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Between Us and Artistic Appreciation: Nabokov and the Problem of Distortion

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BETWEEN US AND ARTISTIC APPRECIATION:

NABOKOV AND THE PROBLEM OF DISTORTION

James M. Tonn

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's view of art and life is confounded by a problem of "distortion," wherein meaning and aesthetic value are obscured when information from a complex form of experience is presented in an inadequate medium (a situation that is analogous to the projection of a three-dimensional globe as a two-dimensional map). For example, Nabokov claims that a work of literature originates in a state of mind in which the author can appreciate all parts of the work and their interconnections simultaneously; but when it is written out as a linear text, the relationships among the parts are rendered indistinct. This dissertation focuses on Nabokov's preoccupation with distortion and his interest in the possibility of glimpsing what is beyond it. Chapter one describes in detail the attributes of distortion and its use in Nabokov's work as a literary device. The second chapter conceptualizes the source of distortion as situations in which a less-circumscribed "outer" level of experience is viewed from a more circumscribed "inner" one. The remainder of the dissertation deals with Nabokov's fascination with ways of looking at things so that aesthetic value can be apprehended in spite of distortion. Chapter three discusses a compulsion among some of Nabokov's characters to overcome distortion by identifying a piece of information that lends order to what is observed. The fourth chapter addresses Nabokov's efforts to achieve "manifold awareness," a type of perception that resembles the simultaneous state of mind in which a work of literature is said to originate. This chapter also touches upon Nabokov's desire to escape from the constraints of time and space, which produce distortion by imposing distance and sequence on the events of life. The final chapter explains Nabokov's use of imagery of geometrical dimensions to depict vantage points from which multiple things may be viewed in juxtaposition with one another. Texts from

Nabokov's entire literary career are addressed in this dissertation, demonstrating that the phenomena under discussion are a systematic concern of his work.

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Introduction

There is no perfect way to represent the world as a map. Every method of projecting a spherical globe into a flat representation invariably results in some distortion. The loss of fidelity that occurs when an elaborate phenomenon is projected into an unsuitable medium is an enormous concern of Nabokov's aesthetics. As I will explain, Nabokov claims that a literary work comes into being when an author perceives an "instantaneous" aesthetic entirety, but that the way a text is experienced—through the linear process of reading—obscures some of the original idea. In similar fashion, life for Nabokov is an aesthetic phenomenon (a fact that is prominently attested to by his "literary autobiography," Speak, Memory (P1966),[1] a work that aims to extract the "thematic designs" from life (SM 27)).[2] It too suffers from a distortion caused by projection: Nabokov suggests that life would be best perceived from a hypothetical timeless point of view, and that the linear way in which it is actually played out causes its aesthetic value[3] to be obscured. A problem of distortion occurring between two qualitatively different levels of experience can be found again in Nabokov's frequent depictions of dreams and wakefulness: When a person dreams, he or she enters an "inferior" state of experience—i.e. one in which the mind is comparatively limited in its ability to interact with and organize information. From this point of view, the person perceives, but has trouble making sense of,

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[1] Throughout this dissertation, I indicate the original title for Nabokov's works not written in English, as well as the composition date(s). Where composition information is not available, I list the first publication date (including serialized publication), marked with the letter P. Speak, Memory is an anthology of works written as early as 1936 and published in many variations. For simplicity, I give the first publication date of the final form of the autobiography, 1966.

[2] See bibliography for abbreviations of cited works.

[3] I use this phrase to indicate the emotions or mental effects that are produced by art and which give art its merit (at least in Nabokov's aesthetics, which is firmly grounded in the notion of "art for art's sake"). I occasionally use the term "meaning" to describe, more generally, any type of coherence that is obscured by distortion.

information that trickles in to the dream from the realm of waking life. Without reaching into the Platonic suggestions of the term, I will say that Nabokov is concerned with situations in which a thing cannot be apprehended in its "ideal" or original form due to a disparity between its native level of experience and the type of experience through which it is perceived.

Human beings are frequently subjected to situations of limited experience. They cannot apprehend the complete and "instantaneous" artistic whole underlying a literary text because they must read linearly; they cannot extract the aesthetic value from life because they perceive life within space and time; and when they dream, they are in no condition to make sense of waking life. Nabokov is dissatisfied with these states of affairs and searches for ways to simulate superior levels of perception in order to apprehend the aesthetic value that is evident when experience is not inhibited. In this regard Fyodor of The Gift (*Dar*, 1935-7) says, "I keep straining for the faraway; I search beyond the barricades[4] (of words, of senses, of the world) for infinity, where all, all the lines meet" (G 341). "Barricades" are an appropriate image for those aspects of perception and physical existence that sustain the limited and distorted condition in which mortals find themselves. Nabokov, like Fyodor, longs for an absolute form of experience that is normally out of reach, in which there are no obstacles to inhibit the consciousness from its exploration of the world. The subject of this dissertation is how Nabokov conceptualizes in his work situations wherein an idea that is associated with a superior form of experience is projected, in distorted form, into the inferior form of experience to which consciousness is often confined; and how he depicts the prospect of surmounting the "barricades" of distortion in order to glimpse—or completely recover—the meaningful "original."

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[4] *Rogatki*.

In his lecture "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov describes the creation of literature as an act that operates outside of the constraints of time: "the idea of sequence does not really exist as far as the author is concerned. <...>[5] Time and sequence cannot exist in the author's mind because no time element and no space element had ruled the initial vision" (LL 379-80).[6] He explains the pleasures of authorship to non-writers by saying, "it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist" (LL 378, italics original). But Nabokov indicates that the timeless impulse that initiates art is unsuited to representation in a written work, whose format is not instantaneous but linear:

> Sequence arises only because words have to be written one after the other on consecutive pages <…>. If the mind were constructed on optical lines and if a book could be read in the same way as a painting is taken in by the eye, that is without the bother of working from left to right and without the absurdity of linear beginnings and ends, this would be the ideal way of appreciating a novel, for thus the author saw it at the moment of its conception. (LL 379-80)

A book, of course, cannot be apprehended instantaneously like a painting. Instead, Nabokov offers "rereading" as a technique for recovering some of the "initial vision" that goes into a text:

> A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader. <...> When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from

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[5] Throughout this dissertation I use angle-bracketed ellipses to indicate my omissions. Ellipses that are present in the source are reproduced without angle brackets.

[6] A character in Transparent Things (1969-71) says, similarly, that he cannot write a certain book because it "would never express in one flash what can only be understood *immediately*" (TT 84, italics original).

> left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting. (LL 3)

Nabokov compares text and painting—while mentioning the nuisance of linear, left-to-right reading—in no fewer than three[7] places in his belletristic writing, suggesting that the notion of ideally apprehending a work at once, like a painting, is strongly grounded in his aesthetic philosophy.[8] (An intriguing corollary to this notion is that, in Nabokov's aesthetics, the human

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[7] A third instance:

> There comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure [of a work] is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete. (SO 31-2)

[8] A similar sentiment is echoed when, asked in an interview, "ideally, how should a reader experience or react to 'the end' of one of your novels <…>?" Nabokov replies that "what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture: *The Artist's Studio* by Van

mind is inadequately equipped to directly appreciate a work of literature.) Nabokov argues that both a painter and an author at first see their creation in its entirety, but that the author, due to the nature of the written form, must convert his or her vision into an inferior structure that strings out rich simultaneity into relatively lifeless linearity. Rereading is a means to counteract this loss[9] and recover the author's "instantaneous" creative perception.[10] The rereader, who experiences the sequential text multiple times, constructs a mental awareness of events that is freed from linearity and is therefore closer to the "initial vision" of the author. In other words, rereading is a way to mentally "negate" linearity and approach a more complete appreciation of a text. The notion that a work of art is fragmented when experienced linearly—and that this fragmentation can be overcome[11] if one changes the way one looks at the work—is emblematic of the broader concern that forms the subject of this dissertation: Nabokov's attempts to

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Bock" (SO 72-3). Nabokov would like the reader to see the work as a whole, in an entirety that is similar to a painting—he wants the world of the book to diminish to occupy a single mental frame so it can be experienced instantaneously.

[9] The fact that rereading negates fragmentation is corroborated by Nabokov's claim that James Joyce "takes a complete and absolute character, <...> then breaks it up into fragments and scatters these fragments over the space-time of his book. The good rereader gathers these puzzle pieces and gradually puts them together" (LL 217).

[10] Fyodor of The Gift, one of Nabokov's most positive characters, is evidently in touch with the "instantaneous" inspiration from which a work is created, as well as the qualitatively different experience produced by reading vs. rereading: "he would skim *in an instant* the entire book, so that in the *instantaneous* mist of its madly accelerated music one could not make any readable sense of the flicking lines" (G 18) after which "he had to reread it right away <...> Now he read in three dimensions, as it were, carefully exploring each poem, lifted out like a cube from among the rest" (G 21).

[11] Leona Toker posits, quite contrary to my thesis, that Nabokov and his characters actively fragment experience as an expression of "a philosophical attitude that rejects, on principle, the valorization of a holistic vision" (Tok95 125). In my opinion, what Toker takes for deliberate attempts to create or sustain fragmentation are generally expressions of Nabokov's acknowledgement of the difficulty—but not the impossibility—of overcoming preexisting distortion in order to make sense of experience. Throughout this dissertation I will, in fact, present evidence for Nabokov's persistent attempts to recover a "holistic vision" in spite of distortion.

recover aesthetic value that has been lost when an idea is transferred from a superior form of experience to an inferior one.

For Nabokov, life, which is played out in linear time, is like a text—distorted through fragmentation. He draws attention to this fragmentation in Speak, Memory with an image of broken pottery: Describing ceramic shards that his son Dmitri has found on the beach, Nabokov says,

> I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scrollwork fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by *her* mother a hundred years ago—and so on, until this assortment of parts, if it all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl,[12] broken by some Italian child, God knows where and when <...>. (SM 308-9, italics original)

As a metaphor, the broken pottery suggests that potentially meaningful events in life may be fragmented and scattered across space and time. The ideal way of seeing them, presumably, would be to apprehend them at once, "like a painting." But while rereading serves to recover an instantaneous impression in the case of a text, one cannot make successive passes over life in order to reconstruct an instantaneous impression of it. One has only a single opportunity to

[12] A similar image appears in the short story "Ultima Thule" (written in Russian with Latin title, 1939-40), whose protagonist finds a piece of porcelain on a beach, "of which the companion fragments must inevitably exist somewhere—and I imagined an eternal torment, a convict's task, that would serve as the best punishment for such as I <...> namely, to find and gather all these parts, so as to re-create that gravy boat or soup tureen" (S 502).

"read" life, and Nabokov's fascination with observation, attention to detail, and memory is undoubtedly energized by the prospect of storing up (even on the first and only pass) sufficient experience in order to approximate an instantaneous aesthetic entirety. As we will see, in addition to these fascinations (which amount essentially to Nabokov's well-known search for heightened consciousness), Nabokov has an entire arsenal of techniques for describing both his dissatisfaction with the distorted nature of experience and the prospect of peering beyond distortion.

Why does viewing a fundamentally instantaneous impression through linear perception obscure aesthetic value? Let us return to Nabokov's painting metaphor and consider it in reverse. What would have to happen in order for a painting to be experienced linearly like a text? It would have to be cut up into pieces, which would then be presented to a viewer one by one. An impartial observer may take this succession of pieces at face value and assume that they are meaningless. But an astute observer will intuit that they are parts of something larger and more meaningful, and that viewing many of them together, or at least viewing certain pieces in a specific combination, might bring him or her closer to apprehending the original. But this observer cannot manipulate the pieces; he or she can only reconstruct the whole in his mind, and the process of accomplishing a viable mental reconstruction is problematic. Firstly, the pieces are presented sequentially, and although some sections of the sequence may fortuitously reveal a small section of the larger picture, in general the parts cannot be expected to appear in an order that is amenable to a meaningful reconstruction of the whole in the mind. Furthermore, a piece that participates in combination with others may be forgotten by the time its neighbors come around. In order for an observer to best understand how the pieces fit

together, they should be made available to the consciousness simultaneously, in a single frame of "vision" that is independent of any potentially misleading sequence.

Most of Nabokov's approaches to recovering the aesthetic "ideal," in fact, are concerned with grabbing up the most distant corners of what is perceived and pulling as much as possible into a single frame of vision, such that experience is liberated from preconceived sequence and all of its pieces can be apprehended together and at once. (Failing that, Nabokov is interested in identifying combinations of elements that reveal some of the aesthetic value of the original.) According to Nabokov, the shortcoming that prevents a person from reading "in the same way as a painting is taken by the eye <...> without the absurdity of linear beginnings and ends," is that "We have no physical organ <...> that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details" (LL 3). The lack of such an organ is lamented by Ada's (1966-8) Van Veen: "The irreversibility of Time <...> is a very parochial affair: had our organs and orgitrons not been asymmetrical, our view of Time might have been amphitheatric and altogether grand, like ragged night and jagged mountains around a small, twinkling, satisfied hamlet" (A 538-9). My understanding of Van's use of the term "amphitheatric" is that he sees time as ideally capable of encompassing a person (*amphi-* meaning "around") and displaying a simultaneous panorama of events upon which one can focus at will, in contrast to the irreversible, unstoppable forward motion of linear perception.[13] This type of vision would effectively overcome the fragmented condition in which experience is commonly played out. Dissatisfaction with limited ways of viewing the world is, accordingly, a prominent theme of Nabokov's work. It is significant, for

[13] Van shares Nabokov's intuition that a linear text is an unnatural representation of an idea: In his discussion of the amphitheatric perception of time, he also notes that "the course of my thought" is a separate matter from "the fact of my writing from left to right" (A 539).

example, that Cincinnatus of Invitation to a Beheading (*Priglashenie na kazn'*, 1934) has only a single window to look out of from his cell (bearing a former prisoner's inscription: "You cannot see anything. I tried it too" (IB 29)), and that Krug of Bend Sinister (1945-6) describes life as "a circular dungeon <…> with only two small apertures optically fusing into one": such depictions of optical obstructions (not to mention imagery of physical imprisonment) are metaphorical representations of humans' limited ability to experience the world. Perceptual freedom, on the other hand, involves, to use Krug's words again, "the disappearance of all walls," which permits the erstwhile prisoner to "survey the entire circular landscape" (BS 175).

Nabokov's search for means to access greater forms of experience intersects in an important way with his metaphysics. If Nabokov longs to appreciate life as an instantaneous, artistic whole, there is some hope for satisfaction in his understanding of the metaphysical afterlife, a prominent attribute of which is that it allows one to hold in simultaneity and explore with absolute freedom every piece of experience offered by the phenomenal world. In works like "Perfection" (*"Sovershenstvo,"* 1932) and "The Aurelian" (*"Pil'gram,"* 1930), for example, the afterlife is depicted as a state in which one is at liberty to have experiences that were not practical or possible in life. That an awareness of a metaphysical level of existence plays an enormous role throughout Nabokov's work has been established compellingly by previous scholars, in particular by Vladimir Alexandrov, whose book Nabokov's Otherworld describes a "transcendent, nonmaterial, timeless, and beneficent ordering and ordered realm of being that seems to provide for personal immortality, and that affects everything that exists in the mundane world" (Ale91 5). My understanding of the metaphysical world in Nabokov's work is

completely in line with the otherworld as Alexandrov and other scholars[14] portray it. However, in this dissertation I approach the metaphysical as just one of several analogous contexts in which Nabokov explores the problem of distortion. Nabokov is determined to obtain a clear, unobstructed view in any situation where conflicting modes of experience result in an apparent loss of aesthetic value. His longing for metaphysical liberation from perceptual constraints is the epitome of this impulse, but it is by no means the only place in which it is acted out. Through his work, Nabokov stages a rebellion against the limits of perception that are imposed by the here-and-now. The mechanism of his literary rebellion is to explore situations in which it is possible to peer beyond, push against, or slip under the "barricades" that inhibit perception and sustain the distortion that obscures greater forms of experience.

The topic of this dissertation also has some ties to Joseph Frank's notion of "spatial form," which originates in the idea that "Form in the plastic arts <...> is necessarily spatial because the visible aspect of objects can best be presented juxtaposed in an instant of time; and it follows that literary form, to harmonize with the essential quality of its medium, must be based primarily on some form of narrative sequence" (Fra63 6). The term "spatial form" itself describes the literary techniques employed by a writer in order to represent with language an aesthetic idea that is fundamentally non-sequential. With the exception of Melanie McKay's 1982 dissertation "Spatial Form and Simultaneity in Nabokov's Fiction" (McK82), I am not aware of any extensive study dedicated to Nabokov's use of spatial form. Alexandrov briefly connects spatial form with Nabokov's tendency to provide details that "retroactively illuminate" a

[14] E.g. Maxim Shrayer, who adds that the otherworld is "not a domain where the souls of the deceased dwell in traditional metaphysical systems. It is a sui generis dimension which exists simultaneously with the author's mundane reality and which is both a source and addressee of artistic creation" (Shr99 21).

preceding scene (Ale91 47) and with Nabokov's tendency to create complex structures of interconnected references that must be understood as a whole (Ale91 215). Sisson, who suggests that Nabokov's works are intended to be perceived in a single instant (Sis79 3), says that Nabokov hopes to "create an effect of simultaneity, but of course in practice the artist, who must work with temporal sequences, can construct only a suggestive simulation of such an effect" (Sis79 25). For the most part such studies implicate Nabokov's tendency to use structural devices that convey simultaneity as his expression of spatial form. I agree that simultaneity is a crucial aspect of Nabokov's response to the problem of representing art as text, and in chapter four I present my own take on the matter (although I focus primarily on Nabokov's use of imagery related to simultaneity rather than the structural properties of his work that seek to represent simultaneity). This dissertation intends to coexist harmoniously with the observations of Frank and the more recent work of various scholars. However, as is the case with the otherworld, I prefer to avoid the potential pitfalls of using another's terminology, even as I elaborate upon similar concepts.

The first part of this dissertation ("Between Us and Artistic Appreciation") is generally concerned with how Nabokov conceptualizes the various imperfect ways in which experience is accessed through human perception. In chapter one, I describe in detail the phenomenon of distortion, which is, as I have said, a tendency for information to degrade when it is represented in a form of experience that is more inhibited than its "native" form. In addition to being a concept that plays a role in Nabokov's understanding of what happens to things when they are forced into a situation of inferior medium, distortion is a prominent and relatively tangible literary device in Nabokov's work. When it is applied as a device, distortion causes an image or

idea to become a parodic, incomplete, or less recognizable version of itself, particularly when it crosses some type of boundary. Nabokov's anagrams, for example, are often expressions of distortion: an anagram is a less recognizable version of an "original" word, and in fact many anagrams in Nabokov's work, as we will see, appear when information crosses into an inferior form of experience from a superior one. As a concept, distortion appears, for example, in Nabokov's depictions of dreams, which usually consist of images from the waking world that have lost touch with their "ideal" forms. The opposition of dreams and wakefulness in turn analogizes Nabokov's understanding of the relationship between phenomenal experience and the superior metaphysical world: life is, for Nabokov, like a dream—filled with impressions from a higher form of experience (the metaphysical world), but subject to perceptual limitations that prevent mortals from making sense of these impressions. I will discuss in particular how the distorted status of the phenomenal world is dealt with in Invitation to a Beheading, which posits the existence of an ideal and undistorted realm beyond the intellectual and sensory reach of the novel's protagonist.

Distortion also helps to shed light on the topic of chapter two. There, I describe "containment," a literary paradigm in which a limited "inner" form of existence seems to be surrounded by a more free "outer" existence. "Innerworlds," the interior level of containment, typically impose constraints on visibility, knowledge, or motion, while corresponding "outerworlds" provide omniscience and omnipresence. Information from an outerworld occasionally penetrates into the innerworld, where it appears in a distorted form. Nabokov's fascination with the superior attributes of the outerworld reflects his longing for attaining greater levels of experience where things can be apprehended in their original and maximally

meaningful state. Essentially, containment is a set of themes that Nabokov uses to model situations that produce distortion where inferior and superior forms of experience collide and produce distortion. Containment is exemplified in several works and in particular in Invitation to a Beheading, whose protagonist intuits, as I mentioned above, that his life is a constrained and distorted innerworld beyond which exists an "ideal" outerworld. Situations of containment and the problems of perceptual ability that they entail may also be found in instances of authorial visitations to a work, such as manifestations of Nabokov's own presence in King, Queen, Knave (*Korol', dama, valet*, 1928) and "The Aurelian."

The second part of this dissertation ("Beyond the Barricades") describes Nabokov's interest in more ideal (and sometimes fantastic) ways of looking at and interpreting the world in order to overcome distortion. In chapter three, I describe Nabokov's preoccupation with making sense of distorted experience by searching for what I call "perspectives"—ways of looking at empirical, observed information that reveal something that is more meaningful than the sum of the observed parts. A perspective is essentially an understanding of how pieces must be oriented in order to reveal aesthetic value. In this sense a perspective has the potential to negate distortion. Nabokov's artistically-minded characters, eager to satisfy the cravings of the consciousness, are endowed with a natural inclination to seek out productive perspectives on the sensory input that is presented to them. Some characters may alternatively be content to accept their observations at face value, without looking for better ways of interpreting them, or they may resort to flawed perspectives that are grounded in madness, obsession, or narcissism. Acknowledging a bipartite structure of "observation" and "perspective" provides a vocabulary and framework that are useful for examining Nabokov's work. For example, it can be said that

Pale Fire's (1960-1) Charles Kinbote holds to an incorrect perspective on the "observed" phenomena of John Shade's poem that supports his delusions of kinghood. In this way, Pale Fire is exposed as a clear structural relative to the earlier short story "The Admiralty Spire" (*"Admiralteiskaia igla,"* 1933), whose protagonist is similarly compelled by madness and narcissism to misinterpret a written work as series of allusions to his own life story. Perspective, like containment, is a phenomenon that acts in multiple contexts, and Nabokov applies the concepts of observation and perspective not only to literary works, but also to the experience of life. For him, the events of life constitute a form of observed information for which a perspective, capable of unlocking their aesthetic value, might be found. In fact, we will see that a supernatural key-like piece of information that exposes coherence in all of life is a recurring image in Nabokov's work.

The physical body presents a significant obstacle to the perception of aesthetic value since its sensory organs are far from capable of absorbing all that the world makes available. The eyes, for example, see only in one direction; the fingers can only feel what is within their reach; the body exists in a single point in space at any given time. Meanwhile, an entire universe of potential aesthetic value takes place beyond the periphery of the senses. The fourth chapter of this dissertation addresses Nabokov's desire for "manifold awareness," an ability to apprehend multiple things at once by bypassing the constraints imposed by physical existence, including the senses, and the "prison" of time and space. These constraints cause experience to be perceived in discontinuous fragments that appear to be meaningless, a situation that resembles the aesthetically-impaired process of reading a linear text. If one could somehow escape from the body, and indeed from time and space, one could view life like a painting and appreciate its

aesthetic value. A rejection of the senses and the body's confinement to space and time is reflected in several prominent themes and devices. We will see, for example, that Nabokov expresses dissatisfaction with the experience offered by human perception when he employs in his work imagery of multiplicities of eyes, of fantastically long tentacle-like organs of touch, and of the liberation of the ego from the body. Nabokov is also interested in identifying "thematic" connections that collapse or "fold" the spatial and temporal distance between events. I will also describe how Nabokov provides a somewhat idiosyncratic spin on Proust's philosophy of time by emphasizing those aspects of In Search of Lost Time that deal with the possibility of experiencing two temporally distant moments together in the same mental frame. Devices depicting this type of experience are put into practice in the early novel Mary (*Mashen'ka*, 1925-6) and Nabokov's autobiography Speak, Memory.

The fifth and final chapter of this dissertation addresses Nabokov's use of imagery of geometrical dimensions as a way to achieve manifold awareness. Geometrical dimensions facilitate manifold awareness because the addition of a dimension, like the construction of a tall tower on a flat plain, provides a vantage point from which things residing in lower dimensions can be observed together and at once, a vantage that resembles the "ideal" instantaneous point of view from which an author (or rereader) apprehends a text. The concepts presented in this chapter allow some of Nabokov's scenes and even entire works, such as "Cloud, Castle, Lake" (*"Oblako, ozero, bashnia,"* P1937) to be reconsidered. In particular, I undertake a detailed examination of the largely neglected poem "The Ballad of Longwood Glen" (1957) in the context of dimensional imagery.

Part One: Between Us and Artistic Appreciation

Chapter 1. Through a Glass, Darkly

As I said in the introduction, Nabokov envisions a certain "distortion" that necessarily takes place when something from a richer form of experience is played out in a situation where experience is limited. Distortion involves the transformation of coherent information into a deformed, fragmented, inferior, incomplete, parodic representation of itself—while maintaining some associative or semantic link to its original. In addition to an abstract problem that afflicts a work of art, distortion is also a literary preoccupation for Nabokov that is reflected in several devices, including

orthographic alteration through paronomasia or anagrammatization. A basic case of distortion as a device can be found in Nabokov's novel Look at the Harlequins! (1973-4), whose protagonist feels that his life is "the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth" (LATH 89). It is strongly suggested that this other figure is Nabokov. The protagonist, Vadim Vadimovich N. (whose name is a "distortion" of Nabokov's first name and patronymic, Vladimir Vladimirovich) writes a series of novels whose titles are distorted versions of Nabokov's works. Nabokov's Camera Obscura, for example, becomes Vadim's Camera Lucida; Mary becomes Tamara; Pnin (1953-5) becomes Dr. Olga Repnin; and Ada becomes Ardis (LATH [ix]).[15] Examining, for example, the pairing of Mary and Tamara, we see that "distorted" Tamara is phonetically similar to its "original," and furthermore maintains a semantic or associative link with Nabokov's novel: Mary is the name of the first love

[15] A similar type of novel-title distortion takes place in the world of Bend Sinister, which is associated with a "refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being" (BS vi) and produces the hybrid title All Quiet on the Don (BS 86).

of Mary's protagonist, while Tamara is the pseudonym Nabokov gives to his first love in his autobiography.

