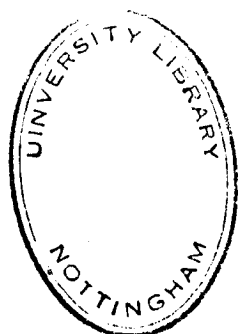


"'Vladimir Nabokov's Comic Quest  
for Reality' by Marianne Walenda.  
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## Abstract

Nabokov once said that "reality" is "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes." He has often expressed his scepticism as to whether it is ever possible to know a thing: all one can do is to collect as many facts and data about a thing as possible, accumulate information about it and thus try to get nearer its reality. But even though one may know a lot about an object, one can never know everything about it: "It's hopeless", Nabokov says and concludes, "... we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects."

What applies to things applies in an even higher degree to persons. More often than not the complexities of their souls and characters escape us and we see not real persons, but "phantoms": images of people that are the products of our own minds and that are shaped by our own interests and expectations.

Nabokov's questioning enters the provinces of metaphysics when he inquires into the nature of space and time, when he asks whether life may not be an illusion, a dream; whether life is just a succession of meaningless coincidences, or whether it has some sensible and meaningful pattern. Finally he inquires into the nature of death and poses the question whether death is indeed the end of everything.

According to Nabokov, it is only the artist who, through his art, can penetrate to the true reality of things and who can answer these philosophical questions, since it is he who approaches the world free from all preconceived ideas which are imposed upon ordinary minds by custom or science or even philosophy.

By using comic devices, most notably parody, Nabokov frees the reader's mind from all conventional ideas and stock responses, making it possible for him to follow his depicted artists in their exploration of true reality.



## Introduction

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Scattered throughout Nabokov's Forewords to his own novels, interviews he gave, rare commentaries on his own work. (as his essay "On a Book Entitled Lolita") and his works themselves are a great number of statements - serious, ironical or parodistic - which offer valuable insights into his conception of art. These are supported by his treatment in The Gift of the views of the nineteenth century Russian journalist, critic and novelist N. G. Chernyshevskii. Briefly stated, what emerges from all these sources is that Nabokov wants art to be created, evaluated, and enjoyed for its artistic values alone, independent of any "purposes" or "ideas" or ulterior motives. He dismisses the suggestion that any utility or morality should be attributed to his art "with the same scorn that he once made use of when a clubwoman asked him what butterflies were for."<sup>1</sup>

"Nothing bores me more than political novels", he says, "and the literature of social intent"<sup>2</sup>, and "I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit..."<sup>3</sup> And speaking in more general terms: "A work of art has no importance whatever to society."<sup>4</sup>

To save his own novels from gross misinterpretations he states plainly in some of his Forewords how his novels should n o t be read, and which considerations the reader had better leave aside. The Introduction to Bend Sinister, for example, even though

granting that the Bolshevist and the Nazi-German régimes have to a certain degree acted as "models" of the world of the novel, yet warns the reader not to see this same novel as directly concerned with either of the two states:

...the influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my books, or at least of this book, on my epoch.<sup>5</sup>

He is even more outspoken in his Foreword to Invitation to a Beheading:

The question whether or not my seeing both [the Bolshevist régime and the Nazi régime] in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book, should concern the good reader as little as it does me.<sup>6</sup>

He does not always express his view quite so directly. It is true that he is very explicit about Lolita:

I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic<sub>7</sub> fiction,...and Lolita has no moral in tow<sub>7</sub>,

but he made this statement only after Lolita had been thoroughly misunderstood despite the Foreword by John Ray. This Foreword is a good example of how Nabokov integrates his view of art into the very art itself. John Ray's insistence on "the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader", that "in this poignant study there lurks a general lesson", and that "'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>8</sup> expresses a view that is diametrically opposed to all of Nabokov's principles, and in the light of these principles the whole

passage can only be taken as a wild parody of such a view.

His principles become an even more integral part of his work in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, where Mr Goodman embodies all those theories in connection with art which Nabokov abhors. Mr Goodman who criticizes Sebastian because he refused to take any interest in general ideas and contemporary questions and who holds the view that at difficult moments "a perplexed humanity eagerly turns to its writers and thinkers, and demands of them attention to, if not the cure of, its woes and wounds"<sup>9</sup>, and who demands that a writer should at such moments transform his ivory tower into a lighthouse or a broadcasting station<sup>10</sup>, is clearly one of those "middlebrow[s] or...upper Philistine[s] [who] cannot get rid of the furtive feeling that a book, to be great, must deal in great ideas."<sup>11</sup>

The most extensive and complex, even though indirect statement of Nabokov's views is to be found in Chapter IV of The Gift<sup>12</sup>, although the chapter should not be read as an abstract treatise on the theory of literature but as an integral part of the novel.

The chapter contains a biography of the nineteenth century Russian critic and novelist N.G.Chernyshevskii. When the novel was published in serialized form in the Paris émigré literary journal Sovremennye Zapiski, this chapter was turned down, and it was only fifteen years later, in 1952, that the novel was published as a complete book.<sup>13</sup> The omission, made with Nabokov's

consent, was motivated by the author's "critical and irreverent approach" to his subject.<sup>14</sup> The editorial board had all been members of the Russian Social Revolutionary Party before the Revolution, and felt that the author was taking too much liberty with the person of Chernyshevskii, "one of the official saints of the Russian 19th century progressive movement"<sup>15</sup>, and indeed "with the great social-reforming tradition of the Russian nineteenth century" itself.<sup>16</sup> There is fine Nabokovian irony in the fact that the hero of the novel, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, who writes the biography, has great difficulty in finding a publisher for his life of Chernyshevskii, and that the reasons are similar to those which prevented the publication of Nabokov's book.<sup>17</sup>

Critics' opinions on this biography differ. As Field points out, Fyodor uses facts<sup>18</sup>, and for long stretches his account of Chernyshevskii's life does seem straightforward enough, following the main stations of his life, and stressing those events and incidents that are stressed in ordinary, matter-of-fact biographies of Chernyshevskii.<sup>19</sup> But then, of course, he also uses facts "which are frequently bypassed"<sup>20</sup>; he uses intimate material from intimate sources, such as journals, and dwells on points that tact would induce others to skip. He highlights some of Chernyshevskii's weaknesses and takes liberties with certain episodes, which, comic in themselves, become more comic when stylized and exaggerated. Karlinsky calls the treatment of Chernyshevskii "satirical and at

times cruel."<sup>21</sup> L.L.Lee, on the other hand, defends Fyodor, stating that "he does appreciate Chernyshevskii's risks, his courage, and, for that matter, his goodness"<sup>22</sup>, and that his work "makes Chernyshevskii a truly sympathetic, if foolish, man and rescues him from politics in the sense that he becomes human and not a symbol."<sup>23</sup>

What is more interesting in this context, however, is the way in which Nabokov treats, not Chernyshevskii the man, but his theory of art. As one biographer says of Chernyshevskii: "...[he] denied serious attention to any theory of art or criticism that confined discussion to the relative merits of works of art and avoided more fundamental questions."<sup>24</sup> Concerning himself with such "fundamental questions", Chernyshevskii decided that the "mission" of art was "to reproduce, to explain, to judge, and to teach."<sup>25</sup> Briefly and simply stated, this implies that art should reproduce reality, which he considered as superior to art.<sup>26</sup> By calling attention to objects through reproducing them, art could fulfil its function to explain, by making these objects' significance clear and "[forcing] people to understand life better." - "Though art might resemble a learned statement, it would more easily be absorbed and comprehended."<sup>27</sup>

Chernyshevskii's conviction that art had the function to judge entailed his "theory of art's social mission."<sup>28</sup> He expected that, if a writer was aware of, and alive to, what was going on around him, "then consciously or not, his work pronounced judgements

on the aspects of life that interested him.<sup>29</sup>

He puts it in a way that suggests that a work of art may in fact contain more than the author intentionally puts into it. His convictions and opinions may flow into his art without him being aware of it, so that, even though he does not write in order to pass judgements, the judgements may be there, implicitly. Nabokov, of course, must have known this; hence his statements about his own novels, like the two quoted above, which anticipate and refute any attempt to read either conscious or unconscious judgements of the kind that Chernyshevskii has in mind into his work.

Chernyshevskii even went a step further determining what a writer should be interested in. Every age had its own particular problems, on which every member of society must necessarily have views. It was impossible and inadmissible that an artist should not be concerned with them. Chernyshevskii went so far as to "deny the right of an artist to consider his artistic work apart from the problems of the age. From [his] point of view, art could not be removed from life."<sup>30</sup>

"Any human activity had to serve mankind"<sup>31</sup>, and art was no exception. The artist neglected his duty and "supported existing social injustice"<sup>32</sup> if he insisted on "pure art", removed from life's concerns. Only if the underlying idea, the content, was "correct", that is, "compatible with the needs of [the] time"<sup>33</sup>, could a work of art be created, for

Artistry consists in the correspondence of form with idea; therefore to discern the artistic value of a work, one must,

as strictly as possible, inquire into the truth of the idea which lies at the base of the work. If the idea is false, there can be no talk about artistry, because the form will also be false and the execution incongruous.<sup>34</sup>

All of this is worlds removed from Nabokov's own views, and it is therefore not surprising that he should treat it derisively in The Gift, having Fyodor comment on it with irony and having him put it all down to the fact that Chernyshevskii had indeed "not the slightest notion of the true nature of art, saw its crown in conventional, slick art (i.e., anti-art)..."<sup>35</sup>, and therefore simply had to "prefer an honest description of contemporary manners, civic indignation, heart-to-heart jingles."<sup>36</sup> If this chapter is a denunciation and refutation of Chernyshevskii's views, it is, by the implied contrast, at the same time a compact and complex statement of Nabokov's own.

The rejection of all that Chernyshevskii has to say about art, and some of Nabokov's statements might make it appear as if he were an artist who creates art for art's sake. But to insist on this would mean pinning him down, labelling him, and it would include him in a specific group which is something else he decidedly and sharply objects to. Also, he does not care for the slogan "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..."<sup>37</sup> And yet: "...there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social



importance but its art, only its art"<sup>38</sup>, and when, in Speak, Memory he speaks about the wonders of mimicry in nature which cannot all be explained by the Darwinian theory of "natural selection" he says that

I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.<sup>39</sup>

This contains all the terms he keeps using when discussing art: "nonutilitarian", "delight", "game", "enchantment", "deception". Sometimes he sounds downright lighthearted when talking about art. He lists as the virtues that characterize all worthwhile art: "originality, invention, harmony, conciseness, complexity", and then adds, somewhat surprisingly, and, as it appears, almost irresponsibly and provokingly, "splendid insincerity".<sup>40</sup> However, the last term fits perfectly into his statements about art and into what emerges from his novels, if any moral meaning, which may spontaneously come to mind in connection with this word, is left out of account. The root of "sincerity" is Latin "sincerus", meaning "clear", "pure", "sound", from which "sincere" derived as one of its meanings: "pure", "unmixed", and also: "containing no elements of... deception", "straightforward".<sup>41</sup> If one therefore takes "sincerity" to mean "purity" (in the sense of being unmixed) and "straightforwardness", and "insincerity" to mean the opposites, the term will be seen to describe in a condensed form two of the basic characteristics of Nabokov's art. The way in which his novels use and combine traditional literary forms

and themes, scholarly procedures, and approaches to literature, and, in particular, the way in which they "mix" comedy and seriousness until these cannot be disentangled, explains why Nabokov should have chosen this particular word in connection with his works. These are equally conspicuous for their deceptiveness which is, in fact, one of Nabokov's avowed aims in writing, and of which, incidentally, his use of the very word which describes it, is a typical example.

He often dwells on the pleasure he experiences in creating a work of art and the pleasure true art is to give, and part of the pleasure of creation consists precisely in producing something that rivals nature in its deceptiveness. This he achieves by approaching the creation of a work of fiction somewhat as he approaches the creation of a chess problem. Both have in common that they present seemingly insurmountable difficulties to the inventor and the solver.

Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy<sup>42</sup>,

he says about his invention of chess problems, and compares this directly to the composition of one of those novels

... where the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients - rocks, and carbon, and blind throbbings.<sup>43</sup>

These, then, are the difficulties of the composer of problems, the artist, the writer of novels. The difficulties of the solver of the problems, the reader

of the novels, consist in trying not to fall victim to the "delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play", which are all "astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray."<sup>44</sup>

However, these difficulties are of course part of the game and an essential part of the pleasure of both the composer and the solver. The pleasure of the solution is completely lost if the difficulties are not fully experienced. When Nabokov expresses this view, he is talking of a particularly "diabolical" chess problem, but it can be applied to his novels as well:

The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and discover its fairly simple, "thetic" solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one...

who is at the end rewarded by "a synthesis of poignant artistic delight."<sup>45</sup>

These statements about art themselves contain an element of deception in that they might delude the uninitiated into believing that Nabokov really composes his novels for no other reason than to get rid of them<sup>46</sup>, for the pleasure of composing "riddles" to which he likes finding "elegant solutions"<sup>47</sup>, and for the sake of that delight which provokes "a radiant smile of satisfaction, a purr of beatitude."<sup>48</sup>

Also, they concern only the form of the novels, which is, in fact, "diabolical" in some cases, and has provoked critics to have recourse to amusing comparisons to describe it adequately:

"... a Jack-in-the-box... a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself novel"<sup>49</sup>,

Mary McCarthy admiringly calls Pale Fire, and Kenneth Allsop says of the same novel that it is "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."<sup>50</sup>

Except for saying that his novels are n o t concerned with moral, social, didactic or other contemporary problems, and neither deal with, nor are intended to propagate, "general ideas", Nabokov's statements contain no clue whatever as to what his novels are about. It is only slowly and gradually, and through patient re-reading (recommended by Nabokov himself) or even re-re-reading, that one begins to penetrate to their essential contents and content, and then it becomes clear that one of their common and prominent themes is reality. In following the artistic exploration of it, the reader gets involved in a difficult quest, and to understand all the complexities and intricacies of this quest, the different meanings that Nabokov attaches to the word "reality" must first be specified.

The main distinction he makes is between "average reality" and "true reality".<sup>51</sup> Kinbote in Pale Fire, who often expresses his creator's opinions and can therefore be accepted as an authority, echoes him when he speaks of "average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye"<sup>52</sup>, and the fact that he puts "reality" in inverted commas and his addition: "perceived by the communal eye" indicate that we are here concerned with what Huxley says has only a "relative reality".<sup>53</sup> It is, again in Huxley's words, "the manifold world of our everyday experience", the people we meet, daily

life with its hazards and incidents, or the events and complications of history. All of these are accessible to each of us, or, as Kinbote says, "to the communal eye". We take them in through our senses and through our intellects and seldom stop to consider whether what we are taking in has an absolute reality, or whether we even perceive things as they are in themselves.

Philosophers, however, have raised certain doubts. Even by assuming that we perceive objects through the medium of "ideas" (Descartes)<sup>55</sup>, or "ideas of sensation" (Locke)<sup>56</sup>; while speaking of "our perceiving ideas and perceiving sensible qualities" (Berkeley)<sup>57</sup>, of "Vorstellungen" (Kant)<sup>58</sup>, of "sensations" (Mill)<sup>59</sup>, or "sense-data" (Moore and Russell)<sup>60</sup>, they indicate that it is their conviction that there is an element of subjectivity in the process of perception. While Descartes and Locke and Berkeley agree that ideas as objects of acts of sensing do in fact "not exist independently of being perceived"<sup>61</sup>, Russell, for example, does grant his sense-data such an independent existence as "sensibilia", "objects 'of the same metaphysical and physical status as sense-data', with the difference that they [are] not actually sensed."<sup>62</sup> What is sensed, the sense-data, for which he later substituted "percepts"<sup>63</sup>, is "private to the observer whose mind [it] helps to constitute."<sup>64</sup> This statement implies that whatever we perceive may not in fact be what is objectively there. Russell gives a concrete example discussing the colour of a table which changes con-

stantly, depending on the light, on the point of view, or on the spectator; and as all the colours seem equally real he concludes "... to avoid favouritism, we are compelled to deny that, in itself, the table has any one particular colour."<sup>65</sup> In this case, however, if the table has no colour, and if all the same we perceive some colour all the time, the table "cannot... be identical with what we see."<sup>66</sup> This applies to its shape as well, and Russell in fact concludes: "The real table, if there is one, is not immediately known to us..."<sup>67</sup>, and Ayer states it even more bluntly: "In fact, the upshot is that we know relatively little about the real table."<sup>68</sup>

Kant comes to a similar conclusion. Rejecting the assumption of rationalist philosophers "that they could discover the nature of things merely by the exercise of reason", because "reason [is] bound to lose itself in contradictions if it [ventures] beyond the limits of possible experience"<sup>69</sup>, he decides that

... the world that we know is partly our own creation. We can infer that there is a raw material upon which we go to work. But what things are in themselves, independently of our processing them, is something that we can never know.<sup>70</sup>

Nabokov does not operate with many philosophical terms and never enters into a detailed abstract discussion of the problem, but the distinction he makes between "average reality" and "true reality" is to a degree the same as that between Russell's "sense-data" or "percepts" and "sensibilia", and that between Kant's "world that we know" and "things as they are in themselves". He also applies the terms to persons, to the

lives of individual persons, and in fact to our whole existence. With regard to each of these he assumes that there is something more truly real behind the "average reality" we perceive and that we generally mistake for the only, and implicitly true, reality: he assumes that there is the "real person" behind the "phantom"<sup>71</sup> we see; some meaningful pattern behind the seeming jumble of incidents and coincidences of which individual lives seem to be formed, but which constitute in fact only their "average reality"; and he assumes that there is some absolute reality, something noumenal behind the "average reality" of our existence.

It is "true reality" that Nabokov wants to know, Kant's "things as they are in themselves" (now used in the wider meaning explained above) but he is aware of all the difficulties connected with this. It seems to be impossible to know even things. One may strive and struggle to know a thing, one may collect as many facts and data related to it as possible, one may add them all up, and one will still have to admit in the end that they do not seem to form more than a haphazard collection of information a b o u t the thing and that something is still missing and escaping one. The thing itself, or that which takes it what it essentially is, refuses to be discovered. Nabokov puts it like this:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of accumulation of information; and as specialization. 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 with that 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. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects.<sup>72</sup>

What is true of things applies in an even higher degree to persons. If it is next to impossible to know even things, as they are in themselves, if they remain "ghosts" to us, how much more hopeless must any attempt be to try and understand what a person really is behind what he appears to be, to see and understand all the complexities of his soul and character. The subjectivity and relativity of what we know about others is proved in Pnin, The Eye, and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Pnin's most obvious characteristics being his tendency to fall into quandaries over simple matters, the curious workings of his mind, and an apparent absent-mindedness, he is irrevocably put down as a freak and nobody cares to look behind the convenient label and find the real person. The Eye and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight both illustrate how our impression of another person is determined by our attitude to him, our preoccupations, interests and emotions. One person - Smurov in The Eye and Sebastian in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight - is seen to evoke highly divergent, even contradictory pictures in the minds of other persons, each of whom



is convinced to really know Smurov or Sebastian, while none of the pictures has probably anything to do with the real Smurov or the real Sebastian.

Nabokov extends his quest into another sphere, hinted at above, in The Defence, Pale Fire, Transparent Things, and Despair. Here he is concerned not so much with individual things or persons and the question what they are in themselves, but with the complexities of human life. To the ordinary person, of whom Hugh Person in Transparent Things is a kind of incarnation, life may appear to be a mere haphazard sequence of incidents and coincidences which do not seem to be in any way logically and purposefully connected. Nabokov is concerned with the question that Dillard describes as central to Russian literature, namely whether a coincidence is not in fact a "controlled event"<sup>73</sup>, and whether life has not an underlying pattern which escapes the attention of those who, like Hugh Person, perceive only its "average reality". To discover some such pattern would be another step on the way to the knowledge of "true reality".

Nabokov's quest is at its most profound when it touches on the reality of life. This theme is first tentatively introduced in The Eye, where life seems to Smurov to be no more than "a shimmer on a screen"<sup>74</sup> and where he himself gets caught up in an unreal world of mirror images. Transparent Things at one point poses the question whether life is not a mere dream.<sup>75</sup> The problem of life's reality is most poignantly treated in Ada and Invitation to a Beheading,

both of which deliberately undercut our confidence in the reality of our very world and life and try to open ways out of their "average reality" and to come to some insight into some ultimate "true reality" beyond our existence.

Again, Nabokov is only too conscious of the difficulties involved in his quest and he knows that he can expect no help from anywhere. The common, "average" approach, as has been seen, prevents knowledge rather than furthers it because it stops at the most superficial appearance of things, and of persons and life as well. Nor does Nabokov feel that science and philosophy have provided any satisfactory answers to his questions. They have tried to provide them and have taken us a few steps on the way to knowledge, but have not really solved any problem. The mysteries remain, provoking and disquieting, and paradoxically they become the more disquieting the more we know:

... In point of fact, the greater one's science, the deeper one's sense of mystery. Moreover, I don't believe that any science today has pierced any mystery. We, as newspaper readers, are inclined to call 'science' the cleverness of an electrician or a psychiatrist's mumbo jumbo. This, at best, is applied science, and one of the characteristics of applied science is that yesterday's neutron or today's truth dies tomorrow. But even in a better sense of 'science' - as the study of visible or palpable nature, or the poetry of pure mathematics and pure philosophy - the situation remains as hopeless as ever. We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought.<sup>76</sup>

If even science and philosophy are excluded as sources of real knowledge, the situation does indeed seem

hopeless, but Nabokov does not get caught in an impasse.

Bergson expresses a thought that Nabokov shares, when he describes the artist as one who can see through the labels affixed to things and perceive their inner life:

Art... [brushes] aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself.<sup>77</sup>

Nabokov expresses it like this:

Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism.<sup>78</sup>

His mind helps the artist in different ways in his understanding of "true reality". In the "average" world, in which man finds himself, the artistic mind may be aware of reflections and echoes of some superior reality, and through them the artist may be enabled to overcome the limitations normally set to the human mind and to apprehend something truly real. This is the case in Lolita, where, through Lolita's youthful beauty, Humbert has an intimation of some infinite perfection and some pure and eternal and immaterial beauty. In Transparent Things the process Nabokov describes seems to be an almost involuntary one. The artist needs only concentrate on an object, and without any deliberate effort he will sink into its past and history. By a simple "act of attention"<sup>79</sup> he breaks the "thin veneer of immediate reality [that] is spread over natural and artificial matter"<sup>80</sup>, and behind this "thin veneer", the "now" of the object

(formed by its present qualities and its present context), opens the vast spectrum of things and incidents and persons with which or with whom it has been in any way connected. More than that, a dense pattern of interrelations between these things and incidents and people is also disclosed. One simple object can take the artist away in space and back in time, and if he traced and followed all the connecting lines, this one object might grant him insights that would in the end comprehend the whole "world that Jack built."<sup>81</sup> Nabokov's implication is that the ordinary, average mind never steps beyond the "now" or the "thin veneer of immediate reality" of things and thus obtains no knowledge of what is concealed behind them.

It seems that this breaking through the "thin veneer" is also the basis of the artistic process of creation that Kinbote describes. He says that "'reality' is neither the subject nor the object of true art"<sup>82</sup>, meaning, of course, that art is not concerned with "average reality" as defined above:

[Art] creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye.<sup>83</sup>

This does not mean that the artist takes no notice of the world around him. On the contrary, Nabokov is wide awake to every trifle and takes in, and uses in his novels, thousands of daily trivia: "The artist should know the given world", he says; "Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art..."<sup>84</sup>, and the same thought, namely that daily life is a constant source of inspiration

for the artist, is expressed in his essay "Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable"<sup>85</sup>:

Si la vie semble quelquefois bien brumeuse,  
c'est parce que l'on est mypoe. Pour qui  
sait regarder, la vie quotidienne est aussi  
pleine de révélations et de jouissances qu'elle  
l'était aux yeux des grands poètes de jadis.<sup>86</sup>

But he does not "reproduce" life in Chernyshevskii's sense. He takes it in, and what happens then is again best described by Kinbote, speaking about "his" poet, Shade:

I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse.<sup>87</sup>

The artist, as has been seen, can break the "thin veneer of immediate reality" of things. This implies that he can see things individually, independent of their present qualities and contexts; in Kinbote's words: while taking the world in he can also take it apart. And seeing things individually, as they are in themselves and free from their present functions and contexts, he will not only discover the pattern of interrelations described above, but other connections and interrelations as well; combinations and patterns that remain hidden to the ordinary mind whose perception is limited to the "immediate reality" of things. He can see links between things from different contexts, even relations between seemingly disparate things, and he can see links and relations between things he is just perceiving and things he has perceived at some

other time. It is thus that he can re-combine the elements into new patterns, and that he can "transform" and re-create the world. He does not invent these interrelations and patterns, nor does he shape them through an arbitrary act of selection. They are there, hidden from the ordinary mind behind the surface appearance of things, and it is for the artist to uncover them in his work of art.

Memory plays an important part in this, because stored in it the artist finds the elements that he may use in the process of re-creation, and, moreover, he finds them stored in such a way that the interrelations and patterns just described are clearly visible. Some "mysterious foresight" seems to be at work (again not an act of arbitrary selection) when memory stores those elements which will uncover the pattern and pushes those into the background that would confuse it or blur it.

I would say that imagination is a form of memory... An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory. When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollections and inventions.<sup>88</sup>

What we find in a work of art, then, may be elements from factual ("average") reality, but they do not reproduce this reality as we know it. They are taken out of their contexts, shaped, re-combined, combined with elements from completely different contexts, or transformed into artistic shapes, so that they form

a new, wholly artistic reality. And this artistic reality is the rendering of the "true reality" the artist has perceived.

It is thus that Shade in Pale Fire, for example, gains through the medium of Kinbote an insight into what he calls "the web of sense"<sup>89</sup>, the ordering and meaningful pattern underlying his seemingly unpatterned and unordered life. It is thus, too, that the narrator of Pnin uncovers for the reader the "true reality" of Pnin's life, the "average reality" of which - and the only reality perceived by the Waindell people - looks like a meaningless succession of absurd and comic incidents. Hugh Person in Transparent Things does not see beyond the "average reality" and sometimes not even beyond the "thin veneer of immediate reality" of his own life. To him it appears as no more than a series of unrelated and haphazard incidents, and it is again left to an artist, Mr. R., to uncover that there are a number of incidents and moments which form a very clear and very meaningful "web of sense".

According to Nabokov it is again only the artist who has the ability to see through the "average reality" of a person and to discover something more real behind the surface appearance that lends itself to misinterpretations and subjective views. It is thus the narrator in Pnin who uncovers a real human being behind the comic freak that the Waindell people see in Timofey Pnin.

Humbert Humbert's vision of Lolita is even profounder

and has metaphysical dimensions. He detects in the little girl he himself so often describes as vulgar some quality which eludes man all the time though he may yearn for it and struggle to reach it and capture it: some "immaterial, pure, eternal, unchanging beauty..."<sup>90</sup> This for him is Lolita's real essence, and this he wants to capture because he feels that by grasping the beauty and perfection encased in child-women man may transcend this world and time and pass beyond "the mirror you break your nose against."<sup>91</sup>

There are shades as to how fanciful or even fantastic the individual artistic renderings of "true reality" are. There are those in Pnin and Transparent Things in which the elements of "average reality" of which they are composed are clearly recognizable. But there is also that in Pale Fire, where the artist puts what he has perceived in purely fantastic shapes which do not at the first sight seem to possess any reality except that of fictitious events and characters. The intimations of "true reality" that they contain emerge only slowly and gradually.

Nabokov attaches a warning to this which is illustrated most poignantly in Pale Fire, but also in The Defence and Despair. The artist must remain aware that his art is no more than a means of transcending "average reality" and catching a glimpse of "true reality", and that it does no more than render an artistic image of it. Doing this, it gives him and others knowledge that cannot be obtained in any other



way, and this knowledge and the implications of the work of art are valuable and should influence him and others in their reactions to the "average reality" in which they live. People at Waindell might react differently to Pnin if only they had the narrator's insights, or even only knew his version of Pnin.

Hugh Person in Transparent Things might have lived had he had Mr. R.'s insights. But the artist must not get involved in his piece of art to the degree of becoming part of his creation and reacting to it rather than to the world in which he finds himself, however "average" this world may be. Both Luzhin in The Defence and Kinbote in Pale Fire fail to make this distinction and the inevitable consequence is madness. The same happens to Hermann in Despair whose invention, moreover, is not based on any reality at all, and can therefore, in Nabokov's view, not even be considered as a work of art. Humbert Humbert in Lolita destroys Lolita by reacting to his view of her as a nymphet and denying her the only reality she is aware of, that of a very human, very terrestrial little girl.

In Invitation to a Beheading, Ada, and Transparent Things the artistic mind is seen to possess still greater and still more far-reaching abilities. In these novels the terms "average reality" and "true reality" acquire new, and perhaps the most profound, meanings.

Life may appear real enough to ordinary minds, and it is in fact presented in the novels in real enough

terms. However, for Cincinnatus, and Ada and Van it possesses at best a "relative reality". The life in which they find themselves caught - "imprisoned" in the case of Cincinnatus - has here no more than the status of "average reality". The ways in which they transcend it may differ from each other, but they do transcend it (and so does Mr. R.) and obtain an insight into some ultimate "true reality" beyond our existence.

In Cincinnatus' case it is a process of awakening from dreams and through his art destroying the world around him that brings him face to face with a "true reality" which has all the appearances of the Platonic world of Ideas, and of which our life and world is only a "clumsy copy"<sup>92</sup>. Cincinnatus' experience is based in his imagination, which may cast doubt on its validity. He imagines even his own death (as do Mr. R. and John Shade) and gains from this the conviction of his immortality, and again the evidence of his experience may be doubted. But, as has been seen, it is Nabokov's thesis throughout that the artist's imagination or "creative fancy" is the only way to knowledge, and that it is reliable. To quote Nabokov once more:

Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism.<sup>93</sup>

In another context he speaks of the "lamp of art"<sup>94</sup> that makes things visible which remain otherwise concealed from our perception and knowledge. Thus the

internal evidence of Invitation to a Beheading suggests that, even though Cincinnatus may not go through the experience of actual physical death, his mind is yet capable of apprehending what mental experiences the end might bring with it, and the same applies to Mr. R. in Transparent Things.

Cincinnatus can talk about his experience, and to a degree he can even convey to the reader an idea of his "real" world. Mr. R. and Ada and Van remain somewhat vague about the nature of their experiences and certainly give no indication of what it actually is that they have come to know. The reason is that their experiences are impossible to put into words.

Mr. R. says of his that if he could put it all down in a book and explain his "total rejection of all religions ever dreamt up by man and [his] total composure in the face of total death... that book would become no doubt a new bible and its author the founder of a new creed."<sup>95</sup> But he admits in the same breath that this is impossible because one "can never express in one flash what can only be understood immediately."<sup>96</sup> Van takes pains to explain that what he and Ada experience is "nowness"<sup>97</sup> or the "true Present"<sup>98</sup>, and he makes yet another attempt at an explanation:

It would not be sufficient to say that in his love-making with Ada he discovered the pang, the agon', 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 a 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<sup>99</sup>  
and she were physically able to make love.

Both Mr. R. and Van speak in terms that are reminiscent of descriptions of mystical experiences. These lay stress on the fact that such experiences free the mind from all the limitations set to it by the intellect; that they grant knowledge which is quite different from, and goes far beyond, that obtained through intellectual processes. It is an intuitive and immediate knowledge:

There come to many the sudden moments  
of intuitive perception, elusive,  
fading quickly, but of deep significance,  
illuminations which they feel reveal to  
them new facets of reality.<sup>100</sup>

Such experiences and the knowledge they convey do not lend themselves to expression in words, as these are made to express and convey rational and intellectual ideas and concepts, and prove insufficient with regard to something in which the intellect has no part, those insights that appear like "something given, a sort of revelation coming from a something outside oneself."<sup>101</sup>

To all appearances both Mr. R. and Van and Ada go through experiences that have these characteristics. They experience something to which the term "noumenal"<sup>102</sup> had better be applied to make its metaphysical dimension quite clear, and although it does at least with Van and Ada probably not have the religious associations Huxley attaches to it, the same is no doubt true of their absolute (or "true") reality that is true of his: "... we can never hope to describe it even though it is possible for us directly to apprehend it."<sup>103</sup>

Admittedly not all of Nabokov's thoughts and problems, and not all of his solutions to the problems he discusses can be said to be original. A few short suggestions may suffice to support this statement: as was indicated above, the doubts, for example, that he entertains concerning what we know (or what we can know) have occupied the minds of the philosophers of all ages and have found expression in their writings.

Plato was named in connection with Invitation to a Beheading because the idea that Cincinnatus C. in that novel conveys of his ideal world has a strong resemblance to Plato's world of Ideas.

Cincinnatus considers life as a semi-sleep "into which penetrate in grotesque disguise the sounds and sights of the real world..."<sup>104</sup>. Sleep and its dreams take him a step in the direction where his ideal world (his "true reality") is to be found, and his scale, which is diametrically opposed to that of everybody else, is completed by death, which is for him in fact an awakening from the dreams and nonsense of life into the very presence of this ideal world. Again, the idea of life as a dream is not originally Nabokovian, but recurs for example in the writings of the exponents of what Huxley calls the "Perennial Philosophy",

... the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being...<sup>105</sup>

As Huxley says:

This metaphor of waking from dreams recurs again and again in the various expositions of the Perennial Philosophy. In this context liberation might be defined as waking out of the nonsense, nightmares and illusory pleasures of what is ordinarily called real life into the awareness of eternity.<sup>106</sup>

The idea of death as liberation and entrance into some absolute reality behind the world and life into which we find ourselves cast is an idea that is also common with German Romantic philosophers and poets. With them, as with Nabokov, this absolute reality has lost its religious associations. Schelling, for example, describes death as the transition from some "relative Non-Esse" into what he calls "pure Esse."<sup>107</sup> The poet Novalis could be named as another exponent of this thought.

German Romanticism also gave rise to an idea which recurs in Ada. Schlegel developed what might be called a philosophy of love: it is through love of another person that man can break the boundaries set to his own self and find fulfilment. This motif is modified in Novalis into some kind of love-mysticism, in that physical love becomes with him a means of escaping from the limitations of our "reality" and of gaining access to something true and absolute behind it.<sup>108</sup> This is precisely what happens in Ada, Van and Ada feeling liberated, reality losing its quotes, only during moments of physical love.

Nabokov is not the first to entertain the notion that art plays a decisive part in man's quest for

"true reality" in that it allows him to gain and to convey insights that neither science nor philosophy can give. Bergson was already named as having expressed the same conviction, but the idea can be traced farther back. Sidney, in his Defense of Poesie, makes the point that the poet "makes direct contact with the world of Platonic ideas", and is in his art "not imitating the idea as reflected palely in real life, but is directly embodying his own vision of the ideal."<sup>109</sup> The position taken by Bergson and Nabokov is also a Romantic one, its ideas perhaps best expressed in Shelley's Defense of Poetry, where he, too, claims that "the poet, through his use of the imagination, comes directly into contact with the world of Platonic ideas, and so with true reality, instead of simply imitating reflections of these ideas.

Quite often, then, Nabokov seems not so much to be proposing something truly original, but rather to be re-asserting propositions and convictions of which some have quite a tradition in the histories of philosophy and literature. His true originality, which has so often been praised, lies rather in his way of presenting these same propositions, of uttering these same convictions in unusual and surprising contexts, and in turning his quest for reality into a comic quest.

The term "comic quest" is not meant to imply that Nabokov's novels follow the structure or the action line of comedies. Ada might be named as the only exception in that it does to a degree follow a typical comedy formula, more specifically the formula that

Northrop Frye describes as underlying Shakespeare's comedies. These, he says, are concerned with

... the efforts of a young man who tries to get possession of a young woman who is kept from him by various social barriers... These are gradually circumvented, and the comedy ends at a point when a new society is crystallized, usually by the marriage or betrothal of hero and heroine.<sup>111</sup>

Ada follows this formula as far as the circumvention of social barriers is concerned, which do, in fact, keep Van and Ada separated for a considerable time. But even here the similarities end, for even though there is a reunion at the end, the festive ending, so typical of Shakespeare's comedies, is ironized and marred. Whereas with Shakespeare the couples are normally united in their bloom of youth, it is "fat old Veen"<sup>112</sup> and Ada, "a dark glittering stranger with the high hair-do in fashion"<sup>113</sup>, aged fifty-two and fifty respectively, who eventually find themselves re-united.

It is not only the typical comedy structure that is absent from Nabokov's novels, but also what, again, Frye describes as the "predominating mood [of comedies] which is festive."<sup>114</sup> Nor can Nabokov's novels be said to be comic in the sense that Tom Jones, say, is comic, or The Pickwick Papers, most of the comic quality of which derives from an almost uninterrupted series of burlesque incidents.

In fact, from the analysis of the central concern of the novels it will have emerged that it is not their subject matter that justifies the use of the term "comic" in connection with them. It is rather



the manner in which the subject matter is treated that accounts for their comic quality. The subject matter, which is in itself not comic, is embedded in an overall pattern formed of a variety of comic elements: burlesque, grotesque, or absurd; chief among them is parody; parody not only of a great number of traditional literary themes and motifs, forms and styles, and of extant literary works, but also of some critical approaches to works of literature. The traditional love story, for example, or the story of the love-triangle, the story about incest, the familiar mystery story, are all parodied, just as well as the biography, the scholarly edition of a poem, or the psychoanalytical and moral approaches to a piece of literature.

One of Nabokov's favourite victims is Freud. He never loses a chance of exposing and ridiculing him and his theories. He uses a particular strategy for doing this, creating plots and incidents that actually seem to invite Freudian interpretations. Lolita and parts of Transparent Things look like paradigms of Freud's theory of the unconscious, like perfect case histories. But whatever psychoanalytical interpretations are provoked by these novels and by others, are then shown to be completely and absurdly beside the point, so that those readers and critics who do not see through the deceptive game at once become the victims of Nabokov's mocking together with Freud.

There is no contradiction between the use of comic devices and the striving for a serious aim, such as the solution to the metaphysical questions that Nabokov

raises. He allows Sebastian Knight to use parody "as a kind of springboard of serious emotion"<sup>115</sup>, and treating the questions that move him in a comic manner, he remains true to his conviction that "... the difference between the comic side of things and their cosmic side depends on one sibilant."<sup>116</sup>

Accordingly, he brings the comic sides of things and their serious aspects into such close proximity that the borderline gets blurred, that they become, in fact, inseparable. (If they are treated separately in the following chapters, this will be done only for the sake of convenience. Even while enhancing each other's qualities, both the comedy and the seriousness being heightened by contrast, they also blend and merge. The superficially comic elements reveal their serious implications and the serious sides of things prove to have also a comic touch. In the last analysis it becomes impossible to separate the manner from the matter, for the matter is actually contained in and expressed through, the manner.

In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, for example, the parodies of various forms of biographical research contain within them the questions that lead to the metaphysical speculations described earlier in this Introduction. They ridicule old and established ways of research and expose them as unreliable, insufficient and misleading, but even while ridiculing them, they actually raise Nabokov's basic question, namely how much and what can be known, and the question if there is any way to true knowledge at all.

The case is quite similar in Pale Fire. Kinbote's commentary to Shade's poem is, of course, a parody of a scholarly commentary. But this superficially ludicrous composition of his provides through its very form the answer to the central metaphysical question of this poem, so that the manner is no longer just the vessel for the subject matter, but is inseparably linked with it.

In Pale Fire, incidentally, comedy and seriousness are seen to interact in yet another way. The comedy of the incongruous commentary in its turn has its source in Kinbote's tragedy - his madness, which results from his complete identification with the story the commentary relates.

Nabokov is perhaps nearest the strategy of absurd plays in his use of comic elements in Invitation to a Beheading and Bend Sinister, where things are comic, and horrible and frightening at the same time. The superficially comic dream images in Invitation to a Beheading turn out to be a rendering of the senselessness and horror of the world in which Cincinnatus lives, and they contain and evoke this horror. Here perhaps more than anywhere else in Nabokov's novels both the comedy and the seriousness are heightened by their close proximity and create a nightmarish effect very similar to the effect created by an absurd play. What has here been said about only a few of Nabokov's novels applies to all of them. Nowhere can their comedy and their seriousness be separated.

When V in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight speaks

about Sebastian's use of parody, he stresses that one of his intentions was

...[to hunt] out the things which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud.<sup>117</sup>

This can certainly also be put down as one of Nabokov's intentions. However, it is perhaps not enough to see in it only the artistic purpose of exposing worn-out literary forms. It also directly serves the quest with which all the novels are concerned, and makes the reader receptive for the novels' import.

What was described above forms an intricate surface of artistry and deception. The reader is often temporarily trapped into feeling that he is reading something very familiar, like the mystery story, say, or a biography, or else that he is dealing with the scholarly edition of a poem. He is trapped into this particularly because the characteristic of parody is "analytic mimicry"<sup>118</sup>, so that a parody may at first sight look like the thing it is in fact parodying. But parody is also a form of "mimicry that is just off the note"<sup>119</sup> so that the reader will realize by and by that he is reading something quite different from what he thought he was reading, and that it has quite a different import from what it seemed at first to suggest.

This, for one thing, is the source of pure intellectual enjoyment and of the pleasure that Nabokov wants true art to give. The reader who manages to avoid "the delusive opening moves, false scents, specious

lines of play"<sup>120</sup> will in the end be rewarded by a "synthesis of poignant artistic delight."<sup>121</sup>

This intellectual enjoyment, in its turn, prevents the reader from getting too emotionally involved, and it frees his mind for the experience of the philosophical contents and content. Thus, he will, for example, penetrate to the real content of Ada, because the artistry will effectively prevent him from reading Van's and Ada's story as literally one about incest, and from getting trapped into an emotional involvement with them. He will no longer read The Real Life of Sebastian Knight as a biography once he has realized that the old methods of biographical research are not used as ways to knowledge about a person, but are parodied and called into question.

He will also be discouraged from reading Invitation to a Beheading as literally a novel about imprisonment and death by beheading; he will not be allowed either to react emotionally to the horrors of any one specific political system, but he will be led on to the realization that the concern of the novel is, again, a quest for knowledge, knowledge of some superior reality, in this case.

The old and traditional forms of fiction - this is the implication - have become stale; they are among Nabokov's (or Sebastian Knight's) "dead things shamming life". They no longer surprise the reader and therefore provoke always the same stock responses from him. By getting rid of - in fact, through parody annihilating - these old conventional forms, the

author frees the reader's mind and enables him to look at things in a new way, without being hampered by the traditional ideas these forms have all along imposed upon him.

"Parody serves to startle the reader into an awareness that his comfortable notions of fiction and 'reality' are about to be exploded."<sup>122</sup> It is thus that his eyes are opened to the novels' basic theme - the quest for reality - and it is thus, too, that he is startled into an awareness of the "true reality" the author has discovered through his art and uncovered for the reader in his art. The author cannot actually bring the reader face to face with the "true reality" he, as artist, perceives, but he can at least bring him face to face with his artistic version of what he perceives.

Sometimes, however, he has to stop short even of this. Nabokov admits that much when, as in Ada and Transparent Things the characters' experiences are hinted at rather than articulated, and he admits as much about himself. His characters' preoccupations are largely his own. This becomes clear from his statements about the enigmatic nature of reality quoted earlier in this Introduction; he is fascinated by patterns in his own life<sup>123</sup> like some of his characters, and, like Van Veen, he is preoccupied with time<sup>124</sup> and death<sup>125</sup>, and shares to a degree Van's conception of time<sup>126</sup>. And it seems that he must have had experiences of the nature described for example in Transparent Things: experiences that have given

him knowledge surpassing that given by the senses, the intellect, by science, or philosophy; experiences that cannot be expressed in intellectual terms because they have nothing to do with the intellect but are purely intuitive. It seems that this is implied in something he once said in an interview:

... what I am going to say now is something I have never said before... 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>127</sup>

What has emerged from this analysis confirms what was said at the beginning about Nabokov's conception of art, and it confirms what he says about his own novels. They are unlike anything that Chernyshevskii wants art to be, and thus support Nabokov's rejection of Chernyshevskii's theories. They neither "reproduce" nor "explain", nor do they "teach". They defy any attempt to read a "social mission" into them, and they are not concerned with the "problems of the age". As Nabokov insists, they contain no "moral message" and certainly no "general ideas".

If they cannot be called "art for art's sake", this is due to their preoccupation with the quest that has been described. As has been seen, Nabokov puts this quest into an artistic shape because he considers art as a superior way to knowledge. By his gift of the imagination, the artist can obtain knowledge, and can penetrate into realms which are forbidden to everybody else, and though he does not "teach", he can, through his art, make this knowledge available to others; he can sometimes open these realms to others, or he

can, at least, make others aware of the existence of these realms and of the fact that there are, after all, ways of obtaining knowledge of them. But Nabokov does not do this for an amorphous mass called "the audience" or "society":

A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me.<sup>128</sup>

Chronologically speaking, however, all this is anticipating things a little. Some motifs from the later novels, it is true, are there in outline in Mary, Glory and King, Queen, Knave, which G. M. Hyde lists under "Three Early Novels"<sup>129</sup> even though Glory is not quite as early as that. But in these novels the motifs do not yet have, and hardly hint at, the profound implications they are to assume later on.

Ganin, the hero of Mary<sup>130</sup> lives as an exile in a Berlin pension together with a small number of other exiles, and his life, and that of the others, has about it some unreal quality: "his dream life in exile" (52) it is called, and his surroundings appear just as unreal to him: Riding on a bus"... Ganin felt that this alien city passing before him was nothing but a moving picture" (52). By chance he finds out that his neighbour's wife, who is about to arrive from Russia to join her husband, is Mary, the girl he loved in his youth, and this discovery starts in his mind "a Proustian act of recreation"<sup>131</sup> of the past. He evokes that past in loving detail, so that, for a few days, it assumes in his mind more reality than his life in



the present.

This act of recreation somehow resembles Van Veen's and Ada's, but whereas in Ada the recreation of the past brings with it a victory over time and in a sense (when memories are turned into art) even over death, it does not have any of these implications in Mary. Ganin realizes eventually that by recreating and in his mind reliving, the past romance he has also exhausted it, and that "his future cannot be founded on the image of Mary, which belongs to the past."<sup>132</sup> On his way to the station where he fully intends to meet Mary, he looks around him and, as it were, becomes alive to the reality of the present for the first time:

Ganin walked down the middle of the sidewalk, gently swinging his solidly packed bags, and thought how long it was since he had felt so fit, strong and ready to tackle anything. And the fact that he kept noticing everything with a fresh, loving eye - the carts driving to market, the slender half-unfolded leaves and the many-colored posters which a man in an apron was sticking around a kiosk - this fact meant a secret turning point for him, an awakening (113).

He abandons his plan, aware of and alive to, the present reality of things and realizing that

By now he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them, and the image of Mary... now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory.

Other than that image no Mary existed, nor could exist (114).

Glory<sup>133</sup> tentatively introduces the motif of a thematic design underlying a person's life, something more fully exploited in other novels, most notably

in Transparent Things.

Like Ganin in Mary, Martin Edelweiss is a young exile trying to come to terms with the fact that his homeland is lost to him. The "course...to take refuge in nostalgia, to enter the comfortable past and there lapse dreamily away"<sup>134</sup> is rejected by him, just as by Ganin. Nor can he in the long run accept the attitude of his Cambridge tutor, Archibald Moon, who treats Russia as an "inanimate article of luxury" (97), who regards it as a definitely lost land "which the present cannot touch" and who delights in its "hermetic containedness."<sup>135</sup> Martin decides on a dangerous enterprise. Illegally, all by himself, he is going to cross the frontier, to enter Russia for just twenty-four hours and thus to recover it. His enterprise is of course doomed, and he never returns from his exploit.

What is interesting in the context of the present study is not so much Martin's story but the way in which the author uses the idea that a human life is not just a chaotic sequence of events and incidents, but that for him who can see, it appears structured. It has an underlying thematic design. There are in a life incidents that link with others, earlier or later ones, and that may in some cases be discovered to be of fatidic significance.

Nabokov introduces this idea in Speak, Memory where he says that "The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography."<sup>136</sup> He weaves one such

design in the life of Martin Edelweiss out of one of his own childhood recollections:

One night, during a trip abroad, in the fall of 1903, I recall kneeling on my (flattish) pillow at the window of a sleeping car...and seeing with an inexplicable pang, a handful of fabulous lights that beckoned to me from a distant hillside, and then slipped into a pocket of black velvet: diamonds that I later gave away to my characters to alleviate the burden of my wealth.<sup>137</sup>

These lights reappear in Glory where they "accompany the hero...throughout his life, from Yalta, to Southern France, Switzerland, and finally back to Russia."<sup>138</sup> He is intensely aware of them on a moonlit night in Yalta:

Right under his feet he saw a broad black abyss and beyond it the sea, which seemed to be raised and brought closer, with a full moon's wake, the 'Turkish Trail' spreading in the middle and narrowing as it approached the horizon. To the left, in the murky, mysterious distance, shimmered the diamond lights of Yalta (20).

This, and the rest of the surroundings: "...above the black alpestrine steppe, above the silken sea, the enormous, all-engulfing sky, dove-gray with stars" (20) evokes in Martin an extraordinary sensation: "an unbearable intensification of all his senses, a magical and demanding impulse, the presence of something for which alone it was worth living" (20). These lights, of which he keeps catching glimpses from trains never lose their attraction and magic for him and firmly remain associated in his mind with the intense emotional experience in his childhood:

Thus the nostalgic memory of the past flashes out of the darkness of anonymous landscapes which are rushing past the

windows of various trains...and urges Martin to attempt to cross the border into 'Zoorland', as he romantically calls 'the remote northern land' (162).<sup>139</sup>

The lights become fatidic for him in the sense that they urge him to undertake the dangerous adventure from which he does not return.

Another such design in Martin's life is of course that formed by the repeated image of the forest path. Again this begins with a childhood memory: On the wall above the bed of little Martin hangs "a watercolor depicting a dense forest with a winding path disappearing in its depths" (4), and in a book from which his mother reads to him before he goes to sleep

...there was a story about just such a picture with a path in the woods, right above the bed of a little boy, who, one fine night, just as he was, nightshirt and all, went from his bed into the picture, onto the path and disappeared into the woods (4-5).

The child Martin wonders if his mother will not notice the resemblance between the picture on the wall and the story and, becoming alarmed, remove the picture to "avert the nocturnal journey" (5).

The path, like the splendid lights, keep haunting Martin's imagination, and later, when he has started thinking of his enterprise, it is always connected with the image of the winding path:

'And then I'll continue on foot, on foot', muttered Martin excitedly - a forest, a winding path - what huge trees! (157)

And this image, connected with his childhood and accompanying him throughout his youth, is also connected with his end: Darwin, his Cambridge friend, informing

Martin's mother of her son's disappearance, momentarily "becomes" Martin, so to speak, as he leaves her and conjures up an image of Martin walking into "Zoorland" from where he will not return:

Darwin emerged from the brown depths of the melancholy garden, closed the wicket behind him...and started back along the path through the woods. ...It was quiet in the woods, all one could hear was a faint gurgle: water was running somewhere under the wet gray snow...The air was dingy, here and there tree roots traversed the trail, black fir needles now and then brushed against his shoulder, the dark path passed between the trunks in picturesque and mysterious windings (205).

Certainly, it is a long way from here to the complexities of later novels, but Glory is partly a first venture into the exploration of the pattern underlying the life of man, which is not, as Luzhin, Shade and Kinbote, and finally Mr. R. are to find out, a sequence of haphazard incidents and coincidences, but which, on close examination, and seen through the eyes of an artist, will be discovered to be well ordered, planned and determined by an underlying "web of sense".

King, Queen, Knave<sup>140</sup>, this "bright brute"<sup>141</sup>, as Nabokov calls his second novel, reads simply like a story of the love triangle, with Franz, the innocent, coming from the provinces to Berlin and being seduced by his much older aunt who also talks him into plans of murdering her unloved husband, Kurt Dreyer. None of the three characters has much depth: the title of the novel itself is an allusion to their cardboard

natures<sup>142</sup>, and a cinema built in the neighbourhood of Franz' dismal lodgings is to open with a show of a film based on Goldemar's play King, Queen, Knave, and, as an advertisement, has a display of "three gigantic transparent-looking playing cards resembling stained-glass windows which would probably be very effective when lit up at night" (216).

Franz is a simpleton and a dumb fool, an easy victim to his aunt's advances, whose values, in turn, are derived from the world of the cinema, and who is so wholly rooted in convention that even for a woman to have a lover appears to her to be a conventional necessity. As in their affair, Franz is equally helplessly her victim when she involves him in her murderous plans.

The only one to show some signs of genuine life is the hen-pecked husband, Kurt Dreyer, who is not only a successful businessman, but also knows how to enjoy life; who has a keen sense of humour, is amused by his conventional home and has something of an artist about him; in fact, in his youth he wanted to be one (223). He reads poems on the train journey, which Martha finds objectionable (9-10), and winces at some abominable performance at a variety show which entrances Franz and Martha (116-117). One sign, perhaps, that he has the author's sympathy is the fact that he can identify "'a Red Admirable butterfly', the recurring lepidopteron that is almost Nabokov's heraldic beast."<sup>143</sup>

But although alive in the sense just described, he

is blind where his wife and Franz are concerned, and this gives rise to a number of ironic situations, described in detail by Jürgen Bodenstein.<sup>144</sup> To give only a few examples out of the many: Dreyer is pleased to find, for example, that his wife is smiling "fairly often of late", and he mistakenly puts this down to the fact that she is happy with him. Actually Martha smiles because she intends to seduce young Franz, and "was in the pleasant position of a person who has been promised a mysterious treat in the near future" (62). Leaving for a skiing trip, Dreyer encourages his wife to "Have a good time over the holidays" and "Tell Franz to take you to the theatre" (148), without realizing that there is no need for such encouragement at all. He is the victim of false appearances on many other occasions, as for example, when he returns from his trip and experiences "perfect happiness" because "there was a magnificent smile on Martha's face" (160). However, it is not a smile of welcome; she smiles because "wise fate... had so simply and honestly averted a crude, ridiculous, dreadfully overworked disaster" (160), namely that of Dreyer surprising her and Franz together in his own bedroom.

All these and many other examples<sup>145</sup> joyfully exploit a stock comedy-situation and its consequences, and may in this novel not have any profound implications. However, they do anticipate, even though in a comic guise, the implications of later novels, such as The Eye, Pnin, Lolita, and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, all of which centre round the question whether

and to what degree, people can really know each other. Dreyer knows neither Franz nor Martha. He has labelled Franz, and Franz will remain for him "an amusing coincidence in human form" (106). He files him away in his mind under "'cretin' with cross references to 'milksoop' and 'sympathisch'" (169).

Martha remains a stranger to him even though he has lived with her for over seven years. He knows her so little that she can make all sorts of cruel plans to abolish him without raising his suspicion. In fact, after he has visited an exhibition of crime and has looked at photographs of murderers and their victims and all the appalling instruments of murder, he comes home, and looking at Franz and Martha, who have been plotting h i s murder for weeks, "felt a pleasant relief at seeing at last two familiar, two perfectly normal faces" (209). His former mistress, Erica knows very well what Dreyer's weakness is:

Oh, I can just see what you do with your wife. You love her and don't notice her. You love her - oh, ardently - and don't bother what she's like inside. You kiss her and still don't notice her (175).

People in the later novels label those with whom they live and file them away in their minds, never getting to know them more than superficially. Humbert Humbert loves Lolita "ardently" and still does not "notice" her.

Without trying to stretch things too far and to burden the "gayest"<sup>146</sup> of Nabokov's novels with a metaphysical meaning, one might say that even in its comical guise Martha's experience foreshadows the



serious and profound experiences of those characters in Nabokov's later novels who find that it is not for man to shape his own future and destiny. In Martha's case their experience is again rendered in ironical terms.

She plans her husband's death with the aim of securing her and Franz' happy future, but her plans miscarry. Her spells do not work (128), nor her tricks (146), and she herself cancels a carefully worked-out plan at the last second because Dreyer happens to mention that he is going to make "a hundred thousand dollars at one stroke" (247) the next day, a sum that "thrifty" Martha is of course not going to sacrifice.

"You see", she says, trying to introduce the idea of murder to Franz, "people generally make all kinds of plans, very good plans, but completely fail to consider one possibility: death. As if no one could ever die" (319). This is turned ironically against her. Of course she applies it only to her husband and never once to herself, and yet, ironically, it is Martha in the end who dies, having caught a fatal pneumonia on the rowing expedition that was to have been the end of her husband's life.

The heroes of Nabokov's later novels, Luzhin, Shade and Mr. R. will come to realize that there is some mysterious power at work, organizing, planning and shaping human life and that it is impossible for man to take any part in this shaping.

In this "gay" novel, it is of course a less mysterious power that does the ordering and planning.

It is "the god of chance (Cazelty or Sluch, or whatever his real name was)" (224), whose real name may in fact be Mr. Vivian Badlook (153) or Bavdak Vinomori (139) who keeps wandering through the novel with his camera and his butterfly net and who interferes with the lives of his (playing card) characters in a way in which Mr. R. in Transparent Things will no longer dare to interfere.

I.    The Eye

    Pnin

    Lolita; Laughter in the Dark

    The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

T H E E Y E

Within the general context of Nabokov's preoccupation with reality some very different novels from different periods of his career centre round the specific question whether it is possible to know and understand what another person really is behind what he appears to be. To put it in terms used in the introduction: is it possible for anyone to know the "true reality" of another person, or is all our knowledge of others limited to their "average reality", to those of their characteristics which are immediately obvious, or even to the images we create of them influenced by our own attitudes, interests, preoccupations and emotions?

The Eye<sup>1</sup>, the first of Nabokov's novels to introduce the theme, denies the possibility of real knowledge about others and ends on a note of despair, for, it implies, if real mutual knowledge and understanding are impossible, genuine contact and communication become impossible too, and this leads in the end to loneliness and complete isolation.

The Eye goes further than this, casting doubt on what we generally take for the "reality" of life: if we do not know real people, but, as will be shown, "phantoms", is not what we take for life merely a picture in a deceptive mirror, or a "shimmer on a screen"?

Pnin and Lolita, although superficially they do not seem to have anything in common with The Eye, explore and dramatize some of the theories evolved in the early

novel. They illustrate how people, even though they think they know each other, and even though they may live as closely together as Humbert Humbert and Lolita, yet remain complete strangers to each other, condemning each other to isolation, either because they make no effort to see behind the most obvious traits of the other and to explore his true personality, or because they see in the other person what they want to see. It is only at the end of Lolita and in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight that some (tentative) positive answers are given and that some (hard) ways of overcoming the barriers between persons are opened.

In The Eye and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight these problems are combined with the respective heroes' quest for self-knowledge: is it possible for anyone to know even himself? This knowledge, too, is denied to Smurov, the hero of The Eye, and it is again only the later novel that introduces some more optimistic note and grants Sebastian insight into, and knowledge of, his own self.

The Eye is a slight novel, simpler in its form than most of Nabokov's other novels, and its central questions and the answers to them are clearly formulated. However, even in this novel the development of the action and the narrative hinges on a typically Nabokovian comic twist. Before the novel has progressed very far, the narrator shoots himself; at least, he tries to commit suicide. To all appearances, he does not succeed, but he believes he has succeeded and behaves accordingly from the moment on at which some (he thinks miraculous and post-mortem)

consciousness returns to him. The idea he tries all along to impress on the reader is that he is not a live person any more: it is only his "thought", as he puts it, that "lives on by momentum" (29), and all he experiences is no more than a "postexistent chimera" (31). If this is so, human thought must indeed be "a mighty thing" (29), for even after his supposed death it recreates to perfection all the things he knew in life, including a hollow tooth.

It also furnishes his memory with the exact details of his (attempted) suicide. Looking back on it, he even seems to be aware of a streak of irony and absurdity in a situation that, after all, marked a serious crisis in his life: He has had specific and yet rather vague ideas of "how people went about shooting themselves" (26). In his imagination this is a ceremony that should follow a certain established pattern. There are the "traditional letters" (26) to those whom one knows and loves, the tidying up of things, the clean linen one is supposed to put on, one's money to dispose of... But "I knew few people and loved no one" (26); so what is the use of writing letters? All he possesses in the way of money are twenty marks. Is this worth the trouble of putting it in an envelope and leaving it to someone? The tradition of suicide is rather too solemn and pompous for the "wretched, shivering, vulgar little man" (26) he sees in the mirror. When his time has come, he is not up to executing all the moves that tradition requires. Instead, he makes a very unconventional and unceremonious exit (after

tearing the banknote into little pieces and destroying his wrist-watch).

The incidents after his suicide also smack of irony, and again he seems to be aware of it and slightly hurt. The dramatic circumstances which accompanied his last moment, that "delightful vibrating sound behind...me" after the shot, "the warble of water, a throaty gushing noise" (28), are explained away all too prosaically: it was only the pitcher that his bullet hit and smashed. If he felt "unbelievably free" (27) during his last moments and convinced that nothing mattered any more, he finds that this was another mistake on his part. Everything matters, just as before. The world closes in on him again. Even as a ghost he has to be practical. His watch has to be repaired, he needs money, he needs a job. He is not free at all, but finds himself (or, in his opinion, his thought) engaged as always in "a sphere where everything is interconnected" (31), and in a world which, he feels, might have strongly objected had he given in to his lawless impulses (27) inspired by that exalted feeling of freedom.

The worst ironic slight, of course, is that nobody but himself believes in his death. The only sympathetic comment comes from Weinstock: "You look awful", which he attributes to the "grippe" (32), and this must be rather disconcerting for someone who is convinced that he is stone-dead and no more than a ghost.

It is, to say the least, rather unusual to be talked to by a narrator of whom one is pretty sure that he is as alive as can be, but who seems to believe

quite firmly in his own death and pretends that it is only his disembodied spirit that goes about the ordinary affairs of life, that speaks to and talks about people. Yet such is the underlying comic formula of this "twinkling tale."<sup>2</sup>

It is also the necessary precondition for the quest the narrator sets out to undertake. From the moment at which he moves into the house at 5 Peacock Street and gets to know a group of émigré Russians, he does not talk much about himself any more. At least, he pretends that he is only present as the narrating "I" that watches what is going on, that observes people and comments on them. He does talk a lot about a certain Smurov, a young man who is a newcomer to the group. He watches him closely and attentively; he notes how other people react to him, and he sets himself the aim of "[digging] up the true Smurov" (59), "the type, the model, the original" (58).

It does not take one long to realize that he himself is Smurov. He has always watched himself; he has never been able to stop doing so, even when he desperately wanted to, and behind this obsession, it seems, has been a constant preoccupation with the riddle of his own personality and, in fact, his whole existence:

...I was always exposed, always wide-eyed; even in sleep I did not cease to watch over myself, understanding nothing of my existence, growing crazy at the thought of not being able to stop being aware of myself...(16-17)

If his suicide has not freed him of his obsession, it has yet given him a kind of freedom he did not



have before: after the suicidal act he is no longer wrapped up in his own self, watching his every thought and action from inside, self-consciously and "with sympathy" (35), that is, emotionally, but he looks upon himself as upon another person, detachedly, soberly, as an "onlooker", and "with curiosity instead of sympathy" (35). With the suicide, then, he has not killed himself physically, but, as his own words imply, he has killed (or: for the time being, has shed) the emotional part of himself, that part which always made him suffer. Looking at Smurov, he is, as it were, looking at himself from the outside, interested, curious, striving to find out about himself and his existence, and all the while talking about himself in the third person.

His quest foreshadows to a certain degree Sebastian's and V's search for the "real" Sebastian Knight, for in addition to watching himself, the narrator tries to gain knowledge about himself by observing and spying on, other persons' reactions to him.

He is soon puzzled because his image takes on new aspects all the time. The pictures that the others form of Smurov differ widely from one another, they even exclude one another. Marianna sees in him "a brutal and brilliant officer of the White Army" (59), Weinstock suspects him of being a dangerous spy (57-58). For Gretchen and the janitor's wife he is "a foreign poet", "a spiritual gentleman" (78); he is "an adventurer", "a Don Juan, a Casanova" (76) for Weinstock, but "a rascal", "a sexual lefty" (85) for

Bogdanovich, which may well be the picture preserved for future centuries in Bogdanovich's diary. Uncle Pasha has his own private picture of Smurov the bridegroom (which is based on an error), and Krushchov sees him as "a thief in the ugliest sense of the word" (86). None of these has anything to do with the picture which the reader is moved to form of him at the beginning: that of a pitiable man, lonely, "despondent and afraid" (16), "frightened to death" when crossing the Finnish border (even though with a permit [15]); a weak person who allows himself to be seduced by plump Matilda and to be beaten up by her husband.