Distortion is produced most prominently in Nabokov's work by pairings of qualitatively different levels of experience. These pairings include: the instantaneous vs. the linear experience of life or art; dreams vs. wakefulness; and the phenomenal vs. the metaphysical world. I will begin this chapter with a discussion of the opposition of the phenomenal world and the metaphysical world in Invitation to a Beheading, whose protagonist, Cincinnatus, suspects that his surroundings are an inferior version of something ideal beyond his reach. I will describe how distortion is conveyed in Invitation to a Beheading and other works through optical imagery such as refraction, light and darkness, and imperfect reflection, and may, appropriately, have some connection to the Biblical phrase "through a glass, darkly." I will explain in detail the role of distortion in Nabokov's depictions of dreams and how dream distortion acts as an analogy for phenomenal existence and its inferior status with regard to the metaphysical world: In the same way that distortion in dreams originates in a superior realm of wakefulness, distortion in life originates in—and provides evidence for—a more clear and coherent metaphysical existence.

According to D. Barton Johnson, "Nabokov adhere[s] to the Symbolist belief in two worlds, with ours being a defective one that has lost touch with its ideal[16] archetype. <...> The external

[16] Distortion, insofar as it prevents the viewer from apprehending something in its true or "ideal" form, may have some connection to the notion of Platonic idealism. Platonic philosophy is explicitly suggested in Invitation to a Beheading by the comic opera "Socrates Must Decrease," which is scheduled to be performed after Cincinnatus's execution. Themes of imprisonment and execution upon which the plot of Invitation to a Beheading is based are also connected to Socrates and therefore to Plato. See (Mou10) and (Por10) for more on the topic of Platonism in Invitation to a Beheading.

world exists only in hazy outline" (Joh81 398). This phenomenon of two worlds, he says, is especially pronounced in Invitation to a Beheading, which takes as one of its "primary structuring devices" the opposition of "*tut"* (here) and "*tam*" (there), the protagonist's terms for the phenomenal and metaphysical worlds. The novel describes Cincinnatus's final days as he awaits execution for the crime of "Gnostical turpitude" and is apparently set in a dystopian world, although little is presented of what exists beyond the prison. Cincinnatus's descriptions of *tam* suggests that it is a more perfect world than the one he is confined to: "*There, tam, là-bas* <...> *there* are the originals of those gardens <…> *there* everything pleases one's soul, everything is filled with the kind of fun that children know; *there* shines the mirror that now and then sends a chance reflection here" (IB 94, italics original). This superior realm is opposed to the "horrible 'here'" of mortality and the prison where Cincinnatus spends his final days. Cincinnatus intuits that *tut* is only a "clumsy copy" of *tam*. Because of the qualitative difference between these two worlds, it is appropriate that information that seems to originate in the superior metaphysical world takes on a distorted character when it appears in the phenomenal world where Cincinnatus resides. Johnson observes, for example, an orthographic deformation in the name of a park:

> Cincinnatus's prison world has within its confines one glimmer of the ideal world. It is the municipal park where he once blissfully wandered with his bride-to-be of which he dreams in his cell. The park is named the Tamara Gardens in obvious allusion to the world of *tam* and is a pale replica of their archetype in that other world. (Joh81 386)

In other words, the Tamara Gardens are a distortion of something more ideal that resides in the metaphysical world, and this distorted status is echoed in the paronomastic link between

Tamara and *tam*. As we will see below, orthographic distortion frequently affects information that originates in the metaphysical world.

Another distortion appearing within Cincinnatus's world is his mother Cecelia C, whom Cincinnatus accuses of being a "parody" (a term that Nabokov clarifies in an interview as referring to a "grotesque imitation" (SO 76)). There is a hint that Cecelia C stands in for an "ideal" when Cincinnatus at one point notices a fleeting expression in her eyes: "it was as if something real, unquestionable (in this world, where everything was subject to question), had passed through, as if a corner of this horrible life had curled up, and there was a glimpse of the lining" (IB 136). Furthermore, if the phenomenal world is a distorted version of the metaphysical, Cecelia C provides a metaphor for this situation when describing a type of toy from her childhood:

> <...> you would have a crazy mirror like that and a whole collection of different '*nonnons*,' absolutely absurd objects, shapeless, mottled, pockmarked, knobby things, like some kind of fossils—but the mirror, which completely distorted ordinary objects <...> when you placed one of these incomprehensible, monstrous objects so that it was reflected in the incomprehensible, monstrous mirror, a marvelous thing happened; minus by minus equaled 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. <...>
>
> "Why do you tell me all this?" asked Cincinnatus.
>
> She was silent. (IB 135-6)

Cecelia's silence communicates the gravity of the metaphor that she has just presented: The world that Cincinnatus occupies itself resembles a *nonnon* by dint of its grotesqueness and distortion, its status as a "clumsy copy" of something superior. A hypothetical "mirror," then, could be capable of negating that distortion.[17] The metaphysical world of *tam*, which "sends a chance *reflection* here" (IB 94, italics mine) appears to refer to the ordered version of things revealed by this mirror.

One of the most fascinating cases of distortion in all of Nabokov's writing was identified in Invitation to a Beheading by Gennady Barabtarlo and involves a scene in which Cincinnatus's wife Marthe arrives to visit him, bringing with her an assortment of family members and household furniture. Amid this bizarre display, one of Marthe's brothers sings the pseudo-Italian phrase "*Mali é trano t'amesti*," presumably a line from the opera "Socrates Must Decrease," in which he is going to perform following Cincinnatus's execution (IB 103). Barabtarlo argues convincingly that the phrase, which appears in Latin letters in both the English and Russian versions of the novel, is a deliberate anagram for the transliterated Russian "*Smert' mila[;] èto taina*" (Bar93 194, brackets Barabtarlo's): "Death is sweet, but it's a secret."[18] Death, in fact, will be sweet for Cincinnatus because his execution, marked by the

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[17] I propose that the mirror itself is related to "perspectives"—ways of looking at things that reveal their coherence or aesthetic value. I discuss Nabokov's use of perspectives in chapter three of this dissertation.

[18] See (Bar93 238-9 (note 7)) for some less convincing theories on the meaning of the "Italian" phrase. I am inclined to agree that Barabtarlo presents the "one and only solution that fits the thematic design of [the phrase's] contextual environment and <…> the author's deepest philosophical concerns" (Bar93 239 (note 7)). However, one of the questionable aspects of this theory is the problem of why this profound insight is borne by the brother-in-law, whose bumbling manner and preoccupation with vulgar things places him among Nabokov's negative characters. One explanation is that this depiction falls in line with Nabokov's belief (which I

collapse of two-dimensional stage-like props constituting the phenomenal world, seems to convey him into the metaphysical world that he has longed for in life.

Whereas the problem of distortion in a work obscures aesthetic value, when Nabokov depicts distorted information originating in the metaphysical world, it often conceals potential life- or sanity-saving information from characters. A similar instance of orthographic distortion that occurs across the boundary between the metaphysical and phenomenal worlds can be found in the message that Pale Fire's Hazel Shade receives while spending a night in a shack, interacting with an orb of light that she takes for a spirit. Interpreting flashes from the orb as an alphabetic code, Hazel records the apparently meaningless message "pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told." However, as Boyd (drawing from a letter Nabokov wrote to biographer Andrew Field) says,

> As Nabokov has noted privately, the message can be decoded as a garbled warning <...> "<…> *Padre* should *not go* to the *lane* to be mistaken for *old Goldswart* (worth) after finishing his *tale* (pale) *feur* (fire) [which in Shakespeare is accompanied by] the word 'arrant' (*farant*) [and this] with *'lant'* makes up the Atalanta butterfly in Shade's last scene. It is *'told'* by the spirit in the barn." (Boy91 454, italics and brackets presumably Boyd's)

In other words, the message is a distorted prediction of the murder of Hazel's father, John Shade, which takes place outside the home of Judge Goldsworth and is marked by the appearance of an Atalanta butterfly. This message, like the anagram of Invitation to a Beheading, contains crucial information that is distorted in the course of its transition between

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describe in more detail in chapter three) that aesthetic value is a question of "how" rather than "what," and may be found even among the most mundane components of life.

two "levels" of experience—the afterlife and life. Abstractly speaking, it appears as if, just as an artistic work cannot "fit" in a linear medium and becomes fragmented, messages from the qualitatively superior metaphysical world cannot "fit" in this one and become garbled.

An interesting case of paronomastic and paranormal distortion is documented in Nabokov's own life. In 1916 Nabokov dreamed of his uncle Vasya Rukavishnikov, who bequeathed to Nabokov a fortune that was almost immediately lost in the Russian revolution. The vision enigmatically told him, "I shall come back to you as Harry and Kuvyrkin." Later in life Nabokov speculated that his wealthy uncle did eventually "come back" in the form of the enormous windfall he received from the sale of the movie rights to Lolita (1949-54), whose film adaptation was produced by James B. *Harris* and Stanley *Kubrick* (Boy91 366).[19] Notwithstanding the danger of mixing biography and literary analysis, I imagine that Nabokov's fascination with distorted messages in literature must have allowed him to savor this particular real-life coincidence.[20]

In addition to their tendency to be realized paronomastically or orthographically, depictions of distortion frequently involve optical effects related to light. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1938-9), Sebastian's novel The Prismatic Bezel—a term suggesting optical distortion, as if something were seen through a jewel—is described as based on "a *parody* of certain tricks of

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[19] Information about the future that is paronomastically distorted and conveyed through a dream also appears in Nabokov's novel Glory (*Podvig*, 1930-2): Its protagonist Martin dreams of the phrase "Georgians [*gruziny* in Martin's native Russian] do not eat ice cream." Later, his acquaintance Gruzinov states that he never eats ice cream (Maa09 64 (note 22)).

[20] Another anecdote of real-life distortion noted by Nabokov: his novel Laughter in the Dark (*Kamera obskura*, P1932) features a character named Dorianna Karenina, whose lack of familiarity with Tolstoy's heroine is a source of irony in the novel. Fate seems to have displayed its taste for irony when the paronomastically-suggestive actress *Anna Karina* was chosen to play Margot in the 1969 film adaptation of the novel (SO 162).

the literary trade" (RLSK 91, italics mine) and is a sort of parodical (i.e. "distorted," in my terminology) detective novel. The narrator of the same work identifies "an occult resemblance between a man and the date of his death. <…> This date to me seems the reflection of that name in a pool of rippling water" (distortion is suggested by the rippling) (RLSK 183). A fractured circle, a kidney shape that Nabokov identifies as "an outline broken by *refraction*, a *distortion* in the mirror of being, a wrong turn taken by life, a sinistral and sinister world" is an emblem of the boundary between two worlds in Bend Sinister (BS vi, italics mine). Victor Wind of Pnin, experimentally viewing objects through a glass[21] filled with water, observes that:

> <...> the red apple became a clear-cut red band bounded by a straight horizon, half a glass of Red Sea, Arabia Felix. The short pencil, if held obliquely, curved like a stylized snake, but if held vertically became monstrously fat—almost pyramidal. The black pawn, if moved to and fro, divided into a couple of black ants. The comb, stood on end, resulted in the glass's seeming to fill with beautifully striped liquid, a zebra cocktail. (P 99)

Victor's experimentation conveys both Nabokov's general interest in the phenomenon of distortion, as well as the fact that it is the consequence of boundary crossings (in this case the refracting boundary is between the interior and exterior layer of the glass). If distortion often involves imagery of light, it is appropriate that images dealing with the availability of light occasionally refer to the penetration of metaphysical information into the phenomenal world. In the short story "Ultima Thule," Adam Falter's metaphysical epiphany (which grants him direct access, apparently, to the undistorted metaphysical world) is followed by an image of a lamp

[21] See (Bar93 149-51) for a more detailed discussion of glass and optical phenomena in Pnin.

that is suddenly switched on (S 507); John Shade quotes an anonymous maxim: "*Life is a message scribbled in the dark*" (PF 41/L235, italics original), the suggestion of which is that if something is written in the dark, it is bound to come out in a distorted form. Light and optical phenomena also indicate the qualitatively-higher metaphysical level of existence in many places (even when distortion is not explicitly present). In Look at the Harlequins! it is said that certain lines of poetry "[ornament] sad lives with a sudden cadenza coming from some celestial elsewhere, a glory, a sweetness, the patch of rainbow cast on the wall by a crystal paperweight we cannot locate" (LATH 58). In Bend Sinister Nabokov refers to "the *glint* of a special puddle (the one Krug had somehow perceived through the layer of his own life)" (BS 241, italics mine). The narrator furthermore uses "an inclined beam of pale light" to trigger Krug's madness after his son's death (BS 233). The fact that Nabokov unites distortion and the metaphysical under the common imagery of light is appropriate since, in his work, the metaphysical information is almost always subjected to distortion when it appears in the phenomenal world.

Mirrors and questions of light and darkness are especially appropriate to an understanding of distortion considering that Nabokov's use of distortion finds conceptual support in the Biblical formulation "through a glass, darkly,"[22] which has been understood as a statement on the perception of reality available during life (as opposed to beyond death). In the Bible the phrase seems to refer to the fact that mortals cannot experience true reality directly, and are limited to seeing only a dim mirror[23] image of it. Kinbote at one point mentions a slight variant

[22] 1 Cor 13:12 ("For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known"). One interpretation of this verse is that in life ("now"), perception is imperfect, while in death ("then"), perception is clear ("face to face").
[23] The original Greek specifically references a mirror. Modern English renderings of the phrase generally retain the archaic synonym "glass."

of the expression to describe John Shade's creative process, quoting a reviewer who wonders if "Pale Fire" represents an incomplete view of a much greater whole: "None can say how long John Shade planned his poem to be, but it is not improbable that what he left represents only a small fraction of the composition he saw in a glass, darkly" (PF 14). Mirrors appear frequently in Nabokov's work,[24] and they often play the distorting role suggested by their Biblical prototype. Pale Fire mentions a "distortive mirror" (PF 146/N149) in connection with one character's disguise, as well as "a mirror maker of genius," Sudarg of Bokay—a name that reflects, with distortion, the name of the novel's villain, Jacob Gradus (PF 314). Johnson notes similar distorted reflections[25] in the names Kinbote and Botkin, Campbell and Beauchamp, and Radomir and Mirador (Joh85 69); King Charles's friend Odon has a half-brother named Nodo, and (in spite of the perfect symmetry of their names) the latter is a member of "the Shadows," the "Gothic and nasty" "shadow twins" to the Karlists that Odon serves (PF 150/N171). During a discussion in New Wye[26] of Kinbote's suspicious resemblance to the deposed Zemblan king, it is noted that the word "Zembla" derives from "Semberland, a land of reflections, of 'resemblers'" (PF 264/N894); Andrew Field briefly discusses a distorted-reflection relationship between Cincinnatus and M'sieur Pierre in Invitation to a Beheading, which includes the pair's initials (i.e. Ц and П) (Fie67 188). The *nonnon* metaphor of Invitation to a Beheading involves a distorted mirror (although the purpose of this mirror is to resolve distortion rather than to create it). And

[24] See especially Despair (*Otchaianie*, 1932). See also (Bar93 149-51) regarding reflection and mirrors in Pnin.
[25] See also (Pat76 109) for a discussion of "distorted reflections" in Transparent Things.
[26] New Wye, Appalachia may itself be a distorted reference to New York ("N.Y." becomes N. "Wye"). Nabokov taught (and began to envision Pale Fire) at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., in the northern tip of Appalachia.

a metaphorical distorting mirror appears in the introduction to Bend Sinister, where Nabokov speaks both of a "crazy-mirror of terror and art" (BS x) and says that

> <...> 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. There can be distinguished, no doubt, certain *reflections in the glass* directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know <...>. No doubt, too, 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 Nazist pseudo-efficiency. (BS vi-vii, italics mine)

An important example of distortion produced by a pairing of qualitatively different levels of experience is dreaming and wakefulness. The latter provides a much more coherent and rich form of consciousness than the former. A person who is awake is relatively free to conceptualize the information that is being taken in by the senses; but a person who is asleep is extremely limited in his or her ability to understand sounds, sensations, and memories that penetrate into a dream from the waking world and recent past. Nabokov's depictions and descriptions of dreams accordingly feature distortion prominently. Ultimately they also form a relatively explicit allegory for the imperfect perception that the living have of the metaphysical world. In Bend Sinister, Nabokov suggests that dreams tend to be a distorted version of recent experiences from waking life:

> Naturally, the script of daytime memory is far more subtle in regard to factual details, since a good deal of cutting and trimming and conventional recombination has to be done by the dream producers (of whom there are usually several, mostly illiterate and middle-class and pressed by time) <...> (BS 63)

In Strong Opinions, Nabokov indicates that the sources of dream imagery are typically evident if one traces them back to their prototypes from waking life, saying that "I take gleeful pleasure every morning in refuting the Viennese quack by recalling and explaining the details of my dreams without using one single reference to sexual symbols or mythical complexes" (SO 47). In the course of rejecting Freudian approaches to dream interpretation, Nabokov again identifies dreams as fragmentary and recombined versions of previous events, saying that

> About twice a week I have a good, long nightmare with unpleasant characters imported from earlier dreams, appearing in more or less iterative surroundings—kaleidoscopic arrangements of broken impressions, fragments of day thoughts, and irresponsible mechanical images, utterly lacking any possible Freudian implication or explication <...> (SO 29)

At several points, in other words, Nabokov expresses the notion that dreams are constructed from distortions of what one has experienced while awake or of events in the surrounding world that reach the consciousness of the sleeper. Nabokov is essentially describing "dream incorporation," the appearance of waking imagery in dreams; and the "day residue," which involves, specifically, dream images based on events from the preceding day (Nie04 328). A tendency to conceptualize dreams as distortions of wakefulness is even assigned to characters in Nabokov's fiction. Van Veen of Ada, for example, reports that "Metamorphoses in dreams" (presumably a synonym for the "cutting and trimming" and "recombination" that Nabokov experiences) "are as common as metaphors in poetry" (A 363).[27] Many of Nabokov's frequent

[27] A larger excerpt of this section reveals that Van is as cognizant of the phenomenon of dream incorporation as Nabokov is:

literary depictions of dreams adhere to a formula in which elements of the sleeper's environment or events from the preceding day are deformed into new, yet recognizable images.[28] One example can be found in Bend Sinister, in which the daughter of the university president has a dream while napping during a gathering that her father has organized and where she has been serving guests:

> <...> the President's daughter who was dreaming of not being able to find a certain pot of apple jelly which she knew was a ship she had once seen in Bervok and a sailor was leaning and spitting overboard, watching his spit fall, fall, fall into the apple jelly of the heart-rending sea for her dream was shot with golden-yellow, as she had not put out the lamp <…> (BS 56)

An analysis of the preceding pages of the novel yields some explanation for the images in the dream. "Bervok" is the type of apple the daughter has just carried in to the guests (as well as, presumably, a location in the fictional world of the novel). The golden-yellow color of the dream, as the passage states, is due to the lamp being on in the room as she sleeps. The combination of these two elements yields the apple jelly. The ship seems to come from imagery in a speech her father has just made to his visitors: "So let us not by our own fault place ourselves in the position <…> of the admiral whose fleet is lost in the raging waves" (BS 49).

> Perhaps the most typical trait of practically all dreams, unimportant or portentous—and this despite the presence, in stretches or patches, of fairly logical (within special limits) cogitation and awareness (often absurd) of dream-past events—should be understood by my students as a dismal weakening of the intellectual faculties of the dreamer, who is not really shocked to run into a long-dead friend. At his best the dreamer wears semi-opaque blinkers; at his worst he's an imbecile. (A 362-3)

Van's discourse leads, unsurprisingly, into an assault on Freudian dream interpretation.

[28] Additional examples of dream incorporation can be found at the end of chapter four of Look at the Harlequins!, at the end of chapter three of Pnin, and in chapter twenty of Transparent Things.

And the spitting sailor may come from a drop of ink that falls from the fountain pen of one of the guests.

The notion that dreams involve an obscured coherence behind their apparent disorder is addressed, again in Bend Sinister, by Adam Krug, who detects a "code" among the components of a dream:

> But among the producers or stagehands responsible for the setting there has been one … it is hard to express it … a nameless, mysterious genius who took advantage of the dream to convey his own peculiar code message which has nothing to do with school days or indeed with any aspect of Krug's physical existence, but which links him up somehow with an unfathomable mode of being <…> which cannot be defined more accurately than this, no matter how Krug strains his brain. (BS 64)

In the same way that the "code" in Krug's dreams link him with "an unfathomable mode of being," the extent to which Nabokov leverages imagery of dreams to suggest something greater, more coherent, and more meaningful is notable. For example, when he is asked in an interview about the "Alice-in-Wonderland world of unreality and illusion" that plays a role in many of his works, Nabokov says that, "If read very carefully,"

> *Alice in Wonderland* <…> will be seen to imply, by humorous juxtaposition, the presence of a quite solid, and rather sentimental, world, *behind the semi-detached dream*.[29] (SO 183-4, italics mine)

[29] More than one scholar had approached the Alice books from a Freudian perspective prior to this statement (Bro04 xvi-xvii). Nabokov's response and its emphasis on this work's underlying solidity is probably both another jab at Freud as well as a window onto Nabokov's understanding of dreams and their relationship with reality.

The protagonist of "Ultima Thule" says, addressing his dead wife, "the true meaning of reality, of that piercing term, purged of all our strange, dreamy, masquerade interpretations, now stands so pure and sweet that you, angel, find it amusing that we could have taken the dream seriously (although you and I did have an inkling <...>)" (S 503). In a similar vein the protagonist of Look at the Harlequins! pairs "dreams and other distortions of 'reality'" (LATH 20)[30] and associates "wide-awake reality" with "the hereafter" (LATH 26).

Invitation to a Beheading (which Nabokov's calls his "dreamiest" novel (SO 76)) uses sleep to describe its protagonist's intuition of an ordered realm beyond the distorted phenomenal world—as well as the possibility of escaping into that realm. Cincinnatus states that

> <...> our vaunted waking life <…> is 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—as when you hear during sleep a dreadful insidious tale because a branch is scraping on the pane, or see yourself sinking into snow because your blanket is falling off. (IB 92)

Johnson notes in connection with this passage that

> The assumption that the worlds of sleeping and waking are reversed, and that Cincinnatus is in the wrong one, finds reinforcement in the fate of the town statue of Captain Somnus (sleep), who in the disintegrating world of the novel's end is

[30] It is similarly noted in Transparent Things that "all dreams are anagrams of diurnal reality" (TT 80). I would argue that dreams and anagrams are fundamentally similar because they are both forms of distortion. Like an anagram, a dream incorporates information that comes from a coherent source. But the ordering principle that makes that coherence evident is lost in the shuffle.

> mysteriously shattered by lightning—thus marking the end of the reign of sleep. (Joh85 159)

The protagonist of Look at the Harlequins! suffers from "'numerical nimbus' syndrome," a condition resembling sleep paralysis, and which, like other depictions of dreams in Nabokov's work, involves an intuition of something greater—of an ordered version of that which is currently appearing to the consciousness as disorder. This condition causes him to imagine

> <...> a fatidic problem which had to be solved lest I perish and indeed might have been solved now if I had given it some forethought or had been less sleepy and weak-witted at this all-important moment. The problem itself was of a calculatory order: certain relations between the twinkling points had to be measured or, in my case, guessed, since my torpor prevented me from counting them properly, let alone recalling what the *safe* number should be. Error meant instant retribution—beheading by a giant or worse; the right guess, per contra, would allow me to escape into an enchanting region situated just beyond the gap <…> (LATH 16, italics original)

This syndrome provides a metaphor for phenomenal experience. The possibility of decoding the "numerical nimbus" and escaping into "an enchanting region" has much broader implications when considered in the context not just of the dream but of life. Nabokov seems to say, through the pairing of dream distortion and wakefulness, that an analogous ordered reality (i.e., the metaphysical world) can be perceived behind the surreal dreamland of life. The same notions that apply to dreams—their distortion, their origins in a more clear and ordered level of existence, the potential for accessing that level of existence by achieving a degree of alertness sufficient to see beyond the distortion—are all also used prominently by Nabokov to explain

the relationship between the phenomenal and metaphysical worlds. When in Speak, Memory Nabokov uses dreams as an allegory to describe the spiritual views of his mother,[31] he speaks of an intuition of order lurking behind the chaos of the here-and-now:

> Her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life. All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour. (SM 39)

Nabokov seems himself to appropriate this metaphor when, a few pages later, he uses a contrast of dreaming and wakefulness to describe an advanced form of perception:[32]

> It is certainly not then—not in dreams—but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction. (SM 50)

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[31] The fact that Nabokov's mother provides an important piece of metaphysical insight involving the phenomenal world's status as a distorted version of the metaphysical may lend credence to the notion that Cincinnatus's mother also possesses special knowledge of the roIe of distortion in mortals' perception of reality.

[32] Such heightened states of consciousness can sometimes be initiated by a work of art: Nabokov states that alert readers of Gogol's "The Overcoat" "will find <…> shadows linking our state of existence to those other states and modes which we dimly apprehend in our rare moments of irrational perception" (NG 145).

In this very important metaphorical statement on life and the forms of consciousness beyond it, the presence of distortion again indicates a boundary, and implies something clearer, more comprehensible, and more meaningful on the other side.

Distortion is valuable to Nabokov because it conceptualizes and analogizes a fundamental problem of both his aesthetics and worldview: how to appreciate a meaningful and coherent phenomenon, such as a work of literature or life, when its complete scope and structure are beyond the present limits of one's perception. While confined to life, a person who hopes to reach beyond the barricades may press against these limits, and sufficient attention and effort may help the living to occasionally discover meaningfulness in life, just as an anagram solver can find a secret message and a rereader can appreciate some of the aesthetic whole underlying a written text. But generally, confinement to the prison of the phenomenal world involves a near-constant state of distortion. The end of phenomenal imprisonment, on the other hand, presents the enticing prospect of apprehending things in their supremely meaningful, original form. Closely associating life and death with sleep and wakefulness, Nabokov hints at the possibility of escaping altogether from the "dream" of life through "waking up" and asks: are we separated from another world by a boundary that causes metaphysical information to be recombined and distorted? When one awakens from life, will the source of its jumbled events become clear? Will distorted phenomenal experience collapse like the props of the stagecraft world of Invitation to a Beheading? By emphasizing the metaphorical connection between dreams and the distorted status of life, Nabokov is able to suggest such conclusions.

Chapter 2. Nabokov's Outerworlds

Among the ways in which Nabokov conceptualizes the situations that lead to distortion is "containment," a literary paradigm in which personages are confined to a state of limited experience, which I call an "innerworld," beyond which is a distinct, less circumscribed state of experience called an "outerworld." Containment finds expression in many forms throughout Nabokov's work but has several consistent properties. For one, the innerworld is usually an unpleasant place or state that limits the freedom, mobility, or visual range of its inhabitants. When Nabokov presents containment in his work, this property of "limitation" may, for example, involve a surrounding barrier or enclosing structure, or a character who is unable to move or travel. An outerworld, on the other hand, usually provides omniscience and freedom of movement or omnipresence over the corresponding innerworld. Secondly, characters who are confined to an innerworld may sense the existence and influence of the world beyond their own. Finally, and most consistently, if a person residing in an innerworld encounters information that originates in an outerworld, this information is altered by distortion.

Invitation to a Beheading makes use of containment and exhibits all of the properties I associate with the phenomenon, including: limitations placed on characters within an innerworld; an intuition of a superior outerworld; and a phenomenon of distortion afflicting information that enters the innerworld from the outerworld.[33] A theme of "limitation" is prominent throughout the novel. The phenomenal world of "*here*" "holds and constricts" Cincinnatus (IB 93); he is physically confined to the prison and has little ability to move throughout or view his surroundings because he may only interact with the outside world

[33] Timothy Langen describes the novel as "essentially an extended fugue on the theme of in versus out," and sees a major structural device in this opposition (Lan04 61).

through a single "window tunnel" in his cell (IB 28). His confinement to one spot is so important to his captors that dreaming of "resplendent landscapes" and "outings with friends" is forbidden by the prison rules (IB 49). The novel that Cincinnatus reads, Quercus, echoes his immobility[34] and limited visibility: The book is about an oak tree that is, naturally, rooted to one spot, and describes events that take place within its immediate vicinity. [35] Demonstrating the second characteristic of the containment paradigm, Cincinnatus intuits and longs for the freedom of a superior metaphysical outerworld, which he refers to as *tam* (there). In accordance with the third property of containment, the occasional glimpses Cincinnatus gets of the metaphysical outerworld are distorted versions of ideal "originals." Examples, as I noted in the previous chapter, include the *Tam*ara Gardens, Cecelia C, and the anagrammatic message regarding death.

A more abstract, but equally valid, application of containment can be identified in Nabokov's ideas about the apprehension of a text through reading vs. rereading. As I described in the introduction to this dissertation, Nabokov views an artistic text as an unnaturally linear representation of an instantaneous impression. Limitation is created for the reader because the structure of the text imposes a certain "immobility": The necessity of taking a linear path to get from one part of the work to another constrains the reader's ability to comprehend the text's aesthetic value. The *re*reader, on the other hand, attains an "instantaneous" mental structure in which multiple parts of the story are present at once and equally accessible. In this sense, the

[34] For a brief discussion of immobility in Quercus, as well as possible literary predecessors of the fictional novel, see (Gri06 241-2).

[35] Imprisonment and visual impairment tend to appear in conjunction in Nabokov's work. For example, Ivanov of the short story "Perfection" admonishes his pupil to observe and enjoy the world, in case he "were someday to go blind or be imprisoned" (S 345).

rereader enjoys "omniscience" and "omnipresence" over the text. Distortion confounds the reader's experience insofar as linearity and sequence separate parts of the work that are meaningful only in combination with one another. In other words, the aesthetic value of the work is obscured (whereas the rereader comes close to seeing the work as an undistorted whole). The reader may *intuit* that the work is meaningful, but cannot access aesthetic value as easily as a rereader, who can recombine pieces irrespective of the sequence in which they appear in the text. In other words, the reader resides in a confined and distorted "innerworld" with regard to the experience of the text, whereas the rereader occupies a liberated "outerworld" of omniscience and omnipresence from which the work can be more fully appreciated. Essentially, containment is a model of the basic problem that this dissertation addresses: How Nabokov conceptualizes what happens when information associated with a higher level of experience is projected into a lower one, and how those operating within a lower level of experience can recover some of the "ideal" "original." Although the disparate experience afforded to readers and rereaders is perhaps the prototypical expression of containment, the general paradigm and its various attributes have many realizations in Nabokov's writing.

Nabokov's appearances in his works in the guise of characters constitute one realization of containment and exhibit the main properties of the device. In several works, special characters, usually "distorted" versions of Nabokov himself, seem to drop in to the narrative innerworld. These outerworldly personages usually exhibit omnipresence and omniscience with regard to the story, and may be shown in contrast to regular characters who, trapped in the innerworld of the story, experience limitation, intuition, and distortion. The best known instance of

Nabokov appearing within his own writing takes place in his early novel King, Queen, Knave. A character in that work, Dreyer, is unaware that his nephew Franz and wife Martha are having an affair and are planning to murder him. The three take a trip to a seaside resort, and while there, encounter a couple resembling Nabokov and his wife Vera:

> The foreign girl in the blue dress danced with a remarkably handsome man in an old-fashioned dinner jacket. Franz had long since noticed this couple; they had appeared to him in fleeting glimpses, like a recurrent dream image or a subtle leitmotiv—now at the beach, now in a café, now on the promenade. Sometimes the man carried a butterfly net. The girl had a delicately painted mouth and tender gray-blue eyes, and her fiancé or husband, slender, elegantly balding, contemptuous of everything on earth but her, was looking at her with pride; and Franz felt envious of that unusual pair, so envious that his oppression, one is sorry to say, grew even more bitter, and the music stopped. They walked past him. They were speaking loudly. They were speaking a totally incomprehensible language. (KQK 254)

As I mentioned above, one characteristic of containment is a limitation of movement and knowledge for those confined to the innerworld, and an opposing omniscience and omnipresence for those in the outerworld. The couple seems beyond the spatial confines to which Franz is subject—they appear to him in "fleeting glimpses," as if coming and going from his world at their leisure. It is natural that a visiting author should enjoy omniscience and omnipresence. An author, according to Nabokov, perceives the work like a painting, and therefore may turn his or her attention to any particular part. Elevated knowledge or visibility and an ability to move about with ease are, correspondingly, markers of the special characters

who are connected with Nabokov-the-author and possess his advantageous "outer" point of view. Franz, conversely, is trapped in an increasingly stifling relationship. Franz is ignorant of the couple's language but they seem to have complete knowledge of him and his situation.[36] While Franz is out buying aspirin for his mistress,

> <...> the puzzling foreign couple overtook him. They were both in beach robes and walked rapidly, rapidly conversing in their mysterious tongue. He thought that they glanced at him and fell silent for an instant. After passing him they began talking again; he had the impression they were discussing him, and even pronouncing his name. It embarrassed, it incensed him, that this damned happy foreigner hastening to the beach with his tanned, pale-haired, lovely companion, knew absolutely everything about his predicament and perhaps pitied, not without some derision, an honest young man who had been seduced and appropriated by an older woman who, despite her fine dresses and face lotions, resembled a large white toad. (KQK 258-9)

Two aspects of this situation of containment suggest distortion. Firstly, Franz cannot understand the language spoken by the couple. (And such losses of meaning are symptomatic of information that passes from a superior outer level of experience into an inferior one.) Secondly, an anagrammatic distortion of the type described in the previous chapter appears when Dreyer discovers from the resort's guest list that the foreign man's name is "Blavdak Vinomori"—a perfect anagram of Vladimir Nabokov (KQK 239).

Instances of Nabokov "visiting" his works have been noted by many scholars. Johnson, for example, remarks that "Nabokov has a penchant for incorporating himself into his novels,

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[36] Elsewhere the man's "iris brim[s] meaningfully" as he invites Martha to dance—a possible allusion to his special knowledge (KQK 253).

sometimes by description, sometimes by initials, and often by anagrams such as Vivian Darkbloom, Baron Klim Avidov, Blavdak Vinomori, or Adam von Librikov" (Joh85 72). Nabokov even explicitly remarks in the English foreword to King, Queen, Knave that Vinomori and his companion are representations of himself and Vera Nabokov (KQK viii). On the other hand, the omniscience and omnipresence that is frequently available to such "outer" characters, not to mention the distortion that surrounds them, is rarely discussed. These attributes, however, point to another figure who, to my knowledge, has not yet been identified as a surrogate for Nabokov: the character Sommer in the short story "The Aurelian." The story is about Pilgram, a Berlin shopkeeper and nonprofessional butterfly expert (the term aurelian indicates a lepidopterist and comes from the Latin word for chrysalis),[37] whose life takes a sudden turn when he gets the opportunity to swindle a widow out of a valuable butterfly collection and resell it to Sommer, a wealthy collector, at a significant profit. The proceeds allow Pilgram to plan a butterfly hunt. But just as he is about to leave for this trip, he dies. The narration continues, however, and Pilgram's expedition seems to take place in the afterlife.

In Sommer we can recognize a "distorted" version of Nabokov. The short description given of him indicates that he is "a sunburned, bespectacled man in an old mackintosh and without any hat on his brown bald head" (S 255). The fact that Sommer is a butterfly collector connects him both to Nabokov and to the net-toting Vinomori. His physical description recalls Vinomori, who is "walnut brown," "elegantly balding," and "suntanned." These details in both King, Queen, Knave and "The Aurelian" coincide with Nabokov's own physical characteristics.

[37] The protagonist's name of course has its own connotation to "pilgrim," which is appropriate considering the story concludes with something resembling a spiritual journey.

"Elegant balding" at the temples is evident from photographs taken before either work was written,[38] and Boyd notes Nabokov's love of sunbathing (Boy90 369).

Sommer exhibits omniscience and omnipresence over the innerworld to which Pilgram is confined. Sommer "knew perfectly well of the existence of this collection" (S 256) before coming into Pilgram's shop (just as Franz intuits that the couple "knew absolutely everything about his predicament"). Sommer has "just returned from a trip to Venezuela" (S 256). His ability to travel with ease points to the "omnipresence" or freedom of movement characteristic of the outerworld. For Pilgram, on the other hand, travel is a lifelong, unfulfilled dream. "What he craved for, with a fierce, almost morbid intensity, was *himself* to net the rarest butterflies of distant countries" (S 252, italics original), but his attempts at making an expedition have never come to fruition for a variety of reasons. Pilgram's wish to travel reflects a longing for the outerworld from which Sommer originates and where movement is unrestricted. In fact, after his death, Pilgram embarks on a mystical journey in which he goes "far, very far. Most probably he visited Granada and Murcia and Albarracin, and then traveled farther still, to Surinam or Taprobane; and one can hardly doubt that he saw all the glorious bugs he had longed to see" (S 258). The places mentioned are geographically distant, encompassing Europe, Asia, Scandinavia, and South America. Maxim Shrayer notes that several of the exotic-sounding names used throughout the story are archaic. For example, Taprobane is "the ancient Sanskrit name of Ceylon" (i.e. Sri Lanka) (Shr99 115). It is suggested, therefore, that Pilgram gains facility of movement across both space and time (similar to the escape from the "prison" of time that Nabokov longs for in the opening of Speak, Memory, which I discuss later in this chapter). A

[38] See for example, the 1926 portrait in (Boy90 446-7).

likely explanation for the fantastic scope of Pilgram's journey is that death offers escape from the innerworld and leads therefore to the same omnipresence and omniscience that "natives" of the outerworld, like Nabokov's surrogates, enjoy. Nabokov's descriptions of containment often emphasize the disparities between innerworld and outerworld experience: Just as Franz's lack of understanding of the couple's language is juxtaposed with an intuition of their supernatural knowledge of the murder plot, Pilgram's unfulfilled dreams of world travel are set in contrast to Sommer's mobility.

The most significant clue to Sommer's role as a surrogate is his mackintosh. This garment links him to the mysterious mackintosh-wearing character that appears at various points in Joyce's Ulysses. While teaching at Cornell University, Nabokov lectured to undergraduates on this work, and as Brian Boyd notes, "In his lectures Nabokov explained M'Intosh, that enigma wrapped in a raincoat, as Joyce himself inspecting his novel, but he failed to offer a shred of evidence" (Boy91 179). In the published version of his Ulysses lecture,[39] Nabokov does offer a small piece of circumstantial evidence for this assertion: the fact that the character Stephen Dedalus, at one point in Ulysses, expresses a belief that Shakespeare has hidden himself in his own works, "and this is exactly what Joyce has done" (LL 319-20). Another clue, I argue, can be detected in the fact that Nabokov seems to give special attention in his lecture to the almost supernatural mobility of "the Man in the Brown Macintosh,"[40] who, Nabokov notes, can be seen eleven times throughout the complex landscape of the novel, and whose appearance "is sudden and unexpected" (LL 316). It is not beyond speculation that "M'Intosh's" apparent

[39] Nabokov's discussion of M'Intosh can be found in (LL 316-20).
[40] Nabokov's view of the importance of this character was evidently strong enough that he claims to have given a student a C-minus or D-plus in part for failing to notice the man in the brown mackintosh (SO 55-6).

omnipresence over the novel is one reason that Nabokov intuitively connects the character with his creator, since, as I argue, omnipresence is a natural characteristic of persons (e.g. Vinomori) originating in an outerworld. Although Nabokov uses the mackintosh in other places,[41] the conjunction of multiple attributes of containment in "The Aurelian" suggest that Nabokov gives the garment to Sommer as an allusion to Ulysses and as the token of an author "inspecting his work."[42]

A situation of containment that is especially marked by distortion can be found in Bend Sinister. The novel concludes abruptly when its protagonist Krug is about to be killed:

> <...> just a fraction of an instant before another and better bullet hit him, he shouted again: You, you—and the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire netting of my window. (BS 240)

In other words, the end of Krug's existence within the text coincides with the advent of a view on Nabokov's own "level" of existence. Krug appropriately suggests that experience can be conceptualized as two "problems"[43] one of which lies beyond death, when he asks: "What is more important to solve: the 'outer' problem (space, time, matter, the unknown without) or the 'inner' one (life, thought, love, the unknown within) or again their point of contact (death)?" I find it significant to the question of "inner and outer" that Hamletian imagery

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[41] Sebastian Knight's girlfriend Clare Bishop wears one, for example.
[42] It is the presence of multiple properties of containment that allow us to identify Sommer as a surrogate. There is little corroborative evidence, for example, suggesting that "baldheaded suntanned professor" Pnin is a case of Nabokov appearing in his work.
[43] In the sense of "puzzles," apparently.

abounds in Bend Sinister (Sch91). "Hamlet" itself involves something resembling containment: a play that is staged within the play. The "inner" play tells a "distorted" version of the events that have taken place in Shakespeare's "outer" play. Likewise the "innerworld" of Padukgrad in Bend Sinister resembles a distorted version of the real world: The title of the novel, according to Nabokov, is "an attempt to suggest an outline broken by refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being, a wrong turn taken by life, a sinistral and sinister world" (BS vi). Distortion in the novel is most prominently expressed through linguistic play and especially paronomasia, which "is a kind of verbal plague, a contagious sickness in the world of words; no wonder they are monstrously and ineptly distorted in Padukgrad <...>. The book teems with stylistic distortions, such as puns crossed with anagrams <...> suggestive neologisms <...> parodies of narrative clichés <...> spoonerisms <...> and of course the hybridization of tongues" (BS ix).

The distortion that characterizes containment can also be found in situations wherein one of Nabokov's characters creates a work (i.e., an innerworld) of his own. Sergei Davydov, in his book *Teksty-matreshki*, identifies something like distortion between what he calls "internal" and "external" works. In his understanding, the "external" work is one that is written by Nabokov, while the "internal" one is a fictional work written by one of Nabokov's characters. One work is placed within the other like a nesting *matreshka* doll. Davydov uses Nabokov's short story "Lips to Lips" (*"Usta k ustam,"* ca. 1931) as an example of this structure. The protagonist of the story is Tal, a relatively wealthy businessman and amateur author who writes a bad romance novel but is deceived concerning its merit by a struggling journal ("Arion") that hopes to get financial support from him. Dolinin, the protagonist of Tal's "internal" novel, courts a much younger woman, Irina, who is torn between him and a "young artist." Davydov

argues that the world of Tal's novel is a microcosm of the "external" world of Nabokov's story, and that there are parallels between the two layers. As Davydov notes, "The theme of both works is unhappy love. In the novel, the lonely Dolinin falls in love with the young Irina; in the short story a romance with the novel begins for the widower [Tal]" (Dav04 14).[44] Davydov identifies something resembling distortion (which he calls "mimicry")[45] among the details that link the inner and outer layers:

> A corresponding principle of narrative mimicry takes the form of anagrammatization and bilingual play in the case of proper names. The surname of Ilya Borisovich that appears in the English version—Tal—copies the surname "Dolinin" [the German *Tal* is equivalent to the Russian *dolina* (valley)].[46] The name of the heroine of the novel, "Irina"—is a near anagram for the almanac "Arion," and the "young artist" in the novel corresponds to the "young writer"[47] in the story.[48] (Dav04 15)

Instances of works-within-works that exhibit name distortion can be found elsewhere in Nabokov's body of work. The Original of Laura (1974-7), Nabokov's last, unfinished novel, to some extent seems to reflect the same structure of internal and external that Nabokov uses in

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[44] "Тема обоих произведений—несчастная любовь. В романе одинокий Долинин влюбляется в юную Ирину, в рассказе у вдовца Ильи Борисовича начинается любовный роман с романом." All translations from *Teksty-matreshki* are mine.
[45] "*Mimikriia.*"
[46] Barnstead argues for an additional link between English "tall" and Russian "*dlinnyi*" (long), which bears some phonetic resemblance to "Dolinin" (Bar86 53-4).
[47] Davydov is apparently referring to the character Galatov, a younger writer who is in "Arion's" favor.
[48] "Последовательный принцип сюжетной мимикрии сменяется в плане личных имен анаграмматизмом и двуязычной игрой. Появившаяся в английской версии рассказа фамилия Ильи Борисовича—Tal—копирует фамилию «Долинин» (der Tal по-немецки «долина»). Имя героини романа, «Ирина»—неполная анаграмма альманаха «Арион», а «молодой художник» в романе соответствует «молодому писателю» в рассказе."

"Lips to Lips." One of the characters, named Philip Wild, writes a novel called My Laura (itself a distortion of The Original(!) of Laura), in which he includes himself as a character with the distorted name "Philodor Sauvage" (TOOL 125). Julia Bader points out that the character Silbermann in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight has a slightly altered doppelganger in the character Siller who appears in one of Sebastian's "internal" novels (Bad72 21). This Silbermann may be another case of Nabokov's own appearance in his work. The *bald* character, in addition to apparently himself manifesting (miraculously, since Sebastian has never met him) in Sebastian's novel, demonstrates a kind of omniscience over the world of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, inasmuch as he is able to very easily uncover information concerning Sebastian that V. has given up hope of finding. In the same work V. suggests the presence of the author and his authority over the work when he speaks of

> <...> the fundamental assumption that *an author is able to discover anything he may want to know about his characters*, such capacity being limited only by the manner and purpose of his selection in so far as it ought to be not a haphazard jumble of worthless details but a definite and methodical quest <...> (RLSK 95-6, italics mine)

There is even a slight correspondence between Cincinnatus and the eponymous "protagonist"[49] of the "internal" work Quercus, both of whom are imprisoned in one way or another and both of whose names (unlike any others in Invitation to a Beheading) feature the Latin masculine ending *-us*.

[49] It is unclear from the descriptions of this novel whether or not Quercus is anthropomorphized.

The significance of notions of inner and outer to Nabokov's work has been recognized by Brian Boyd, who notes that stratified "realities" have an implicative role within Nabokov's metaphysics:

> Just as the world of a novel has an internal reality that can in no way be applied to the world outside it, but can be made more real, more alive in the imagination, by the application of knowledge from the outside world, so our "outside" world may contain nothing in it to explain *a still richer state of reality beyond*—while such a state, if we could only reach it, might explain so much more of this world and its reality. (Boy91 175, italics mine)

In other words, the fact that Nabokov tends to depict narratives as internal structures with corresponding outer components allows him to suggest that life—especially if one appreciates the aspects of life that resemble a work of art, as Nabokov does—must have a corresponding outer component: the metaphysical world. In fact, there are some clues that Nabokov views the phenomenal world as an innerworld residing within a metaphysical outerworld. A sense of limitation is evident from the fact that Nabokov seems to long for increased and even supernatural mobility: When asked in an interview, "In what time would you prefer to live?" Nabokov replies, "In the coming days of silent planes and graceful aircycles, and cloudless silvery skies, and a universal system of padded underground roads" (SO 100). In a separate interview he says, similarly: "My favorite method of locomotion, though, is the cableway, and especially the chairlift. <...> Some day the butterfly hunter will find even finer dream lore when floating upright over the mountains, carried by a diminutive rocket strapped to his back" (SO 200). Nabokov seems to intuit something beyond life when he says, for example, that he feels a

"sense of something much vaster, much more enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or energy in any imaginable cosmos" (SM 297). And the presence of distortion to those living in the phenomenal world can be detected in Nabokov's appropriation, as I noted in the previous chapter, of his mother's "faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life." Nabokov's intuition of a metaphysical outerworld is also supported by the cosmological impulse that seems to permeate his philosophy. Replying to an interviewer's question about his belief in God, Nabokov says, "To be quite candid—and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill—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" (SO 45). The solemn, preparatory tone that marks the beginning of this enigmatic response suggests that the remainder deserves a close look. Nabokov seems to answer the interviewer's question in the affirmative by pairing the idea of what can be "expressed" with the phenomenal experience of life; and the "more" that can only be "known" with the spiritual world, the afterlife, or the God of the interviewer's question, and to imply that the "known" is what enables the "expressed" to exist. The existence of the phenomenal *expressed* implies the existence of the metaphysical *known*.[50] In Speak, Memory, Nabokov uses another implicative construction to intimate that the miracles of life are, intrinsically, evidence for a further form of existence: "Nature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between" (SM 20). The approach that Nabokov takes in both cases to

[50] There is some indication that the "expressed" is inferior to the known. Sebastian Knight writes in his book Lost Property: "I have an innate distrust of what I feel easy to express <...>" (Nab92 25).

support his metaphysical beliefs resembles the cosmological argument for the existence of God, which is based on the notion that if one thing exists, it must have been caused or created by something else. In the theological version of the argument, one eventually follows the chain of causality to the "first cause" of God;[51] in Nabokov's version of the argument, the position of creator is replaced by a question of "worlds." One "world" must be seated within another. At several points in Nabokov's work, statements can be found suggesting that Nabokov accepts as fact the general principle that one thing logically implies a greater phenomenon within which it is seated. Humbert's maxim that "every limit presupposes something beyond it," as well as the poem-in-prose that ends The Gift ("the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page" (G 378)) further echo Nabokov's cosmological impulse, as does the formulation in Speak, Memory that "every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act" (SM 301), and John Shade's belief that: "<…> if my private universe scans right, / So does the verse of galaxies divine" (PF 69/L974-5). The spirit-narrators of Transparent Things assure the reader that "there is no mirage without a vanishing point, just as there is no lake without a closed circle of reliable land" (TT 93). A cosmological implication is suggested in Cincinnatus's resentment at being confined to

> The horrible 'here,' the dark dungeon, in which a relentlessly howling heart is encarcerated, this 'here' holds and constricts me. But what gleams shine through at night, and what—. It exists, my dream world, it must exist, since, surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy. (IB 93)

[51] The concept of First Cause is mentioned by Kinbote in a dialog on religion that he ostensibly has with Shade (PF 227/N549).

In general, the assumption that there is perpetually something greater and more ordered beyond what is seen provides an explanation for Nabokov's use of the containment device: in perhaps its most productive case, Nabokov's fascination with containment allows him to intimate the existence of the metaphysical world that is central to his work.

Nabokov often uses terminology and images of "outerness" to describe the metaphysical world. As I mentioned above, Adam Krug is concerned with an "inner" and "outer" "problem," the latter of which appears to be the metaphysical world existing beyond death. Kinbote of Pale Fire reports that Zemblan theologians believe that a "particle" of the mind "survives death and suddenly expands, bursts *out* as it were, in peals of healthy and triumphant laughter" (PF 237/N629, italics mine). The narrator of "Ultima Thule" says that the character Falter, who has apparently solved "'the riddle of the universe'" (S 509), "stands *outside* our world, in the true reality" (S 500, italics original). Vadim Vadimovich of Look at the Harlequins! speaks of "other states of being which were not exactly 'previous' or 'future,' but definitely *out of bounds*, mortally speaking" (LATH 7, italics mine).