All these pictures are evoked by the same person. Marianna, Bogdanovich, Weinstock, Krushchov, and all the others see, and talk to, the same Smurov. But they see him from different angles, as it were. They are grouped around him like mirrors, and each mirror catches him differently and reflects him in a different perspective and colouring. What perspective and colouring depends wholly on the position and quality of the mirror. In other words, how Smurov appears to each individual person, depends on this particular person's attitude to him, which is determined by this person's preoccupations, emotions and interests.

As he puts it:

...his image was influenced by the climatic conditions prevailing in various souls -  
...within a cold soul he assumed one aspect but in a glowing one had a different colouration (59).

Only a "spy" will satisfy mysteriously-minded Weinstock; a "foreign poet" suits the simple "romantic"

imagination of Gretchen best; all the qualities that make Mukhin look on him with contempt (55-56) acquire a certain charm in gentle Vanya's view (94-95); and the defeat he has just suffered is reason enough for Smurov to invent an extremely idealistic and gallant picture of himself (40-41), which can be trusted no more than any of the others.

This has rather pessimistic implications as far as the answer to the basic question is concerned. It appears that anybody looking at another person will be aware of only a few of that person's superficial traits without being able to see the real person behind them. And moreover, the little he is aware of will be wholly subjective because what he sees will depend on his own specific personality and character.

It is hard to guess at the real and natural stature and the real looks of a person whom one sees distorted by perspective in a mirror, and when there are a whole number of distorted and fragmentary images, this becomes even harder. Eventually it becomes impossible even for Smurov himself to detect the real Smurov behind the confusing variety of contrasting reflections: even the possibility of self-knowledge is thus ruled out in this novel. Being unable to do what he has set out to do, namely "to dig up" the real Smurov, he decides in the end that such a person does not exist. The only mode of existence, not only for him but for anybody, he implies, is in the multiplicity of contrasting images formed by others. There is no such thing as the model, or the real person, but only "phantoms"

that vaguely resemble him:

...I do not exist: there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me. With every acquaintance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. Somewhere they live, somewhere they multiply. I alone do not exist (102).<sup>3</sup>

The novel reaches beyond this concern with the "true reality" of a person and explores the implications of the pessimistic conclusion just analysed:

Just as all the people he meets are "not live beings but only chance mirrors for Smurov" (90), he is a mirror himself, in which all the others, too, are reduced to mere reflections, their entire existence being "merely a shimmer on a screen" (91).

If this is so, this same multiplicity can be a valuable protection: Nothing that one person can do can really harm the other one. It is impossible to hurt anybody if he does not exist. Whatever attacks may be aimed at a person, they can reach only one of the variety of "phantoms" that resemble him; all the others go unharmed. This, it seems, is what gives Smurov that exultant feeling of security at the end: "The world, try as it may, cannot insult me. I am invulnerable" (103). But in this triumph is mingled a note of despair. Why should he insist so repeatedly, so defiantly and aggressively that he is happy?

I am happy - yes, happy! What more can I do to prove it, how to proclaim that I am happy? Oh, to shout it so that all of you believe me at last, you cruel, smug people... (103).

This sounds rather as if he were trying to convince above all himself that he is happy. He has in-

deed been through an experience that may account for this. There is a brief period during which he tries to break out of the unreal world of mirrors and reflections and during which he steps back into life. He becomes one with himself once more, so to speak; he does not watch himself, nor his emotions but lives through them, and talks in the first person of Smurov (72ff.) He loves Vanya. Not for anything he knows about her: "What difference did it make to me whether she were stupid or intelligent, or what her childhood had been like, or what books she read, or what she thought about the universe?" (73) He loves her for something that he sees as her essential quality and which he calls "her loveliness" (73). But he is not loved back, and he also feels that this "loveliness", which he most needs and wants from her, is too intimately hers and not accessible to him. Like "the tint of the cloud or the scent of the flower" (74) it can only be sensed and admired but not "appropriated" (74). The only escape he sees from this painful passion is to tell himself that it is all just an illusion on his part. There are probably as many different versions of Vanya as there are of himself. There is probably no such person as the "real" Vanya whom he believes for a moment to have found. Why, then, should he be unhappy if she does not love him? He calms down (74), telling himself that he has loved no more than one of the "phantoms" that resemble her, an image created in the mirror of his own mind. "...Vanya, like all the rest, existed only in my imagination..." (191-192).

He says he calms down, but the tone in which he later insists on his happiness betrays the despair that has remained in him. One might conclude that the source of his despair is not simply the loss of Vanya but an awareness of the great loneliness to which his theory condemns man and has condemned himself. If his assumption about himself and about Vanya is right, then people not only see and judge, hate or attack "phantoms"; then they also talk and get attached to, and fall in love with, not real people, but persons of their own invention, "phantoms" as well. Then all genuine contact and communication is impossible. Feelings and emotions never reach the person on whom they are centred because they are all based on errors and illusions. Should an emotion become too powerful and painful, one needs only remind oneself of these facts.

In the last analysis, and this may well be the profoundest cause of Smurov's despair, the conclusions he has come to completely reduce life to irreality and uncover its transiency. He has set out to try and understand his existence, and has found that his and, in fact, everybody's existence is only "a shimmer on a screen." He has found only reflections, images in mirrors, which, though they may look like people and appear lifelike, cannot be taken for real people and are not life, but only a debased and distorted and unreal version of it. His own real self, and Vanya's, which he thought for a moment he had found behind her reflection, escape him, and although he senses that

there must be some "model" and "original" of the unreal "shimmer" of life on the screen, real life, too, escapes him.

Something else contributes to his despair. For a little while he has entertained the illusion that his image, so elusive that he himself cannot capture and preserve it, might be "securely and lastingly preserved" by Roman Bogdanovich, and at that thought has felt "a sacred chill" (80). He has entertained the hope that Roman Bogdanovich, in his diary, might be "creating an image, perhaps immortal, of Smurov" (82), only to find that Bogdanovich's is the most humiliating, distorted and degrading image of the many that exist of him in the mirror minds of others (85-87). Along with Uncle Pasha Smurov sees "the happiest image" of himself dying (93), and it gradually dawns on him that there is no such thing as immortality. Only "phantoms" of himself will survive him for a while, and then even these will die:

With every acquaintance I make the population of phantoms resembling me increases. I alone do not exist. Smurov, however, will live on for a long time. The two boys, those pupils of mine, will grow old, and some image or other of me will live within them like a tenacious parasite. And then will come the day when the last person who remembers me will die. ... Perhaps a chance story about me, a simple anecdote in which I figure, will pass on from him to his son or grandson, and so my name and my ghost will appear fleetingly here and there for some time still. Then will come the end (103).

Sebastian Knight in the later novel, who is confronted with the same dilemmas, eventually finds a way out. Smurov has no means of escaping from the

state of affairs he recognizes and from which he desperately wants to escape. He gets irrevocably caught up in the world of mirrors and mirror images, and the process is concluded when, on leaving the flower shop, he merges into one with his reflection in the mirror:

As I pushed the door, I noticed the reflection in the side mirror: a young man in a bowler carrying a bouquet, hurried towards me. That reflection and I merged into one (97).

From that moment on there are no two Smurovs any more. There is just one, isolated, watchful: ("a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye" [103]); "dead" (as the mark of his bullet on the wall proves [99]), no more than an unreal reflection, and yet, it appears, yearning for real life.



P N I N

In their appreciation of Pnin<sup>1</sup> critics have remarked on its relative simplicity in comparison with Nabokov's other novels. One of them has called it "a quiet and gently comic interlude between the involved magnificence of its predecessor and Pale Fire"<sup>2</sup>, and it does in fact appear much less complex than Lolita, the novel that precedes it in the Nabokov canon, and Pale Fire, which follows it, or the complex and intricate Sebastian Knight, with which it is thematically connected. This can be attributed to the fact that it "does not employ its own artifice as its own primary subject"<sup>3</sup> and does therefore not send the reader on a desperate quest for what is "real" in the maze of mirror images that art creates when reflecting on itself. Instead of playing with and parodying, literary techniques and devices, as other Nabokov novels do, and instead of creating "puzzles", Pnin "concentrates on the depiction and understanding of a truly human being."<sup>4</sup>

It is not strictly speaking a biography. Rather than a full-length account of Pnin's life, the novel contains seven episodes, each showing Pnin in a different situation during his residence at Waindell where he has been an émigré assistant professor for over nine years, and it is only through flash-backs that some bits of his past are revealed. From these somewhat loosely connected episodes he emerges as a fascinating character, or rather: two Pnins emerge;

one evoking hilarity: the comic Pnin; "the outstanding Waindell campus curio"<sup>5</sup>; the Pnin who is in one way or another always out of step with the world around him; the other evoking compassion: the pathetic and sad Pnin; the exile; "the perpetual wanderer"<sup>6</sup>, battered and stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness" (144).

With the emergence of the two Pnins the novel loses much of its superficial simplicity. Though less clearly defined than in The Eye and in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the central concern of Pnin closely resembles that of these two novels. The analysis of The Eye has suggested how easily people fail in their appreciation of others, and how the "true reality" of a person can get lost behind the faulty images created of him in the minds of those around him. This leads in Sebastian Knight to a quest of infinite complexity, and Pnin, in the very process of depicting and understanding a "truly human being", also poses the question whether such a depiction and such an understanding is at all possible. It is true that instead of a whole variety of Smurovs and (later) Sebastians there are only two versions of Pnin, but both these are open to doubt, and in the attempt to single out the more likely version, or to form a picture of the real personality of Pnin, the reader gets involved in the question described above. Gradually this problem is widened, and round the main concern are grouped other questions all dealing with the approach to individual aspects of reality.

For the sake of convenience the two aspects of Pnin must be dealt with separately, although, of course, they are never separate in the novel. For the depiction of the comic Pnin, the narrator, who by and by emerges also as a character in the story and an old acquaintance of Pnin's, relies for the most part on what others tell him. Dr. Eric Wind, for example, gives him "some bizarre details" (185) of Pnin's passage to America; his main source of information, however, is apparently Jack Cockerell who can impersonate Pnin "to perfection" (187).

Theories of the comic name "unlikeness"<sup>7</sup> as the main criterion by which a comic character can be identified. A person appears comic when he is seen against the background of a society whose conduct, habits, and modes of thinking are presented as the norm (not necessarily the ideal), and when his own conduct, habits, and modes of thinking differ from that norm. In fact, everything in a person: his appearance and his clothes, his speech and gestures, his emotions, interests and desires, can work together to make him appear comic if they are different from what is supposed to be normal.<sup>8</sup> Some specification is necessary: someone excessively and abnormally bad or cruel is not comic, says Olson, because he is "the object of serious concern."<sup>9</sup> Nor can someone be said to be comic because he is "extremely good or better than most."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, two types of comic persons must be distinguished: the ridiculous and the ludicrous. The term "ridiculous" implies for Olson some moral judge-

ment. Ridiculous persons are not simply "unlike", they are also "bad in a way which renders [them] worthless or of no account even as bad"<sup>11</sup>, and they are "inferior, either to the ordinary, or at least inferior to what has been thought or claimed about [them]"<sup>12</sup>, inferior also "in a way which obviates the possibility of taking them seriously, that is as the object of any serious emotion."<sup>13</sup> The term "ludicrous", as Olson uses it, has no moral implication. The basis of the ludicrous, too, is "unlikeness", but it is an unlikeness that makes a person neither worthless nor inferior. There is no element of degradation in it; it is, rather, the unexpected, surprising, sometimes bizarre unlikeness of the odd, the eccentric, and the quaint.<sup>14</sup>

It can be stated at once that Pnin belongs to the second category of comic persons. The background (the standard) against which he is seen and against which nearly everybody around him measures him, is a section of modern (American) society: the population of Waindell and Waindell College campus.

Pnin's very name is odd. It is a very unusual name: "a preposterous little explosion" (32), unpronounceable for American tongues (26). It is, incidentally, also the name of the eighteenth century Russian poet Ivan Pnin, and, together with its allusions to one of that poet's works, it is one of Nabokov's "private Russian jokes" and is coloured by all sorts of associations (as the names of comic persons often are), which also reflect on Pnin and his behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

Pnin's appearance is comic, made up of a number of incongruous elements both in his facial expression and in his figure (7). Also, at the age of fifty-two, he has got used to making concessions to the "heady atmosphere of the New World" (8), and whereas he dressed himself soberly and in a conventional manner in his youth, he now sports fashionable and trendy clothes and creates an image of himself that does not correspond with his conservative beliefs, his sedate manners and his old-fashioned inner self.

His comic diction, or, to be precise, his comic use of English (for "his Russian was music" [66]) is a source of amusement to those around him and inspires Cockerell to endless imitations (187). After so many years in America Pnin admits himself that he still speaks "in French with much more facility than in English" (105), and, as examples are given, it becomes indeed quite clear that mastering the language is still a problem for him in many respects. A person's speech becomes comic through faulty pronunciation, through grammatical errors, through being "too prolix or concise" or "by employing the wrong style."<sup>16</sup> Pnin is fighting a constant battle with the sounds of the English language, but it is a losing battle: all his vowels and consonants come out wrong; the results are so odd at times as to be pronounced "mythopeic" (165). Although by stubborn application Pnin has learnt enough English to "handle practically any topic" (14), he clearly still has some difficulty both with the peculiarities of English grammar and with the choice of

words. He misapplies the words he has learnt with so much devotion, thus creating some amazing mental pictures ("I only am grazing" [40]). He also uses adventurous word formations all of his own which he unconcernedly creates by analogy ("abstractical" [11]) or by simply "Englishing" Russian words ("quittance" [18]). He constantly moves on the wrong level of English, using formal words and phrases (not excluding archaisms), no matter whether he is having a chat over a meal or just asking someone to his house:

So I take the opportunity to extend a cordial invitation to you to visit me this evening. Half past eight, postmeridian. A little house-heating soiree, nothing more. Bring also your spouse - or perhaps you are a Bachelor of Hearts?  
(150-151)

Even when his English is not quite wrong, it is just off the mark; most of the time it is formal and stilted; so much so, in fact, that an occasional colloquialism ("O.K." [104]) sounds rather out of place.

Something else must infallibly make him appear comic to all those around him, and that is his apparent incompetence and helplessness in everyday situations and with regard to commonplace little problems. He seems to be quite unable to cope with life and its daily little hazards in the same way as everybody else. Pnin is on safe ground with literature. He loves it, he understands it, he knows how to approach it, but once he leaves his preoccupation with Russian literature and lore, he is on safe ground no longer. He then seems to enter a completely new and dangerous world, full of treacherous pitfalls, in which he gets caught

all the time. He suffers an almost uninterrupted series of minor disasters and defeats and appears to those who do not know much about him and who see him only from the outside, as one of those comic Bergsonian "childlike dreamers for whom life delights to lie in wait."<sup>17</sup> The comic effect of this is heightened once the causes of his mishaps are discovered: ironically it is Pnin himself who creates most of the unfortunate situations which he finds so hard to master and which often prove too much for him. The source of all his troubles is that his approach to things and ordinary matters and problems is different from everybody else's (and therefore "odd"): it involves a special Pninian attitude, a particular, peculiar way of thinking, a special kind of logic. In connection with literature he has a clear and scholarly mind; with regard to everyday matters the workings of his mind are no good. His thoughts and his logical conclusions hardly ever suit the occasion: they are either too complicated or too simple. They put him out of step with everybody and everything and invariably either make him appear odd or get him into trouble.

One instance of this is the comic war with inanimate objects in which he finds himself engaged almost permanently and in which he is always the loser. The world outside literature seems to Pnin to be full of wonderful and intriguing things. He approaches them with an attitude and an enquiring mind that are in fact very much like a child's. He looks at them as if for the first time, with fresh eyes and a fresh mind

that has as yet not formed any idea about them, that is ready to marvel at them and is consequently filled with admiration for what it sees. The less he understands about things, the more wonderful they appear to him. "On gadgets he doted with a kind of dazed, superstitious delight. Electric devices enchanted him. Plastics swept him off his feet. He had a deep admiration for the zipper" (13-14). The very delight he takes in these things makes him appear odd. The zipper, plastics, electric devices and thousands of other things have become very ordinary objects. Everybody uses them, everybody takes them for granted. Nobody thinks about them any more; much less does anybody develop a "deep admiration" for them. It is with regard to them clearly a wrong (and therefore comic) emotion.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore Pnin is not content to simply admire them and to use them as they ought to be used. They seem to him to ask for close examination and investigation. "Out of sheer scientific curiosity" (40) he experiments, he tries to find out to what other uses they can be put, and this is fatal. Somehow it looks as if things had developed some kind of incomprehensible intelligence and consciously defended themselves against the unaccustomed treatment. Pnin's scientific curiosity, his kindly, though unusual, approach provoke the most vicious behaviour on their part, and are answered by unpredictable attacks. Things become unmanageable in his hands: They "fell apart, or attacked him, or refused to function, or viciously got themselves lost as soon as they entered the sphere of his



existence" (13). In his presence they behave in wicked and unnatural ways, even when he is quite innocent for once (64).

It contradicts all expectation and logic that a thinking, intelligent human being should be inferior to, and a victim of, inanimate, mindless objects<sup>19</sup>, but even though Pnin has taken up some extraordinary measures to protect himself, such as wearing rubber gloves "so as to avoid being stung by the amerikanski electricity in the metal of the shelving" (77), his intelligence is constantly outwitted by that of the objects around him, and he suffers one comic defeat after another.

He also gets defeated in his dealings with people, and for exactly the same reason as in his dealings with things: namely because he does not act (or react) "normally". There are instances in which his "adversaries" are not aware of any problem and in which neither they nor Pnin himself are aware of his defeat. Such is the case when he gets involved with the "Twynns": Professor Tristram W. Thomas of the Department of Anthropology and Professor Thomas Wynn of the Ornithological Department who resemble each other. The doppelgänger device is in itself almost a guarantee of comic effects, and when someone like Pnin gets involved with doppelgängers, comic effects are impossible to avoid. When Pnin realizes (after eight years or so) that a person he has known as Professor Wynn "was not always Professor Wynn", but "at times...graded, as it were, into somebody else" (149), this fact assumes

for him the dimension of a major problem and he proceeds to treat it as one. Simple and "normal" ways of action never occur to him. But neither his initial complicated efforts to avoid the two professors (until he eventually seems to be playing a hilarious game of hide-and-seek with them) nor his later efforts to identify them lead to anything at all. In fact, although he is never aware of it, he gets them more thoroughly confused than ever, inviting the one to his party while he thinks he is inviting the other, and causing wonder and amusement at his apparent oddity when (in his seeming triumph over them) he makes sly quips which are, in the circumstances, quite pointless (156).

Paradoxically and ironically Pnin gives the impression of being singularly absent-minded because he spends so much time thinking and analysing situations. He thinks at the wrong moments, creating such far-fetched problems that he cannot cope with (or does not even see) the issues immediately at hand, and fails to do the necessary or obvious thing. He gets into absurd and nightmarish situations although (or just because) he tries so hard to avoid them, because he is "too painfully on the alert" (13), because he thinks and analyses when he should act or react. In this way he manages to get himself defeated even when there is no enemy whatever, neither of the human nor of the inanimate kind. He simply conjures up the conditions of defeat himself by complicating simple issues and getting himself into Pninian quandaries about, for example, whether he should carry the manuscript of a lecture he

is going to give, on his person or in the suit he is going to wear for the occasion. In the end, and because the confusion he has created is too great, he leaves it in his bag and takes the wrong manuscript instead. (It is only the author's kindness that spares him a final catastrophe and allows him after all to arrive at his lecture with the manuscript he desperately needs.)

Pnin does not even react "normally" where laws and conventions require him to do so. It appears, indeed, that he is quite unaware that laws and established ways of behaviour have in many situations replaced thinking and what appears to him as logic. For everybody except him these laws and conventions have become so firmly established that they are not questioned any more. They have become so predominant as to provoke certain automatic reactions and patterns of behaviour that make further thinking unnecessary. As far as Pnin is concerned they might as well not exist. He does not react automatically (which to others means naturally and normally); he is not conditioned by conventions. He thinks and applies logic and defends what his logically thinking mind tells him is right. Unfortunately his thinking, although it tends to take rather sinuous paths, is also characterized by a certain harmlessness and naïveté, so that his approach to certain questions is paradoxically too complicated and too simple at the same time. Why, he argues, for example, and at a very unsuitable moment too, should he stop at a red light, encouraging "the

development of a base conditional reflex" (113) even when the road is clear?

It does not occur to him that his reasoning and his nonconformity in such matters could possibly be regarded as eccentricity by those who behave "naturally", and be the object of mirth and laughter. In fact, it does not occur to him that his attitudes might not be regarded as perfectly natural as to him they are, and this self-delusion adds of course another facet to the picture of the comic Pnin.<sup>20</sup> When he meets with contradiction, or with surprise at what he thinks is right, he reacts to the judgements behind them "with a dignified scorn for their manifest inferiority."<sup>21</sup> What if he did get the number of a library volume wrong as long as he got the date right! "Eighteen, 19... There is no great difference! I put the year correctly, that is important!...They can't read, these women. The year was plainly inscribed" (75).

It is true that he sometimes does submit to laws and conventions (when he eventually learns about them), but he does so unwillingly and out of sheer necessity: to pass his driver's licence test, for instance. There are other occasions where he makes it quite clear that there are limits to his readiness to compromise and that he has "reservations" (60). He applies (or misapplies) logic to things that by agreement should not be treated and questioned logically. He strictly refuses, for example, to accept the laughable assumptions one has to accept in order to find a cartoon funny: "So small island, moreover with palm, cannot

exist in such big sea" (60). It comes hardly as a surprise that even Pnin's sense of humour should be different from everybody else's and that things that amuse others should leave him indifferent. And one can hardly expect him to laugh at Charlie Chaplin, that "incomparable comedian" (80), of whose misfortunes and endless fights with things one is so often reminded when watching Pnin's own comically helpless battles.

Whatever Pnin does, whatever happens to him, it is nearly always something unexpected and hardly ever the "normal" kind of thing. With his extraordinary delight in ordinary things and his constant losing battles with them; with his quandaries over simple matters; with the curious workings of his mind, which lead to unsuitable reactions at the wrong moments and result in irrelevant comments on what is supposedly humour, the picture of the comic Pnin is complete, or, almost complete: Pnin is so unpredictable as to sometimes behave like other, "normal" people. Absent-minded and forgetful about ordinary things (or rather, too deeply engaged in his own complicated thoughts to have any time for them), he can be quite unexpectedly efficient. He goes, in fact, to funny extremes in his efficiency when he supplies someone on the phone not only with the precise bit of information that this person wants, but adds an extra bit which he fancies may come in useful (159). He is so constantly out of step with the world, his eccentricity is so firmly established from the beginning, that the few occasions when he is in step seem totally out of character. One is so

used to his behaving differently from everybody else that when all of a sudden he behaves l i k e everybody else, this comes as a little shock of surprise. What in others is normal is not normal in him. In him, it is incongruous and thus adds the finishing touch to the picture of the comic Pnin.

This, then, is Pnin as seen by the majority of people at Waindell, as described to the narrator by Cockerell, and by the narrator to the reader.

He [Cockerell] went on for at least two hours, showing me everything - Pnin teaching, Pnin eating, Pnin ogling a coed, Pnin narrating the epic of the electric fan which he had imprudently set going on a glass shelf right above the bathtub into which its own vibration had almost caused it to fall; Pnin trying to convince Professor Wynn, the ornithologist who hardly knew him, that they were old pals,... We heard Pnin criticize the various rooms he had successively rented. We listened to Pnin's account of his learning to drive a car, and of his dealing with his first puncture... (187-188).

Cockerell has an endless repertoire (187-189), though it is not quite clear how much of his impersonation is based on fact and how much of it his enthusiasm has caused him to invent. However that may be, his and the general Waindell image of Pnin is clearly incorrect and one-sided. To put it in terms of The Eye: people at Waindell know only a "phantom" that resembles Pnin, and to that phantom they react. They do not know, and make no effort to find out, whether there is anything behind the comic person they see.

It becomes obvious by and by that their picture of Pnin is rooted in their approach to all aspects of life and reality, and this issue springs in turn

directly from Pnin's peculiar and surprising approach to the world. His approach is considered as comic because it is different from everybody else's and not "normal". But if his approach is not normal, then the norm must be an unthinking, blind, matter-of-fact acceptance of things and an equally unthinking attitude to people and life. This is, in fact, the attitude that characterizes the Waindell community as it emerges from Pnin (although it might as well be stated that this attitude is not limited to that particular group of people).

The general approach to things is to regard them as merely useful and functional. Their specific uses are indicated by their names which are attached to them like labels, and behind these labels hardly anybody tries to look. People see that side and that quality of a thing which the label promises will be useful to them, and to that side and quality they react. The other qualities they notice only in passing, if at all, so that the thing itself escapes them. They do not normally even try to find out how or why a thing works. They are aware of how inconvenient it is to have to do without it when it refuses to function. They are seldom aware of the wonder that it should function at all.<sup>22</sup>

What is true of the general reaction to things also applies to the general ("normal") reactions in many other spheres of life. In many fields life is regulated by conventions, customs, and laws which fulfill the same function as the names of things: they label

specific situations and provoke specific reactions, that is, the reactions that the situations require. Certain signals are quite sufficient to produce unfailingly the specific reflex actions. No questioning, no thinking, no reasoning precede or accompany them. They are quite automatic. One stops at a red traffic light, one laughs at a cartoon, one laughs about Charlie Chaplin, because, by common agreement, he is funny.

At Waindell, the signal "beginning of term" never fails to provoke the same activities year in year out. Young students are regularly brought up on "word plastics like 'conflict' and 'pattern'" (138) and react to their first samples of academic teaching with always the same notes in the margins of books. The Waindell Recorder regularly discusses the Parking Problem; and regularly, and with dull and mindless repetition, the same "mimicked kiss" in "applied lipstick" appears on "the marble neck of a homely Venus in the vestibule of Humanities Hall" (137).

Routine and monotony have even crept into some areas of people's private lives. This shows in a deadly uniformity of taste and interest which assures that in the bookcases of all the houses Pnin tries out "Hendrik Willem von Loon and Dr Cronin were inevitably present", and that in all the houses a Toulouse-Lautrec poster hangs somewhere (64).

In this respect, too, Pnin is of course different from all the rest. For years, it is true, he has lived in rented rooms which have afforded him neither peace nor privacy, but even so he has never failed to make



them at least l o o k like his own, "Pninizing" them (35), weeding out all traces left by their former occupants. He lovingly applies this "pleasant task" (35) even to his university office (69); and when, after all these years, he moves into "a discrete building all by himself" (144), his pleasure and delight almost equals that which he finds in his scholarly activities.

With all this in mind, it is neither fair nor satisfactory to see in Pnin simply a curio, or the "freak" (32) that he is taken for at Waindell College. Compared with those around him he emerges by and by not only as the one person who has retained his individuality, but also (with the exception of the Clementses) as the only person who strikes one as really alive. Customs, laws, and conventions have not dulled his mind. It is ever active, inquisitive and critical; neither satisfied by looking at surfaces, nor content simply to accept the information that labels provide; never ready to follow rules laid down by conventions and laws unless he has analysed them first and found them satisfactory or impossible to circumvent. He does not allow labels and conventions to intervene between himself and things or problems; he looks behind them or through them, at the things and at the problems themselves, and penetrates (or at least tries to penetrate) to their real being and nature that others do not even suspect.

All this has the effect, if one is willing to see in him not only the eccentric, and to try and follow the train of his thoughts, that he can divert one from

one's own prejudices and insinuate his vision into one's own consciousness.<sup>23</sup> With him, one can discover new and surprising aspects of reality and discover that there is more delight, more beauty and wonder, but also that there is more sadness than the "normal" approach discloses. As one critic has put it: "By the absurdities of his life, by his laughable preoccupation with the patently irrelevant, he persuades us to readjust our focus and to revise our own sight."<sup>24</sup>

However, this is not the attitude brought to Pnin at Waindell. No one there is persuaded by him to readjust his focus or to revise his sight. On the contrary, as has been seen, Pnin himself has become the victim of the conventional approach to the world. Once people have made up their minds about him and decided that he is an outsider and a freak, they do not let anything interfere with this notion. He has been labelled and behind the convenient label no one cares to look.

This mindless approach is fatal when applied to human beings. It also reflects on those who exercise it and casts a new and surprising light on them. All along Nabokov has led the reader to believe that it is Pnin who is the comic figure of the novel, and so he is when he is measured against what is commonly accepted as the norm.

However, without a word of open criticism, and almost imperceptibly, Nabokov cuts the ground under our feet. Not only has he led us to realize that, compared with Pnin, we miss a great deal of what the world offers, and that, what we look at as reality is

indeed only the very thinnest surface of it; he also shakes our belief and trust in old and established norms, in the very norms indeed, against which Pnin has so far been measured. For many purposes the "normal" approach that Waindell people and ourselves bring to things is undoubtedly reasonable and practical, as Pnin's difficulties prove by contrast. But from a superior point of view, from which practical ends become inessential, all actions that are prompted by habits, all those which have become simple reflex actions, and even those at the basis of which lie convention and ceremony, are seen to lack all freshness and originality; people move and behave and think in fixed and rigid patterns and "give us the impression of puppets in motion."<sup>25</sup> "Campus dummies" (146)

Nabokov very appropriately calls the population of Waindell College Campus. From that point of view a great part of "normal" human behaviour proves to be prompted by the very automatism and to be characterized by the very inflexibility that Bergson sees as the basic source of the comic.<sup>26</sup> From that point of view, then, not Pnin but the world around him is comic, insofar as it is absent-minded, and mindless, automatic and inflexible. These qualities are so prominent in the world around him that Pnin, when he leaves Waindell, "bears away with him all of the world's vitality."<sup>27</sup>

All this, as was said above, is implicit in the relation of Pnin's story rather than stated in the form of open criticism, but Nabokov is not so chari-

table throughout. From mild reproof he switches to ridicule and unsparing satire when he turns to groups who claim special attention; who pretend to superior knowledge and an enlightened mind; of whom one would expect spiritual openness and flexibility, but who prove by their attitudes that automation has penetrated into their fields and minds as well and that their minds are caught in a tiny circle of concepts into which they must perforce fit everything and everybody they encounter.

Academic life at Waindell mirrors everyday life in that it cannot and does not want to accommodate Pnin. The Waindell scholars are harsh in their judgement of him: he is pronounced "not fit even to loiter in the vicinity of an American college" (141). This is a surprising verdict in view of the fact that Pnin appears throughout as a devoted and true scholar with a great love of precision and detail and a rare and wonderful capacity for enthusiasm, and as an inspired, even though somewhat unorthodox, teacher. It emerges that the reason for his rejection is the very same that leaves him an outsider in everyday life. He is too much of an individual, and unpredictable, and consequently he upsets and endangers the fixed and predictable Waindell academic machinery, in which instructors can rely on superannuated articles (not available to students) for their lectures (141), and in which the Chairman of French Literature and Language "disliked Literature and had no French" (140). Again, it is of course not Pnin who is really comic

but the group of academics with whom he is contrasted: "a lot of sterile and pretentious people...whose academic ambitions vastly exceed their intellectual capabilities."<sup>28</sup> Rejecting Pnin, they expose themselves and their narrowmindedness. Their inability to appreciate what is alive and original in the sphere of scholarship, and the methods of their own academic pursuits make it obvious that they have even in their academic fields become victims of the comic automatism that is characteristic of life as a whole. In the very sanctuary of the live human mind their minds have lost life and spontaneity and are suspicious of these qualities in others. Pretending to superiority and being in fact vastly inferior, they clearly qualify to be classed among the ridiculous.

So, of course, do Liza and Eric Wind, in whose psychoanalytical efforts and practices the general mania for grouping and labelling and pigeonholing things and people finds its absurd culmination. Nabokov has in many places expressed his abhorrence of psychoanalysis and has in ironic and sarcastic passages dismissed its father as "the Viennese Quack"<sup>29</sup> and itself as "voodooism".<sup>30</sup> He has declared it to be "one of the vilest deceits practised by people on themselves and on others" that can be tolerated only "by the ignorant, the conventional, or the very sick."<sup>31</sup> But seldom has he allowed it quite so much room as in Chapter IV of Pnin.

The passage about the Wind parents worriedly analysing their little boy seems at first reading oddly

disconnected with the story of Pnin's life, but soon reveals how intimately its implications are related with those which emerge from behind the mere surface events in that story. For the absurd Winds, perseveringly and gloomily subjecting their son to one test after another, stand as examples of how the narrow-mindedness and inflexibility to be observed in all fields of life have been sanctified, and have become the underlying principles of a science that pretends to knowledge about what is potentially the most alive thing imaginable, namely the human mind. Absurdly, and in the name of science, and in order to prove the results of its researches, the living mind is expected to react according to dead and established patterns. Only if it does, can a person be counted as "normal". If it does not, as Victor's mind, that person becomes a "problem", no matter what the reason for the non-conformity. The rigid system allows of no place for what is the greatest proof of the possibilities and of the life of the human mind: for originality and genius.

In a world which is dominated by the views which have just been described, not only Pnin, but everybody who is either original or different from his surroundings, arouses, if not amusement, either dislike or suspicion. Laurence G. Clements, for example, is "the most original and least liked scholar on the Waindell campus" (156). Victor's teacher, Lake, who, although he himself lacks originality, can detect and appreciate it in others, who is indifferent to

"schools and trends", and is convinced (like Nabokov himself) that nothing but individual talent matters, is disliked, and is kept on the staff of his college only as a "distinguished freak" (96). Significantly, too, all the outsiders take to each other: Lake to Victor, who reveres him (95); Victor to Pnin, and Pnin to Victor; and Clements is after some initial hesitation won over to Pnin, and "a tender mental concord" (41) develops between the two men.

Apart from this friendship, Pnin strikes one as a lonely figure. He makes his way all alone and "very tired" across the "sad campus" (79). "...battered and stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness" (144), he still has to change his lodgings "about every semester" (62); even his office at the college is taken over without much ado by a younger colleague (69-70). All things taken together, his world, with all the rooms in which he has lived over the years,

...in his memory now resembled those displays of grouped elbow chairs on show, and beds, and lamps, and inglenooks which, ignoring all space-time distinctions, commingle in the soft light of a furniture store beyond which it snows, and the dusk deepens, and nobody really loves anybody (62).

When he has at last found a little house for himself, he feels at a loss whom to invite to his house-warming party: his "little list of guests...had body but it lacked bouquet" (146), but when he tries to give it bouquet, his invitations are, one after the other, declined on various pretexts.

The Eye suggests that people do not know each

other's real personalities and natures but that they know only phantoms: images they create of each other and which they mistake for real persons. Once they have created an image of somebody they are reluctant to change it, and as their reactions are to that image and not to the real person, and as the image corresponds to only one (and in most cases the most superficial) aspect of that person (if there is any correspondence at all) there can be no real communication and contact between people and no mutual attachment and understanding. The end of The Eye suggests how lonely and unhappy anyone can get as a result.

Pnin reveals the mechanism at work behind all this, and in Timofey Pnin shows the effects that are only implicitly indicated in The Eye. At one point Hagen makes a remark which both explains, and exposes the absurdity of, the general attitude of those who insist on treating Pnin as the comic person they see in him (their "phantom"), and which neatly sums up what is at the root of his loneliness: "The world wants a machine, not a Timofey" (161).

The reader is not allowed to share the attitude of the Waindell people. He is certainly shown what they see and might be inclined to simply laugh as they do, if he were not at the same time made to appreciate Pnin's originality.

Also, Pnin's comic sides are presented in such an exaggerated form, which so obviously makes for effect, that by and by the laughter is stifled. The initial amusement is superseded by an almost protective attitude



which induces the reader to sympathize with Pnin, to take sides with him and react rather scornfully against those who have so blindly made him their laughing stock.

Bathos, too, is used to evoke sympathy rather than hilarity, such as when Joan Clements finds Pnin in a truly distressed state after Liza has left him, and is immediately confronted with an instance of his adventurous and comic English:

He came out of [the pantry], darkly flushed, wild-eyed, and she was shocked to see that his face was a mess of unwiped tears.

'I search, John, for the viscous and sawdust,' he said tragically (59).

Most important, however, in determining the reader's attitude to Pnin is the insight he is given to the "inner Pnin" of whom the Waindell people know nothing.

"Always in Nabokov, the most sensitive consciousnesses are those made to bear enormous pain."<sup>32</sup> This is insinuated at first only in short and unobtrusive remarks which, moreover, stand in very comic contexts. In the middle of a description of Pnin almost collapsing over his own subtle jokes in class, there is the laconic statement, added in brackets and as an afterthought, that the world of his youth had been "abolished by one blow of history" (12), and in the middle of his comically disastrous journey to Cremona, Pnin himself dismisses his fears about losing a travelling bag by reminding himself that he has "lost, dumped, shed many more valuable things in his day" (19).<sup>33</sup>

"Such a comment", says Morton, "is easily passed over, but it opens a way through the trivial problems at the

surface of Pnin's present life into the reservoir of accumulated pain."<sup>34</sup>

Pnin has lost all that mattered most to him. He has lost his home and his country, and he has also lost the two women he has loved. Liza, his ex-wife, whom he still adores in spite of all her thoughtlessness and cruelty, actually comes for a brief visit, only to leave him in utter distress. But even if "recollections of his marriage to Liza were imperious enough to crowd out any former romance" (134-135), the memory of the loss of a girl he loved in his youth is even more unbearable than that of Liza. It is not so much the separation from Mira that haunts him but her death in a German concentration camp. Dr. Hagen, even though "the gentlest of souls alive" (135) perversely laments only the fact that the camp was put so near "the cultural heart of Germany" (135). Pnin, more imaginative and more human, cannot cope with the thought of what happened in that camp, no matter where it was. That was something with which "no conscience, and hence no consciousness" (135) can live and which he has taught himself to ban from his memory "in order to exist rationally" (134).

He has learnt to ban other memories as well, and yet, from time to time, called forth unexpectedly by the chance combination of details of scenery, by sounds (114), by a few words he happens to be reading (75), they crowd into his mind and re-awaken the pain that their loss caused him. Thus, gradually, beside the comic outer Pnin, whom the Waindell community knows

and smiles at, there emerges quite a different person: someone who suffers from "real exile", a "complete loss of home and cultural ties", and a "total absence of love."<sup>35</sup> As the exile, Pnin can be himself only once every two years when he meets other exiled Russians, who share his background and his values, at the place of a friend, Alexandr Petrovich Kukolnikov; he has much love and affection to give, and wants them, and yet finds himself in a world where "nobody really loves anybody" (62), and he is left, even after thirty-five years, with no certain possession but his sorrows: "Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?" he himself asks at one point (52). And at the very moment that he thinks that he has found something to make up for his past miseries: a permanent job and a neat little house of his own, when he bravely tries to convince himself that

...had there been no Russian Revolution,  
no exodus, no expatriation in France, no  
naturalization in America, everything  
- at the best, at the best, Timofey! -  
would have been the same: a professorship  
in Kharkov or Kazan, a suburban house  
such as this, old books within, late  
blooms without (144-145),

he finds that his wanderings are not yet over. He is no longer wanted at Waindell College.

However, his suffering is saved from degenerating into melodrama; at no point is there any tearful sentimentality about Pnin, and Pnin himself of course, never gives way to self-pity and never accepts the victim's role.<sup>36</sup> When grievous memories become too strong to be born, he bans them, and even the end,

in which one sees him, homeless once more, disappearing into the distance and into an uncertain future, is not without an element of hope and confidence.

Throughout, then, there are two Pnins: the Pnin the Waindell people see and laugh at is a "phantom" whose only characteristics are his comic eccentricities. They are unable to see behind these superficial traits and never even make the attempt. On the contrary, they build them up until the real person is forever lost behind them. Pnin's life appears to them as no more than a succession of comic disasters and absurd incidents. Unlike them the reader sees a complex person, somewhat eccentric, imaginative, and sensitive, who has preserved his originality and individuality in a world which is hostile to these qualities. The reader is also made to see the pain and sorrow, past and present, that have determined Pnin's life and have given it more depth than can ever be appreciated by the people at Waindell.

The comic image they have of Pnin and his life is exposed as the result of a faulty vision and a mindless approach to all things and to persons. As has been seen, this picture does not necessarily evoke hilarity in the reader but rather the opposite reaction, and this is particularly true when it is put in close proximity with the tragic aspects of his person and life, as in the example given above, when it partakes of their quality and at the same time acts as a foil to them, making the tragedy even more poignant.

More depth and reality are also given to Pnin's life through the narrator's use of a device which can be traced in Glory, then in The Defence and much later in Transparent Things, which Nabokov comments on in Speak, Memory<sup>37</sup>, and which Joan Clements describes as typical of the narrator's novels:

But don't you think...that what he is trying to do...practically in all his novels...is...to express the fantastic recurrence of certain situations? (159)

The most impressive and most fantastic example of this occurs quite early in the novel, when Pnin, on his journey to Cremona has what looks like a heart attack. The sensations he experiences detach him for the time being from his surroundings (19) and take him back to a certain moment in his childhood when he was ill, and which he now relives with the "sharpness of retrospective detail that is said to be the dramatic privilege of drowning individuals" (21). However, it is not just a matter of reliving that past moment, for in the surroundings in which he finds himself sitting on a bench, a multitude of the features from his childhood bedroom are miraculously repeated and come to life: not only the pattern of rhododendrons and oak leaves on the wallpaper, but also the scene that was depicted on a wooden screen near his bed: Pnin himself is the "old man hunched up on a bench" (23), and before him, when he regains full consciousness, he finds a duplicate of the squirrel which was shown on his screen "holding a reddish object in its front paws" (23) - this object now turns out to be

a peachstone. The very questions the child asked himself in his fever now beset Pnin: the pattern of the foliage and flowers around him is as intricate as that on the wallpaper of old was. It seems impossible to detect the system of the design, which no doubt must be there; but at last, "during one melting moment, he had the sensation of holding...the key he had sought" (24). Als Julia Bader says, the scene "serves as a retrospective mirror into Pnin's childhood"<sup>38</sup>, and of such mirrors there are a few more. Pnin feels transported back into the past when sitting in the lecture hall of Cremona (27-28); when watching a film about Russia (81-82); at the place of his friend Kukolnikov (133); and even the combination of some sound and the warm wind is sufficient to take him back to a "dim dead day" in a Baltic summer resort and to evoke "the sounds, and the smells, and the sadness -" (114).

But this particular scene in the park is more than just a mirror. The narrator has been accused by critics of not fulfilling his role as a faithful chronicler of events and of not being a trustworthy biographer. His sources of information about Pnin being for the most part the accounts of others, he yet talks about things that one would expect only Pnin himself to know. Everything that surpasses the obvious incidents, all the insights into Pnin's mind and emotions, clearly surpass what can have come to his knowledge through others. Pnin himself at two points denies the narrator's statements and calls him "a dreadful inventor" (185;

cp. 180). The narrator also gives himself away by what Field calls his "narrative 'slips'"<sup>39</sup>: points in the story at which he quite clearly gives up all pretence of being the objective reporter of the true story of Pnin's life; at which he invents scenes and elaborates on them rather in the fashion of an omniscient narrator, and at which, moreover, he quite frankly takes pleasure in a skilful relation of his inventions.

This tendency on his part is underlined by his quasi-identification at certain moments with Nabokov himself. Like the author (who has in turn invented him and Pnin) he is "a prominent Anglo-Russian writer" (140), a "fascinating lecturer" (169), he shares his love of butterflies, and even his initials (V.V.) with him (128). Therefore, together with Pnin, critics mistrust him, and apart of accusing him of a tactless and unforgivable intrusion into Pnin's life and privacy and of exposing not only his comic eccentricity but even his most private sorrows<sup>40</sup>, they wonder whether "the version of Pnin we have come to believe in, through the narrator, is any more authentic than Jack Cock-erell's imitation" of him.<sup>41</sup>

The scene in the park and the narrator's implied knowledge of all its similarities with an earlier experience of Pnin's would be another point in the critics' argumentation, for here the narrator oversteps again the limits of what he can reasonably be expected to know. So, paradoxically, even while adding another touch of depth to Pnin's story, and while apparently

adding to its reality, it also detracts from it, for it can be suspected of having been invented.

The intricacies are so tight as hardly to allow of a solution. One answer to the riddle might be that Pnin, in a rather round-about fashion, is relating the story of his own life, exposing and correcting the faulty images that exist of him in the minds of others. One can also approximate to a conclusion if one remembers and accepts Nabokov's direct and indirect statements about art and reality. The narrator is an artist, like other Nabokov characters: Luzhin, Shade and Kinbote, Sebastian Knight and Mr. R., and like Nabokov himself. Therefore, when writing Pnin's biography, he does not write a straightforward factual account of Pnin's life but shapes his work artistically. Kinbote speaks for all of Nabokov's artists when he says that "'reality' is neither the subject nor the object of true art."<sup>42</sup> This certainly does not mean that art has nothing at all to do with factual reality; what it means is that art does not aim at describing and reproducing factual reality slavishly, and to this the narrator of Pnin subscribes. Apart from his rather obvious departures from reality, he betrays what liberty he feels he can take with it by his somewhat less obvious unconcern with real dates: even though the 15th February 1955 was a Tuesday (187,188) the 15th February 1953 was not, although the author insists in a rather round-about fashion that it was (67, 75).

Instead, then, of taking down facts and instead of



being accurate in every point, the narrator shapes reality, following artistic considerations. And doing so, he does something that Nabokov does in Glory, Luzhin in The Defence, Shade in Pale Fire and R. in Transparent Things. With different effects on their minds, both Luzhin and Shade find out and understand the pattern of their lives through their respective art forms, and Nabokov in Glory and R. in Transparent Things make the lives of their heroes "transparent".

The narrator in Pnin may invent things; the incident in the park, for example, may not be wholly based on fact. It certainly has nothing to do with "average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye."<sup>43</sup> The "average 'reality'" of Pnin's life perceived by the Waindell population, is a never-ending and chaotic sequence of comic incidents, which Jack Cockerell, with absurd and mindless repetition, relates again and again. The artistic insight reaches beyond that. It detects a meaningful design under the seemingly meaningless and chaotic surface and uncovers it, pointing out curious repetitions in Pnin's life, or, to put it in terms of Speak, Memory, uncovering its "thematic design".<sup>44</sup> Doing this, it provides the key to its pattern, which the common beholder does not see and of which Pnin himself is only vaguely aware and which he cannot grasp and hold.

The "average 'reality'" of Pnin's own person, that is, Pnin as seen by people at Waindell, is the freak and comic eccentric. Again the artist, gifted with more imagination and insight, penetrates the outward appear-

ance which is all the ordinary ("average") mind perceives, and helps the reader penetrate it with him.

Pnin anticipates much that will have to be discussed in connection with other novels. As they will be seen to do, it changes in the very process of being read. And as it changes, it becomes clear that the misunderstandings concerning the narrator and the criticism of him are brought about by a rather too close adherence to the simple factual information the novel provides and by a neglect of its implications, that is by a more or less automatic reaction to its surface.

It is true that the comic Pnin is rather prominent at first and that it seems tactless to expose what simply looks like his comic eccentricity and all his comic misadventures. It is equally true that the narrator sometimes rather seems to overstep the bounds of simple truth and to wander off into fiction. However, it has by now turned out that it is not really Pnin who is exposed to ridicule but the general modern automatic approach to all aspects of life which results in a superficial knowledge of things and bars the way to an understanding of their real quality and nature; which fails to see and accept people as they are because it wants and reacts to machines rather than to live and real human beings.

What the narrator gives us may not be the "true" story of Pnin's life, nor the "true" Pnin, but his artistic versions of both are more r e a l than what the "communal eye" perceives. The question posed at the beginning, namely, whether the depiction and under-

standing of a "truly human being" is possible has been answered by the novel: it is possible through a work of art, the artist's perception being superior to the perception of other minds, art being superior to other, "normal" approaches to life and people.

LOLITA

LAUGHTER IN THE DARK

There seems to exist no relation at all between the early novel The Eye and the much later Lolita. However, a relation can be established if one recalls one of the conclusions that emerged from The Eye. That novel ends on a note of despair. It is the first novel (before Pnin and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight) to illustrate and dramatize the fact that people tend to see other persons not as these really are, but that their impressions of others are qualified and determined by their own characteristics, preoccupations or wishes. As a consequence they see, judge, react to, hate or get attached to, not real persons but persons of their own invention, "phantoms" that have no existence outside the minds of their inventors. The result is the impossibility of genuine contact and communication, isolation, loneliness and unhappiness. This is what eventually determines the relationship of Humbert Humbert, who insists on seeing in Lolita a nymphet instead of a little girl, and Lolita, who comes to regard Humbert as a pervert and a dirty old man.

This looks rather like a commonplace of literature. However, it has emerged from The Eye that with Nabokov this theme is intimately connected with his central concern, namely his quest for "true reality". Humbert's obsession, too, can be seen in this context, for it is his yearning for something truly real, for some pure,

eternal beauty, and his conviction that he has found it in Lolita, that is at the root of his view of her and causes unhappiness to both.

Lolita<sup>1</sup>, as written by Humbert Humbert in his prison cell is made available to the reader through the intermediary of one John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., who claims to have been asked by Clarence Choate Clarke, Esq., his own friend and Humbert's lawyer, to publish it. It is preceded by a Kinbotean sort of Foreword by John Ray, which sets the tone for the entire novel, for, as the novel itself, it contains passages that have to be taken at their face value and others which do not, and it is not easy to distinguish between them and to disentangle them. There are those passages which are quite obviously parodies of a foreword proper and of various critical conventions, and they seem misleading and beside the point in the same way as Kinbote's critical apparatus in Pale Fire. However, by negation of the things they parody, they contain valid comments on Humbert's memoir and a valuable help towards an understanding of it. And there are those passages which have the same parodistic look about them, but which are not, in fact, parodies, but genuine and true comments on the story about to unfold.

Ray presents Humbert's memoir as based on actual events. He explains how he happens to be its editor. He takes pains to establish that he has treated it with due respect, that what the reader has before him is indeed the memoir as Humbert wrote it, "intact", save (and here he sounds very Kinbotean) "for the correction

of obvious solecisms and a careful suppression of a few tenacious details" (5). He even refers the reader to the newspapers which, he says, reported on Humbert's crime. However, in his very next sentence Ray undercuts his own pretence, exposing his own foreword as a parody of the kind of foreword he is ostensibly writing. After first parodying the expectations of those readers in whom the subtitle: "... , or the Confession of a White Widowed Male" excites hopes of some pornographic oeuvre<sup>2</sup>, he now parodies the demands of those "old-fashioned readers" (and the kind of work which fulfils their demands) who do believe in the "reality" of the "true" story and who "wish to follow the destinies of the 'real' people beyond [it]" (5). The "facts" that he offers about these "real" people are arbitrary and unreliable. He puts the words "true" and "real" in quotes, indicating thereby how questionable the "reality" of memoirs is anyway, just as Nabokov would do were he speaking in person, and Nabokov is indeed not very far off. The reference to Vivian Darkbloom and her biography "My Cue" makes it pretty clear who this John Ray is.

Significantly, he calls Humbert's manuscript a novel and then "a work of art" (6) when discussing it in more detail and applies critical standards to it which would not normally be applied to a memoir. These standards are quite frankly Nabokov's own, the commentator here "repeating" (and apologizing for this) "what he has stressed in his own books and lectures" (6).

One luckless early critic wrote about Lolita: "A strong, a disturbing book... it is largely concerned with Humbert's youth and is intended to trace, in the Freudian fashion, the origins of the man's obsession."<sup>3</sup> This critic overlooked that the scientific, psychological approach to a piece of art, and all its connotations of "Freudian voodooism"<sup>4</sup> is clearly ridiculed in the Foreword (and of course in Lolita itself) and thus dismissed. He also overlooked that Nabokov "in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book"<sup>5</sup> and certainly does not have the kind of intention here ascribed to him. What Nabokov says in "On a Book Entitled Lolita" also makes it clear that he has no "moral purpose", ascribed to him by another critic<sup>6</sup>; that Lolita has "no moral in tow", and that a work of fiction exists for him "only in so far as it affords me... aesthetic bliss."<sup>7</sup> All this Nabokov found it necessary later to state unmistakably and in his own voice, but it is already there in the Foreword:

... still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson;... '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 (7).

The moral-social-didactic approach could not be parodied and condemned more effectively than in this passage and in the rather outré vocabulary, "the curious mixture of moral, psychological, and social judgements"<sup>8</sup> that Ray uses with regard to Humbert, and which might

by a sensitive reader well be applied to him in earnest.

More echoes from the "commentator's books, almost overgrown by their parodistic surroundings, indicate quite plainly and seriously what the approach to Lolita should be. The reader should accept it for what it is: a magical work of art that can "entrance" the reader even though he may abhor its author. In a genuine piece of art everything has its place, even that which may by the "paradoxical prude" be felt to be offensive. Anyway - and Ray now speaks in Nabokov's very own voice:

... 'offensive' is frequently but a synonym for 'unusual'; and a great work of art is of course always original, and thus by its very nature should come as a more or less shocking surprise (6).

Alfred Appel has said with reference to Nabokov's novels: "... one must penetrate the trompe-l'oeil, which eventually reveals something totally different from what one had expected."<sup>9</sup> For this task and process John Ray's Foreword prepares the reader.

This trompe-l'oeil, which complicated the publication of Lolita and which excited so much moral indignation once it was published, is the familiar story of Humbert Humbert, the middle-aged nympholept, who makes twelve-year-old Lolita his mistress after her mother has been killed in an accident. This story and its sequel, their two mad journeys across the United States, Lolita's escape with Clare Quilty, Humbert's pursuit of them, and his eventual murder of Quilty, is told in an essentially comic manner.

"Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!" (33)



says "well-read" Humbert Humbert, and Alfred Appel points out that he plays in fact (often parodistically) with the words and stylistic peculiarities of more than fifty writers<sup>10</sup>, dramatists, poets and novelists of different nationalities, from different ages and of widely different character, including Horace, Catullus, E. A. Poe, George Gordon Lord Byron, Hans Christian Anderson, James Joyce, Christopher Marlowe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot, Laurence Sterne, François René Chateaubriand and Charles Baudelaire; and these are joined at one place by the unnamed author of Baby Snooks, a "popular weekly radio program of the forties"<sup>11</sup>, namely when the name of the place in which Lolita seduces Humbert is given as Briceland.

Often Humbert's playful handling of his models does not exceed the quotation of one line or one word, or even only a name, and sometimes these do not do much more than throw a comic sidelight on the immediate context and scene in which they occur. This can be said of the passage in which Humbert incongruously describes the effect that he believes Lolita to have on others in Baudelairean terms (159).<sup>12</sup> This can also be said of his characterization of the yet unknown Quilty as a "heterosexual Erlkönig" (234). Another example seems at first sight to belong into the same category: an 18th century English classical scholar (Thomas Morrell) and his song, "See the Conquering Hero Comes" serve to describe a banal advertisement which Lolita has pasted on the wall above her bed (69).<sup>13</sup> But the superficial playfulness of this is deceptive: in retrospect the motto of the "conquering hero"

on the picture of someone who is said to resemble Humbert closely, is seen to be laden with irony.

The passage is a good example of how quite inconspicuous references have a greater and deeper significance than is at first apparent. In various ways they reflect on the individual scenes in which they occur, on the persons and their characters and peculiarities, sometimes on the whole novel. In one way or another they all add illuminating aspects to it and give depth to Humbert's narrative through the implications they carry. Some out of the many will be commented on in the appropriate places.

Nor is Humbert's use of parody limited to the playful handling of the words and stylistic devices of other authors, to the borrowing and insertion into his narrative of quotations from their works, and to the parodistic imitation of their characteristic manners and mannerisms. It extends so far as to embrace whole literary genres as well as individual works: the confessional mode and the literary diary, the literary death scene, the Doppelgänger tale, and the tale of ratiocination; Dostoevski's Notes from Underground, Poe's Annabel Lee, his William Wilson, and the ideas of his Philosophy of Composition.<sup>14</sup>

This overall use of parody does not wholly account for the peculiar effect of Lolita. Nor does the fact that a serious tale emerges from behind the comic surface formed by the parodies and incongruities just listed suffice to explain things. This happens in all of Nabokov's novels, and yet Lolita affects the reader in a way which is different from that in which most of the other novels affect him. Into the amusement caused by the comic

surface, into the initial moral shock, and into the serious emotions evoked by the sadness behind it all, there enters also a feeling of profound uneasiness, even of exasperation, sometimes exceeding the amusement, sometimes giving way to it, but never taking over or disappearing altogether.

Humbert Humbert himself provides the word that best characterizes his and Lolita's story and which explains this phenomenon when he calls their journey across the United States "our grotesque journey" (224). Most of the comic scenes and descriptions of his memoir - parodistical, or farcical, or absurd, or all at once - also have a touch of the grotesque about them, and they all add up to create an overall grotesque effect.

Briefly stated, the grotesque comes into existence by "the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response."<sup>15</sup> It may simply be "the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable"<sup>16</sup> in the subject matter that causes a twofold reaction. In other cases something disgusting or horrible or gruesome, or, in general terms: something which is definitely not comic in itself, is presented in a comic manner. In such cases disgust or horror are evoked on the one hand, and on the other hand those reactions which are incompatible with them, namely amusement and laughter, and with them a feeling of indignation or exasperation because the manner will be felt to be wholly unsuitable to the matter.<sup>17</sup> It is the essential characteristic of the grotesque that the conflict between the incompatibles should not be re-

solved, that is, that something should not turn out to be just horrible or just comic after all, and that the reaction should not be reduced to either one or the other.<sup>18</sup>

Both forms of the grotesque are to be found everywhere in Lolita and they account for the unique impact it makes. They give its peculiar quality to the action, both to the main action and to minor incidents and encounters; and they determine the quality of the relation of Humbert Humbert and Lolita and are the reason for the uneasiness and uncertainty the reader experiences with regard to his reaction to the book. He can neither simply react with indignation as he might feel he ought to, for much in the relation is incongruous and comic. Nor can he react simply to the comic side of it, because the amusement is constantly qualified by the awareness of the impossible outrage of it all. The response is further complicated by the fact that Humbert tells his story in the comic, parodistic style hinted at above, which, in view of what he is telling, is felt to be another outrage.

However, before that story actually starts, Humbert gives a lengthy account, couched in equally inappropriate language, of some events and experiences that preceded it and, as he pretends, led up to it. He acquaints the reader with his peculiar affliction, making at the same time a comic mock-effort to explain it and excuse it. The origin of his nympholepsy, he tries to make the reader believe, was an experience in his early youth, his unfulfilled love for Annabel Leigh, a girl then roughly his own

age. She was the "initial girl-child" without whom "there might have been no Lolita at all" (11). It was during that summer, he argues, "that the rift in my life began" (15). He cannot get over the memory of their unfulfilled, frustrated romance; the memory of her "honey-coloured skin", "brown bobbed hair", "long lashes" (14), of her "musky perfume" (17) and the memory of their crudely interrupted love-making haunts him. Long after her death his thoughts still seem to be coloured by hers. Such an impression has their short unhappy romance left on him, and such a shock has her death been that no other romance is possible for him. It takes him fully twenty-five years, during which he struggles with his perversion and with actual insanity, before the spell of Annabel is broken, and this happens at Humbert's first sight of Lolita. In her he finds everything he loved in Annabel, the same "bright beauty" (41), "the same frail, honeyhued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair" (40). She is so much "the same child" (40) that, after the first shock of passionate recognition, Annabel and Lolita seem to merge into one, or, as Humbert puts it, "...I broke [Annabel's] spell by incarnating her in another" (17). He makes it all sound very much like a case history of the Freudian kind. He traces not only his nympholepsy and the long years of struggling against this predicament back to the frustration in his youth, but he sees his very discovery of Lolita and his subsequent involvement with her as a "fatal consequence" of that experience in his "tortured past" (41).

The reader who is acquainted with Nabokov's abhor-

rence of anything that smacks of Freudian psychoanalysis is suspicious of all this from the very start, and this suspicion soon proves to be justified when it becomes clear what Humbert's own reaction to it is. On the two occasions on which he gets involved with it he reveals the same attitude to psychoanalysis as his inventor. Insane though he is, he still sees through what he regards as complete nonsense, and it becomes for him a source of gleeful enjoyment. He first realizes on what shaky ground it stands when, on some obscure expedition, he is supposed to record the psychic reactions of his comrades, gets bored with his task and just makes up a perfectly spurious report, only to find it accepted and printed in some scientific magazine. He finds the same readiness on the part of the doctors to believe anything, when he himself becomes the object of psychoanalysis. No matter what he tells them, it is solemnly accepted as true, analysed with equal solemnity and eventually made to yield such absurd and hilarious diagnoses that Humbert is in the end not cured by the treatment he receives but by the endless fun he derives from it all. He leaves the sanatorium a saner man than the psychiatrists, whom he has so frightened with his invented dreams that they, "the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking" (36).

With Freudian methods thus once more reduced to humbug, there can be no question of taking Humbert's "analysis" of his "case" seriously. Even by providing a psychoanalytical explanation in spite of what his attitude to this sort of approach is, he ridicules it,

and implies in the parody that nothing could be more absurd than to try and understand his problem by believing in his "childhood trauma".

"As a case history, 'Lolita' will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles", John Ray mockingly predicts in his Foreword (7). Humbert suspects the same, and parodying and ridiculing the psychoanalytical approach, he frankly mocks not only Freud and his methods but also the future reader and critic of his memoir, one of whose possible reactions he anticipates in the comic "analysis" of his "case".

This is not the only instance in which the reader is made the object of parody. Both Ray and Humbert Humbert also anticipate the storm of moral indignation that Lolita was to raise, and parodying it, exclude it, too, as a valid approach. Ray calls Humbert "abject" and "horrible"; "a shining example of moral leprosy" and "abnormal" (6), into which chain of epithets Dupee's "a thorough creep" and "a sex fiend"<sup>19</sup> fit nicely. Humbert Humbert himself joins in with Ray's comic denouncement of his vice, and so convincing does he manage to sound that he has been said to be conducting not only his own defence but also his own prosecution.<sup>20</sup> There is certainly some truth in this as far as the later parts of his memoir are concerned, but at the beginning, when he talks of a time at which Lolita has not yet entered his life, he seems to be doing no more than giving the reader what he expects. His self-accusations sound too stale and conventional to be taken for expressions of sincere and genuine

emotions, and furthermore they are partly embedded in the account of his abortive attempt to keep "my degrading and dangerous desires" under "pacific control" (26) by marrying Valeria, and in the comic quality of this account they participate.

They become all the more questionable as he intermingles with them all sorts of facts meant to rationalize his affliction and to prove that he is not such an exceptional and shocking case after all, and that "it was all a question of attitude, that there was really nothing wrong in being moved to distraction by girl-children" (20). To prove his point, he goes back to ancient Greece and points out that nothing was thought at that time of implicating little girls of ten in sex, and for a similar purpose he evokes certain habits of the people of some East Indian province (with the girls participating even younger) (21). He draws examples from the Bible and from modern law. What introduces an element of insincerity into all this is the fact that he seems to have meddled with some of his examples so as to make them serve his purpose. Whereas throughout his memoir he proves to know his authors and his literary history inside out, he makes some strange mistakes here, which cannot simply be put down to ignorance. He overlooks that "Dante...was...nine years old when he met Beatrice in 1274, and she was supposedly eight", and that "there was no romance", and that there is no certainty about who Petrarch's Laura was and about how old she was when he met her<sup>21</sup>, so that these two can certainly not be counted among his distinguished predecessors as he wants to make out.



He is equally inaccurate in what he says about the law, which, he pretends, still tacitly allows a girl of twelve, or fifteen at the most, to get married (134)<sup>22</sup>, so that there is again a suggestion of dishonesty about his statements. So, all of Humbert's early supposedly moral innuendoes against himself belong into the same category of parody as his mocking psychoanalytical explanation of his own "case".

Anyone whom this does not discourage from applying ordinary moral standards to Humbert's memoir must gradually be discouraged as he reads on, for there is much in this memoir which makes this approach appear hypocritical, and ironically casts doubt on the moral standards and integrity of the very society which condemns Humbert.

One critic has complained about Humbert's attitude towards the world around him:

He is indeed anything but attractive...  
His characteristic mode of thought is contemptuous and satirical, but we do not know what makes his standard of judgment, for it is never clear what, besides female beauty of a certain kind, has won his admiration.<sup>23</sup>

Humbert does indeed not paint a beautiful picture of society. There is nothing to admire in what he shows us of it. One could argue that he uses all its negative aspects to excuse his own guilt, but this does not argue them out of existence. The fact remains that society ignores and tolerates a lot that is not in keeping with its outward show of respectability.

Alfred Appel points out that in a strange, unsettling and grotesque way the entire physical world of

Lolita seems to be maimed: not things only but persons too. There is Miss Opposite, the crippled neighbour, Lolita's almost deaf husband, his friend Bill who has lost an arm in the war; a man wiping Humbert's windshield has a broken nose. A "hunchbacked and hoary Negro" takes Humbert's and Lolita's luggage into the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, and there are the tennis-playing "Boschean cripples".<sup>24</sup>

It appears throughout that the world in which Humbert and Lolita move is in the same way "maimed" morally. "But let us be prim and civilized" Humbert admonishes himself at one point (21). This "civilized" has an ironic ring about it when it is taken to refer to a civilization that accommodates Miss Lester and Miss Fabian, Gaston Godin, Clare Quilty, and Lolita's schoolmates for that matter, without taking offence at their habits or even sharing them.