That Nabokov views the metaphysical world as an exterior realm is also suggested by the imagery of walls or other barriers that delimit the boundaries of the phenomenal world. In the opening of Speak, Memory, Nabokov describes feeling confined to the "prison" of time (which is "spherical and without exits"), and in the same discussion, seems to acknowledge a superior existence beyond it:

> Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from

> the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. (SM 20)

"[I]n my metaphysics," he writes later, "I am a confirmed non-unionist and have no use for organized tours through anthropomorphic paradises" (SM 297). Nabokov's apparent willingness to distance himself from conventional religion, as well as his proud comparison to the "gaudily painted savage," communicate the idiosyncratic nature of his vision of the afterlife, if the term *after*life may even be used. He seems, in fact, to envision two simultaneous levels of existence: mortality, which is enclosed by the "walls of time," and the separate, "free world of timelessness" beyond those walls.[52] Nabokov's hope that "personal glimmers" will appear in either of "both sides of my life," and the fact that he refers in Speak, Memory to these two sides as "identical twins" (SM 19) suggest that before-life and after-life are very similar, if not the same thing, in his metaphysics, and that the realm of timelessness therefore exists not before or after but altogether *outside* of earthly time.

The depiction of life as a permeable—and even escapable—imprisoning structure appears again in the poem "Restoration" (1952): "To think that any fool may *tear* / by chance the web of when and where.[53] / O window in the dark! To think / that every brain is on the brink / of nameless bliss no brain can bear" (Nab70 167, italics mine). A related image is found in the short story "Signs and Symbols" (P1948), one of whose characters wants "to *tear* a hole in his world and escape" (S 599, italics mine). Bend Sinister features a recurring kidney-shaped image

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[52] While in the beginning of Speak, Memory, Nabokov envisions a solid boundary between this world and the next, an ecstatic moment of "cosmic synchronization" is described later in the same work as "not so much a fraction [presumably in the sense of 'breaking'] of time as a fissure in it," suggesting that the "walls" around life can be penetrated under the right circumstances (SM 217).

[53] Apparently stand-ins for *time* and *space*.

that Nabokov explicitly connects with "a *rent* in this world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty" (BS ix, italics mine). Images of (potentially permeable) membranes are often used to communicate the fact that life takes place *within* something, and death or the afterlife is separate and external. The novella The Enchanter (*Volshebnik*, 1939) ends with the protagonist's sudden death, described by the phrase "the film[54] of life had burst" (E 95). One of the narrators of Transparent Things uses the same terminology to explain the experience of mortal life: "A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film" (TT 2). John Shade, perhaps supernaturally intuiting that he is about to die, notes that his skin is "ridiculously thin," and has become "less secure" (PF 66/L895-6). And the narrator of Pnin comments that "one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film envelops us, we die" (P 20).

In The Gift, Nabokov uses to an image of a door to convey the externality of the metaphysical outerworld: The protagonist, Fyodor, discussing the ideas of the fictional philosopher Delalande, says that

> <...> death in itself is in no way connected with the topography of the hereafter, for a door is merely the exit from the house and not a part of its surroundings <...> One has to get out somehow <...> The other world surrounds us always and is not at all at the end of some pilgrimage. In our earthly house, windows are replaced by mirrors; the door, until a given time, is closed; but air comes in through the cracks.[55] (G 321-2)

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[54] *Plenka* in the original, apparently in the sense of "membrane."

[55] Fyodor elsewhere recounts a childhood illness that apparently granted him temporary psychic clairvoyance, an experience that Alexandrov connects to Delalande's metaphysical

Suggestions of an incompletely sealed room are used to evoke the metaphysical world when, in a manuscript of Conclusive Evidence, Nabokov writes that "Our sense of Time may be the draft coming from the next dimension" (qtd in Boy90 292). The narrator of "Ultima Thule" says that "I suddenly feel that there is no extinction beyond the grave; that in an adjacent locked room, from under whose door comes a frosty draft, there is being prepared a peacock-eyed radiance" (S 520). Nabokov perhaps has the same drafty door in mind when Vadim Vadimovich of Look at the Harlequins! speculates that "maybe, the hereafter stands slightly ajar in the dark" (LATH 26).

Images of window-like apertures often alert the reader to the fact that Nabokov is dealing with metaphysical themes. It is through a window that The Defense's (*Zashchita Luzhina*, 1929-30) Luzhin goes to his "eternity" (D 255-6). A window acts as a metaphorical boundary (and the cause of death for a waxwing) between life and the metaphysical world at the opening of John Shade's final poem. Adam Krug's deceased wife is associated with a moth that twangs at a window screen in the final scene of Bend Sinister. In addition to the "window in the dark" that is connected to otherworldly states in the poem "Restoration," noted above, Nabokov speaks in an interview of "consciousness—that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being" (Fei76 22) and in the beginning of Speak, Memory, derides the presumption that life is nothing more than a "brief crack of light between two eternities of

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door, noting that Fyodor "describes his return to health in terms of 'plug[ging] up certain chinks with bread'" (Ale91 109, brackets Alexandrov's).

darkness" (SM 19). In Bend Sinister, Krug visualizes life as a prison of stone that provides limited[56] visibility through small holes but whose walls will be removed at death:

> And now, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the problem of death. It may be said with as fair an amount of truth as is practically available that to seek perfect knowledge is the attempt of a point in space and time to identify itself with every other point: death is either the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge (similar say to the instantaneous disintegration of stone and ivy composing the circular dungeon where formerly the prisoner had to content himself with only two small apertures optically fusing into one; whilst now, with the disappearance of all walls, he can survey the entire circular landscape), or absolute nothingness, *nichto.* (BS 174-5)

The depiction of consciousness as a view through a "small aperture" suggests that, in Nabokov's understanding, human perception provides only a fraction of the complete landscape that could be revealed if only the "walls" of mortality could be overcome. An important scene involving a window in The Gift is emblematic of this disparity of experience between the "inner" phenomenal world experience and the "outer" metaphysical one: Fyodor's friend Chernyshevsky asserts on his deathbed that, "'<...> Of course there is nothing afterwards.' He sighed, listened to the trickling and drumming *outside* the window and repeated with extreme distinctness: 'There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining'" (G 324, italics mine). Chernyshevsky's failure to correctly identify the source of the water

[56] A theme of limited mobility, in fact, pervades the work. Johnson notes that "Bars, both real and metaphysical, abound" in Bend Sinister, contributing to an atmosphere of confinement, and refers to the image conjured up by the heraldic sinister bend as "a sinister black prison bar proscribing entry into the world of [Krug's] creator" (Joh85 196).

implies that his dismissal of the afterlife should be questioned: If he were *outside* of his room,[57] and had access to the superior vantage point available there, Chernyshevsky would see that the drops come from a neighbor watering plants on a balcony above—not from rain.

A possible explanation for Nabokov's fascination with containment and outerness in general is, as Blackwell says of The Gift in particular, that the "obsession with boundaries <…> allows the work to offer a resolution to its most pressing concern: the limits of human existence" (Bla99 603). I am inclined to agree that, throughout Nabokov's work, one of the important functions of imagery of boundaries, and consequently, of the longing for the "outer" states beyond them, is to emphasize the limited experience of man—especially where incomplete perception and the inability to appreciate aesthetic value is concerned—and the hope that this condition can be overcome. Nabokov's repeated use of containment as a device attests to the importance of this notion to his philosophy and aesthetics. I have described containment as a recurring paradigm through Nabokov's work. Its prevalence and relatively consistent form, I argue, demonstrate that Nabokov is preoccupied with a situation in which two differing levels of experience come into contact, and the "inner" is less privileged than the "outer." Although I discussed individual realizations of containment, in general it points to the situation that motivates this dissertation: the question of how experience becomes deformed when it is played out in a way that is less than ideal, and the longing to glimpse it in its original state.

[57] The limited view from inside a room is brought up (more obscurely) at the beginning of the novel: "For some time [Fyodor] stood by the window. In the curds-and-whey sky opaline pits now and then formed where the blind sun circulated <...> Taken by itself, all this was a view, just as the room was itself a separate entity; but now a middleman had appeared, and now that view became the view from this room and no other" (G 19).

Part Two: Beyond the Barricades

Chapter 3. Observation and Perspective

Many situations in Nabokov's work can be understood in terms of a bipartite structure consisting of raw observed material and a mental arrangement of beliefs and concepts through which this material is comprehended. "Observation" in my terminology refers to empirical information from the surrounding world that is available to the senses. This pure sensory information has not yet been operated upon by intelligence, and consequently appears arbitrary, lacking coherence or order. "Perspective" refers to any way of looking at observed information that attempts to discover order and coherence within it.

A literary example of observation that is illuminated by a perspective is Nabokov's recollection, in Speak, Memory, of seeing a fence,

> <...> the boards of which had been brought from some other place where they had been used, apparently, as the inclosure of an itinerant circus. Animals had been painted on it by a versatile barker; but whoever had removed the boards, and then knocked them together again, must have been blind or insane, for now the fence showed only disjointed parts of animals (some of them, moreover, upside down)—a tawny haunch, a zebra's head, the leg of an elephant. (SM 221)

The collection of boards in their haphazard state constitutes "observed" information, and Nabokov identifies a way of looking at the boards to ascertain and appreciate the fact that they once formed a circus panorama. I propose that this scene[58] exemplifies the distorted nature of reality and the impulse that select characters possess to search for undistorted originals.

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[58] The disordered fence is evidently important enough that it also makes an appearance in The Gift (G 188).

Perspective, in this sense, is that which is lost in the process of distortion, and the discovery of a correct perspective offers the opportunity of restoring an original.

In this chapter, I will outline the extent to which pairings of observation and perspective act in Nabokov's work and aesthetic philosophy. I will begin by proposing that the bipartite structure of observation and perspective plays an important role in Nabokov's understanding of how art is created. Specifically, Nabokov emphasizes the distinction between the question of *what* elements are presented in a work and the question of *how* that those elements are organized—and suggests that the *how* is by far the more important of the two. Nabokov's preoccupation with the distinction between the what and the how (corresponding to my notions of observation and perspective), I argue, also informs his approach to the translation of literary works: In his translation of Eugene Onegin, for example, Nabokov provides not only an English gloss of the Russian text but also a separate commentary that acts as a sort of "perspective" to help the English-speaking reader uncover the meaningfulness of Pushkin's original. In some works, including Pnin and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Nabokov deals, on the other hand, with the problem of "observed" information that is conveyed without sufficient perspectival material. A lack of concern for perspective is an attribute of several of Nabokov's negative characters. For example, I will implicate a disregard for perspective in the tyrannical social philosophy (and anagrammatic tendencies) of Bend Sinister's Paduk. Some characters, due to narcissism or other forms of obsession, tend to invent their own fictitious perspectives. These include Pale Fire's Kinbote and the narrator of "The Admiralty Spire." Nabokov also considers the possibility of observed information for which perspective is altogether unavailable—a nightmarish situation that is addressed in works like "Terror" (*"Uzhas,"* ca. 1926)

and "The Visit to the Museum" (*"Poseshchenie muzeia,"* P1939). Finally, I describe the potential for a perspective to explain the events of life, a notion that Nabokov takes to an extreme through a recurring literary image of a single, simple but profound and miraculous piece of information that suddenly makes life meaningful. The metaphysical tales "The Word" (*"Slovo,"* 1923) and "Ultima Thule" will be particularly relevant to that discussion.

Nabokov suggests very frequently that the most important aspect of art is how its components are organized. In Nikolai Gogol (P1944), Nabokov claims that artistic merit comes not from "*what* is said but *how* it is said" and involves "the dazzling combinations of drab parts" (NG 56, italics original), and in the same work speaks of things that have gone through "a thorough permutation and reconstruction in the laboratory of Gogol's particular genius" (NG 70). The narrator V. of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight believes that his half-brother's novelistic "method has attained perfection" due to his awareness that "It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations" (RLSK 176). Reading one of Sebastian's books, V. suggests that "the world yield[s] its sense" when it is "remodelled and re-combined" (RLSK 179). In his lectures, Nabokov maintains that the process of creating art is the process of finding new structures that give life to lifeless elements, saying that "minor authors" "merely try to squeeze the best they can out of a given order of things, out of traditional patterns of fiction. <...> But the real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning <...> has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself" (LL 2). He reports that, "In my academic days I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead" (SO 156-7). In his essay "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov states that

> The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says "go!" allowing the world to flicker and to fuse. It is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts. (LL 2)

Art, then, consists of special combinations of materials, and apparently depends little on the materials themselves. Nabokov does not explain the principles that make combinations artful, but he frequently uses terminology of "harmony" to describe ways of looking at elements such that aesthetic value is revealed. In notes from a lecture he defines drama as "the selective and harmonious intensification of the loose patterns of chance and destiny, character and action, thought and emotion, existing in the reality of human life" (qtd in Boy91 31). In "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," he associates the creation of novels with "the art of forming sudden harmonious patterns out of widely separate threads" (LL 379). Similar statements appear in Nabokov's fiction. The short story "The Fight" (*"Draka,"* P1925) concludes with the statement "Or perhaps what matters is not the human pain or joy at all but, rather, the play of shadow and light on a live body, the harmony of trifles assembled on this particular day, at this particular moment, in a unique and inimitable way" (S 146). The idea that aesthetic value originates in special configurations of mundane components also finds expression in Invitation to a Beheading, where Cincinnatus senses that words become more than the sum of their parts when the question of their configuration comes into play:

> Not knowing how to write, but sensing with my criminal intuition how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its

> neighbor's sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence <...> (IB 93)

Kinbote of Pale Fire notes John Shade's "combinational turn of mind and subtle sense of harmonic balance" (PF 15), mentions later Shade's "special brand of combinational magic" (PF 253/N727), and describes the "thrill" of witnessing Shade in the process of "recombining" the elements of the world to produce "an organic miracle" (PF 27). John Shade, in turn, implies in his poem "Pale Fire" that artistic inspiration involves combination: "<...> I feel I understand / Existence, or at least a minute part / Of my existence, only through my art, / In terms of combinational delight" (PF 68-9/L970-3).

Dmitri Nabokov, in the commentary to his father's novella the The Enchanter, describes how Nabokov would put into practice the idea of finding meaningful combinations among relatively mundane components by adding pencil marks to the designs of the wallpaper in his Montreaux hotel to produce a new image such as a butterfly.[59] According to him,

> Such enhancement and recombination of chance patterns are, in a larger sense, an essential part of Nabokov's creative synthesis.[60] The fortuitous observation, the

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[59] Cincinnatus "help[s] patterns form" on the wall of his cell (IB 124). A similar pastime is described in Speak, Memory, when Nabokov would find "faces [in the linoleum of the bathroom floor] where a crack or a shadow afforded a *point de repère* for the eye" (SM 85). Elsewhere Nabokov describes seeing clouds "among the curves of which one could distinguish a mammary allusion or the death mask of a poet" (SM 216). When Martin in Glory is ill, he is prone to seeing "human profiles" "in every pattern, in every relationship between chance objects" (GL 114).

[60] Dmitri Nabokov says of his father:

> Something lurking behind the mental capabilities he called on for the straightforward investigation of haphazardly accumulating materials suddenly manifested itself, like the meekest employee who suddenly appears before his employer with a plan that casts a whole new light on a deal the tycoon had negotiated with reckless haste, proposing certain options, a new connection. In other words, the hour had come when my father suddenly sensed a truth had matured that he had not consciously sought but that had

> reported or imagined psychological anomaly, elaborated by the artist's imagination, assumed a harmonious growth of their own as the infant work was gradually weaned from the image, the news item, or the reverie that had jolted its cells into the process of multiplication. (E 111)

Nabokov's approach to writing, in other words, was to expose order (or "harmonious growth") by finding special ways to present disordered elements ("chance patterns").[61] It is notable that Nabokov draws attention to, and evidently makes fundamental use of, a discrete and secondary informational layer that lends meaning to what is presented in a work of art.

As I have described earlier in this dissertation, Nabokov views literature as a fundamentally fragmented (due to the fact a text is an instantaneous impression that has been written out linearly) phenomenon whose aesthetic value is obscured. An effective writer may therefore be one who includes, within the linear text, hints to the reader on how to mentally reorganize its parts in order to recover some of the ideal impression. A good author, in other words, gives the reader the tools to reverse distortion in the form of supplemental perspective information. A meticulous concern for perspective is involved in Nabokov's approach to the transmission of art. How does one convey the aesthetic impact of a work from one person—who speaks a particular language and has knowledge of a particular culture—to another person who may be linguistically and culturally ignorant? To state the question differently: how can one help others

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> harmoniously grown out of an internal association of elements he had gathered. The mystery was only in the very act of association, and akin to capillary attraction—happening, as it were, independently of the gatherer's will. Yet his entire effort, it now turns out, was still imperceptibly propelled and directed by this very force, which, at the appropriate moment, suggested a method of stellar elegance for organizing the gathered materials. (Nab00 214)

[61] It may also be worth mentioning that Nabokov's writing process generally involved storing details on index cards, which would be "recombined" to produce the final work.

to see beyond the inevitable fragmentation in a work of literature? When Nabokov provides a literal translation of a poem, he is careful to observe the necessity of including explanatory information about its versification, cultural significance, allusions, and nuances. This secondary information helps the reader to view the work in the "correct" way and consequently to unlock its meaning.[62] In his translation of Eugene Onegin, Nabokov provides a near-literal gloss of the novel-in-verse itself, but the bulk of his work is commentary, through which he attempts to give the non-native reader an experience as close as possible to that of a native Russian. Nabokov in this way provides not only the "observation" in the form of a near-literal translation of the poem itself, but also a deluge of information forming a cultural, historical, and linguistic "perspective" that hopes to eliminate the disadvantage for the non-Russian reader.

The necessity of an interpretive component in the case of foreign-language translations is made apparent when Pnin presents a painfully literal translation of Pushkin's "*Brozhu li ia...*" to his students, accompanied by comically meager commentary:

> "'And where will fate send me', imperfective future, 'death,'" declaimed inspired Pnin, throwing his head back and translating with brave literality, "'in fight, in travel, or in waves? Or will the neighbouring dale'—*dolina,* same word, 'valley' we would now say—'accept my refrigerated ashes', *poussière,* 'cold dust' perhaps more correct. 'And though it is indifferent to the insensible body…'" (P 68)

To Pnin—with his knowledge of Russian language, culture, and the events of Pushkin's life—the significance of the poem is clear (and it even rouses him to "exclaim triumphantly" and to begin "dramatically pointing with the piece of chalk he still held"). On the other hand, to the

[62] Nabokov is a decidedly monologic writer and is concerned with eliciting a particular reaction from the reader, rather than inviting the reader to invent his or her own "perspective."

students in Pnin's class who lack the benefit of the same cultural knowledge, Pnin's attempt at literal translation can be little more than a clumsy and unmoving series of words. The scene highlights the crucial importance of having both halves of the situation: the raw material of observation *and* the explanatory material that constitutes a perspective. The failure to convey the crucial information that unlocks "observation" is a trait of Pnin's interaction with his students, and the narrator describes explicitly how Pnin tends to leave them in the dark by conveying observational information but failing to convey the perspective that enlivens it:

> But there were still better sessions in the way of humor. With an air of coy secrecy, benevolent Pnin, preparing the children for the marvelous treat he had once had himself <…> would open the book <...>. Usually the passage of his choice would come from some old and naïve comedy of merchant-class habitus rigged up by Ostrovski almost a century ago, or from an equally ancient but even more dated piece of trivial Leskovian jollity dependent on verbal contortions <…> but since *to appreciate whatever fun those passages still retained one had to have not only a sound knowledge of the vernacular but also a good deal of literary insight, and since his poor little class had neither, the performer would be alone in enjoying the associative subtleties of his text*. (P 11-12, italics mine)

The problem of linguistic and cultural perspectives that may not be present in one's audience is something that Nabokov dealt with in his own life. In his essay "On a Book Entitled Lolita," Nabokov laments the loss of Russian language and culture when adopting English as his primary language for writing:

> None of my American friends have read my Russian books and thus every appraisal on the strength of my English ones is bound to be out of focus. My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way. (AL 316-17)

The absence of the "velvet backdrop" of Russian language and culture is precisely the problem Pnin faces when reading "*Brozhu li ia...*" to his class. In my terminology, Nabokov and Pnin do not have the benefit of a shared, predefined perspective with their audiences. In order to effectively produce art for his English-speaking audience, Nabokov was forced either to relearn the shared "perspective" of English-language composition, or risk conveying information incompletely, as Pnin does.

The best approach to the transmission of art is then not only to provide the audience with the "raw" and "objective" material of a poem (a literal gloss), but to attempt also to recreate the necessary background information and guide the reader toward the perspective that will bring it to life. It is possible to view The Real Life of Sebastian Knight as a statement on translation and the pitfalls of trying to convey a complete picture of someone to another person. Like Nabokov's translation of Eugene Onegin, the novel deals with the attempt to accurately capture the information that provides coherence to a set of observed phenomena. The protagonist, "V.," undertakes a biography of his deceased half-brother Sebastian. His inspiration to capture Sebastian's "real life" is a response to a poor biography written by

Sebastian's former secretary Goodman, a negative character who is not especially driven to find the correct way to make sense of observed information. Goodman seems to have fallen into a trap that Nabokov warns against in his essay "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible" (*"Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable,"* 1937):

> One begins by sifting through the great man's correspondence, cutting and pasting so as to fashion a nice paper suit for him, then one leafs through his works proper in search of character traits. And God knows one is pretty unfastidious about it. <…> the [subject's] life is invariably distorted even if the basic facts are there. Then, hallelujah, we get the subject's psychology, the Freudian frolics, the bedaubed descriptions of what the protagonist was thinking at a given moment <...> (Nab88 39)

The biography produced by Goodman is, in fact, full of such incorrect assumptions. For example, V. notes that Goodman inexplicably applies his own stereotypes about Russia to his understanding of Sebastian's youth:

> This foreign influence, Mr. Goodman goes on, "brought acute suffering to the child, so that in his riper years it was with a shudder that he recalled the bearded moujiks, the ikons, the drone of balalaikas, all of which displaced a healthy English upbringing."
>
> It is hardly worth while pointing out that Mr. Goodman's concept of Russian surroundings is no truer to nature than, say, a Kalmuk's notion of England as a dark place where small boys are flogged to death by red-whiskered schoolmasters. (RLSK 15)

A correct perspective involves supplying missing information or a way of looking at things that unlocks their meaning, and making connections that are not based in truth is an affront to

this process. V. remarks derisively upon Goodman's tendency to fill in the blanks of Sebastian's life:

> <...> we must imagine that Sebastian in between work would say: Do you know, my dear Goodman, this reminds me of a day in my life, some years ago, when... Here would come the story. Half a dozen of these seem to Mr. Goodman sufficient to fill out what is to him a blank—Sebastian's youth in England. (RLSK 63-4)

V.'s approach to describing Sebastian's life displays more reverence for the necessity of finding a correct perspective on what is observed. He is less prone to rely on assumption. After envisioning Sebastian writing at a desk, instead of drawing conclusions, he wonders, "perhaps he preferred doing his writing in bed?" (RLSK 39) Nabokov's essay "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible" (composed the year before work on The Real Life of Sebastian Knight began) discusses the dangerous practice of coming to conclusions about writers based on slim facts and question the notion that another life cannot be truly known or conveyed:

> Is it possible to imagine the full reality of another's life, to relive it in one's mind and set it down intact on paper? I doubt it: one even finds oneself seduced by the idea that thought itself, as it shines its beam on the story of a man's life, cannot avoid deforming it. Thus, what our mind perceives turns out to be plausible, but not true. (Nab88 40)

Aesthetically-minded characters, like Nabokov in Speak, Memory, refuse to take the "observed" world at face value, and cannot help but look for perspectives that complement sensory experience. Sebastian Knight, for one, has a very active consciousness that seeks out connections among what is observed, of which he writes in his book Lost Property:

> Most people live through the day with this or that part of their mind in a happy state of somnolence: a hungry man eating a steak is interested in his food and not, say, in the memory of a dream about angels <...>; 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. <...> Every ordinary act <...> provoked such a multitude of associative ideas in my mind, and these associations were so tricky and so obscure, so utterly useless for practical application, that I would either shirk the business at hand or else make a mess of it out of sheer nervousness.[63] (RLSK 67)

It is common for Nabokov's positive heroes to search for and locate the "correct" perspectives that expose the meaning that resides in apparently disordered phenomena, but Nabokov makes it clear that it is generally not essential to do this. One may simply, like the "blind or insane" fence builder, take observed information at face value, but to do so is to potentially miss out on a wealth of meaning and experience. Characters who are unconcerned with perspective or the search for correct perspectives are generally negative. Among these are Paduk and the authorities of Bend Sinister, whose tendency toward anagrammatization reflects a belief that words (as well as human beings) are interchangeable as long as they contain the same "quantities." Interchangeability, I argue, is a theme in Nabokov's fiction that reflects an attitude of carelessness with the crucial perspective component of experience (as well as

[63] Clare Bishop, Sebastian's girlfriend, likewise has an ability to easily discover connections: "She possessed, too, that real sense of beauty which has far less to do with art than with the constant readiness to discern the halo round a frying-pan or the likeness between a weeping-willow and a Skye terrier" (RLSK 83). Fyodor of The Gift has a propensity for "multi-level thinking: you look at a person and you see him as clearly as if he were fashioned of glass and you were the glass blower, while at the same time without in the least impinging on that clarity you notice some trifle on the side—such as the similarity of the telephone receiver's shadow to a huge, slightly crushed ant" (G 175).

contrasting with Nabokov's high regard for detail and his belief in the primacy of the *how* over the *what*.). It consists of a belief that orderings, combinations, and other superficial structures are inconsequential, and that the question of whether one thing is the same as another depends solely on the observational material they contain. Conversely, a positive character appreciates the fact that uniqueness may come from the combinations and orderings of (even identical) components. In the world of Bend Sinister, however, "everybody is merely an anagram of everybody else" (BS ix); Paduk says that "all men consist of the same twenty-five letters variously mixed" (BS 68)[64] and refers to people by anagrams or near-anagrams of their names. The preoccupation with anagrams seems to be a reflection of a more disturbing societal capacity to believe in the interchangeability of human beings. This tendency begins with the guards' failure to recognize Krug on his second trip across the bridge at the beginning of the novel and culminates in the fatal substitution of Krug's son David with near-anagrammatical and unrelated Arvid Krug. An awareness of the uniqueness of things, on the other hand, is a part of Krug's philosophy: "We speak of one thing being like some other thing when what we are really craving to do is to describe something that is like nothing on earth" (BS 174). But in the nightmare world of Bend Sinister, crude imitations can pass for originals. The notion that individuality can be replicated is emblematized by the "padograph," a custom typewriter invented by Paduk's father that mimics a specific person's handwriting. According to the narrator, "Philosophically speaking, the padograph subsisted as an Ekwilist symbol, as a proof of

[64] Johnson believes that the absent twenty-sixth letter—a testament to the suppression of individuality in Padukgrad—is "I" (Joh85 49).

the fact that a mechanical device can reproduce personality, and that Quality is merely the distribution aspect of Quantity" (BS 69-70).[65]

While certain characters like Goodman and Paduk are irresponsible or irreverent when it comes to finding a perspective, and others, like Pnin, are incapable of conveying the needed information to an audience, there are a few characters whose narcissism or obsession is to blame for their failure to identify the correct perspective that lends coherence to observed information. Pale Fire explores the question of what happens when the correct perspective for a text is ignored and a fraudulent one, grounded in madness, is applied in its place. The majority of the novel's action takes place within the commentary to the long poem "Pale Fire," written by the late John Shade, a university professor. The commentary is supplied by Shade's colleague, "Charles Kinbote," and largely bypasses the true context of the poem, to focus instead on Kinbote's belief that he is actually King Charles the Beloved, deposed ruler of Zembla, now living incognito in the United States. Kinbote has regaled Shade with stories and believes that Shade has constructed his poem around references to his homeland. To the reader of Pale Fire, however, it appears that Kinbote is merely the little-respected and insane university professor Botkin, whose delusional tales may have been humored by Shade but in no way have been incorporated into "Pale Fire." Shade provides no commentary of his own for his poem, but the sane and alert reader of Pale Fire can determine relatively easily that it focuses on his own life and the suicide of his daughter. Kinbote is unwilling to or incapable of identifying this correct perspective and supplies his own in the form of commentary. Assuming this

[65] An outlook of interchangeability is shared by the negative character Gradus in Pale Fire, for whom "The generality was godly, the specific diabolical. If one person was poor and the other wealthy it did not matter precisely what had ruined one or made the other rich; the difference itself was unfair" (PF 152/N171).

straightforward interpretation for the novel[66] is correct, then Kinbote is merely, as Shade suspects, "a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention [i.e. replaces his true memories with delusions of having been king]" (PF 238), just as he "peels back" the back-story to Shade's poem and replaces it with his invented and delusional commentary. I propose that this commentary can be understood as a "perspective"—an attempt to unlock the meaning that resides within Shade's poem. Kinbote's perspective, of course, is incorrect and strays far from the true meaning of the text.