Gaston Godin, suitably placed at Beardsley, with his predilection for little boys, is the favourite of all his neighbours, "crooned over by the old and carressed by the young" (179), because he easily manages to fool them all about his infirmity. Fowler sees him as almost representative of the hypocrisy and self-deception which is practised by so many of the other members of society as it emerges from Lolita:

The sentimental gauze which surrounds and disguises Gaston is part of the relentless self-deception that all philistines practice in this novel;...hyper-middle class Charlotte; and John Farlowe, solid burgher and anti-Semite; and Mona Dahl...who has already had an affair with a marine; and Mary Lore...who helps Lo escape

with Quilty; and, of course, Pratt, the head-mistress of Beardsley School...<sup>25</sup>

Quilty's case is different. There does not seem to be any attempt at secrecy about his perversion, but there is no suggestion of a scandal either. On the contrary, he is rich, he is a public figure, he has a reputation as a talented playwright. His plays are staged at girls' schools, and his picture is pasted on walls in girls' bedrooms. He knows the corruption of others (of the chief of police for instance) and can therefore make them his instruments. He has no difficulty finding "friends", ready to join in his "games" and to figure in his films. They know of his criminality and are indifferent to it, just as they are indifferent to his death. Again, Fowler sees all that goes on around Quilty as representative of the attitude of society, "of everything that is not Humbert in this novel."<sup>26</sup>

Thus, apart from the psychoanalytical and the moral approaches being parodied, any moral judgement that might be made about Humbert is ironically turned back on society in much the same way in which the ridicule heaped on Pnin is flung back on the world. Any moral judgement that society might pronounce on Humbert would, indeed, only add to its own hypocrisy.

The final irony which adds the supreme grotesque touch to the background of Humbert's story, as it has now emerged, is the fact that even the children are not the innocent creatures Humbert naïvely believes them to be. He has all his "conventional notions of what twelve-year-old girls should be" (123) disabused

by Lolita's reports of the various "diversions" (135) practised by her friends in the summer camp. Lolita herself is no exception, and the moment at which Humbert discovers this is one of the most grotesque in the whole book.

At some stage, on his signing out of the sanatorium in which he has so successfully fooled the doctors, "precise fate, that synchronizing phantom" (102), deliberately seems to take over and arrange things for Humbert. Instead of allowing him to take rooms in the McCoo household as he had planned, it starts a fire in this very house so that he has to change his plans. It spares him the disappointment of the little McCoo girl whom he had imagined as a lovely nymphet and whom "I would coach in French and fondle in Humbertish" (37). It deposits him instead in the very garden where, "in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees" (40), he finds Lolita.

Nor does fate stop halfway but works on his behalf again somewhat later. From the moment he moves into the Haze household, there begins for him a time of such intense frustration and agony that he begins to fear another breakdown, for Lolita, so near and an "intolerable temptation" (48), is of course unattainable. Checked in his desires by her mother's presence and, he protests, his own consideration for the child's chastity and moral (56,62), he has to content himself with a few blissful moments when Lolita "co-operatively" allows him to kiss "her fluttering eyelid" (44-45), to hold and stroke and squeeze her hand (51),

or to hold her on his knee (49). There comes a Sunday on which he achieves what he has been longing for, on which, alone with her in the house and ostensibly fooling around with her, he "solipsizes" her, as he puts it, experiences paradise, ecstasy, without her being aware of it (Ch.13). His hope of repeating this performance is thwarted, for Lolita is sent away to a summer camp, and all his other schemes, too, seem to miscarry hopelessly: He marries unloved Charlotte Haze, for in his exasperation on reading her love letter it suddenly dawns on him that, if he can bring himself to do this, he will be able to bestow on Lolita with impunity and quite naturally "all the casual caresses" that he longs for and does not dare to bestow on her now. "I would hold her against me three times a day, every day. All my troubles would be expelled, I would be a healthy man." His fancy carries him well beyond those "casual caresses", though at one point he stops himself: "No, I would not go that far" (70-71). It must appear to him as a terribly ironic move when, after he has committed himself with his own very special end in mind, Charlotte decides: "Little Lo goes straight from camp to a good boarding school with strict discipline and some sound religious training. And then - Beardsley College. I have it all mapped out, you need not worry" (83). Of course he does worry. He even plans the perfect murder by which to remove Charlotte, but cannot bring himself to put it into action.

It is here that fate interferes and takes over

again and turns his despair into triumphant delight. It not only arranges for Lolita to have to return for at least some time, it also does what Humbert himself cannot do. It stages an accident, artistically combining all the elements that lead up to it: "hurrying housewife, slippery pavement, a pest of a dog, steep grade, big car, baboon at its wheel", and adding to these Humbert's own contribution, namely his journal which produced "vindictive anger and hot shame" and "blinded Charlotte in her dash to the mailbox" (102). So perfectly are they all mixed, and so perfectly timed, that Charlotte is "messily but instantly and permanently eliminated", just as Humbert has somewhat tastelessly but accurately imagined in one of his daydreams (53). Although talking about a fatal accident which is in itself certainly not comic, Humbert mentions so many details that appear comic (or become so in his description), both in the scene of the accident and in his reactions to it all, that the gruesome and the comic are in the end perfectly balanced. He mentions such incongruous details as the silly dog walking about from group to group "and back to the car which he had finally run to earth"; the father of the driver of the car, "to the anatomical right of the car", "whom the nurse had just watered on the green bank where he lay - a banked banker so to speak" (97). Side by side with the comic details there is the shocking sight of Charlotte Haze, "the top of her head a porridge of bone, brains, bronze hair and blood" (even here he has time for alliter-

ations ) (98). And he describes his own mock enaction of all the appropriate emotions that are expected of him at this "tragic" moment, but which he wisely does not overdo: "The widower, a man of exceptional self-control, neither wept nor raved. He staggered a bit, that he did;..." (98). And he staggers "friend" Beale (the "friend" being another comic touch, for Beale is the driver of the fatal car), "the agent of fate" by accepting "with a drunken sob of gratitude" the offer to pay the funeral home expenses (102).

With the gruesome elements thus intimately linked with the comic, with a fatal accident related in Humbert's comically irreverent and ironic style, his account of his stay at Ramsdale ends on a grotesque note, which suitably rounds it off (for that stay has its own grotesque aspects), and which sets the suitable tone for the account of his grotesque relation and journeys with Lolita.

It was said above that much in the relation of Humbert Humbert and Lolita is comic. Given the basic fact that Humbert is middle-aged and Lolita a girl of twelve, this sounds in itself a rather incongruous statement: the natural and spontaneous reaction to Humbert's confession is one of horrified revulsion, for, as Lionel Trilling says (even though he comes to the conclusion that Lolita is really about love): the novel makes "a prolonged assault on one of our unquestioned and unquestionably sexual prohibitions, the sexual inviolability of girls of a certain age."<sup>27</sup> It is this intimate connection of the comic and the

outrageous, and the incompatible reactions evoked thereby, which give the grotesque quality to the relation. And, one must add, Humbert's comic and ironic and wholly inappropriate style heightens this peculiar effect.

One of the comic aspects of the relation is the fact that Lolita does not strike one as the sort of girl to cause the irresistible sexual attraction and the passionate admiration and love that Humbert professes to feel for her, and that therefore his emotions seem quite incongruous. Recent critics have been rather uncharitable in their comments on her. They have accused her of indifference<sup>28</sup>, brainlessness<sup>29</sup>, conventionality<sup>30</sup>, a horrifying "lack of imagination" (proved for this particular critic by her inability to imagine Humbert's state of mind and her inability to see Humbert's superiority to Quilty)<sup>31</sup>, of vulgarity and shallowness<sup>32</sup>, and of having no soul and no identity.<sup>33</sup>

She does indeed emerge from some of Humbert's descriptions as a very ordinary little girl; even in her appearance and manners there is at first sight very little to justify Humbert's reactions to her, in fact, there are moments when he seems puzzled himself:

Why does the way she walks - a child; mind you, a mere child! - excite me so abominably? Analyse it. A faint suggestion of turned-in toes. A kind of wiggly looseness below the knee prolonged to the end of each footfall. The ghost of a drag (42-43).

She likes to dress in faded jeans and boys' shirts, and sneakers, she has rows with her mother, she has



a strident, harsh high voice, and a vulgar vocabulary which she uses freely. "Vulgar" is a word that Humbert uses throughout with respect to Lolita. Even by making this vulgar little girl with turned-in toes and a wiggly gait and bad manners the object of his love and lust and passion he stands the traditional love story with the traditional and conventional expectations with regard to the heroine on its head; his sobs and the agony and the tremors and the "dull pain" which he feels "in the very root of my being" (56) because of this little anti-heroine make him appear at once pathetic and comic, and his repeated solemn evocation of "that Lolita, my Lolita", reminiscent of Catullus' evocation of his Lesbia<sup>34</sup>, is, in its incongruity, one of the many comic stylistic touches of his memoir. The comedy of this is intensified by the fact that at such moments Humbert implicitly figures as Catullus, just as he figures as Dante when he compares Lolita to Beatrice, and as Petrarch when he sees Laura in her.<sup>35</sup>

His decision, incidentally, to marry Charlotte solely for the reason to be near her daughter makes havoc of another literary cliché: "the theme of an affair between the lodger and the mother"<sup>36</sup>, quite apart from the fact that he looks on her with distaste although she is "full-blown and conventionally seductive."<sup>37</sup>

Besides being anything but the plausible heroine outwardly, Lolita also justifies the critics' censure of her brainlessness and conventionality. Humbert

himself admits that "mentally I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl", and her "list of beloved things" goes a good way towards explaining what he means: "Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth - ..." (146). She consumes comic-books insatiably and uncritically, she believes their advertisements and advice, she piously follows road signs directing her to gift shops, ads are directed to her, she is "the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (146). Clare Quilty is her idol. She is "just another one of the 'wholesome children' who, even before adolescence, think and feel only in terms of outwardly inspired stereotypes."<sup>38</sup>

Humbert's culture need not be proved; it speaks from every line he writes. The discrepancy between their minds is comically underscored at one point when Humbert loses himself in the contemplation of the scenery through which they travel and finds himself reminded of Claude Lorrain and El Greco paintings, whereas Lolita "not only had...no eye for scenery" but resents having it pointed out to her, and is more charmed by toilet signs (149-150).

Altogether it is hard to see eye to eye with Humbert who calls her "a gaspingly adorable pubescent pet" (168), and the idea of him literally crawling on his knees to her chair (188) verges on the grotesque. By the time he has been reduced to this, their relationship has become grotesque altogether. One hardly knows what to call it unless one talks in terms of parody.

When Humbert talks of his decision to marry Charlotte for the sake of having Lolita near him as his "daughter", he quotes Byron, thereby subtly and ironically commenting on his own past, for Harold's lines to his absent daughter Ada: "'To hold thee lightly on a gentle knee and print on thy fond cheek a parent's kiss'" (71) have little to do with Humbert's "visions of venery" (71) that crowded into his mind at that past moment. The Byron reference contains some more implicit comment: the facts that Byron married his wife "for the sake of tranquility and respectability" and that he had an incestuous relationship with his half-sister<sup>39</sup> provide an appropriate backdrop to the development of Humbert's relationship with Charlotte and Lolita.

"The word is incest" (119), Lolita later points out in a shrewd, matter-of-fact way when Humbert is groping for a word to characterize their relationship that is about to start, and makes an insincere and clumsy attempt to make it look like a normal father-daughter relationship: "For all practical purposes I am your father. I have a feeling of great tenderness for you. In your mother's absence I am responsible for your welfare" (118).

Their relationship is neither one nor the other but a parody of both. Although Humbert has taken great pains to make the credulous Farlows believe that Lolita is really his own child, neither he nor Lolita live up to their respective roles. Taking his own words quite literally, Humbert does indeed act as her father

for all p r a c t i c a l purposes: He sustains her, he buys her clothes and presents, he takes her on long journeys, he gives her tennis lessons, he tries to give her an education. He does "everything in my power to give my Lolita a really good time" (160). But where fatherly affection should come in, there is Humbert's insatiable sexual desire. Lolita, for her part, shows little filial love for Humbert and never calls him "Dad" without a sneer of ironic contempt. After he has lost his initial glamorous attraction for the girl, she accepts what he offers her in material respects without any particular show of gratitude, and, the sexual complication apart, makes life difficult for him. "Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat", Humbert admits. "I was not really quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement griping, her sprawling, droopy, dopey-eyed style, and what is called goofing..."; "Charlotte, I began to understand you!" he sighs, remembering Charlotte's complaints about her impossible daughter (145ff). There is an oblique comment on this father-daughter relationship in the fact that Lolita seduces Humbert in the town of Briceland. The name of this town, as, again, Appel points out, evokes the name of Fanny Brice who starred in a radio-programme of the forties. The two characters in this programme, the unpleasant Baby Snooks and her "helpless and ineffectual Daddums", and their relationship: "the program explored all but one of the various ways the tyrannical Baby Snooks

could victimize her poor daddy and hold him in her sway"<sup>40</sup>, are in themselves parodistic of what father and daughter and their relationship are normally expected to be. As somewhat distorted comic mirror images of Humbert and Lolita and their life together, they throw an additional ironic and parodistic light on them.

At the Enchanted Hunters Hotel Lolita adds one more way (the one which the Baby Snooks programme skipped) of victimizing her Dad to her repertoire, thus giving the mock-incestuous touch to the mock father-daughter relationship. Again, this is a very comic scene although it makes one of the most reckless attacks on some deep-seated moral principles: Humbert plans to satisfy his perverse sexual desire on a little girl whom he thinks he has drugged with some potent pills. But not only is Humbert very comic in his role as the would-be passionate (though stealthy) lover ("L'Amant Ridicule" he calls himself with a fine sense of humour) (128), but his and Lolita's roles are comically reversed: it is the little girl who eventually seduces the experienced man.

The night is for Humbert a terrible (and for the reader a very comic) anti-climax. Instead of enjoying all the delights and raptures that he has imagined, Humbert is troubled by a multitude of quite unforeseen and all too sobering mundane inconveniences. His "magic potion" (121) has not worked, which means that he has to cope with quite an unexpected and intensely frustrating situation. Burning to move

nearer to Lo, he does not dare to for fear that she might "explode in screams". His physical discomfort is intensified by a fit of heartburn and by the fact that Lolita has left him only a "narrow margin of bed" and has appropriated "an unfair amount of pillow"; he snatches his back when she has a drink of water in the night. The "quiet, cosy, old-fashioned" hotel fairly explodes in all sorts of noises which attack Humbert's tense and tender nerves from all sides: the elevator's gate clatters and the elevator bangs and booms; trucks roar past; toilets gurgle and cascade; someone in a neighbouring room is "extravagantly sick". In the end, poor Humbert, exhausted by his long unpleasant and frustrating vigil, and although he is intensely aware of Lolita's bare shoulders and her "nebulous haunch" only a few inches from him, is affected by "a breeze from wonderland"; and quite inappropriately and very comically (after all he is the passionate lover in bed with his "bride" for the first time) he catches himself "drifting into a melancholy snore". And just as comically for someone in his situation, he finds himself in such a state of perplexity in the morning that he simply admits in retrospect, "I did not know what to do" and tries to save his dignity by feigning "handsome profiled sleep" (127-131). It is here that Lolita takes over and assumes Humbert's role as seducer, surprisingly and shamelessly knowledgeable. It was said above that this reversal of roles is in itself comic, and there is also something incongruous and comic in

this twelve-year-old girl so energetically disproving whatever idealistic and conventional conceptions Humbert (and anybody with him) had of a girl of her age; and in view of Humbert's past considerate (and frustrating) reserve the situation can also be called ironical.

But whatever laughable and comic aspects the situation has, the conventional notions about little girls are so deeply rooted that Lolita's part in the scene cannot be viewed simply with amusement. The same facts which are incongruous and comic are simultaneously exasperating and outrageous. From the conventional point of view Lolita disabusing Humbert of his illusions of her innocence and purity, is not laughable. Here we have again the "unresolved clash of incompatibles" in the subject matter and in the response which is the characteristic quality of the grotesque and which determines Humbert's and Lolita's relationship throughout.

At the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, then, Humbert and Lolita become "technically lovers" (italics mine) (131). They never become more than just that. Their relationship which has by now turned out to be a parody of incest and a parody of a father-daughter relationship almost immediately turns into a "parody of conventional notions of the love between the sexes."<sup>41</sup> What love Humbert has for Lolita finds expression mainly in his perverted and insatiable sexual desire; Lolita feels no love for him at all. He has lost all the

attraction he had for her as "the glamorous lodger" (49) and which prompted her on various occasions "in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance" (112) to try out on him what she has seen in movies and movie magazines, and which also prompted her at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel to boast her "experience". As Humbert correctly states, her curiosity has first turned into distaste, and after a while she is ready to turn away from him "with something akin to plain repulsion" (163). They remain together because they are mutually dependent on each other, Humbert, because of his passion, Lolita, because she has nobody else to support her.

In this relationship the vulgar and philistine little American girl incongruously and comically figures as "Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' in bobby socks"<sup>42</sup>, and L.Trilling's interpretation equally incongruously promotes her to the role of the passionately loved and cruel mistress of the romances of courtly love.<sup>43</sup> It gives another comic twist to things when, with Lolita in these roles in mind, one sees Humbert securing her unwilling submission to his demands through means which definitively degrade their relationship: through blandishments and threats (145), through terrorizing her (149) and eventually even through paying her. Sometimes he takes a perverse pleasure in inventing ways of making this cruel little mistress do what he has come to regard as her duty: "How sweet it was to bring that coffee to her, and then deny it until she had



done her morning duty" (161). With "the human element dwindling" (180), what remains of a normal man-woman love relationship is only the outward frame which is filled with comic and parodistic elements.

Their relationship, which has so far appeared comic because it is parodistic of so many normal relationships, is made grotesque by the fact that Lolita is, of course, only twelve years old. "Remember she is only a child", Humbert tells himself (112) and remains conscious of this throughout, as does the reader. He often stresses her childish and fragile appearance and her unselfconscious childlike ways. She retains these even after the night at the hotel:

She wore her professional white socks and saddle oxfords, and that bright print frock with the square throat; a splash of jaded lamplight brought out the golden down on her warm brown limbs. There she sat, her legs carelessly highcrossed, and her pale eyes skimming along the lines with every now and then a blink...Nothing could have been more childish than her snubbed nose, freckled face or the purplish spot on her naked neck where a fairytale vampire had feasted...(137).

He says a little later in the same passage that she would strike anyone as "harmless", "innocent" and "naïve" (137-138), and we catch other glimpses of the child Lolita, teaching a friend a special way of jumping rope (160), or talking to some neighbour, "her structural heap of books pressed against her stomach, her knees showing pink above her clumsy wellingtons, a sheepish frightened little smile flitting over and off her snub-nosed face..." (176).

But into all these passages intrudes Humbert's constant preoccupation with sex. The child never remains

a child for him for long. His memories of some bliss he has just enjoyed take over: "...every nerve in me was still annointed and ringed with the feel of her body - ..." (138), or the anticipation of more delights, of which he either talks triumphantly:

"...things that the most jaded voyeur would have paid a small fortune to watch" (177), or in a comically flippant, vulgar tone, as when he states that he led "reluctant" Lolita away from play and her little companion "for a quick connection before dinner" (161).

Such passages break a taboo, and, to quote Trilling again, they "make a prolonged assault on one of our... prohibitions, the sexual inviolability of girls of a certain age". The outrage caused thereby is deepened by some other passages in which Lolita appears even more poignantly childlike and touching (an epithet applied to her by Nabokov<sup>44</sup>), as when she frees herself from Humbert's attempted embrace "with the neutral plaintive murmur of a child demanding its natural rest" (129); when she sobs in the night - "every night, every night - the moment I feigned sleep" (172), or when she comes weeping to Humbert's room on the night after he has told her that her mother is dead (140).

Few critics, when rather harshly criticizing Lolita, consider the fact that, whatever else she may be, she is "also a little girl whose mother is dead"<sup>45</sup>, and Nabokov is the only one to express some pity for her when he calls her "my poor little girl."<sup>46</sup> But all other qualities aside, her conventionality, her vulgarity and brainlessness, even her seeming sexual

experience, up to a certain point she is just that. She is dependent on Humbert materially, she is frightened because he infuses into her a consciousness of "shared guilt" and makes her dread the consequences in case they are found out (148-149); she is subject to his incessant sexual desire which she resents. For him their life together is paradise, "a paradise whose skies were the colour of hell-flames - but still a paradise" (163); for her it is hell. But she can react only through "vicious vulgarity and childish despair" (168), expressions of her very helplessness, through "fits of moodiness" and "storms of sobs" after "the operation" is over and Humbert is "laughing happily" (165); and she has no one to turn to except, ironically, Humbert: as he says with an awful undertone of triumph when she comes weeping to his room: "You see she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (140).

All the elements which have had to be somewhat artificially separated for the sake of analysis, are in fact firmly interlinked throughout. The reader is constantly faced simultaneously with the comic and the outrageous aspects of Humbert's and Lolita's relationship. All the time Humbert appears simultaneously in his role as the comically pathetic lover of a mindless vulgar little girl, and the hateful pervert who frightens and pays a child to make her conform to his wishes. It is all equally ambivalent with regard to Lolita: she is incongruous and comic in the role into which she half manoeuvres herself and in which she is half cast against her will, and pathetic

and pitiful at the same time. And all the time the contradictory elements evoke contradictory and even incompatible emotions and reactions in the reader. The relationship is indeed, as Humbert says, grotesque.

The basic situation of Lolita is anticipated in the much earlier Laughter in the Dark.<sup>47</sup> Like the later novel it deals with the infatuation of a mature man with a much younger girl: Margot is sixteen. Albinus' idolatry of her is as complete as Humbert's of Lolita. He abandons his family to live with her and becomes indirectly responsible for the death of his child. The basic difference between the two novels is aptly described in Nabokov's own statement that "Actually, of course, Margot was a common young whore, not an unfortunate little Lolita."<sup>48</sup>

Margot's, as Lolita's, youth and childishness are often mentioned: her "girlish figure" (LD, 38) and "childish" face" (LD, 115) her childish manners and handwriting (LD, 39-40), and "You're a child yourself" (LD, 116) Albinus says to her. However, in her, this childishness is coupled with gross materialism and great cunning. Hers is only the appearance of a child and schoolgirl; she has none of Lolita's genuine childish nature, and certainly none of her helplessness.

Enamoured by material possessions, it does not matter to her how she comes by them, so that, after she has satisfied herself by inspecting his flat that Albinus is really wealthy, she is content to give in to his wishes although she does not love him. And she quickly falls in love with the life Albinus offers

her: "... - a life full of the glamour of a first-class film with rocking palm trees and shuddering roses..." (LD, 76). So much is this the kind of life that she wants and so afraid is she "of seeing it all snap" (LD, 76) that she does not take any risks, even when tempted. In order to secure the material luxury and comfort with which Albinus surrounds her, she tries "her utmost to remain quite faithful to him", even though, whatever her feelings for him may be, "she knew, all along, that for her it would always be love minus something, whereas the least touch of her first lover had always been a sample of everything" (LD, 75). But when this man, Axel Rex, returns, she is not prepared to abandon her luxurious life for the sake of her love. She has worked on Albinus, insisting on marriage. She thinks that "now he is ripe" and is exasperated to think that Axel Rex, who is "a beggar compared with him" might spoil everything (LD, 98).

It was said above that recent critics have been very harsh in their judgements on Lolita, pointing out her conventionality and brainlessness, her vulgarity and shallowness and what they call her insensitivity. As the analysis has shown, they are right up to a certain point and in some respects Lolita appears like a younger edition of Margot. Conventionality certainly is a predominant characteristic of both of them. Also, Margot, lying on the sand, "a thin white rubber belt relieving the black of her bathing suit", looks like "the perfect seaside

poster" (LD, 72) - the kind of poster that Lolita would fall victim to. Both have a passion for the cinema in common. "Margot", says Moynahan, "turns out to be entirely a creature of the camera-obscura world."<sup>49</sup> She has been an artist's model and then the model and mistress of Axel Rex, and, ambitious to become a film actress and convinced of her talent, she considers her job as an usherette in a cinema as no more than the start of that career. One of the advantages of living with Albinus is that he "belonged to the world which offered easy access to the stage and the films" (LD, 45). She sees her own life in terms of the film world; the life she leads with Albinus makes her think of a "first-class film", and sitting between Axel and Albinus "she felt as though she were the chief actress in a mysterious and passionate film-drama" (LD, 95) and behaves accordingly. "Lolita's world is in many ways a movie", says Alfred Appel.<sup>50</sup> She keeps the pictures of "crooners" and movie stars above her bed, she reads movie magazines, a visit to Hollywood is the highlight of their long journey; as Charlotte Haze remarks: "She sees herself as a starlet" (L, 65); and, like Margot, she acts out in life from time to time what she has read about in her magazines or seen in films. "That she will eventually prefer Clare Quilty to Humbert Humbert is the result of her 'veritable passion' for Hollywood." But to this remark Appel adds in all fairness: "...no one would suggest that, from her point of view, a distinctive moral choice is offered her."<sup>51</sup>

Looking at it for a moment with moral terms in mind, one might even say that when she leaves Humbert and runs away with Quilty she does the most moral thing she can do in her situation. Unlike Margot, who stays with unloved Albinus for the sake of luxury, Lolita is not willing to stay with Humbert, whom she does not love, merely for the sake of material security and comfort. She follows Quilty because she is in love with him. She does not see through him at that stage and has no idea what "weird, filthy, fancy things" (269) she will be expected to take part in on his ranch with the telling name.<sup>52</sup> It seems, in fact, that the critics are somewhat inconsistent with regard to Lolita. They see her as a product of her education, a child who has learnt to "think and feel only in terms of outwardly inspired stereotypes"<sup>53</sup>; they admit that her education does not "enable [Lolita] to distinguish between the truly perverted and nature's faithful hounds"<sup>54</sup>; and they state that the whole society in which she grows up is corrupt: "It is no accident that Quilty is rich and successful, that he has 'friends' on the police force, ...a reputation as an outstanding playwright."<sup>55</sup> Granted all this, it seems unfair to expect insights of her that would be superior to those of which anybody around her is capable. Seeing in Humbert a dirty old man and in Quilty a genius she does only what society has taught her. It seems equally unfair to accuse her of a "horrifying" lack of imagination because she is unable to imagine Humbert's state of mind.<sup>56</sup> This is

something which is not easy to imagine even for the reader who, moreover, is in a much better position, as he has Humbert's memoir from which to piece together the evidence.

It might even be argued that Lolita is in fact superior to everybody else in her reactions and decisions. Considering her upbringing and the example that even her mother sets her, she can be said to have amazingly healthy reactions to things. She leaves Humbert because she does not love him and gives up material security; she refuses to do the filthy things expected of her on Quilty's ranch because she loves and wants only him, and suffers herself to be thrown out, having to renounce the hopes he has evoked in her of having a tryout in Hollywood, even "a bit part in the tennis-match scene of a movie picture" based on a Quilty play (269). Considering her passion for the movie world one can imagine what a sacrifice this must be for her. And after this she drifts for two years, does restaurant work in small places and eventually meets and marries and is faithful to, wholly unglamorous Dick Schiller.

Another shattering statement has been made about Lolita: "Lolita has no soul, no identity", says one critic, "(which is why she acts so well)." <sup>57</sup> If one is to believe the testimony of others, Lolita does very well in the rehearsals for The Enchanted Hunters.

Margot, too, is given the chance to act in a film, but it turns out in the preview that she acts "atrociously" (121), a fact that Albinus finds touching



and Axel Rex delightful. But Margot is by far the better actress in life. Albinus never suspects that she stages her scenes not out of passion for him but with only one thought in mind: that of his wealth; he is only amazed to see "tears of that size and brilliance" (77). She deceives him throughout as to her feelings for him and as to her relation with Rex. He neither sees through her confusion when Rex first comes to his home nor through the "farcical" situation in which he himself unknowingly plays the role of the fooled husband (106). He does not see through her feigned indifference when he suggests that Axel go with them on their journey; and it cannot be easy for her to put on this indifference, for "she felt that this man meant everything to her" (126). Her talent serves her again when she manages to convince Albinus that there is no truth in what he has heard about herself and Rex. She invents lies, she talks, she pleads (all the time anxious not to spoil anything). She weeps, she has a fit of hysterics; in the end, feeling she is gaining the upper hand, she accuses Albinus because of his suspicion: "...please remember that you've insulted me and my love for you in the worst manner possible. I suppose you'll understand that later" (148).

There is little acting of the kind that Margot practises all the time, on Lolita's part. Her behaviour is an honest mirror of her mind and her emotions which she makes no attempt to conceal. She is equally frank in her "backfisch foolery" (112) and in her surprised

question "Are we to sleep in one room?" (118) and in her brusque rejection of Humbert's "controlled tenderness before dinner": "Look, let's cut out the kissing game and get something to eat" (119). Her fits, her weeping and sobbing, and her tears are genuine. She never leaves Humbert in any doubt about what she thinks of him: "I'd be a sap if I took your opinion seriously...Stinker. ..You can't boss me... I despise you..." (168).

Oddly enough, there is little acting in the sense in which the word has been used with regard to Margot, even when Lolita gets involved with Quilty, when she knows that he is following them and that sooner or later she is going to run away with him. She does tell some lies to Humbert to cover up her communication with Quilty and her meetings with him, but apart from that her behaviour reflects her emotions as faithfully as before. This applies to her reactions to Humbert, to whom she says "unprintable things" (201), but it applies also to her reactions to Quilty. More than once Humbert is puzzled by something about her: "a kind of celestial vapidness" in her eyes (199); "those muddy, mooney eyes of hers, that singular warmth emanating from her" (210); "a private blaze on my right: her joyful eye, her flaming cheek" (215). Again unlike Margot, she does not play down the emotions evoked in her by the man she loves: her happiness shows, and she is content to let it show.

It appears from all this that Lolita is not quite the soulless creature and almost non-entity that some

critics have made her, and from what has been said one can also gather some first indication of why Laughter in the Dark must end tragically for Albinus while Lolita is after all<sup>58</sup> (and as the title indicates) Lolita's story.

It was said above that the style of Humbert's memoir adds to the ambivalent and grotesque effect. With its comic qualities, its constant playful and parodistic handling of words and styles and forms, with its playing with and abusing of, the reader's conventional expectations and reactions, its flippant comments on incidents that would ask for some serious treatment, it evokes amusement. The other reaction to it - incompatible with amusement - is indignation because it seems to be so wholly unsuited for what it relates.

At the same time Humbert's tone and style is an indication of something behind the trompe l'oeil which is formed by the surface events. Nabokov talks about Humbert Humbert and Hermann, the hero of Despair, in his Foreword to that novel and says that while "Hell shall never parole Hermann", "there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year."<sup>59</sup> For an explanation of why this privilege should be granted him (after all Nabokov calls him "a vain and cruel wretch" elsewhere<sup>60</sup>), one can first turn to the Foreword by John Ray and then again to Humbert's memoir.

The clearly parodistic passages apart, the Foreword talks of the "tendresse" and "compassion" for Lolita

that the book conjures up. It talks of the "desperate honesty that throbs through [Humbert's] confession", of the "supreme misery" betrayed perhaps by his very jocularity, thus hinting that there is more to Humbert's memoir than may at first meet the eye.

The shock and the moral indignation evoked by the concern for the child Lolita come very near the moral scorn which is so effectively ridiculed both in the Foreword and by Humbert himself, but much in the memoir indicates that it is in fact quite an inadequate reaction, and that the sadness of it all lies much deeper. There is also much in the memoir to betray the misery which the Foreword hints at.

"Is 'mask' the keyword?" Humbert asks at one point (53). If one takes into account what has just been said, it is possible to see the very way in which he deals with his past and which prejudices one against him, the very jocularity and flippancy of his style, as the "mask" behind which Humbert takes refuge to cover up his misery, and as a means of putting an ironic distance between himself and his anguish.

What it is that earns Humbert the privilege granted him by Nabokov, that makes John Ray talk of him in sympathetic terms and also causes the critics to speak up for him, can be appreciated only when Clare Quilty's role is analysed and seen in relation to Humbert's own.

Quilty is certainly a real enough person. He has a house and friends; he is known as a playwright; Stegner points out that "he exists in photographs, which do

not record images of the symbolic self."<sup>61</sup> And of course, Lolita runs away with Quilty, and Humbert murders him. But Quilty has also been called "Humbert's perverse alter ego"<sup>62</sup>, "the dubious incarnation of Humbert's sinister side"<sup>63</sup>, and "a projection of Humbert's guilt."<sup>64</sup> Humbert himself quite clearly assigns that role to him.

Some of the conditions of the traditional Doppelgänger tale, Dostoevski's The Double and Poe's William Wilson, for example, seem to be fulfilled by Quilty and Humbert Humbert, who moreover has an appropriate name. It is certainly no accident that Quilty, after his name has several times been mentioned only briefly and unobtrusively, should first appear on the scene at The Enchanted Hunters Hotel, just before Humbert will for the first time possess Lolita. It becomes clear only in retrospect that the person mentioned there is Quilty, but Lolita notices the resemblance, and he is introduced in a manner suiting the role he is going to play: although he talks to Humbert, Humbert "could not really see him" (125), and when the man strikes a light, "the flame illuminated not him but another person" (126). "...I saw not, at any moment, the features of his face", says William Wilson of the mysterious person who follows him wherever he goes.<sup>65</sup> Humbert and Quilty resemble each other in certain respects. Apart from both being sexual perverts, they both have purple bathrobes (Wilson's double always wears clothes of the same style as Wilson himself), and, as Humbert notes, Quilty's "type of humour

- at its best at least - the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own" (243). In Poe's tale, the two Wilsons are believed by some pupils at the academy to be brothers<sup>66</sup>. The hero in Dostoevski's The Double is asked whether the new man in the office, who looks so much like him and also bears the same name it not his brother?<sup>67</sup> Mary, the nurse, whom Humbert waylays in a solitary sidestreet whispers: "He is your brother" when Humbert insists on knowing the identity of Gratiano Forbeson, one of Quilty's aliases (243), and Humbert himself finds some comfort in the thought "that I still had my gun, and was still a free man - free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother" (241).

However, parody interferes again, and by standing some of the conventions of the traditional Doppelgänger tales on their heads, Nabokov complicates the issue, so that at times it becomes impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between an "evil" and a "good" self. Humbert, ostensibly the good self, is repeatedly referred to as an ape, both by Quilty and by himself (40,49,252,290), and this description is in the traditional tales about doubles reserved for the evil self.<sup>68</sup> Humbert calls Quilty "my shadow" and "our shadow" (215) which is again what the evil self is traditionally called; but, as Appel says, "the pun on Humbert's name suggests that he is as much a shadow as Quilty..." And, in fact, when Humbert penetrates into Quilty's house, Quilty sweeps past him, and Humbert is not sure whether Quilty has not noticed him "or else dismissed me as some familiar and innocu-

ous hallucination" (287).<sup>69</sup>

It is certainly a parodistic innovation that, after the "evil self" (Quilty) has first pursued the "good self" (Humbert), the roles should be reversed and Humbert should in his turn pursue his evil and perverse alter ego. Also, it is not in the tradition of the Doppelgänger tale that this pursuit should demand so much detective ingenuity of the pursuer as to turn the account of it into something like Poe's Tales of Ratiocination, and to grant him success only because he is a literary expert and able to decipher all the clues his victim has planted - which is again something that doubles do not normally do.

The confusion becomes almost complete in their fight, in which "We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms...and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (291), and as Humbert drives away, he is still "all covered with Quilty, with the feel of that tumble before the bleeding" (298).<sup>70</sup> Quilty, who "rightly balks at his symbolic role"<sup>71</sup> and dies only after impossibly long and comically Shakespearean death throes<sup>72</sup>, also considers the question of identity as far from settled: Accused by Humbert of kidnapping Lolita, he denies all responsibility and lays all the blame on Humbert: "I did not!...I saved her from a beastly pervert. Show me your badge instead of shooting at my foot, you ape, you...I am not responsible for the rapes of others" (290).

The murder has been seen as a symbolic act: "One self has destroyed the other and Humbert is made whole"<sup>73</sup>, but Stegner sees it, too, as a parody of a formula, and so does Appel, who argues that, strictly speaking, "it should not be necessary to kill Quilty and what he represents, for...in asking the no longer nymphic Lolita to go away with him, [Humbert] has transcended his obsession."<sup>74</sup>

Ironically, Humbert himself seems to undercut the symbolical meaning of Quilty's death. Driving away after the murder, he crosses over to the left side of the highway, which Field interprets as a sign that "he has no more to fear from his sinister double"<sup>75</sup>, but, as Humbert says, "it occurred to me - not by way of protest, not as a symbol, or anything like that..." (298).

If it is all the same possible to see Quilty at least up to a certain point as a reflection of Humbert's evil self and to see in his destruction "a moral purgation for Humbert"<sup>76</sup>, it is because of those qualities (which Quilty has not got) that relieve Humbert from unrelieved damnation and which make him "transcend his obsession".

"...in recent fiction no lover has thought of his beloved with so much tenderness...no woman has been so charmingly evoked, in such grace and delicacy, as Lolita."<sup>77</sup> There are passages in which Humbert perceives and speaks of Lolita's youthfulness and beauty in terms of which no one else in the novel, and certainly not Quilty, would be capable:



No hereafter is acceptable if it does not produce her as she was then,..., with everything right: the white wide little-boy shorts, the slender waist, the apricot midriff, the white breastkerchief whose ribbons went up and encircled her neck to end behind in a dangling knot leaving bare her gaspingly young and adorable apricot shoulder blades with that pubescence and those lovely gentle bones, and the smooth downward-tapering back (225-226).

This is how he sees Lolita when she plays tennis, and this is how he wishes he had filmed her. Quilty, too, was to give her a bit-part in a tennis match scene in a film, but his private films are of a different kind.

There is at least one passage which shows that Lolita is for Humbert not just the sex object she is for Quilty; there are moments at which he is capable and in need of nearness and tenderness which has nothing to do with sex, and at which there seems to be in him a protective and almost painful awareness of Lolita's youth and fragility and loveliness:

...you never deigned to believe that I could, without any specific designs, ever crave to bury my face in your plaid skirt, my darling! The fragility of those bare arms of yours - how I longed to enfold them, all your four limpid lovely limbs, a folded colt, and take your head between my unworthy hands, and pull the temple-skin back on both sides, and kiss your chinesed eyes... (188)

Humbert's feelings for Lolita have so far been talked about almost exclusively in terms of sexual perversion and obsession to which moments like this one are the exception. But his emotions have another dimension by which parody is at last overcome, and which allows one to see this novel, too, as dealing,

behind the comic texture of its surface, with one aspect of man's search for what Nabokov calls "true reality". Humbert's admiration and passion for nymphets has been said to be "a metaphysical as well as a physical compulsion."<sup>78</sup> To understand this, it is useful to remember that "nympholepsy" is defined as

A state of rapture supposed to be inspired in men by nymphs, hence, an ecstasy or frenzy, esp. that caused by desire of the unattainable,

and "nympholept" as

One who is inspired by a violent enthusiasm, esp. for the unattainable.<sup>79</sup>

Two passages from Laughter in the Dark and Lolita respectively express that this is the state both Albinus and Humbert Humbert suffer from. Albinus has dreamt of hundreds of girls, but has never got to know them. He feels that

... they had just slid past him, leaving for a day or two that hopeless sense of loss which makes beauty what it is: a distant lone tree against golden heavens; ripples of light on the inner curve of a bridge; a thing quite impossible to capture (LD, 10).

Humbert, too, feels that there is something which it is impossible to capture, something which man may yearn for and struggle to reach, and which eludes him all the same. But like Albinus he feels that some of that elusive quality is caught and encased in child-women. He feels that by grasping their beauty and perfection man may transcend this world and time, pass beyond "the mirror you break your nose against" (L, 220), and be admitted into Wonderland; be taken as near the unattainable as it will ever

be possible for him to be taken; for in them, the nymphets<sup>80</sup> on their "intangible island of entranced time" (L,19) he discovers the

...infinite perfections [which] fill the gap between the little given and the great promised - the great rose-grey never-to-be-had (L,257).

Hence his secret horror of mere human, grown-up, "terrestrial women" (L,20); his fear that Lolita should grow up and lose that quality, and hence his "Never grow up" (L,22), which can now no longer be taken simply as the wish of a sexual pervert, but rather as the expression of the desperate wish, common to all men, that beauty might be durable, and not subject to change, and not transitory.

At this point Edgar Allan Poe comes to mind, whose Annabel Lee and William Wilson are parodied in Humbert's memoir, and whose name Humbert uses jokingly on various occasions (L,44, 75, 118, 185). Here it appears that he is introduced not merely for the sake of parody, but because there exists some affinity between his mind and Humbert's. The essential point is not that Poe, like Humbert, suffered from attacks of insanity (caused, he explains, by "the horrible never-ending oscillation between hope & despair" when he sees his wife ill and then recovering and then ill again, and undergoes seven times altogether "all the agonies of her death."<sup>81</sup>) The essential point, which establishes the similarity between him and Humbert, is the fact that he, too, is in pursuit of beauty impossible for man to cap-

ture in this life. As one critic expresses it: "It is an immaterial, pure, eternal, unchanging beauty... Man cannot possess this loveliness for it is infinite..."<sup>82</sup> The only way to get anywhere near that beauty seems to be for Poe, as for Albinus and Humbert, through the love of a woman, or child-woman, in whom they see it caught. As somebody who knew him says about Poe: "His love for his wife was a sort of rapturous worship of the spirit of beauty which he felt was fading before his eyes."<sup>83</sup>

Both Albinus and Humbert, then,

...have received a true intuition that the route to the infinite is through attachment to an adorable image or eidolon, yet both blunder, perversely and fatally, by haplessly confounding the image with its illusory reflection or echo in the flesh of a child-woman.<sup>84</sup>

Their common blunder must have different consequences because Margot and Lolita are so different.

Lolita is a little girl, and very much alive, and very human, so that "there is... the possibility of love."<sup>85</sup> Margot, as she has emerged from the analysis, has none of Lolita's qualities and has turned out to be "entirely a creature of the camera-obscura world." It is very apt, then, that Albinus' involvement with her should be presented in terms of the cinema. Albinus is not aware of it, but his melodrama is that of the film of which he watches the end in the very cinema where he first meets Margot, and where, therefore, his own melodrama begins. It is apt that Axel Rex, the film maker, should see his place at "the programme of [this] roaring comedy" in the private box of the stage manager (LD, 118),

and it is also appropriate and logical that he and Margot should feel mutually attracted and that Margot should stay with him.

"Love is blind" remarks the postman (LD,119) - again talking to the hall-porter as on the occasion when Albinus tried to intercept Margot's letter. Albinus' blindness consists, in conventional terms, in not seeing what everybody else does see "this little slut is going to be the ruin of him" (LD,105). On another level it consists in mistaking Margot for something superior, namely for one of those creatures in which rest elements of that "pure, eternal, unchanging beauty" towards which man aspires.

Through her he wants to penetrate to the infinite and elusive realm of beauty, that is, to some reality that is superior to the "average reality" which man normally experiences. Instead he gets caught up in the camera obscura world which is Margot's and Rex's and of which they are part, and thus loses all chance and hope of ever experiencing what he is yearning for. Instead of getting any nearer that superior realm, he has moved away from it, for the camera obscura world is inferior even to the average world of man and completely removed from "true reality". It does not even share the "average reality" our world possesses. Its so-called "reality" consists only of fleeting shadow images of our world, those "degrading images"<sup>86</sup> which film makers produce and in terms of which Margot has been described throughout. It is obvious that Albinus' attachment to one of those images can

only lead to disaster. Being lost in a world of images, he is in the end even physically blinded to the finite realm and reality of "mere mortals"<sup>87</sup> to which he has been morally blind all along. It is ironical that recognition of the truth should come to him only "in the dark-room of his blindness"<sup>88</sup>, but it must not be forgotten that, strictly speaking, it does not even "come" to him (Albinus, unlike Humbert, never becomes aware of things himself), but that the truth is revealed to him by his brother-in-law.

Humbert's blindness seems to be very much like Albinus', but whereas Albinus ends up in total darkness, Humbert becomes seeing in the end. From the conventional point of view, Humbert is guilty of continually abusing a child to satisfy his perverse sexual desire. In terms of his metaphysical obsession he is guilty of seeing in Lolita not the little girl she is, but one of those "chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets'", whose "true nature... is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)" (L,18).

From the start, then, Humbert denies that Lolita's true nature is human. In a way, this adds to the comedy of their relationship. Lolita has been seen as incongruous and comic in her role of the cruel beloved mistress, La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Now there is the additional incongruity between Humbert's idealized, unearthly version of her, and the very human, very terrestrial Lolita, who constantly interferes with, and threatens to destroy, Humbert's own reality.<sup>89</sup>

But Humbert's view of Lolita also adds another tragic dimension to their story, for from the start it is clear that he does not love her as she is, but as he sees her, as that fanciful, semi-divine being, a creation of his own mind (based on one of her qualities, namely her youthful beauty and loveliness), who comes between him and the real child.

I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita for ever; but I also knew she would not be for ever Lolita... The words 'for ever' referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood (65-66).

Even on that memorable Sunday

What I had madly 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.

The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her (62).

He has possessed his own creation, more real to him than the child before him, and the child - a being apart - knows nothing. Later, of course, the child does not remain ignorant, but Humbert's attitude does not change. In his preoccupation with the fanciful nymphet in whom he senses and worships and wants to grasp some mysterious and otherwise unattainable beauty, Lolita and her soul and wonder elude him.

He says he can "visualize" Lolita with "hallucinational lucidity"; he says that he is "always 'with Lolita' as a woman is 'with child'" (107). Craving to attain the unattainable, he wishes he could "turn

my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart..." (161), and, with the old Biblical meaning of "to know" in mind (to which Humbert himself refers mockingly on a different occasion), one might even venture to see his sexual desire as an expression of the wish to know beauty and to capture beauty, that thing of which Albinus feels that it is impossible to capture.

Lolita has nothing to do with all this. She is left out. Even though Humbert may turn to Charlotte's old Know-Your-Child Book for Lolita's measurements and consult "a book with the unintentionally biblical title Know Your Own Daughter" (170), he remains blind to the human being beside him. It sometimes dawns on him that

... I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind, and that quite possibly, ... , there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate - dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me... (277).

Although they live as closely together as it is possible for two persons, they are distant from each other, isolated, and lonely. Lolita is for Humbert not a child, real, alive, and "rooted in the present"<sup>90</sup>, but something fanciful, no more than the vessel of some abstract, metaphysical quality. Humbert is for Lolita, who is less metaphysically-minded, "... not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn..." (276). It is a long way from The Eye to Lolita, but by their relation and their suffering Humbert and Lolita prove



the truth of the theory developed in that novel.

Humbert is all the more guilty as he is perfectly aware of it all. He knows that the words "for ever" do not refer to the real child, that in a few years she will cease being a nymphet, and there is the thought in his mind

that around 1950 I would have to get rid somehow of a difficult adolescent whose magic nymphage had evaporated (170),

but quite early, during their first trip, he firmly decides "to ignore what I could not help perceiving" and he makes this decision for purely selfish reasons: "in order to enjoy my phantasms in peace" (276).

Erich Fromm, in The Art of Loving, names respect and knowledge as two of the essential constituents of love. He uses "respect" in the old meaning, suggested by its root: "respicere" = "to look (back) at"; "regard"; "to pay attention to"; "to observe carefully"; "to regard as being of a certain kind"<sup>91</sup>, and takes it to be the ability to see a person as he really is, to see him as having a unique and quite individual personality. To love a person means to feel as one with that person as he is, not as one would like him to be, or as he ought to be.<sup>92</sup> To obtain real knowledge of a person is possible only if one overcomes all self-interested motives and succeeds in seeing that other person as he sees himself.<sup>93</sup>

It is only at the end, and when she is lost to him, that "respect" and "knowledge" enter into Humbert's feelings for Lolita. When he sees her before

him "hopelessly worn at seventeen" (270), he accepts her for the first time as a human being, and as she is, and loves her for what she is:

... there she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, ... 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 (270).

He overcomes at this moment both his perverse sexual passion and his metaphysical yearning that was part of it, or was even at the root of it. Lolita is hardly recognizable as the nymphet she was, or that he saw in her: "She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet" (270), and it is not this echo that he now loves but "this Lolita", as she is before him, "pale and polluted, and big with another's child" (271), and he loves her more than anything he "had hoped for anywhere else", more, that is, than even that abstract beauty and perfection he had hoped and longed to find in her and through her.

It is curious that a "message", and from Quilty's play, too, should sum up Humbert's experience at that moment: "mirage and reality merge in love" (197): Our "average reality" may contain reflections and echoes of the superior realm of "true reality", and through them it may be possible to apprehend that realm. But this is as near as man can get to it. Whatever belongs to it will never actually become part of our "average reality", nor can anyone make it become

part of it. Even with the intuition or knowledge of something superior man must live in, and react to, the world in which we find ourselves so as not to lose touch with this world. This, however, has happened to Humbert.

He has been enabled to apprehend through Lolita's beauty and loveliness that "infinite perfection", that "immaterial, pure, eternal, unchanging beauty". But seeing in her a nymphet, a semi-divine creature, and thus trying to make what he has apprehended part of his own world and of "average reality", he has been deluded. This is what he becomes aware of when he sees her before him "hopelessly worn at seventeen". H i s Lolita, the nymphet, was a mirage with no reality except in his own mind.

Onto this mirage is now superimposed what Humbert has never wanted to accept until now, and what he has in fact hardly ever been aware of: the image of the human being that Lolita essentially and really is. "Reality" in the quotation from Quilty's play must certainly be taken as meaning Lolita's essentially and unchangeably human nature. And as these images are superimposed one upon the other, they also blend and become indistinguishable. They blend in Humbert's mind, and they blend and merge in his love.

Humbert has certainly destroyed Lolita's childhood, and for this he suffers in his mind. Looking down on a small town one day, he hears its sounds rising,

And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature,... What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that...

I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord (299).

But all that Humbert has done to her has not destroyed her essential human nature (nor has Quilty been able to do that: unlike Margot who stays with Rex, Lolita leaves her film maker), and just as the Young Poet in the playlet (The Enchanted Hunters) is eventually informed by his Diana that she is not his invention, not "a poet's fancy, but a rustic, down-to-brown-earth lass" (197), Humbert is awakened by Lolita herself to the fact that she is a human being, not his nymphet, and it is as a human being that he comes to accept her in the end, and to love her.

THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT

The novel which resembles The Eye more closely than any of the others is The Real Life of Sebastian Knight<sup>1</sup>. Like The Eye it deals with the quest for the "true reality" of a person, as defined at the beginning of the chapter about that novel, and also with Sebastian's quest for self-knowledge. The basic formula is essentially the same as that of the earlier novel: Sebastian, of whose death we are informed on the second page of the novel, emerges at the end as its author, just as the "dead" narrator of The Eye emerges as the very person he is talking about, so that the experience that both Smurov and Sebastian go through might be called, in the words of Mr Silbermann in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight a "dress rehearsal of death" (120), an experience which somewhat later the poet Shade in Pale Fire and Mr. R. in Transparent Things will share with them. For the purpose of writing the book Sebastian has split into two like Smurov, one observing, the other being observed, and these two, V and Sebastian, merge back into one on the last page of the novel. The device is disclosed (or rather hinted at) only in the last paragraph, although one comes to suspect it much earlier. Nearly until the end the pretence that V is a real person writing about Sebastian is consistently maintained, and on a special level this can even be accepted as a fact.

After the negative and pessimistic conclusion of the earlier novel and after what has emerged from Pnin the title of the later one with its implied promise

of an insight into the real life of one Sebastian Knight gives rise to scepticism and doubt.

Human beings and their minds are individual and separate entities and there seems to be no way of anyone acquiring complete and real knowledge of anybody else.

On the physical level we all feel the intense solitariness of individuality. There are you, and here am I. You can never know what it is like to be me, nor can I ever know what it is like to be you. As though to emphasize this, or at least symbolising it, our bodies are all discrete and well-defined entities separate in space.<sup>2</sup>

On the level of the mind a certain amount of communication is of course possible, but it looks as if in the last analysis there existed the same solitariness there as on the physical level, with each person having his own and individual thoughts and dreams and memories and fantasies which are accessible to him alone, which he can exhibit and about which he can give information, but which he cannot transfer to another person.<sup>3</sup> The validity of verbal communication itself must be doubted for the simple reason that different people attach different meanings to words<sup>4</sup>, especially, one might say, where mental experiences are concerned. And even if one assumed for a moment that two persons completely shared, for example, their memories, "there would still be at least the possibility of different reactions to the experience."<sup>5</sup>

A.J.Ayer suggests a method which, he implies, may in certain cases help to bridge the gap between two persons and grant at least a momentary and fragmentary understanding. "I can conceive of having any

consistent set of characteristics that you please", he says, and continues saying that it does not matter "that I do not have the characteristics chosen, or even that I could not have them, being the person that I am": that does not "entail that I cannot know what it would be like to have them." Being told, for example, of the experiences of a child,

...I may come to believe that I was the child in question. Later, I may discover that I was not: but I do not then cease to understand the statement about the child's experiences.<sup>6</sup>

This contradicts partly the statement about the solitariness and separateness of each individual person, for it assumes that one person can after all, by a feat of the imagination, know what it is like to be somebody else. It also presupposes that the correct meaning is attached to the statement about that person's experience, which is again something that Ayer has said is by no means certain.

So far, then, there are only difficulties and doubts concerning the enterprise that The Real Life of Sebastian Knight advertises in its title. There is also Nabokov's own scepticism to take into account, dramatized in The Eye and in Pnin and put forth in theoretical form in his essay "Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable."<sup>7</sup>

Est-il possible d'imaginer en toute réalité la vie d'un autre, de la revivre en soi et de la mettre intacte sur le papier? J'en doute: et l'on serait tenté de croire que la pensée même, en dirigeant son rayon sur l'histoire d'un homme, la déforme inévitablement. Ainsi, ce ne serait que le vraisemblable, et non le vrai, que perçoit notre esprit.<sup>8</sup>

The doubt with which one approaches The Real Life of Sebastian Knight turns out to be justified, for the truth about Sebastian and his real life proves to be extremely elusive. Even at the end, and even though the narrator finishes on a note of confidence and satisfaction, implying that he has indeed found what he has set out to find, the reader feels "that the promise made by the title has not been kept by the novel."<sup>9</sup> And throughout the novel one feels that perhaps one has missed something essential, failed to understand or see some revelation about Sebastian. In fact, one has the same feeling with regard to The Real Life of Sebastian Knight that the narrator has with regard to Sebastian's own novel The Doubtful Asphodel:

I sometimes feel when I turn the pages of Sebastian's masterpiece that the 'absolute solution' is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage I have read too hastily, or that is intertwined with other words whose familiar guise deceived me. I don't know any other book that gives me this special sensation, and perhaps this was the author's special intention (169).

This is not only due to the difficulty of the quest. It is also due to the fact that what seems to promise in the title to be simply Sebastian's biography is not just that, but a complicated structure of many parts that mirror each other in various ways. It is, or so it seems, a book by one writer (Nabokov) about another writer (V), who writes about his brother (Sebastian), who in his turn wrote novels, some of them parodies of extant literary works. The book does give some biographical information about Sebastian,



gathered from various sources, and at the same time it tells us the story of how this information was come by. It contains bits of another biographical work about Sebastian and criticizes this work. It contains expositions of Sebastian's own novels and evaluates them. Careful reading reveals that each of Sebastian's novels has something in common with the book about him, and that his Doubtful Asphodel in particular mirrors, and is mirrored in, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. It reveals furthermore that Sebastian's views and techniques correspond closely with those of Nabokov himself. One could compare the novel with that children's toy: a set of little boxes of ever diminishing size that fit into each other. And one should add that some of the walls of these boxes are transparent, so that all the boxes are visible at once, and that, furthermore, some of the walls act as mirrors to each other. To all this is added the confusion concerning identities. Are there really two persons, V and Sebastian, V writing about his half-brother? Or is The Real Life of Sebastian Knight another of Sebastian's own novels and V one of his fictitious characters?<sup>10</sup> Is the whole Sebastian's own autobiography?

Nabokov complains that "reviewers scurrying in search of more or less celebrated names for the purpose of passionate comparison" have "hurled" at him, among many others, "even Sebastian Knight."<sup>11</sup> This is not quite so absurd as he seems to imply, for, as

has already been stated, Sebastian's art has indeed a lot in common with that of his creator. One passage in particular has often been quoted to illustrate the affinities between their works, namely the passage in which V explains Sebastian's use of parody:

...at the very moment when the reader feels quite safe in an atmosphere of pleasurable reality and the grace and glory of the author's prose seems to indicate some lofty and rich intention,...we are again wallowing in a morass of parody (88).

He also explains Knight's intentions when using parody. One is to expose and

...[to hunt] out the things which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud (85).

This (purely artistic) purpose is not his only one:

...he used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion (85).

Parody is the comic form Nabokov uses most consistently in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. On the one hand this adds to the bewilderment created by the intricate structure, but on the other hand it also helps to get nearer to an understanding of the novel. An analysis of the passages where it is used and an investigation of why it is used may lead a few steps towards the solution of the "riddle" of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.

After the death of the writer Sebastian Knight his half-brother sets out to write his biography. Apparently the relationship between the two was not

a very close one, and it seems that Sebastian was to blame for this. V insists that he was even as a child deeply interested in his brother, trying in various ways to catch his attention, but that Sebastian remained "silent and distant" (15) towards him and ignored him almost completely. On the few occasions on which they met in later years, Sebastian was apparently just as distant and off-hand in his dealings with V. V sees their relationship as one in which his life-long affection for Sebastian "had always been crushed and thwarted" (31) by his brother's aloofness.

No wonder he realizes very soon that he hardly knows anything about Sebastian. Beyond an "inner knowledge of [his brother's] character" (31) that he claims to possess there is nothing on which to base his book; even the feeling that "Sebastian and I...had some kind of common rhythm" (32) cannot make up for the absence of facts. His memory does not furnish much beyond vague glimpses of Sebastian as a boy, "gloriously messing about with water-colours in the homely aura of a stately kerosene lamp" (15), "[coming] up the stairs, after school..." (15), or, later, sometimes helping V with his lessons, but soon impatiently "[pocketing] his pencil and [stalking] out of the room" (16). The only other memory V has of those days is his discovery that Sebastian wrote "very romantic" poems which he signed with "a little black chess-knight drawn in ink" (16).

Nor does he learn much from his mother (Sebastian's

stepmother).

...I knew he obtained good marks at school, read an astonishing number of books, was clean in his habits, insisted on taking a cold bath every morning although his lungs were none too strong - I knew all this and more, but he himself escaped me..." (29).

She tells him a few facts about the first marriage of Sebastian's father, about a short meeting of nine-year-old Sebastian and his mother in an hotel, and about his father's death. She has something to say about Sebastian's upbringing and about Sebastian's adventure with the poet Alexis Pan and his wife. Apart from this she has always felt "that I never really knew Sebastian" and that he would always remain "an enigma" (29).

Undismayed, and urged by his love for his brother, V decides that information can surely be obtained from others, particularly from those persons who met Sebastian after he left for England and who lived with him, and he sets out to find it, making "exhaustive research, fairness and wisdom" (14) the three conditions under which alone his kind of quest can lead to correct results. Without any warning he involves the reader in his research and writes not the expected biography of Sebastian, but, much in the manner of A.J.A.Symons<sup>12</sup>, "A Quest for Sebastian", an account of his investigations, interspersed with bits of information about Sebastian as he comes across it.

In his quest he follows all the well-established methods of biographical research, and as he conscien-

tiously follows all the moves they dictate, his account soon takes on the complicated structure described above, which has striking similarities with that of Sebastian's own The Prismatic Bezel. That novel has methods of composition for heroes. V explains:

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 (89).

In much the same way the different methods of biography become the heroes of V's "twisted quest."<sup>13</sup> One suspects that the last sentence of this description, too, will later turn out to have some significance with regard to The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.

One of the methods pursued throughout the book is that which tries to reconstruct the outward circumstances of a person's life and relies on them for information about the person's character and mind. It advises the biographer not to neglect even "small and trivial facts" because they "may throw a sudden light on a hidden aspect of the personality"<sup>14</sup>, to include "any fact that adds to the physical knowledge of the hero"<sup>15</sup>, and to realize that "for us, today, the most trivial habit will often suggest the interpretation for some major trait of character and [that] the accredited anecdote becomes an epigram."<sup>16</sup> Diaries, letters, "no source of information should be neglected."<sup>17</sup>

To all appearances V behaves as a biographer should.

He tries to find out about Sebastian's childhood, investigates his flat, collects "small and trivial facts" where they are offered, he notes down his brother's "trivial habits" and listens patiently to anecdotes. He goes on long journeys to meet and question many people.

For long stretches the reader is allowed to "feel safe". But then parody sets in. It is very subtle at first, so subtle that one is hardly aware of it. There are some sentences which are slightly out of tune with their context and with the purpose of the book. True to Fowler's definition that the distinguishing mark of parody is "analytic mimicry"<sup>18</sup>, even these mimic the style and the procedures of biography so perfectly as to be hardly conspicuous. It is only later in the book that their number increases until parody takes over altogether for a while, quite openly and unsubtly, illustrating the process that Rodway describes: "All good qualities are in danger of losing vitality or relevance and hardening into mannerism. Parody indicates the end-product of such a process."<sup>19</sup>

After his journey to Lausanne where he hoped in vain to learn something about the child Sebastian from their old nurse, V travels to London to visit his brother's flat, and it is here that his proceedings first begin to appear somewhat questionable and have a touch of parody about them. He goes about his work somewhat like a detective in the Sherlock Holmes tradition (or as he imagines such a detective would

go about it), behaving as if he were tracing a criminal much rather than his brother. Even granting that biographical research must necessarily resemble a detective's work of investigation, one can state that V often takes the recommended methods to comic extremes, applying them where even the most optimistic biographer would no longer hope to learn anything. What can he expect to learn from a row of old suits, some folded shirts and Sebastian's shoes (34)? Can it be of any interest that the trees outside the window of the study are "elms, not oaks, in spite of the street name's promise" (35)? V's rather too emotional questions as to what "all these quiet things" in the flat can tell him of Sebastian are answered in a totally sober and comically matter-of-fact fashion: they can tell him nothing at all. The white-robed armchair which, V imagines, gives a particularly "guilty start" (34), yields a Brazil nut instead of the secret that V expects in its folds, and a cigarette-end that V seems to count as a personal item in the otherwise "impersonal" dining-room turns out to have been left by a house agent (35). V then turns to Sebastian's desk, feeling that he is "really getting down to business" (35). The contents of the desk yield some information about Sebastian's approval of mixed metaphors, about his "queer way...in the process of writing" (37), about plans he had of writing a fictitious biography. So, V does seem to be on the right track after all. But, when he finds something that promises to disclose a few facts about

his brother's personal life and possibly an insight into his emotions, namely a bundle of letters, he does something quite unheard of: he burns them because this is what Sebastian has determined should be done. Soon after destroying this clue, he indifferently includes two others in his collection of insignificant details: the two pictures on the wall, which he regards with complete incomprehension: "The taste of their juxtaposition seemed to me questionable" (38), and the collection of books set apart on one shelf.

Through some unobtrusive touches of parody this instance of V's investigation illustrates from the beginning the limitations of this particular method of biographical research. It is constantly in danger of degenerating into a more or less automatic and indiscriminate accumulation of facts. V takes with him some meagre factual knowledge about the writer Sebastian Knight, but hardly anything from which it would be possible to draw any conclusion about the real person, and ironically he gets those two clues which might possibly tell him something about his brother's mind mixed up with a lot of insignificant details.

Ironically, too, instead of filling in a gap in his knowledge of Sebastian, his visit to the flat has created new and wider ones and has put new questions: who is the woman that wrote to Sebastian in Russian, and what was their relation? And it has put V in the absurd situation of having to find out with



infinite trouble what he could have learnt from the letters there and then.

Again, V's account of his visit to Sebastian's best college friend at Cambridge, who was "the only man in [Sebastian's] life with whom [Sebastian] had been perfectly frank and natural" (44) and who had therefore known him "intimately" (42), is not quite so straightforward as it seems at first reading. Parody intrudes again. Disconcertingly, it is easy to be misled, for those passages of which one tends to be suspicious, appear to have some serious implication behind their seemingly parodistic surface, whereas those passages which seem to indicate "some lofty and rich intention" on the narrator's part and which seem to convey some insight into Sebastian's mind, turn out to be parodistic.

Much of their conversation deals with superficial aspects of college life: breakfast in Hall, lunch at the Pitt, lectures, playing fives, tea with friends, playing tricks on venerable old tutors. V asks questions that seem trivial: "And where did Sebastian sit?" (43); "And tell me,...what about games? Was Sebastian good at games?" (41), and receives answers that seem just as trivial, such as a lengthy description of Sebastian's failure at tennis. He indulges in an equally lengthy explanation about Sebastian's not quite perfect English. To all this apparently meaningless material Sebastian's old friend adds a few anecdotes from the beginning of Sebastian's time at Cambridge. One feels as if one were on the uncer-

tain ground of parody again, as if V were repeating his mistake of contenting himself with a collection of superficial facts. They might, indeed, be applied to any undergraduate; but, trivial though they may seem, they acquire some significance with regard to Sebastian: they confirm the general impression his friend had of him, namely that Sebastian "had done his best to be a standard undergraduate" (43). His joining in all the commonplace activities was an expression of his fear "of not doing the right thing" (41), of his attempt and wish to fit into the new country and the new way of life. This, incidentally, was also confirmed by his new habits and his new way of dressing that so struck V when Sebastian came to see him and his mother in Paris. With his tweed coat, his baggy flannel trousers, his new habit of smoking his pipe in the street, his new way of standing with his back to the fire, his hands deep in his trouser-pockets, even his mannerism of carrying his handkerchief in his sleeve, which particularly puzzled V<sup>20</sup>, Sebastian was obviously trying to be what he thought of as particularly English. But, it emerges from the conversation, Sebastian failed. His efforts "to be and act like other people" (43) led to nothing. He remained different and, "aware of his inability to fit into the picture" (41), he eventually accepted the fact. He even accepted it serenely, turning from the things he thought he ought to do and enjoy "to what really concerned him" (44).

What were the things that really concerned him? We learn from his old friend that Sebastian used to make "obscurely immoral statements, related to Life, Death or God", but his friend assumes that Sebastian made them to annoy him; he "never believed that [Sebastian] really meant what he said" (45). We also learn that Sebastian used to retire to his room to emerge only after some time of complete absorption, with some poem he had just composed. To these poems, however, neither V nor Sebastian's friend attach much importance: "Little things like that are the darlings of oblivion" (45-46). This of course puts an end to any hope of learning something essential from Sebastian's intimate friend.

V makes a brave effort not to leave things in this unsatisfactory state, trying to imagine what might have occupied Sebastian's thoughts at that time:

That cockney girl with her soft hair still in plaits...? The form of a particular cloud? Some misty sunset beyond a black Russian fir-wood...? The inner meaning of grassblade and star? The unknown language of silence? The terrific weight of a dew-drop? The heartbreaking beauty of a pebble among millions and millions of pebbles, all making sense, but what sense? The old, old question of Who are you? to one's own self...? (46)

He becomes quite eloquent, actually succeeding in conveying the impression as if he were getting down to some central issue of Sebastian's secret. But he gives himself away; of course it is all speculation and partly what he hopes might have been in Sebastian's mind: "Oh, how much I would give for such a memory coming to him!" (46)

Et puis, Dieu merci, nous avons la psychologie du sujet, le freudisme folâtre, la description empâtée de ce que le héros pensait à tel moment, - un assemblage de mots quelconque pareil au fil de fer qui retient les pauvres os d'un squelette, - terrain vague de la littérature où parmi les chardons, traîne un vieux meuble éventré que personne n'a jamais vu y venir.<sup>21</sup>

This settles the matter. With Nabokov's ironic statement in mind, one reluctantly has to accept the fact that this passage must not be taken seriously, and that V's account has imperceptibly again become a parody of what he wants it to be.

So far, then, this particular method of research has failed. It has not disclosed anything essential about Sebastian. "...what actually did I know about Sebastian?" V had to ask himself before he set out on his quest (31). And he still has to admit what he does not know and what he cannot do<sup>22</sup>, violating one of the principles of biography which says that the reader "must not be reminded that there is no information about the principal figure."<sup>23</sup>

V has many other shortcomings both as a biographer and as a detective. He sometimes forgets the sources of what little information he has and completely ignores other sources offered to him: there is no indication that he would have attempted to find out the "somebody" who is also collecting data about Sebastian Knight, had he not discovered by chance that this somebody is Mr Goodman, whom he has already seen and whom he dismisses as unqualified. He has taken an instinctive dislike to him and is forever after unable to "deal fairly with [his] views which he does not

share", as a good biographer should.<sup>24</sup>

His worst blunders V commits when he comes to the period during which Sebastian lived together with Clare Bishop. Clare is alive and V knows where she lives. He goes there and allows himself to be sent away by her husband. He sees her in the street, and does not make himself known to her. In Sebastian's flat he burnt her letters together with those of the unknown Russian woman, now he lets the most important and knowledgeable witness of six years go by unquestioned. His motive may be praiseworthy although it is none too clear. Whatever it is, the consequences for his work are disastrous. It degenerates into a mixture of second-hand information and, what is worse, conjecture and speculation, innocent of "'authentic information' from which...good biography is made."<sup>25</sup>

There is a longish passage that looks somewhat like an objective (even though second-hand) account of those particular six years in Sebastian's life. Clare is described, a sensible and sensitive young woman who apparently fitted perfectly into Sebastian's life, who helped him in many ways and with whom, it seems, he was happy. He wrote his first three books during the six years he lived with her. There is some first indication of his illness; then, after a period during which Sebastian seemed strangely moody and unpredictable, it became necessary for him to spend some time at Blaenberg. And after his return from there, we learn, Sebastian inexplicably stopped taking any

notice of Clare, and stopped talking to her. He received letters from some woman he had met at Blaenberg, left England for months, and Clare drifted out of his life "as quietly as she had come" (104).

All this V has learnt from Miss Pratt and Sheldon, friends of Clare's, but he is not satisfied with it: "I wrote it all down - but it was dead, dead" (72). He seems to be quite aware of a good biographer's duties: "I want to be scientifically precise" (62), he says, meaning to distinguish his book from Mr Goodman's, and: "...it would be ridiculous to discuss what no one can definitely assert" (98). Sometimes he is ridiculously strict about these theories: "Shall we try to guess what [Clare] asked Sebastian, and what he answered, and what she said then? I think we will not..." (103). His discretion concerning something so obvious is quite superfluous: it does not require much imagination to guess what a woman who suspects that her lover has found another woman may ask him. But then he neglects his theories sadly. Feeling that he is not obtaining very satisfactory results, he steps in and develops some new mannerisms that make of him a minor Kinbote. He falls victim to the "temptation...of adding to his narrative the colour of fiction and romance"<sup>26</sup>, a touch of the *biographie romancée*, which he himself denounces as "by far the worst kind of literature yet invented" (19), and parody appears again where the reader was tempted to feel on safe ground.

He "improves" on the information he gets where it

seems to him too colourless, he tries to fill with life what seems to him "dead". He provides dialogues between Clare and Sebastian which no one probably has overheard and reported to him, and sets them in imaginary backgrounds. He provides details of their life together which, apart from being no more than the products of his imagination, are so commonplace as to verge on the comic and certainly form a comic contrast to his solemn purpose:

That spring was probably the happiest period of Sebastian's existence. He had been delivered of one book and was already feeling the throbs of the next one. He was in excellent health. He had a delightful companion... Clare posted letters for him, and checked laundry returns, and saw that he was well supplied with shaving blades, tobacco and salted almonds for which he had a special weakness (80-81).

They must have had a glorious time together, those two. And it is hard to believe that the warmth, the tenderness, the beauty of it has not been gathered, and is not treasured somewhere, somehow, by some immortal witness of mortal life. They must have been seen wandering in Kew Gardens, or Richmond Park ..., or eating ham and eggs at some pretty inn in their summer rambles in the country, or reading on the vast divan in Sebastian's study with the fire cheerfully burning and an English Christmas already filling the air with faintly spicy smells on a background of lavender and leather (81-82).

Are we to imagine "the happiest period of Sebastian's existence" and the "glorious time" with Clare, which V even considers worthy of having been treasured by some "immortal witness", to have been based on ordinary activities and pedestrian pleasures (eating ham and eggs)? The comic incongruity and the deflating effect this has on V's enterprise of sketching Sebastian's real life is obvious.

In the degree in which V's search concentrates for a while not so much on Sebastian but on the mysterious Russian woman from whom he expects revelations about his brother, the detective elements in V's account become more and more prominent. In detective stories, the detective almost invariably deals with murder cases. He looks into the circumstances that led to the murder, and his aim, always brilliantly achieved, is the hunting down of the murderer. V's is obviously not a murder case, but all the elements are there to give to his further work the basic pattern of a detective story: "One corpse, one investigator, some obscure photographs and burned letters, a mysterious woman..., faint clues dropped here and there..."<sup>27</sup>

To find the mysterious woman, V says, is "a scientific necessity", for she is "the missing link in [Sebastian's] evolution" (112). V himself now makes allusions to the detective qualities of his work: "The question is how, not why", he pronounces, quite in the manner of a professional detective, in answer to one of Mr Silbermann's questions (120), and prides himself on a "Sherlock Holmes stratagem" on another occasion (143). But whatever he may think of his detective talents, it becomes ever more apparent that they are minimal. And just as V can in no way be said to be a match for the classical detective with whom he compares himself, all the other detective elements soon turn out to be only superficially like their models. Parody now takes over completely,



parody of what Stegner calls the "detective story formula."<sup>28</sup>

The main fascination of the detective story should lie in the solution of a problem by processes of deduction.<sup>29</sup> The detective is set going and kept going by clues. These should be, and in good detective stories are, of the faintest, subtlest and most ingenious kind. They give a mere shadow of a hint and would go unnoticed by any ordinary mortal. But the detective is no ordinary mortal. He is more perceptive than others. Nothing is lost on him. He is a "keen observer"<sup>30</sup>, he never misses a clue and he lets his "brilliant intelligence"<sup>31</sup> work and shine, drawing from them the logical and, to him, perfectly obvious conclusions. One thing is ruled out in detective stories, namely "conclusions reached purely by instinct, through accident or through coincidence, [for they show] a failure on the part of the author and [are] unfair to the reader."<sup>32</sup>

The episode with Mr Silbermann is indicative of the quality of this part of V's quest and of his account. On his way back from Blauberg V meets Mr Silbermann on the train, a funny little man who has mysteriously stepped into life (or: back into life?) out of Sebastian's The Back of the Moon, complete with "bushy eyebrows", "small moustache", "big shiny nose" and all the other physical characteristics of Mr Siller in Sebastian's story, and who even alludes to his own literary background (123). Absurdly this little man, who speaks queer English and whose

Looking Glass logic and arithmetic leave even V "flabbergasted" (124), finds out the information that V so urgently desires, but, unsubtle and awkward in his dealings with the Blaenberg hotel manager (whose manners so resemble those of Carroll's caterpillar) did not obtain (114-115). Without much ado, the astonishing Silbermann provides a list of the names of four women among whom may be the one V is trying to find.

Thus the tone is set, not to change until the end of V's quest. Logic, the very essence of detective stories, clearly has no part in it. V's proceedings are completely mechanical. He simply seeks out the four women in an order that seems to him the most convenient, and what he learns on the way is not the result of deduction but is offered to him by mere chance and coincidence, such as the unsought for name and address of Sebastian's first sweetheart. Another coincidence: after collecting from her "one of the most precious pages of Sebastian's life" (128): memories of some romantic summer days, he finds that the taxi driver taking him to the station is her brother, Sebastian's former school mate. However, he is a disappointing witness, reluctant, even unwilling, to recall the past. The only statement V can coax from him is that Sebastian "was not very popular at school" (131).

Even the last stroke, the discovery of the woman he has been hunting for, is not achieved through logic or combination on V's part. In fact, in all the events

that lead to it, he is singularly obtuse. This begins in Rechnoy's flat. What should Mr Rechnoy hold in his hand when he admits V but a black chess knight, which furthermore serves him to point to an open door and whose head comes off and has to be screwed on again. Here is no subtle and ingenious clue to please the detective story addict and to test and strain V's perceptiveness and intelligence, but a solid broad hint, crying out for attention, not to be missed, one should think. But V does miss it. And a good deal more escapes him. Otherwise, how could he possibly listen to Mme Lecerf ostensibly describing her friend, Helene von Graun, and not state more than "a slight family likeness" (152) between that woman and Nina Rechnoy? How could he repeatedly sit face to face with the woman he has been looking for, whose very name he once claimed he would recognize on a list of names (115), and not realize who she is, cold, capricious, insensitive, with all the attributes of a woman out of a "cheap novel" (137), as Rechnoy described her, including rare illnesses: "all flowers except pinks and daffodils withered if I touched them" (cp. pp.137, 155), including also a "frog-faced, wheezing, black bulldog" (144): Sebastian also had a black bulldog when he was still living with Clare.

V not only lacks all the typical qualities of a good detective, he lacks even intuition, and nothing short of another coincidence and another solid clue can at last open his eyes to what is indeed so obvious: in the garden which makes him think of a murder and

of "a murderer who had buried his victim in just such a garden as this" (158), Mme Lecerf confesses to him that "once upon a time...I kissed a man just because he could write his name upside down" (160). It is only then that V understands that it is indeed Mme Lecerf who "smashed [his brother's] life" (112). The man who can write his name upside down is Rechnoy's cousin, whom V has met and seen perform some more tricks at the Rechnoy flat (134-135); Mme Lecerf is Rechnoy's first wife.

The purely detective part of V's quest has almost come to an end. The "mysterious person" (not a murderer strictly speaking) has been found, even though all the classical rules of how this should be done have been violated in the course of the hunt. Now would be the time for revelations, for explanations, for the unveiling of all the mysteries that still cling to the relation between Sebastian and Nina Rechnoy-Lecerf; time to learn something about the real Sebastian. But the formula is inverted until the very end. When the questioning of this important witness should begin, V takes his leave and walks away. For the third time, as when he burnt the letters and when he let Clare go by, he forfeits a unique chance. Or has he heard enough?

When V breaks off his quest, he has collected the main data for a curriculum vitae of Sebastian Knight. One can follow him through the main stations of his life. One knows about his flight from Russia, his time at Cambridge, his visit to Paris in 1924; about

the time during which he lived with Clare, the first signs of his illness and the necessity for him to go to Blaubeurg. There is, finally, his unfortunate and unhappy affair with Nina, and, in 1936, his death in a St Damier hospital. There are rare moments at which a real person seems to fill the dry information with some traces of individual life: "sundry bits of a cinema-film cut away by scissors" (17), bits that show pictures of the young Sebastian, of the lover, of the student as seen by a college friend; of Clare's companion as seen by Miss Pratt and P.G.Sheldon. The last glimpse that this fragmentary film furnishes is an "atrocious" picture (150) of Sebastian, sketched by a woman the very thought of whom makes her first husband shudder. How much truth is there in it? How much truth in there in any of the pictures?

Smurov in The Eye is left with a whole variety of pictures that rather conceal than reveal the person he is looking for. It seems as if the same were happening to V. It is true that there is one prominent trait in Sebastian's nature on which all those who knew him agree: he struck them all as silent, distant, aloof, morose, preoccupied, and unsociable. However, none of them knows what the source of his aloofness was. As happens with Smurov, the pictures of Sebastian vary according to the natures of those who knew him, and according to the reactions he evoked in them. He has left sadness, and love and admiration in V for whom that trait in his brother was a sign of superiority. Clare loved him and accepted him as he

was, and was made unhappy by him. He struck Miss Pratt as "an amazing personality" (56) and Mme Lecerf as "a difficult sort of man", "anything but nice" (148). She remembers him as selfish and insensitive, "much too preoccupied with his own sensations and ideas to understand those of others" (149). She does not cherish his memory at all. Mr Goodman's opinion is again quite different from all these. The true and real self of Sebastian threatens to be lost behind all these different pictures; the essential part of his personality has been left in the dark.

So far, then, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight has only proved the failure of biography; it has proved "that the most one can hope to attain via the path of biography is a macabre doll"<sup>33</sup>, and for the most part it has done this through the medium of parody. Left at that, the novel would leave one with the same pessimistic outlook as The Eye, and with regard to the genre it parodies it would be simply arrogant and destructive. However, it proves true to the principle that V has also discovered in Sebastian's art, namely, that parody is not simply there to expose and destroy, but to lead on to something serious. It is "a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion" (85).

A deeply ironic and profoundly serious scene brings V's account to an end, the same scene, in fact, which starts his investigation off. He receives an alarming telegram: "Sevastian's state hopeless come immediately Starov" (179). A nightmare journey takes him across

France. He is tormented by regret because he feels that he has missed his chance of establishing a close relationship with Sebastian, and by fear of not finding him alive. Much to his relief he is told on his arrival at the hospital that his brother's state has improved, and he is allowed to sit in the patient's room for a minute. He listens to his breathing, feeling closer to Sebastian than ever before, all other feelings being "drowned...in the wave of love I felt for the man who was sleeping beyond that half-opened door" (190). What he learns too late is that there has been a misunderstanding. The man is not Sebastian. Sebastian is dead. V has listened to the breathing of a complete stranger.

So it looks a bit as if the comic tone were sustained until the very end, and, rather tactlessly, even in the face of death. Some person of Mr Goodman's sensitivity might accuse Nabokov of the same vice that this gentleman sees in Sebastian when he comments on an incident that Sebastian describes in Lost Property:

Sebastian Knight was so enamoured of the burlesque side of things and so incapable of caring for their serious core that he managed,...,to make fun of intimate emotions, rightly held sacred by the rest of humanity (18-19).

But this would be an unjust accusation, for under the burlesque surface the serious core, not only of this scene, but of the whole book, is visible. V comments on this incident:

So I did not see Sebastian after all, or at least I did not see him alive. But those few minutes I spent listening to what I thought was his breathing changed

my life as completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying. Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that 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. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. Thus - I am Sebastian Knight.

...

I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows (191-192).

This is an enigmatic statement which has received different interpretations. It remains doubtful throughout the book, says Stegner, whether V has an individual identity of his own. Various little incidents seem to prove that he has not, and "that V and Sebastian are simply divided halves of a single identity": the Russian half and the English half, and, more significant, the man and the artist.<sup>34</sup> About the man little is disclosed. His "reality" has proved to be elusive, and the whole concept of "reality" has turned out to be without meaning with regard to the human soul. What little is said about the man indicates that he withdrew into purely aesthetic concerns, that "his response to the vulgarity around him was to escape into aesthetics"<sup>35</sup>, and this is where, according to Stegner, one can get nearer the goal of one's quest. Here he sees the answer to the question concerning Sebastian Knight: "We know a considerable amount about Sebastian the artist, because V...gives us... a detailed explication of his novels." Through his books we find him: "Sebastian's 'real life' is his art."<sup>36</sup> In a mysterious way these two aspects blend



on the last page of the novel, they "fuse into an encompassing creative imagination."<sup>37</sup> They merge into a "free-floating imaginative consciousness"<sup>38</sup>. Nabokov's, Stegner seems to imply, referring to Nabokov's own "sensitivity to his Russian-English, artist-man duality"<sup>39</sup>, which, however he is able to overcome. Unlike Sebastian, he "possesses an artistic obsession and is not obsessed by it."<sup>40</sup> He is both artist and man, both Sebastian and V; in him the two sides are harmoniously united.

This sounds like a sensitive interpretation but leaves one unsatisfied. It has not taken one any nearer Sebastian Knight. How is one supposed to get through to the truth and reality of the artist, present, Stegner says, in his work? Nabokov is not favourably disposed towards persons hunting for the artist in his books:

...puis ce sont ses oeuvres proprement dites qu'on feuillette pour y trouver des traits personnels. Et parbleu, l'on ne se gêne pas...Quoi de plus simple en effet que de faire circuler le grand homme parmi les gens, les idées, les objets qu'il a lui-même décrits et qu'on arrache à demi morts de ses livres pour en farcir le sien? Le romancier biographe organise ses trouvailles de son mieux, et, comme son mieux à lui est généralement un peu plus mauvais que le pire de l'auteur dont il s'occupe, la vie de celui-ci est fatalement faussée, même si les faits sont véridiques.<sup>41</sup>

Concerning his own novels, he admits that persons and incidents from his life do appear in them from time to time, and also that "some of my more responsible characters are given some of my own ideas."<sup>42</sup> But this is as it should be: Asked about the significance of autobio-

graphical elements in literary works, he explains that

...imagination is a form of memory...  
An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory. When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollections and inventions.<sup>43</sup>

It is, then, for purely artistic reasons that personal recollections and thoughts find entrance into an author's work. They are taken out of their original context and combined with other elements according to the demands of the individual work, so that they may in fact no longer contain any information about the author; the critic and biographer should therefore beware of "dotting all the 'i's' with the author's head"<sup>44</sup> or of otherwise establishing too close a connection between the characters and ideas of a book and its author.

Even if one does not look for direct hints, and concrete information about the author's life but approaches the work as the expression of his mind: how can one hope to read it exactly as he conceived it? How can one be sure to discover in it exactly what went on in his mind when composing it, what processes of forming and combining preceded the creation of what we are reading? How can one be sure exactly what inspired it and what the sources of the final product were? Words are open to misinterpretation. There is the danger that the biographer will find in them only

what he wants to find, that which fits in with the material he has already collected. Thus, it is quite likely that two different persons will arrive at completely different conclusions about the man behind the work, both of course assuming that they have found the real personality of the author. So it seems that instead of revealing himself through his work the author can hide behind it, that the words, instead of opening the way to his "reality" can build up another barrier. All this does in fact happen in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Mr Goodman and V, both reading the same works, arrive at widely, absolutely, different conclusions about their author.

Mr Goodman approaches Sebastian through the "environmental method of correlating the author with the fluctuations of the society around him"<sup>45</sup>, and through his novels. It can be stated at once that both methods are parodied in his handling of them.

Mr Goodman does not start with the person, on whom and on whose thoughts, history and the trends of the time may admittedly have had some influence and in whom the events of the period may have provoked certain reactions. Goodman starts with the outward circumstances and the historical situation. A person seems to be no more for him than some kind of material that is formed and moulded by these circumstances. His quest does not yield, as one might expect, the picture of an artist with an independent mind and individual emotions, with an artist's faculty of resisting and fighting adverse circumstances and of freeing

himself from their influence. It does certainly not yield the picture of an artist from whom one would expect the novels V describes. The picture of Sebastian that Mr Goodman arrives at is that of a conventional figure: "an 'essentially modern' character" (58), "a youth of acute sensibility in a cruel cold world" (59) with which, apparently, he did not come to grips. Goodman's Sebastian is a type, a weak person, influenced and shaped by the spirit of the time in which he lived, and by historical events. War and its consequences damaged his sensitive soul, "a fatal split [opened] between Knight the artist and the great booming world about him" (109), and it seems, if one believes Goodman, that he never found his way out of the "misery which had begun as an earnest young man's reaction to the rude world into which his temperamental youth had been thrust..." (110).

It is also "poor Knight", "a product and victim of ... 'our time'" (58-59), unhappy, lonely, "Byronic" (109) whom Goodman finds behind what he calls the "cynicism" (60) of Sebastian's earlier books. The author who he pretends is present is the author as he sees him. The emotions he finds behind incidents and descriptions, and which he pretends are the author's very own, are those that he thinks fit in a person of the type he has described. In order not to have his concept overthrown, he ignores that which does not fit into it and "never quotes anything that may clash with the main idea of his fallacious work" (62). A completely different Sebastian might be visible, Mr Goodman

would not see him.

Somewhat unexpectedly, his comments on Sebastian's work contain a valuable hint which allows the reader who does not share Mr Goodman's preconceived ideas, to arrive at conclusions about Sebastian that differ from his. Goodman not only carries his own prefabricated picture of Sebastian into his evaluation of the author's work, he also criticizes him for not having done what he (Goodman) feels he ought to have done. Knight, he says, retreated to an ivory tower, and this was insufferable. The age demanded that the ivory tower be "transformed into a lighthouse or a broadcasting station" (109). The "burning problems": economic depression, unemployment, the next supergreat war, new aspects of family life, sex (Mr Goodman's list contains a few more items) (109-110) ought to have moved him. After all, at difficult moments "a perplexed humanity eagerly turns to its writers and thinkers, and demands of them attention to, if not the cure of, its woes and wounds..." (109). But Goodman's concerns were not Sebastian's. He "absolutely refused to take any interest whatsoever in contemporary questions", and also refused to have his attention called to books which fascinated Goodman because they were of "general and vital interest", but which Sebastian disqualified as "claptrap" (110).

Mr Goodman does not realize it, but this bit of comment gives him away as one of the "upper Philistine[s]" of whom Nabokov talks in connection with his own loathing of general ideas, his complete unconcern

with contemporary and social problems which have no place in a work of art:

O, I know the type, the dreary type!  
He likes a good yarn spiced with social  
comment; he likes to recognize his own  
thoughts and throes in those of the  
author;...<sup>46</sup>

Mr Goodman stands condemned not only by V but by Nabokov himself, whereas Sebastian, through an ironical twist, emerges from behind Mr Goodman's hilarious biography as resembling Nabokov in at least one respect.

What it is, however, that occupied Sebastian instead of what Mr Goodman thinks ought to have occupied him, is still unknown. Furthermore, with not only the environmental method so clearly parodied and exposed as lending itself to abuses, but that method too, which relies on an author's work for material, the question arises how one can trust anyone talking about, and interpreting, an author's work. How, if this way, too, is barred, can one hope to get through to the reality of an author? How far, to return to The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, can one trust V's explication of Sebastian's novels? His comments on the books and on Sebastian differ vastly from those of Mr Goodman, and he leaves no doubt about what one should think of the rival biographer and his product. But Stegner says about V that he is "suspect as a narrator, worshipping as he does the subject of his quest. When he talks to people who have known Sebastian, he only listens to what he wants to hear."<sup>47</sup> He has also made himself suspect, as has been seen, through speculating about his brother's life and thoughts. Like Goodman,

he falls back on passages from Sebastian's works to draw from them conclusions about their author's very own and intimate emotions: Rejecting Goodman's theories about Sebastian's attitude towards Russia, he contrasts it with his own, also based on a passage from one of Sebastian's books (25-26). He uses this method most spectacularly when he states that a letter written by one of Sebastian's fictitious characters may contain much "that may have been felt by Sebastian, or even written by him, to Clare" (107). Clearly, after all that has been said, his interpretation of Sebastian's novels and his picture of his brother might be just as false und subjective as Goodman's.

And yet his comments on his brother's works sound much truer and seem, much rather than Goodman's, to do justice to them, to point to their true meaning and to what really concerned Sebastian. Instead of the type formed by the outside world and able to react to it only through a Byronic pose of melancholy and loneliness, an individual thinker emerges from them, whose mind has remained independent, and who has not stopped treating what he is confronted with in his own way. Something must have opened V's eyes to the truth of Sebastian's books and must have enabled him to see what Mr Goodman does not see, and to understand what Mr Goodman cannot understand. The solution must lie in V's statement that "I am Sebastian".

Susan Fromberg, commenting on this passage says somewhat enigmatically: "Sebastian i s working through his brother"<sup>48</sup>, and then explains what she

means by this:

...by 'finding and following the undulations' of Sebastian's soul, V. strengthens that part of him that is like Sebastian, the 'psychological affinities' they show as brothers. This process continues until the Sebastian in V. becomes dominant.<sup>49</sup>

Charles Nicol sees this experience of V's as brought about through his total immersion in Sebastian's books, particularly The Doubtful Asphodel, the central situation of which, Nicol says, V relives in his own life. "It is...through his attention to Knight's novels... that V. becomes Sebastian Knight."<sup>50</sup> Nicol quotes for his interpretation an essay by Jorge Luis Borges: "A New Refutation of Time", in which Borges develops the theory of two "identical moments in the minds of two individuals who do not know each other but in whom the same process works." Borges continues:

Is not one single repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the series of time? Do not the fervent readers who surrender themselves to Shakespeare become, literally, Shakespeare?<sup>51</sup>

Yet another explanation suggests itself. It seems somewhat risky to affirm as confidently as John Updike does that "Nabokov is a mystic"<sup>52</sup>, even though some of his statements, among them the one that Updike quotes in support, point to this conclusion: Nabokov once replied to the question whether he believed in God:

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>53</sup>

It can however be said that it is legitimate and natural to suppose that Nabokov, approaching reality in so many different ways, should also have thought of mys-



ticism as one possible way to truth and reality, and that it would be strange if he had completely ignored it. There are hints in the short passages from Sebastian's novels that we get, and in V's interpretation of these novels, that Sebastian was preoccupied with some of the central ideas of mysticism.

...if we open our eyes and see clearly, it becomes obvious that there is no other time than this instant, and that the past and the future are abstractions without any concrete reality.

Until this has become clear, it seems that our life is all past and future, and that the present is nothing more than the infinitesimal hairline which divides them. ...But through 'awakening to the instant' one sees that this is the reverse of the truth: it is rather the past and the future which are the fleeting illusions, and the present which is eternally real. We discover that the linear succession of time is a convention of our single-track verbal thinking, of a consciousness which interprets the world by grasping little pieces of it, calling them things and events. But every such grasp of the mind excludes the rest of the world, so that this type of consciousness can get an approximate vision of the whole only through a series of grasps, one after another.<sup>54</sup>

For Sebastian, too, time in the commonly accepted sense does not exist. He calls time and space "riddles" (167). Dates mean nothing to him. There is no element of succession or progression in his concept of time: "Time for Sebastian ... was always year 1" (62). Into this year 1, a sort of eternal present, is gathered everything that has been and that is to be:

...the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where "all is always now."<sup>55</sup>

Similarly with Sebastian:

He could perfectly well understand sensitive and intelligent thinkers not being

able to sleep because of an earthquake in China; but being what he was, he could not understand why these same people did not feel exactly the same spasm of rebellious grief when thinking of some similar calamity that had happened as many years ago as there were miles to China (62).

He cannot understand them because that calamity is for him just as much of the present as an earthquake happening in China today.

His thinking is not of the single-track kind. His mind and perception are awake at all times, not only to individual sections of his surroundings, excluding all the rest, but to the whole variety of things:

Most people live through the day with this or that part of their mind in a happy state of somnolence: ...but in my case all the shutters and lids and doors of the mind would be open at once at all times of the day. Most brains have their Sundays, mine was even refused a half-holiday (63-64; from Lost Property).

He often feels "as if I were sitting among blind men and madmen" when he realizes how little aware others are even of their immediate surroundings, even of their fellow men (102). He misses nothing:

The blind man's dog near Harrods or a pavement-artist's coloured chalks; brown leaves in a New Forest ride or a tin bath hanging outside on the black brick wall of a slum; a picture in Punch or a purple passage in Hamlet... (65; from Lost Property),

everything crowds into his mind at once, all the time; things, too, that others might not think worth noticing acquire beauty in his eyes:

...a sundazzled window suddenly piercing the blue morning mist or ...beautiful black wires with suspended raindrops running along them (65; from Lost Property).

The passages betray not only an awareness of things generally, but an acute awareness of opposites, of the cheerful and the sad, of the colourful and the drab, of funny things and of serious things. The two pictures in his flat show how very much aware he is of the side-by-side existence of extreme opposites: the impressions of cruelty and innocence could not be conveyed any better than through the two photographs, which V describes in curiously ill-chosen and incongruous terms:

One was an enlarged snapshot of a Chinese stripped to the waist, in the act of being vigorously beheaded, the other was a banal photographic study of a curly child playing with a pup (38).

Mysticism has been called "integrated thought"

in that it brings things together in a new pattern, i.e. integrates them instead of, as in analytical thought, breaking them into parts. It thus relates them into a meaningful whole.<sup>56</sup>

Sebastian sees no contradiction in the existence of opposites. Everything has meaning: Just as humble things, the raindrops on the wires, the brown leaves, the coloured chalks, or, in V's interpretation of The Doubtful Asphodel, "a cherry stone and its tiny shadow which lay on the painted wood of a tired bench" (168) have meaning and significance for those aware of them - the same significance as the "shining giants of our brain" (168; from The Doubtful Asphodel) - so, equally, sadness, ugliness, and cruelty belong into the pattern of existence. They all go together "to form a definite harmony, where I, too, had the shadow of a place" (65; from Lost Property). There may not even be a contradiction there. In Lost Property

Sebastian writes:

All things belong to the same order of things, for such is the oneness of human perception, the oneness of individuality, the oneness of matter, ... The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition (99),

and seems to echo with this what has been said about mystical experiences. One of their common characteristic is

the presence of a consciousness of the Oneness of everything. All creaturely existence is experienced as a unity, as All in One and One in All.<sup>57</sup>

Things are not inherently good or bad, gentle or cruel. The contradiction arises only when moral terms are applied that classify them as either one or the other:

When God created the world and all was done, He said, "It is good." This "good", to be sure, has no moral meaning.<sup>58</sup>

V's experience in the hospital can be seen in the context of all this. What he says in his commentary on The Doubtful Asphodel (a commentary which reads rather like a good summary) offers a valuable help towards placing his experience. In our search for the answer to all questions concerning the meaning of things, and to our questions concerning life and death, he says, paraphrasing Sebastian's words,

...the greatest surprise [is] perhaps that in the course of one's earthly existence, with one's brain encompassed by an iron ring, by the close-fitting dream of one's own personality - one had not made by chance that simple mental jerk, which would have set free imprisoned thought and granted it the great understanding (167-168).

This "mental jerk" grants knowledge and understanding quite different from the kind of knowledge the senses can give and from intellectual knowledge. The senses and the intellect are insufficient. They cannot fulfil our desire to find out about the true meaning of things. What the average mind perceives through them is what Nabokov calls "average reality", but, he says, "that is not true reality."<sup>59</sup> Even science has not taken us through to that:

...I don't believe that any science today has pierced any mystery... We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought.<sup>60</sup>

As Christmas Humphreys says:

The intellect may argue and debate; it may learn and teach a vast amount about almost anything; it can never KNOW.<sup>61</sup>

Nor can our senses and the intellect help us to know an individual thing or person completely. They can take us far in our discovery, but something in that thing or person will remain unattainable. The essence, the soul, whatever one chooses to call it, escapes:

There is ... what may be called the 'Ultimately Real', the 'Thing-as-it-is-in-itself'. This may prove to be unknowable in its completeness. We may have to confess that we cannot hope to reach more than an approximation.<sup>62</sup>

To quote Humphreys once more:

A rose may be torn in pieces, and each particle analysed in the laboratory; no scientist will find therein the beauty of the rose.<sup>63</sup>

Nabokov says quite the same thing: a botanist may know a lily better than an ordinary person, and a

specialist in lilies may know even more about it, but neither will know it completely. And so with everything; with persons as well:

You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless.<sup>64</sup>

There is another way to knowledge though. The insights revealed in Sebastian's novels are not the results of analytical thought, but resemble those which mystics are described as receiving through intuition:

There come to many the sudden moments of intuitive perception, elusive, fading quickly, but of deep significance, illuminations which they feel reveal to them new facets of reality.<sup>65</sup>

At such moments the mind is freed from all the limitations set to it by the intellect, and obtains knowledge different from, and beyond, that obtained through the senses or through rational and intellectual processes. This knowledge cannot be built up slowly and consciously. It is not the sum of various bits of knowledge that the mind can gather and accumulate. It comes suddenly and unexpectedly, in a flash, and unsummoned:

The insights of intuition ...often have the appearance of something given, a sort of revelation coming from a something outside oneself. The mind, often in a state of passivity, makes a sudden leap. What has been before obscure becomes clear.<sup>66</sup>

At such moments "average reality" is transcended and "true reality" reveals itself. A man's sense of the significance of all things is sharpened, no matter how humble they are. The pattern of life may become

clear, and the harmony and the meaning of the world may be revealed, and with these insights comes the "consciousness of the oneness of everything".

V's experience is of this nature. As he sits listening to what he thinks is Sebastian's breathing, feeling "a sense of security, of peace, of wonderful relaxation" (189-190), his mind makes the "sudden leap". To put it in his own words: "the iron ring" bursts, and he is rid of what he calls "the close-fitting dream of one's own personality", the obstacle to true knowledge and the barrier between persons.

"The only real number is one"; there is a unity of "All in One and One in All". The sudden awareness of this must be the root of V's astonishing statement that "I am Sebastian". It opens the way out of "the solitary confinement of his own self" (43), to which even Sebastian, when young, thought he was condemned, for it implies the sudden realization that there can in fact be no barrier between people's souls and selves, because they are all (one's own self included) parts of that Oneness:

...as we penetrate towards the true spiritual essence of individuals, the things which can be fully shared increase, and the things which cannot be shared decrease. When the limit is reached, when the root of "I" is experienced, as in the profoundest mystical experience, the overwhelming discovery is made that the root of "I" is united to all other "I's"...<sup>67</sup>

With this truth revealed to him V transcends his own mind and personality and becomes one with Sebastian, obtaining true knowledge of him.

Sebastian is dead, but this does not change any-

thing. V has an insight that Sebastian did not reach in The Doubtful Asphodel. For Sebastian "the asphodel<sup>68</sup> on the other shore is as doubtful as ever" (168-169). He sees no way of stepping beyond the bar put up by death. A person dies and takes his soul and his secret along with him. "The man is dead and we do not know" (168). For V death has lost its grim finality. Once he has obtained knowledge of Sebastian, even death cannot take that knowledge from him. Sebastian is dead, but he lives on in V, for his soul and V's have become one. And equally, V implies, death may not be final for anyone, it may not mean complete extinction. Striving to know others' souls, thus making them one's own, one may live on in them after one's own physical death:

...I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that 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. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden (191-192).

He has found Sebastian's soul, and thus Sebastian lives on, and, perhaps unknown to him, there live in V the souls of others as well: "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (192).

The fact that V was listening to the breathing of another and not of Sebastian, does not impair the genuineness of his experience, in its depth and quality, because this breathing was merely the factor that



initiated the insight. In listening to what he took to be Sebastian's breathing, V's readiness to receive enlightenment was heightened to maturity, and if the maturation was there, enlightenment would equally have been brought about by the banging of a door or somebody shouting.

This experience, so much in line with Sebastian's thoughts and experiences as present in his novels, creates in V the state of mind that alone enables him to read and understand, and comment on, these novels exactly as the author meant them to be read and understood. To a certain degree, no doubt, prepared by the novels, it, in turn, opens V's mind to their truth and grants him a deeper insight into their real meaning than to anybody else.

In view of this it seems safe to dismiss Mr Goodman's comments as misinterpretations, and to accept V's interpretations of Sebastian's novels as being closest to their real import.

The interpretation of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight has so far been based on the premise, suggested by the tone and the structure of the novel, that V and Sebastian are actually two persons. This is true only in a very specific sense. Charles Nicol discusses in some detail the similarities between Sebastian's books and the book about him.<sup>69</sup> These are close similarities in structure and style and content. Each of Sebastian's books mirrors in part The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, and this novel, in its turn, reads like a clever combination of all the structural,

stylistic and thematic elements of Sebastian's novels, the closest structural parallels existing between The Real Life and The Prismatic Bezel, and the closest approximation of content between The Real Life and The Doubtful Asphodel. The conclusion suggests itself that there is no such writer as V and that the author of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is Sebastian himself. Some other clues suggest the same thing: the fact, for example, that Mr Goodman is not aware that Sebastian has a half-brother; the "v" in "Sevastian" in Dr Starov's telegram; the fact that the narrator consistently talks of "my father" and never once of "our father" when talking about his own and Sebastian's childhood. One should add as the most striking and the plainest hint in this connection the moment when V looks at a portrait of Sebastian:

...These eyes and the face itself are painted in such a manner as to convey the impression that they are mirrored Narcissus-like in clear water - with a very slight ripple on the hollow cheek, owing to the presence of a water-spider which has just stopped and is floating backward. A withered leaf has settled on the reflected brow, which is creased as that of a man peering intently... The general background is a mysterious blueness with a delicate trellis of twigs in one corner. Thus Sebastian peers into a pool at himself (111-112).

The impression the reader is left with is not so much one of V studying a portrait of Sebastian, but of Sebastian looking at a reflected image of himself.

From the beginning, it now appears, until the end, when they are actually seen to merge, V and Sebastian are not separate persons but are, in fact, one. Sebastian has written The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

himself, and in it V appears as his fictional biographer. Only on this level can V be said to exist.

However, it would be wrong to see in this a device on Nabokov's part simply to produce a trick ending in which all the theories and all the seriousness are made to collapse and crumble. The fact that The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is no longer V's book but Sebastian's own, does not detract from its meaning. Everything remains valid that has been said about it. On this level V does have an identity of his own and he does go through his quest and experience. On this level the novel can be taken at its face value.

Thematically, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight fits of course perfectly into the canon of Knight's works, each of his earlier novels presenting one aspect of his preoccupation with reality. Lost Property, described by V as autobiographical, "a summing up, a counting of the things and souls lost on the way" (104), can be regarded as Sebastian's effort to come to terms with his own past life. Success deals with the quest later to be pursued so devotedly by Shade, namely the uncovering of the methods of human fate. We do not know much about The Back of the Moon, except that it, too, is devoted to the "research theme" (97). The preoccupation with reality is more obvious in The Prismatic Bezel. This novel not only "exploits ...parody as a means of enforcing the shifting and illusory nature of 'reality'"<sup>70</sup>, it also uncovers one method of how an artist can convey his own conception of reality to his audience:

...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 (89).

The passages from The Doubtful Asphodel indicate that some of the central concerns of that novel are the same as those of The Real Life, that in fact the two novels mirror each other. "A man is dying: you feel him sinking throughout the book" (163). His thoughts and memories pervade that whole book. Sometimes his personality is prominent, and sometimes it fades in the background. He is the hero; the other persons, in whom we recognize some from The Real Life, appear only for short stretches of his way and then disappear; they are "but commentaries to the main subject" (164). A man is dying and at the moment of his death the reader is made to feel "that we are on the brink of some absolute truth, dazzling in its splendour and at the same time almost homely in its perfect simplicity" (166). One word from him before he dies will disclose "some absolute truth", will, in fact, disclose "the answer to all questions of life and death" (167). But that one word is not uttered. The man dies and the mystery remains. At this point The Real Life of Sebastian Knight goes beyond The Doubtful Asphodel, for if the reading of it which has been offered is correct, it solves the riddle which remains unsolved in that novel. It does so through the exploration of yet another approach to reality, present, but never fully explored in the earlier

novels of Sebastian Knight, namely the mystic way.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is a typically Knightian novel down to the particular twist he gives it by placing V's visit to the hospital, Knight's death, and V's experience at the end, even though they are the beginning of everything. By doing so, he gives V's insight the place where it appears as a triumph after long and painfully ineffective efforts. But although the sequence of events and experiences may be twisted in V's story for the sake of effect, it is yet the sequence in which they occurred in Sebastian's own quest and experience.

One fact has so far not been considered, namely that The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is also Sebastian's artistic rendering of his quest for self-knowledge. Even while on one level, explained above, the novel can be taken at its face value, with V going through the quest and the experience described, it reveals an additional meaning if the Narcissus reference in the description of the portrait is taken into account. Supposedly V is here looking at a portrait of Sebastian, but the implication is that actually Sebastian is looking at a reflected image of himself:

These eyes and the face itself are painted in such a manner as to convey the impression that they are mirrored Narcissus-like in clear water.. Thus Sebastian peers into a pool at himself (111-112).

Applied to the whole novel this suggests that even while on the one hand V as a separate character may be looking at Sebastian, Sebastian is also looking at himself through the medium of V. In this light

the hospital scene acquires of course a new, or rather, an additional meaning.

So far the moments V spends sitting by the patient's bedside have been interpreted as moments during which he attains knowledge of his brother. They must now also be seen as moments during which Sebastian comes to know himself. V attains his knowledge when he "becomes one" with Sebastian. Sebastian attains knowledge of himself when he "becomes one" with himself. Throughout his quest he has been split in two, as it were: V, a subject, looking at Sebastian, an object, a perfect paradigm of the "duality of subject and object in the phenomenon of self-consciousness".<sup>71</sup> Self-knowledge comes at the moment at which this dichotomy is overcome; at which Sebastian-as-subject (V) no longer looks at Sebastian-as-object, but experiences himself as one; experiences the "root of I" in a mystical state of enlightenment and also experiences himself as part of the "Oneness of everything" in which "the root of 'I' is united to all other 'I's'".<sup>72</sup>

His death can now no longer be seen as actual physical death but is what Huxley calls "a dying to self":

The man who wishes to know the 'That' which is 'thou' may set to work in three different ways. He may begin by looking inwards into his own particular 'thou', and by a process of 'dying to self' - self in reasoning, self in willing, self in feeling - come at last to a knowledge of the Self...<sup>73</sup>

All those that knew Sebastian have described him as distant, silent, unsociable, morose, preoccupied, aloof. This can now be explained if one takes into account that the process described by Huxley involves complete concentration, to the exclusion of everything else, on the quest. V (or, as it now appears, Sebastian himself) at one point formulates the thoughts that may have occupied Sebastian during his time at Cambridge:

The inner meaning of grassblade and star?  
The unknown language of silence? The terrific weight of a dewdrop? The heartbreaking beauty of a pebble among millions and millions of pebbles, all making sense, but what sense? The old, old question of who are you? to one's own self...? (46)

Complete concentration on the last question, so central to the complex of thoughts and questions in Sebastian's works, means giving up all attachment to, and involvement in, mundane affairs; all other feelings, interests, and desires cease to count. Only thus can the mind be prepared for the state and experience which brings enlightenment, and knowledge, and this, it appears, is how Sebastian attains that knowledge which he expresses in what are now no longer V's words:

"I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I..." (92): I am I, the only way in which his oneness can be expressed.

With The Real Life of Sebastian Knight established as Sebastian's own book things that have been puzzling so far fall into place and take on a new meaning. The use of parody is now easier to understand and at the same time turns out to be even more complex than it seemed. What Sebastian wants is real knowl-

edge and understanding, an insight into the nature of things, and, above all, true knowledge of himself. He undertakes the quest for himself through the fictitious biography. Real insight, however, he finds, cannot be obtained through the traditional methods of biography. They do not lead to more than superficial knowledge. The methods that do not pay attention to this fact and which do not even betray an awareness on the biographer's part of his shortcomings and limitations, are accordingly parodied and exposed by Sebastian for what he has found them to be: "dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud" (85). And these parodies are "[springboards] into the highest region of serious emotion", for even while exposing and ridiculing established procedures in the quest for knowledge as insufficient and misleading, they contain within themselves Sebastian's question if there is any way at all that leads to real knowledge.

How very complex the novel is becomes apparent when one realizes how many of the things that were classed as simply parodistic assume an additional quality when seen in the new light of Sebastian himself being the author of the book about him. Things that appeared as the comically awkward blunders of an incompetent biographer can now be explained by Sebastian's reluctance to disclose the private aspects of his life and to analyse emotional upsets, both of which may



in his opinion not have formed part of his real life. This is why the letters in his desk are burnt, and why Clare is not asked to act as a witness. The fact that in the light of his new knowledge his affair with Nina has lost its significance may account for the parodistic treatment the quest for her receives.

On the other hand, those things which should have no part in an objective biography because they may look like mere inventions of the biographer, such as the speculations about Sebastian's thoughts, assume significance when seen as coming from Sebastian himself. Those passages which seem to prove that V is relying on Sebastian's novels for conclusions about their author's life in a way Nabokov disapproves of, lose their tinge of absurdity when it can be stated that it is Sebastian himself who points to certain parallels even while objecting to those that Mr Goodman believes he sees.

The fact, incidentally, that Sebastian is the author of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight also solves the very puzzling little problem of Mr Silbermann, alias Mr Siller. It now appears that he does not so much step back into life out of The Back of the Moon, but that the "meek little man" waiting in Sebastian's hall on one occasion (97) here turns up in a second work of Sebastian's (namely The Real Life), in the same way in which some of Nabokov's own characters tend to reappear.

Shade in Pale Fire will be seen to transcend the pessimism of Luzhin in The Defence that drives Luzhin

to suicide. Sebastian overcomes the pessimism that stands at the end of The Eye. He indicates that there is a way, which is of a highly spiritual order, of obtaining true knowledge of others, and thus shows a way out of the isolation to which each individual seems condemned at the end of that novel. He also attains self-knowledge, which is again something Smurov in The Eye is incapable of, thus being reduced to a shadowy existence.

How well does the reader know Sebastian at the end of the novel? Knowledge is normally conveyed through words. They are suitable and helpful where logic and the intellect are concerned. It has however appeared that both V's and Sebastian's experiences and knowledge have nothing to do with logic. What they know is therefore beyond words. It cannot be passed on and understood by anybody but themselves; it must be experienced, and everybody must go through that experience for himself.

The reader's knowledge of Sebastian seems to consist at the end of what V/Sebastian can put into words. He has a vague idea of what Sebastian looks like, of what his manners are, and his habits, and he knows his reactions to certain things. He has a fair idea of Sebastian's art, and at various points sees Sebastian converting life into art. He also has a fair idea of the thoughts and problems that most occupy Sebastian's mind. It is even possible for him to guess at the reason for some of Sebastian's peculiarities and eccentricities; to explain what strikes

others as his remoteness and aloofness through his preoccupation with vital philosophical questions.

However, Sebastian does not leave the reader quite alone in his (the reader's) quest for Sebastian.

Talking about Sebastian's The Prismatic Bezel V/Sebastian says

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 (84).

The painter discloses his landscape in a multitude of different versions which, when fusing and blending will show the landscape as he wants it to be seen.

Sebastian has collected a multitude of different images of himself. Of course they are all subjective, and each in itself is misleading. However, knowing himself as he does after his experience, Sebastian knows how much of each individual picture to retain and how much of it to reject; which parts of it to acknowledge as correct and which to ridicule because they are false. And, knowing himself as he does, he also knows how to put these images together so that they fuse and blend in such a way as to disclose his personality as nearly as possible as he knows it and as he intends the reader to see it.

II. The Defence

Pale Fire

Transparent Things

Despair

T H E D E F E N C E

R. H. W. Dillard, discussing Nabokov's novels, discovers in them close affinities to Russian literature.<sup>1</sup> One of its characteristics is, he says, that its world

...is one in which a coincidence is a controlled event and in which the creative freedom of man is involved in the discovery of the pattern of his destiny rather than in forming the future himself out of a chaos of possibilities.<sup>2</sup>

In various ways a number of Nabokov's novels illustrate the points Dillard makes about Russian literature. The early novel The Defence, and two novels which Nabokov wrote when he had long begun to consider himself an American writer: Pale Fire and Transparent Things, seem to continue the Russian tradition. Nabokov makes the "discovery of the pattern" part of his quest for "true reality". People do not normally see more than the "average reality", or even only the "thin veneer of immediate reality", of their lives: what they see appears to them chaotic. The events and incidents of their lives do not seem to them to be in any way logically connected but seem to follow each other haphazardly and without any recognizable design or purpose.

None of the novels quoted, however, leaves any doubt about the fact that "a coincidence is a controlled event". Behind the seemingly chaotic surface and "average reality" another (true) reality is revealed. In it each event and incident can be seen to have its function and purpose, and in it even the

seeming coincidences of life lose their quality of fortuitousness and become significant elements in an intricate and logical and purposeful pattern, Shade's "web of sense".

Dillard's second statement has to be modified in order to become applicable to Nabokov's work. In the three novels named above he does explore the possibility of discovering the pattern of fate, but with him this possibility is not given to everybody. Only the artist possesses the "creative freedom" of which Dillard speaks; only he has the gift to understand, with the help of his art, the workings of fate, and to see and uncover a purposeful design in what appears to ordinary mortals as a confused and mad jumble of unconnected coincidences.

In Pale Fire and Transparent Things it is the writer's art that makes this possible. In Transparent Things, significantly, the hero himself, a rather ordinary young man, does not see through the pattern of his own fate. It is his creator, the artist, who uncovers this pattern for the reader. In The Defence it is chess that grants the hero an insight into the pattern of his life. Chess is for Nabokov certainly an art form: he refers to it when talking about his conception of the composition of novels<sup>3</sup>, and in The Defence it is shown to have close affinities to music<sup>4</sup>.

The three novels also confirm Dillard's third point, and are joined in this by Despair. They all state with great definity that it is impossible for man to shape

his own future, and it becomes clear that this is something which is beyond even the artist's range of possibilities. Man cannot take part in "the game of the gods"<sup>5</sup> in which his fate is determined, and the even more crucial fact, responsible for the failures of those who are not aware of it, is that the future does not exist; it is "but a figure of speech, a specter of thought."<sup>6</sup>

All of this is fairly obvious in The Defence.<sup>7</sup> Luzhin, the hero of the novel (if one can call him a hero) is isolated and uncommunicative as a child, and interested only in those things in which, out of a seeming chaos, some pattern and order is miraculously seen to evolve: mathematics (12, 28); jigsaw puzzles, which, when the pieces are properly put together, "formed at the last moment an intelligible picture" (29); Sherlock Holmes stories, which take one "through a crystal labyrinth of possible deductions to one radiant conclusion" (26).

He finds the qualities that fascinate him in all these united in chess: their logic (26); the pattern that, although hidden at first, gradually unfolds itself and becomes transparent; and their harmony. By and by he becomes absorbed in chess, to such a degree, in fact, that he becomes unable to cope with life, and for a while loses touch with it altogether. Whereas at first he merely fails to see any longer the boundaries between chess and life, chess gradually becomes an obsession with him and eventually assumes in his mind the role of life, whereas "everything apart from

chess was only an enchanting dream" (105).

Cured of a nervous breakdown - the consequence of this obsessional and exhausting preoccupation - Luzhin is for a while obedient to the instruction to regard chess as a "cold amusement", and he is "unable to think of it without a feeling of revulsion" (126). He gently submits to his wife's management of his life, and in a vague, dreamy sort of way even enjoys it.

Then, by and by, chess takes hold of him again, more fatally and frighteningly than before. He is vaguely aware that a series of incidents seem to echo certain decisive incidents from his past. He realizes by degrees that this cannot be pure coincidence, but fails at first to see through what he calls the combination. Then, finally, comes a moment when things do fall into place and when the combination reveals itself to him, and this is for him a moment of aesthetic and artistic enjoyment. He feels the same delight he used to experience in connection with mathematics and jigsaw puzzles, but above all with chess. Pride and relief fill him, for he feels he has penetrated a mystery. He has detected the combination and system in the pattern of his life, found a pattern where there did not seem to be one, and where none but himself will see one. He experiences "that physiological sensation of harmony which is so well known to artists" (168), and which foreshadows the "combinational delight" that Shade in Pale Fire experiences when he discovers through his art the pattern and design underlying his own fate.



Unlike Shade, however, Luzhin cannot accept what he finds. His delight changes into dread and horror when he realizes that the harmony he has detected is in fact the harmony of chess. Move by move, he finds, awesomely, elegantly, flexibly, the images of his childhood have been repeated (168);

...just as some combination, known from chess problems, can be indistinctly repeated on the board in actual play - so now the consecutive repetition of a familiar pattern was becoming noticeable in his present life (168).

He suspects that the repetition will be continued, and he knows that if this happens, it will be fatal, for it will lead on to the same passion and ensuing catastrophe as before and destroy once more what he has come to call "the dream of life" (190).

From the moment he is able to distinguish the combination that has been worrying him for some time, his whole life takes on in his mind the semblance of a monstrous game of chess. Even though he forbids himself to think of actual games, he is able to think only in chess images (190), and even sleep consists of

sixty-four squares, a gigantic board in the middle of which, trembling and stark naked, Luzhin stood, the size of a pawn, and peered at the dim position of large pieces, megacephalous, with crowns and manes (186).

Dillard's statements describe accurately what Luzhin experiences from now on. Although he has come to understand through his art the pattern of events and incidents in his life, and although he thinks he knows what it will lead to if it is developed any further, he is yet quite unable to interfere and to form the

pattern of his future himself.

He imagines he is a participant in the game of chess that is his life, and tries to trick his opponent:

Already the day before he had thought of an interesting device, a device with which he could, perhaps, foil the designs of his mysterious opponent. The device consisted in voluntarily committing some absurd unexpected act that would be outside the systematic order of life, thus confronting the sequence of moves planned by his opponent. It was an experimental defence... (191).

But whoever his opponent is will not be fooled. From what happens it appears that Luzhin's move has been foreseen and taken into account. His defence proves to be erroneous and the development that he has feared is almost brought to its fatal conclusion.

It becomes apparent that Luzhin is not so much a player at the board as a piece on the board, moved about at will and with a definite purpose by the mysterious powers playing the game. His art may, in fact, allow him an insight into the pattern and working of fate, the rules and moves being the same in both. But though he is free to move the pieces on the little board, he has no power to interfere in "the game of the gods" (32), in which he is himself no more than a tiny chessman and in which his fate is shaped.

The feeling of absolute helplessness and despair that comes over him with the realization of this fact allows of only one way of action, namely, "to drop out of the game" (198) in order to be saved. Ironically, the last thing he perceives when he jumps from his bathroom window into eternity, is that apparently its underlying design does not differ at all from what he

has recognized as the basic pattern of life:

...the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and...he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him (201).

PALE FIRE

Pale Fire<sup>1</sup> centres round the same issue that has emerged from the brief analysis of The Defence. It shows that there is behind the seemingly chaotic surface of life some intelligent power, planning events and incidents and bringing them about through skillful combinations of moves rather resembling those performed by a gifted chess player on a chess board. The novel also takes up the idea of The Defence that, while the ordinary mind may have no insight into the combinations and into the pattern thus formed, this insight is granted to the artist through the medium of his art.

However, in Pale Fire this idea lies at the centre of a structure that is infinitely more complex than that of The Defence, and it can be grasped only after all the intricacies of this structure have been disclosed.

"...when I begin what I think is a novel, I expect to read a novel throughout, unless an author can... transform my idea of what a novel can be."<sup>2</sup> Pale Fire, part of which (the poem) was according to Nabokov "the hardest stuff I ever had to compose"<sup>3</sup>, exasperated those critics who were not ready to have their idea of what a novel can be transformed. Their indignant comments betray how great their surprise and confusion was and how strongly they objected to being thus taken unawares and confused. G. Highet sounds like the spokesman of them all when he says

The sensitive reader dislikes being teased, unless it is done with such tact and good humor as in Tristram Shandy. He is apt to resent an author who keeps saying, "Look, how clever I am! Here's a puzzle. I thought you'd miss it. I bet you can't solve it. There's another one inside. An inside that..."<sup>4</sup>

Pale Fire does not even l o o k like a novel, but with its four parts: a Foreword, a long Poem, a Commentary to the Poem and an Index, it looks like the scholarly edition of a poem. Two principal characters emerge at first: Shade, the author of the poem, and Kinbote, the editor and commentator.

Shade's poem, in four cantos, is a mixture of Wordsworthian autobiography and Popian metaphysical speculations. It records, besides some major incidents of Shade's life, his lifelong preoccupation and struggle with the problems of death and survival after death, and the problem of whether there is some meaningful scheme, directed by some intelligent power, behind all the incidents and events and catastrophes of human existence, which so often seem no more than a succession of mad and meaningless coincidences. Kinbote, though he should be secondary to his author, manages to push himself completely into the foreground. He insists that the poem was inspired by him and an account he gave Shade of a distant country, Zembla, of the revolution in that country, of her king and the flight of the king. This account he repeats at great length in the commentary. In the course of it, hints are dropped from which it emerges that Kinbote himself is that king.

More hints are dropped which reveal that he only imagines this, that he is really one of the professors (Botkin) of Wordsmith College, that he is probably mad, and that he has for some reason made up this fantastic past for himself. Persons and incidents from his present life and surroundings go into the making of this imaginary past. Gradus, for example, the third principal character, an extremist despatched from Zembla to kill the king and killing Shade instead through a fatal mistake, by and by turns out to be a criminal lunatic who has escaped from the asylum to revenge himself on the judge who committed him.

Besides those critics who reacted with outraged comments to this<sup>5</sup>, there are others who were not so much exasperated as amused, and at the same time ready to acknowledge Pale Fire as one of the great pieces of literature of this century. K.Allsop pays tribute to both its difficulties and its uniqueness<sup>6</sup>, and so does Mary McCarthy:

'Pale Fire' is a Jack-in-the box, ..., a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself novel.<sup>7</sup>

Her detailed analysis ends in enthusiastic praise:

...this centaur-work of Nabokov's... is a creation of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth. Pretending to be a curio, it cannot disguise the fact that it is one of the very great works of art of this century, the modern novel that everyone thought was dead and that was only playing possum.<sup>8</sup>

The individual parts have provoked comments just as varied<sup>9</sup>, and Nabokov himself and his moral attitude when composing Pale Fire have been objects of both doubt and admiration.<sup>10</sup>

Shade's poem, if taken by itself, does not present too much of a problem. The difficulties of Kinbote's story, too, can be overcome. He plants hints and clues quite generously, and with their help and some combinational talent it is possible to connect the various bits of the puzzle of his invented story and thus to arrive at the real story behind it and to recognize the levels of truth and reality in it, which are rather blurred at first. The basic questions, those that most tease and puzzle the reader and have given rise to irritation on the one side and to amused bewilderment or admiration on the other side, are those which concern the novel as a whole: the relation between the two principal characters, Shade and Kinbote; the relation between the two main parts, the poem and the commentary (there seems to be no connection at all), and the meaning of it all.

A number of critics have arrived at the conclusion that Pale Fire is a malicious satire on scholars and scholarly editorial work, using parody as its medium, and have left it at that<sup>11</sup>, and this is a plausible enough conclusion if the work is taken at its face value, for with its four parts it mimicks the form of a scholarly edition of a poem perfectly. Foreword, commentary and index all give the impression that here a diligent and conscientious scholarly editor

has been at work and has spared no trouble in his attempt to help the reader in his approach to the poet and his poem and to elucidate its problems for him. However, the form is deceptive. It only serves to trap the reader into believing that he is on safe ground, into feeling secure and at ease because he thinks he is concerned with something very familiar. This security is then shattered by the realization that what looked at first sight like the well-known "real thing" is after all disturbingly different from what it appears to be. This happens here just as it happens in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, and the causes are the same.

There is in Pale Fire the same promise and pretence of scrupulous and scholarly research, of objectivity and truth as in Sebastian Knight, but the promise is not kept. The result is the same comic incongruity between form and contents; in fact, it is much more obvious here than in the earlier novel. There is the echoing of typical formulations, which, through their incongruous contents, sound off the note. There is, too, the same exaggeration of characteristic traits of the genre that is imitated. Its typical techniques and devices seem to be mirrored perfectly, and yet have an odd look about them because they are carried to ridiculous extremes. Its very faults, potential and real, are so grotesquely multiplied and magnified that "its worst potentialities are seen realized."<sup>12/13</sup> All these taken together "tip imitation into parody"<sup>14</sup> and are responsible



for the overall comic effect of the work (in spite of the poem which is on the whole serious and in parts quite solemn). At the centre of this is, of course, Kinbote, the bungling and bad scholar.

Bad scholars provoke Nabokov to fiercer comments than bad writers. He is indifferent to criticism of his literary work, but to be accused, or even only suspected, of bad scholarship incenses him.

He is moved by incompetent criticism of his translation and edition of Eugene Onegin to write a scorching Reply to My Critics<sup>15</sup>, and in it he refutes "practically every item of criticism in [Mr Wilson's] enormous piece"<sup>16</sup>, proving throughout with scorn and glee and irony that the results of his own scrupulous painstaking scholarly work can not be overthrown by someone like Wilson, who is content with using "fairly comprehensive" dictionaries<sup>17</sup> and betrays throughout his critical essay a "mixture of pompous aplomb and peevish ignorance."<sup>18</sup> - "Some lone, hoarse voice must be raised", he says, "to defend ... the helpless dead poet"<sup>19</sup>, and he writes an equally scorching critique of W.Arndt's translation and edition of Eugene Onegin. Arndt undertakes the task in Nabokov's view not only with an inadequate knowledge of Russian and as a result confuses words and meanings<sup>20</sup>, but, like Wilson, betrays his ignorance on so many points that Nabokov can easily prove his edition to be full of errors and mistakes and howlers. A scholarly work, like the edition of some author's masterpiece, "... possesses an ethical side, moral

and human elements. It reflects the compiler's honesty or dishonesty, skill or sloppiness"<sup>21</sup>, and this skill, and even more perhaps this honesty, is reflected and proved by the editor's thorough knowledge of his subject, his untiring pursuit of more knowledge about it, and by absolute accuracy, to the point of pendency, on even the smallest point.

In his own edition of Eugene Onegin Nabokov of course meets all these demands. Prompted in 1950 and published in 1964<sup>22</sup>, it is an awe-inspiring piece of scholarship. Not only does it furnish, besides the translation of the poem, the most detailed explication of the text; behind that emerges also a portrait of the poet, and the whole culture of Pushkin's time is reconstructed in hundreds of notes. These deal not only with the poem, with its language, and with its literary sources, which Nabokov traces unerringly past all the mistakes he finds in the commentaries of others; they also deal with a breathtaking variety of other fields, including such diverse subjects as fashions, and varieties of vehicles, the quantity of wine imported into Russia; with games, and plants and customs.