In a lecture, Nabokov describes "lunatics" as those who have "thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power—or have lost the power—to create a new one as harmonious as the old" (LL 377). Like the "insane" person who assembles the circus fence in a disordered fashion, Kinbote garbles the harmonious key that unlocks the meaning of "Pale Fire." Kinbote's tendency to adopt narcissistic perspectives instead of rational ones shows through at other points. In one scene, for example, he discovers a note in his pocket that reads, "You have hal.....s real bad, chum." The circumstances suggest that one of Kinbote's colleagues has accused him of having halitosis.[67] Within the suggestive series of observed phenomena (the letters, h-a-l and s), there is the potential for a "perspective" that fills in the gaps to make the whole meaningful: the missing sequence i-t-o-s-i. But Kinbote's self-obsession and paranoia cause him to erroneously imagine that someone has accused him of having "hallucinations," although it is ludicrously beyond the context of the scene (he has been demonstrating wrestling moves) for anyone to be remarking upon Kinbote's mental state (not to mention the absurdity

[66] See (Joh85 70-1) regarding this interpretation. Debate continues today over Kinbote's actual status (whether he is "truly" King Charles, Professor Botkin, or even a fiction of Shade's mind).
[67] The meaning of the note's ellipsis is unclear. It could indicate that its author attempts to be tactful in some way by not writing the world in full, or perhaps does not know how to spell it.

of someone discretely informing him of such an assessment through a note slipped into his pocket). The reference to hallucinations and Kinbote's reaction to it are, incidentally, ironic: although Kinbote is almost certainly insane, and he does experience at least one aural hallucination (he seems to mistakenly hear Shade speaking to him (PF 258/N802)), he falls into the category of Nabokov's obsessive but aesthetically-minded characters, who are largely consummate observers.[68] Where they differ from others is in their defective ability to *identify perspectives* that are appropriate to observed information. At another point he tries and fails to discern the meaning of a distorted message that Hazel Shade receives from a supernatural orb of light (PF 193/N347). He furthermore declines to research a fact related to Shade's poem ("such humdrum potterings are beneath true scholarship") (PF 256/N747).[69] As Sebastian Knight writes in his book Lost Property,

> A person who fails to notice a taxi-driver's hare-lip because he is in a hurry to get somewhere, is to me a monomaniac. I have often felt as if I were sitting among blind men and madmen, when I thought that I was the only one in the crowd to wonder about the chocolate-girl's slight, very slight limp. (RLSK 108-9)

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[68] A possible exception is Hermann in Despair, who believes, evidently incorrectly, that Felix is almost identical to him in appearance.

[69] In spite of Kinbote's ineptitude with regard to identifying correct perspectives, he shares Nabokov's awareness that the "how" is what brings to life an otherwise dead text. At the end of his foreword to "Pale Fire" Kinbote says: "Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality since the human reality of such a poem as his <…> has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide" (PF 28-9). (Of course, Kinbote's notes are driven by narcissism and therefore lead to an incorrect presentation of the poem's "reality.")

There seems, in fact, to be some connection between megalomania and the way some of Nabokov's characters interpret what is observed: Although a Narcissist may notice events in the surrounding world, the triggered associations remain within his or her own ego.

The young man around whom the short story "Signs and Symbols" revolves is another character who believes that all surrounding phenomena relate to him. This figure, who never makes a direct appearance in the story, suffers from a mental disorder in which "man-made objects" are "vibrant with a malignant activity that he alone could perceive" (S 598). A description that is given of the disease in question, "referential mania," indicates that "the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence." Nabokov lends an element of narcissism to this condition: The sufferer "excludes real people from the conspiracy—because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men" (S 599).

The same diagnosis of "referential mania" would probably apply to Kinbote and other narcissist-paranoiacs, and a variant of it could describe characters, like Luzhin, Humbert, and Cincinnatus, whose obsessions involve some external fixation toward which all signs seem to point. Fixation is the tragic flaw of Hermann (a mirror-obsessed narcissist) of Despair, who murders his supposed doppelganger in order to fake his own death and collect life insurance. He is so convinced of the perfection of his crime that he overlooks two significant problems: a forgotten cane bearing the name of his victim, and the fact that his perceived double does not actually resemble him. Krug of Bend Sinister loses his son and his sanity because of an overconfident refusal to take note of the ominous convergence of tyrannical forces around him.

The notion of perspective may be useful for defining the character of obsession in Nabokov's work: obsession (including the self-obsession of narcissism) is rarely a mere preoccupation with a certain subject. It is a corruption of perspective, a belief that all observed phenomena fit together according to a set of associative links that gravitate around the target of fixation. Characters who rely on obsessive perspectives include Luzhin, who believes that structures in his life are being created by an external force that is related to chess; the protagonist of "A Busy Man" (*"Zaniatoi chelovek,"* 1931), who interprets events in the world as signs pertaining to his death, which he thinks may have been foretold in a dream; and Cincinnatus of Invitation to a Beheading, whose obsession is his looming execution and who "involuntarily <...> forg[es] into a chain all the things that were quite harmless as long as they remained unlinked" and "inspire[s] the meaningless with meaning" (IB 155). As Hasty observes, he perceives everything around him through the prism of his obsession:

> Repeatedly Cincinnatus pleads that he be told the date of his execution and repeatedly his pleas are ignored, intensifying his anticipation of the beheading and leading him to involuntarily interpret stimuli of the surrounding world as signaling the end. Thus any noise or activity he hears in the corridors spells for him the arrival of the beheading he so anxiously awaits, causing him to die many times before his death. (Has08 9-10)

Like Pale Fire, Nabokov's short story "The Admiralty Spire" involves a narcissistic character who regards a written text from an erroneous and self-centered point of view. Nabokov's unfinished novel Solus Rex (written in Russian with Latin title, 1939-40) can be considered the primary *thematic* precursor to Pale Fire (SO 91-2) but questions of observation and perspective bring to light major *structural* parallels between Pale Fire and "The Admiralty Spire." The story

takes the form of a man's letter to the author of a novel that—he believes—is based on his own life and love for a girl named Katya. Although the accusation seems to spring from a handful of genuine coincidences between the novel and the speaker's life, it becomes increasingly clear that his accusations are the product of madness. The insinuations assume unbelievable and comical proportions when he begins to point to events in the novel that diverge from his life and, rather than accepting that the novel is simply not about him at all, he accuses the novelist of making "innumerable and sloppy mistakes" (S 349): e.g. "you oblige Katya and me to follow revolutionary events with keen concern, that is, to conduct (for dozens of pages) political and mystical conversations that—I assure you—we never had" (S 353); "But how did you dare, where did you find the gall not only to use Katya's tale, but, on top of that, to distort it so irreparably?" (S 349)

Nabokov clues the reader in to the speaker's madness at the opening of "The Admiralty Spire." The speaker brings up the topic of delusion in the first sentence of his letter, which admonishes the novelist not to "labor under any delusion" by expecting the letter to be that of a fan (S 348). Ironically, the narrator disparages the practice of drawing (presumably erroneous) conclusions based on inadequate amounts of information ("You, as a writer, have already collected these clues to fill in the rest of me" (S 348))—which is precisely what he and the like-minded Kinbote do when presented with the texts that they narcissistically reinterpret. The speaker, indeed, proceeds to then draw his own conclusions about the novelist, accusing "her" of disguising "her" identity by adopting a male pseudonym. The self-assuredness with which he makes this assertion ("how easy it is to guess that the author's name is a pseudonym, that the

author is not a man!" (S 348) is reminiscent of the confidence with which Kinbote absurdly misinterprets Shade's poem "Pale Fire."[70]

As I said, characters who misinterpret observed phenomena do not always do so narcissistically; they may also focus on an obsession outside themselves. "The Return of Chorb" (*"Vozvrashchenie Chorba,"* P1925) is a short story about a man who retraces the steps taken during his elopement in an apparent attempt to deal psychologically with his bride's recent and sudden death.[71] Connolly explains an important scene in the story as follows:

> The climactic episode of the night occurs when Chorb suddenly awakens and begins screaming horribly, for he had just seen his wife lying next to him [mistaking a prostitute he has hired]. This is a significant episode, and it emblemizes Chorb's tendency to view the world exclusively in terms of his own personal concerns. Having awakened in the dark, he fails to recognize the prostitute for who she is; instead, he projects onto her an internalized image of his own making. (Con92 13)

"Dire madness threatens those Nabokov characters who obscure the physical features of those around them with their own subjective perspectives," says Connolly (Con92 13), who finds a relative of Chorb in Nabokov's short story "Details of a Sunset" (*"Katastrofa,"* 1924), about which he notes, "The opening section of the story underscores the degree to which Mark's obsession with his personal image of Klara renders him oblivious to surrounding reality" (Con92

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[70] A further similarity between "The Admiralty Spire" and Pale Fire is that the narrator in both cases does not limit himself to attempts to clarify what has been written but uses the original text primarily as a springboard for lengthy digressions that come to dominate the work.

[71] It is possible to detect some narcissism in this story. As Connolly notes, "Chorb is so fixated on recovering an image of his lost love that he remains insensitive to the effect his actions may have on the living others in his environment" (Con92 12). However, it is difficult to place Chorb in the same league with the more seriously insane narrators of Pale Fire and "The Admiralty Spire."

16-17). "Mark insists on providing a positive interpretation for everything that enters his field of vision, and he remains untouched by all warnings that come his way" (Con92 17). This positive, but self-centered outlook is emblematized in Mark's statement: "Oh, how happy I am <...> how everything around me celebrates my happiness" (S 82).

Although some perspectives may remain undiscovered due to a character's unwillingness or inability to seek them out, Nabokov explores the question of situations in which it is impossible to identify a satisfying perspective through which to view observed material. The protagonist of the short story "Terror" seems to have a temporary psychological breakdown that causes him to lose sight of the even the most basic connective tissue that lends coherence to observed phenomena:

> <…> I stepped out into the center of an incidental city, and saw houses, trees, automobiles, people, [but] my mind abruptly refused to accept them as 'houses,' 'trees,' and so forth—as something connected with ordinary human life. My line of communication with the world snapped, I was on my own and the world was on *its* own, and *that* world was devoid of sense. I saw the actual essence of all things. I looked at houses and they had lost their usual meaning—that is, all that we think when looking at a house: a certain architectural style, the sort of rooms inside, ugly house, comfortable house—all this had evaporated, leaving nothing but an absurd shell, the same way an absurd sound is left after one has repeated sufficiently long the commonest word without heeding its meaning: house, howss, whowss. (S 176-7, italics original)

At the height of his terror, the narrator feels that he has become "a naked eye, an aimless glance moving in an absurd world" (S 177). In my terminology, the ability to view the world

through a perspective is lost and all observed information simply stands on its own. Without the lens of perspective, sensory inputs have ceased to activate a web of associations. Every perception is just that and nothing more. A related instance of the disorienting absence of a perspective lens can be found in Pnin. While ill, the young Pnin becomes obsessed with the wallpaper and his bedroom. His failed attempts to find the pattern dictating its repeating images is a source of supernatural discomfort:

> He had always been able to see that in the vertical plane a combination made up of three different clusters of purple flowers and seven different oak leaves was repeated a number of times with soothing exactitude; but now he was bothered by the undismissable fact that he could not find what system of inclusion and circumscription governed the horizontal recurrence of the pattern; that such a recurrence existed was proved by his being able to pick out here and there, all along the wall from bed to wardrobe and from stove to door, the reappearance of this or that element of the series, but when he tried travelling right or left from any chosen set of three inflorescences and seven leaves, he forthwith lost himself in a meaningless tangle of rhododendron and oak. It stood to reason that if the evil designer—the destroyer of minds, the friend of fever—had concealed the key of the pattern with such monstrous care, that key must be as precious as life itself and, when found, would regain for Timofey Pnin his everyday health, his everyday world; and this lucid—alas, too lucid—thought forced him to persevere in the struggle. (P 23-4)

Another case of a frightening absence of a perspective is "The Visit to the Museum." This short story is similar to "Terror" insofar as it involves a nightmarish scenario where the

protagonist has no hope of discovering a perspective that would allow him to make sense of observed phenomena. Like "Terror," "The Visit to the Museum" explores a situation of complete arbitrariness and meaninglessness—and concludes that it is supernaturally unpleasant. The protagonist, a Russian émigré, travels to a European museum to try to purchase a particular painting as a favor for an acquaintance. Undercurrents of horror can be detected in the early stages of the story, from the curator's bizarre insistence that the painting is not in the collection (despite the protagonist having seen it prominently displayed), to the purchase agreement signed in red ink.[72] Eventually, the protagonist gets lost inside the museum and, attempting to escape, goes through a long series of exhibits involving discontinuous and seemingly arbitrary (aside from the fact that they are things that may be found in a museum) phenomena, including (paraphrasing the section): enormous marble legs; Oriental fabrics; a whale skeleton; fish with translucent frills; a gigantic mock-up of the universe; a locomotive; an infinitely long passage with elusive, scurrying people; an enfilade of grand pianos among mirrored walls; a Section of Fountains and Brooks; stone stairs; misty abysses; sounds of whistles, rattles, typewriters, hammers; a parlor in the Empire style; a greenhouse; a deserted laboratory; and a burst of applause. Finally, the protagonist is supernaturally expelled through a door into Soviet Russia. As Alice Jedličková notes, "I dare say just about anything could be expected in the next room or space" (Jed06 265). I argue that this sense of arbitrariness is precisely the feeling that Nabokov means to convey (and is exacerbated by the expectation of a museum being a place where disparate pieces of knowledge are painstakingly *ordered*). Just as

[72] See (Der93) for a detailed discussion of hellish allusions in the work. An alternative interpretation for the story, one that I find tenuous, is that its events are a dream or hallucination (Sis79 160-1).

the narrator of "Terror" finds that the perspective lens has been removed and what remain are disconnected phenomena, the protagonist of "The Visit to the Museum" experiences disconnectedness that suggests the nightmarish unavailability of any ordering principle.

In more general terms, the absence of an available perspective is the problem one encounters when examining a text or a life. If art comes from harmonious combinations of things, then arbitrary items presented in such a way that no mental associations are likely to appear is diametrically opposed to Nabokov's desire to overcome distortion. The absence of perspective is horrifying because it suggests the possibility that the meaningful original is beyond recovery—or even worse, does not exist at all.

Although a list of phenomena in "The Visit to the Museum" emphasizes the hopelessness of identifying meaning, a related and more optimistic "device of the list" is used throughout Nabokov's work to suggest the possibility that there exists a "perspective" that exposes an order or design in the surrounding world. The device most frequently appears in moments of "cosmic synchronization"[73] and involves an enumeration of observed phenomena that have no

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[73] Cosmic synchronization is Nabokov's own term for a mental state wherein a person feels blissful harmony with the entire universe and contact with disparate and potentially distant objects and events. In one case of cosmic synchronization, for example, Nabokov says that the experiencer,

> Lost in thought, [taps] his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cinder-gray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Docteur Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles occur <...>. (SM 218)

Sisson calls Nabokov's use of lists during instances of cosmic synchronization a "catalogue of remote activity" (Sis79 25), and links it primarily with the impulse for an awareness of all points in the universe. I agree that universal awareness and the transcendence of time and space are frequent features of the device of the list, but lists presented during cosmic synchronization by no means always involve remote phenomena: Ganin's experience, for example, involves nearby

apparent connection, but nonetheless an intuition some hidden connection exists. Examples of the device can be found as early as Nabokov's first novel, Mary, whose protagonist, Ganin, senses, but cannot pinpoint, a perspective that might explain the various things he experiences while bicycling along a highway:

> And as he stared at the sky and listened to a cow mooing almost dreamily in a distant village, he tried to understand what it all meant—that sky, and the fields, and the humming telegraph pole; he felt that he was just on the point of understanding it when suddenly his head would start to spin and the lucid languor of the moment became intolerable. (M 47)

Ganin's attempt to understand "what it all meant" is of particular interest to this discussion. What could fields, the sky, and a humming telegraph pole possibly "mean?" As Boyd says, "consciousness becomes most fully itself when it owes nothing to habit and the promptings of ready continuity, when it perceives the openness of its choice and acts to take advantage of this freedom" (Boy85 19). Nabokov is indeed interested in liberating the consciousness from the habits or obstacles that cause it to take life at face value, in its given order. In Nabokov's work, one finds the recurrent suggestion that commonplace objects have the potential to produce meaning—much in the same way that mundane images may become art—when apprehended in the right configuration. The device of the list represents the darting consciousness, the impulse to take things in without regard to their sequence, location, or preconceived notions of their significance, and to thereby identify meaningful combinations among them.

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things. The main characteristic of the elements in the device of the list is their associative distance from one another and the lack of any obvious connecting principle.

A persistent belief that a hidden meaning can, in fact, be found if one reorients one's perspective appears throughout Nabokov's work. Describing one of his half-brother Sebastian's books, the narrator of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight says that

> The answer to all questions of life and death, "the absolute solution" was written all over the world <…> it was like a traveller realising that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural phenomena, but the page in a book where these mountains and forests, and fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence; the vowel of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings of a road writing its message in a round hand, as clear as that of one's father; trees conversing in dumb-show, making sense to one who has learnt the gestures of their language <…> Remodelled and re-combined, the world yielded its sense to the soul as naturally as both breathed. (RLSK 178-9)

Here, according to V., the reader of Sebastian's novel finds himself "on the brink of some absolute truth, dazzling in its splendour and at the same time almost homely in it is perfect simplicity" (RLSK 178).[74] V. continues: "And now we shall know what exactly it is; the word will be uttered—and you, and I, and everyone in the world will slap himself on the forehead: What fools we have been! <…> Shall we whisper the word which will shatter the snug silence of our brains? We shall" (RLSK 180). Fyodor of The Gift intuits, similar to Sebastian, that the mundane

[74] A related example can be found in Pnin, whose eponymous protagonist at one point finds himself "on the verge of a simple solution of the universe." Although reference to a single "word" is not made, the notion of a "simple solution" to the universe is suggestive of the same underlying idea.

phenomena of life are explainable by some metaphysical principle, which he envisions as the reverse side of a piece of fabric:[75]

> He was in a troubled and obscured state of mind which was incomprehensible to him, just as everything was incomprehensible, from the sky to that yellow tram rumbling along the clear track of the Hohenzollerdamm <...> but gradually his annoyance with himself passed and with a kind of relief—as if the responsibility for his soul belonged not to him but to someone who knew what it all meant—the felt that all this skein of random thoughts, like everything else as well—the seams and the sleaziness of the spring day, the ruffle of the air, the coarse, variously intercrossing threads of confused sounds—was but the reverse side of a magnificent fabric, on the front of which there gradually formed and became alive images invisible to him. (G 326)

Just as the untidy underside of a piece of embroidery is the consequence of its orderly surface, Nabokov suggests that seemingly arbitrary things might be meaningfully connected if viewed from the correct angle. In many cases, the perspective that lends order to commonplace components is conceptualized as a single piece of information, the identification of which releases a surge of meaning. Nabokov says, for example, of Gogol' that "in the most innocent descriptive passage, this or that word, sometimes a mere adverb or a preposition <…> is inserted in such a way as to make the harmless sentence explode in a wild display of

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[75] Fabric is a frequent image for a hidden order underlying life. Van Veen has hopes of "catching sight of the lining of time," (A 227) and Cincinnatus sees "a glimpse of the lining" of life in his mother's eyes (IB 136). Kinbote says that "it is the underside of the weave [of the poem "Pale Fire"] that entrances the beholder" (PF 17). In the foreword to "The Waltz Invention," Nabokov says that in the play "there occurs now and then a sudden thinning of the texture, a rubbed spot in the bright fabric, allowing the nether life to glimmer through" (WI ii).

nightmare fireworks" (NG 142). Several characters find or look for special pieces of information that transform the mundane into the spectacular. In The Defense, during his chess match with Turati, "a kind of musical tempest overwhelmed the board and Luzhin searched stubbornly in it for the tiny, clear note that he needed in order in his turn to swell it out into a thunderous harmony" (D 138). Cincinnatus speaks of "word propinquity," a phenomenon wherein a "commonplace word" may "come alive and <...> share its neighbor's sheen, heat, shadow <...> so that the whole line is live iridescence" (IB 93). A writer in "The Christmas Story" (*"Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz,"* P1928) finds the "necessary, one-and-only key" that allows him to unite observations of his surroundings into "something exquisite" (S 226). A fragment from John Shade speaks of "The crooked made straight. The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above—smeared out as it were by the splotch of some master thumb that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line" (PF 261/N810). The character Falter, who will be discussed in more detail below, has a metaphysical epiphany as the consequence of a particular piece of information in the short story "Ultima Thule" when "[he] kept combining various ideas, and finally found the right combination and exploded" (S 514). And the notion that a single key-like piece of information can "solve" a previous set of "observed" phenomena is put into practice by Nabokov in the well-known story "The Vane Sisters" (1951), whose final lines contain a concealed acrostic that retroactively illuminates the story.

More specifically, Nabokov often envisions a single, special *word* that can bring about a revelation of meaning that encompasses all of life. Franz in King, Queen, Knave dreams of a "phonograph [that] would bark the word that solved the universe after which the act of existing would become a futile, childish game" (KQK 202). Falter of "Ultima Thule" hints that a

potentially fatal metaphysical revelation can be triggered in others through a word that he refuses to reveal.[76] In addition to the "word" that promises to "shatter the snug silence" in Sebastian Knight's Lost Property, which I mentioned above, Sebastian's half-brother V. believes that a metaphorical "word" will lend meaning to the scant information he has about Sebastian: "When she had gone, I wrote it all down—but it was dead, dead. I simply had to see Clare! One glance, *one word*, the mere sound of her voice would be sufficient (and necessary, absolutely necessary) to animate the past" (RLSK 76, italics mine).

The potential for a single word to act as a key-like catalyst that "solves" life is most prominently expressed in Nabokov's short story "The Word," whose protagonist receives metaphysical insight that seems to suddenly explain the mundane and disordered phenomena of his life. This understudied work (published in Dmitri Nabokov's English translation in 2005) deals with the possibility of finding a profound perspective that explains how components must be viewed in order for life to be exposed as meaningful. The story is evidently told by a man who has entered Paradise, possibly in a dream.[77] There, he feels compelled to tell the angels about his home:

> I wanted to explain how wondrous my land was, and how horrid its black syncope, but I did not find the words I needed. Hurrying, repeating myself, I babbled about trifles,

[76] Following his metaphysical transformation, Falter considers creating a new generation of the "initiated," but decides against revealing the secret to children "lest any of them with *one dreamy word* commit manslaughter" (the revelation has apparently already killed one adult) (S 521, italics mine).