Nabokov does not escape (or avoid?) the temptation to insert purely personal remarks into his notes: small articles that convey his bitterness, for example, at not being able to check his material where it is stored in Leningrad libraries<sup>23</sup>, or which express his amusement at the "incredible ignorance concerning natural objects that characterizes young

Americans of today."<sup>24</sup> He comments with his usual irreverence on works that belong to world literature<sup>25</sup>, and deals uncharitably with earlier and faulty commentaries.<sup>26</sup>

His personal comments, however, never crowd into the foreground. The main concern, namely to serve the masterpiece and its author, is faithfully followed throughout, so that, as Field says, the attentive reader should be "ready for" Eugene Onegin after reading the introductory essays<sup>27</sup>, and that, as another critic has put it, "the non-Russian reader has a fairly good chance of coming to know the Russian Onegin."<sup>28</sup>

It soon becomes clear that, except for the outward form, no similarity exists between Nabokov's edition of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin and Kinbote's edition of Shade's Pale Fire, as has sometimes been suggested, for Kinbote is guilty of the most unconventional and incompetent use of all the stock devices of scholarly editorial work and of continually committing all the slips and blunders an editor can possibly commit. "Pompous aplomb and peevish ignorance" appear as his main characteristics and it is clear that he is meant to be a parody of what he says he is.

Some of the editorial peculiarities are betrayed in the very foreword and then sprout fantastic growths in the commentary (in Kinbote's words "an unambiguous apparatus criticus" [86] where "placid scholarship should reign" [100]), in which even more of his shortcomings become apparent. The beginning of the foreword

sounds quite promising with a typical formulation containing a typical piece of information, and the reader is for a moment tempted to believe that the foreword is going to give him the necessary introductory knowledge about the poet and his poem. At the end of it, however, he knows little about the poet, less about his poem, nothing about Shade's other works, and a lot about Kinbote. The references to Shade do not contain anything beyond the most superficial facts: the dates of his birth and death (13) and a description of his working habits (13-14); the reader learns about his unattractive appearance. This description Kinbote spices with some "profound" remarks which, however, remain rather obscure (25-26). Nor is the commentary very helpful on this point. True, after studying it carefully, the reader has a somewhat better idea of Shade, but what information there is about him is buried under a lot of irrelevant material in various unexpected places and has to be dug up, freed from all the superfluous stuff clinging to it, and pieced carefully together.

There is no word either in the foreword that even vaguely hints at the contents of the poem and the philosophical questions that Shade discusses in it. Instead, Kinbote gives a fussy description of the manuscript(13f.) and later supplements this description by mention of the rubber band which held together the index cards on which Shade wrote his first draft (15). Again, this inclination to introduce the most pedantic detail from which the reader does not

learn anything, to wrap it up in a shining coat of erudite language and to offer it with great officiousness as valuable material is confirmed in the commentary. Kinbote proves his pedantry by commenting on obvious images like the one in lines 1-4 (73-74), by explaining who Sherlock Holmes was (78), or by writing a lengthy (and purely speculative) note on what a dash in a discarded line of the draft might stand for (167-168). His compulsion to comment on the perfectly obvious leads to hilarious results, like his note on line 584 (231). The line is quite clear as it stands, no note is needed. It remains unclear why Kinbote should want to render half of the line in German. The German "translation" is wrong in two respects. The note to line 664 to which he refers the reader, does not exist (there is a note on line 662, with reference to 664), and what he there has to say about Goethe's ballad does nothing to explicate either of the two lines. At such moments (as also in his note to line 615: "two tongues" [235]) and at many others, too, his commentary ceases altogether to be one. What remains is only the form devoid of all meaning.

This insistently scholarly form is often in comic contrast not only with the negligible contents, but also with Kinbote's apparent ignorance on various points. He is guilty of negligence where pedantry would be appropriate (instead of where he is a pedant) and of inaccuracies, both of which Nabokov finds inexcusable in a scholar and which he exposes and

denounces mercilessly where he finds them. A. Field quotes Nabokov as telling one reviewer "that Kinbote's remarks on matters such as flora and fauna are all ludicrously inept"<sup>29</sup>. So are a number of his remarks on literature, in which he misspells and misquotes titles ("Finnigan's Wake" (76), "The Nymph on the Death of Her Fawn" [241]) or gets his quotations wrong (a Seahorse is mentioned in Browning's My Last Duchess, but it is not an 'Untamed Seahorse' [240]). At one point Kinbote quotes even "his" author inaccurately, namely in his note on line 149, where he has "One foot upon a mountain" (137), which is "mountain-t o p " in the poem. He makes nonsense of the explanations and etymologies of words and names (shootka [221], Botkin [100], Shakespeare [208]). He cannot remember the name of a literary review he refers to (100), he would like to quote a poem but cannot, because he does not have it "at hand" (258). One of the most flagrant proofs of his pseudo-scholarship is the note to line 550 where he admits having made a mistake in an earlier note but refuses to correct it: "that would mean reworking the entire note, or at least a considerable part of it, and I have no time for such stupidities" (228).

At other times Kinbote resorts to speculation. Speculation can sometimes not be avoided, in undertakings of this kind and is a legitimate means of trying to come to terms with problems concerning a manuscript or a final text. But it should be used only when all the sources of knowledge have been

exhausted. Kinbote uses it from the beginning. It replaces knowledge and serves to cover up his lack of information. It is also purely subjective. It is not deduced from facts, which might give it a shade of probability, but springs from his imagination, is an echo of his own constant preoccupations, and is coloured by his prejudices and preferences respectively. His attachment to certain themes, his dislike of Sybil Shade, and his fond illusions about his relation to the poet are clearly the sources of his thoughts about some drafts preserved by Shade (15-16). There are some very comic moments at which his speculations turn into sheer absurdity, as when the glimpse he catches of the poet's slippered foot (which is all he can see of him when spying on him from his own window) inspires him to draw bold conclusions about the poet's state of mind at that moment (23). In an "orgy of spying" (87), even using binoculars (88), he later draws even wilder conclusions from what he sees. Quite apart from resorting to a very odd and unorthodox method of research (an expression of all editors' desire to find out about their authors, normally, however, kept within proper bounds), he yields to yet another temptation (also quite common in the profession), namely to attach too much importance to trivial details and to see some deep and significant meaning where there is no meaning at all.

It is clear that with all this Nabokov is making fun of what he is ostensibly imitating. Even while

using imitation as his basic device, he exposes through exaggeration of the characteristic traits of the genre imitated the dangers inherent in it. He exploits the comic effects of a scholarly work becoming a parody of itself when undertaken by someone like Kinbote who falls victim to all these dangers, uses the normal techniques indiscriminately, misapplies them, carries them to ridiculous extremes, and fills the form with incongruous contents or no contents at all. And in Kinbote of course, he ridicules the inept and luckless scholar, who, by bungling his task completely, becomes a parody of what he wants to be and of what he assumes he is.

Nor does Nabokov stop here. The parody becomes even fiercer with regard to Kinbote's person. There are other weaknesses besides that of bad scholarship that Nabokov cannot forgive in an editor, and he gives them all to Kinbote, so as to show them at their worst and to ridicule them. As he by and by emerges from the foreword, Kinbote turns out to be self-centred, obtrusive, conceited and presumptuous, besides being a bad scholar. He writes the foreword and, as will be seen later, the commentary, basically about himself. In a strangely disconnected sequence of chatty digressions from his real subject he talks about things that concern only himself, things so ridiculously remote from the poem as the heating system in the house into which he moved (19), his own personal idiosyncrasies, his likes and dislikes (20-21), the unpleasantness of certain persons he met



(24-25). He talks about how he ingratiated himself with the poet and boasts of his friendship with him (14f.;22f.;27). He adopts an unpleasantly indulgent and patronizing tone when talking of Shade. His worst crime, however, is that he does not content himself with his part of an editor, which is a subordinate one, but that he steps in with his criticism, and that he pretends that he has inspired the poet. Nabokov can be indifferent to criticism ("...I yawn and forget"<sup>30</sup>), he can be ironical about critics<sup>31</sup>, he can scorn their various ways of approach<sup>32</sup>, but he does not tolerate those who presume that they "know better" than the artist, who offer suggestions as to what should have been different in a finished work, or who try to advise the artist on the yet unfinished work, those, in short, who do not respect the integrity of the artist and of his work of art. Kinbote's unqualified criticism of Canto III: "that shocking tour de force" (13) (breaking the promise of objectivity on the very first page) is harmless. But then he criticises Shade for deciding to discard some of his drafts (16); he suggests "in all modesty" that Shade was going to ask his advice (16), and he finally implies that the inspiration for the whole work came really from him (17): with all this he is (or seems to be) established not only as an incompetent scholar, but as one of those "pompous avuncular brutes who ... attempt 'to make suggestions'", who do not see that "a point of art" is often "a point of honor", and whom Nabokov, when he encounters them,

stops "with a thunderous 'stet'."<sup>33</sup>

At this point parody, the "game", has turned into satire, the "lesson".<sup>34</sup> There is no trace of good nature here any more. "The gap between what might be [or should be] and what is" has become too great to be tolerated. The folly that the author sees has to be exposed in all its absurdity, held up to derision and condemned.<sup>35</sup>

Pale Fire has been described as "one of the most hysterically funny novels in contemporary literature."<sup>36</sup> All of Kinbote's shortcomings listed so far contribute to this quality, but his conviction that he has inspired the poet is the main source of comedy, for from it springs Kinbote's phenomenal over-reading and misinterpretation of the poem and, consequently, the "ironic"<sup>37</sup> and "unholy"<sup>38</sup> relation between poem and commentary.

The commentary is strange even to look at. It seems odd that, discussing and ostensibly explicating, a poem in which some of the basic philosophical questions are treated, Kinbote should select such inconspicuous lines and words to comment on: lines and words that are perfectly clear and understandable, both in themselves and in their respective contexts. That he should do so, is in itself amusing, it looks suspiciously like yet another instance of his pedantry, his inability to distinguish the inessential from the essential, and his tendency to misapply the techniques of sound scholarship grotesquely, but it is exploited for further comic effects.

"Parents" (I,71), "my bedroom" (I, 80), "offer" (I,62), "address" (III,768) and many other words do not call for explanatory notes. The very idea to comment on them seems ludicrous. But for Kinbote they are all significant: for him they carry a host of implications which are quite alien to the poem but very real to him, and which he desperately wants the reader to see as well. As G.Highet points out, Kinbote draws three stories from the "framework" of the poem: "the story of his own lonely unhappiness at Wordsmith College (relieved only by his admiration for Shade), the outline of Shade's life while he is working on Pale Fire (with flash-backs), and the melodramatic flight-and-pursuit tale of King Charles of Zembla and the murderer Gradus."<sup>39</sup> Of these the third story (in which it gradually becomes clear first: that Kinbote is himself the king, second: that he only imagines this, and third: that he is mad) forms the main bulk of the commentary. It can be reconstructed from the numerous fragments, complete with the revolution in Zembla, the king's hilarious flight (part of which is said to have been inspired by the Marx Brothers), and Charles' pursuit by the rather repulsive Gradus; complete also with Charles' sexual aberrations and his unsuccessful marriage with Disa, Duchess of Payn.

Each of the innocent lines of the poem sings of this for Kinbote. Each of them brings parts of it crowding into his mind and from there into the notes, forming fantastically disproportionate digressions of

up to twenty pages. Dates (204), syllables (77), and the fortuitous juxtaposition of letters in two adjoining words in a variant (231) are for him charged with meanings which are all connected with his Zemblan fantasy.

This, he says, is the material he gave to Shade, and this is what inspired the poet, even though it may not seem so at first sight. It looks, he says, as if "the final text of Pale Fire [had] been deliberately and drastically drained of every trace of the material I contributed" (81), and this comes as a great shock to him when he first reads the poem and finds it "void of my magic, of that special rich streak of magical madness which I was sure would run through it and make it transcend its time" (296-297). Then he reads it again and finds in it a "dim distant music", "echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripple-wake of my glory" (297). It is all there, after all, he feels; the poem is his, he is "the only begetter" (17). He insists that this is also why it is only with the help of his notes that the poem can be appreciated; in fact, the notes should be consulted first. Only through them will the "human reality" of the poem come to life. (28-29).

With this the ultimate peak of absurdity and comedy has been reached. The basic assumptions of the genre have been turned upside down. The notes which so absurdly twist and misinterpret the contents of the poem as to render it unrecognizable, completely overshadow what little there is in the way of real

commentary, and they also overshadow the poem. The commentary becomes the central part of what is offered as an edition of a great poet's work, and it establishes Kinbote, the editor, as the central figure. Shade, the famous poet, is swept into the background and is robbed of his creation. Kinbote himself finds "a whiff of Swift in some of my notes" (173). There is more than that. It is a very lively Swiftean breeze that blows through the commentary from its beginning to its very end.<sup>40</sup>

On one level, then, Pale Fire is the "lampoon of a scholarly method"<sup>41</sup> that the critics have seen in it, the parody and satire through which Nabokov exposes and ridicules bad and arrogant scholarship. On another level it is to some degree his own experience, become art, when translating and editing Eugene Onegin, and in a way, a parody of it too. Some critics are content not to question the novel any further.<sup>42</sup>

But all of this can serve only as an explanation of the surface appearance of the novel and of some of the mechanisms at work in it. It is not sufficient, nor is it satisfactory, as an explanation of anything below or even implied in the surface.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight has proved that parody has for Nabokov the same meaning it has for Sebastian: it is "a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion",<sup>43</sup> and Nabokov, talking about parody in an interview, confirms in fact that it is more for him than just a game:

While I keep everything on the very brink of parody, there must be on the other hand an abyss of seriousness, and I must make my way along the narrow ridge between my own truth and the caricature of it.<sup>44</sup>

Pale Fire is another instance of a novel in which he performs this artistic balancing act, and the reader must perform it after him if he wants to arrive at a recognition of the essential content under, or implicit in, the deceptive comic surface of the novel. The analysis of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight has shown that its philosophical questions are contained in its very parodies, and, just as there, some deep seriousness becomes visible in what is only superficially comic in Pale Fire.

The initial source of seriousness in Pale Fire is Shade's poem. It is autobiographical. However, it does not give a detailed account of his life, but follows the various stages of his life-long musings about life and death, the possibility of an existence after death, and the question whether everything in a man's life is just mad and improbable coincidence, or whether there is a pattern in his existence in which each incident has its logical place.

Shade has been troubled by these questions ever since his early boyhood when he was subject to mysterious attacks. During these attacks he suddenly and unaccountably sinks into blackness which is yet sublime, because his existence is no longer limited to "here" and "now" but is "distributed through space and time" (I, 146-156). Although the attacks stop after a while, the memory remains with him of some

forbidden knowledge of which he has been allowed a taste. By this taste, as if by something indecent, he feels "corrupted", "terrified", and yet strangely attracted, eager to know more (I, 160ff.). The curiosity and the wonder aroused in him by "playful death" (I, 140) remain with him throughout his life. There is a time when he suspects that everybody, except only himself, knows the whole truth (II, 167-172) and that this truth is kept from him on purpose. There is a time when it seems to him that only people insane can live with the terrible uncertainty about what awaits them after death (II, 173-176); and there is the moment when he decides "to explore and fight / The foul, the inadmissible abyss" and to make this his main purpose in life (II, 177-181).

For a long time there are only questions and speculations, caused not only by his general perplexity but also by the deaths of his Aunt Maud and his daughter Hazel: "What moment in the gradual decay / Does resurrection choose?" and who is the determining force behind it? (II, 209-211). Should we scorn a hereafter simply because we cannot verify it? After all, our present life was something unknown to us prior to life. Might not existence after death be just as wild and nonsensical and weird and wonderful as this life? Paradise and Hell are both equally likely (II, 217-230). But even though it should be paradise, he will turn it and eternity down unless the tenderness and passion of this life, the joy in little things, and the daily trivia are all there to

be found by the newlydead (III, 523-536). However,  
when one night he dies, when he crosses the border,  
he finds that

Everything I loved was lost  
But no aorta could report regret (III, 700-701).

He finds something else, though, that is like a first  
answer to his questions. The vision of

A system of cells interlinked within  
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked  
Within one stem

and

Against the dark, a tall white fountain (III,  
704-707)

is for him sufficient indication that all is not chaos  
in that other strange world. Although he is unable  
to grasp the sense of it, he is yet convinced that it  
is meaningful and that it suggests "an imaginative  
consciousness on the other side of death."<sup>45</sup> There is  
a disappointment for him when he finds that the re-  
port about someone who is said also to have seen the  
fountain, contains a misprint:

There's one misprint - not that it matters much:  
Mountain, not fountain, the majestic touch  
(III, 801-802).

Life Everlasting - based on a misprint! (III, 803).  
Does this mean that his vision was meaningless after  
all? And does it mean that the secret is impenetrable?  
Then he feels all of a sudden that here a clue is  
given to him and that what seemed to complicate the  
search even more, indicates in fact a way towards a  
solution? The misprint not only confirms the existence  
of an intelligence at work on the other side but im-  
plies that the pattern devised by it is more complex



than he thought it was<sup>46</sup>:

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  
(III, 806-810).

Who this intelligence is, or who they are, he has no way of knowing, nor does it matter to him, but he is now convinced that they are there, "aloof and mute, / Playing a game of worlds" (III, 818-819), coordinating disparate events and objects into "ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities" (III, 828-829) and taking pleasure in the game (III, 815). And if he can see through at least part of it all, find links and patterns, recognize the artistry, and also take pleasure in it, then this will be enough for him and confirm him in his "faint hope" (III, 834) of a continuation of it all after death. The echoes of Pope's Essay on Man in many passages of Shade's reflections are unmistakable.

Canto IV, which seems at first to be about something totally different, namely about two possible methods of literary composition (treated humorously, and somewhat deflated by the context of rather too ordinary activities), contains, in fact, a direct continuation and development of the ideas initiated in Canto III. The first four lines

Now I shall spy on beauty as none has  
Spied on it yet. Now I shall cry out as  
None has cried out. Now I shall try what none  
Has tried: Now I shall do what none has done  
(IV, 835-838).

can be taken to refer to the task Shade has set himself, namely, to find the texture, the "web of sense",

the "correlated pattern" in the game of existence that no one has found yet. His art will be the medium to take him to the discovery of what he has not been able to discover so far either through speculation or through logical discussion:

I feel I understand  
Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight (IV,970-973).

If through his art he can find a pattern and a harmonious rhythm in his own private existence, this will be proof to him that the verse of the universe, "of galaxies divine" (IV,975), is also harmonious and "scans right" (IV,974).

Surprisingly, it is Kinbote, in his commentary, who does precisely what Shade wants to do. The very quality that is the primary source of comic effects in his commentary and earns him the severest reproof from Nabokov, also contains the germ of his redemption: although the commentary is so fantastically twisted, and although its contents are worlds apart from those of the poem, there is yet a subtle connection between the two, through which Kinbote's Zemblan fantasies become indeed a commentary, though in a different sense from the one suggested by the form.

The crucial passage in which he hints at what he is about to do occurs in his note on line 17, where Gradus makes his first appearance:

We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought, as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia, through the entire length of the poem,

following the road of its rhythm,  
riding past in a rhyme, skidding  
around the corner of a run-on,  
breathing with the caesura, swing-  
ing down to the foot of the page  
from line to line as from branch  
to branch, hiding between two  
words,...,reappearing on the hori-  
zon of a new canto, steadily march-  
ing nearer in iambic motion ... (78).

With its extravagant imagery this is one of the most extraordinary notes, and where it appears, quite early in the commentary, its contents seem just as extraordinary as the form. It is at that moment not clear at all what possible purpose the coordination of Gradus' approach and the movement and development of the poem might serve. The note simply looks like one of the many striking examples of Kinbote's comic overreading of the poem and his total unconcern toward what it is really about. It transpires only very gradually, and it becomes quite clear only at the end, what his purpose is: a series of events has been set in motion which aim at his (Kinbote's) death, in which Gradus takes an important part, and in which Shade will be caught up, although they are really quite extraneous to his own existence. Shade is ignorant of them, and he cannot resist or stop the development. While he is writing his poem, making plans and looking into the future confidently, his fate is prepared in a distant place. Step by step and inescapably it moves towards him in a sequence of incidents connected with Gradus' pursuit of Kinbote (King Charles of Zembla). Following the individual steps in Gradus' approach and at the same time fol-

lowing the development of Shade's poem, and Shade's life while he is writing it, Kinbote intends to show how and why two lines from two completely different spheres converge slowly until they meet at the moment of Shade's death, when Gradus aims at Kinbote (the King) and, missing him, shoots Shade. Doing this, Kinbote follows the same method, which Sebastian Knight follows for a similar purpose in his novel Success.<sup>47</sup>

The first instances of synchronization do not seem very convincing, in fact, they look as meaningless as the long note in which Kinbote announces them. It does not seem meaningful at all that Gradus should find himself "designated to track down and murder the King" (150) on the same day on which an "innocent poet" (151) starts working on a new poem (July 2nd). It does not seem any more meaningful that he should depart for Western Europe on the very day on which the same "innocent poet" is beginning Canto II of his poem (July 5th) (78). And so with all the other seeming coincidences.<sup>48</sup>

Again, it all acquires meaning only when looked at in retrospect and with the end in mind. Then it becomes indeed obvious that the "timing" is perfect, and that the combination of incidents on the last day and during the last few hours of Shade's life is perfect too: Gradus arrives at New Wye airport, goes by car to the Campus Hotel, goes from there to the Library, gets lost in his search for Kinbote (the King), comes back to the main desk,

actually sees Kinbote, loses him, and catches a lift to his house (280-284). - Meanwhile Kinbote is on his way home, happens to see Sybil "speeding townward" (287), feels encouraged by her absence to look up Shade and invite him to his house. - Had Kinbote not vanished behind a bookcase so quickly; had Gradus not caught a lift; had Sybil not gone out; or had Kinbote not seen her go: the end would have been different. As it is, the incidents of this day logically round off the development that started three weeks earlier (it certainly started much earlier than this, but this is as far as Kinbote traces it back), and at the end of which Shade dies in Kinbote's place. It is certainly of symbolical significance that Shade has his first heart attack on October 17th, 1958, the very day of Kinbote's arrival in America.

Thus, for at least a "minute part" of Shade's existence, namely the period during which he composes Pale Fire, Kinbote combines "accidents and possibilities", coordinates events with other remote events, and traces the pattern in which the lines, originating at different times and at different places, run together in time and space at the moment at which Gradus kills Shade. Reversely, Shade's death, which, seen from one point of view, seems to be caused by a mere coincidence, can be traced back and explained through the interaction and combination of a whole series of events and incidents. It all seems to imply that there is some intelligent power behind it all, planning and designing the fate of Man. And

it brings to mind the idea of a game of chess with its skillful combination of moves which the opponent does not understand before a certain moment, but which it is possible to trace back once they have led to a specific result.<sup>49</sup>

Seen in this light, Kinbote's commentary acquires new meaning. What looked like the product of a bad, arrogant and mad scholar, now proves to "reflect the pattern in the game of life that Shade postulates in his poem" (III,810-829), Luzhin's "game of the gods", and turns out to be a perfect illustration or: "a working model", says Stegner<sup>50</sup>, of Shade's theories on life, death, coincidence and pattern. Kinbote may be a bad scholar, he may be arrogant and even mad, but one cannot say of him, as Field does, that he "really does not know what is going on in Shade's poem."<sup>51</sup>

His understanding of the poem goes even further and deeper. That he should prove his understanding of the poem and of Shade's theories, and of the pattern of existence through a highly fantastic story is somewhat surprising and unsatisfactory. The pattern does not look genuine enough, and an invented pattern superimposed on a real person's life certainly cannot prove anything.

However, it appears gradually from a multitude of clues that Kinbote's story has as its basis certain real events, and the clues also lead to an explanation of how and why Shade gets fatally caught up in them. Although Kinbote does not admit the truth of it, it

emerges that the man whom he casts as Gradus is really one Jack Grey who has escaped from the Institute for the Criminal Insane. He wants to revenge himself on the judge who sent him there, mistakes Shade for that judge and kills him.<sup>52</sup> Kinbote talks of "crass banalities" (85), and "evil piffle" (294), when referring to this representation of the incidents that lead to Shade's death, but his own notes contain enough material to make it appear the most likely, in fact, the true, version of what happens. In this series of incidents, too, a pattern can be recognized: The judge (Goldsworth) is Shade's neighbour; he is away (in England); Kinbote has rented his house; Kinbote has sought Shade's friendship. On this particular day, Sybil happens to have gone out, Kinbote happens to have seen her go out, and has therefore invited Shade. They arrive at his house at precisely the same moment at which Grey also arrives with his gun. The pattern is complete down to the last detail: Grey does not fire at Kinbote, as Kinbote will have it, but aims deliberately at Shade: He has mistaken Shade for the judge, for Shade and the judge resemble each other.<sup>53</sup>

Kinbote's version may look very different from the official one, with the melodramatic King of Zembla replacing the honourable judge, and the Zemblan Extremist Gradus stepping into prosaic Grey's place; with, also, Gradus' slow and circuitous approach from abroad instead of Grey's direct and rather ordinary approach to Kinbote's house. Yet, the two ver-

sions have the essential quality in common. They both make transparent how incidents and possibilities and seeming coincidences combine (or are combined?) into an intricate pattern of moves by which the fate of one man, who is totally unaware of it all, is decided. This taken into account, Kinbote's version does not look all that absurd any more, and it ceases looking absurd once one realizes that his story is the artistic version of the bare and ordinary facts. His imagination removes the events from the level of the crude and commonplace onto the level of art and leaves the sober facts to the "scurrilous and the heartless", to all those "for whom romance, remoteness, sealskin-lined scarlet skies, the darkening dunes of a fabulous kingdom, simply do not exist." (85) Into his story go other persons and elements from his immediate surroundings. Persons from the Campus go through an artistic process of transformation and get involved in the dramatic action. Gerald Emerald, who repeatedly irritates Kinbote, appears as "one of the greater Shadows" (255), the Shadow, in fact, from whom the murderer Gradus learns where to find the King. He is easily recognized not only by his "green velvet jacket" (255) but by his very name, 'Izumrudov' being Russian for "emerald".<sup>54</sup> There is also Gordon, Assistant Professor, a musician, who lends his name to a young boy, described in the Index as "a musical prodigy and an amusing pet" (310).

Mary McCarthy, by a series of ingenious conclu-



sions, shows that even the "fabulous kingdom" Zembla is based on Kinbote's surroundings, that "Zembla" is indeed synonymous with "Appalachia".<sup>55</sup> Kinbote's explanation of the name (though wrong) is a valuable clue and confirms McCarthy's statement: "...the name Zembla is a corruption not of Russian zemlya, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections, or 'resemblers'" (265).

Into the Zemblan fable Kinbote, finally, projects himself as King Charles the Beloved, victim of the Zemblan revolution, exiled and persecuted by the Extremists. The King looks exactly like him, and he shares his fate: Kinbote, too, is an exile. It appears from his note to line 894 that he is r e a l l y one V. Botkin "of Russian descent" (267) who teaches in the Russian Department and who, because of his peculiarities, is subject to all sorts of attacks and signs of unkindness from those around him. In the King's fear of death and murder one recognizes Kinbote's (Botkin's) own constant harrowing fears of "death's fearful shadow" (96) which make his nights restless, and his visions of "relentlessly advancing assassins" (97). Onto Zembla, and onto the figure of King Charles, Kinbote (Botkin) projects his "persecution mania" (98), which those around him have recognized, and which is "complicated by the commonplace conspiracy mania of a faculty common room."<sup>56</sup>

Transferring the drab and unpleasant real events into the imaginative fable of Zembla, Kinbote emerges as an artist who follows the same principles of art

that he sees at work in Shade's creation and which he recognizes and sets down as the basic rules for any true artist. He gives "a certain poetical patina, the bloom of remoteness to familiar figures and things" (290). He refuses to see things simply as they appear to the "scurrilous and the heartless", who look at them in always the same way which has become a habit with them. Unlike them, he can "wean myself abruptly from the habit of things" and discover new and surprising aspects in them:

...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 the weft of that web (289).

He has proved, too, that he can do it. For a small part of existence (three weeks of Shade's life) he has uncovered the pattern formed by individual incidents and their interaction, by lines that come from different points and then meet and intersect and complicate the pattern: and he has done it through art, the very medium that Shade, too, believes is the only medium through which he can understand "existence, or at least a minute part of [his] existence".

The criticism, then, that Kinbote's commentary is an example of crass over-reading and a wild misinterpretation, that it gives evidence only of his "stupidity"<sup>57</sup> and "egomania"<sup>58</sup> is valid only as far as the mere surface of Shade's poem is concerned. Kinbote does indeed not explicate what the poem

superficially is about. He twists and falsifies facts until they fit into his story. But this very story is the proof that he has seen through the surface and has penetrated to the "underside of the weave" (17) and the central concern of Shade's work. "It is the underside of the weave that entrances the beholder", and with this part of the poem, which is the more difficult one to grasp, his commentary has a subtle and intimate connection.

It is Kinbote's tragedy that in his mind (as in Luzhin's) art encroaches on life until he is incapable of distinguishing between them and takes the one for the other.

However, art can be no more than a means of transcending "average reality" and understanding "true reality", and uncovering it by shaping an artistic image of it. An artist cannot, and must not try to, make his creation part of his actual world and life, nor must he identify himself with it until he sees himself as part of it. Madness would be the consequence of such a confusion, and it is in fact the consequence in Kinbote's case. He completely identifies himself and those around him with the illusory beings of his own story, i.e. his artistic rendering of what he has perceived. His tragedy is rendered more poignant by the fact that, although he has proved to be so perceptive and has penetrated to a superior form of reality, he should be caught in a purely illusory world which exists only in his own mind.

His tragedy, in its turn, becomes the source of comedy in that it has its expression in the ludicrous

commentary whose mechanics have been analysed.

There is an epigraph to the novel, taken from  
Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson:

This reminds me of the ludicrous account  
he gave Mr Langton, of the despicable  
state of a young gentleman of good family.  
"Sir, when I heard of him last, he was  
running about town shooting cats." And  
then, in a sort of kindly reverie, he  
bethought himself of his own favorite  
cat, and said, "But Hodge shan't be shot:  
no, no, Hodge shall not be shot."

Field has two explanations for this. One is that it is  
a statement of Shade about Kinbote, who must live to  
write the commentary: "...no, no, Kinbote shall not be  
shot." The second explanation refers to "a work that  
was to be written by Johnson on the Boswell family  
based on papers to be furnished by Boswell." However,  
this plan was given up "in favor of other projects, which  
strongly suggests that the epigraph does indeed have  
something to say about Pale Fire as a whole."<sup>59</sup> - It  
could also simply be read as a statement about Kinbote's  
mental state, the person relating what he has heard and  
getting caught up in his story in much the same way  
as Kinbote in his, and thus foreshadowing Kinbote's tra-  
gic failure to distinguish between fiction and life.

The commentator, then, emerges as a person with  
a triple identity: V. Botkin; Charles Kinbote; Charles  
the Beloved, King of Zembla. Of these three, the  
clues in the commentary establish Botkin as the "real"  
person, and Botkin, Moynahan says, "reinvents himself  
twice."<sup>60</sup> Moynahan accepts the novel at its face  
value as far as the implication is concerned that it  
is "really" Shade who has written the poem, and

"really" Kinbote who has written the commentary and the rest of the critical apparatus, in other words, that they are "really" separate individuals. Both Field and Stegner have come to a different conclusion. There are no two authors, they both decide; there is only o n e primary author and he invents the other and his work. They differ in their choice, though. For Stegner, the primary author is Kinbote, for Field, it is Shade.

Stegner points out the close connection that exists, after all, between poem and commentary and which proves how well Kinbote has understood the poem, and he has another argument: He pleads that

If [Kinbote] is able to dream up an Arabian Nights tale of his royal life in Onhava and populate that capital city with several dozen fantastic, though imaginary, personalities, he is certainly able to dream up John and Sybil Shade and their daughter Hazel,<sup>61</sup> and create a fictitious poem as well.

He supports his theory by showing how, all the different meanings of 'Shade' taken into account (comparative darkness, shadows, spirit or ghost [in Shakespeare], degree), and the implications of 'Gradus' also taken into account (" 'Gradus' means 'degree' in Russian, one of his aliases is Degree, and another, Grey, suggests a predominant colour of shade"), "Shade blends into Grey-Degree-Gradus." And, Stegner, concludes, "a Gradus is also a dictionary used to aid the writing of poetry."<sup>62</sup>

Field, too, sees unifying bonds between poem and commentary, which make him decide for o n e primary

author, but for him they are of a different nature. For him the unity is proved by the title, which is "meant to refer not to the crude theft of Shade's manuscript by Kinbote, but to the less evident factor of the bonds and interplay of light and reflection between the novel's disparate bodies..."<sup>63</sup>; by the epigraph<sup>64</sup>; by the prevalence of death as a theme in both poem and commentary (both the King's flight from Zembla and his persecution by Gradus are connected with death)<sup>65</sup>, and by the rejected draft portions: "if they are Shade's [they] would prove...that the old poet was indeed on the verge of writing a poem about Zembla."<sup>66</sup> Field doubts Stegner's conclusion that Kinbote has understood the poem, and all his conclusions taken together lead him to the statement that "the primary author - even without Nabokov's acknowledgement that Kinbote really does not know what is going on in Shade's poem - must be Shade."<sup>67</sup> And he rejects Stegner's conclusion on another ground: he finds it "in a sense, just as confusing as the apparently obvious idea that Kinbote and Shade are quite separate."

A sane man may invent an insane character, and we call him an artist; an insane man who invents a perfectly sane character is, also an artist, but ipso facto no longer insane in the way that Kinbote is. What sort of an Alice would the Mad Hatter make for us?

Stegner's reading, he says, leaves the reader "with an enormous and rather pointless joke for its own sake - something which Nabokov has never done."<sup>68</sup>

That Kinbote's 'stupidity' and his 'misunder-

standing' of the poem do not hold as arguments to rule him out as primary author has been shown. However, there are clues which, indeed, point to Shade as the more likely candidate for that role.

In connection with The Real Life of Sebastian Knight the relation (if any) between an author's life and autobiography and his works has been shown. Nabokov's own works abound in details that come clearly from his own life and experience: persons, major events, and incidents, but also a goodly quantity of trivia noticed in passing (like a sign on a snapshot booth<sup>69</sup>), echoes and scenes from films he has seen<sup>70</sup>, and "an extraordinary amount of material drawn from his quotidian."<sup>71</sup> But he makes it quite clear that all these should not be used to draw conclusions about his personality. They are mostly taken out of their original contexts and are combined with new elements, partly real and partly invented ones, so that something quite new is created out of them which has nothing to do with the author's identity. They go into an author's work for purely artistic reasons. There is in Pale Fire a passage which describes this very process. Kinbote, talking of Shade, expresses his own wonder at the process of literary creation:

I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse (27).

Kinbote applies this to the creation of the poem,

but it can also be applied to those parts of the novel which were supposedly written by Kinbote. Just as all sorts of echoes from Nabokov's life (and from Speak, Memory) can be traced in new imaginary contexts in his novels, certain elements from the poem (Shade's autobiography) can be recognized in all parts of the commentary, and this strongly suggests that the commentary, the commentator himself and his invention (Zembla) are Shade's creations.

There are some seemingly insignificant examples, which yet acquire significance in this connection. There is the waxwing (I,1) and there is the Red Admiral butterfly (II,271, IV,993-995) which reappear as, respectively, the Zemblan sampel (silktail), "the model of one of the three heraldic creatures... in the armorial bearings of the Zemblan king" (73-74), and the harvalda (the heraldic one), which can be recognized in the escutcheon of the Dukes of Payn (172). There is a puzzling remark about the two Russian experts hunting for the Crown Jewels: "One has seldom seen, at least among waxworks, a pair of more pleasant, presentable chaps" (244). It can now be accounted for by Shade's device of introducing into his works things from all spheres of his life. Here he is seen modelling the two on some wax figures he has seen somewhere. The table-turning séances with an American medium that King Charles has to go through after his mother's death and the spooky messages that come from her (109) seem to have their sources in Shade's experiences at IPH (III,630ff.).



Shade mentions a famous film: Remorse (II,450), which he and Sybil watched on TV on the night of Hazel's death. The long passage about Charles' and Disa's "calamitous marriage" (207) reads like an outline of the contents of that film (207ff.). Charles has dreams about their unfortunate relation, and these dreams are of a love "like an endless wringing of hands, like a blundering of the soul through an infinite maze of helplessness and remorse" (210). One is tempted to think that this last word is used deliberately as a clue. One wonders also whether this whole passage (half comic and fantastic in the usual Kinbote style, and half serious) and those dreams, which "transformed the drab prose of his feelings for her into strong and strange poetry" (209) do not actually provide a clue to Kinbote's "drab and unhappy past", which he deliberately "peels off" and "replaces with a brilliant invention" (238).

It is not only such commonplace elements that slip from the poem into the story told in the commentary, but very personal experiences, too, reappear there in artistic guise and confirm the theory that this story, no less than the poem, is a creation of Shade's. Emotional experiences that Shade has gone through are given the Zemblan king: like Shade (I,72-73), he has difficulty in evoking the image of his father (101). "One picks up minor items at such slowdowns of life" (106), says Kinbote about the king, who, without yet knowing of his mother's death, registers everything around him with exceptional and unconscious

awareness. Similarly, and this looks like the origin of the king's experience, Shade later remembers quite clearly everything that happened in his house during the span of time during which his daughter took her life (II,408-500).

It is also rewarding to look at Kinbote himself. He is modelled on no less than three persons. The basic figure to lend him substance and life (and the letters of his name) is Botkin, "American scholar of Russian descent" (306) and his destiny (exile) is also bestowed on Kinbote. Some of Kinbote's traits come from Shade's daughter Hazel. With her he shares the habit of twisting words and he claims that she resembled him in other respects as well (193), but does not specify of what kind the resemblance is. One might presume that he is thinking of the attraction suicide has for him: "If I were a poet I would certainly make an ode to the sweet urge to close one's eyes and surrender utterly to the perfect safety of wooed death" (221), and that he feels that this establishes a spiritual affinity between him and Hazel who took her own life.<sup>72</sup> The third person to contribute to the making of Kinbote is Shade himself. His extreme opposite in certain respects ("in origin, upbringing, thought associations, spiritual intonation and mental mode, one a cosmopolitan scholar, the other a fireside poet" [80]), Kinbote appears as Shade's mirror image in other respects: He is a strict vegetarian (Shade has to "make a definite effort to partake of a vegetable" [21]), he (and King Charles)

is left-handed (180) and he is a homosexual.

Most remarkable and conclusive in this connection is the fact that there are moments when all differences become insignificant and when Kinbote is caused "to undergo an evolution toward Shade and toward Nabokov"<sup>73</sup>, moments when he utters opinions that are in perfect keeping with Shade's convictions, and which, when traced beyond Shade, take one to their common creator. Among these is his condemnation of Gradus and Gradus' belief in "general ideas" (152); among these is also his failure to comprehend "how and why anybody is capable of destroying a fellow creature" (279).

Most striking, however, are certain pronouncements which are proofs of Kinbote's great sensitivity to art and of his ability to be quite naïvely amazed and delighted by the "miracle of a few written signs" that can create new worlds and new destinies (289). Art has for him nothing to do with "average reality": Reality is neither the subject nor the object of true art" (130). Art creates a special reality of its own, and whatever a poet chooses to turn into art will come to life, will become true and "real" (214), though in a different way from the "average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye" (130). All these are, of course, favourite preoccupations, likes and dislikes of Nabokov himself. He hands them down to Shade, this "greatest of invented poets"<sup>74</sup> being one of his "more responsible characters", to some of whom, Nabokov admits, he gives some of his own ideas.<sup>75</sup> That they

all reappear in Kinbote can be taken as a further proof of Shade being the primary poet in Pale Fire: It is in keeping with what has been said above that in this, too, he should follow Nabokov, that he should use the same device as his creator and, in turn, pass them all on to Kinbote: Kinbote, although to others "technically a loony" is for him certainly a "responsible character": he considers him as "a fellow poet" (238).

Now the strong resemblance between the creative process at work in Kinbote's transformation of reality into art and the principles that Shade follows in his creative work can also be accounted for. Shade bestows not only a number of his views and ideas, but also some of his creative and artistic principles on his "created poet", just as Nabokov has given his own to him (and to Sebastian Knight).

Kinbote is (or is made) aware of Shadean echoes in his work:

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... (81),

and provides with this passage a clue to the meaning of the title of the novel.

There are a number of theories about the choice and meaning of this title, all of them of course based on the Shakespeare lines from which it is taken:

I'll example you with thievery:  
The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;

The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears  
(Timon of Athens, IV,3,441-446).

There is the theory which regards art as "the thief which robs nature's pocket, and like the moon decks itself in borrowed glory."<sup>76</sup> There is the theory of Stegner who applies the title only to the poem and seeks the explanation in some vague similarity in the mental states of mind of Shade and Timon, and who also mentions the fact that the poem, like Shakespeare's play, remains unfinished as a possible (unconscious) motive on Shade's part for the choice of the title.<sup>77</sup> There is even the attempt to account for the title by likening Kinbote's lonely fate to that of Timon.<sup>78</sup>

The passage quoted above allows of a different conclusion. The 'fiery orb' suggests the sun from which, in Shakespeare's words, the moon "snatches" her "pale fire". After what has been said about the relation of Shade and Kinbote the "pale fire" of the title can now be taken to refer to the subtle echoes of his own work that Shade allows to go into the work of the poet who is himself his own creation, to the tricks and devices that this created poet "steals" from his creator. These will not shine with the full strength and beauty of the poet's own original work (just as all the beauty and complexity of Nabokov's own novels do not appear in Sebastian Knight's work), but, in reflecting it, they shed a somewhat weaker, milder, 'opalescent' light.<sup>79</sup>

Another (curious) phenomenon points to the same

theory about the relation between Shade and Kinbote and Kinbote's supposed creation. There is what looks like a strange coincidence of dates in Pale Fire: Shade's birthday is the 5th July; so is Kinbote's (161), and so is even Gradus', who is exactly the same age as Kinbote (275). The 5th July (1947) is the day on which King Charles sees Disa for the first time, and on the 5th July 1959 Shade begins to work on Canto II of his poem, and Gradus departs from Zembla to Western Europe (78).<sup>80</sup> Starting with this date, a neat temporal sequence and pattern is built up, and again this can be explained if one sees Shade as the organizing creative force behind it all. Choosing this (to him probably the most familiar) date as his temporal point of departure he is once more seen using a Nabokovian trick: "In common with Pushkin I am fascinated by fatidic dates. Moreover, when dating some special event in my novels I often choose a more or less familiar one as a point de repère."<sup>81</sup>

Even some remarks about Gradus, which seem at the time they are made no more than somewhat abstruse products of Kinbote's extravagant imagination, can now be seen in a new light and as adding more evidence to the theory about Shade and Kinbote. One is never left in any doubt about the fact that Gradus is not "real" (in the "average" sense). Like the automaton he is<sup>82</sup>, he lives and moves and acts only through some force with which his inventor and creator inspires him, and for his creator he is not so

much a person even on the level of invention, but a symbolic figure: the image of doom.<sup>83</sup> Shade and Gradus, the commentator implies, awake at the same time one morning (272-273); Gradus falls asleep "as the poet lays down his pen for the night." (78) The "motor" that keeps this "clockwork man" going, "the force propelling him is the magic action of Shade's poem itself" (136). These hints and the synchronization device through which Gradus' approach and the growth and development of the poem are linked suggest that Gradus' creator is not Kinbote but Shade; that Shade, on whose "combinational turn of mind" (15) and on the "contrapuntal nature" of whose art Kinbote comments (77) has written the poem and the critical apparatus simultaneously; that, again, Shade is the master-mind of Pale Fire.

With this conclusion reached and accepted, Pale Fire reveals yet two more levels of meaning. What appears at first sight and to the unsuspecting eye as a poem by John Shade and the presumptuous and unfortunate commentary by one Dr Charles Kinbote has bit by bit turned out to be the combination of two works by the same author, John Shade: one, his poetical autobiography, which contains facts, his own concrete and spiritual experiences, places and people he has known in his life, questions and problems that have occupied his mind; the other, a work of fiction, which contains imaginary events, but in which a number of his experiences reappear in a changed form and in new surroundings. The unity

that these two works constitute, the novel Pale Fire can now be looked upon as an image of the relation between the reality in which we live and art. These, it has become sufficiently clear, must not be confused one with the other. However, they cannot, and must not, be completely separated either. Factual reality is the source of experiences and inspirations, which the poet, storing, recombining, reshaping them, transforms into art. This is precisely what Shade is seen to be doing. Certain elements from his own life, actual experiences, spiritual experiences, thoughts and convictions, can be recognized in the commentary, all of them in new and surprising and striking surroundings and combinations. Being able to trace them, to compare their original, "real", and their new artistic shapes, to watch the poet selecting and transforming them, one is given more than an insight into the relation between reality and art: an insight is granted into the actual process of literary creation. Shade, within his fictional work, grants the same insight when he shows Kinbote relying on and transforming his (Kinbote's) "average reality" for his creation; and outside and above the whole work is, of course, Nabokov, who allows occasional glimpses of his own reality as it reappears and looks in new artistic shapes and surroundings. What one knows from Nabokov's theoretical remarks about literary creation and about the relation between reality and art is here shown in practice:



In the relationship between John Shade and Charles Kinbote, Nabokov has given us the best and truest allegorical portrait of "the literary process" that we have or are likely ever to get,<sup>84</sup>

and what applies to the relation between Shade and Kinbote (and Nabokov and Pale Fire) also applies to the relation of Nabokov to his other novels.<sup>85</sup>

To get to the central concern and meaning of Pale Fire under all these various and variously interrelated levels, one has to go still one step further. If one stopped here, the whole would seem to be a fascinating but somewhat futile undertaking illustrating and demonstrating the transformation of reality into art. It remains to be shown that this process of transformation is not just a clever game on the part of the artist. He does not create art just for the fun of it; he does not create art for art's sake.

The question that is central to Shade's poem and which moves him more than any other question is, as has been shown, whether man's fate depends on coincidence and chance, or whether, as he supposes, there is some power that imposes a pattern on it; whether the incidents, although they may seem fortuitous, are yet logically connected and have logical places in this pattern. Kinbote's commentary with its Zemblan fantasy has turned out to provide a clear answer to this question. Abstruse and highly fantastic though it is, it all the same solves Shade's problem: Kinbote "has structured in his fantastic commentary a story that mirrors Shade's philosophi-

cal notion of a symmetrical fate."<sup>86</sup>

Now that Shade has been established as the master-mind of Pale Fire, it becomes clear that it is not Kinbote who has developed this "working model" for Shade's theories, but Shade himself.

I feel I understand  
Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight (IV, 970-973).

The commentary, or rather, the whole critical apparatus, is the piece of art that grants him the understanding that he hopes and struggles for. He uses elements from the world he knows, and in his work of art and through the mediation of Kinbote, he transforms them, combines them and recombines them, thus creating a new world, in which the pattern which he seeks to detect becomes visible and comprehensible to him

The intertwined relationship of Gradus, Shade and Kinbote, and the correlated moves of Gradus' search for his prey with Shade's progress toward completion of Pale Fire are an imaginative recreation of that correlated "Pattern in the game", that "web of sense" emerging from "topsy-turvical coincidence" that Shade postulates in Canto III.<sup>87</sup>

Through the artistic and imaginative transformation of characters and events and incidents from his life, through giving some of his problems to Kinbote to reflect upon (319ff.), and through "discussing" some of them with his fictitious character (223ff.) Shade comes to terms with what moves him. In the new world and in the pattern which becomes visible in the workings of fate in this world he finds an explanation

even for his own death. It comes upon him so suddenly and unexpectedly that he cannot finish his poem.

The fact, however, that the poem remains unfinished is no proof that Shade "really" dies; it is rather a deliberate and ingenious move of Shade's which, within the framework of the pattern he has discovered and within the whole of Pale Fire, stresses the unexpectedness of death. One must assume that Jack Grey's shot was not fatal, but that Shade has at this crucial point changed things; that he has imagined the worst possible consequence that a dangerous incident might have had and that he has built his whole theory on the assumption that he might have died at that moment.

It may also be that Shade, like Mr. R. in Transparent Things, realizes that a pattern can only be fully understood when it is completed, which means, when applied to a person's life, that the pattern of this life can only be seen through after the person's death. It may be for this reason that Shade has staged, like Mr. R. a "dress rehearsal of death", going so far as even to invent someone to take care of his work after his death.

It appears at the end that Pale Fire stands in the same tradition as The Defence. Both novels demonstrate that "a coincidence is a controlled event", and that "the creative freedom of man is involved in the discovery of the pattern of his destiny." Beyond discovering the pattern, man can do nothing.

He cannot form his future "out of the chaos of possibilities."

Shade experiences the same sensation of harmony and of pleasure that first comes to Luzhin when he sees through the combination that forms the pattern of his fate. And, unlike Luzhin, Shade can accept what life brings him, for beyond experiencing aesthetic and artistic pleasure, he finds comfort in the hope evoked in him by the thought of some intelligent and purposeful plan behind the seeming chaos.

It is art that grants Shade his insights. Logical questioning and reasoning have not taken him very far: only as far as having some vague notion that all does not depend on coincidence. His art and his imagination have done for him what his reason and intellect could not do, and in this, again, Shade is as one with Nabokov:

Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism.<sup>88</sup>

TRANSPARENT THINGS

An old Nabokovian mechanism is again at work in Transparent Things<sup>1</sup>: a seemingly simple plot gives occasion for a very individual discussion of metaphysical problems. In this novel the quest centres on the reality of life, but it is pursued even further, and for a moment Nabokov (or, his spokesman Mr. R.) steps beyond the boundary put up by death. Besides, Nabokov evolves yet another method of uncovering the pattern of a person's life, that "true reality" of a life normally covered up by its seemingly chaotic "average reality". The problem of time is touched on, anticipating one of the central issues of Ada; and Nabokov establishes again that insights on all these points are given only to the artist. But he does not keep his insights to himself. He passes on as much of his knowledge as is possible, and opens up possibilities for the reader to follow his example. He offers his art as a refuge, as it were, and he takes the reader as far as the point where it becomes impossible even for an artist to communicate what he knows, because, as he admits himself, there is a kind of knowledge which cannot be put in words.

Luzhin in The Defence and Shade (and Kinbote) in Pale Fire are artists in their respective fields; Hugh Person in Transparent Things is decidedly not an artist. He works in various capacities in a great American publishing firm, as "research assistant, scout, associate editor, copy editor, proofreader, flatterer of our authors" (23), and he "steered into production" (24) the novels of the intriguing Mister R. All this

involves contacts with authors and their works, but his dealings with art are of a subordinate, purely subservient nature. He enjoys reading the proofs, it is true, in fact he reads them twice: "once for the defects of the type and once for the virtues of the text" (74); his spine, "(the true reader's main organ)" (75), collaborates with his eye, but there are limits beyond which he cannot follow his author's mind and genius. He is puzzled by exceptional words and phrases, questions some of R.'s stylistic eccentricities, and is "not sure he entirely approved of R.'s luxuriant and bastard style" (75). In his diary he boasts of some beautiful talents: "I can compose patches of poetry as strange and new as you are, or as anything a person may write three hundred years hence..." (27); "Using ink and aquarelle I can paint a lakescape of unsurpassed translucence with all the mountains of paradise reflected therein..." (28), but there is no evidence that he uses these gifts, or that he even possesses them.

Nor does Hugh distinguish himself in any other respect. He is neatly summed up as "a rather ordinary American" (67) by those who cannot understand why Armande should have married him, and his very name is indicative of his ordinariness. Although deriving from Peterson, as he insists (31), it hardly sounds like an individual or individualizing name. "Here's the person I want. Hullo, person!", the novel starts (1), and only by capitalizing the word does the author transform that indifferent "person" into the main character of his novel. Reversely he sometimes uses

the name as if it were simply the noun; only in print can the two be distinguished: "...we have to single out for this report only one Person" (44); "Hugh, a sentimental simpleton, and somehow not a very good Person..." (48).<sup>2</sup> His Christian name, mispronounced by Armande so that it sounds like "You" and used by the narrator in this form ("You swerved toward her, thinking she was alone" [45])<sup>3</sup> does not add to his individuality. His whole name gives the character no distinction beyond that of being some figure or "person" in a novel.

Person's story is easily told. It is concerned with his four visits to Switzerland. He first comes as a tourist together with his father, who dies quite suddenly; then, twice, on professional missions to see Mr R. His fourth visit is a kind of sentimental journey, Hugh returning for the sake of old memories and in an attempt to relive certain experiences of the past. On his second visit Hugh meets, and falls in love with, attractive, sophisticated, difficult, cool, and "dry-souled" (62) Armande. They get married and live in America, with Hugh's love for her growing "ever more tender" (78), in spite of her "unlovableness", her "vile temper" and "morbid amour-propre" (63-64). One night, in a dream, he strangles her and is for several years locked up in prisons and asylums, and subjected to Freudian analyses. The novel ends with his death in a hotel fire during his fourth visit to Switzerland.

It can be assumed on the ground of Nabokov's dis-

like of Freud and Freudian analyses that Hugh's story should not be read as the description of a "case" and that it should not be interpreted with the methods of psychoanalysis, even though R. Alter points out that

...Nabokov adopts the riskiest strategy of his continuing skirmish with "the Viennese witch doctor" by inventing a plot that seems to be a perfect paradigm of the Freudian theory of the unconscious.<sup>4</sup>

This plot, complete with a dream filled with obvious sexual images, seems to "mean" that Hugh, devoted to his wife in waking life in spite of the causes she gives him for resentment, and masking his feelings of aggression toward her from his conscious self, expresses them in the act of violence that he commits in the unconsciousness of a nightmare paroxysm.<sup>5</sup>

However, the parodistic tone in which the analyses are rendered, Hugh's own refusal to admit of any symbolic connection between his waking life and his dreams, and his pronouncement (behind which one can hear Nabokov's voice) that this is all "odious rot" (61) put an end to all attempts to interpret the novel along these lines.

One gets nearer its import if one concentrates not so much on the mere surface events, but analyses Hugh's quest and what becomes of it. "Person was prone to pilgrimages ..." (86). Ten years after his first visit to Trux with his father he returns to the place although it holds no pleasant memories for him, for the sake of "a sentimental thrill, half wonder and half remorse..." (9). His present "revisitation" (86) is easier to understand, since it is the memory of



Armande that has brought him back:

Practically all the dreams in which she had appeared to him after her death had been staged not in the settings of an American winter but in those of Swiss mountains and Italian lakes...

The desideratum was a moment of contact with her essential image in exactly remembered surroundings (94-95).

To fulfill this desideratum proves to be a vain attempt, partly because the surroundings have changed and partly because Hugh's memories are inexact. He finds his expectations and his memories disappointed and contradicted wherever he goes. The shutters of the hotel, which he remembers as green, are red, and the hall (although the author says that it "was no doubt as squalid as it had always been" [3]) seems to him unfamiliar. For a long time he cannot remember which room on the third floor he occupied on his former visit. Witt has changed. There are new roads and new houses, "crowding out the meager landmarks he remembered or thought he remembered" (87). He finds the surroundings of Villa Nastia unrecognizable. He makes a painful and exhausting effort to repeat one of the hikes on which he accompanied Armande in the past. He hopes that this will evoke her image with sufficient clarity and grant him what he is longing for. "Had she passed here, had her soles once imprinted their elaborate pattern in that clay?" (90) But there is a new road, there are a number of new climbs and cableways, and also, his memory lets him down again. Places and paths that he thought he remembered look unfamiliar. A stream and a broken bridge

that he expects to find in one particular place "were nowhere to be seen" (90). Separate scenes and places have combined and merged in his mind and formed the images of surroundings that have no counterparts in reality, and in the same way

Hugh's memory had bunched into one path the several wood trails and logging roads that led to the first difficult stage of the ascent...No wonder he soon lost his way (89).

Sadly he cannot even find the spot in the woods where for the first and only time Armande showed some signs of genuine emotion.

Hugh's experience suggests the conclusion that his memory is not a very efficient instrument in the kind of quest he is undertaking. Contrary to all his hopes and expectations it proves to be useless in his attempt to find access to the past. Where he hopes to catch one glimpse of it, to evoke and capture one of its cherished images, his memory plays tricks on him by getting his old impressions mixed up; it creates obstacles and blocks his view.

It is seen to fail in another, much more crucial respect. "A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter", the author says (2). So thin is this veneer (it is like a "tension film" [2]) that it is easy to break it. And behind (or under) this veneer (the "now" of things) their past can be perceived (and much more, as will be seen). For the artist, in fact, it may not be necessary to break the film deliberately. He needs only concentrate on an object to sink into its past and history without

a conscious effort. Things are transparent, the past shines through them (1).

The author illustrates what he means by picking a pencil as an example. It is implicit in this example that the "thin veneer of immediate reality" is formed by all the qualities a thing has at present. The pencil is described in great detail:

It was not a hexagonal beauty of Virginia juniper or African cedar, with the maker's name imprinted in silver foil, but a very plain, round, technically faceless old pencil of cheap pine, dyed a dingy lilac... the pencil has been worn down to two-thirds of its original length. The bare wood of its tapered end has darkened to plumbeous plum, thus merging in tint with the blunt tip of graphite whose blind gloss alone distinguishes it from the wood (6-7).

This, then, is the "now" of the pencil. In an "act of attention" (6) the author manages to see through what constitutes its present reality and to move about freely in space and time to trace its complete history. He does well to utter a warning to novices to be careful and not break the tension film if they wish to remain in the now, because they might fall through the surface unawares and get lost in the unforeseen maze that awaits them below.

The sense of being lost in a maze of interrelated matter seizes even the reader who, after all, has the author to guide him. For not only is one informed about what the pencil looked like at the various stages of its existence; not only is its history unfolded; the pencil also gives occasion for a description of how it was made and of what material went into it, allowing glimpses of the "fleecy fat-giver being

butchered, a shot of the butcher, a shot of the shepherd, a shot of the shepherd's father, a Mexican" (7). It is tempting to look at the people who produced it, and their histories might in turn provoke fascinating "side trip[s] of inspection" (7). Its history takes one away in space and back in time. One might go back as far as "Shakespeare's birth year when pencil lead was discovered" (7).

This looks like a logical development of the method pursued in Pale Fire, where it was shown how, over the period of a few weeks, the lives of Shade and Gradus followed two lines that gradually converged and finally met at the moment of Shade's death. The pattern evolved here is infinitely more complex because of the many lines that are at least tentatively followed, and the innumerable lines that might be followed and traced until they all met at the precise moment at which the pencil is being considered. If the method were consistently pursued, if one were really tempted, for example, to look into the histories of the butcher, the shepherd, the cutter; to follow the development of the power saw; to follow, as the author suggests, the "complicated fate of the shavings", which are by now "reduced to atoms" and widely dispersed; if, in short, one were to follow all the complicated and complex interrelationships that are visible on all sides, then the result would indeed be "panic catching its breath" (7).

To produce this result is not the author's intention. And, if one believes Nabokov, it is not his

intention either to convey the impression that "seeing through things is the professional function of a novelist", for "a novelist is, like all mortals, more fully at home on the surface of the present than in the ooze of the past."<sup>6</sup> What the example should do is to convey an idea of what a novelist is capable of. It demonstrates what intricate and complex patterns of interrelations between seemingly disparate things he can perceive behind the simplest and most inconspicuous object and its "thin veneer of immediate reality", which is by the common observer taken to be its only reality. An old pencil gives rise to speculations and grants insights that might in the end comprehend the whole "world that Jack built" (8).

The example shows by contrast why Hugh Person does not succeed in his quest. His problem is that "actuality and memory fail to coincide"<sup>7</sup>, and, one should add, that actuality gets between him and his memories. The present condition of the pencil, its shape, colour and length, is no obstacle for the artist in his pursuit of its history and everything that is even remotely connected with it. For Hugh, an ordinary man, the present condition of things is an obstacle with which he cannot cope. The new colours of shutters and houses (Villa Nastia is now painted blue), the fact that there are new houses and roads changing the surroundings, all those thin veneers through which the artist can see easily, combine and seem to form a solid opaque wall which screens the past from his

sight and which his mind cannot penetrate. The present condition of things, their immediate reality, is the only reality he perceives. Their former appearance and reality, and even his own memories of them, are lost to him.

Just as with things, Hugh registers only the most obvious and superficial thin veneer of his own life, namely its concrete events and incidents. He cannot see through them, and whatever significance they might have remains concealed from him. When he first comes to Witt, he strolls about the place, and among the exhibits in a souvenir store notices "a wooden plate with a central white cross surrounded by all twenty-two cantons" and wonders whether he should buy it for his college roommate. "Hugh, too, was twenty-two and had always been harrowed by coincident symbols", the author comments (13). But of course this is one of those superficial and very obvious coincidences which fit into the "thin veneer of immediate reality". He does not see the symbolic coincidences of his own life, or, to be precise, he is not aware of their symbolic significance. It is left to the author to reveal it by making Hugh's life transparent.

To do this, he does not follow the complicated method described above. There are a few instances when he seems tempted to do so, or at least hints that he might do so if he wished, but he checks himself each time and returns to Hugh because he is his main concern. Nabokov adopts a method which he hints at in his own autobiographical works. "To describe the

past with utmost precision and to discover in it extraordinary outlines: namely, the development and repetition of hidden themes in the midst of one's overt destiny" is the autobiographical aim which he describes in Drugiye Berega.<sup>8</sup> He specifies this when he relates two curiously linked incidents in Speak, Memory. When he was a little boy, a friend of the family, General Kuropatkin, once came to his parents' house and amused him by doing some tricks with a handful of matches. They were interrupted: the general was rushed off to take command in Russia's war against Japan. Fifteen years later Nabokov's father, fleeing from "Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg" was asked for a light by an old man in whom he presently recognized this same old friend. Nabokov sees this second scene as a sequel to the one at home and is fascinated by the design: "The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography."<sup>9</sup>

This method is transferred to the "translucing" (32) of Hugh's life, and it yields surprising results. The author finds in it a rather curious doubling of names and shuttlecocks and old dogs, and some strange resemblances, but these do not yield any hidden meaning. They seem to be rather of the same insignificant nature as the repetitions and doublings to which Hermann in Despair attaches so much importance and on which he bases his whole construction of a "new life harmony". The author in Transparent Things finds something more significant in Hugh Person's life,

namely, a series of events and incidents in which certain central elements keep recurring and all of which anticipate, or at least hint at, Hugh's death in the fire, which is, in turn, only the climax of the series. Taken together, they form a very clear thematic design.

The first hint is dropped in connection with one of R.'s novels, in which "there's a rather dramatic scene in a Riviera villa, when the little girl...sets her new dollhouse on fire and the whole villa burns down" (26). "It is all rather symbolic, in the grand manner", Hugh comments innocently and of course quite unaware of the implication of his words (26). Armande gets the title of this same novel wrong and twists it into The Burning Windows (26), and these actually figure in the cover design (25,28). Hugh and Julia Moore have to leave a theatre because of a "brisk fire" (35). Then comes the rehearsal of an escape from the hotel, on which Armande insists because she has just watched a fire on T.V. A dream, throwing in a street-walker from the past, some glaciers, and a "Doppler shift" (touched off by "an electric sign, DOPPLER", which "shifted to violet" [77]) gathers elements from these earlier impressions and experiences into a new combination: spurting flames, a house on fire, and a girl called Giulia Romeo ("Romeo" means "pilgrim" and Hugh has been seen to be one), whom Hugh feels he must save. And while dreaming, he strangles Armande. The theme is repeated just before his death, when the hotel to which he wishes to move is closed down because of repairs after a fire (98).



Hugh Person ignores a vague feeling that tells him that he had better leave Witt there and then, and that very night dies in the flames when his own hotel burns down.

Again, then, as in The Defence and Pale Fire it appears that life is not simply a series of unrelated and haphazard coincidences. A number of thematically linked incidents and moments emerge from Hugh's life and form a very clear design, Shade's "web of sense", which suggests that some intelligent power (or powers) must be at work, planning, ordering and organizing.

"Everyone can sort out convenient patterns of related themes in the past development of his life", Nabokov says in an interview<sup>10</sup>, but it appears in Transparent Things that this is not really something that "everyone" can do. Hugh has been seen to fail, and the reason is that he is not an artist. With his vision limited to the surface of things, to the immediately perceptible reality in which he lives, and to the surface events of his life, such repetitions as the author has uncovered, escape him and he is quite unaware of the mysterious connections which exist between separate incidents, and quite incapable of interpreting their meaning. It takes an artistic mind to see through the mere surface of a life, to see the design shining through it and to uncover and recreate it through the medium of art. Nabokov admits as much in Speak, Memory. Talking of his own life he says that it has "a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is

made to shine through life's foolscap."<sup>11</sup>

With Hugh perceiving only a tiny fraction of reality and even of his own life, he might even now be said to justify the author's "need for quotation marks" (93) round "reality"; something else definitely establishes the need for them. If Person is remarkable in any one respect it is because of the way in which his conscious life and his dreams interfere with each other to such an extent that he cannot distinguish between them. This begins in his youth when he gets out of bed in the middle of the night and behaves as if fully conscious, and it leads to his fight with the bedside table. He is later in life troubled by what he calls dream anguish and recurrent nightmares. In a dream inspired by recollections of real impressions and incidents he strangles Armande; it is a recurring dream of Armande that has made him come back to Switzerland.<sup>12</sup> He experiences even the moment of death in dream pictures.

If all this is frightening, there is also a moment at which the confusion is conducive to happiness. When, as a child, Hugh got up in the middle of the night in his "spectral fits" and walked about the house, he would "[circumvent] all obstacles in his magic sleep" (20): unconsciously, in his dreams, he would avoid very real things, such as wet towels and basins with water, which his parents had placed at strategic points. Likewise, in his sleep and dream at the hotel, his mind circumvents all the obstacles that his memory has created, and it also penetrates

the wall which in his waking life blocks his view into the past and prevents him from succeeding in his conscious quest. The miracle happens:

Person...was on the imagined brink  
of imagined bliss when Armande's  
footfalls approached... (102).

In other words, his dream is on the point of granting him what real life has withheld: "...a moment of contact with [Armande's] essential image in exactly remembered surroundings."

Yet, this does not describe quite accurately what is happening at that moment, and the author, striving for the utmost precision, realizes this. The distinction between dream and reality again does not hold for Hugh. Once more they are seen to merge, or rather, his dream assumes for him the appearance of reality, making the qualifying epithet superfluous and "striking out both 'imagined' in the proof's margin" (102): He was on the brink of bliss when Armande's footfalls approached, and he experiences elation "at [the] moment of her...dawning through the limpid door of his room..." (102). In Hugh's case, then, no neat distinction seems possible between dream and reality. How can his experiences be defined as mere "dreams" if, by penetrating the outward veneer of reality, they allow him glimpses of what his waking mind cannot uncover for him, and thereby enrich his picture of reality? How, too, can they be called mere "dreams" if they are for him as "real" as anything he experiences in waking life? On the other hand, his dreams do not represent and reproduce reality faithfully but

rearrange the elements that constitute it. "All dreams are anagrams of diurnal reality" (80), and the dream during which he strangles Armande is perhaps the best example of this. The author may concede by means of a stylistic twist that Hugh is experiencing real and not just imagined bliss at the crucial moment before his death, but he cannot go so far as to grant to that moment of unique and subjective "reality" the full and general meaning that the word `r e a l i t y` has without quotation marks.

Hugh's example has implications that reach far beyond his individual case. It is an example that stands for many, one might even say that it reflects a problem that concerns all men. It seems that nobody can be certain of the reality of anything, for Hugh's case suggests that whenever we take something for a real experience, it might be only a dream. In fact, what we take for real life, might be no more than a whole series of somewhat logically connected dreams.

If men have ever worried about this, they are not always actively aware of it, or rather, they have learnt to live with it: "Men have learned to live with a black burden, a huge aching hump: the supposition that 'reality' may be only a 'dream'" (93). Once more, Nabokov has demonstrated the general and metaphysical need for quotation marks round "reality"; and he takes the speculation even a step further:

How much more dreadful it would be if the very awareness of your being aware of reality's dreamlike nature were also a dream, a built-in hallucination! (93),

thus opening the view into an abyss of uncertainty in which the human mind might be helplessly and hopelessly lost if he did not in the very next sentence advance the suggestion that there is a way out of the dilemma:

One should bear in mind...that there is no mirage without a vanishing point, just as there is no lake without a closed circle of reliable land (93).

Throughout the novel the author has proved that he is aware of immense fields of reality which Hugh does not perceive; that he knows not only the surface reality of things, but all the layers behind it, and that he can also see and understand the underlying design of a man's life. He has also proved that he is able to define the relation between dreams and reality. He knows how dreams originate and what they are made of; he can trace all the elements that go into them. He can decipher the anagrams of dreams and twist the anagrams back into the original words. He can determine the exact boundaries between reality and dreams. And he is so sure of his ground that he can determine, and by means of a stylistic device pin down, the precise moment at which Hugh's dream ceases to be a mere dream and, at least for Hugh, becomes "reality"; this, he feels, is a triumph of art:

Person, this person, was on the imagined brink of imagined bliss when Armande's footfalls approached - striking out both 'imagined' in the proof's margin...This is where the orgasm of art courses through the whole spine with incomparably more force than sexual ecstasy or metaphysical panic (102).

As in other novels by Nabokov, The Real Life of

Sebastian Knight, for example, and Pale Fire, where the artist was seen to be capable of insights that the ordinary man does not have, the "closed circle of reliable land" is formed by art, and the novel the reader is holding in his hands is another demonstration and proof of this. It lays open the failings of the ordinary human mind but suggests ways of overcoming them. It poses questions and pursues them to a point where they seem unanswerable, but it has the answer ready and offers solutions where the ordinary mind might be overcome by doubts. The author creates a moment of the utmost uncertainty, but holds out a helping hand and offers insights that restore certainty. After almost pushing the reader over the brink of an abyss, he helps him regain the circle of reliable land.

It might be objected to all this that the whole is after all something invented, a novel, in which the author figures prominently as an omniscient person. The so-called insights might be considered as no more than the evidence of his omniscience, the result of a convention, and thus parts of his invention.

The author's omniscience is of course apparent from the first. He knows all about Hugh, about his past, his thoughts, memories and dreams. He knows where Hugh's memories are erroneous and he corrects them. He can explain and account for incidents that have only a very loose connection, or none at all, with Person's story. He comments on irrelevant matters just to show that he knows everything (13,25). At cer-

tain moments he positively flaunts his omniscience. He explicitly draws the reader's attention to his own presence and his own doings and allows glimpses of his narrative tricks and techniques: "Now we have to bring into focus the main street of Witt...", he opens one chapter and then proceeds to do just that (44). He leaves no doubt that he is the one to decide what is interesting and worth noting (42).

The most conspicuous instances are those in which he frankly manipulates his main character. He selects the main character in the first sentence of the novel and gives him no chance to escape: "Here's the person I want" (1). At another moment he decides that Hugh should not recognize a certain letter because he might feel hurt if he did (38), and later on he even admits that it might not be impossible for him to influence Hugh so as to induce him to take or avoid a certain course of action (92).

As so often before, then, Nabokov quite candidly exposes what he is telling as a piece of art and allows the reader many insights into the devices of his craft. Transparent Things is certainly in part what Herbert Grabes sees in it: "...ein Buch über das Verhältnis des 'allwissenden' Autors zu seinen Geschöpfen."<sup>13</sup>

But then Hugh's story could not have been invented and written if the author had not had the gifts and insights that he has been seen to have. The piece of art explains and exposes the gifts that made its creation possible, or, to put it in the inverted manner

suitable to this novel: the author's omniscience and the creation of the piece of art were only possible through the insights that this very piece of art uncovers. This time, then, beyond exposing his technical skills, the author also allows glimpses of the wisdom that makes creation possible. The two constituents of the creative power shine through the book and the book becomes one of the author's transparent things.

All his life...our Person had experienced the curious sensation...of there existing behind him - at his shoulder, as it were - a larger, incredibly wiser, calmer and stronger stranger, morally better than he. This was, in fact, his main 'umbral companion'... (98),

and he is at one point

..conscious of something or somebody warning him that he should leave Witt there and then for Verona, Florence, Rome, Taormina, if Stresa was out (98-99).

This mysterious "umbral companion" is of course the omniscient author who always accompanies his invented character and admits that it is difficult to abstain from at least attempting to "[steer] a favorite in the best direction" (92). However, he knows he must be careful because he might cause injury to others:

The most we can do...is to act as a breath of wind and to apply the lightest, the most indirect pressure such as trying to induce a dream that we hope our favorite will recall as prophetic if a likely event does actually happen (92).

He leaves the decision to Hugh, though. Hugh does not heed his shadow and his warning. He stays at Witt, he pursues his quest, he moves to another room, and that very night dies in the fire.



We thought that he had in him a few years of animal pleasure..., but after all it was for him to decide, for him to die, if he wished (99).

This is surprising in view of the fact that it might reasonably be expected of an omniscient author that he should have absolute power over his created characters, that he could at any chosen moment influence their actions, make them follow the course of action that seemed best to him or make them avoid another one, that he could, in short, manipulate and determine their destinies. It seems unusual to allow them the liberty that Hugh is seen to enjoy. The author denies that he has the right to exert any such direct interference: this "does not enter our scope of activity" (92).

Behind this stands another of Nabokov's convictions, which concerns the third of the "three tenses". From the first he makes it quite clear that he can only be concerned with the past: "Transparent things, through which the past shines!" (1) Their past, shining through the present, lies open to him, but he knows nothing about their future. In fact he feels that the word *f u t u r e* is as much in need of quotation marks as "reality" and "dream". Like Van Veen, in Ada, he denies to the future any concrete reality: "The future is but a figure of speech, a specter of thought" (1).

This being so, it is impossible to make any predictions about the future of a person's life and destiny. It is neither "a chain of predeterminate links", nor

is it a predictable "cause-and-effect sequence" (92). Something unforeseen can happen at any moment and interrupt a development that seemed unavoidable or inescapable. There may be a miraculous last-minute rescue "even if the lunette has actually closed around your neck, and the cretinous crowd holds its breath" (92). To put it in terms of something that has already been discussed: looking back into the past, it is possible to distinguish in a person's life some underlying pattern or "thematic design". On the crucial day at the hotel this design in Hugh's life has already become so prominent that the author is aware of it and, being an artist, has a premonition of how it might be completed. He ventures to induce in Hugh a vague feeling of impending danger. But he can do no more. The future being the abstraction it is for him, he cannot foresee the pattern with any certainty. The development he foresees may be likely, but it is "chimeric" (92).

This thought, pursued to its logical conclusion, means no less than that the design of a person's life can really be seen through only when the last little section has been added to the mosaic, that is, after the person's death. It is only then that anything valid can be said about that person's life, and that any understanding of it is possible. It is only then that the significance of its events becomes clear, that the significance attached to some diminishes and that others become prominent and are seen to have been decisive.

The thought throws more light on, for example, The Defence because it helps one understand Luzhin's failure to take any influence on his future, although his artistic mind has penetrated the mystery of the pattern that has shaped his past. And it also throws light on Pale Fire, for it explains why Shade has to put on a "dress rehearsal of death". Only by assuming for a moment that his life has come to an end can he look back on it as an outsider would after his death, and only then can he perceive the finished design, evaluate past events, or learn something about himself.

So far the presence of Mr. R. has not been accounted for; nor the fact that so much space and comment is devoted to his person and his works. It emerges from the comments that, at least as an artist, he is very similar to Nabokov, so much so that critics tend to see in him an ironic impersonation of the author: "R is the latest of the unreliable, self-mocking fictional silhouettes of himself Nabokov has written", says Martha Duffy<sup>14</sup>, and R. Alter supports this view<sup>15</sup>. Nabokov continues his mockery outside the novel, in the interview which has already been quoted<sup>16</sup>. He says about critics who have come to this conclusion that "They were led to that notion by mere flippancy of thought because, I suppose, both writers are naturalized U.S. citizens and both happen, or happened, to live in Switzerland."<sup>17</sup> Two factors are supposed to prove his point, namely: "When Transparent Things

starts, Mr. R. is already dead and his last letter has been filed away..."<sup>18</sup>, and also: "...the surviving writer [is] an incomparably better artist than Mr. R. ..." <sup>19</sup>

It seems presumptuous to contradict Nabokov's own evidence about his own novel, however, the fact remains that the descriptions of R.'s works: "surrealistic novels of the poetic sort" (26), which are characterized by "a streak of nasty inventiveness" (30), and of his style, which teems with strange and beautiful words and is "diabolically evocative" (75), could well be applied to Nabokov's own works. His views on art (69-70) also correspond closely to those of Nabokov. His novels, and even their titles, "give us mirror-glimpses of specific characters and events in Transparent Things." <sup>20</sup> In one of them there even appears "an incidental character Adam von Librikov" (75) which "sly scramble" (75) conceals of course Vladimir Nabokov, whose habit it is to make a brief appearance in his own novels. There is finally John Updike's comment, namely, that "R" [is] a mirroring of Russian Я, ya, meaning 'I'." <sup>21</sup>

It is possible to reconcile the two contradictory statements by qualifying the critics' findings. Perhaps one should not see R. as a fictional self of Nabokov, but rather as one of his favourite, responsible characters to whom he lends some of his own characteristics and artistic qualities, just as he has given some of them to Sebastian Knight and Shade, and just as Shade, in turn, has given some of his to Kinbote.

That Nabokov does consider R. as one of his more responsible, even though "rather grotesque"<sup>22</sup> characters can be deduced from the fact that possibly the whole novel is to be considered as R.'s work. Martha Duffy comes to this conclusion: "...it is broadly hinted that Hugh may exist only as a creature of R's pen"<sup>23</sup>, and Nabokov's own somewhat enigmatic statements about Transparent Things seem to imply as much. Asked about the identity of the "I" and the "we" on the first page, he replies that "The solution...is so simple that one is almost embarrassed to furnish it", and he then gives a number of comments all of which point to Mr. R.<sup>24</sup> The deepest thoughts of the book certainly are expressed through the medium of R.

Both R. and Hugh Person are dead at the end of the novel (according to Nabokov R. is already dead when it begins). Death is that part of the future which is the most unpredictable and the most chimeric. It is one of those "eternities of darkness" on both sides of our lives which are "caused...by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness."<sup>25</sup> While the artist can see through the present and gain a clear view of the past, and while he can even "steal into realms that existed before I was conceived"<sup>26</sup>, he cannot penetrate the wall that conceals the darkness ahead of him. That wall is equally opaque for Hugh and for R.; the artist knows no more than the ordinary man, but both have visions of death and for once their visions seem to coincide. Hugh, in his dreams, tries in vain "to stop

or divert a trickle of grain or fine gravel from a rift in the texture of space"; he is "hampered...by... confused heaps and hollows, brittle debris and collapsing colossuses", and finally "blocked by masses of rubbish, and that was death" (60). He also suffers from "'avalanche' nightmares at the rush of awakening" bringing along with them a total confusion of words and images and mental concepts (60).

Despite the injections, R. feels the pain (the first terrible and undeniable sign of impending death)

...always present behind the wall of my flesh like the muffled thunder of a permanent avalanche which obliterates there, beyond me, all the structures of my imagination, all the landmarks of my conscious self (84).

To both their minds death presents itself in images of destruction and chaos, matter descending upon them like an avalanche and burying them. It seems, then, that what R. is experiencing in full consciousness corresponds exactly to Hugh's dream visions. Yet: Hugh is "finally blocked by masses of rubbish, and that was death." In other words, his dreams represent death to him as a purely physical thing, and it is physical fear only that he experiences: "the crude anguish of physical death" (104). All the deaths in the novel, onstage and off, seem to justify him, for they dispose of the characters in crude enough ways. "...Person Senior...felt a roaring redness fill his head. He died before reaching the floor, as if falling from some great height..." (14-15). Another girl, besides Armande, gets strangled - in an aside, as it were,

which strangely prefigures Armande's and Hugh's story (13); a former lover of Armande's is buried under snow (96), people die in hospitals (32,68) and in fires, and a hideous physical death also expects R. But in connection with his end another dimension of death is uncovered, and significantly it is R., the artist himself, who reveals it.

Hugh is less frightened of his "'avalanche' nightmares" than of his other dreams, even though they "perhaps [imperil] a person's brain to an even greater extent" (60). This aspect is for R. the most poignant thing about death. Physical destruction is for him of minor significance. He can speak scoffingly about the operation he has just undergone, and about his disease. What he objects to is the breakdown of his mental powers, the obliteration of "all the structures of my imagination" (84), the destruction of his consciousness and his identity: of "all the landmarks of my conscious self" (84).

It seems ironic that the mind should experience its greatest triumph only on the point of death and just before it is annihilated. Not Hugh's mind: his perception remains limited to the immediate present and commits errors to the end. When he dies in the flames and under "crumbling partitions of plaster and wood" (his dream images have again come true), "one of his last wrong ideas was that those [human cries] were the shouts of people anxious to help him, and not the howls of fellow men" (104).

R.'s mind achieves at the moment of death

the highest degree of lucidity and wisdom. It was said above that a man's life becomes transparent at the moment of death; its incidents and events assume their correct proportions and can be evaluated. At the moment of R.'s death infinitely more than his own life lies open to his mind. His own past and past sentiments are present to him, but also the sentiments of all men, their philosophies and religions, "the entire solar system" (84), and they all fall into place and he knows more about them than he ever has. All of a sudden he sees their proportions change. What has seemed humble and negligible all along assumes "gigantic proportions" (84), and other things dwindle, and their "gigantic proportions" diminish until "the entire solar system is but a reflection in the crystal of my (or your) wrist watch" (84). As he sees the proportions of things change, and as humble and trivial things assume the same significance as "the shining giants of our brain"<sup>27</sup>, his experience more and more resembles that of the dying man in Sebastian Knight's

The Doubtful Asphodel:

And as the meaning of all things shone through their shapes, many ideas and events which had seemed of the utmost importance dwindled not to insignificance, for nothing could be insignificant now, but to the same size which other ideas and events, once denied any importance, now attained<sup>28</sup>

R.'s knowledge far surpasses what he can convey in words. He knows that if he could put it all down in a book and explain his "total rejection of all religions ever dreamt up by man and [his] total composure in the face of total death...that book would



become no doubt a new bible and its author the founder of a new creed" (84). But this book cannot be written, "not merely because a dying man cannot write books but because that particular one would never express in one flash what can only be understood immediately" (84). This "immediate" understanding can be taken to be of the same kind as that which was discussed in connection with The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. It is not some understanding that stands at the end of a long and deliberate effort of the intellect but comes unsummoned, unexpectedly, and in a flash. It is comprehensive, it unites disparate things, it discloses their connection and the harmony they form; it has all the qualities of a mystical insight, and that is something which cannot be put in words. Words can express and convey rational and intellectual ideas or concepts, but they are insufficient for the expression of the intuitive knowledge gained in a mystical experience. R. dies taking his knowledge and his wisdom along with him.

R. dies. And yet, if Nabokov's statements are to be trusted (and various elements in the novel confirm what he says) Transparent Things is one of R.'s novels. We must, then, see in R. yet another artist (after Shade) who goes through what Mr. Silbermann in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight called a dress rehearsal of death. But R. goes even a step farther than Shade does. For once, and although he knows that the future is chimeric and that death is the most chimeric part of it, he looks forward instead of back.

Shade does not venture to make any statement about the nature of death. Sebastian Knight says in The Doubtful Asphodel

... that only one half of the notion of death can be said really to exist: this side of the question - the wrench, the parting, the quay of life gently moving away aflutter with handkerchiefs...<sup>29</sup>

The other half remains unknown: "The asphodel on the other shore is as doubtful as ever."<sup>30</sup>

R. and with him Nabokov, who is, after all the master mind of the novel and R.'s creator, for once steps beyond the boundaries which even the artist must normally respect, and tries to catch a glimpse of what there is behind the wall that conceals the future. And at the end R. qualifies his earlier statement about what he thinks death means: it is not simply a crude physical annihilation of the human mind. He eventually comes to the conclusion that death actually involves the human mind in perhaps the most difficult activity it has ever yet had to perform:

This is, I believe, it: not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental maneuver needed to pass from one state of being to another (104).

Nabokov calls Transparent Things "... a beyond-the-cypress inquiry into a tangle of random destinies"<sup>31</sup>, and for a moment R. does take the reader to "the other shore": "On the threshold of my novel", Nabokov says,

... Hugh Person is welcomed by a ghost - by his dead father, perhaps, or dead wife; more probably by the late Monsieur Kronig, former director of the Ascot Hotel; still<sup>32</sup> more probably by Mr. R.'s phantom.

It probably is Mr. R.'s phantom, greeting Hugh just as the living R. greeted him in life: "Hullo, p(P)erson!" (1,30), soothing and reassuring bewildered Hugh who has only just gone through the incomparable manoeuvre: "Easy, you know, does it, son" (104), and thus finishing the novel on an optimistic note by implying that death is not the end of everything.

R., it has been seen, shares a lot of qualities with Nabokov, and Nabokov is of course the master-mind and presiding genius of the novel, even though he refuses to be identified with R. There is a sly and very inconspicuous hint which also establishes the identity of Hugh Person. His surname, as was said above, is so neutral as to apply to anyone, and the same can be said of "Hugh" when pronounced by Armande, and used by the author as "You". It is only two thirds through the novel that the author discloses whom precisely he has had in mind all along: "Our Person, our reader..." (75).

Nabokov has at the end gone a long way towards helping his reader overcome the limitations in which his (our reader's, any person's) mind might be caught. He has made him aware of these limitations, he has broken the "thin veneer of immediate reality" and has shown what vast fields of reality can be found behind it, and he has offered a refuge in art, that "closed circle of reliable land". He has tentatively broken the wall that conceals the future and death and has gone so far even as to steal a glimpse of "the other shore". But there is one point beyond which he cannot

go, and one kind of knowledge which he cannot convey. The insights that one would expect were R. to write the book of which he talks before his fictional death must be of the kind Nabokov has in mind when he says of himself:

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>33</sup>

D E S P A I R

Despair<sup>1</sup>, though written long before The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Pale Fire and Transparent Things, can be better understood in the light of these novels. To understand it, it is also helpful to remember two novels written before it, namely, The Eye and The Defence, for Hermann, the hero of Despair, is seen to fail as badly as their heroes, in fact, his problems and his subsequent failures combine those of Smurov and Luzhin.

Ostensibly Despair tells the story of one Hermann Karlovich, a chocolate manufacturer who faces bankruptcy. On a business trip to Prague he meets a tramp, Felix Wohlfahrt, in whom he thinks he recognizes his perfect double. After careful preparations he executes a plan which, he claims, originated in all its details the moment he laid eye on Felix: he induces Felix to exchange clothes with him and then murders him, in order to change places with him, to have his wife collect the insurance money and join her after some time for a cosy and peaceful life. The ingenious plan miscarries for the simple reason that the two men are really not at all alike. Not for a single moment does anyone take the murdered Felix for Hermann. The victim's identity is established as well as that of the murderer, and even while Hermann is sitting writing his last page, the police come for him.

This "pleasing plot"<sup>2</sup> is narrated by Hermann himself, and he turns it into something quite extraordi-

nary and complicated by making not only the words look "self-conscious", which he avowedly likes to do (56), but the sentences, the structure, and the contents as well. At the first reading, when the "real" story remains rather obscure, his mannerisms of speech and style seem to unite simply to produce an overall comic effect. At hardly any one point does he refrain from commenting on the accepted stylistic conventions, which he has to follow himself to a certain degree, and on the conventional narrative patterns which he cannot quite avoid either: he exposes them, rejects them, sneers at them, parodies them. He intrudes into his narrative continually. "Intrusions discussing the book itself or its frailties can range from a 'meanwhile' or explicit digression to the most elaborate burlesque of the technique of other authors."<sup>3</sup> Everything that this statement allows of can be found in Hermann's tale. There are his comments on his own choice of individual words, on his imagery, on his puns, some of them pleased and satisfied, some of them more critical.<sup>4</sup> There are his comments, mostly appreciative, on individual sentences or whole passages<sup>5</sup>, and, once, his somewhat puzzled reaction to something he has just written.<sup>6</sup> Not only are there interruptions of the flow of the narrative throughout the book, and digressions; Hermann explicitly draws the reader's attention to them as if they were not quite conspicuous enough, and explains why they are there.<sup>7</sup> His comments on conventional narrative devices range from one on the habit that "indiscriminate novel-writers have of

rendering a certain sound thus: 'H'm'" (115) to a long discussion of the epistolic form of narration (70) and to the spectacular parody of the opening of a chapter. In fact he offers three openings (Ch. III) all following well established patterns, but all of which he rejects because of the weaknesses he sees in them; and from there he unceremoniously slips back into his narrative without really having opened his chapter at all. He takes the same liberties with the end of his tale, if indeed it can be said to have an end. He toys with no less than four possible endings that occur to him at various stages (the first before he has even decided on a title)<sup>8</sup> and which are born of different moods. One of them, although it has almost a touch of probability about it, is no more than an evil dream<sup>9</sup>, two are just fleeting thoughts, the results of his anxiety<sup>10</sup>; one, a lengthy and elaborate one, he wickedly declares to be a parody of Turgenev and Dostoievsky (188-190) and thus makes clear that it is not to be taken seriously either. (It is not the only parody of Dostoievsky, by the way).<sup>11</sup> At the end, the reader is left with the rather odd picture of Hermann making a speech from his window: "Frenchmen! This is a rehearsal. Hold those policemen" (222) and is left to wonder what really happens to Hermann and the others. From time to time he makes mistakes. He gets the facts wrong. Various experiences blend, and what belongs to one gets mixed up in his account of another one, so that the time sequence is often overthrown. He does not erase the faulty passages because, he says, that

would be "wicked" (47), but he corrects them, offers explanations, and sometimes even an apology.<sup>12</sup> His very addresses to the reader, artificial in themselves, become the objects of his comments, so that their artificiality is heightened.<sup>13</sup>

This list could be continued, but the examples may suffice to illustrate that Hermann's devices all work together to produce something very much like the effect produced by a Shandian commentary. One wonders at the extraordinary kind of novel one is reading. One wonders why an action that is to all appearances so simple and the chronology of which is so straightforward and logical, should in its telling become such a perfect jumble of incoherent odds and bits. It is through the incongruity between the apparent simplicity of what is told and the complex and almost chaotic way in which it is told, as much as through the parodies of literary conventions, that a comic effect is achieved.<sup>14</sup>

The comedy is effective only so long as the surface pattern is seen separately from the contents of the story. When seen in connection with it, the analysis tells quite a different tale, and what seems at first serenely comic, then turns out to have a grim import at its heels.

Hermann makes a remark that gives a clue to the mystery of his muddled style and at the same time throws some light on the story under the confusing surface:



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 (29).

"I have grown...used to...being both painter and model" says in fact that Hermann has got used to being two persons at once, so to speak, somewhat like Smurov in The Eye, one of his selves observing what the other is doing. While explaining that under this constant supervision his spontaneity is lost, his remark also establishes a link to the story he is telling about himself and takes one right to its central concern.

The central concern is Hermann's obsession with the idea that he has a double. Just how much of the story that revolves round this double is based on fact never becomes clear. There are a great many questions none of which can be satisfactorily answered at the end. Is there such a person as Felix? If Hermann meets him, does he really write to him? Does he really see him again? Does he really murder him? Or is it their first meeting that starts off Hermann's imagination and makes him invent the rest? There are some indications that this might be the case. There is one point at which Hermann is seen practically creating Felix:

...it was not at once that I glanced at his face; I started working from his feet upward, as one sees on the screen when the cameraman is trying to be tantalizing. First came big, dusty shoes, thick socks sloppy about the ankles, then shiny blue trousers...and a hand holding a crust of dry bread. Then a blue coat over a dark-grey sweater. Still higher the soft collar that I knew...There I stopped. Should I leave him headless or go on building him? (83-84)

The description he gives of Tarnitz reads as if he

was, again, creating the place, constructing it of "certain refuse particles of my past" (80), very obviously and awkwardly using the method that Shade has been seen to use so subtly. And another point which seems to settle the matter is of course Orlovius' remark that Hermann used to write letters to himself (201).

However, it is only possible to look into the causes of the confusion, not, to clear it up, for Hermann is perhaps the most unreliable in the gallery of Nabokov's unreliable narrators and makes it impossible for the reader to decide how much of Hermann's story is based on fact and how much of it is pure invention. While writing about him one constantly finds oneself reduced to using arguments that stand on extremely shaky ground, for one never knows which part of his story can be relied upon and used as a valid argument and which part it would be better to avoid.

Hermann is quite outspoken about two of his qualities that make him so doubtful a narrator: his tendency to tell lies and his habit of composing fiction. Even as a child, he says, "I lied as a nightingale sings" (55), and to his wife he tells "such a heap of lies" (36) that he finds it impossible to remember them all. There are a good many examples of this "essential trait" of his throughout the book. However, he regards it not so much as a weakness of character, but as an expression of an artist's gift to be proud of. He has always felt that there is in him "a poet, an author" (113), and for him his lies take on the

dimensions of artistic creation, of fiction. Even his childish lies he glorifies when looking back on his childhood: He did not just tell lies as a child, he composed "elaborate stories" which even then gave him - a mere boy - the illusion that he was creating a "new life-harmony" (55).

All this gives one quite sufficient reason to doubt him on many occasions, and by and by it becomes difficult to ever accept what he says as plain fact. It seems indeed to be very likely that the story one is concerned with is one of his inspired lies. It seems all the more likely because a full-length example that Hermann gives of his literary exercises and which he describes as "a sort of subconscious training...in view of my present tussle with this harrassing tale" (116) is significantly a story about doubles (117-118).

His very first paragraph seems to indicate no less than that his story is an invented one. He quotes fragments of an introduction to his tale, which he has discarded, but which, in this rather roundabout fashion, he smuggles in after all:

If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness...So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale. Further, I should have drawn the reader's attention to the fact that had I lacked that power, that ability, et cetera, not only should I have refrained from describing certain recent events, but there would have been nothing to describe, for, gentle reader, nothing at all would have happened...The gift of penetrating life's devices, an innate disposition toward the constant exercise of the creative faculty could alone have enabled me... (13).

"Silly, perhaps, but at least clear", he comments on this (13). It is really not at all clear at this point. It is only in connection with what one learns later about Hermann's creative ambition that it becomes somewhat clearer. He implies in this passage that it is his power to write, his ability to express ideas vividly which is the source of all the recent events. Without his creative faculties "nothing at all would have happened", and this seems to say quite clearly that nothing at all has happened.

Yet, in spite of this remark, Hermann is assertive throughout about the truth of what he is telling. But Hermann is mad. Many passages, quite apart from his stylistic idiosyncrasies, indicate a confused state of mind: "My hands tremble, I want to shriek or to smash something with a bang..." (14), "I have been sitting in a queer state of exhaustion, now listening to the rushing and crashing of the wind...then starting up all aquiver..." (15); "I was not much out of doors: it frightened me, that thunder in my head..." (192); and though, ostensibly, it is at some hotel in France that he is writing his tale and, later, in some rented room in a little French village, his attention fails at some points and the mention of "long white passages" where the doctor "would buttonhole me" (193), and his mention of the "madhouse" (83) give away the fact that he is locked up in an asylum.

It appears from a great many things that his grasp of reality has for a long time been rather uncertain, that at some point he lost it altogether, and that,

when he starts writing his tale, he cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy any more. This is the real problem, and the story he writes, with its whole intricate and inextricable chaos of truth and fiction, is the expression of this process. One cannot take the events of the story at their face value, because the borderline between real and fictitious events is too blurred; it is impossible to say at which point precisely invention sets in. All the same these events combine into a picture of the gradual disintegration of Hermann's mind, and on this level they acquire significance, whether or not they are real.

It was said above that Hermann's failure partly resembles that of Luzhin in The Defence, and like Luzhin's it can be explained through what has emerged from the analyses of Pale Fire and Transparent Things: It is possible for man to look back on his past and if he has an artistic mind, he will perceive in his past some ordering principle that coordinates events and incidents; behind the seemingly chaotic surface of his life he will perceive a clear and meaningful design. But it has also emerged from Transparent Things (and Luzhin's failure has proved it) that it is not for man to anticipate fate and to try and shape his future himself. Luzhin, although he sees through the pattern of his past, fails when he tries to influence its completion, and even the omniscient artist in Transparent Things, who knows everything about his hero's past and has a very clear idea of how its design might be completed, is extremely cautious and avoids all direct

interference.

Hermann, then, in trying to shape his own future is trying to do something that has proved to be impossible. He is also extremely badly qualified even to make the attempt, for it becomes clear by and by that he has not got the artistic gifts he claims to possess.

In order to re-combine or re-create the given world "the artist should know the given world."<sup>15</sup> The artist's main instrument in acquiring knowledge of the given world and using it for his creations is his memory: "The act of retention is the act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events"<sup>16</sup>, and in the re-creation of the past the same process must be at work: "... the combination and juxtaposition of remembered details is a main factor in the artistic process of reconstructing one's past."<sup>17</sup>

The discussion in the introduction of the process of creation has shown that there is in Nabokov's view nothing arbitrary either in the act of selection performed by memory or in the way in which the artist recombines events and recreates the world. Nabokov hints at some "mysterious foresight" at work when memory stores elements in such a way as to reveal links and interrelations between them and make the pattern they form transparent; and the artist, recreating the world, or, specifically, recreating his past, selects the elements he uses on the basis of the insight made possible by memory. Hermann does claim to possess an "artist's memory" (213), but his memory exhausts itself

in its capability of photographic retention ("I have always possessed a memory of the camera type" [71]) and in an obsession with mirrorings, simple repetitions and doublings. A pine forest, pictures, people, statues, whole scenes strike him as familiar; a couple of "inseparable birches" (43) keep reappearing; some little girls playing marbles, a pince-nez'd waiter. Wandering about in Tarnitz, he feels that the town is "constructed of certain refuse particles of my past":

... I discovered in it things most remarkably and most uncannily familiar to me: a low pale-blue house, the exact counterpart of which I had seen in a St. Petersburg suburb; an old-clothes shop, where suits hung that had belonged to dead acquaintances of mine; a street lamp bearing the same number... as one that had stood in front of the Moscow house where I lodged; and nearby the same bare birch tree with the same forked trunk in an iron corset... (80).

Hermann seems to offer these as fascinating clues to some hidden meaning, but, as Suagee puts it, "we can never penetrate their tangled surface simply because Hermann does not tell us enough."<sup>18</sup> One might add, because Hermann does not combine them into a recognizable pattern. Composing his narration, he interrupts himself at various points, conscious of "the muddle and mottle of my tale" (62), which he excuses by stating that "the real author is not I, but my impatient memory" (47), "which has its own whims and rules" (62). This amounts to a confession that both his memory and his mind lack the artistic gift of selecting, ordering and combining. Therefore the pictures he conjures up from his past can appear as no more than somewhat intriguing but basically meaningless repetitions and

doublings, anticipating the doublings of names and shuttlecocks and old dogs in Hugh Person's life.

Hermann, however, takes the very doublings as clear indications of the working of fate. In his mind they do form a recognizable pattern into which his meeting Felix (another doubling) fits perfectly. He considers this meeting, too, as planned by fate ("chance", he says), and planned so as to fit into the pattern exactly as he has foreseen: he is convinced of his artistic "gift of penetrating life's devices" (13) and thinks he sees it confirmed:

As in the case of inventive geniuses,  
I was certainly helped by chance (my  
meeting Felix), but that piece of luck  
fitted exactly into the place I had  
made for it... (132).

He regards not only his discovery of Felix and his perception of their resemblance as a proof of his ability to see through the workings of life and fate, and of his creative power and art, but also the plan he bases on it and even in fact his crime. He sees them as the artistic completion of the pattern that he thinks fate has started weaving for him, and he also claims that crime is of the same nature as art in yet another respect: it requires carefulness, precision and logic in its execution; the criminal act

... is really but a link in the chain,  
one detail, one line in the book, and  
must be logically derived from all  
previous matter; such being the nature  
of every art. If the deed is planned  
and performed correctly, then the force  
of creative art is such, that were the  
criminal to give himself up on the very



next morning, none would believe him, the invention of art containing far more intrinsical truth than life's reality (132).

But all the qualities that make a piece of art and give it its "intrinsical truth" are absent from what he claims to be his masterpiece. In fact, he abuses art, and it may be for that just as much as for his crime, that Nabokov condemns him to everlasting hell-fire.<sup>19</sup>

What is most seriously wrong with Hermann's creation is of course the fact that it has no basis and no equivalent in reality. Ardalion, unpleasant though he may appear (but then, of course, we get only Hermann's partial view of him) has the more artistic insights of the two. He knows that there are no exact copies in reality: "Every face is unique" (50) and also that art does not consist in copying things. He transforms reality in his pictures, however doubtful his "modern style" may appear to Hermann who cannot discover "the ghost of a likeness" (66) in the portrait Ardalion has painted of him.

Unlike Ardalion, "Hermann wants actual copies, not the connection made by art"<sup>20</sup>, and he insists on imposing his will on reality which does not provide what he wants. As Ardalion has said: "Every face is unique", and it is clear from the beginning that Felix who, Hermann insists, is "a creature bodily identical with me" (23) is so unlike him that everybody, including Felix himself, fails to notice any resemblance at all. There are instances of Hermann himself almost doubting what he so strongly insists on at other times.

When he meets Felix at Tarnitz, he feels for a second that he has been mistaken:

For a moment I had the impression that it had all been a delusion, a hallucination - that never could he have been my double... For a moment, as I say, he appeared to me as like me as any man (84).

But, as he says, his doubts never last longer than a moment, and then "...I saw, once again, the marvel that had arrested me five months before" (84). He ignores what his own eyes tell him, namely, that the resemblance is by no means perfect. He notices that their ears are slightly different, their hands, the colours of their eyes; "I possess large yellowish teeth; his are whiter and set more closely together, but is that really important?" (27) In the name of art he ignores the details that interfere with his design, all "those trifling discrepancies...which have no importance whatever in the sum of an artist's success" (204).

Never, not even at the end, does he realize what his principal mistake has been. He believes that his masterpiece has been destroyed by a minor mistake, namely, his failure to remove Felix's stick and thereby the means of establishing the dead man's identity. He blames the reporters for destroying his masterpiece by

...[hurling] themselves upon such small and quite immaterial blemishes as would, given a deeper and finer attitude towards my masterpiece, pass unnoticed, the way a beautiful book is not in the least impaired by a misprint or a slip of the pen (202).

To the end, then, he remains convinced that but for one mistake his creation would have been perfect.

But even though true art should not be out to represent reality slavishly, reality should yet be the basis of art. "The artist should know the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no further than the back yard of primitive art "<sup>21</sup>, and this is what Hermann's masterpiece eventually boils down to. Lacking insight into the true ways of life and fate, he shapes a pattern that has sprung solely from his imagination, which he cannot impose on reality because it has absolutely no equivalent in it and which, for the same reason, no one can accept as a piece of art.

It is fatal for Hermann that he never understands what his failure is, and that he not only mistakes his creation for art, but eventually firmly believes in the actual reality of what he has created. In fact, his fictitious world supersedes in his mind, and becomes for him more real than, the world in which he actually lives; he gets caught up in it to the degree of becoming part of it and, like Kinbote, completely losing touch with the external world. As with Kinbote, the consequence is insanity.

Hermann considers his meeting Felix, in whom he sees his perfect double, as planned by fate, but a different explanation suggests itself. One of Hermann's characteristics that strikes one from the beginning, is his rather unnerving vanity and his preoccupation with his own self, his constant awareness of his own elegance, of his own way of moving, even of his own

voice. He never relaxes, he is never self-obliviously just himself. Part of him is constantly standing on the side, as it were, watching, admiring, praising what he is doing. While making love to his wife, he becomes joyfully aware of "a well-known kind of 'dissociation'" (37) which enables him to enjoy these occasions both as an active party and as a spectator, and which greatly increases his ecstasy. It increases more and more the farther he moves from the scene, "the greater the interval between my two selves" (38). Eventually the point is reached where he cannot distinguish between his two selves any more; he thinks he is where in fact he is not:

... one April night, ... as I was sitting at my maximum distance of fifteen rows of seats and looking forward to an especially good show... 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 her the red book she had left in the parlor (38).

What then follows is not all that surprising Hermann's mental make-up taken into account. On that particular night the spell is broken. He tries for some time to recover his singular ability, but abandons the attempt when some new and more exciting and wonderful obsession takes its place. His imagination, as has been seen, is prone to providing reflections and repetitions on innumerable occasions, but something is missing in this world of reflected and mirrored objects. Hermann is "unconsciously tracking" it (19), "some force [is] driving [him] along" (18) when he happens upon Felix. The moment he sees him, he externalizes what has for a long time been latent in his mind. He projects his own face onto the face of another man, thereby creating a "real",

tangible double of himself, and definitely falling victim to the illusion that there are two of him.

Another factor is most certainly at the root of it all. Hermann's obsession with Felix can be explained by the fact that Felix is everything that Hermann is not. He is not just Hermann's second self, but his complementary self. He is "that side of human nature that society has forced the businessman to submerge."<sup>22</sup> He is free, uninhibited, unrestrained, vaguely artistic, and he has a telling name: he is "the happy one" (23). Hermann is certainly not happy. He talks a lot about his happy life in Berlin, his attractive flat; he pretends that his wife adores him. He talks about the fact that they belong "to the cream of the smug middle class" (29), and about his "delightful little car" (29). But he is facing bankruptcy, he has no friends (113), and although he makes a great show of not knowing anything about Lydia's unfaithfulness and pretends to believe her naïve explanations in delicate situations, it is clear that she is continually deceiving him with Ardalion. Felix, then, is everything that Hermann can only dream of being, and something that Hermann has been unconsciously tracking. It is not surprising that Hermann should in his wishes and his imagination see himself in Felix's role, all the while, of course, lending Felix his own face.

It does not matter whether the story that this gives rise to is "real". It is real enough for Hermann even though it may only take place in his own mind (of which, again, there is no proof), and it is the story

of his mental struggle, and new failure, and collapse.

From the moment that the existence of a second "I" has been established for Hermann, his sense of his own identity is shaken. Embarrassingly trivial things have to help him restore it for the moment when he gets back to the hotel after the first encounter with Felix. In the mirror in the hotel room he sees not himself but Felix, and

I remember that the small marks of conscious existence such as the dust in my nose, the black dirt between the heel and the shank of one shoe, hunger, and presently the rough brown taste tinged with lemon of a large, flat veal cutlet in the grillroom, strangely absorbed my attention as if I were looking for, and finding (and still doubting a little) proofs that I was I, and that this I...was really at a hotel...and had nothing in common with a certain tramp who, at the moment, was lolling under a bush (24-25).

But he never succeeds in restoring his identity for good. For a little while, back in Berlin, his memory of Felix heals up, but then he starts having visions:

Out of the darkness, straight towards me, with jaw protruding and eyes looking straight into mine, came Felix (60).

He writes to him, he meets him again, once again he succeeds in freeing himself from his influence: "Felix, my double, seemed no more than a harmless curio" (113). But then a chance incident, a misunderstanding, throws him back into the state which he is struggling to escape. He impetuously commands the maid to dismiss the man he thinks is Felix:

Then tell him to go to hell!...Let him be gone at once, I'm not at home, I'm not in town, I'm not in this world,...

only to rush after the man the next moment (120). From

this attack of his second self he never recovers:

I could not quite make out at the time what was going on in me - but now I know what it was: my passion for my double was surging anew with a muffled but formidable violence which soon escaped all control (124).

Hermann's peace of mind and secure sense of identity can only be regained if one of his selves is destroyed. The murder of Felix, which has on one level a purely practical function (getting hold of the insurance money) is to do this for him: "...if you think that my prompter's name was Gain - capital G not C - then you are mightily mistaken" (100).

But the crime is also to fulfill another function. Felix is murdered, but he is then dressed in Hermann's clothes. The murder is made to look like a suicide. Hermann puts on Felix's clothes and assumes his role. The purpose of the crime is not only to dispose of one of Hermann's selves and enable him to re-establish one identity for himself; Hermann also hopes that the crime will enable him to discard his own old unhappy self, and to slip into a new and completely different, and happy identity.

However, he finds that he cannot do either. He cannot completely resume his old identity: "Try as I may I do not succeed in getting back into my original envelope, let alone making myself comfortable in my old self" (29). But he cannot completely discard his old self either. He is still conscious of it, so much so that he tries to hide it by growing a beard: "...that beard of mine has done jolly well, and in such a short time too! I am disguised so perfectly, as to be in-

visible to my own self" (31). Nor does he succeed in slipping into Felix's self.

All this allows of different interpretations. If one does in fact see Felix as Hermann's own complementary self, then his failure is very much like Smurov's, for like Smurov, Hermann is aware of the different sides there are to his personality, but, again like Smurov, he is unable to unite them into one single and unified and balanced whole, something that Sebastian Knight has been seen to do. His failure is even worse than Smurov's. For while Smurov is able in the end to choose and establish one identity, however unpleasant, for himself, Hermann remains even at the end caught between his two selves. He is still aware of his old self, but also considers it possible that he will all of a sudden "wake up somewhere; on a patch of grass near Prague" (221). A complete loss of identity and permanent madness are the result, and his confused and helpless state of mind is reflected in the strangely intricate and superficially comic style and structure of his tale. What seems comic is an expression of the despair that creeps into his "vast vacant soul" (193).

Another explanation should be taken into account, and once more Ardalion can be seen to act as a foil to Hermann. Hermann pretends not to recognize himself in the portrait Ardalion has painted of him, because, as he says, it is not like him at all. However, this portrait is "more insightful than Hermann can bear - and most prophetic."<sup>23</sup>

As Hermann describes it, it pictures



...the ruddy horror of my face. I do not know why he had lent my cheeks that fruity hue; they are really as pale as death. Look as one might, none could see the ghost of a likeness! How utterly ridiculous, for instance, that crimson point in the canthus, or that glimpse of eyetooth from under a curled, snarly lip. All this - against an ambitious background hinting at things that might have been either geometrical figures or gallow trees... (66).

Clearly, Ardalion does not simply copy the mere appearance of things or persons as Hermann does. With his portrait he has produced something that proves his ability to see behind the surface and appearance and detect the essential qualities of the objects of his art. And he has produced something living, a piece of art that allows the viewer, too, an insight into the life and soul of the person it represents, and which, to use Hermann's own words, carries a heavy burden of "intrinsical truth".

Hermann lacks the artistic insight that enables Ardalion to paint this telling portrait of him. He does feel that he has changed places with Felix (69), and also that "I look like my name" (203), but this is not enough. He knows too little about Felix; just a few haphazard facts that Felix has told him, some of his tastes and favourite sayings, and memories. All these he keeps repeating and memorizing, adding a few details each time, but this does not allow him even to imagine Felix's life in full: "I failed - and still fail - to rerun his life on my private screen" (54). Much less does it enable him to make Felix's soul his own, for he knows next to nothing about it: "Felix's soul I had studied very cursorily, so all I

knew of it were the bare outlines of his personality, two or three chance traits" (186). Like those who see only one aspect of Smurov or of Sebastian, he is unable to see, behind the little he knows of Felix, the complete and complex human being and his soul, to understand this soul, to appropriate it, or to represent it.

There remains the possibility to look at this failure exclusively in terms of art. Creating his double, Hermann creates an almost perfect copy of himself. It has already been stated that the production of mere copies is inartistic in itself. But Hermann wants actual copies, and moreover, art consists for him in lifeless copies. It is in a state of "immobility" (17), "in a state of perfect repose" (25) that he finds that Felix's face most resembles his own, and when Felix is dead,

...when all the required features were fixed  
and frozen, our likeness was such that really  
I could not say who had been killed, I or he  
(182).

Once more he uses art as an argument to prove his point:

"...what is death, if not a face at peace - its artistic perfection? Life only marred my double" (25). Art is for him an equivalent of death, "mere stasis."<sup>24</sup> This being so, it is not surprising that Hermann should be incapable not only of imagining the life of his created person, but even more of instilling into that person a living and complex soul. This life and this soul are not something that Hermann might copy. They are outside his experience and knowledge, and his double therefore remains for him a mere lifeless puppet with

only a limited number of such stock responses and habits and views as are traditionally attributed to persons like him.

Nabokov quite rightly warns the reader in his Foreword that the plot of the novel "is not quite as familiar as the writer of the rude letter in Chapter Eleven assumes it to be."<sup>25</sup> Its mere surface events, of course are familiar and can be categorized together with those of Lydia's trashy novels; the connection is actually established several times (34,151). But behind this surface Despair has turned out to be yet another novel about the relation between art and reality and to anticipate much of what Nabokov elaborates on in his much later novels.

III. Bend Sinister;

Invitation to a Beheading

Ada

B E N D   S I N I S T E R

I N V I T A T I O N   T O   A   B E H E A D I N G

Bend Sinister<sup>1</sup> and Invitation to a Beheading<sup>2</sup> are often quoted together, for they have much in common, although several years lie between the respective dates of their composition and publication.<sup>3</sup> Both look very much like political novels, dealing as they do with the suffering of individuals in perverse and cruel totalitarian states whose systems are "opposed to the life of the Mind"<sup>4</sup> and whose supreme aim is "the destruction of the individual."<sup>5</sup>

The protagonist of Bend Sinister is Adam Krug, a professor of philosophy, whose wife has just died. He lives and suffers in a country that has just been taken over by the Ekwilists, a revolutionary party under the leadership of one Paduk, preaching and demanding the absolute equality of all people. Paduk, otherwise "the Toad"<sup>6</sup>, is a former schoolmate of Krug's and used to be Krug's victim in the schoolyard. Krug bullied him and "every blessed day for about five school years" (BS, 45) sat upon his face. Now their roles are reversed. The philosopher is helpless in his dealings with the dictator. The only person who dares openly oppose him by being faithful to his own private and individual convictions, he sees first his friends disappear one by one, and as that does not induce him to submit, his little son is brutally taken from him, is sent to an Institute for Abnormal Children, where he becomes the victim of a hideous

experiment, is tortured and murdered. Krug, who is shown bits of the film about the experiment, is spared further suffering by the author taking pity on him, "[sliding] towards him along an inclined beam of pale light", as Krug wakes up to brutal reality in a prison cell, and "causing instantaneous madness..." (BS, 210).

The hero of Invitation to a Beheading, Cincinnatus C., is "Accused of the most terrible of crimes, gnostical turpitude, so rare and so unutterable that it was necessary to use circumlocutions like 'impenetrability', 'opacity', 'occlusion'", and is "sentenced for that crime to death by beheading" (IB, 65). He leads a nightmare existence in his prison cell, longing for freedom, painfully aware of the passing of time, desperately afraid of the end, trying to put his experience into words. One sunny morning he is taken to Thriller Square in the centre of the town and executed.

Besides the link provided by the subject matter, there exist also very obvious stylistic links between the two novels. Although there seems to be no room in either of the grim tales for anything comic, long stretches of both are related in an essentially comic manner, and they are perhaps the most striking illustrations of Nabokov's conviction "that a serious subject does not necessitate a solemn style."<sup>7</sup> In fact, they illustrate how the conscious use of comic devices, seemingly unsuitable, can give the serious subject more poignancy than sustained solemnity possibly could.

For further proof of this one needs only turn to

the Dark Comedies of the Twentieth Century, the Absurd Plays, to which particularly Invitation to a Bedeadening bears a striking resemblance, both in individual scenes and in the general tone. Here and there, and partly in Bend Sinister, the most depressing truths about man, human society, and life, the most disquieting problems, and the most shattering experiences man can have, are expressed in comic terms and with the help of comic devices, and in each case the effect of this blatant incongruity is very disturbing.

One of the most painful scenes from Bend Sinister, which may stand as a first example, is that which gradually brings home to Krug what has happened to his little boy. Nabokov, who never allows himself to miss a single chance of ridiculing modern psychological experiments, "[holds] up a glass in which [their] worst potentialities are seen realized"<sup>8</sup> by giving a parodistic account of one - the most gruesome one imaginable - in which a child is used as a "release-instrument" for children with criminal records (BS, 195ff.). This account is clothed in a curious mixture of pseudo-scientific terminology, which includes the astonishing "pure 'egg' (common extract of egos)" (BS, 196-197), and completely inappropriate language, which of course has a comic effect.

Moreover, the scene in which Krug is shown parts of the film about the experiment is a perfectly comic one. The whole staff of the institute are in such a state of panic that the director loses his command of language, which gives the author an opportunity of

using spoonerisms (one of which he takes the trouble to point out [BS, 198-199]); the others, to gain time, offer Krug a perfectly absurd selection of things, such as "a shower bath, the assistance of a pretty masseuse,...,a mouth organ,...,breakfast,...,a shave (BS, 198). Something goes wrong with the machine, an inscription appears upside down, which makes a nurse giggle, which, in its turn, provokes the director to utter his third spoonerism, the counterpart of the second.

The comic treatment of this agonizing scene does not stop even here. When describing those scenes of the film that Krug is eventually shown, the author turns them into a parody of scientific silent films, logically pursuing what he started doing in his account of the experiment itself. The parodistic effect is brought about by the legends, which are either totally superfluous, or seem to stem from the not-so-scientific sort of silent films in which they are used as "humorous" commentaries on the action, and they quite openly invite one to misapply them: one is tempted to read the legend "Watch Those Curves" in connection with the "statuesque blonde" of the preceding sentence much rather than in connection with a "curving line" on the blackboard in the following one (BS, 200).

Styan says of Beckett that he "invented a screen of laughter through which to conceal and filter his nightmare."<sup>9</sup> However, the image of the screen suggests that the laughter and the nightmare are kept separate,



and that one has first to penetrate the screen in order to discover what it conceals. But Nabokov does not conceal anything. One perceives the laughter and the nightmare simultaneously because they are inextricably linked. With Nabokov (and perhaps even with Beckett) it might be more to the point to speak of a woven fabric in which laughter and nightmare are combined in a complex pattern, in which they partake of each other's qualities and set each other off.

The technique of linking the comic with something not comic has in the chapter on Lolita been described as characteristic of the grotesque. One of the effects of the grotesque is to evoke simultaneously two incompatible emotions. In many scenes, as in the one just described, anything comic seems totally inappropriate, its introduction seems outrageous. But apart from evoking contradictory emotions, the combination of the comic with its opposites has also the effect of "sharpening the awareness of the onlooker".<sup>10</sup> Just as colours assume more brilliancy when seen in combination with other colours, and just as their brilliancy may come out best when they appear in unusual combinations, the qualities of the comic and those of the elements with which it is linked, appear more sharply through their juxtaposition. The unbearable scene of Krug watching the suffering of his little boy becomes more unbearable because it is related in a comic manner. The same applies to a great number of other scenes in both novels.

However, both in Bend Sinister and in Invitation to

a Beheading the comic elements have a double function. The same comic devices that deepen by contrast the depressing or the frightening sides of things also expose these same things, stress their absurdity, and hold them up to ridicule. For examples of this one needs only look at the political systems and some of the laws in Bend Sinister and Invitation to a Beheading.

"...the utterly nonsensical is a natural and logical part of Paduk's rule" (BS, 78), old Maximov, who proves to be so much more clairvoyant with regard to Paduk than Krug, "the thinker" (BS, 168), neatly summarizes the total impression one gets when one looks at the various features of this rule and of the state, and old Maximov's words also apply to the state and the laws in Invitation to a Beheading.

The utterly nonsensical shows for example in a certain "amusing new law" (BS, 159) that concerns public transport and that, instead of having positive effects, as a good law should, only serves to create complete chaos and confusion. It shows in the episode on the bridge, which, although one is acutely aware of Krug's desperate state of mind all the time, is nevertheless comic. In a series of incidents, it demonstrates the total absence of sense both in the regulations devised by the ruler and in the heads of the soldiers, who are clearly expected to maintain law and order but are just as clearly not intelligent enough to deal with even so uncomplicated a problem as someone wishing to cross the bridge. Officious but illiterate, they almost manage to realize for Krug

the absurd fate he himself envisages as a result of their ill-timed pedantry and their stupidity: the fate of having "to walk back and forth on a bridge which has ceased to be one since neither end is really attainable" (BS, 14).

These find their counterparts in such absurd laws as are in force in the state of Invitation to a Beheading; the law, for example in accordance with which "the death sentence was announced to Cincinnatus C. in a whisper" (IB, 9); that which insists "that on the eve of the execution its passive and active participants together make a brief farewell visit to each of the chief officials" (IB, 166). They are also mirrored in the absurd "eight rules for inmates" in Cincinnatus' prison cell (IB, 43-44).

The best illustration of just how nonsensical the rules in the states of both novels are, is of course provided by the political system Paduk and his followers have forcibly introduced. Calling his schoolmates by anagrams of their names because "one should constantly bear in mind that all men consist of the same twenty-five letters variously mixed" (BS, 60) (one can assume that he does not count the "I"), Paduk is later fascinated by a theory called Ekwilism, the theory of one Fredrik Skotoma. This theory transfers the socialist ideal of uniformity from the economic level on to the intellectual plane and maintains that human consciousness should be distributed equally throughout the population of the world. According to Skotoma this can be done, just as the distribution of

liquid in vessels of various shapes and sizes "could be made even and just either by grading the contents or by eliminating the fancy vessels and adopting a standard size" (BS, 66). Inspired furthermore by a series of cartoons about the Etermon (Everyman) couple, who supposedly demonstrate the whole bliss of the average life of an average couple, Paduk founds the Party of the Average Man. Happiness can be attained only, he says, by following a pattern of life similar to that of the Etermons. But above all, he insists, bliss and "total joy" (BS, 65) can be attained only by completely renouncing one's personality and identity, "by weeding out all such arrogant notions as the community does not and should not share", "by letting [one's] person dissolve in the virile oneness of the State", in short, by becoming like everybody else, by becoming "interchangeable" (BS, 86). These theories he enforces as laws, ruthlessly eliminating the "fancy vessels", those persons who fail to comply.

It is in just such a world as this that Cincinnatus C. in Invitation to a Beheading finds himself in prison, and for precisely the reasons that would have brought him there in the world of Bend Sinister. For Cincinnatus' crime consists in his having a mind that is different from everybody else's and is therefore incomprehensible to those around him. In a world where people understand each other "at the first word" (IB, 22) because they think and talk only in commonplace and sober terms, he remains a mystery, for he has "words that would end in an unexpected way,

perhaps in some archaic letter, an upsilamba, becoming a bird or a catapult with wondrous consequences" (IB, 22). All other souls are "transparent to one another" (IB, 21); he alone is not transparent. He is "a lone dark obstacle" (IB, 21).

He has been different from those around him ever since he was a child. With other children he lived in a "canary-yellow, large cold house" (IB, 86) to be prepared for life, or, as it appeared to him even then for "secure nonexistence" (IB, 86). That canary-yellow house, it would seem, was a school, in which the flexible minds of children were influenced and formed and bent in such a way that they eventually conformed to what society and the state required from them.

As the only one among his coevals, Cincinnatus refused to have his mind formed (deformed, one should say, in the face of what emerges from the novel). He tried in his youth to conceal the fact that his mind was and remained different; he would turn his soul this way and that, "employing a complex system of optical illusions" (IB, 21), making his mind resemble the minds of others by the "manipulation of cunningly illuminated facets and angles" (IB, 21). Now that he has given that up, the nature of his mind is all too obvious: it has retained its original form, that of a black block that is "impervious to the rays of others" (IB, 20).

The system in Bend Sinister is grim and frightening and, after all, Krug is its victim, but at the

same time it is exposed in its utter absurdity. All the premises on which it is based, namely that the human mind is some sort of substance which can be disposed of and distributed at will; that man's greatest joy consists in his being indistinguishable from others, and interchangeable; its reliance on a cartoon as a model of an ideal way of life: all this amounts to a complete refutation of generally accepted values and is clearly relegated to the realm of comedy which, as Potts says, deals with the "abnormal".<sup>11</sup> The same applies of course to the state and the system in Invitation to a Beheading which resemble those of Blend Sinister so closely.

In the light of Nabokov's insistence on the independence of each individual mind, which must under no circumstances yield to laws inflicted on it from outside, and in the light of his own life, the idea suggests itself to read the two novels as based on, and to a certain extent reflecting, his own experiences in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, in fact, to read them as bitter satires on these two states. Parallels between the two actual states and the imaginary states of the two novels have been traced and named.<sup>12</sup> Nabokov himself later refers to both novels as "absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism..."<sup>13</sup> and to Invitation to a Beheading as a novel "that deals with the incarceration of a rebel by the buffoons and bullies of a Communazist state"<sup>14</sup>, and he grants in connection with Blend Sinister that

No doubt...without those infamous models before me I could not have interlarded

this fantasy with bits of Lenin's speeches, and a chunk of the Soviet constitution, and gobs of Nazi pseudo-efficiency.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand he half denies the importance these models may have had and cautions the reader by insisting that

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>16</sup>

And in the Foreword to Invitation to a Beheading he declares that

The question whether or not my seeing both [the Bolshevik régime and the Nazi régime] in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book, should concern the good reader as little as it does me.<sup>17</sup>

To insist, then, on interpreting the novels exclusively along narrow political lines would be contradicting the author's own evidence, and misinterpreting them. One should take his hints and refrain from tracing all the allusions and references that offer themselves. To reduce the books to no more than allegories and satirical denunciations of just one or two hateful states would impoverish their rich implications.

The political aspect cannot be left out altogether, but rather than taking the novels as direct attacks aimed at two specific states and their systems, one might see the states they describe as "ideal model[s] of totalitarian possibilities"<sup>18</sup> and as denunciations of any totalitarian state, of the past, of the present, and of the future. This element is more prominent in Bend Sinister than in Invitation to a Beheading.

In both novels, but more obviously in Invitation to

a Beheading, on which, therefore, this chapter will concentrate, the apparently political contents gradually assume metaphysical dimensions, which demand that one should see these novels, too, in connection with Nabokov's quest for reality, and just as gradually the totalitarian theme is "converted into the stuff of [fables] about art and artifice."<sup>19</sup>

The metaphysical dimension of Invitation to a Beheading becomes obvious when one looks at what Cincinnatus' crime consists in. He is a riddle to the others, "a lone dark obstacle" (IB, 21) because he has thoughts that the others do not understand: he is not content to accept the world in which the others live quite happily as in any way perfect or beautiful. The world which to them represents ultimate reality appears to him ridiculously unreal. It is a world of "ignorance" (IB, 22), composed of "senseless visions, bad dreams, dregs of delirium, the drivel of nightmare" (IB, 32); it is peopled by "spectres, werewolves, parodies" (IB, 36); and it is governed by "calamity, horror, madness..." (IB, 82).

This puts Invitation to a Beheading in a line with Transparent Things and Ada, which, in the last analysis, also question the reality of the world in which we find ourselves, and which are concerned with opening ways out of the irreality that surrounds us and discovering means of coming to an understanding of the ultimate reality beyond human existence. Invitation to a Beheading rivals only Ada in the depressing picture it paints of life, and it resembles Transparent Things



in the solution it offers.

Cincinnatus has an intuitive knowledge that there is more behind things than the ordinary mind can grasp and put into words. He knows intuitively that the world he lives in is no more than a shabby reproduction, "a clumsy copy" (IB, 84) of some wonderful original that exists somewhere and for which he longs: a realm of "stars" and "thoughts and sadness" (IB, 22), where "time takes shape according to one's pleasure, like a figured rug whose folds can be gathered in such a way that two designs will meet" (IB, 85), where "the gaze of men glows with inimitable understanding", where "everything strikes one by its bewitching evidence, by the simplicity of good", where "the freaks that are tortured here walk unmolested" (IB, 85). That is reality for Cincinnatus, not this "so-called world" (IB, 62), in which he finds himself only "through an error" (IB, 82).

Cincinnatus had knowledge of all this even as a child, perhaps an even better knowledge than now, for that place, where the beautiful originals of this world are, is the "native realm" of his soul (IB, 84). The mind and soul of the child was nearer its native realm, thus nearer reality, than the mind of the adult who has been worn down by "continual uneasiness, concealment of my knowledge, pretence, fear" (IB, 86).

His dreams, however, bring him a knowledge of that world that can be said to equal the child's:

...ever since my childhood I have had dreams...In my dreams the world was ennobled, spiritualized; people whom in

the waking state I feared so much appeared there in a shimmering refraction...; their voices, their step, the expression of their eyes and even of their clothes - acquired an exciting significance; to put it more simply, in my dreams the world would come alive, becoming so captivatingly majestic, free and ethereal, that afterwards it would be oppressive to breathe the dust of this painted life (IB, 82).

His dreams, then, show him clearly the ideal realm that is the original of our so-called reality. They allow him to see clearly what he only vaguely knows in waking life and what he finds so hard to put into words. Dreams are for him proofs of the reality behind this world of imitations; they are "a foreglimpse and a whiff of it" (IB, 83). He knows that dreams, to others the very essence of irreality, are in fact semi-reality, sleep taking us a step in the direction where reality itself is to be found. Whereas sleep and its dreams take us nearer reality, thus nearer real life, waking life leads us away from it. In its turn, it is therefore a semi-sleep,

...an evil drowsiness into which penetrate in grotesque disguise the sounds and sights of the real world, flowing beyond the periphery of the mind... (IB, 83).

In it the ideal images of the real world appear as "senseless visions, bad dreams, dregs of delirium" (IB, 32).