[77] The story begins "Swept out of the valley night by an inspired oneiric wind, I stood at the edge of a road, under a clear pure-gold sky, in an extraordinary mountainous land" (Nab05 76). The term oneiric (the Russian begins "Унесенный из дольней ночи вдохновенным ветром сновиденья") suggests a dream, although it is not clear whether the reader is supposed to consider the events a dream altogether, or that perhaps a dream of the protagonist has facilitated actual interaction with Paradise.

> about some burned-down house where once the sunny sheen of parquet had been reflected in an inclined mirror. I prattled of old books and old lindens, of knickknacks, of my first poems in a cobalt schoolboy notebook, of some gray boulder, overgrown with wild raspberries, in the middle of a field filled with scabiosa and daisies—but the most important thing I simply could not express. <...> I spoke of rooms in a cool and resonant country house, of lindens, of my first love, of bumblebees sleeping on the scabiosa. It seemed to me that any minute—any minute!—I would get to what was most important, I would explain the whole sorrow of my homeland. But for some reason I could remember only minute, quite mundane things that were unable to speak or weep those corpulent, burning, terrible tears, about which I wanted to but could not tell. . . . (Nab0578)

The narrator speaks in a fragmentary list of phenomena (the device of the list) that seems to convey the lamentable absence of order and meaning among the events of life, although, like Ganin, he intuits that he is just on the edge of discovering the information that will reveal this order. Apparently taking pity on the narrator and

> Embracing my shoulders for an instant with his dovelike wings, the angel pronounced a single word, and in his voice I recognized all those beloved, those silenced voices. The word he spoke was so marvelous that, with a sigh, I closed my eyes and bowed my head still lower. The fragrance and the melody of the word spread through my veins, rose like a sun within my brain; the countless cavities within my consciousness caught up and repeated its lustrous edenic song. I was filled with it. Like a taut knot, it beat within my

> temple, its dampness trembled upon my lashes, its sweet chill fanned through my hair, and it poured heavenly warmth over my heart. (Nab05 78)

The word that the angel speaks appears to resolve the narrator's difficulty by supplying the perspective information that he could not himself call forth. It seems appropriate that the effect of the word involves images of "filling in the gaps" ("the word spread through my veins," "the countless cavities within my consciousness," "I was filled with it," "it poured heavenly warmth over my heart"). Perspective, insofar as it is a way of mentally ordering things so as to expose their meaning, can be conceptualized as a kind of "connective tissue" that unites the disparate, disconnected, and disordered elements haphazardly gathered up through observation.

Another case of a character who is granted access to the perspective that explains life can be found in the short story "Ultima Thule." The narrator visits his former tutor Adam Falter, who has reportedly received amazing and spontaneous insight into "the essence of things" after an epiphany one night in a hotel room—an apparently painful event that is marked by several minutes of screaming. The story begins with a device of the list—a description of various objects that the protagonist observes as he sits on a beach:

> Pebbles like cuckoo eggs, a piece of tile shaped like a pistol clip, a fragment of topaz-colored glass, something quite dry resembling a whisk of bast, my tears, a microscopic bead, an empty cigarette package with a yellow-bearded sailor in the center of a life buoy, a stone like a Pompeian's foot, some creature's small bone or a spatula, a kerosene can, a shiver of garnet-red glass, a nutshell, a nondescript rusty thingum

> related to nothing, a shard of porcelain, of which the companion fragments must inevitably exist somewhere <...> (S 502)

In the context of the narrator's depression—his wife has recently died—this list takes on a melancholy character and one has the feeling that the key uniting all of the elements will never be found. The narrator himself imagines what torture it would be to have to track down all of the porcelain shards belonging to the same pot. But his hopelessness at the prospect of finding and connecting the pieces falls later into implicit contrast with Falter's apparent awareness of the principle that unites and explains all things, described as "a key to absolutely all the doors and treasure chests in the world" and "Truth with a capital *T* that comprises in itself the explanation and the proof of all possible mental affirmations" (S 515, italics original).

As a result of his epiphany, Falter "stands *outside* our world, in the true reality" (S 500, italics original). One literary relative of "Ultima Thule," indeed, may be Poe's poem "Dream-Land," which includes the lines "I have reached these lands but newly / From an ultimate dim Thule— / From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime, / *Out of SPACE — out of TIME*" (Poe92 967-8, italics mine). The allusion would be appropriate, since Falter has, since his revelation, "lost his sense of time" (S 512).[78] Falter's supposed thoughts prior to the event are expressed through the device of the list. Leading up to the epiphany, the narrator imagines, Falter must have been thinking of mundane things:

> The star-ashed brow of night; her expression of gentle insanity; the swarming of lights in the old town; an amusing mathematical problem about which he had corresponded the year before with the Swedish scholar; the dry, sweet smell that seemed to loll, without

[78] As I will discuss in the next chapter, one metaphysical vantage point from which Nabokov obtains an omniscient view of reality is outside of space and time.

> thought or task, here and there in the hollows of the darkness; the metaphysical taste of wine, well bought and well sold; the news, recently received from a remote, unattractive country, of the death of a half-sister, whose image had long since wilted in his memory—all of this, I imagine, was floating through Falter's mind as he walked up the street and then mounted to his room; and while taken separately none of these reflections and impressions was in the least new or unusual <...>, in their totality they formed perhaps the most favorable medium for the flash,[79] <...> in no way foretold by the normal function of his reason, that struck him that night in the hotel. (S 506)

This mundane set of thoughts in no way appears to contain the information necessary to generate a transcendental epiphany. (Although the "metaphysical taste of wine" is suggestive, the image is not developed and there is no indication that it alone acts as the trigger for Falter's insight.) However, a combination of mundane and seemingly unconnected phenomena through the device of the list is precisely the situation that precedes metaphysical insight in "The Word" and accompanies Ganin's intuition of cosmic meaning in Mary.

Following the incident, Falter's first words are: "'One would like some light' <…> Thinking for an instant that Falter had broken the lamp during his fit, the landlord automatically checked the switch, but the light obediently came on" (S 507). Goethe's presence is felt in the story thanks to his reference to the mythical land of (Ultima) Thule in his poem "*Es war ein Koenig in Thule*,"

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[79] Note "flash" often serves as Nabokov's terminology of instantaneous and asequential perception: "it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist" (LL 378, italics original); Pnin's experience of a nervous attack, "all happened in a flash but there is no way of rendering it in less than so many consecutive words" (P 21). Falter here presumably experiences a flash that causes him to experience multiple things simultaneously.

but Falter's phrase (which occurs at a point of something akin to death, his exit from the realm of worldly concerns) furthermore echoes Goethe's supposed last words: "More light!" (Lew64 559) Goethe's request is commonly taken as an entreaty for the light of knowledge; Falter's casual request, which is granted simply and completely when the lamp is switched on, betrays the sudden and complete knowledge that he has just received through his metaphysical epiphany.

I have proposed that Nabokov's work is in many places informed by a bipartite structure that involves the conjunction of disconnected, observed components, and a perspective that organizes and reveals coherence among those components. Of course, Nabokov has not invented a new way of looking at reality with the structure of observation and perspective. In general it is probably correct to say that one must always look at something in a "correct" way in order to uncover its meaning. What is especially significant for understanding Nabokov's work is the scope and centrality of the concept of perspective. This centrality, I argue, comes from the important role that perspective plays in the resolution of distortion and the recovery of originals. In fact, distortion might be conceptualized as the removal or disfigurement of perspective. In previous chapters I have described anagrams as examples of the distortion that takes place when information travels from a higher form of experience to a lower one. It can be said that a message becomes anagrammatized when its perspective (information about the correct ordering of the letters) is lost. In other words, only the *what*—the observed components, the letters—survives the journey from one form of experience to the other; the *how*—the perspective that correctly organizes these letters—is lost. The recipient of the resulting distorted message may take it at face value, or may search for a perspective that

restores the meaningful original. The primacy of this perspectival lens is best conveyed through Nabokov's statements on art, which suggest that aesthetic value can be found even among the bleakest elements, as long as they are enlivened by being placed in harmonious combinations. Certain characters, like Paduk in Bend Sinister, display a deliberate disregard for the process of harmonious combination by denying that arrangement has anything to do with individuality, and by claiming, conversely, that one thing can be the equivalent of the other as long as it contains the same components, regardless of how those things are organized. Attempts to transmit the experience of art are one place where Nabokov pays special attention to perspectives and their correctness. In order to truly transmit experience from one person to another, both the observed information and the corresponding perspective must be provided—and Nabokov takes pains to provide it in works like Eugene Onegin. Positive characters generally seek out the "correct" perspective on a given scene. Insane characters tend to substitute the most obvious perspective with one that is centered on the object of their obsession. An exploration of how observation and perspective operate in Nabokov's writing provides tools for examining connections that prevail among his own, seemingly dissimilar works: "The Admiralty Spire" and Pale Fire are clearly related when one considers them in the context of observation and perspective; the short stories "Terror" and "The Visit to the Museum" may be read as explorations of the horrifying possibility of the complete unavailability of perspective; and, on the other end of the spectrum, in works like "The Word" and "Ultima Thule," Nabokov explores the possibility of discovering an ultimate "correct" perspective that makes evident the coherence in life. Nabokov's preoccupation with observation and perspective reflects his perpetual impulse to break free from limited

experience, an impulse that is satisfied by an active, restless, and inquisitive consciousness, which is never satisfied with reality at face value, but always seeks out connections and combinations that might enliven it. The search for perspectives, ultimately, is the attempt to make sense of fragmented reality and to access the original and meaningful state of affairs that has been obscured by the confines of limited existence, to get, as Fyodor of The Gift says, "deeper, to the bottom of things: [to] understand what is concealed behind all this, behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green greasepaint of the foliage[.] For there really is something, there is something!" (G 340)

Chapter 4. Manifold Awareness

Nabokov claims that "a person hoping to become a poet must have the capacity of thinking of several things at a time" (SM 218), and many of his aesthetically-minded characters possess such a capacity. Fyodor of The Gift, for one, has a hyperconscious artistic perception that apparently comprises "the gift" of the novel's title,

> <...> that mysterious and refined thing which he alone—out of ten thousand, a hundred thousand, perhaps even a million men—knew how to teach: for example—*multi-level* thinking: you look at a person and you see him as clearly as if he were fashioned of glass and you were the glass blower, while *at the same time* without in the least impinging on that clarity you notice some trifle on the side—such as the similarity of the telephone receiver's shadow to a huge, slightly crushed ant, and (*all of this simultaneously*) the convergence is joined by a third thought <...> (G 175, italics mine)

Sebastian Knight writes in his novel Lost Property that,

> Most people live through the day with this or that part of their mind in a happy state of somnolence: a hungry man eating a steak is interested in his food and not, say, in the memory of a dream about angels wearing top-hats which he happened to see seven years ago; 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. (RLSK 67, italics mine)

Nabokov himself, like Fyodor and Sebastian, experiences moments of heightened awareness during which disparate sensations are mentally processed together. He reports that, during a conversation with a village schoolmaster that took place while he was in the process of writing

his first poem, he was in a new and peculiar state of mind in which it was possible for him to take note of multiple impressions within and immediately around him at once:

> <...> I registered *simultaneously* and with equal clarity not only his wilting flowers, his flowing tie and the blackheads on the fleshy volutes of his nostrils, but also the dull little voice of a cuckoo coming from afar, and the flash of a Queen of Spain [butterfly] settling on the road, and the remembered impression of the pictures (enlarged agricultural pests and bearded Russian writers) in the well-aerated classrooms of the village school which I had once or twice visited; and—to continue a tabulation that hardly does justice to the ethereal simplicity of the whole process—the throb of some utterly irrelevant recollection (a pedometer I had lost) was released from a neighboring brain cell, and the savor of the grass stalk I was chewing mingled with the cuckoo's note and the fritillary's takeoff, and all the while I was richly, serenely aware of my own manifold awareness. (SM 218-19, italics mine)

In this chapter I will demonstrate how a preoccupation with "manifold awareness" plays a role in Nabokov's claim that life and art are fragmented, distorted phenomena that must be reassembled in order to be aesthetically appreciated. Nabokov believes, as I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, that he initially perceives a work of literature in an "instantaneous" state wherein all parts and interconnections are immediately accessible. "The most natural form of creative thrill," according to him, is "a sudden live image constructed in a flash out of dissimilar units which are *apprehended all at once* in a stellar explosion of the mind" (LL 379, italics mine). When this "live image" is forced into the uncomfortable confines of a linear text, however, it becomes subject to "the absurdity of linear beginnings and ends" and

the reader is cut off from the "ideal way of appreciating" it, which would be to read it "in the same way as a painting is taken in by the eye"—that is, to take in all of its parts simultaneously (LL 380). So although an artist in the process of creation may experience many things at once and therefore fully appreciate the aesthetic value of his or her own work, anyone who hopes to appreciate the written art of others must achieve a state of manifold awareness in order to mentally restore the initial, meaningful, non-linear "live image" from the inherently sequential text. The experience of life, as I explained earlier, is distorted in a similar way to a text: Its pieces are scattered, and the important combinations that lend aesthetic value to the whole are obscured. Consequently, if life is to be appreciated aesthetically, then it must be viewed, like a painting, as a simultaneous collection of interconnected elements.

The prospect of perceiving the disparate pieces of experience simultaneously in order to reconstruct a coherent whole is an important one for Nabokov. John Shade of Pale Fire, for example, finds existential comfort in his intuition that the seemingly random events of life are actually informed by a hidden "*web* of sense"—an allusion to a structure whose myriad interconnections are visible at once (PF 63/L810, italics mine). Getting a grasp of the disparate elements of life is so central to Nabokov's work that he considered calling his autobiography "The Anthemion," "which is the name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters, but nobody liked it" (SM 11). The title was evidently meant to present life as an aesthetic unity whose beauty becomes apparent when its parts are apprehended together. And as I described in the introduction to this dissertation, Nabokov uses the "broken bowl" scene at the end of Speak, Memory to convey the fragmentary nature of life. In spite of the formidable difficulty of reuniting the whole, Nabokov spends considerable

literary effort addressing the possibility of perceiving things in their undistorted state by taking in their parts simultaneously.

I will begin this chapter by identifying several elements of Nabokov's work as reflections of a pervasive fascination with achieving manifold awareness. Allusions to manifold awareness are far-reaching in Nabokov's oeuvre and can be detected, I argue, in the mental attitudes he associates with chess and his use of terminology related to transparency. I will discuss how Nabokov views the physical body and its senses as hindrances to the attainment of manifold awareness, and how he consequently furnishes his work with imagery related to exceeding the limitations of sight and touch. A significant related theme is the complete "dissolution" or "divestment" of the physical body and mind. I will identify Nabokov's interest in bodily divestment with several metaphysical philosophies, as well as note parallels between Nabokov's statements on "egolessness" and certain views of Bergson, Huxley, and others, suggesting that Nabokov shares with these writers a belief that consciousness is not produced by the brain but is a discarnate phenomenon that is temporarily (as well as temporally) confined, via the body, to the phenomenal world. Imprisonment within physical existence entails imprisonment within time and space, which, like the senses, contribute to an incomplete, distorted view of the world by preventing the consciousness from apprehending meaningful combinations of impressions together and at once. I will describe Nabokov's resulting desire to hypothetically "distribute" the body across space and time. A fascination with time and memory is one of the best known and most extensively studies features of Nabokov's work. However, I will note here an important and somewhat understudied aspect of Nabokov's interest in the pair—namely, that memory is valuable because it helps one to

mentally collapse the temporal distance that separates events and obscures their coherence or aesthetically-valuable connections. In other words time (and less prominently but no less importantly, space) introduces distortion by placing distance between connected events; memory therefore has the potential to negate distortion by placing distant events together. This function of memory, I will explain, is emphasized in Nabokov's first novel Mary, as well as the interpretation of Proust he presents in his lectures. Finally, I will discuss Nabokov's interest in accessing a state of metaphysical timelessness as a means for bypassing the distorting barricades of time and viewing life without "beginnings and ends."

Nabokov's interest in chess and chess problems is related to his desire for manifold awareness. Playing chess well is largely a question of comparing series of potential moves and responses, and the best players analyze evaluate and discard many branches of moves in advance. One of Luzhin's professional exploits in The Defense is to play multiple matches against the public at once—a feat that is simultaneous on two levels, since the manifold awareness required by each game is multiplied by the quantity of games being played at one time (D 75).[80] The necessity of a simultaneous perceptive capacity at the chessboard is not surprising since manifold awareness is explicitly connected to the poetic tendencies: according to Fyodor, the "inner impulse" that precedes the composition of a chess problem is "indistinguishable from poetic inspiration," and part of the process involves "pondering the alternatives" in order to achieve "the utmost economy of harmonious forces" (recall from

[80] "He often took on a score of amateurs." The original expresses more firmly that these matches are simultaneous: "Он сражался на турнирах с лучшими русскими шахматистами, играл вслепую, часто играл один против человек двадцати любителей." It is not clear from the Russian sentence whether the blindfolded and simultaneous matches are separate or whether Luzhin ever plays simultaneous matches *while* blindfolded (a not-unheard-of feat for chess masters).

chapter two that "harmony" tends to describe aesthetically-valuable combinations) (G 183). Chess's demand for manifold awareness may be an enjoyable exercise for the positive, often artistic, characters who possess much of it, but it is a drain on negative characters: M'sieur Pierre of Invitation to a Beheading is one instance of a notably poor chess player who constantly requests to withdraw his moves (IB 144-5). For Gaston, Humbert's acquaintance and one of Nabokov's vulgar characters, chess is such a strenuous activity that it seems to rob him of manifold awareness. Over the course of many games that he and Humbert play, Lolita makes multiple appearances in Gaston's peripheral vision. Yet at one point Gaston inquires about Humbert's "*fillettes*" (AL 183). In other words, Gaston is unable to grasp Lolita's many visitations across time, and instead concludes that there are multiple girls in the household. Humbert, on the other hand, seems to easily envision potential moves on the chessboard, which he sees as a "pool of limpid water with rare shells and stratagems rosily visible upon the smooth tessellated bottom, which to my confused adversary was all ooze and squid-cloud" (AL 233).

The use of terms suggesting clarity—"fashioned of glass," "ethereal simplicity," "clearly," "clarity," "transparent", "limpid"—in the above handful of passages relating to manifold awareness cannot be an accident on Nabokov's part. He uses such terms with striking regularity in conjunction with images of simultaneity. Cincinnatus, for example, "imagine[s], with such sensuous *clarity* as though it all was a fluctuating corona emanating from him, the town beyond the shallowed river, the town, from *every point of which one could see* <...> the tall fortress" (IB 73, italics mine). The spectators at his execution are described as "transparent," at odds with Cincinnatus's own "opacity," and an unprecedented lucidity comes to him at his death: "with a *clarity* he had never experienced before <...> 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* [i.e., taking in multiple visual impressions]" (IB 222, italics mine). It is during the contemplation of a set of simultaneous impressions (the sky, fields, and a telegraph pole) that, for Ganin, "the *lucid* languor of the moment became intolerable" (M 47, italics mine). A passage from Lolita, in which Humbert realizes his culpability in the tragic loss of Lolita's childhood reads, "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" (AL 308). The "concord" in question is a product of several simultaneous sounds, a "*vapory* vibration of accumulated sounds," a "*vapor* of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near" and "flashes of separate cries" originating in a "transparent" town that Humbert looks over while on a cliff suspended in "limpid" air (AL 307-8, italics mine). And discussing his personal experience of manifold awareness during the composition of poetry, Nabokov says

> <...> in a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge <...> while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cinder-gray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Docteur Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble[81] puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles

[81] This name and location seem to have no special significance. The disconnectedness of each perception mentioned conveys the all-encompassing nature of the emotion.

> occur—all forming an instantaneous and *transparent* organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus. (SM 218, italics mine)

The title of Nabokov's Transparent Things, which refers to the ability of the novel's spirit-narrators to supernaturally apprehend the detailed history of any person or object (TT 1), offers some clues to Nabokov's frequent use of "transparent" terminology in situations of manifold awareness: In addition to hiding nothing from the viewer, things that are transparent may be apprehended together in a single frame of vision, like a stacked set of microscope slides. Viewers who attain a "transparent" sense of a scene may therefore see multiple things within it at once.

The visual metaphor that prompts Nabokov's use of transparent terminology also provides an explanation for his frequent and rather unusual imagery involving eyes. For example, Nabokov's poem "Oculus" (*"Oko,"* 1939) describes existence as a disembodied eye:

> To a single colossal oculus,
> without lids, without face, without brow,
> without halo of marginal flesh,
> man is finally limited now. (Nab70 101)

A fascination with eyes, I argue, is essentially related to the desire to overcome a fragmented or distorted view of the world: the more prominent and powerful one's eyes, the more one can take in at once. Images of numerous and biologically unlikely eyes can be found in many places throughout Nabokov's work. Argus Panoptes, the hundred-eyed watchman from Greek

mythology appears no fewer than eight times, as Alfred Appel notes.[82] Cincinnatus thinks that he may "evolve a third eye on the back of [his] neck <…> a mad eye, wide open" (IB 92-3). For Humbert, eyes are associated with the subject of his fixation: Lolita and other nymphets. He has a "thousand eyes wide open in [his] eyed blood" when looking at Lolita (AL 42); his dissatisfaction with adult women is blamed in part on the fact that he sees "through the prism of [his] senses" (AL 18). Elsewhere Humbert perceives that "The sunny noon was all eyes" (AL 287). (Simultaneity characterizes Humbert's feelings for Lolita: his "heart seem[s] everywhere at once" after physical contact with her (AL 44).) He describes how a child "would be all eyes, as the pavonine sun was all eyes on the gravel under the flowering trees, while in the midst of that oculate paradise, my freckled and raffish lass skipped <...>" (AL 163).

The term "pavonine" and related imagery are themselves recurring elements in Nabokov's work. The word refers to a peacock's tail (whose circular adornments are often called "eyes"). The similar term Pavonian (of or relating to a peacock) can be found in Pale Fire (PF 105/N71). "*Pavonia*" also appears, as Nabokov is of course aware, in the Latin names of certain moths with "eyespot" features, and Barabtarlo believes that the moth in Cincinnatus's cell is *Saturnia pavonia* (Bar93 28). An angel majestically spreads his evidently pavonine wings in "The Word" and "it was like a burst of sunlight, like the sparkling of millions of eyes." (Nab05 76) Eyed

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[82] In a note to the phrase "Argus-eyed" in The Annotated Lolita, Appel includes an extensive list of appearances of the term elsewhere:

> *Argus-eyed*: "observant"; from the hundred-eyed monster of Greek mythology, who was set to watch Io, a maiden loved by Zeus. In *Laughter in the Dark*, Albinus meets his fatal love in the Argus cinema, where she is an usher <...>. "My back is argus-eyed," says the speaker in "An Evening of Russian Poetry" <...>. In *Pale Fire*, one of the aliases of the assassin Gradus is "d'Argus"; Hermann in *Despair* envisions "argus-eyed angels" <...>; the title character in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* "seems argus-eyed" <...>; Ada and Van dread "traveling together to Argus-eyed destinations" <...>, and Van, in search of the nature and meaning of Time, drives an "Argus" car <...>. (AL 401)

feathers are also a part of the narrator's intuition of paradise in "Ultima Thule." He feels that in death "there is being prepared a peacock-eyed radiance" (S 520). "Eyed wings" are said to unfurl in one of Sebastian Knight's books (RLSK 175). And at the end of "The Aurelian," Pilgram, just prior to his death, tries "to avoid the knowing looks of those numberless eyes"—the eyed wings of pinned butterflies in his shop (S 257).

The association between pavonine features and death or the afterlife in "The Aurelian" speaks to a quite prevalent, dichotomous worldview wherein life provides limited visibility, and death offers a superior form of vision. The notion that optical clarity (and consequently manifold awareness) is the norm—whereas visibility during life is occluded by some kind of phenomenal blinders—is put forth more explicitly by the fictional author Delalande in The Gift, who claims that what is

> <...> due to be revealed to us with the disintegration of the body is the liberation of the soul from the eye-sockets of the flesh and our transformation into one complete and free eye, which can simultaneously see in all directions, or to put it differently: a supersensory insight into the world accompanied by our inner participation. (G 322)

Bend Sinister echoes the sentiment that death removes a certain visual impairment. Nabokov suggests in that novel that death may be

> <...> the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge (similar say to the instantaneous disintegration of stone and ivy composing the circular dungeon where formerly the prisoner had to content himself with only two small apertures optically fusing into one; whilst now, with the disappearance of all walls, he can survey the entire circular landscape) <…>" (BS 175)

While alive, however, humans are limited to seeing through the "two small apertures"–the eyes. The disintegration of the metaphorical dungeon plays out relatively tangibly for Cincinnatus, who is confined to a prison cell with only a single aperture (a window). This prison physically falls apart prior to his execution, which is marked, as I mentioned above, by "clarity" (IB 28). The same opposition of limited vision in life and uninhibited vision in death can be found in the story "Perfection" (whose title suggests the "perfect knowledge" mentioned in Bend Sinister). Its protagonist "want[s] to take off his glasses" while trying to rescue his drowning student (S 346). When he dies in the attempt, however, "Only then were the clouded glasses removed" (S 347). The character Sleptsov in the short story "Christmas" (*"Rozhdestvo,"* 1924), whose name comes from the Russian "blind," "open[s] his eyes" just as a transcendentally-suggestive moth emerges from its cocoon shortly after his son's funeral (S 136). Blindness or impairments of sight—frequent images in Nabokov's work—are usually more than just physical conditions. They often entail a general inability to make sense of the world; or, in other words, a tendency to perceive the world through a lens of distortion. Recall, from the discussion of chapter three, that it is a "blind or insane" worker who fails or chooses not to reassemble a circus fence such that its meaningful original image is apparent. And Nabokov uses visual impairment as a metaphor for the distortion experienced in dreams, where (as I described in chapter one) "the lighting is poor and one's field of vision is oddly narrowed" (BS 64). Physically blind characters include Albinus in Laughter in the Dark and Dreyer in King, Queen, Knave, both of whom, even before losing their sight, are "blind" to the blatant infidelity of the women in their lives. Albinus, after becoming blind, is almost comically incapable of

piecing together the many clues suggesting that his rival is actually living with him under the same roof.