This escapes the notice of everybody but Cincinnatus. The ordinary minds give shapes and substance to these crazy dream images; for them they are real. The others have, in fact, so much become part of this copy-imitation-dream world that they are themselves

no more than the strange and grotesque creatures of dreams: "spectres, werevolves, parodies" (36).

Cincinnatus' scale of values is thus diametrically opposed to that of everybody else; it forms, in fact, a sort of mirror image of it. It would seem logical to complete this scale by assuming that death, to others the affirmation of ultimate irreality, would mean a return to ultimate reality to him.

Throughout the novel the reader sees the world through Cincinnatus' mind, that is, the world appears to him as it appears to Cincinnatus: as a world that is not real. Cincinnatus sees it as a world of dream fancies and nightmares, and he also sees it as an imitation of his ideal reality, as a "clumsy copy" of it, and to create this impression, the theatre lends itself as an analogy. Throughout, accordingly, the world that holds him prisoner is created in terms of bad dreams and nightmares, and in terms of a theatrical production, or, to be more precise, in terms of low, cheap comedy, sometimes degenerating into a bad circus performance. All the time, both the dreams and the "production" are at once comic and frightening, illustrating throughout what was said at the beginning about the use of comic devices in the novel.

Throughout the novel people keep changing and exchanging their identities the way they do in dreams. The prison director changes into Rodion, the jailer, adopting the latter's manner of speaking and growing his beard while talking to the lawyer (IB, 35f.). "Pop's coming", says Emmie, the director's little

daughter, and in walks Rodion (IB, 69). Rodion and the lawyer take Cincinnatus to a terrace on the tower of the prison from where he can enjoy a view of the town, and there Rodion is all of a sudden transformed into the prison director, and, mysteriously, it is the director's frock coat that is soiled with chalk whereas a second ago it was the lawyer's (IB, 36ff.). They all seem like dream visions that can evaporate at will and materialize again, either in their own shapes or in somebody else's. One cannot rely on anyone to remain the same person for any length of time. One is never quite sure whom one is dealing with at any given moment.

At various points in the novel, there is a sudden change, or rather blending of scenes, dreamlike, too, in which, moreover, people undergo even more dramatic transformations. Right at the beginning, when Cincinnatus is left alone in his cell, Rodion watches him through the peephole. All of a sudden, the peephole becomes a porthole, through which Rodion, "with a skipper's stern attention", no longer sees a prison cell but "the horizon, now rising, now falling", and Cincinnatus, on the heaving ship, becomes seasick (IB, 10). M'sieur Pierre's special trick with the chair starts a regular circus performance with an act on the tightrope (in which the spider is involved), with music, and applause from the audience, with the circus director appearing in person, and the clown performing the usual antics of the circus

clown (IB, 104-105). And the occasion on which Cincinnatus is for the first time allowed to look through the peephole at the mysterious M'sieur Pierre imperceptibly changes into a scene in a laboratory, where the professor allows people, who are patiently queueing up, to look at something wonderful under the microscope (IB, 52).

One thinks of Strindberg's introductory note to A Dreamplay, one of the plays that Esslin lists among the predecessors of the Theatre of the Absurd:

... the author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations. The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge.<sup>20</sup>

These phenomena undoubtedly have their comic sides, and it is precisely their irreality and dreamlike quality that produces the comic effect. Being the stuff of dreams, they combine in such a way as to form the apparent nonsense of dreams, in which logic, at first sight, seems allowed no part at all, and where ample scope is given to the comic non-sequitur.

According to Freud, very similar mechanisms are at work when dreams are born, as when jokes are composed. In jokes, these are often mechanisms of condensation<sup>21</sup>, processes of "telescoping"<sup>22</sup>, by which separate, even disparate words or elements of words are linked, and relations between seemingly disconnected things and

ideas are established. The new words thus formed may, at first sight, appear merely as senseless verbal hybrids with a slight comic touch because of the apparent incongruity of the elements that form them; the sequences of ideas may at first seem so haphazard as to be taken for no more than totally absurd non-sequiturs, comic on a superficial level.

The genuine and aimed at comic effect is attained when the relations that actually do exist between the individual elements become obvious; when it turns out that the unusual words are not so much haphazard mixtures and distortions of normal words, but calculated combinations of elements from different sources into a new unit that contains a whole multitude of related ideas; when, in a flash, the affinity of apparently disconnected things and ideas becomes clear; when all the implications of the complex statement are recognized and taken in; and when the technical structure, too, is seen through.<sup>23</sup>

This "telescoping of form,...or of ideas,...or of tone and implication"<sup>24</sup> is a typical technique of wit. It makes it possible to express in a short and condensed form what would otherwise ask for lengthy and unwitty explanations.<sup>25</sup>

This same mechanism may, according to Freud, be held responsible for the kind of dreams in which different persons or objects or ideas mix and merge into one.<sup>26</sup> Again, it is not so much a distortion of reality that takes place, but a concentration of various individual elements into something new. The qualities

of the original still shine through, but they appear odd and in a curious disguise, veiled, strange and enigmatic. And, as in dreams reason cannot help one to see through the pattern and mechanism, and solve the riddle, the impression created is one of absurdity and nonsense. As with jokes, however, rational analysis of the ingredients of dreams, or an intuitive recognition of the associations at work, will soon discover that there is, after all, more logic behind it all than was at first apparent; so that, indeed, the same comic shock of recognition may be induced by the deciphering of the symbols and the structure of dreams as by the unriddling of a joke.

But what may be taken as an unfailing principle where jokes are concerned, is not so unfailing with regard to dreams. Their comedy is often limited to the superficial level of dream nonsense and absurdity. The logic and associations behind them may be of a frightening nature rather than comic. And this is, indeed, the case with the dream world of Invitation to a Beheading. Behind Cincinnatus' superficially comic dream visions of elusive and ghostlike people, whose identities are fluid and mix and merge, lies the horrible logic of a world in which it is a capital crime, punished by death, to have a pronounced personality of one's own. People in this world have no characteristic qualities, no identities, they are all alike. It does not matter whether they are called Rodian or Rodrig Ivanovich, and if their names get mixed up. Some of them are so featureless as not even

to have names (IB, 11).

The same intimate connection between comedy and horror can be traced in those scenes which so curiously blend and change without previous warning. On one level they produce the same comic dream effect that has just been described, and they produce it through their apparent absurdity and lack of logic. The horror behind their comic surface emerges when it becomes clear that in a certain sense the circus director is also the director of the prison, the laboratory assistant is also the jailer, the clown is also the executioner, and the circus and the laboratory are also the prison.

It is all a reflection of the state of affairs round Cincinnatus: In this world, where people are transparent to each other, where they are so much alike as to be interchangeable, and where Cincinnatus is the only one to be different, everyone is his enemy. "His jailers, who in fact were everyone" (IB, 65-66), are everywhere.

One of the most comic and most agonizing scenes is the family gathering in Cincinnatus' prison cell. It reads exactly like the account of a nightmare, and also like a scene from an absurd play; in fact, it could quite easily be staged as one.

Cincinnatus expects his wife Marthe, but she does not come alone. In what is in itself an effective comedy situation - one expects one person and in walk no end of people - the whole family arrive. They are a grotesque lot, slightly funny, slightly repulsive



each of them. There is Marthe's aged father, with "a purple blotch of a birthmark on his corded temple, with a swelling resembling a big raisin right on the vein" (IB, 90).

Marthe's maternal grandparents come, "so old that one could already see through them" (IB, 89); the grandfather "all shaky and shrivelled, in patched trousers" (IB, 90), the grandmother, "so slim that she might have encased herself in a silk umbrella sheath" (IB, 90). Comically, disturbingly, dead members of the family join this extraordinary gathering: the grandfather brings "a bulky portrait, in a gilt frame, of his mother, a misty young woman, in turn holding a portrait" (IB, 90). Along with the grown-up (and dead) members of the family, and along with Marthe's ridiculous brothers, come Marthe's children (who are not Cincinnatus'); sad little parodies of children: "Lame Diomedon" (IB, 89), "twisting his whole body in a rhythmic distortion" (IB, 92), and "obese little Pauline" (IB, 89), "red-haired, cross-eyed, bespectacled" (IB, 91), so cross-eyed, that her eyes "seemed to meet behind the bridge of her nose", and with a napkin tied around her neck (IB, 91).

These people may be far from matching the rather awful Lynch family in Beckett's Watt<sup>27</sup>, but the tendency in the description and its effect is a similar one as there. They are grotesque: They are sad and tragic in their helpless, shivering and trembling old age; skinny and transparent, they are also slightly repulsive. The children are pathetic poor little

cripples and also singularly unattractive.

But the absurdly improbable concentration of the ugly, the repulsive and physically abnormal and the manner in which these are described, give a comic touch to what appears at the first sight merely pathetic and monstrous. And the reaction to this mixture of incompatibles is a twofold one of disgust and amusement.

It is not surprising that the gathering of this unique bunch of people should gradually take on more and more of the qualities of a grotesquely nonsensical and at the same time nightmarish dream. Strangely, absurdly, as can happen only in a dream, they bring not only their dead ones but "all their furniture", too (IB, 84): household utensils, "even individual sections of walls continued to arrive" (IB, 90); a "cheerless little tricycle with orthopaedic attachments" is pushed in; a mirrored wardrobe, which in its turn, "brought with it its own private reflection" (IB, 90) of, among other things, a dropped glove: the glove Marthe is looking for, and that her escort picks up when they leave.

Thus, the scene is set for a family reunion, and as at any family gathering, there is some quarrelling, some whispering, some joking, and some nonsense from the children. But at various points, and without the slightest previous warning, these extraordinary people leave the realm of normality and do and say the most peculiar things; again they behave as one knows only people in dreams to behave. One of Marthe's brothers

"cleared his throat and softly began to sing" (IB,93).  
"'Diomedon, leave the cat alone this instant', said Marthe, 'you strangled one the other day, one every day is too much'" (IB, 94). (The cat does get killed in the end and is carried out on a dustpan). When it is time for them to leave, their exit is just as absurd as their entrance.

And in the light of their peculiar activities even the perfectly normal ones, like whispering, talking, looking for a glove, seem curiously unreal. As in Pinter's plays, the intimate combination of the normal and the abnormal has an amusing and at the same time disturbing effect, and Marthe's grandparents, "shivering, bowing, and holding up the hazy portrait" (IB,96) are about as absurd and as frightening as McCann in The Birthday Party, "tearing a newspaper into five equal strips."<sup>28</sup>

Everything in this scene, facial expressions, and gestures, is described in minute detail and is seen as if in a slow-motion picture:

"Woe, woe!" proclaimed the father-in-law, striking the floor with his cane. Frightened little smiles appeared on the faces of the oldsters. "Don't, daddy, we've been through it a thousand times", Marthe said quietly, and shrugged a chilly shoulder. Her young man offered her a fringed shawl but she, forming the rudiment of a tender smile with one corner of her thin lips, waved away his sensitive hand (IB, 90).

"But tell me, are you sure you're not cold?" Shaking her head negatively, Marthe lowered her soft palm on to his wrist; and taking her hand away immediately, she straightened her dress across the knees and in a harsh whisper called her son, who was bothering his uncles,

who in turn kept pushing him away -  
he was preventing them from listening  
(IB, 91-92).

The conversation seems to proceed slowly, there seem to be long stretches of silence. Again one is tempted to compare the effects of this with those of a Pinter play. Here as there, the slow movement of the action and the long pauses stress on the one hand the meaninglessness and the triviality of a gesture or of a phrase, and on the other hand seem to endow the same gesture and phrase with a new burden of meaning. This is disturbing and disquieting, as it is impossible to find out what that meaning is. Thus, almost imperceptibly, the dream that seemed purely nonsensical and comic at the beginning, becomes gradually more and more oppressive.

For Cincinnatus, the whole occasion is indeed a nightmare, reflecting what torments and depresses him. Marthe is the only person in the world whom he loves, even though she has been unfaithful to him ever since they got married. In a world where he finds no one who is like him, no one to whom he can talk, and no one who understands him, because "there is in the world not a single human who can speak my language; or, more simply, not a single human who can speak; or, even more simply, not a single human" (IB, 85), he is hoping that one day some kind of beautiful relation may be established between himself and Marthe, that she may be the person to help him out of his isolation:

And afterwards - perhaps most of all after-  
wards - I shall love you, and one day we  
shall have a real, all-embracing explanation,

and then perhaps we shall somehow fit together, you and I, and turn ourselves in such a way that we form one pattern, and solve the puzzle: draw a line from point A to point B...without looking, or, without lifting the pencil...or in some other way...we shall connect the points, draw the line, and you and I shall form that unique design for which I yearn (IB, 54).

However, when Marthe comes, he cannot get to her. The others do not let him come near her. When he breaks away from them, there are physical obstacles. Most agonizing is the fact that Marthe does not seem to be aware of him until the very last moment. She talks to the others, but takes no notice of Cincinnatus. As in a dream, when one sees someone but has no means of getting to him, Cincinnatus sees her, and yet communication is impossible.

This nightmare scene anticipates the outcome of the slightly less grotesque and nightmarish but just as depressing last interview he has with Marthe. Both scenes are perfect renderings, in terms of dreams, of what has become of their relation. It appears from them that Cincinnatus' hopes of getting through to Marthe are illusory. She neither loves him, nor does she understand him. She flatly refuses even to make the effort. They live and think on completely different levels. Communication is impossible because Marthe has become (or always has been) part of the unreal world of the others in which Cincinnatus stands no chance of being understood or tolerated. Again, then, the superficially comic dream visions carry the most depressing implications, stressing the fact of Cincinnatus' com-

plete isolation and the fact that there is no way out of it, not even through love.

The second device in the creation of Cincinnatus' unreal imitation-and-dream world are constant references to the theatre and the circus. They are too numerous to list. They are used so consistently throughout the novel as to involve everybody and everything in the "performance" of which Cincinnatus finds himself the frightened and bewildered centre. People wear masks and make-up, false beards and toupees, and costumes of various descriptions. They assume theatrical poses, sing and dance and serve letters on salvers as they do in plays. All the typical items of stage property are there, and natural phenomena, too, sun and moon and clouds, are clearly parts of the stage-scenery, and time itself has nothing to do with real time.

Significantly, it is in terms of a bad and unskilful theatrical production, of low, cheap comedy, and of a bad circus performance, that Cincinnatus' world is described.

The world represented in a play and on the stage may be modelled on our own; it may represent our world faithfully or it may be a stylized or distorted version of it. It may also be a highly fantastic world, quite unrelated to ours, like that of A Midsummer Night's Dream. No matter which it is, a good play and a skilful production can make us believe that what we see on the stage is an integral world with a reality of its own, self-contained, independent of

our own world , and with its own laws and rules. Good theatre can make us forget about all the tricks it has to use in order to achieve this, about the costumes, the make-up and the stage-props. In fact, these can all work together to create a new world and a new and independent reality, in which we can believe and in which we can get caught up and involved.

Bad theatre does not have this effect. If theatre is made so poorly that it is easy to see through all its tricks and devices and if, also, someone comes along and points them out to us, the impression of a reality of the kind described above will not be evoked at all, or it will be quickly destroyed.

This is the case with the "performance" in Invitation to a Beheading. All the items of stage-property are exposed for what they are; they are soberly analysed, and their mechanisms and working, or their refusal to work, laid bare. They are easily recognized as cheap imitations: wax apples and artificial aquamarines, and unbreakable glasses. A true-to-life spider is found to consist of "a round plush body with twitching legs made of springs, and there was, attached to the middle of its back, a long elastic..." (IB, 195). As Cincinnatus is driven to Thriller Square, clouds move across the sky in a naturalistic setting. But they move "jerkily" as only stage clouds do, and it is quite obvious that they are "the same ones... over and over again" (IB, 202). This, of course, is a blunder of the prop man, and

not his only one.

The characters in this production cannot conceal that they are, after all, only playing parts, playing them badly at that. Even their make-up is bad: behind the masks of the prison director and Rodion their own unattractive faces shine through. Rodion behaves as unaccountably as people in operas often do. Without any apparent reason, but energetically, he breaks into song on quite extraordinary occasions; he assumes on the edge of the table the stock pose of a stock character: the "imitation jaunty pose of operatic rakes in the tavern scene", and... rolling his eyes, brandishing the empty mug",..." [sending] the empty mug crushing against the floor...", and suddenly raising both arms and going out (IB, 26), he does all the things an operatic rake is expected to do but which, when exaggerated, can become unbearably ridiculous and absurd.

The few examples must stand for many. From them the technique employed by the author becomes clear. He looks at a theatrical production - and makes us look at it along with him - as one does not normally look at a play. He exposes what is normally carefully hidden. He makes all the tricks transparent. He insists on our seeing the rather repulsive ordinary men behind the actors in their fantastic make-up; he insists on our seeing everything that goes wrong. He looks at things soberly and calls them by their names. The man who looks like one insane, he tells us, is not really insane: he feigns insanity (IB, 200), and



the river we see him fishing in is not a river at all: it is waterless, and he fishes "for non-existent fish" in it (IB, 200).

The effect of such sober comment and analysis is a comic one of alienation, deflation and disillusion. One cannot possibly take what one sees seriously. It cannot be taken for a real world in the sense described above, i.e. a world that can be believed in and accepted on its own terms, one of which one would willingly be a part and whose laws one would be willing to accept and respect. That which tried to make us believe in its own independent existence and reality is exposed as being no more than a very poor example of a theatrical production in which our own world is imitated, and in which even this imitation goes pathetically wrong.

But while to the reader the world of the novel looks like a cheap imitation of our world, Cincinnatus actually sees our very world in the terms that have been described. It is our world and our life that appear to him like a bad theatrical production or "performance", and like an imitation of that ideal reality of which he has always had an intuitive knowledge; a bad imitation, too, no more, in fact, than a "clumsy copy" of his ideal realm. It is ridiculously hideous, cheap and primitive in its unsuccessful attempt to copy that realm; all the tricks it uses are easily seen through; its people are no more than "dummies" (IB, 130), "rag dolls" (IB, 51) and parodies - even children, even Cincinnatus' wife,

and, sadly, even his mother.

This world is ridiculous and comic, but it is also frightening. Its inhabitants are ridiculous, but they are dangerous and cruel. Although they are no more, apparently, than comical dummies and dolls, they believe in their own reality<sup>29</sup>; they have assumed a position of absolute power which they use mercilessly to destroy anyone who is not like them or who doubts their own reality and the reality of what is their world. Mechanical creatures, with no will and no minds of their own absurdly rule over human beings.

The most obvious and most striking example of the fusion of the comic and the threatening and terrifying is of course M'sieur Pierre. When he is first seen, he seems harmless enough:

Seated on a chair, sideways to the table, as still as if he were made of candy, was a beardless fat little man, about thirty years old, dressed in old-fashioned but clean and freshly ironed prison-pyjamas; he was all in stripes - in striped socks and brand-new morocco slippers - and revealed a virgin sole as he sat with one stubby leg crossed over the other and clasped his shin with his plump hands;... his long eyelashes cast shadows on his cherubic cheek, and the whiteness of his wonderful, even teeth gleamed between his crimson lips (IB, 53).

The impression of him as a comic figure is created when he next appears, when his calm and composed and pompous dignity is described in ironically exaggerated terms and forms a comic contrast with his appearance. Tentatively only on this occasion,

inspired by a picture on which he is seen "juggling three apples" (IB, 75), he steps into the role he is to resume later on: he gives a little performance with a deck of cards, "[indulges] in a bit of hocus-pocus" (IB, 76), tells a rather tactless joke, gives another performance with the cards for the ungrateful und unresponsive librarian, and eventually retires, "bowing comically, in imitation of someone" (IB, 79). His role in the production is that of the circus clown.

It is in the cell of this fat comic little man that Cincinnatus discovers in a case, which he at first thinks contains a musical instrument, "a broad shiny axe" (IB, 150) embedded in black velvet. M'sieur Pierre is the executioner. Uniting in his person the clown with a white face, with "a little yellow wig [that can rise] with a comic whistle" (IB, 146), him that brings mirth and laughter; and the executioner, who can fly into a frightening temper, him that brings horror and death, M'sieur Pierre is the most comic and most frightening, in short, the most grotesque figure of them all.

Certain scenes in Bend Sinister closely resemble scenes in Invitation to a Beheading in that they, too, employ the structure of dreams and theatrical devices to stress the irreality of Paduk's state. Inexplicably, or rather, through a miracle possible only in dreams, Krug, on having left Quist, finds himself in his own backyard after walking through some dark and secret passage (BS, 165), much in the

same way in which Cincinnatus finds himself back in his own prison cell after a walk out of the prison and through the town (IB, 17-18).

Theatrical terms are used in the account of Krug's interview with Paduk, which make it appear comic, absurd and unreal. An aide-de-camp, "very muchlike one of those stage valets..." fetches Krug from his home (BS, 124); at Paduk's palace, he is met by "two masked men" (BS, 125); an armchair appears "from a trap near the desk" (BS, 127); Paduk is made up ("beautified" [BS, 128]) before the interview starts; stage-directions interrupt the actual interview, and Paduk "intermittently assumes Renaissance rhetoric ('Nay, do not speak. ... Prithee, go')." <sup>30</sup>

If one does for a moment take the novels for what they appear, namely satires on totalitarian states, the condemnation of Krug and Cincinnatus appears quite logical. For in states of wholly identical souls who all think the same thoughts approved of by the government, their thoughts are not only alien to all the others, but they are also dangerous. A totalitarian government cannot possibly tolerate anyone who sees through its absurdity, who can not only recognize but also expose the principles on which it is based, and prove to it its own irreality and instability. Such knowledge and such thoughts are "forbidden, impossible", and "criminal" (IB, 86); they are not "within legitimate limits" (IB, 33). People who have such thoughts and insist on them and

do not conceal them must die. It is thus that in Bend Sinister, which deals more concretely with political themes<sup>31</sup> than Invitation to a Beheading, the nightmare gets out of control.<sup>32</sup> "Krug is subjected to very literal harassment and shut away in a very material prison"<sup>33</sup>, and is destroyed.

Exactly the same thing seems to happen in Invitation to a Beheading. Cincinnatus is at the end taken to the block, he lies down, spreads out his arms, and the shadow of the swing of the executioner's axe is "already running along the boards" (IB, 206). Yet Invitation to a Beheading has been described as an "optimistic" novel in comparison with the "pessimistic" Bend Sinister.<sup>34</sup> The solution of this apparent contradiction lies in the fact, already mentioned above, that the basic concern of Invitation to a Beheading is not of a political but of a metaphysical nature. Cincinnatus feels imprisoned not in one particular state, but in this world and in this life whose reality he doubts, which he sees measured by man-made time ("... every hour the watchman washes off the old hand and daubs on a new one" on the blank dial of the prison clock [IB, 122]) and at the end of which there is death, although its exact hour is horribly uncertain. Thus it becomes clear that the account of Cincinnatus' imprisonment cannot be taken literally, and that it is, as Field says, "an enactment of the aphorism... 'the world as a prison'."<sup>35</sup>

All those scenes, then, in which unaccountably and

in a dreamlike fashion his prison seems to be converted into a boat, a laboratory, or the setting of a family gathering, now find a definite explanation. Cincinnatus never really is in prison, but he feels imprisoned wherever he goes, whatever he does, and he sees his enemies and his jailers in everybody. No matter whether he goes for a walk in the town (IB, 15-17), or, together with other "travellers", climbs a tower to enjoy a view (IB, 37), no matter, too, whether he attends some social gathering "at the suburban house of the deputy city manager" (IB, 166ff.), he always feels surrounded by them, and even his home is part of the prison that is the world: "Come along home", says the director, and takes him back to his cell (IB, 39):

I am here through an error - not in this prison specifically - but in this whole terrible, striped world; a world which seems not a bad example of amateur craftsmanship, but is in reality calamity, horror, madness, error... (IB, 82).

Nobody, of course, but Cincinnatus is aware of this state of affairs: "'What do you mean 'escape'? Where to?', asked M'sieur Pierre in amazement" (IB, 104), when Cincinnatus suggests that they escape together from the prison.

However, Cincinnatus' view of the world and of life as a clumsy theatrical production, as a dream and as a prison carries within itself a possibility of escape and salvation. For Cincinnatus being the only one to see through the nature of things, he is

also the only one who can imagine an alternative. He, as the only one, can imagine the original of the "clumsy copy", the wonderful reality behind the base dream images, and the freedom in his "native realm".

Cincinnatus' mother has an astonishing tale about some crazy objects that were popular when she was a child. Called nonnons, they were "absolutely absurd objects, shapeless, mottled, pockmarked, knobby things" (IB, 123) that "made no sense to the eye" (IB, 123) until they were placed in front of equally crazy and incomprehensible mirrors. These mirrors matched the nonnons to perfection and reflected them in such a way that

... a marvellous thing happened; minus by minus equalled plus, everything was restored, everything was fine, and the shapeless speckledness became in the mirror a wonderful, sensible image; flowers, a ship, a person, a landscape" (IB, 123).

Robert Alter sees in the transformation that the mirrors effect a "model of the astonishing alchemy that imagination works on formless reality", particularly an artistic imagination; indeed, he sees in the mirrors an image of Nabokov's own art.<sup>36</sup>

It is also possible, then, to see in them an image of Cincinnatus' imagination that transforms the parodies and senseless visions that surround him into the real and beautiful originals of the world of his own dreams. He himself says quite early in the novel that it is only imagination that can save him:

...  
"This is curious", said M'sieur Pierre.  
"What are these hopes, and who is this  
saviour?"  
"Imagination", replied Cincinnatus  
(IB, 103-104),

but it takes him a long time to be really aware of  
the fact that imagination has indeed saved him.

"Everything has duped me", he writes, "all of this  
theatrical pathetic stuff" (IB, 189), and this is  
the first indication that he is becoming aware how  
his salvation can be (in fact, has been) effected.  
He has seen through the absurdity and irreality of  
everything around him, and yet he has taken it  
too seriously. He has allowed himself to be duped  
by it. He has even "sought salvation within its  
confines" (IB, 189): he has relied on Emmie to save  
him; he has for a moment believed in the reality of  
his mother and her emotions; he has sought Marthe's  
love; and above all, he has never quite stopped  
playing a part in the "production" - the part that  
was expected of him.<sup>37</sup> Because he felt that he was  
being watched, he suppressed his feelings of re-  
bellion, his attacks of passion and temper. He  
remained calm outwardly as was right and lawful,  
and allowed only his double to do what he dared  
not do openly. It was only his double that crumpled  
and hurled newspapers: "the double, the gangrel,  
that accompanies each of us - you, and me, and him  
over there - doing what we would like to do...  
but cannot..." (IB, 21). Only his double stepped  
with his naked sole on Rodion's upturned face



(IB, 26) and only his double stamped his feet hysterically in frustration and fury and rebellion, while outwardly he remained calm and obedient and submissive (IB, 35). Now that he has come to realize all this, he can free himself by quite simply refusing to play this part any longer.

Also, even though throughout Cincinnatus has not been aware of it, feeling all the time that his words expressed only inadequately what he wanted to say, he has, in what he has written, given substance to his inner reality<sup>38</sup>, and all of a sudden this truth flashes across his mind: When they come to fetch him for the execution, he is surprised, he is still not prepared for it, even though it is what he has been expecting all along, and he asks to be allowed "to finish writing something" (IB, 194):

... but then he frowned, straining his thoughts and understood that everything had in fact been written already (IB, 194).

It is with this thought, too, with this dawning awareness that he has created something real and durable, that the disintegration of the mock-reality around him sets in and that he is freed from it. What he has written amounts to a piece of art in which he has given shape and substance to something superior to the dream-and-imitation world around him, and in which he has at the same time destroyed and abolished this same unreal world by exposing it and its absurdity. It is thus, that, when he is taken away to the

execution, the unreal world around him disintegrates. When Cincinnatus walks out of his cell, it is no longer there (IB, 196). The fortress crumbles (IB, 197), and everything in the town and in the place of the execution - a poor piece of stage-scenery - comes apart bit by bit. Trees crash down, the platform eventually collapses, the executioner dwindles into a tiny larva (IB, 207).

It is the end of the production which Cincinnatus insists on acting out (or imagining) that is more difficult to cope with than anything else. Cincinnatus is afraid.

He realized that his fear was dragging him precisely into the false logic of things that had gradually developed around him (IB, 198);

he has come to know and understand that it is all a masquerade, absurd and unreal, which has no power over him, and yet he cannot rid himself of this "choking, wrenching, implacable fear" (IB, 198).

But Invitation to a Beheading does not end on a note of horror for death is not what Cincinnatus has been dreading all along. On the contrary, it is on the point of dying when he is counting to ten, that he overcomes all fear:

... with a clarity he had never experienced before - at first almost painful, so suddenly did it come, but then suffusing him with joy, he reflected: why am I here? Why am I lying like this? And, having asked himself these simple questions, he answered them by getting up and looking around (IB, 207).

He has been "duped" by the common notion of death as by everything else. Now death - the execution - is for

Cincinnatus no longer what it is to all the others. It is not the end, painful, horrible and definitive. It is on the contrary what it must logically be on his scale of values: it is the moment at which he is definitely freed from the mock-real world that has so long imprisoned him, and it is the moment of awakening to his own reality, to that realm "where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (IB, 208).

After all that has been said it can be concluded that the execution, like Cincinnatus' imprisonment, takes place only in his imagination, and this definitely establishes the relation between Invitation to a Beheading and those other novels whose main characters are preoccupied with life, with its pattern and meaning and with death, and who, to find out, "rehearse" their own deaths in their works of art. They do this because they have realized that it is only on the point of death that knowledge about what moves them can be obtained; only then is the pattern complete and can be seen through, and only then can the mystery of death itself be unravelled. As Krug tentatively formulates: "... death is the instantaneous gaining of knowledge..." (BS, 155). This proves true for Shade in Pale Fire, whose art allows him to distinguish a sensible pattern not only in his own life but also in the hereafter, and for Mr. R. in Transparent Things for whom, on the point of (imagined) death everything falls into place, for whom all riddles are solved, and who comes to understand death

as the "[passing] from one state of being into another."<sup>39</sup> Neither of them sees death as the end of everything, nor does Cincinnatus C. His view is perhaps the most optimistic of all. Grim though his view of life is, death is for him an awakening, a passing on into a better and more real world. He can therefore cross out the word "death" in his manuscript (IB, 190), and the epigraph of the novel by the imaginary poet Delalande is fully applicable to Cincinnatus' experience. His imagination and his art have shown him a way out of the prison of this world and this life and out of the prison of time, and has furnished him with proof of his immortality.

It must be remembered at this point what power Nabokov attributes to the imagination and to art and what belief he has in their ability to answer questions that both science and philosophy have left unanswered. Cincinnatus' intense imagination prepares the ground for an insight that surpasses common knowledge. Imagination and art with him (and with Mr. R.) become vision, so that, even though he does not experience death physically, his mind is yet able to apprehend the mental experience death may bring with it and find therein salvation and peace.

Krug, although a philosopher, never attains this knowledge and this comfort. Confronted, as has been stated, with very concrete harassments, which prove too much to cope with, locked away in a very material prison, he also fails to overcome the metaphysical doubts and harassments that torture him.

He speculates about time in much the same way as Nabokov himself and other Nabokov characters. Like Van Veen, for example, and Mr. R. he denies the existence of the future: "... the basic element of the future... is its complete non-existence" (BS, 39). Like Nabokov himself and like Van Veen, he abhors the thought of the eternal nothingness after life:

My intelligence does not accept the transformation of physical discontinuity into the permanent continuity of a non-physical element escaping the obvious law, nor can it accept 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 infinite nothingness (BS, 87-88).

This, it is true, is followed by the remark "Unquote" (BS, 88), but it fits in with Krug's other ideas on the same theme.

The quotation just used in connection with Invitation to a Beheading continues on a much less confident and optimistic note:

... death is either the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge... or absolute nothingness, nichto (BS, 155-156),

and it seems that it is this idea as much as his concrete sorrows that drives Krug mad, or rather, induces the author to take pity on him and cause instantaneous madness. Unlike the artists, unlike, also, Cincinnatus C., the philosopher sees no way out of the prison of this world and out of the prison of time, and he sees no way of coping with and overcoming death:

Krug could take aim at a flock of the most popular and sublime human thoughts and bring down a wild goose any time. But he could not kill death.

The immortality bestowed upon him is only "a slippery sophism, a play upon words" (BS, 217).

A D A

Ada<sup>1</sup> has more than any other Nabokov novel puzzled, perplexed, and, in a few cases, even annoyed critics, and it has caused one of them

...to part company with a writer whose work I have enjoyed so often and so much until now. But I fear that I shall not be among the Happy Few who will survive this latest and bizarre excursion.<sup>2</sup>

This is what Philip Toynbee says at the end of a review in which he does admit that "Of course, of course, there are marvellous things in Ada, such as "a wealth of exquisitely fine writing", "a wide variety of different narrative devices", "a massive homogeneity of tone", but in which he deplores "all the knowing literary references; all the wise saws; the interminable instances;" and also "the perpetual demonstration of agility and skill -", and "the constant implication that we haven't understood the half of it."<sup>3</sup>

A more recent critic, Douglas Fowler, adds a number of complaints to those of the early reader Toynbee. He describes Ada as "a...mannered, self-referential encyclopedia [which] frequently seems to represent an attempt on Nabokov's part to satisfy a series of private fantasies."<sup>4</sup> On Antiterra, he says, "all of Nabokov's private interests achieve public importance."<sup>5</sup> - "Nabokov uses Antiterra to settle several old scores, largely cultural, bookish and idiosyncratic in nature"<sup>6</sup>, and sacrifices "all mimetic and dramatic interest" in Ada to a number of "semiprivate

executions and other authorial intrusions."<sup>7</sup> Fowler adds to this list of complaints "the unpleasantness of Van and Ada"<sup>8</sup> whom he describes as "stylized fantasy-figures."<sup>9</sup> All this, he concludes, makes both the situations and the characters of the novel unconvincing<sup>10</sup> and "makes it impossible for the reader to have any real sense of participation in [the] story."<sup>11</sup> What remains is "a textbook for a course in Nabokov", "naked Nabokoviana"<sup>12</sup>, demanding "the Nabokov specialist: a reader with sympathy, access to a good library, and a great deal of time."<sup>13</sup>

All of these things are true only to a certain degree and should not lead to the harsh judgement of Fowler, who calls Ada "a very imperfect book."<sup>14</sup> The elements to which he objects constitute only the surface appearance of the novel, and will be seen to have very specific functions, just as the unrealistic mode of narration of which Fowler complains. Fowler's description of Ada as "Nabokoviana" cannot be accepted unless the word is given a more comprehensive meaning than Fowler assigns to it. As L. L. Lee has pointed out, the novel contains indeed Nabokov's signature: "Ada or Ardor: a Family Chronicle, a novel that contains another title within itself, Van's Book, which is Nabokov in anagram..."<sup>15</sup> (Nabokov has been seen to make his presence clear in a similar way in the Preface to Lolita). Quite clearly, then, Nabokov's is the ultimate voice behind the book, and its concerns are not just Van's but Nabokov's own. However, they are not so much the rather obvious elements that



combine to form the surface texture of the novel, but a whole cluster of concerns which are central to Nabokov's whole oeuvre. Time is the central one in this novel, and around it are grouped reality, love, death, memory, and art. It is in this sense that Ada can be described as "Nabokoviana".

This also provides an answer to Fowler's complaint that it is difficult to develop any real sense of participation in the story. This is a true enough statement, and the difficulty arises from precisely the reasons which Fowler quotes: Van and Ada are unlikable, and somehow it all remains rather abstract. Also, the overwhelming amount of what Fowler calls "Nabokoviana" and the strange and confusing background from which the story must be disengaged are indeed responsible for this effect. But with the central preoccupations of the novel in mind, one can assume that it is the author's intention to make participation difficult. One can assume that he deliberately gives the story its distant and somewhat unreal quality so as to prevent it from becoming the novel's main issue and from absorbing the reader's attention by involving him emotionally.

Much of the surface texture of the novel and of the story's background is not only strange and confusing, but also comic. Chief among the elements that make it so is again parody. Parody starts with the family tree and does not end before the last page, on which Van's memoirs fade into a mock-serious blurb praising "the joyousness and Arcadian innocence" of

"the 'Ardis' part of the book", which, it says, have no equal in world literature ("save maybe Count Tolstoy's reminiscences"), praising also the "spanking pace" at which the novel proceeds, and sending the reader scrambling back in search of the details which it counts among the "adornment[s] of the chronicle" (588-589). The family tree, ostensibly included to help the reader get the relations between the characters straight, not only does not provide this help but is actually misleading, and it wickedly confirms the wrong conclusions of those readers who are not among Fowler's Nabokov specialists; who are either not used to the author's tricks and therefore do not watch out for and collect and piece together the inconspicuous hints and clues that establish the real relations, or who do not have "a great deal of time" and therefore simply miss them. The family tree makes Van and Ada appear to be first cousins, whereas a careful collation of dates and place names and other hints reveals them to be brother and sister - offspring of Marina and Demon's affair - which the clever children themselves realize quite early in the novel.

Within the brackets that these two parodies at the beginning and at the end provide, there are a great many others. "'Old story-telling devices', said Van, 'may be parodied only by very great and inhuman artists...'" (246), and he evidently takes himself for one, for he parodies them all. Into the construction of his story goes

...a string of stock scenes from the traditional novel - the young man's return to the ancestral manor, the festive picnic, the formal dinner, a midnight blaze on the old estate, the distraught hero's flight at dawn from hearth and house as the result of a misunderstanding, the duel, the hero's profligacy in the great metropolis, and so forth.<sup>16</sup>

Appel points out how "Moments from Tolstoy become dazzling set pieces in Veen: the first kiss, the fateful letter, the tearful farewell."<sup>17</sup> "...everything in his story is taking place against a background of jaded literary conventions..."<sup>18</sup> But Van is aware of this all the time and points it out to the reader, thereby at once parodistically revealing the weakness of the old story-telling devices, stressing the fact that they have been by now used too long and too often, casting an ironic light on his own story and saving it from becoming like those he is imitating. He is aware of all the conventional turns and tricks that occur in his own book and exposes them in his comments: "...as Jane Austen might have phrased it" (8); "...the romantic mansion appeared on the gentle eminence of old novels" (35); "A coachman...came straight from a pretzel-string of old novels" (154); "It was - to continue the novelistic structure - a long, joyful, delicious dinner..." (250); "When lightning struck two days later (an old image that is meant to intimate a flash-back to an old barn)..." (284). Blanche speaks quaint and stilted English that is "spoken only in obsolete novels" (292), and Lucette "returned the balled handkerchief of many an old romance to her bag..." (369). These are only

a few examples out of a great many more; and there are instances when Nabokov (through Van) does indeed perform some of the "semiprivate executions" that worry Fowler, such as when he mocks at Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago by turning it into "Les Amours du Docteur Mertvago, a mystical romance by a pastor" (55). "Mertvago", as C.Proffer explains, means "dead", whereas "Zhivago" in the real title means "alive", "living", and there is, of course the parody of the religious concerns of the novel.<sup>19</sup> D.H.Lawrence is abolished together with the author of Fanny Hill: "...the chatter, the lays and the fannies of rotting pornographers..." (270); T.S.Eliot is ridiculed (505-506), and G.L.Borges appears as "Osberg (Spanish writer of pretentious fairy-tales and mystico-allegoric anecdotes, highly esteemed by short-shift thesallists)" (344).

However, Van is not always so outspoken about his parodies; the reader and critic has to spot them for himself. Alfred Appel has pointed out that the "thorny" first three chapters "surely parody the reassuring initial pages of those traditional novels...which prepare the reader for the story about to unfold by supplying him with the neat and complete psychological, social, and moral pre-histories of fictional characters."<sup>20</sup> The three chapters do provide glimpses of the pre-histories of the characters, but they do anything but unfold these histories neatly. They require the "rereader", invoked on page nineteen, to disentangle the complicated genealogy, made all the

more confusing by the great number of unfamiliar, multilingual names, doublings (such as Walter D. Veen), and the fact that even the chronological order is soon abandoned. It is only preserved on the first few pages, in parodistic imitation of those traditional novels mentioned by Appel, which are "so anachronistic to Nabokov."<sup>21</sup> After that, the rereader finds himself piecing together from vague allusions what happened years ago.

Nabokov knows what the reader's expectations and reading habits are. He has been seen parodying them in Lolita and he parodies them again (through Van) in Ada. As Appel shows, he does not allow the reader to be concerned with "What Happens Next?"<sup>22</sup> The outcome of the story is revealed quite early in Ada's notes which furnish a sort of running commentary to Van's memoirs, inserting mild, and sometimes "vehement" (97) objections to something Van has just said, correcting or specifying some statement, commenting on his age ("Van, thank goodness, is ninety now" [104]), sometimes even taking over from him for a page or so (70-71). These, plus some editor's notes, such as "Marginal jotting in Ada's 1965 hand; crossed out lightly in her latest wavering one", settle as early as page fifteen that, whatever may happen to them before their reunion, Ada and Van will live happily together to a very old age; and "to reveal the outcome before the story is barely underway is of course to ruin it" - at least for "the old-fashioned reader."<sup>23</sup> This reader will certainly also be upset

when all of a sudden "the spanking pace" of the story slackens. In Part II it seems to stand still altogether. This part starts with a verbatim rendering of Ada's letters to Van (Nabokov ridicules the epistolary novel in Despair<sup>24</sup>, and Van himself comments ironically on the "novelistic theme of written communications" [287]). They are followed by a bit of science fiction: Van's Letters from Terra; the "Floramor" fantasy of Eric van Veen; a comic rendering of a classroom lecture on dreams, with the usual digs at Freud; and the detailed description of Kim's photographs. And it is at the most critical point of the chronicle, and therefore at a moment of great suspense, namely when Ada "donated her collections to a National Park museum and traveled by air to Switzerland for an 'exploratory interview' with fifty-two-year-old Van Veen" (532), that the flow of the story is wickedly interrupted again for the most difficult and intellectual bit of the novel, namely Van's treatise on The Texture of Time (535ff.).

From time to time jokes are directed at those readers who are led by the subject to expect "Casanovanic situation[s]" (418) and their explicit descriptions. The use of the code, helpfully explained (160f.) after it has just been used (157), suggests that the action is getting too incendiary to be expressed in normal print, so that the harmlessness of what the decoded passage yields: "...this attire was hardly convenient for making his way through the brush and crossing a brook to reach Ada in a natural bower

of aspens; they embraced,..." (157) is a very comic anti-climax and surely a letdown for "a certain type of tourist" (419).

Nabokov must have had the same tourist in mind when he turned the scene which brings Ada and Lucette and Van together on Ada's and Van's "tremendous bed" (417), and which would of course have lent itself to a "Casanovanic" description, into a somewhat pedantic and detached description of an "unsigned and unframed" (420) painting.

One suspects that this time a trap has even been planted for the "specialist", who, having learnt that in a Nabokov novel practically everything matters and adds to the significance of the whole, tends to pause and puzzle over things to make them yield their "meaning". "How odd", Marina muses, bewildered by "a dozen elderly townsmen, in dark clothes, shabby and uncouth", who settle down for a "modest collazione" quite near the picnickers who are celebrating Ada's sixteenth birthday, refuse to be chased away by Van although he tries half a dozen languages on them, mutter "in a totally incomprehensible jargon", are identified by Dan as a "collation of shepherds" and finally disappear without much ado, leaving only a "stiff collar and reptilian tie...hanging from a locust branch" (268-277). "How odd", the reader muses with Marina, but for once there is something that really does not seem to have any significance, and Nabokov (or Van) has foreseen the reader's bewilderment and mocks at it: "a most melancholy and

meaningful picture - but meaning what, what?" (269)

The most obvious parodistic violation of old literary practices is the happy ending of Ada, which, at least for the reader who is rooted in convention, is quite the wrong thing, because, after all, Ada's and Van's is an incestuous relationship and should lead to guilt and punishment instead. The parodistic intention is emphasized by the many allusions to Chateaubriand, whose story of René and Amélie serves as an ironic foil.<sup>25</sup> Ladore, Bryant's Castle, the St. Malô fishersong that Lucette sings, can all be traced back to Chateaubriand. Ada reads "a story by Chateaubriand about a pair of romantic siblings" (133) and sometimes calls Van "cher, trop cher René" (131). The mirroring becomes quite elaborate with Mlle Larivière's screenplay, based on a novel of hers, "about mysterious children doing strange things in old parks" (249). The novel's title is Les Enfants Maudits, its hero is called René (198), its setting is Bryant's château (205), and in the film version of it Marina is to play the children's mother.<sup>26</sup>

Appel points out another complex allusion fitting into the pattern of incest, in which Byron and Chateaubriand are cleverly linked. Byron is brought in because of his incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta. His daughter's name was Augusta Ada, and she is simply called "Ada" in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.<sup>27</sup> Also, Chateaubriand claims in Mémoires d'outre-tombe that "René was conceived under the same elm in Middlesex, England, where Byron s'abandonnait



aux caprices de son âge." Van lies near an "immense elm" when he reads Ada's copy of Atala (89), another of Chateaubriand's works with an overtone of incest.<sup>28</sup> All these allusions combine to evoke associations with the Romantic mal de siècle which pervades Chateaubriand's tales, the melancholy of René and Amélie, their feeling of guilt when they become aware of their passion, and their respective fates. But, as has already been said, all this is there in the first instance to provide an ironic foil. Instead of René's longing for death, there is Van's denunciation of it (297). Never for a moment does guilt enter into Ada's and Van's feelings. On the contrary, they blissfully enjoy being together, although they know the nature of their relationship, and instead of the convent and the wilds for Amélie and René respectively, there is a triumphant reunion for Ada and Van. (One might however see a further irony, and a parody of the practice of traditional love stories, in the fact that Ada and Van are fifty and fifty-two respectively when they are eventually united).

The parodies make an emotional involvement difficult, if not impossible, and two more factors are fundamental in the creation of this effect: the strangeness of the world that Van and Ada inhabit, and their own unpleasantness. John Updike complains about the world of Ada and says that Nabokov has created a "nulliverse", which is in his opinion something an author should not do because

...fiction is earthbound, and while in decency the names of small towns and middling cities must be faked, metropolises and nations are unique and should be given their own names or none.<sup>29</sup>

Antiterra is not wholly unfamiliar. There are elements in it that are recognizably elements of the world we inhabit, but our world is not described realistically as in traditional novels; rather, Ada presents a mirror image of our world that is strangely distorted and out of focus. The map of Antiterra (or Demonia) is very different from that of Terra, which exists only in rumours and deranged minds and is strongly debated. The boundaries of countries as we know them have got hopelessly jumbled, the most spectacular difference being that America and Russia are "poetical" rather than "political" notions. Together they constitute Antiterrestrial "Amerussia" which is governed by Abraham Milton (18). The European part of the British Commonwealth extends "from Scoto-Scandinavia to the Riviera" (19), and there is on Antiterra "an independent inferno" called "Tartary", which "...spread from the Baltic and Black seas to the Pacific Ocean, [and] was touristically unavailable..." (20).

Antiterrestrial dates have no more to do with our calendar than Demonian geography with our maps; Appel advises the reader to put them in quotation marks.<sup>30</sup> The action takes place in some "nineteenth" century and extends into the early "twentieth", but neither is fully recognizable. Amazing gadgets are in use, such as "hydrodynamic telephones" (23) which, when transmitting a long-distance call, send all the water-

pipes into "borborygmie convulsions" (260); motorcars "of an early 'runabout' type" (79) are used side by side with calèches and charabancs (78) and the occasional "jikker" (a sort of flying carpet) (44); there are "automatic dorophones" (16) and "Sonarolas" (313) and a thing called "dorotelly" (455); as early as "1892" Van can tell Ada to "charter a plane" (386).

All this combines into an abstruse setting which is comic in its own terms, but which also mimicks parodistically the background of traditional novels, using their method of exact and sometimes pedantic description, but filling the old frame with new and unusual material. But most important is its function of adding to the effect described above. In the context of what has been said it seems logical that Nabokov should not have created a world in which the reader would feel comfortably at home and at ease, and as the description of Antiterre has shown, he is successfully prevented from doing so from the first page on.

Even if the reader tried to overcome all these obstacles and to become involved emotionally, Ada and Van themselves would thwart the attempt. Unlike Lucette, who is described as a normal enough child, with a natural and spontaneous admiration for Van, puzzled by strange words, and with no outstanding gifts, Ada and Van are from the beginning indeed "stylized". Ada, looking back on the earliest stages of their love, speaks of their "prodigious individual awareness and young genius", which made them "a unique

super-imperial couple", different from, and, she implies, infinitely superior to, "billions of brilliant couples" (71). It is their very genius that makes them so implausible as children. Ada, aged twelve, knows everything about orchids and butterflies and literature, and talks about them in an impossibly stilted style, and yet casually, relegating bits of astounding knowledge to subordinate clauses, her "spectacular handling" of which even Van acknowledges (61). One example may suffice:

...'I can add,' said the girl, 'that the petal belongs to the common Butterfly Orchis; that my mother was even crazier than her sister; and that the paper flower so cavalierly dismissed is a perfectly recognizable reproduction of an early-spring sanicle that I saw in profusion on hills in coastal California last February. Dr. Krolik, our local naturalist, to whom you, Van, have referred, as Jane Austen might have phrased it, for the sake of rapid narrative information (you recall Brown, don't you, Smith?) has determined the example I brought back from Sacramento to Ardis, as the Bear-Foot, B,E,A,R, my love, not my foot or yours, or the Stabian flower-girl's - an allusion, which your father, who, according to Blanche, is also mine, would understand like this' (American finger-snap) (8).

"A pretty prig", Van calls her in retrospect (51) and "impossibly pretentious" (43), and there is no denying the truth of his statements.

As to genius, Van is quite her equal, even though, except for literature, his interests and talents are different from hers, and singly or together they confuse and dumbfound not only Lucette but all their elders by their precocious ways. Van, as Sissela Bok puts it, is "blessed with every visible talent."<sup>31</sup> At quite a tender age (nine) he "adored...Gilberte

Swann et la Lesbie de Catulle" (66); he is, when he first comes to Ardis at fourteen, "a schoolboy of genius" (59); he is "the first American to have won (at seventeen!) the Dudley Prize (for an essay on Insanity and Eternal Life)" (186); and at thirty-one he has gained "'honors' and a 'position' that many unbelievably laborious men do not reach at fifty" (471). He publishes several works, among them an anti-Freudian paper: The Farce of Group Therapy in Sexual Maladjustment (577), but considers himself an "artist" rather than a "savant" (471) and thinks of his publications as "buoyant and bellicose exercises in literary style" (578). Almost casually it is mentioned that Van is also an excellent tennis-player and table-tennis player, a first-rate chess player, and that he is good at fencing and shooting. And, of course, he has the singular talent of not only walking but literally dancing on his hands, a talent, however, which he loses at eighteen after a duel.

Fowler quotes Nabokov himself as calling Ada and Van "rather horrible people"<sup>32</sup>, and it is difficult to contradict him and all the critics who share his opinion, for while they may excel in awareness and genius, Van and Ada are, even at an early age (and remain later in life) inferior with regard to human qualities, although Ada has some redeeming traits.

As was stated above, Ada considers herself and Van as an immensely superior couple, a view which, quite obviously, they hold of themselves even as youngsters, and which makes "their conversations reek of mutual

congratulation."<sup>33</sup> It also induces them to take an arrogant view of things outside their own interests, and encourages in them an attitude of condescension towards others. Van is called a "young fop" (304) and "angry young demon" (301), which epithets neatly describe both his boundless self-confidence and "princely sense that everything is open to him"<sup>34</sup>, and his complete lack of self-restraint and his cruelty, to which even Ada is provoked to object on some occasions (403,406,530).

Ada's and Van's only preoccupations outside their relationship being sensuous and aesthetic pleasures, their relations with other persons are devoid of human sentiments. They use others, damaging and sometimes destroying them. Only those survive who, like Cordula and Van's countless women, can accept and follow the rules on which their conduct is based. Those who seek real involvement and sentiment in their relations with Van and Ada are hurt, the saddest example being of course Lucette, whom their behaviour drives to suicide.

Ada and Van are thus shown divested of almost all "normal" human characteristics. They are shown exclusively in terms of their genius, of what critics have called their unpleasantness and cruelty, and of their love for each other, and it is in this sense that they are Fowler's "stylized fantasy-figures". It will appear later that they are stylized also insofar as they are from the first conceived as ideal lovers, and in view of this their incest will appear

in quite a new light and defy all "moral" comment and judgement.

One intention behind all these devices, and behind the parodies in particular, can be said to be the same that V describes as giving Sebastian Knight's works their characteristic quality:

...[he] was ever hunting out the things which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread...<sup>35</sup>

Again like Sebastian Knight, Nabokov puts in their places something new and original, something that has not been so used in the past as to be indissolubly linked in the reader's mind with some conventional association. The result is what Fowler deplores: a lack of any "real sense of participation in the story", but in exchange for that,

Through parody and self-parody...and by parodying the reader's conception of 'story' - his stereotyped expectations and preoccupation with 'plot' machinations - Nabokov frees him to experience a fiction intellectually, aesthetically, ecstatically.<sup>36</sup>

Thus it appears that, far from being a weakness, as Fowler implies, the story's distant and unreal quality is, in fact, an essential trait of the novel, fully intended and consciously created by the author.

The analyses of the other novels have shown that the intellectual, aesthetic and ecstatic enjoyment cannot be seen as the only experience given the reader by a Nabokov novel. Along with the insights into their artistic qualities the novels also grant insights into various philosophical problems and Nabokov's handling of them. The central concerns of Ada were named above,

and the same artistic devices that free the reader to experience the novel intellectually and aesthetically as a piece of art also put him in a position to experience its philosophical concerns and content more fully.

The thesis that the philosophical content is the main issue of the novel seems to be supported by the fact that e v e r y t h i n g in it is stylized, and that an artificial pattern underlies the whole work. The parodies: "old story-telling devices", "set pieces", the old-fashioned formal construction of the first chapters, the family tree, the happy ending, and all the others, are the most obvious elements creating an artificial and stylized surface texture.

The cast of the characters, too, and many other elements, are affected. Aqua and Marina marry first cousins, both called Walter D. Veen, who not only share Aqua's and Marina's birthday (January 5th), but are also both born in the same year (1838). January 5th is moreover the date at which Demon and Marina's affair starts.

Like Ada and Van, all these characters are seen in terms of so very few essential traits as to appear hardly human at all. Of Aqua's "useless existence" (26) nothing much is disclosed except some details of her madness and of her suicide during a rare period of "mental repose" (27). Dan is more of a non-person than anybody else. An opulent but dull art dealer with no interests, who appears at Ardis only for occasional weekend stays, he is absent-minded, vague, slightly funny (in fact, he is at one point described in terms



of a comic strip cartoon [124]), and his life is "a mixture of the ready-made and the grotesque" (433). His Boschean death is the only remarkable thing about him.

Aqua's sister Marina is described as "essentially a dummy in human disguise" (252) with a "screen-corrupted mind" (253). Her thoughts centre on two things to the exclusion of nearly everything else: her career on the stage and on the screen, and her affairs. Even these she tends to see in theatrical terms, such as her affair with Demon, to which she applies the title of her cinema hit: A Torrid Affair (253). All its emotional implications she has discarded as "mere scenery"; it is all "easily packed, labeled 'Hell' and freighted away" (253); and such infrequent emotional reminders as do affect her, remain vague and are put off: "Someday, she mused, one's past must be put in order. Retouched, retaken" (253). She has no affection for her family, is in turn ignored by them most of the time (262-263), and Demon finds it impossible even "to realize,..., that there was a woman whom he had intolerably loved..." (251).

There are a few moments at which Demon emerges as a somewhat more "normal" human character than Aqua and Dan and Marina. One of them is the moment which has just been mentioned, at which the "complete collapse of the past" (251) grieves him and at which he realizes with something like amazement that, once an affair is over, "... the human part of one's affection seemed to be swept away with the dust of the inhuman

passion, in a wholesale operation of demolition" (252). Van sharing a number of his father's talents and his "demon blood" (20), there exists between them a relation of mutual love, which in Van takes the form of "adoration" which remains unchanged even in his very old age (237). Apart from these moments, however, Demon is conspicuous only for his innumerable affairs and his immorality, shared again by Van.

The only somewhat "human" figure to emerge is Lucette. But though she plays such a great part in the story, and though Van thinks of her as "fantastically intricate" (471), even her description is limited to only a few aspects of her personality. One of them is expressed in the adjectives applied to her: "neutral" (36), "guileless" (127), "tidy" (203), "poor" (280), "trustful" (281), "naïve", "patient" (378), "loyal", "simple" (415). The other aspect is her love for Van, which, as it is hopeless, plunges her into loneliness and despair, makes her life dull and empty and blank, and in the end drives her to commit suicide.

The stylisation is carried further by a conspicuous pattern of colours, interpreted as symbolically significant by Bobbie Ann Mason.<sup>37</sup> Ada is mostly seen in black and white, sometimes in black. Lucette, whose colour is green (e.g. 64,280,410,414) later sometimes takes to Ada's black (367,460), and for her suicide dresses in black and yellow (492). These are the same colours that Aqua wears for her suicide; that Ada is wearing when Van leaves her on discovering her infidelity (295), and they are also the colours of Ada's

and Van's divans and cushions (41,425).

A host of other elements go into the creation of a highly organized and artificial pattern, such as cross-references to other novels by Nabokov, foreshadowings, repetitions (though slightly distorted) of crucial scenes, and internal mirrors. Among these are paintings, the plays and films in which Marina appears, Mlle Larivière's stories, but, most conspicuous of all, Van's own works, in particular his Letters from Terra and his philosophical treatise on The Texture of Time. About this work he says,

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 a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction (562-563).

It will turn out by and by that this is in fact a very apt description and explanation of Ada, and it will serve to show that the artificial surface pattern of the novel has indeed the function that has been ascribed to it.

A little earlier the setting of Ada was described as a strangely distorted image of our own world with some decidedly comic aspects. This description needs some specification. In Ada "...the entire universe has been re-imagined, including Space-Time."<sup>38</sup> This universe consists of two worlds: Antiterra (or Demonia) and Terra. On the surface appearance of it, these two worlds are clearly separated, the more so as the

existence of Terra is the subject of debate and accepted only by deranged minds "...in support and token of their own irrationality" (18). By and by, however, it turns out that the two worlds are closely related, and this is one of the facts that combine to make Ada, which has by one critic been called "...surely one of the sunniest works of fiction written in this century"<sup>39</sup>, and by another "the most happily loony work since Alice"<sup>40</sup>, a very sad work indeed: it appears from them that the abstruse and comic surface of the novel and the story of Ada and Van, "unreal" and abstract though it may seem, reflect indeed on factual reality, and that they are the artful and artistic disguise of what seems to be a very disenchanted view of life and of human existence.

Terra the Fair, the "Other World" which in sick minds gets confused with the "Next World" and "the Real World in us and beyond us", and in which they imagine "a rainbow mist of angelic spirits" (21), is not really such a heavenly place at all. Ostensibly a piece of science fiction, Van's Letters from Terra, and the movie that is based on it, reflect twentieth century history: "a succession of wars and revolutions" (580), including the 1914-1918 World War and preparations for "a conflict on an even more spectacular scale" (581), and they feature among others "Athaulf the Future" ("Athaulf Hindler" in the film version) (581), "...[who] was said to be in the act of transforming a gingerbread Germany into a great country of speedways, immaculate soldiers, brass bands and mod-

ernized barracks for misfits and their young" (341). Van, apparently, has not written his novel without a very distinct aim in mind:

...the purpose of the novel was to suggest that Terra cheated, that all was not paradise there, that perhaps in some ways human minds and human flesh underwent on that sibling planet worse torments than on our much maligned Demonica (341).

A number of clues suggest what is later explicitly confirmed, namely that Terra is not only "a distortive glass of our distorted glebe" (18) ("glebe" referring to Antiterra) but that the two worlds are indeed identical. The first clear indication of this is supplied by some details in Van's notes on Terra: "...proper names often came out garbled, a chaotic calendar messed up the order of events but, on the whole, the colored dots did form a geomantic picture of sorts" (340). This can equally be applied to Antiterra whose peculiar calendar was mentioned above, whose geography is somewhat haphazard, and where there are place names like Le Bras d'Or, Acapulcovo, Goluba University, and Scoto Scandinavia.

The movie based on Letters from Terra is produced in 1940 (Antiterra time), its action takes place in 1940 by the Terranian calendar, which corresponds to 1890 on Antiterra. But although this difference in dates is meant to support the fiction that "...our annals lagged by about half a century behind Terra's along the bridges of time..." (340-341), the reaction of the public to the film shows that they identify the fictional world of the film with their own:

"...thousands of more or less unbalanced people believed...in the secret Government-concealed identity of Terra and Antiterra" (582), and the next few sentences state clearly that they are right. Van, performing his Mascodagama stunt, perceives such wonders as "an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reserve" (184-185); he perceives in fact the whole universe upside down in a "magical reversal" (146), and it is thus that he recreates it. But the true state of affairs shimmers through the artistic version, and is then frankly revealed. In another reversal the ostensibly "real" Antiterra is shown to be a figment of Van's imagination, a distorted version of Terra, and the "fictional" world (Terra) assumes its full reality. The passage in which this reversal takes place even leaves the level of fiction and for a moment establishes a connection with the actual reality of the author and the reader:

Demonian history dwindled to a casual illusion. Actually, we had passed through all that...Tropical countries meant, not only Wild Nature Reserves but famine, and death, and ignorance, and shamans, and agents from distant Atomska. Our world was, in fact, mid-twentieth century...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).

As Van's novel was to suggest, all is not paradise on Terra, in fact, paradise has been abolished. Terra, the paradise of sick minds, is identical with Antiterra, or "Demonia", and the implication is that this is Hell. The name of Van's father is very suitably Demon, and Ada refers to him as "our father in hell"

(385). Van himself is called an "angry young demon" (302), and he calls Ada "Adoschka, adova doschka, (Hell's daughter)" (403). The fact that "Ada" is an inflected form of the Russian word for "hell" reflects of course on the title of the whole novel.

One might of course object to this and say that the whole is Van's very subjective and overbearing view of the world in which he lives, and he has in fact been blamed for his arrogance in calling it "this pellet of muck" (498) by John Updike, who calls this phrase "a dandy's dismissal."<sup>41</sup> There is, however, Aqua's statement "...that only a very cruel or very stupid person, or innocent infants, could be happy on Demonica..." (301), and Aqua being a shrewd person during her periods of sanity, as she proves by outwitting all the Freudians in her "radiant and easygoing home" (27ff.), this can be taken as a valid statement which confirms Van's view and justifies his reactions. Aqua puts an end to the uselessness of life by committing suicide, and significantly signs her farewell note: "My sister's sister who teper' iz ada ('now is out of hell')" (29).

There is nothing much to contradict the identification of (Anti) Terra with hell, for what people experience during their lives seem to be almost exclusively the "ghost things" or "fogs" that figure in twelve-year-old Ada's "web of wisdom" (74). Their individual fates fit into the depressing frame furnished by historical events. They die young, as Marina's brother, or suffer horrible deaths like Rack

and Marina. They get killed in wars and accidents, or commit suicide, putting an end to their "useless existence" in order to escape madness (Aqua) or out of thwarted love (Lucette). Dan dies a suitably hellish death, evidently still being under the impression which has haunted him for some time, namely "...that a devil combining the characteristics of a frog and a rodent desired to straddle him and ride him to the torture house of eternity" (435). This devil is to be found in the centre part of Bosch's triptych The Last Judgement<sup>42</sup>, exactly as Van describes him:

"black, pale-bellied, with a black dorsal buckler shining like a dung beetle's back and with a knife in his raised forelimb" (435), and he is indeed seen straddling one of the poor lost souls.

There is no suggestion that human relationships, with the exception of Van's and Ada's, provide any happiness to compensate for the deficiencies of (Anti) Terra and for the sufferings that people are subjected to on this planet. They are characterized by indifference; if there is ever any true feeling in them, they do not last, as Demon's and Marina's affair has shown. Love goes unrequitted and leads to misery or suicide. Affairs and frequent visits to the "flora-mors" provide poor substitutes for what is lacking. Considering this state of affairs, one cannot miss the irony (unintentional on his part) in Demon's suggestion that Van should not "deprive" Ada of "normal interests and a normal marriage" and of "normal amusements", and one cannot blame Van for his ironic answer:



"Don't forget normal adultery" (442).

Paradise, or what deranged minds mistook for it, does not exist, for (Anti) Terra is hell. Nor do some of the glimpses that Van allows the reader of the hereafter give rise to any hope that a better place may follow this "evil world" (301). Dan has only a dim vision of the hereafter as "the torture house of eternity" (435), but Van's ideas are more specific. Death, he knows, cannot be the end of everything:

The mind of man, by nature a monist, cannot accept two nothings; he knows there has been one nothing, his biological inexistence in the infinite past, for his memory is utterly blank, and that nothingness, being, as it were, past, is not too hard to endure. But a second nothingness - which perhaps might not be so hard to bear either - is logically unacceptable. ...we simply cannot expect a second nothing, a second void, a second blank (314).

What he imagines as following life is perhaps harder to face than this second "impossible" nothingness and blank, for it is nothing less than a continuation of the unhappiness and pain of life, experienced through some form of "disorganized consciousness" (314). To dying Mr Rack he says (mercifully only in thought): "...the only consciousness that persists in the hereafter is the consciousness of pain" (315), and he foresees for him

...tiny clusters of particles still retaining Rack's personality, gathering here and there in the here-and-there-after, clinging to each other, somehow, somewhere, a web of Rack's toothaches here, a bundle of Rack's nightmares there - ... (315).

He sees Lucette's death as followed by an eternity

of unhappiness and loneliness:

As she began losing track of herself, she thought it proper to inform a series of receding Lucettes - telling them to pass it on and on in a trick-crystal regression - that what death amounted to was only a more complete assortment of the infinite fractions of solitude (494).

Van and Ada have found their own individual ways of at least trying to survive and to preserve their sanity in this depressing world which is hell. "... independent and original minds", says Van, "must cling to things or pull things apart to ward off madness or death..." (220). This need explains what Sissela Bok sees in a purely negative light and what she calls

...the disturbances in the attitudes of both Van and Ada: their desire to take and collect life, in the form of plants or insects, to preserve them and their beauty; to collect, to classify, to attempt to grasp all of creation for themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Earlier on Van's and Ada's various interests and passions were discussed; they are indeed comprehensive and in some points seem to confirm what Sissela Bok says about them. There is Ada's profound curiosity and knowledge about insects and birds and plants which is almost an obsession with her. She has a positive mania for analysis and pedantic specification when talking about them; she has a perfectionist dream of "a special Institute of Fritillary larvae and violets - all the special violets they breed on" (57); she copies in minute detail or, on paper, combines in "unrecorded but possible" ways, different species of orchids with each other (99). Both Van and

Ada have an equally profound knowledge of and critical insight into works of art, both paintings and works of literature, and their interests extend beyond the "normal" aspects of life to its aberrations and more unusual and abstruse sides.

But all this can hardly be taken as indicative of a "disturbance" and a desire to "grasp all of creation to themselves", nor, on the other hand, as simply an expression of their delight in "the particulars of this world" [which they] "observe and recall...with tender meticulous care."<sup>44</sup> For Nabokov, precise science and art are the two means by which reality can be at least approached, and in some of the foregoing chapters art has been seen to be even superior to science in that the artistic mind can see parallels and relations and patterns which remain invisible to other minds. It is in this connection that Ada's and Van's interests can be seen. Their curiosity about all the phenomena of life and their scientific and artistic ways of approaching them are for them the means in an attempt to get through to, and understand, at least part of creation and reality; to experience something lasting and "real" behind all the "ghost things" and "fogs" which have been seen to dominate the world, causing unhappiness, despair and madness in others and making the world hell to live in.

According to Van, however, it is their love which grants them the profoundest experiences and liberates them from the horrors of their world. It also allows them to escape from the hell around them and to expe-

rience "paradise" and reality. These terms seem rather too chaste when applied to what looks simply like Van's and Ada's indefatigable and incestuous love-making, especially, to quote Alter, as "there is a much higher degree of descriptive specification about sexual matters here than anywhere else in Nabokov's fiction."<sup>45</sup> In fact, their love has been much commented on and has caused critics to speak of Van's and Ada's "sinister" love<sup>46</sup>, of their "guilt" from which they seek "redemption" through their work of art<sup>47</sup>, and of their "upside down (or abnormal) form of sexuality", of which Van's Mascodagama act is "a striking emblem."<sup>48</sup>

Their love may seem "abnormal" and "unnatural", though hardly "sinister", but what they experience from early onwards is not simply the sexual act for its own sake as might appear, but perfect love, its "happiness", "tenderness", "gentleness", and its "fantastic joy" (123-124). Ada may be unfaithful to Van, but she knows that he is "her only true love" and "all her life" (192), and if Van, during times of separation, frequents brothels, it is "to seek, with what tenacious anguish, traces and tokens of my unforgettable love" (104), who is "my whole life" (440), as he says to Demon, echoing Ada. Although moments of physical love figure prominently in their memoir and crowd out others, they are not the only ones that they remember. Van experiences a "moment of total happiness", which he recalls many years later, just being aware of Ada by his side, of his love for

her, and telling himself "that the most eccentric girl cannot help being faithful to one if she loves one as one loves her" (281). And there is the "immortal moment", which they experience together, when "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" (287).

Such perfect love, as has been seen in Lolita, can only grow out of the true and complete knowledge and acceptance of another person. These are difficult to achieve, but they come to Ada and Van, for besides being brother and sister, sharing "demon blood", they are also to a certain degree each other's mirror images, which makes their incest appear like another form of doubling.<sup>49</sup> It is thus that the incest theme need not necessarily give rise to moral speculation and condemnation, but that it can be seen as perhaps the most essential element in the stylized pattern and structure of Ada. Being brother and sister, each other's mirror images, almost doubles, Ada and Van are created to be ideal lovers from the first.

The mirroring is suggested by certain physical similarities. Their lips are similar; Van has the same small brown spot on his right hand that Ada has on her left one; and in a book which Van (not quite unselfishly) gives to Lucette, there is a drawing of his of "Ada-like Van" (146). The mirroring and doubling is underscored by Van's initial mirroring Ada's "A" and "embracing" it when, as happens on one occasion, it is printed upside-down: "V" (47). These are only the

outward signs of the closeness of their minds which, where they do not correspond, complement each other. Taken together, their minds seem to form one single superior mind, superior by what Ada herself points out: "prodigious individual awareness and young genius" (71). Their minds are close to each other in their youth and "their brains and senses stayed attuned and were to stay thus always, through all separations" (218). Even in their respective old ages, when composing their memoir, they feel that they are essentially one: "...we are not 'different'" they say (120), and to confirm this, Van's name "[rhymes] with and indeed [signifies] 'one' in Marina's double-you-less deep voweled Russian pronunciation" (360).

In their youth they experience this love as something that is equal to an experience of paradise. Van abolishes the paradise of others, rather conventionally viewed by some as peopled by "angelic spirits" and less conventionally by Aqua as "a future America" (21), but doing so he does not deny the possibility of gaining one's own private paradise. This is not a place that one might fix in space or that one might hope to find oneself in after death: as he explains to Ada, who is puzzled by the fact that he seems to believe in Terra (which means paradise in Antiterrestrial terms): "I accept it as a state of mind" (264). He says this to her in a moment of particularly intense and tender love, and he implies that in a place that is hell, they have both attained this state of mind: "Anyway", he said, "it's fun to be two secret

agents from an alien country" (264).

The setting of their early love is Ardis Hall and its park. Even the description of Van's short trip there from the station suggests great natural beauty:

He was taken through pinewoods and over rocky ravines, with birds and other animals singing in the flowering undergrowth. Sunflecks and lacy shadows skimmed over his legs... (34)

This impression is deepened in the description of Ardis Park itself with its "rond point - a small arena encircled by flowerbeds and jasmine bushes in heavy bloom" (51), its trees and birds and flowers and butterflies: "Blue butterflies...were flitting swiftly around the shrubs and settling on the drooping clusters of yellow flowers" (128); its bowers and arbours and secluded spots, and its everlasting sunshine suffusing the Park and the rooms of Ardis Hall, and surrounding Ada (e.g. 51,75,99,100,189).

"...idealized gardens have traditionally been the literary locations of human paradises..."<sup>50</sup> Ardis Park is one of them. It even has its own "Tree of Knowledge" imported "from the Eden National Park" (95). Various clues suggest comparison with other literary paradises, such as Baudelaire's and Marvell's. The two paradises evoked in L'Invitation au Voyage and The Garden respectively differ from each other in an essential point: As R.Alter puts it:

The Baudelaire poem is...a dream of a perfect world, a world saturated with both generally sensual and specifically erotic delight...

whereas

Marvell's poem is a ravishing vision of bliss beyond the raging of physical passion.<sup>51</sup>

However, they are subtly linked, as Alter points out, through the insertion of Marvell's oak tree in the parody of Baudelaire's poem<sup>52</sup>, a device which seems to hint that Ardis should be seen as partaking of both Baudelaire's and Marvell's paradises. The similarities to Baudelaire's perfect world are obvious, and Alter suggests that the opening lines of the second stanza of The Garden, too, are "applicable... to the novel, a kind of adumbration of its plot..."<sup>53</sup> Some of the echoes of The Garden in Ada are of a humorous kind, such as the reference to "Marvel's Melon" in the description of one of Kim's photographs (405), and Van's departure - "stumbling on melons" - at the end of his first stay at Ardis. And there is Ada who comes falling down onto surprised Van in the branches of the shatal tree, which, she then explains, is "really the Tree of Knowledge" (95), much in the way "Ripe apples" and "luscious clusters of vine" drop about Marvell's gardener.<sup>54</sup>

Alter describes this as "a Happy Fall", for in this garden, as in Marvell's, no fatal sin is really possible."<sup>55</sup> Ardis is for him an essentially beautiful, joyful, and, above all, innocent paradise. There is no sin even in what appears as Ada's and Van's incest, for, as he explains, quoting the mirroring and doubling described above:

...both physically and psychically the lovers are really the two halves of that androgynous pristine human zestfully des-



cribed by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium. According to rabbinic legend, Adam in the Garden before the creation of Eve was androgynous, and it is clear that Nabokov, like the rabbis, has conjoined the Greek and the Hebrew myths, creating in his deliciously intertwined sister and brother an image of prelapsarian, unfragmented man.<sup>56</sup>

Bobbie Ann Mason's view of Ardis Park is diagonally opposed to that of Alter. Van Veen's very name, she says, is significant, for "In Russian, Veen means guilt (vina, that is, means 'fault' or 'guilt')"<sup>57</sup>, and his paradise is "a perverse Eden."<sup>58</sup> His nature imagery seems to create a perfect Edenic garden, but on second sight it appears that he uses (or abuses) natural objects, trees and flowers and butterflies, to describe a basically unnatural story.<sup>59</sup> Incestuousness is unnatural and Van's guilt consists not only in breaking the rules of nature himself but also in making Ada, who has a genuine love of nature, a partner in his crime, thus "drawing [her] away from her natural garden..."<sup>60</sup> Mason argues that Van admits his guilt by making use of so many references to nature, and calls them "Van Veen's attempt to legitimize what he fears is an unnatural story by narrating it in natural terms."<sup>61</sup> Sometimes, ironically, his nature images turn back on him, such as, when all of a sudden, he applies a butterfly metaphor (used so far only for Ada) to both Ada and himself<sup>62</sup>, or when he gets his orchid metaphor confused and when Ada and himself both resemble an orchid.<sup>63</sup> At such moments, Mason says, their incest becomes synonymous with solipsism: "Each sees himself in the other and adores his own image"<sup>64</sup>,

and, without Van being aware of it, "the Garden of Ardis [becomes] a perverse Eden, a world of childhood turned in on itself."<sup>65</sup> Van may turn the Biblical story upside-down: Adam and Eve lost their paradise because of their disobedience, whereas "Van wants to prove that sibling sexuality (a disobedience of the rules) initiates paradise."<sup>66</sup> Van and Ada may attain their private paradise, but they, too, lose something, namely "nature...(an objective world separate from man's consciousness) which they forsake as they attempt to perpetuate the paradise of their love."<sup>67</sup>

Alter appears to take Ardis Park as very literally an ideal garden. Mason points out that it only seems to be perfect. Van's partial description makes it appear so and tends to make one forget that it really is "...a country estate where self-absorbed people luxuriate attended by servants..."<sup>68</sup> It does in fact appear less picturesque in Kim's photographs, a somewhat more objective representation of places and incidents, to which Van reacts violently, but which also gives him the idea to write his own memories down:

That ape has vulgarized our own mind-pictures. I will either horsewhip his eyes out or redeem our childhood by making a book of it: Ardis, a family chronicle (406).

But their mind-pictures, which go into his chronicle, are idealized versions of Ardis not because Van and Ada are untruthful or basically unwilling to see things objectively, nor because Van is attempting all the time, as Mason implies, to make their "unnatural" passion appear more natural. They are the pictures,

stored in their minds, of a paradise which is an externalization of the bliss young Van and Ada experience through their love. "I accept it [Terra = paradise] as a state of mind", says Van to Ada, and they both project their inner paradise onto Ardis Park, turning the country estate into an Edenic garden, the appropriate setting of their love. This view is supported by the fact that Ardis loses all its Edenic qualities for both Van and Ada after their separation. Staying there becomes a "dreary" affair for Ada (396), and Van, who, at a happy stage of their relation, tells Demon that "I would gladly spend all my scarred and strange life here" (241), rejects this idea after he has found out about Ada's infidelities: "Who wants Ardis Hall!" (300).

There is however more to their love than has so far appeared. When questioned about the incest theme in Ada, Nabokov gave one of his teasingly evasive answers:

If I had used incest for the purpose of representing a possible road to happiness or misfortune, I would have been a best-selling didactician dealing in general ideas. Actually, I don't give a damn for incest one way or another.<sup>69</sup>

Even though the answer does not do a great deal to elucidate the problems posed by Ada, it establishes that Nabokov is plainly as little concerned with Van's and Ada's incest as with Humbert Humbert's immorality. The moral implications leap into foreground only if one reads the novel as literally one about incest (which its form does not encourage); however, they lose their significance if the fact that Van and Ada

are brother and sister is seen as one of the elements that form the highly stylized surface pattern of the novel, and if one sees them not so much as an incestuous couple but as the ideal lovers that they in fact are.

Strange as it may seem to speak of their love in philosophical terms, there is an element in it which gives it a metaphysical dimension and relates it directly with Van's (Nabokov's) quest for reality which is in this novel tied up with his preoccupation with time. Mason accuses Van repeatedly of being unable to face reality, of attempting to opt out of life, of creating other worlds (Antiterra and his version of Ardis) "in order to find protection and privacy, in order to avoid facing reality."<sup>70</sup> She also accuses him of not having understood and of abusing Marvell's

Garden:

Van uses Marvell's poem to augment the effect of his botanical images. By describing the children's copulation in terms of the visible flora, Van attempts to portray the naturalness of the scene - but it is a quite debased version of Marvell's innocent garden! By evoking Marvell's poem, Van wants to establish Ardis as Eden, like the garden in the poem, and to establish his own work as literature. In using Marvell's poem to justify his own concern with gardens, he is attempting falsely to justify himself by saying that a great poet did the same sort of thing.<sup>71</sup>

Marvell's speaker, she argues, delights in the sensuous pleasures of the garden, but he transcends them. Nature, in his garden, is a setting that induces a meditative state of mind, and

Since nature was traditionally God's book, the well-tended garden was an avenue to ecstasy, a mystical experience of heavenly delights.<sup>72</sup>

In a setting of repose, quietness and solitude,

...the mind is free to indulge in intellectual pleasures, the chief one being contemplation of one's own image.<sup>73</sup>

Not, however, to stop at this, but to seek God "through His manifestations in nature, and, ultimately, through His manifestation in the greatest of creations, the mind of man."<sup>74</sup>

The spiritual and intellectual pleasures, Mason says, are absent from Van's garden. Even though he idealizes and exalts what he experiences through his love for Ada and in their love-making "his spiritual pleasure...is purely private and sexual/incestuous."<sup>75</sup> The incestuous act is also self-reflexive, but unlike Marvell's gardener Van does not go beyond contemplation of his own self. He does not "seek God", but "is caught in a dead end of mirrors" and "is, in effect, worshipping his own image."<sup>76</sup>

If the interpretation offered earlier is acceptable, then the love of Ada and Van appears in a different light, and it also appears that Van has not misunderstood Marvell quite so thoroughly. Nabokov never commits himself as to his religious views, nor do his characters "seek God". What they seek to attain is an insight into reality; not what Kinbote, and with him Nabokov, calls "average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye"<sup>77</sup>, but "true reality"<sup>78</sup>. Some of them achieve such insights, and with a few - V and Sebastian

in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, and Mr. R. in Transparent Things - these have all the qualities of mystical insights.

"Average reality " in Ada has already been described. It is life as led by Aqua and Marina, Lucette, Demon and Dan; a life which is governed by time in which nothing lasts, and which is made up of "ghost things" and "fogs"; it is history determined by wars and crimes; a world of sufferings that eventually lead to death. This, then, is the reality which Van tries to avoid facing, which he and Ada try to overcome through their scientific and artistic preoccupations, and from which they escape into their private paradise.

It is there, too, during moments of love, that they experience "true reality". As Van expresses it:

What, then, was it that raised the animal act to a level higher than even 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 and she were physically able to make love (219-220).

This needs an explanation, and Van's own treatise on The Texture of Time provides one. Separating Space from Time and dismissing it as having no significance in relation to Time, he explains his conception of "true Time" and then deals with the Future, the Past

and the Present. Like his creator, Van does not include the Future in his concept of time.<sup>79</sup> "Sham Time" he calls it (548), and "a fantasm belonging to another category of thought essentially different from that of the Past which, at least, was here a moment ago- ..." (544). The Past he calls at one point "the colored nothingness of the no-longer" (550), which is "intangible and 'never-to-be-revisited'" (544). For a moment it seems to become an abstraction like the Future. However, it possesses reality insofar as it exists in one's mind. In fact, Van speaks about it in very concrete terms when he considers it "not as the dissolution of Time implied by immemorial metaphors picturing transition" (544), but as "an accumulation of sensa" (544), "a constant accumulation of images [which] can be easily contemplated and listened to, tested and tasted at random", and as "a generous chaos out of which the genius of total recall,....,can pick anything he pleases" (545).

His treatment of the Present is rather more complicated. What is commonly called the "Present" is really "the constant building up of the Past, its smoothly and relentlessly rising level" (551). We are aware of the "Present" as a "time span" (550), to which, again, our mind gives duration (560), but into this awareness always creeps "the lingering freshness of the Past still perceived as part of the nowness" (550). What we normally perceive is not the "true Present". That is "an instant of zero duration, represented by a rich smudge, as the dimensionless point of geometry is by

a sizable dot in printer's ink on palpable paper" (550), changing at the very moment of perception "because I myself am in a constant state of trivial metamorphosis" (549), and becoming in its turn part of the Past. It follows logically that Van should define it as an "imaginary point" (551), something which it seems impossible to grasp and enjoy. All this is very close to something that was quoted in connection with The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Alan Watts' statements about time are worth repeating here:

...if we open our eyes and see clearly, it becomes obvious that there is no other time than this instant, and that the past and the future are abstractions without any concrete reality.

Until this becomes clear, it seems that our life is all past and future, and that the present is nothing more than the infinitesimal hairline which divides them... But through 'awakening to the instant', one sees that this is the reverse of the truth: it is rather the past and future which are the fleeting illusions, and the present which is eternally real.<sup>80</sup>

Van having discussed the Future as an "absolute nothingness" (550) and the "true Present" as an "imaginary point", it would seem that in his system (and using Watts' words) "our life is all Past", and consists only in our memory of what has been. There is, however, something in Van's theory which corresponds to Watts' "awakening to the instant", and this is what Van calls "the Deliberate Present" (549). Driving past a row of poplars, he says, one may wish "to isolate and stop one of them, thus making the green blur reveal and offer, yes, offer, its every leaf" (549). In the same



way one may wish and try to isolate and contemplate one of the innumerable moments of life, which are so elusive because "I myself am in a constant state of trivial metamorphosis." An "act of attention" helps one achieve that:

[It gives us] three of four seconds of what can be felt as nowness. This nowness is the only reality we know; it follows the colored nothingness of the no-longer and precedes the absolute nothingness of the future. Thus, in a quite literal sense, we may say that conscious human life lasts always only one moment, for at any moment of deliberate attention to our own flow of consciousness we cannot know if that moment will be followed by another (549-550).

It is this nowness and reality that Van and Ada experience during and through their love-making, a reality which, Van says "lasted a moment, but could be repeated as often as he and she were physically able to make love."

It is very apt, too, that it should be moments of love during which they have this experience. Surely, at such moments, the mind is in an exceptional state of concentration and, for a few seconds, remains in that state. It is concentrated both on the immediate individual present moment and on its experience, to the exclusion of everything else, and the mind remaining unchanged, the moment, too, remains changeless. With its sharpened awareness it is possible for the mind to take the moment in completely. The green blur of the poplars offers its every leaf, and the moment of awareness offers its every detail and becomes real:

'But this', exclaimed Ada, 'is certain, this is reality, this is pure fact - this forest, this moss, your hand, the

ladybird on my leg, this cannot be taken away, can it?' (153)

The mind remaining unchanged during these seconds, it can also become aware of its own being and nature. It can look at itself, so to speak, and grasp its own reality. This, again, is expressed perfectly in Van's and Ada's love-making, for, created as ideal lovers, as each other's mirror images, almost as twins (148), they not only know each other completely at the moments of love, but, knowing each other, also attain knowledge of their own minds and selves.

Bobbie Ann Mason, as was described above, contrasts the experience of Marvell's gardener with Van's and Ada's. Marvell's speaker, she says, seeks mystical insight, he seeks God; Van is worshipping his own image.

No attempt shall be made to pin Van's and Ada's experiences down as mystical experiences. It has emerged, though, that what Van describes amounts to something more than Mason is prepared to see in it. Van's and Ada's Ardis, like Marvell's garden, is "a vision of bliss beyond the raging of physical passion."<sup>81</sup>

Whatever one chooses to call their experiences, in their very transiency they liberate Ada and Van from "average reality". For a second or so they feel "safe" (220), liberated, that is, from all the things "average reality" is made of. They are liberated from clock time, from the constant succession and changes of things and events (possible only in time) and the suffering these bring with them. They are

liberated from "Numbers and rows and series - the nightmare and malediction harrowing pure thought and pure time..." (450). And, escaping from time and its changes, they also, for a few seconds, escape death. Loving and knowing each other completely, they virtually become one, thus also overcoming the opposites and dualities which exist in what we term "reality".<sup>82</sup>

Van and Ada experience "nowness" and "reality" - r e a l i t y , that is, which has lost its quotes and which Nabokov calls "true reality". Ada may not be just playing on words when she says, "I know there's a Van in Nirvana" (583).

The experiences of exaltation and insight into "true reality" are transient. They fill one timeless moment; they may be repeated, but they cannot be made to last and are followed by a speedy return to normality. "This cannot be taken away, can it?" says Ada at one such moment, but it is. After one moment of captured "nowness", time - normal time with all its implications - reasserts itself, and Ada and Van cannot escape from it, just as they cannot escape from the "real" world closing in on them after their periods of bliss at Ardis, their paradise. Van revolts against suffering and "fanatically denounced the existence of physical pain in all worlds" (137) and indulges in a passionate outburst when Ada suggests that they visit Krolik's grave in the churchyard: "You know I abhor churchyards, I despise, I denounce death, dead bodies are burlesque..." (297), but they

get caught up in the world and become subject to its pain and suffering caused by customs, conventions and general moral standards which come between them and separate them, and, in their turn, they cannot avoid causing suffering and even death to others.

Ada's and Van's Ardis resembles Marvell's garden in that it, too, grants "a vision of bliss beyond the raging of physical passion." Van's memoir follows the poem in yet another respect:

After the garden-dweller's soul, whetting  
and combing its silver wings among the  
branches, has experienced ecstasy, the poet  
glances backward at the first Adam's para-  
dise and then returns us to the "real"  
world of time, but it is a time now trans-  
figured by art, nature ordered by "the  
skilful Gardner" in a floral sundial to  
measure time.<sup>83</sup>

Van also takes us back to the "real" world of time, but this time, too, is transfigured by art. "We can know the time", says Ada, "we can know a time. We can never know Time. Our senses are simply not meant to perceive it. It is like - " (563), and, hesitating and pausing, she implicitly points back to the novel we have just read,<sup>84</sup> to Van's memoir in which, illustrating it through their love story, he has caught the texture of time.

As the Future does not have the status of time in Van's system, and as he regards the Present, as commonly understood, as "the constant building up of the Past, its smoothly and relentlessly rising level" (551), it is only possible to come to an understanding of the texture of time by looking at the Past as stored in one's memory. Some of Van's basic assumptions must be recalled before it can be shown how

his own memory of the Past, made into a piece of art, serves to illustrate his theories: Van defines time as rhythm:

... not the recurrent beats of the rhythm but the gap between two such beats, the gray gap between black beats: the Tender Interval. The regular throb itself merely brings back the miserable idea of measurement, but in between, something like true Time lurks (538).

To attain "the feel of the texture of Time" (548), it is necessary that the rhythm should be regular, but also that one should not simply select some random events, but that these events (these "beats") "should be not only gaudy and graduated, but related to each other by their main feature..." (549).

As already hinted above, Van also holds special views of the past:

The past, then, is a constant accumulation of images. It can be easily contemplated and listened to, tested and tasted at random, so that it ceases to mean the orderly alternation of linked events that it does in the large theoretical sense. It is now a generous chaos out of which the genius of total recall,..., can pick anything he pleases... (545).

Of this he gives an example. Looking back from his vantage point in 1922 into the Past, he haphazardly picks what he pleases, jumping about in time, from 1888 to 1901, back to 1883, then forward again to 1884, and eventually to an incident of only a day ago. But, as he admits, the images he selects "tell us nothing about the texture of time into which they are woven..." (546); they have nothing in common, they are unconnected, and only serve to prove the complete freedom the mind has when contemplating the Past.

This is not, however, how he deals with his and

Ada's past. His contemplation of that involves his theory of time as rhythm, so that their love story, apart from existing in its own right, becomes indeed an "illustrative metaphor" (563) for his concept of the texture of time. This becomes clear when one analyses the story-line and finds that it "is structured around the periods of time Van and Ada were able to be together."<sup>85</sup> There are five such periods, the last one starting in 1922 and ending only with Ada's and Van's deaths. Certainly, the periods differ from each other in many respects, and Van himself is aware of this, both at the actual times and when he is writing about them. The summer of 1888, for example, his second stay at Ardis, is not simply a summer of experiences and bliss repeating those of four years ago. It is pervaded by memories of that other summer<sup>86</sup>, and although Van has on one occasion "the sensation of fate's rerun" (278), he also feels that "this summer is so much sadder than the other" (214). It also ends on a sad note, with Van leaving Ardis on discovering that Ada has been unfaithful.

They are reunited in the winter of 1892-1893. Of this period Van writes that they reached "heights of happiness he had not known at his brightest hour before his darkest one in the past" (431). A still darker hour follows soon afterwards, when they are again separated, Demon having discovered their illicit relationship.

"Fat old Veen" (508) and Ada, "a dark-glittering stranger with the high hair-do in fashion" (510),

only meet again after twelve years have elapsed, but somehow, it seems, these years are like no time at all: Ada has changed, and yet she is "more Ada than ever" (511), and their ten secret meetings bring to them "the highest ridge of their twenty-one-year-old love" (521). Van and Ada have to bear yet another long separation. Ada's husband being taken ill, she refuses to leave him and nurses him until his death in 1922. It is only then that the lovers are reunited, this time to stay together.

Ada herself warns Van before she arrives that she has "changed considerably, in contour as well as in color" (556), and Van finds this confirmed: "Nothing remained of her gangling grace, and the new mellowness, ..., had an irritating dignified air of obstacle and defense" (556). Van meditates that

Had they lived together these seventeen wretched years, they would have been spared the shock and the humiliation; their aging would have been a gradual adjustment, as imperceptible as Time itself (558).

However, not the differences matter but the feature which the periods have in common: Van's and Ada's undiminished love for each other, which, even after the initial shock accompanying their last reunion, turns their life together into "a steady hum of happiness" (574). Each time, too, it is indicated how Past and Present blend and merge in Van's mind. He experiences a "sensation of fate's rerun" in the summer of 1888; Ada's advance to him through a crowd of strangers in 1905 "consumed in reverse all the years of their separation..." (510); and in 1922, it is her

voice on the phone that has this effect: "... the phone had preserved the very essence, the bright vibration, of her vocal cords... It was the timbre of their past, as if the past had put through that call, a miraculous connection..." (155).

Talking about time as rhythm, Van explains that it is "the dim interval between the dark beats [that] have the feel of the texture of Time" and that "The same... applies to the impression received from perceiving the gaps of unremembered or 'neutral' time between vivid events" (548). And, following his idea about the freedom memory enjoys with regard to the Past, he feels that he is indeed "... able to suppress in my mind completely..." the dim and grey intervals between colourful events (548). He does not suppress them altogether, he allows "some casual memory to form in between the diagnostic limits" (549), but most of his memoir is of course taken up by descriptions of the times he and Ada could spend together. The less colourful information in between is "meant by Nabokov to be filler between the major events of the book - the gray gap between black beats."<sup>87</sup>

These, then, are the elements that give Van an insight into the texture of time: the gaps, the intervals, harbouring "something like true Time" (538),

... brimming with a kind of smooth, grayish mist and a faint suggestion of shed confetti (which, maybe, might leap into color if I allowed some casual memory to form in between the diagnostic limits) (549),

and the "diagnostic limits" themselves, the colourful events which share a common feature and in which Past



and Present are blended by memory which thus gives meaning and reality to them. This is most clearly expressed in Van's description of Ada's phone call before her arrival:

That telephone voice, by resurrecting the past and linking it up with the present, with the darkening slate-blue mountains beyond the lake, with the spangles of the sun wake dancing through the poplar, formed the centerpiece in his deepest perception of tangible time, the glittering 'now' that was the only reality in Time's texture (556).<sup>88</sup>

Nancy Anne Zeller has detected a slight flaw in the correspondence between Van's theories and the story he has fitted into them. Talking of time as rhythm, he also says that this rhythm should be regular. The rhythm formed by his and Ada's reunions starts off by being very regular, the periods of separation between them being four years (1884-1888), four years again (1888-1892), then twelve years (1893-1905), and twelve, of course, is a multiple of four. It is the last period which is the odd one out, because it does not fit into the pattern: it lasts seventeen years (1905-1922).<sup>89</sup>

However, Zeller shows how this is straightened out by Van having recourse to a very Nabokovian image, the spiral:

Events are free to recur, but on a different level, a higher level, their meaning enhanced by union with a similar past event. These recurrent events line up vertically on the spiral so that just below the present is the past and below that an even more distant past, etc.<sup>90</sup>

Now, in a diagram of a spiral the reunion after seventeen years would be slightly out of line, it would not appear on the vertical line, not immediately above all

the others: the rhythm is slightly disturbed. It is re-established on the morning after Ada's arrival when Van steps out on his balcony: "One floor below, and somewhat adjacently, stood Ada engrossed in the view" (561). "One floor below", and, says Zeller, "one year below."<sup>91</sup> Van "left the balcony and ran down a short spiral staircase to the fourth floor" (562). He corrects the rhythm, he re-establishes the regularity, and although it seems somewhat inconsistent (all of a sudden a spatial metaphor is allowed to creep in) he "realigns their schedules of sentiment by retreating back down the spiral; the seventeen-year separation is turned into sixteen..."<sup>92</sup>

Van's own comment on his treatment of the texture of time can now be fully applied to his memoir:

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 a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction (562-563).

What he calls his "treatise" is in fact the whole novel the reader is holding in his hand, Van's and Ada's love story, which "disintegrates into abstraction" for only a few pages in Part IV where Van draws the theoretical conclusions from what he has been illustrating through their story all along. That he should treat the elusive and difficult question of the nature of time in this unusual manner is wholly in keeping with his characterization of himself as "not quite a savant, but completely an artist" (471) and with his own conception

of his publications as "buoyant and bellicose exercises in literary style" (578). That he should have recourse to stylization all along is a logical consequence of his aim, which is not to write a love story of the conventional kind and for its own sake, but to use this love story as a medium through which to solve the riddle of Time. To have told it in a way that would have made of it more of "a social reality"<sup>93</sup> in which the reader might have got emotionally involved, would have stood in the way of his philosophical quest and would have blurred the results.

Van's investigation of the texture of time has also yielded what he calls the "Deliberate Present", those moments during which man is liberated for a few seconds from what is usually called "reality" and during which he experiences "true reality", or, in Van's words, reality that has lost its quotes. With the mind remaining unchanged for just a few seconds, the experience is one of an escape from "normal" time, from the instability of things, from succession, changes, suffering, and death. But they are fleeting moments, and if they can be repeated, as in Van's and Ada's love, they cannot be made to last. After the bliss at Ardis that granted them these experiences, Van and Ada have to return to "average reality" and "average" time, and everything these imply. They are never more aware of this than during their old age. The sufferings separation caused them have been overcome, but they can no longer revolt against pain, or deny death. "Who said I shall die?", Van said when refusing to acknowledge

the Future as time (535), but

he had made the mistake one night in 1920 of calculating the maximal number of [his heart's] remaining beats (allowing for another half-century), and now the preposterous hurry of the countdown irritated him and increased the rate at which he could hear himself dying (569-570).

He experiences, as a nonagenarian, an "unbelievable intellectual surge", a "creative explosion" (577), which enable him to write his memoir, but the consciousness of his deteriorating health and of inexorably approaching death becomes ever more acute. At first it is only the awareness of "furtive, furcating cracks... in his physical well-being" (569), later it is a suspicion of some "fatal illness" (570), and this suspicion is confirmed, almost nonchalantly, by his referring to his "premature - I mean premonitory - nightmare about 'You can, Sir'" (583), which points back to his "'verbal' nightmare" that revealed to him what Marina was dying of (451). Pain becomes so prevalent that it adds a new aspect to Van's concept of time. It crowds out everything else and eventually becomes equated with time:

... an element of pure time enters into pain, into the thick, steady, solid duration of I-can't-bear-it pain;... (587),

or, even more poignant: "... it was high pain for Ada to be completed" (587).

Thus the memoir that started with an affirmation of the possibility of bliss even in a world identified by Van as Hell, and that seemed to open a way of overcoming the working of time, and, with it, death, is in danger of ending on a depressing note of resigna-

tion. Pain and physical death are inescapable, and the hereafter is a "featureless pseudo-future, blank and black, an everlasting non-lastingness..." (585). If it does not in fact contain the horrors that Van foresaw for Mr Rack, all that imagination can do is to summon up a mental picture of it which makes it appear as "a second-rate continuation of our marvelous mortality (586).

Both Van and Ada are dying. In dying, they become more "one" than ever: "Vaniada" (583). They "overlap, intergrade, interache", and it does become impossible "to make out... who exactly survives..." This is the end they wish for and that they foresee (584).

But there is something to mitigate the horror and to introduce a new note of hope. Physical death is inescapable; Van and Ada who experienced moments of triumph over it, die. But

One can... surmise that if our time-racked, flat-lying couple ever intended to die they would die, as it were, into the finished book,..., into the prose of the book or the poetry of its blurb (587).

This book contains their own memories, arranged, stylized, shaped, turned into a work of art. And art that in Nabokov's novels opens man's eyes to things which normally remain hidden, that unravels problems and grants insights into mysteries, here becomes a refuge in the face of death and a means to escape total annihilation. Turning their life and their memories into a piece of art, Ada and Van give permanence to them. They create something immortal, and dying "into the finished book", into their own immortal work of art, they defy, and triumph over, death.

IV. Look at the Harlequins!

LOOK AT THE HARLEQUINS!

"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!"

Some such advice might have been given by some (in-  
vented) "extraordinary grand-aunt" (8) to Nabokov,  
for this is precisely what he does in all his novels:  
he plays, he invents the world, he invents reality.  
As he demands of the artist, he knows the world, he  
looks at it, he takes it in, he takes it apart; he  
re-combines its elements and shapes out of them a new  
and wholly artistic reality.

He does so for the last time in Look at the Harle-  
quins!<sup>1</sup> in which he creates a fanciful version of  
himself, and which conveys the impression as if he  
were looking back on his oeuvre, deliberately taking  
stock of what he has done and said.

Throughout this novel the narrator, Vadim, is haunted  
by a strange sensation:

I was bothered...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 (89).

He has reasons for this uncertainty. His novels keep  
getting mixed up with those of somebody else. He has  
to insist, somewhat irritably, that the title of his  
novel is Camera Lucida, n o t Camera Obscura (92);  
his Tamara is mistaken for that somebody else's Mary  
(94), and he has the suspicion

...that even Ardis, my most private book,

soaked in reality, saturated with sun flecks, might be an unconscious imitation of another's unearthly art (234).

Certainly it is Nabokov who - at least to a certain extent - serves as a model for Vadim. The quasi-identity with Nabokov is established when the narrator muses about his name. He cannot remember his family name, except that "I felt it began with an N,..." (248). Is it "Nabedrin", or "Nablidze", or "Naborcroft"? (249) Why does somebody call him "McNab"? (7) His Christian name, however, is clearly established: Vladimir Vladimirovich, "Vadim Vadimovich" for short, since "in rapid Russian speech longish name-and-patronymic combinations undergo familiar slurrings" (249).

He could not have put it any better: his life is the "non-identical twin", a "parody" of Nabokov's, who, of course, inhabits "another earth", since his narrator lives in the world of fiction. The word "twin" in the comparison of Vadim's and Nabokov's lives can be accounted for by such obvious parallels as that they are both exiles, study at Cambridge, publish in a Paris émigré magazine, teach at Cornell ("Quirn"<sup>2</sup>), and share memories of a house on Gertsen Street (Hertzen Street, formerly Morskaya, "in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad").<sup>3</sup>

They even have the same views on various subjects. They both have a predilection for Wells, but do not care for "his sociological stuff" (22); Vadim reveals a very Nabokovian attitude when he talks of his "pathological indifference to politics, major ideas in



minor minds, and such vital problems as overpopulation in urban centers" (24). Like Nabokov, he has no respect for Freud, whom (again like his creator) he calls "the Viennese Quack" (126); and his approach to the teaching of literature resembles Nabokov's: like his "twin" he teaches Ulysses

...in a purely textual light, without organic allegories and quasi-Greek myths, and that sort of tripe (131-132).

They both find the U.S.A. "altogether admirable" (130), and it is clear that as exiles they should both have similar views on the Bolshevik state (132).

The second bunch of parallels is offered by their literary production. What Vadim says about himself applies fully to Nabokov:

In the world of athletic games there has never been, I think, a World Champion of Lawn Tennis and Ski; yet in two Literatures, as dissimilar as grass and snow, I have been the first to achieve that kind of feat. I do not know...what physical stress may be involved in serving one day a sequence of thirty-six aces at sea level and on the next soaring from a ski jump 136 meters through bright mountain air. Colossal, no doubt, and, perhaps, inconceivable. But I have managed to transcend the rack and the wrench of literary metamorphosis (122),

and this refers of course to the switch

...from my glorious self-developed Russian ...to...an English I alone would be responsible for, in all its new ripples and changing light (124).

They both make this switch with the same novel, namely The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, which corresponds to See under Real in Vadim's oeuvre.

But even with respect to their works parody sets in, for although their novels have a strong family

resemblance, and although some of Vadim's novels seem to be simply reflections of Nabokov's, others are "serious distortions and even composites."<sup>4</sup>

Richard Patteson has given a detailed analysis of the similarities and differences of which only a few shall be mentioned here to illustrate the point.

Tamara seems to resemble Mary so closely as to be mistaken for it by an old bookseller, who also confuses Camera Lucida with Camera Obscura (Laughter in the Dark), but the remarks about Pawn Takes Queen indicate that in this novel a fusion has occurred between King, Queen, Knave and The Defence (58). The Red Tophat takes its title from a phrase in Invitation to a Beheading<sup>5</sup> and corresponds to that novel, and the correspondences seem to be equally clear between Esmeralda and Her Parandrus and Bend Sinister and their respective heroes Gurko and Krug. Dr. Olga Repnin echoes Pnin in its very title, and A Kingdom by the Sea recalls the title that Nabokov had originally planned to give to Lolita.<sup>6</sup> But when somebody accuses Vadim of writing a book the contents of which is a vague version of Lolita, Vadim is "aware of the uncontrollable cloud of black fury growing within my brain" (218) before he puts this person right: "You are mistaken. You are a somber imbecile. The novel I wrote, the novel I'm holding now, is A Kingdom by the Sea, you are talking of some other book altogether" (218), thus energetically and angrily denying any connection between the two books. Even so, the basic situation does resemble that of Lolita, but some elements from

Ada also appear in it: somewhat like Van and Ada, the lovers "were to live to the combined age of 170 in absolute bliss" (194). The most amusing and most elaborate twist occurs in connection with See under Real which combines the basic situation of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight with the mechanics of Pale Fire. The "uninformed" and mediocre biography of "an English novelist, a brilliant and unique performer" is edited "by the indignant brother of the dead novelist", and in his edition "fraternal footnotes, half-a-dozen lines per page, then more, then much more, which started to question, then refute, then demolish by ridicule the would-be biographer's doctored anecdotes and vulgar inventions" (121) assume by and by the same prominence as Kinbote's critical apparatus in Pale Fire. Vadim's Ardis sounds similar enough to Ada to be identified with it: "a stylized memoir dealing with the arborescent boyhood and ardent youth of a great thinker who by the end of the book tackles the itchiest of all noumenal mysteries" (231). They are, however, not quite identical, for the mystery tackled in Vadim's Ardis is "the Specter of Space" (231), whereas Van Veen is of course preoccupied with the Texture of Time.

But parody soon leaves this somewhat superficial and obvious level and assumes profounder implications. Somewhat surprisingly for a Nabokov character, Vadim states that "the present memoir derives much of its value from its being a catalogue raisonné of the roots and origins and amusing birth canals of many images in my Russian and especially English fiction" (8),

implying with this statement that there exists a close connection between his life and his work and that an understanding of the images may be helpful in at least partly reconstructing his life, and that, reversely, an insight into his life might illuminate his work.

He is quite generous in pointing out the sources of what one finds in his novels. Some of them are fleeting impressions, such as a little gesture of Iris (26), or an unexpected and illogical remark of hers (63) both of which go into Ardis. Others are rooted in his emotions: he could not have written his magic and tender descriptions of the young beauty of girls had he not loved Iris (40). Young Dolly Borg is the model of "little Amy, the condemned man's ambiguous consoler" in The Red Tophat (78), and there are finally those lengthy emotional passages which allow of the conclusion that his relationship with his daughter Bel is the source of A Kingdom by the Sea (168ff.).

At the same time, of course, the present book, Look at the Harlequins!, is supposed to be an artistic reconstruction of Vadim's life in which his successive marriages and love affairs play a prominent part, forming an intricate artistic pattern in which they are interwoven with literary matters:

In this memoir my wives and my books are interlaced monogrammatically like some sort of watermark or ex libris design... (85).

But although Vadim sounds so confident about describing his life in an orderly way and making it transparent to his readers, there are points at which

he himself seems puzzled. It has already been said that he does not always feel sure of his identity. Old Oksman's slip of the tongue, calling Vadim's Tamara "Mary", deepens in him the uncomfortable feeling and "dread that I might be permanently impersonating somebody living as a real being beyond the constellation of my tears and asterisks - ..." and "that was unendurable, that dared not happen!" (96-97).

Nor can he get rid of the feeling that his life has a plot, which to control is somehow beyond him: This begins actually with his meeting his first wife:

I met the first of my three or four successive wives in somewhat odd circumstances, the development of which resembled a clumsy conspiracy, with nonsensical details and a main plotter who not only knew nothing of its real object but insisted on making inept moves that seemed to preclude the slightest possibility of success. Yet out of these very mistakes he unwittingly wove a web, in which a set of reciprocal blunders on my part caused me to get involved and fulfill the destiny that was the real aim of the plot (3).

It is not surprising that he should never get altogether rid of this feeling, for, this instance apart, many episodes and incidents in his life have their sources in Nabokov's novels; great parts of his life are, in fact, a clever combination of bits from various quite disparate plots. Persons from those plots (of which he knows nothing) appear in his surroundings, and vital events in his life echo what has happened to other Nabokov characters. He has lunch at "the Pitt" (3), which is where Sebastian Knight also goes for lunch; Sebastian is actually expected to come

"for the grape season or lavender gala" (5). One Nina Lecerf rings at Ivor's and Iris' villa, and her telephone call causes Iris to betray herself in much the same way in which Nina Lecerf gave herself away in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (14). The "nice blue Icarus, Ivor's thoughtful wedding present" (49) has already belonged to mad Hermann in Despair.

These, of course, are minor influences from that other mysterious realm, but there are more fateful ones. His father, for example, is called Demon and comes straight from Ada, even though Vadim may insist that, reversely, he used him "for touching up the father of the passionate siblings in the best of my English romaunts, Ardis (1970)" (96).

He describes his flight from Russia:

One autumn evening poor Mstislav's young mistress showed me a fairy-tale path winding through a great forest where a last aurochs had been speared by a first Charnetski under John III (Sobieski). I followed that path with a knapsack on my back and - why not confess - a tremor of remorse and anxiety in my young heart (9).

This path - "a two-way street" as Patteson puts it<sup>7</sup> - is the very same path on which Martin Edelweiss in Glory makes his clandestine and fatal way back into Russia.

Most remarkable is the fact that Vadim's relationship with his daughter Bel, which seems to be the basis of his own A Kingdom by the Sea is a direct echo of Lolita. Their journeys are those that Humbert Humbert and Lolita undertake, and Vadim's passion for Bel equals that of Humbert for Lo. The connection, so

obvious anyway, is underscored by Vadim at one point giving his address as "Dumbert Dumbert, Dumberton" - "the dumbest address I could produce at the moment" (143), and on another occasion making a slip he cannot explain (of course!). He calls Bel "Dolly", which sends her into a rage: "What does he mean? Why does he call me 'Dolly'? Who is she for God's sake? Why, why,...., why did you say that?" (195). Dolly Borg, too, the memory of whom may have caused the slip, has her prototype in Lolita (Dolly).<sup>8</sup>

There is no need to stress that all of this has of course nothing whatever to do with Nabokov. Giving bits of his life and some of his thoughts to Vadim, and then involving him in a number of fictional plots, he creates perhaps a more hopeless tangle of reality and fiction than ever before, and extends the parody that started with the comical twisting of his novels so that it now comprehends his own person and life.

It has been seen that Vadim is aware of the fact that his life has a plot. This recalls the theme which is central to The Defence, Pale Fire, Transparent Things and Despair: there is some mysterious power at work, weaving a "web of sense" and determining events and incidents in a person's life. A man may be aware of this as Luzhin and Shade, and Vadim, too, and if he has an artistic mind, he will be able to see through the pattern and understand its underlying principle. What he cannot do is to take an influence on its design and its completion.

Vadim has the feeling at one point that this is

precisely what he should do. After Oksman has shaken his sense of identity he muses,

Should I ignore the coincidence and its implications? Should I, on the contrary, repattern my entire life? Should I abandon my art, choose another line of achievement, take up chess seriously, or become, say, a lepidopterist, or spend a dozen years as an obscure scholar making a Russian translation of Paradise Lost that would cause hacks to shy and asses to kick? But only the writing of fiction, the endless recreation of my fluid self could keep me more or less sane. All I did finally was drop my pen name, the rather cloying and somehow misleading 'V.Irisin'...and revert to my own family name (97).

Vadim cannot be aware of this, but none of the steps he thinks might change and repattern his life would change anything at all. He would remain - as a chess-addict, as a lepidopterist, even as an obscure scholar translating a poetic masterpiece from one language into another - what he has been all along and what he remains even after the dropping of his pen name: the parody of Nabokov.

Of course, in Vadim's case the power that creates the design of his life and disallows of any interference is not quite so mysterious as in the other novels. This time it is very unmysteriously the author who shapes his character's life, and who seems to be doing it with a very specific purpose in mind.

Almost throughout the whole book Vadim supports the impression that by reading his works and by comparing "fact" and fiction, tracing images and following the parallels he himself points out, the reader can learn something about his real life. However, what he gives as "facts" has been seen to be so



intimately interwoven with his (and somebody else's) fiction that it is impossible to disentangle the two and to find the true Vadim. Also, towards the end, Vadim himself undercuts the expectation of succeeding in any such attempt. No matter what one does, his "reality" and identity will remain hidden. About the most intimate part of his life, and perhaps the most precious, his relation to his last love, whose name one does not even learn, he refuses to talk and no reader will be able to find out about it:

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. And how did your  
affair develop, Mr. Blong? Shut up,  
Ham Godman! And when did you decide to  
leave together for Europe? Damn you, Ham!  
See under Real, my first novel in  
English, thirty-five years ago! (226)

The reference to See under Real (The Real Life of Sebastian Knight) and Ham Godman (Mr Goodman in that novel) is telling, and so is the hint that "'reality' is the keyword here" (226), for in that novel, and partly through Mr Goodman, the absurdity of any attempt to dig up the "real" identity of an author from his work has been illustrated.

What Vadim puts in somewhat rude terms when speaking of himself, can in an even higher degree be applied to Nabokov. "...I cannot sympathize with anybody wanting to know me"<sup>9</sup>, he has once said, and, in fact, he successfully prevents his readers from "really" knowing him. Of course, there are in his novels no end of autobiographical details. Mary and Glory, for

instance, are to a large extent based on the experience of his émigré existence in Berlin, and parts of Mary are based on some youthful romance. Some of the main events in the life of Sebastian Knight resemble events in Nabokov's own life, and the same has been found to be true of Vadim. Persons Nabokov knew reappear in his fiction. Thus one can see his own Mademoiselle, described in Speak, Memory, as the model for V's and Sebastian's old Swiss Mademoiselle in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. In connection with Pale Fire it was said that thousands of daily trivia have found their way into Nabokov's novels.

One may try and trace everything. One may trace the obvious parallels between the events in Nabokov's life and those events in the lives of his characters that resemble them. One may include into one's knowledge of the author such views as he gave to his "more responsible" characters. But all of this will not help one to k n o w the author. The chapters on The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Pale Fire have shown that such autobiographical elements as are there, are taken out of their original contexts, combined with other elements, even with invented ones, and introduced into the novels for purely artistic purposes. Look at the Harlequins! is another example to illustrate the point.

If one does not pay attention to this, and if one does not or cannot make the proper distinction between real and invented, but insists on putting all the elements together and reconstruct from them the pic-

ture of the author, one may well end up with the "macabre doll" that Nabokov sees as the product of such an undertaking, or with a parody such as Vadim, whom Nabokov seems to have invented for the very purpose of discouraging the reader from any such enterprise.

From behind the playful façade of the novel emerges as serious warning addressed to the reader not to do what Vadim seems to be suggesting at the beginning, and a definite refutation of any attempt to search the works of an author for any authentic information about him. His "reality" and identity cannot be "ferreted out". They are his own and ought to be left alone. At the end of one's preoccupation with Nabokov's novels, and however well one may know them, one is therefore left with an author whose own reality escapes one and whom one does not know. Once more, and as in all the other novels, parody - this time the parodistic treatment of the author's own life and person - serves a serious purpose.

In many respects Look at the Harlequins! looks like a conscious and deliberate summing-up on the part of the author of what he has done and said in all his earlier novels. This goes well beyond the playful and parodistic recapitulation of their titles and plots.

Throughout the novel Vadim is preoccupied with time, in the guise of space. His affliction, which he has given to a character in Ardis, consists in an inability to "cope with the abstraction of direction in space" (85).

In actual, physical life I can turn as

simply and swiftly as anyone. But mentally, with my eyes closed and my body immobile, I am unable to switch from one direction to the other. Some swivel cell in my brain does not work (41).

This is explained by his last companion as quite a simple failure, common to all, to come to terms with the impossibility to stop or reverse time:

"His mistake," she continued, "his morbid mistake is quite simple. He has confused direction and duration. He speaks of space but he means time.

...

Why...is it so extraordinary that he cannot imagine himself turning on his heel? Nobody can imagine in physical terms the act of reversing the order of time. Time is not reversible" (252).

This is in its turn directly related to the problem of death, treated in so many of the earlier novels. It is a problem that haunts Nabokov and that haunts his characters, and only some of them (all of them artists) are allowed to cope with it and to come to terms with it. The impossibility to reverse time means that one is at any moment and helplessly approaching death, that "madness" that Vadim feels in him even "as a child of seven or eight" (8), that "madness" that he feels "had been lying in wait for me behind this or that alder or boulder since infancy" (240).

Again as with other Nabokov characters (Mr. R. for example), it is when he actually faces death during some severe illness, that Vadim finds some comfort and gains some insights which free him from his despair and mitigate the madness and senselessness of death:

...I feel that during three weeks of general paresis (if that is what it

was) I have gained some experience; that when my night really comes I shall not be totally unprepared. Problems of identity have been, if not settled, at least set. Artistic insights have been granted. I was allowed to take my palette with me to very remote reaches of dim and dubious being (239).

Vadim speaks about his experience in general terms, but these point back to all of Nabokov's earlier novels. They recall all their themes and sound rather like a conscious recapitulation and summing-up on Nabokov's part of what he has been concerned with and of what problems he has solved during a long period of literary creativity. His novels, in fact, contain and fathom Vadim's struggles and experiences.

The Eye, Pnin, Lolita, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight all treat problems of identity, and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight opens a way of solving them. He has gained artistic insights into realms forbidden to ordinary minds in The Defence, Pale Fire and Transparent Things, where his art has shown him ways of coming to an understanding of the puzzling and mysterious underlying pattern of a human life and the workings of fate. He has with Sebastian Knight, Van Veen, Mr. R., and Cincinnatus C. struggled with the problem of death and has found possibilities of defeating that "madness". And he has, in Transparent Things transcended the boundary between life and death and has, with Mr. R., caught a glimpse of those "remote reaches of dim and dubious being", solving the riddle that the dying man in Sebastian Knight's The Doubtful Asphodel seemed to be on the point of

solving.

As has been shown in the chapters on these novels, Nabokov has taken the reader a long way in the discovery of the truth and reality concerning all these questions. But just as his own "reality" and identity escapes one in the end, one cannot follow him the whole way he has gone. He cannot disclose the whole reality of what he has perceived, because, as Mr. R. has also found, there is a limit to what one can express in words and there is a kind of knowledge that it is impossible to convey in words. Nabokov has taken the reader as far as he possibly could, but, as he has once said:

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>10</sup>

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- Mary McCarthy, "Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire", p.84: "...a creation of ...moral truth."
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- 43 Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960), p.85.
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- 45 Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p.117.
- 46 Douglas Fowler, Reading Nabokov, p.99.
- 47 Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, pp.89ff.
- 48 7th July: 1.286; Gradus has flown from Copenhagen to Paris, p.174.  
10th July: 1.408; Gradus driving from Geneva to Lex, p.197.  
16th July: 11.698-746; Gradus at Nice, meeting Izumrudov, pp.254ff., etc.
- 49 Carol T. Williams points out that when writing of his father's death, "Nabokov clearly suggests that his father's death was only from one point of view a poignant mistake; it was also, he writes, his father's destiny or fate ("several lines of play in a difficult chess composition ...blended..."), meeting him at an appointed time." - Carol T. Williams, "'Web of Sense': Pale Fire in the Nabokov Canon", Critique, 6,3 (Winter 1963-64), p.35.
- 50 Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p.126.
- 51 Andrew Field, "Pale Fire, The labyrinth of a great novel", p.20.
- 52 cp. pp.77,83,85,149,284,294,295,298,299.
- 53 cp. pp.83,267.
- 54 Andrew Field, "Pale Fire, the labyrinth of a great novel", p.28.
- 55 Nova Zembla: a group of islands in the Arctic Ocean. 'Nova Zembla' = Russian Novaya Zemlya' = 'New Land' or 'Terre Neuve' = 'Newfoundland' = 'The New World' - Therefore: Appalachia = Zembla.  
Zembla for Pope was roughly equal to Greenland. Then Zembla must be a green land, an Arcadia. Arcady is a name often bestowed by Prof. Botkin on New Wye, Appalachia, which also gets the epithet 'green'.  
Mary McCarthy, "Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire", p.74.



- 56 Ibid., p.72.
- 57 Richard Kostelanetz, "Nabokov's Obtuse Fool", p.484.
- 58 Ibid., p.482.
- 59 The remark about the cat Hodge occurs on the same page of Boswell's work as the remark about the work that Johnson was to write about the Boswell family: p.1,038 of the Modern Library Edition. - Andrew Field, "Pale Fire, The labyrinth of a great novel", p.19.
- 60 Julian Moynahan, Vladimir Nabokov, p.42.
- 61 Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, pp.129-130.
- 62 Op.cit., p.130.
- 63 Andrew Field, "Pale Fire, The labyrinth of a great novel", pp.18-19.
- 64 Ibid., p.19.
- 65 Ibid., p.20.
- 66 Ibid., p.19.
- 67 Ibid., p.20.
- 68 Ibid., p.32.
- 69 Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov's Dark Cinema, (New York, 1974), p.31.
- 70 Op.cit., passim.
- 71 Op.cit., p.30.
- 72 Nabokov asserts that Kinbote committed suicide "after putting his last touches to his edition of the poem."  
Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview conducted by Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov, The Man and His Work, p.29.
- 73 Douglas Fowler, Reading Nabokov, pp.116ff.
- 74 Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview with Robert Hughes, Strong Opinions, p.59.
- 75 Vladimir Nabokov in "Vladimir Nabokov on His Life and Work", BBC Television with Peter Duval Smith, The Listener LXVIII (November 22, 1962), p.858.
- 76 John O.Lyons, "Pale Fire and the Fine Art of Annotation", p.158.

- 77/ Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, pp.125f.
- 78 Nina Berberova, "The Mechanics of Pale Fire", For Nabokov on his seventieth birthday, TriQuarterly, 17 (Winter 1970), pp.154f.
- 79 cp. Andrew Field: "...the title as it appears in the Shakespeare phrase is meant to refer... to the less evident factor of the bonds and interplay of light and reflection between the novel's disparate bodies..."  
Andrew Field, "Pale Fire, the labyrinth of a great novel", pp.18-19.
- 80 There are other such parallels: Charles gets married on the same day as Shade (though thirty years later), and the date of his arrival in America coincides with the date of Shade's heart attack (17th October 1959).
- 81 Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview conducted by Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov, The Man and His Work, p.29.
- 82 He is called "a clockwork man" (152) and "our automatic man" (279).
- 83 cp. p.135: "We feel doom, in the image of Gradus, eating away miles and miles of 'feigned remoteness' between him and poor Shade."
- 84 Andrew Field, "Pale Fire, The labyrinth of a great novel", p.32.
- 85 Loc.cit.
- 86 Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p.128.
- 87 Loc.cit.
- 88 Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview with Allene Talmey, Vogue, Christmas number 1969, reprinted in Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p.154.

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- 2 Herbert Grabes, Erfundene Biographien, Vladimir Nabokovs Englische Romane, (Tübingen, 1975).
- 3 Cp. for this Transparent Things, pp. 46-47: "You were served a cup of hot milk. You also got, separately, a little sugar and a dainty-looking envelope of sorts. You ripped open the upper margin of the envelope. You added the beige dust it contained to the ruthlessly homogenized milk in your cup. You took a sip - and hurried to add sugar."
- 4 Robert Alter, "Mirrors for Immortality", Saturday Review of Literature, 11 November, 1972, p.73.
- 5 Ibid., p.74.
- 6 Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview of which he says: "The New York Newspaper for which this interview, conducted by correspondence in 1972, was intended, refused to publish it."  
Published in Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p.195.
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- 8 Julian Moynahan, Vladimir Nabokov, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, 96, (Minneapolis, 1971), p.12.
- 9 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1972), p.27.
- 10 Vladimir Nabokov in a BBC-2 Interview with James Mossman, published "in an incomplete form" in The Listener, 23 October, 1969, printed "from my final typescript" in Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p.141.
- 11 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p.25.
- 12 Herbert Grabes, Erfundene Biographien, pp.96-97.
- 13 Op.cit., p.98.
- 14 Martha Duffy, "Big R / Big N; Transparent Things by Vladimir Nabokov", Time, 11 December, 1972, p.64.
- 15 Robert Alter, "Mirrors for Immortality", p.72.
- 16 Cp. Note 6.

- 17 Vladimir Nabokov in the Interview quoted in note 6, Strong Opinions, p.195.
- 18 Loc.cit.
- 19 Vladimir Nabokov in the same Interview, pp.195-196.
- 20 Robert Alter, "Mirrors for Immortality", p.73.
- 21 John Updike, "The Translucing of Hugh Person", The New Yorker, 13 November, 1972, p.242.
- 22 Vladimir Nabokov in the Interview quoted in note 6, Strong Opinions, p.196.
- 23 Martha Duffy, "Big R / Big N";, p.64.
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- 25 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, pp. 19, 20.
- 26 Op.cit., p.20.
- 27 Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960), p.168.
- 28 Loc.cit.
- 29 Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, pp.165-166.
- 30 Op.cit., pp.168-169.
- 31 Vladimir Nabokov in the Interview quoted in note 6, Strong Opinions, p.194.  
"Cypress" is defined in The Shorter Oxford Dictionary as: "c. The branches or twigs of the cypress, used at funerals, or as a symbol of mourning." The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, Revised and Edited by C.T.Onions (Oxford, 1968).  
A "beyond-the-cypress inquiry" can thus be taken to mean an inquiry that follows a person's destiny beyond death.
- 32 Vladimir Nabokov in the Interview quoted in note 6, Strong Opinions, p.196.
- 33 Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview with Alvin Toffler, Playboy, January 1964, reprinted in Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p.45.

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- 1 Vladimir Nabokov, Despair, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, <sup>2</sup>1966).
- 2 Vladimir Nabokov, Foreword, Despair, p.9.
- 3 Wayne C.Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, (Chicago, London, <sup>8</sup>1968), p.206.
- 4 "A good word, that! Ornate, but good...", p.39.  
"Rather bulky imagery this.", p.14.  
"What a pun!", p.79.
- 5 "I note for my own pleasure the smooth run of that sentence.", p.42.  
"...that rhythm is foreign to modern speech, but it renders, especially well, my epic calm and the dramatic tension of the situation.", p.163.
- 6 "Don't quite see why I write in this vein.", p.14.
- 7 "At this point...it is meet, I presume, that I should bid my prose stand at ease...", p.18.  
"Let me interrupt this passage, too,...", p.76.  
"A very slight digression of a literary nature...", p.163.
- 8 "One fine day at last Lydia joined me abroad...", pp.188ff.
- 9 "I at last found Lydia, who was hiding from me and who now coolly declared that...she had got the inheritance all right and was going to marry another man, 'because, you see,...you are dead.'", p.209.
- 10 "...it may happen that in five years or so with the aid of some timely amnesty, I shall return to Berlin and manufacture chocolate all over again.", p.220.
- 11 cp. pp.92-98.
- 12 "I have got muddled somehow...", p.41.  
"Sorry, there was really no snake; it was just my fancy borrowing from Tsar Peter...", p.78.  
"No, that's wrong. Cancelled.", p.199.  
"Ought to be corrected, were it not wicked to erase; for the real author is not I but my impatient memory.", p.47.
- 13 "These conversations with readers are quite silly too. Stage asides. The eloquent hiss: 'Soft now! Someone is coming...'", p.64.
- 14 Wayne C.Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, pp.224-240.

- 15 Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview with Alvin Toffler, Playboy, January 1964, reprinted in Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, (London, 1974), p.32.
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- 17 Ibid., pp.186-187.
- 18 Stephen Suagee, "An Artist's Memory Beats All Other Kinds: An Essay on Despair", Carl R. Proffer, ed., A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov, (Ann Arbor, 1974), p.60
- 19 Vladimir Nabokov, Foreword, Despair, p.9.
- 20 L.L.Lee, Vladimir Nabokov, Tusas 266, (London, 1976), p.64.
- 21 Vladimir Nabokov in an Interview with Alvin Toffler, Strong Opinions, p.32.
- 22 Claire Rosenfield, "Despair and the Lust for Immortality", L.S.Dembo, ed., Nabokov, The Man and His Work, (Madison, 1967), pp.69-71.
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- 24 Loc.cit.
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- 2 Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, <sup>2</sup>1973).
- 3 Invitation to a Beheading: 1938; Bend Sinister: 1947.
- 4 L.L.Lee, "Bend Sinister: Nabokov's Political Dream", L.S.Dembo, ed., Nabokov, The Man and His Work, (Madison, 1967), p.98.
- 5 Ibid., p.95.
- 6 L.L.Lee comments on Paduk's nickname: "...his surname is almost 'paddock', a toad. The word 'paddock' certainly hints at something more threatening than 'toad' does; in Shakespeare it is almost always a symbol of evil."  
L.L.Lee, "Bend Sinister: Nabokov's Political Dream", p.104.
- 7 Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov, (New York, 1966), p.21.
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- 49 L.L.Lee, Vladimir Nabokov, p.147.
- 50 Bobbie Ann Mason, Nabokov's Garden, p.15.
- 51 Robert Alter, "Nabokov's Ardor", p.49.
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- 54 What wondrous life is this I lead!  
Ripe apples drop about my head;  
The luscious clusters of the vine  
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;  
The nectarine and curious peach  
Into my hands themselves do reach;  
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,  
Insnares with flowers, I fall on grass.  
  
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- 85 Nancy Anne Zeller, "The Spiral of Time in Ada", A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov, p.286.
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Speak, Memory, rev. ed., (Weidenfeld and Nicolson,  
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