Nabokov frequently implicates the body and its senses as the cause of humans' distorted perception during life. Nabokov is disappointed that there is no "physical organ <...> that takes in the whole picture [of a work] and then can enjoy its details" (LL 3), and says that "All reality is comparative reality since any given reality, the window you see, the smells you perceive, the sounds you hear, are not only dependent on a crude give-and-take of *the senses* but also depend upon various levels of information" (LL 146, italics mine). According to Van Veen, it is the imperfect design of our "organs and orgitrons" that keep us from an "amphitheatric" (presumably simultaneous) perception of time. And as I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, Fyodor lists "senses" among the "barricades" that keep him from getting "to the bottom of things" (G 340). I have described how a dissatisfaction with the senses is reflected in a desire for more or more powerful eyes.

The sense of touch, like sight, is connected to the possibility of achieving a manifold awareness of the world. Nabokov and his characters often feel that they possess tentacle-like appendages that allow contact with distant and disparate points beyond one's immediate environment. In the Defense, Luzhin's gradual loss of contact with the real world due to a preference for the world of chess is described as an alteration in the "rays of his consciousness, which were wont to disperse when they came into contact with the incompletely intelligible world surrounding him" (D 134). In Speak, Memory, Nabokov states that "The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings,

are Apollo's[83] natural members" (SM 218), and says, "Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe" (SM 296). "Strands" are Humbert's metaphorical tool for gaining a manifold awareness over the Haze household in order to keep tabs on Lolita's whereabouts:

> I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. *My* web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room? Gently I tug on the silk. She is not. (AL 49, italics original)

If the sense of touch in its normal form inhibits one's ability to perceive multiple things simultaneously, it is appropriate that the narrator of the short story "Sounds" (*"Zvuki,"* 1923) feels an augmentation in the organs of touch that is explicitly connected with a sense of manifold awareness:

> On that happy day when the rain was lashing <...> I realized that you had no power over me, that it was not you alone who were my lover but the entire earth. It was as if my soul had extended *countless sensitive feelers*, and I lived within everything, *perceiving simultaneously* Niagara Falls thundering far beyond the ocean and the long golden drops rustling and pattering in the lane. I glanced at a birch tree's shiny bark and suddenly felt that, *in place of arms, I possessed inclined branches* covered with little wet leaves and, instead of legs, a thousand slender roots, twining into the earth, imbibing it. (S 15-16, italics mine)

[83] A metonym for the artistic or poetic impulse.

The many inhibitions placed on experience presented by the senses prompt Nabokov to ultimately seek ways to escape from the body or ego altogether. Many of Nabokov's characters have sensations of—or aspirations to—bodily "dissolution." Kinbote speaks of "physical dissolution" and "shedding one's body" in a digression on suicide in Pale Fire (PF 220-1/N493). Philip Wild of The Original of Laura seems to engage in a "process of self-deletion" wherein he mentally imagines an image of himself[84] and then visualizes erasing certain components (TOOL 133-9). He says "the process of dying by auto-dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man" (TOOL 171). The substantial quantity of index cards dealing with the topic, as well as fact that the title of this work was once meant to be "Dying Is Fun," suggest that dissolution was intended to constitute one of the major themes of the final novel. The character Armande in the Transparent Things feels "dissolved with the sun, the cherry trees, the forgiven landscape" (TT 55). Nabokov describes in his autobiography, similarly, "A sense of oneness with sun and stone" during ecstatic moments in the presence of butterflies (SM 139), and an image of dissolution (also involving the sun) appears in The Gift:

> I gradually felt that I was becoming moltenly transparent,[85] that I was permeated with a flame and existed only insofar as it did. As a book is translated into an exotic idiom, so was I translated into sun. <…> My personal I <…> had somehow disintegrated and dissolved; after being made transparent by the strength of the light, it was now assimilated to the shimmering of the summer forest. (G 345-6)

[84] This image resembles, perhaps not coincidentally, the letter I. Despite Nabokov's hatred of general "symbols," the letter in this context is suggestive of the personality or ego.
[85] Note the connection between dissolution and transparency, i.e. simultaneity. Free from the body, the consciousness is no longer limited to experiencing one thing at a time.

Similar to dissolution is "divestment," whose imagery often involves the removal of body parts. The narrator of Pnin states that

> <...> one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. (P 20)

The theme of "divestment" at death is also emphasized in Bend Sinister through the image of removing one's body as a garment. In the introduction, Nabokov speaks of Olga "divesting herself of herself, of her jewels, of the necklace and tiara of earthly life" (BS ix). In the novel itself Krug dreams of his deceased wife removing pieces of herself:

> Olga was revealed sitting before her mirror and taking off her jewels after the ball. Still clad in cherry-red velvet, her strong gleaming elbows thrown back and lifted like wings, she had begun to unclasp at the back of her neck her dazzling dog collar. He knew it would come off together with her vertebrae—that in fact it was the crystal of her vertebrae—and he experienced an agonizing sense of impropriety at the thought that everybody in the room would observe and take down in writing her inevitable, pitiful, innocent disintegration. There was a flash, a click: with both hands she removed her beautiful head <…>. Then he knew that all the rest would come off too, the rings together with the fingers, the bronze slippers with the toes, the breasts with the lace that cupped them ... his pity and shame reached their climax, and at the ultimate

> gesture of the tall cold stripteaser, prowling pumalike up and down the stage, with a horrible qualm Krug awoke. (BS 81-2)

Cincinnatus also feels that he is undergoing a "process of gradual divestment" and removes his body parts much like Olga Krug does (IB 90). If divestment is, as I argue, tied up with the removal of sensory obstacles to perception, it is especially significant that the means of Cincinnatus's execution is decapitation: As Cincinnatus is forcibly "divested" of his head,[86] the sensory blinders are lifted and he achieves "clarity."

I propose that dissolution and divestment are important because they involve the removal of those aspects of the body that inhibit perception—namely, the senses and the confinement of the consciousness to a single location in space and time. There is some reason to suspect that Nabokov's concept of ego-shedding in general is at least remotely connected to the notions of Buddhism or Brahmism, which involve, as part of their views of the afterlife, the possibility of escaping from the ego. A pair of index cards from the unfinished The Original of Laura, marked "OED," seem to be the product of Nabokov looking through the Oxford English Dictionary at various terms related to the belief systems: "Nirvana <…> In Buddhist theology extinction … and absorption into the supreme spirit." "Brahmahood = absorption into the divine essence" (TOOL 215). "Nirvana = 'extinction of the self' 'the individual existence' 'release from the cycle of incarnations'[87] 'reunion with Brahma <…> attained through the suppression of

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[86] Note that the "distorted" twin to this novel in Look at the Harlequins! (see chapter one) is The Red Top Hat, a title that overtly depicts the head as a garment that can be "divested" (LATH [ix]).

[87] Relatively explicit allusions to reincarnation can be found in the lecture "Literature and Commonsense," in which Nabokov says that "only commonsense" rules out the notion that "human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution" (LL 377).

individ[ual] existence" (TOOL 217). Little can be garnered from these notes, and it remains unclear whether Nabokov was already acquainted with these philosophies and looking up the definitions for some purpose in the novel (he may have intended, for example, to incorporate the text of the definitions into the story), or whether he was researching them for the first time. However, the topics are in line with the theme of "dissolution" that occupies many of the other index cards for The Original of Laura.

In a similar way, traces—but little hard evidence—link Nabokov's thematic preoccupations with the philosophy of Gnosticism, whose presence Robert Grossmith examines in his article "Nabokov and Self-Divestment: A Gnostic Source":[88]

> Gnosticism took over the prevailing Ptolemaic conception of the universe as consisting of a series of spinning concentric spheres or 'aeons' with the earth at the center. To this it added an elaborate mythological account of the spirit's descent through the spheres at birth and its re-ascent at death. Now, in the spirit's descent into the world it is encumbered at each successive sphere with a foreign accretion or 'garment' <...> which accretions together constitute the psyche or terrestrial soul of the individual. <...> These 'garments' or 'vestments' are cast off by the soul on its ascent through the spheres at death, so that by the time it reaches the original Heaven it is again 'naked' spirit or Being. (Gro88 74-5)

The imagery of concentric circles resonates not only with Nabokov's interest in divestment but also with the literary paradigm of containment, which I described in chapter two and which involves an innerworld that resides "inside" an outerworld. Personages on the inner level of this

[88] Another discussion of Gnostic elements specific to Invitation to a Beheading can be found in (Dav04 76-98).

structure are indeed "encumbered" since their experience is subject to distortion and their movement or vision is typically constrained. The Gnostic desire to escape from the earthly "sphere" by shedding the garment of the ego echoes characters' desire to attain the superior experience afforded by an outerworld.

The concepts underpinning Nabokov's view of the divestiture of the ego may also be elucidated by a passage from The Doors of Perception, in which Aldous Huxley documents an experiment with the psychedelic drug mescaline:

> These effects of mescalin [sic] are the sort of effects you could expect to follow the administration of a drug having the power to impair the efficiency of the cerebral reducing valve. When the brain runs out of sugar, the undernourished ego grows weak, can't be bothered to undertake the necessary chores, and loses all interest in those spatial and temporal relationships which mean so much to an organism bent on getting on in the world. As Mind at Large seeps past the no longer watertight valve, all kinds of biologically useless things start to happen. In some cases there may be extra-sensory perceptions. Other persons discover a world of visionary beauty. To others again is revealed the glory, the infinite value and meaningfulness of naked existence, of the given, unconceptualized event. In the final stage of egolessness there is an "obscure knowledge" that All is in all—that All is actually each. This is as near, I take it, as a finite mind can ever come to "perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe." (Hux54 26)

In this work Huxley draws from the idea of Henri Bergson, whom Nabokov read and admired (SO 43), that consciousness is external to the body and that the brain or ego is a receiver and, in

fact, a "reducing valve" for this "at-large" consciousness. Nabokov's apparent views on the limitations of mortal consciousness share some compelling similarities with those of Huxley. In Pnin, for example Nabokov refers to the skull as a "space-traveler's helmet" that keeps the wearer both from death and the ability to "mix with the landscape" (P 20)—an image that recalls the "watertight valve" of Huxley's description. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight the narrator speaks of "one's brain encompassed by an iron ring, by the close-fitting dream of one's own personality" (RLSK 179). This confining "ring" suggests Bergson's "reducing valve" and the potential for the expansion of consciousness if only the valve could be bypassed. Images of a restraining element around the brain appear more than once in Nabokov's work. I have noted elsewhere instances in which he speaks of life in terms of a membranous "film." In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the narrator speaks of "the word which will shatter the *snug* silence of our brains" (RLSK 180, italics mine). Bend Sinister's metaphorical "dungeon" with "two small apertures," which I mentioned earlier in this chapter, doubles, more tangibly, as an image of the skull and eye sockets. And it is with similar terms of imprisonment within the ego that Nabokov explains that the writer feels

> <...> a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open. (LL 378)

Similarities between Huxley's and Nabokov's understandings of consciousness can also be found in the disparity, suggested by both authors, between the infinite potential of the mind and the finite limitations of its biological container. Compare Nabokov's frustration at "the utter

degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence" and his "radii" that extend to "monstrously remote points of the universe" (SM 296) with Huxley's "This is as near, I take it, as a finite mind can ever come to 'perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe'" (Hux54 26). The notion of consciousness as a phenomenon that is external to and hindered by the body is not exclusive to this trio of authors. Huxley takes his book's title from William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," which reads, "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is—infinite" (Bla89 114) and "that called body is a portion of the soul discerned by the five senses" (Bla89 106).[89] A similar idea of the senses as a reducing valve can be found in the work of Plato, who says in Phaedo:

> But did you ever behold any of them [absolute justice, absolute beauty, or absolute good] with your eyes? <...> did you ever reach them with any other bodily sense? (and I speak not of these alone, but of absolute greatness, and health, and strength, and of the essence or true nature of everything). Has the reality of them ever been perceived by you through the bodily organs? or rather, is not the nearest approach to the knowledge of their several natures made by him who so orders his intellectual vision as to have the most exact conception of the essence of that which he considers?
>
> <...>
>
> And he attains to the knowledge of them in their highest purity who goes to each of them with the mind alone, not allowing when in the act of thought the intrusion or

[89] Blake is described as viewing "the spiritual world as true reality, with this world a *limited* image of it" (Bla89 101, italics mine). This is similar to the view of the world that I have proposed for Nabokov, wherein the phenomenal is only a distorted version of the metaphysical.

> introduction of sight or any other sense in the company of reason, but with the very light of the mind in her clearness penetrates into the very light of truth in each; he has got rid, as far as he can, of eyes and ears and of the whole body, which he conceives of only as a disturbing element, hindering the soul from the acquisition of knowledge <…> (Pla99 85-6)[90]

I will not undertake to demonstrate the potential influence of any of these thinkers on Nabokov,[91] but the possibility that all drew from similar understandings of the body as a hindrance to consciousness is intriguing, and, along with Gnosticism and other philosophies, may at the very least help the reader to construct a mental framework for making sense of certain patterns in Nabokov's work. If, on the other hand, the presence of such philosophical influences could be decisively established, a secondary problem would be to identify *why* Nabokov draws from them. I would be inclined to think that any interest in a philosophy that deals with divestment originates in the underlying impulse for manifold awareness and the circumvention of the fragmentary perception of reality to which mortals are confined. In other words, philosophies that address the problem of inhibited experience and offer escape from phenomenal constraints would appeal to Nabokov's very central concern for the discovery of aesthetic value or meaning wherever it is present. If the body and the senses could be

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[90] William James is another apparent adherent to the notion of an external consciousness inhibited by the ego, and states that "Consciousness is already there waiting to be uncovered." An extremely interesting discussion of James's views on consciousness, time, bodily dissolution, and other topics (many of which resemble Nabokov's views as I describe them in this chapter) can be found in (Bri10).

[91] Toker is also careful not to claim an influential connection between Bergson and Nabokov but diplomatically points to some "echoes" of the former in Nabokov's writing and says that "a number of remarks, metaphors, or turns of phrase throughout Nabokov's works can be annotated with the help of Bergson" (Tok95B 367).

eliminated as "barricades" in Nabokov's view, then consciousness would no longer be surrounded by distortion and would presumably enter a situation of unrestrained artistic appreciation.

Escape from the body also implies an escape from the distortion that is imposed by time and space. Distortion in a work of literature comes into being because an "instantaneous" impression (in which all elements of the story are present at once) is written out as a text, which is subject to "the absurdity of linear beginnings and ends" (LL 380). Analogously, when the aesthetic phenomenon of life is played out within space and linear time, it becomes distorted due to the imposition of sequence and the intrusion of spatial or temporal "distance" between meaningfully connected events. Although Nabokov's literary rebellion against time has been discussed before (see McK82 for a representative account), its function is too frequently approached as the whimsy of a nostalgic émigré (e.g. Pel01 152). I argue that Nabokov's disdain for time and space has a more specific source: a desire to *superimpose* points in time and space with the goal of recovering aesthetic value that has been obscured by distortion. Time and space lead to distortion because they scatter and artificially order the important "puzzle pieces" of life that produce aesthetic value when viewed together. A form of manifold awareness that allows a person to mentally place multiple points in time and space on top of one another in superimposition, conversely, allows one to approach an "ideal" view of life, resembling the "instantaneous" "initial vision" during which a work of art is created and in which aesthetic value is apparent.

The desire to access multiple impressions at once in spite of time and space is evident from Nabokov's frequent references to being "distributed" across space and time. When asked by an

interviewer, "Would you have liked to have lived at a time other than this?" Nabokov phlegmatically responds:

> As a matter of fact, I would have to construct a mosaic of time and space to suit my desires and demands. It would be too complicated to tabulate all the elements of this combination. But I know pretty well what it should include. It should include a warm climate, daily baths, an absence of radio music and traffic noise, the honey of ancient Persia, a complete microfilm library, and the unique and indescribable rapture of learning more and more about the moon and the planets. In other words, I think I would like my head to be in the United States of the nineteen-sixties, but would not mind distributing some of my other organs and limbs through various centuries. (SO 48)

When asked, "Is there a particular picture of the world which you wish to develop," Nabokov answers, "As to the past, I would not mind retrieving from various corners of spacetime certain lost comforts, such as baggy trousers and long, deep bathtubs" (SO 100). When asked where in America he would like to settle after returning from Switzerland (a planned move that would never take place), Nabokov states that he "would like to live either in California, or in New York, or in Cambridge, Mass. Or in a combination of these three" (SO 56). Since this statement comes almost immediately after a comment on his increasing disinclination for travel, it is apparent that Nabokov has some sort of transcendental living arrangements in mind and does not imagine shuttling among the three places. The idea of bodily (along with temporal) distribution also appears in Nabokov's fiction. John Shade, for example, recalling the blissful feeling preceding a childhood epileptic seizure, writes:

> I felt distributed through space and time:

One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand

Under the pebbles of a panting strand,

One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,

In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.

There were dull throbs in my Triassic; green

Optical spots in Upper Pleistocene,

An icy shiver down my Age of Stone,

And all tomorrows in my funnybone. (PF 38/L148-156)

Nabokov's metaphysically-themed poem "Fame" (*"Slava,"* 1942) seems to describe a similar type of distribution and includes the line "Without body I've spread, without echo I thrive" (Nab70 111).

The supernatural distribution of the body is far from the only tactic in Nabokov's battle against time. An effort to use memory to overcome the "distance" imposed by time is evident as early as Nabokov's first novel, Mary. For its protagonist, Ganin, time appears to break down in the face of exceptionally potent memories. After he realizes that one of his neighbors is about to marry his former lover, he becomes "so absorbed with his memories that he was unaware of time"; his memories are so powerful that he does "not feel any discrepancy between actual time and that other time in which he relived the past"; "no discrepancy existed between the course of life past and life present"; "It seemed as though his past <...> ran now like a regular pattern through his everyday life in Berlin" (M 55). This confusion leads him to forget that there is in fact a separation between then and now, to the extent that he remembers a situation from his distant past as if it were recent: "Ganin sat on the window

ledge (in a flash he wondered where it was that he had sat like this *not long ago*—and in a flash he remembered: the stained-glass interior of the pavilion, the white folding table, the hole in his sock)" (M 62, italics mine). (In reality he sat in the pavilion many years before.) The action of Ganin's memories, at first glance, recalls the Proustian notion of "involuntary memory," a rush of powerful recollections set off by an experience in the present. However, Nabokov's interest is not simply in the power of memory to bring up the past, but, more importantly, to remove the distance separating past experiences. Ganin's memories, in fact, generally involve a feeling that the past and present have merged. In other words, the memories are not merely distractions or a way to richly relive the past. Their function, instead, is to remove the distance between the past and the present.

The inadequacy of "involuntary memory" to satisfy Nabokov's impulses with regard to time is made evident in his lecture on Proust's In Search of Lost Time. Although one would expect the treatment of Proust in a relatively introductory lecture to focus on the central concept of involuntary memory, Nabokov instead accentuates the portions of Proust's work that deal with the notion of using memory to bring disparate events together, claiming that "something more than memory, no matter how vivid and continuous, is involved" when it comes to appreciating the past (LL 247). Nabokov notes that the theme of In Search of Lost Time is "the unsuspected riches of our subliminal minds which we can retrieve only by an act of intuition, of memory, of involuntary associations" (LL 208). In other words, it seems that involuntary memory is valuable insofar as it exposes the "riches" stored in the mind. For example, Nabokov includes in his lecture the following statement from Proust's protagonist Marcel, and implies that it is crucial to understanding Swann's Way and to In Search of Lost Time as a whole:

> What we call reality is a certain relationship between sensations and memories which surrounds us at the same time, the only true relationship, which the writer must recapture so that he may for ever link together in his phrase its two distinct elements. One may list in an interminable description the objects that figured in the place described, but truth will begin only when the writer takes two different objects, establishes their relationship, and encloses them in the necessary rings of his style (art), or even when, like life itself, comparing similar qualities in two sensations, *he makes their essential nature stand out clearly by joining them in a metaphor in order to remove them from the contingencies (the accidents) of time, and links them together by means of timeless words*. From this point of view regarding the true way of art [Marcel asks himself], was not nature herself a beginning of art, she who had often allowed me to know the beauty of something only a long time afterwards and only *through* something else—midday at Combray *through* the remembered sound of its bells and the tastes of its flowers. (qtd in LL 211, italics mine, brackets presumably Nabokov's)

The focus of this passage is the notion of "linking" together disparate events so that one may be viewed "through" the other. Such superimposition achieves the goal underlying manifold awareness—the simultaneous mental apprehension of disparate elements such that meaning is exposed. As Moraru notes, Proust is important to Nabokov because "The Proustian discourse <…> 'folds,' as it were, the <…> Nabokovian magic 'carpet' and its corresponding complex temporality (past, present and future all together), allowing its segments—memories and impressions—to exhibit the same invariant 'pattern'" (Mor95 176). Later in his lecture Nabokov

returns to the same idea when describing Marcel's mature philosophy of memory, which, as Nabokov emphasizes, involves the simultaneous mental experience of past and present:

> In short, to recreate the past something other than the operation of memory must happen: there must be a combination of a present sensation (especially taste, smell, touch, sound) with a recollection, a remembrance, of the sensuous past. To quote Leon: "Now, if at the moment of this resurrection <…>, instead of obliterating the present we can continue to be aware of it: if we can retain the sense of our own identity, and at the same time live fully in that moment which we had for long believed to be no more, then, and only then, we are at last in full possession of lost time." In other words, a nosegay of the senses in the present *and* the vision of an event or sensation in the past, this is when sense and memory come together and lost time is found again. (LL 249, italics original)

Nabokov ends the lecture with the passage that concludes Proust's series of novels and involves a vision of time in which any event can be superimposed on any other:

> If, at least, there were granted me time enough to complete my work, I would <…> describe men <…> as occupying in Time a place far more considerable than the so restricted one allotted them in space, a place, on the contrary, extending boundlessly since, giant-like, reaching far back into the years, they touch simultaneously epochs of their lives—with countless intervening days between—so widely separated from one another in Time. (qtd in LL 249)

This hypothetical timelessness would presumably facilitate the form of perception that is needed to appreciate works of art in their "instantaneous" state, beyond the reach of

distortion, and would resemble, as Cincinnatus of Invitation to a Beheading imagines, a state 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—and the rug is once again smoothed out, and you live on, or else superimpose the next image on the last, endlessly, endlessly, with the leisurely concentration of a woman selecting a belt to go with a dress <...>. (IB 94)

In his autobiography, Nabokov displays a desire to superimpose events through such spatial and temporal "folding." A pair of meaningfully connected events is described in Speak, Memory, where Nabokov recounts an incident in 1904 in which General Aleksei Kuropatkin, during a visit to the Nabokov residence, begins to show the young Vladimir a trick with matchsticks. Interrupted by Kuropatkin's aide-de-camp, the general leaves, but Nabokov describes a "special sequel" to the scene that takes place fifteen years later: Kuropatkin, now incognito to escape Bolshevik persecution, by chance encounters Nabokov's father, who is also in flight, on a bridge. Kuropatkin,[92] not recognizing his acquaintance V. D. Nabokov, asks for a light—a "sequel" to the matches that Kuropatkin left Nabokov with years before. Nabokov explains,

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[92] As Rowe notes, the wording here does not establish absolutely that the person on the bridge is Kuropatkin (Row74 171), but it is certainly implied:

> <...> at a certain point of my father's flight from Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg to southern Russia he was accosted while crossing a bridge, by an old man who looked like a gray-bearded peasant in his sheepskin coat. He asked my father for a light. The next moment each recognized the other. I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment <...> (SM 27)

> What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through, like my toy trains that, in the winter of 1904-05, in Wiesbaden, I tried to run over the frozen puddles in the grounds of the Hotel Oranien. (SM 27)

Things and events from the past are conveyed by the vehicle of Nabokov's simile, the toy trains, which perished because there was no bridge. And yet while some of these have "fallen through" and "vanished," have "been trifled with and mislaid," or otherwise succumbed to time, certain things have remained in spite of it. The "match theme" forms a temporal bridge that is supported by a real one, solid enough to help conduct both Kuropatkin and V. D. Nabokov safely out of Bolshevik Russia. Nabokov attaches major significance to identifying connections of this type across time and space, saying that "The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography" (SM 27).

The image of "folding" time and space with the help of memory pervades Speak, Memory. In chapter five Nabokov describes picking up a handful of snow, and the evoked memories that cause "sixty years [to] crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers" (SM 100). In a figurative passage, Nabokov describes entering a marsh near his family's Vyra estate around 1910 and emerging in view of Longs Peak in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado at least thirty years later in a metaphorical butterfly hunt that collapses both the time and space separating his Russian and American lives. Nabokov provides an image for what has just taken place when, in the same chapter, he says "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another" (SM 137-9). In other words, Nabokov sees himself picking up the "magic carpet" of time and manipulating its

fabric such that distant events are brought together. Images of time and space as foldable can be found at many points in Nabokov's work. For example, the narrator of "The Paris Poem" (*"Parizhskaia poema,"* 1943) would like to "<...> fold / [life's] magnificent carpet in such a fashion / as to make the design of today coincide / with the past, with a former pattern" (Nab70 123). The lecturer in the poem "An Evening of Russian Poetry" (1945) contends that "space is collapsible" (Nab70 162). And a folding spatial "bridge" reminiscent of Nabokov's description of Vyra can be found in the story "The Visit to the Museum," whose protagonist enters a museum in Europe and is supernaturally expelled into Soviet territory.

Nabokov often associates modes of thought that defy time and space with art and artists. Just as they have a capacity for thinking about several things at once, Nabokov's artists generally have an ability to think about many times at once, or in other words, like Nabokov they do not "believe in time" and disregard the notion that events are discrete and discontinuous. Sebastian Knight, for example, seems to deny the relevance of time to his understanding of compassion when it is said that

> 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.[93] Time and space to him were measures of the same eternity <...> (RLSK 65-6)

[93] Luzhin's wife as well seems to have the capacity for (at least spatially) distant compassion: "the mysterious ability of her soul to <…> to feel constantly an intolerable, tender pity for the

The timeless sentiment is echoed by Koncheyev in The Gift, who suspects that "there is no time, that everything is the present situated like a radiance outside our blindness" (G 354).

Nabokov's rejection of the apparent limitations of space and time culminates in an abstract desire for "escape" from both. Nabokov displays an imaginative capacity for ideas and processes that seem to operate in an "outside" realm where time is rendered inconsequential. As Nabokov describes in the opening of Speak, Memory, "timelessness" is a metaphysical state residing beyond the confines of life:

> Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. (SM 20)

He acknowledges that true timelessness is unobtainable within life: "Short of suicide," he says, "I have tried everything" (SM 20). Yet Nabokov's desperate attempts to make contact with this form of existence—his "colossal efforts" resulting in figuratively "bruised fists"—indicate that its attainment is tremendously important to him (SM 20). At the same time, the prominence of the discussion of (life)time's regrettable limitations at the beginning of Nabokov's "literary autobiography" hints that some form of timelessness may be achieved through art and that Speak, Memory itself will be a literary enactment such a pursuit. Much of Nabokov's writing—compensating in literature for what cannot be done in life—is, in fact, devoted to achieving a modicum of "timelessness" through art. When Nabokov speaks of "timelessness," he is not

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creature whose life is helpless and unhappy; to feel across hundreds of miles that somewhere in Sicily a thin-legged little donkey with a shaggy belly is being brutally beaten" (D 105).

speaking of a condition in which time has stopped or is absent, but the end of the subjugation of consciousness to the rules of sequential temporality. And Nabokov seems to imagine a freedom from time as the next logical step in man's evolution: A supposed fragmentary index card note from the creation of Pale Fire suggests the disappearance of time in an advanced state of being: "Time without consciousness—lower animal world; time with consciousness—man; consciousness without time—some still higher state" (SO 30).

If time and space tend to isolate the important moments of experience such that their sublime meaning is almost perpetually out of reach, then achieving a form of awareness that negates these divisive forces is not just an opportunity to make a modicum of sense of the far-flung and fleeting episodes of life, but a thrilling feat of defiance against an oppressive force and a means to attain a higher view of life's order.

Chapter 5. To Climb into the Next Dimension

Distortion takes a meaningful and instantaneous unity and fragments it into disconnected and disordered pieces. Manifold awareness, an ability to apprehend and think about many things at once, is valuable because it allows one to mentally reconstruct some of the original unity. In this chapter I describe a different means by which multiple points may be apprehended in combination: If a vantage point is relocated to a higher geometrical dimension, then things occupying the previous dimension appear in juxtaposition with one another. For example, the view from an aircraft (a vantage point that can be associated with the third dimension) allows one to see multiple points of the landscape below (a two-dimensional plane) together. Nabokov frequently employs images and concepts related to dimensions in his quest to peer beyond the barricades of distortion. In this chapter I will discuss the role of dimensions in Nabokov's work, beginning with his use of dimensional terminology and imagery to positively or negatively qualify characters, situations, and works of art. I will then describe how Nabokov associates transitions from lower to higher dimensions with an ability to see multiple things in juxtaposition. I will examine the short story "Cloud, Castle, Lake" as a work rich in dimensional imagery and involving escape from a single dimension into a two-dimensional landscape where things can be apprehended in juxtaposition. I will describe how dimensional transitions in Nabokov's work often coincide with metaphysical ones, and how the butterfly may be an emblem of this dual transformation. Finally, I will use imagery of dimensions to undertake a detailed analysis of the poem "The Ballad of Longwood Glen"—which Nabokov once called "the best poem I have composed" (qtd in Boy91 304) but which has received little critical attention.

In the colloquial conception, the absence of any dimension "is" a point; the first dimension "is" a straight line; the second "is" a plane; the third "is" space; and the fourth "is" time. Such "is"es are surely scientifically irresponsible, but much more appropriate to the present discussion than full-fledged mathematical explanations since Nabokov himself prefers an informal system of metaphors in which certain environments on earth are only loosely analogized to the scientific actualities of the dimensions. For Nabokov, I argue, immobility or imprisonment usually correspond to the geometrical point that comprises zero-dimensionality; motion along a straight line is suggestive of a one-dimensional environment; flat ground recalls the plane of two dimensions; flight or elevation is associated with the space of the third dimension; and an absence of, or freedom from, time and space (a characteristic of Nabokov's metaphysical world) is associated with the fourth.

In Nabokov's work, higher dimensions are more privileged than lower ones. In Speak, Memory, for example, Nabokov describes reverently "an infant's first journey into the next dimension, the newly established nexus between eye and reachable object, which the career boys in biometrics or in the rat-maze racket think they can explain" (SM 298). The opening lines of The Gift present a moving van whose logo is displayed "in yard-high blue letters, each of which (including a square dot) was shaded laterally with black paint: a dishonest attempt to climb into the next dimension" (G 15). This passage, as Boyd observes, implies that the narrator of The Gift is about to *honestly* climb into the next dimension through the novel that we have just begun reading (Boy90 448). Conversely, imagery of limited dimensions, especially the flatness associated with two dimensions, is negatively colored: Trailing off impassively after his description of killing Clare Quilty, Humbert says "The rest is a little flattish and faded" (AL 305).

Franz in King, Queen, Knave thinks of his rival, Dreyer, as "two-dimensional and immobile" (indeed, all three vulgar protagonists of this novel are connected to imagery of playing cards) (KQK 178). Sebastian Knight, conversely, is "a sphere among circles" (RLSK 66). For Albinus of Laughter in the Dark, an inept lover, "romance had a trick of becoming flat when it came his way" (LITD 14). The vulgar world that Cincinnatus leaves at the close of Invitation to a Beheading contains flat scenery made up to deceptively convey three dimensions: "The fallen trees lay flat and reliefless, while those that were still standing, also two-dimensional, with a lateral shading of the trunk to suggest roundness, barely held on with their branches to the ripping mesh of the sky" (IB 223). (Cincinnatus, who ultimately escapes this prison world through death, feels "as if one side of his being slid into another dimension, as all the complexity of a tree's foliage passes from shade into radiance" (IB 121).) Two-dimensional stage imagery also appears in Nikolai Gogol, where Nabokov speaks of "something else" (a code phrase for metaphysical states that can be found in the poem "Fame" (Nab70 113)) "behind the crudely painted screens" of "The Overcoat" (NG 142). In Speak, Memory, Nabokov mentions a childhood phenomenon of hearing meaningless conversations in his mind, of which he declines to offer examples "lest the flatness [i.e. unintelligibility] I wish to convey be marred by a molehill of sense" (SM 33).

Eric Naiman notes that dimensional imagery plays a contrasting role in The Defense, whose "central structural opposition" is "the conflict prevailing between registers of two and three dimensions" (Nai98 4). "In general, two-dimensional geometrical figures are most often used in *The Defense* to describe the world of prosaic tedium that Luzhin must endure when he is not playing or thinking about chess" (Nai98 5). This "two-dimensional, superficial life," as Naiman

notes, is often described in terms of silhouettes, profiles, and flatness (Nai98 5-6). Naiman finds evidence of a burgeoning three-dimensionality in Luzhin in spite of his flat surroundings—for example his

> <…> attachment to three-dimensional geometric figures. When Luzhin begins to draw as a substitute for chess, his wife in profile does not turn out well, but his works concerned with depth or three-dimensionality—even the illusion of three-dimensionality—are far better: these include a train on a bridge spanning an abyss, a bas-relief done in charcoal, a cube casting shade, and "a confidential conversation between a cone and a pyramid." (Nai98 13)

While three-dimensional images are associated in The Defense with the higher faculties of the mind, a lack of dimensionality, specifically a lack of understanding of the rules of perspective, is employed to negatively qualify art. A perspectiveless drawing in Pnin is associated with primitiveness: "Framed in the picture window, the little town of Waindell—white paint, black pattern of twigs—was projected, as if by a child, in *primitive* perspective devoid of aerial depth, into the slate-grey hills" (P 29-30, italics mine). (In contrast, it is said of Pnin's Victor Wind, an artistic prodigy, that "At five, he began to draw objects in perspective—a side wall nicely foreshortened, a tree dwarfed by distance, one object half masking another" (P 90).) The narrator of Look at the Harlequins hallucinates "flat, *primitive* images" (LATH 243, italics mine). A concern for perspective is also mentioned with regard to verbal art in Lolita. Discussing one of his old poems, Humbert says,

> <...> I notice it is really a maniac's masterpiece. The stark, stiff, lurid rhymes correspond very exactly to certain *perspectiveless and terrible landscapes* and figures, and magnified

> parts of landscapes and figures, as drawn by psychopaths in tests devised by their astute trainers. (AL 257, italics mine)

Discussing the various sins of incompetent translators, Nabokov says "The third, and worst, degree of turpitude is reached when a masterpiece is planished [i.e., made flat] and patted into such a shape, vilely beautified in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public" (Nab08 3). In Nikolai Gogol, Nabokov describes "Molière's stuff" as "something of one dimension and absolutely devoid of the huge, seething, prodigiously poetic background that makes true drama" (NG 55), whereas he later says that "The prose of Pushkin is three-dimensional; that of Gogol is four-dimensional, at least" (NG 145).

I propose that Nabokov's use of dimensional imagery and terminology in such simple contrasts reflects a more complex view of dimensions as comparative indicators of the extent to which experience is distorted. In general, distorted experience is described in terms of lower dimensions, and undistorted experience is depicted as being made available by additional dimensions. Nabokov's frequent comparison of text to painting, which I described in the introduction to this dissertation, presents distortion as a dimensional problem: distortion takes place in a work of literature because a two-dimensional "painting" (the instantaneous aesthetic impression whose every detail is present before the eyes at once) is forced into the confines of a one-dimensional series of words. (This situation is in turn analogous to what happens when a three-dimensional globe is projected as a two-dimensional map: information is lost, the true relationships among points are obscured, and graphical perspective becomes "primitive.") If one could somehow reintroduce the subtracted dimension to the text, one might recover the aesthetically-complete original. Abstractly speaking, what is subtracted when a text is

committed to paper is the ability for readers to apprehend its parts simultaneously. The addition of a dimension to a situation provides a viewer with a means to apprehend disparate components in a unified manner. Each higher dimension provides a juxtapositional, simultaneous view of the previous one because any dimension, geometrically speaking, is made up of an infinity of instances of the next lower dimension. A one-dimensional line is a succession of non-dimensional points; a two dimensional plane is a series of lines, laid out alongside one another; a three-dimensional space is a stack of planes. The fourth dimension, by this formula, is a series of three-dimensional spaces (individual instants of time). As Bergson explains,

> <…> spatialised time is really a fourth dimension of space. Only this fourth dimension allows us to juxtapose what is given as a succession: without it, we would have no room. Whether a universe has three, two, or a single dimension, or even none at all and reduces to a point, we can always convert the indefinite succession of all its events into an *instantaneous or eternal juxtaposition* by the sole act of granting it an additional dimension. (Ber02 214, italics mine)

A viewer with access to a vantage point in a higher dimension automatically achieves a sort of manifold awareness over the lower dimensions. Nabokov seems, in fact, to frequently emphasize the connection between additional dimensions, especially elevation (which can be associated with the third dimension since it is perpendicular to a two dimensional plane), with the ability to see things simultaneously. In a short essay called "The Fourth Dimension of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*," Vladimir Alexandrov draws a comparison between a scene in Laughter in the Dark and statements from the philosopher P. D. Ouspensky, and speculates that

Nabokov may have been influenced by Ouspensky, or at least that Nabokov exhibits some lines of thought that run parallel to that thinker's ideas on the fourth dimension. Alexandrov cites, appropriately, the following passage from Tertium Organum (published 1912), in which Ouspensky notes the ability of an advanced dimension to display things in juxtaposition:

> If our perception could rise above this plane, it would most certainly see below *simultaneously* a far greater number of events than it usually sees from its position on the plane. If a man climbs a mountain or goes up in a balloon, he sees simultaneously and at once a great many things that it is impossible to see *simultaneously and at once* when on earth—the movement of two trains towards one another which must result in a head-on collision; the approach of an enemy detachment to a sleeping camp; two towns separated by a mountain ridge and so on <...> (qtd in Ale03 6, italics Ouspensky's)

Alexandrov connects this passage to a scene in Laughter in the Dark where a woman on a hill and an airplane (a dirigible in the original) seem to look down on the moving car of the protagonist, Albinus, who is about to be involved in an accident that will drastically affect his life (Ale03 4-9). The narrator speculates that, given a sufficiently elevated perspective, one could "see simultaneously the mountains of Provence, and a distant town in another country—let us say, Berlin" (LITD 237). In Berlin, Albinus's wife experiences a disquiet that apparently comes from a psychic awareness of the impending crash (LITD 238). The motion of the car can be identified with the plane of the second dimension, and the increasingly elevated narrative viewpoint is suggestive of the third dimension—a viewpoint whose inaccessibility has tragic consequences for Albinus.

Generally, elevation provides an elevated and advantageous way of seeing the world. Nabokov asserts that the writer should take as his or her home the proverbial ivory tower, in part because of its "grand circular view" (LL 371). As I mentioned in chapter four, Nabokov very consistently connects manifold awareness with terms of optical clarity. If elevation provides manifold awareness, it is appropriate that it occasionally leads to such clarity. One of Nabokov's poems (steeped in imagery of elevation[94]) states, for example, that "The higher the dark and damp / trails twist upward, the *clearer* / grow the tokens, treasured since childhood, / of my northern plain" (Nab70 35, italics mine). More frequently, a certain mental clarity provided by elevated vantage points seems also to precipitate epiphanies. It is through the perspective provided by the "lofty slope" that Humbert comes to his realization of the true tragedy of his relationship with Lolita (AL 307-8). In the short story "Tyrants Destroyed" (*"Istreblenie tiranov,"* 1938), the narrator goes through the gamut of emotions with regard to a dictator before settling on laughter, which is portrayed as bringing about the tyrant's "destruction": "Having experienced all the degrees of hatred and despair, I achieved those *heights* from which one obtains a *bird's-eye view* of the ludicrous." (S 459, italics mine) A scene in which Pnin is lost while driving to a friend's house, but then suddenly finds his way, is depicted from the elevated perspective of a mountaintop (where an ant ascends a lookout tower) (P 114-5). At its end, "everything happened at once:[95] the ant found an upright beam leading to the roof of the tower and started to *ascend* it with renewed zest; the sun appeared; and Pnin at the *height* of

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[94] The poem, "I Like That Mountain" (*"Liubliu ia goru,"* 1925), is structured around the image of climbing a mountain and concludes with the stanza "Shall we not climb thus / the slopes of paradise, at the hour of death, / meeting all the loved things / that in life elevated [*vozvyshalo*] us?" (Nab70 34-5)

[95] The wording here ("everything happened at once") reiterates the connection between elevated vantage points and manifold awareness.

hopelessness, found himself on a paved road with a rusty but still glistening sign directing wayfarers 'To The Pines'" (P 115, italics mine).

Nabokov's expression of the superiority of higher dimensions does not always involve elevation. "Cloud, Castle, Lake" is, I argue, a story of dimensional transcendence that originates in something approximating the first dimension, and involves glimpses of a superior second dimension. The story centers on Vasiliy Ivanovich, who wins a countryside tour at a charity ball. He would prefer to keep to himself, but the bureaucracy of the fictional version of Berlin in which the story is set prevents him from foregoing the prize. During the trip, which takes place in the company of several vulgar Nabokovian characters, Vasiliy Ivanovich encounters a landscape and an inn near it, and resolves to stay there. But the other travelers are upset at his attempt to leave the group, beat him, and force him to return with them.

The trip is conducted mostly by train, whose linear motion may be associated with the first dimension. In some scenes the narrator seems to lament the dimensional limitations inherent in the train's motion—the inability to stop the train, exit the track, and explore things in depth. The rhythm of one passage, for example, conveys the speed of train, as well as the quickly moving view from its window:

> We both, Vasiliy Ivanovich and I, have always been impressed by the anonymity of all the parts of a landscape, so dangerous for the soul, the impossibility of ever finding out where that path you see leads—and look, what a tempting thicket! It happened that on a distant slope or in a gap in the trees there would appear and, as it were, stop for an instant, like air retained in the lungs, a spot so enchanting—a lawn, a terrace—such perfect expression of tender well-meaning beauty—that it seemed that if one could

> stop the train and go thither, forever, to you, my love ... But a thousand beech trunks were already madly leaping by, whirling in a sizzling sun pool, and again the chance for happiness was gone. (S 432)

A contrast to the sequential and fleeting view from the window arrives when Vasiliy Ivanovich, on foot, encounters a beautiful scene consisting of three, simultaneously visible parts: a cloud, a castle, and a lake.

> It was a pure, blue lake, with an unusual expression of its water. In the middle, a large cloud was reflected in its entirety. On the other side, on a hill thickly covered with verdure (and the darker the verdure, the more poetic it is), towered, arising from dactyl to dactyl, an ancient black castle. Of course, there are plenty of such views in Central Europe, but just this one—in the inexpressible and unique harmoniousness of its three principal parts, in its smile, in some mysterious innocence it had, my love! (S 435)

The source of Vasiliy Ivanovich's rapture is a type of manifold awareness, a conjunction of three separate objects that are viewed in a single frame of vision.[96] The discovery of the three-part scene coincides with the transition from a lower dimension to a higher one. This new dimension affords Vasiliy Ivanovich the ability to see multiple things at once (whereas previously he had only disparate glimpses from the train window).[97] Vasiliy Ivanovich also

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[96] Note yet again that manifold awareness (here the cloud, castle, and lake) appears in conjunction with references to optical clarity (the visibly "pure" lake). Furthermore, as I mentioned in the third chapter of this dissertation, Nabokov uses terms of "harmony" to describe combinations that are aesthetically satisfying. The "harmoniousness" of the cloud, castle, and lake suggest that Vasily Ivanovich is in the presence of such a combination.

[97] It is significant that Vasily Ivanovich hopes to occupy himself by reading Tiutchev on the train (although the others prevent him): according to Liberman, "Tyutchev's universe rests," in part, on the opposition of

exhibits "dimensional" motion as he departs from the tour's appointed route in order to approach the landscape. The first dimension, which "is" a line, characterizes the train's linear movement. But in order to view the cloud, castle, and lake, Vasiliy Ivanovich moves perpendicularly to the line to which he was initially confined, a feat that is only possible when a second dimension is available. When Vasiliy Ivanovich announces to the rest of the group that he would like to stay, they refuse to let him deviate from the (linear) plan and torture him.[98] When the group forcibly pulls him back to the appointed route, Vasiliy Ivanovich is thrust back into forward-only, one-dimensional motion:

> Swept along a forest road as in a hideous fairy tale, squeezed, twisted, Vasiliy Ivanovich could not even turn around, and only felt how the radiance behind his back receded,

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> <…> up/down, realized as the sky/the earth and the mountain/the valley. Unbounded space interested Tyutchev insofar as it was vertical, whereas journeys (whatever the surrounding landscape) exhausted him; he composed a great number of poems while riding in a coach, and most of them are gloomy. (Lib93 10)

This observation is relevant to "Cloud, Castle, Lake" in two ways. Firstly, Vasily Ivanovich's dissatisfaction with his confinement to linear motion echoes Tiutchev's disdain for earthbound journeys. Secondly, elevation implies a superior dimension over the relatively flat landscape to which humans are typically confined. The fact that Vasily Ivanovich unsuccessfully tries to read Tiutchev's "elevated" poetry foreshadows his unsuccessful attempt to make a transition into the higher-dimensional landscape of the cloud, castle, and lake.

[98] To my knowledge it has never been noted that Vasiliy Ivanovich's tortures recall the crucifixion wounds (holes in the hands and feet) and preceding flogging (with a Roman knout) of Christ: "It occurred to them, among other things, to use a corkscrew on his palms; then on his feet. The post-office clerk, who had been to Russia, fashioned a knout out of a stick and a belt, and began to use it with devilish dexterity" (S 437). The comparison is furthered by the image of the uncomprehending mob's assault on a meek individual who has some special insight (in Vasily Ivanovich's case, his appreciation for aesthetic combinations). Further in this chapter I will connect dimensional images with spirituality.

Cincinnatus's persecution in Invitation to a Beheading is, similarly, connected to his propensity for juxtapositional experience: part of what makes him an outcast and criminal is the fact that, as he states "<...> I am the one among you who is alive—Not only are my eyes different, and my hearing, and my sense of taste—not only is my sense of smell like a deer's, my sense of touch like a bat's—*but, most important, I have the capacity to conjoin all of this in one point*" (IB 52, italics mine).

> fractured by trees, and then it was no longer there, and all around the dark firs fretted but could not interfere. (S 436)

Understandings of geometrical dimensions were accessible to both mathematicians and dilettantes prior to Nabokov's birth, and it is possible that he was acquainted with the 1884 science fiction novella Flatland, which conceptualizes them in rigorous but accessible terms.[99] The protagonist of the story is an anthropomorphic square who lives in a two-dimensional world called Flatland. In Flatland, there is no concept of anything resembling height, elevation, or "up," and the notion of alternative dimensions is regarded as a heresy. However, the protagonist is something of a dreamer, and he imagines other hypothetical dimensional worlds—one, called Lineland, which is one-dimensional and inhabited by creatures that all occupy a single, straight line. The square imagines another place, Pointland, that is non-dimensional and inhabited by a single being who exists as a point. Additionally, the square is eventually visited by a messianic sphere from a three-dimensional world, Spaceland. The square at first refuses to believe that the visitor is actually from the third dimension, or that such a place exists, and the frustrated sphere finally pulls him into the third dimension. From this vantage point, the square is able to look "down" on Flatland and see multiple disparate things at once—an instance of juxtapositional perception, which he calls "omnividence." Vasiliy Ivanovich's inability to turn around in the preceding quoted passage recalls the one-dimensional world that the square imagines in Flatland. In his vision, Lineland is inhabited by beings who have an eye at one end and perpetually look at the back of the creature in front of

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[99] H. G. Wells's The Time Machine (published 1895) also offers a detailed, but more abstract, conceptualization of dimensions, including the dimension of time. Nabokov of course read this very popular work (SO 175) and knew its author personally (SO 104).

them. Their motion and vision is severely limited and, like Vasiliy Ivanovich while he is on the train, they are incapable of turning or departing from the straight line that constitutes their dimension.

The afterlife in Nabokov's view is timeless, and timelessness, as I noted, can be associated with the fourth dimension. It is not entirely surprising, then, that characters who undergo the "dimensional" transition from the three-dimensional phenomenal world of life into four-dimensional death often do so while making another dimensional transition or somehow severing ties with lower dimensions.[100] Cincinnatus's death, for example, is marked by the toppling of "two-dimensional" stage props. Another example can be found at the end of the first chapter of Speak, Memory, where Nabokov glides from a description of his father being thrown into the air by appreciative peasants to a description of his funeral:

> <...> the good *barin* would be put through the national ordeal of being rocked and tossed up and securely caught by a score or so of strong arms. <...> and the second time he would go higher than the first and then there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church, while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up <...> and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin. (SM 31-2)

[100] A recent study of Nabokov's metaphysics by David S. Rutlege insightfully notes a connection between metaphysical "transcendence" and imagery of "ascension" without delving into the more general idea of ascension as a form of dimensional motion (Rut11 162-6).

In this case, the two-to-three dimensional transition achieved by V. D. Nabokov when he is thrown into the air (and is then figuratively relocated to the church ceiling) coincides with his transition between life and death. The death of the waxwing that flies into John Shade's window at the opening of the poem "Pale Fire," is another case where death is marked by the advent of a new dimension: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure of the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I / *Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky*" (PF 33/L1-4, italics mine). The implication of the lines is that the waxwing loses its physical body when it strikes the glass but carries on in a metaphysical form after going "into" the glass of the windowpane.[101] Motion (like the waxwing's) *into* a flat surface is a recurring image in Nabokov's work that makes evident the association between metaphysical and dimensional transitions. Luzhin makes a dimensional transition when he commits suicide by jumping out of a frosted bathroom window. Because much of Luzhin's life is presented in terms of chess, it may be appropriate to consider this final "move" in the context of the same imagery. If we associate the motion of chessmen across a board with two-dimensionality, then Luzhin's suicide is dimensional insofar as it takes him *into* the "white square" of the window. As in "Pale Fire," this physical motion into a surface is accompanied by a metaphysical transition (life into death). A similar image of entering a chessboard may also play a role later in Pale Fire. According to one commentator,

> In *Pale Fire*, King Alfin's old flame Iris Acht (d. 1888), may be seen as translating to Iris Eight, i.e., i8 (or eye-8), in chess notation referring to a square just off the 8x8 board (which only goes up to h8); her irisated photograph hangs above the trapdoor escape

[101] Shade associates himself with the waxwing because he has, similarly, crossed the boundary between life and the metaphysical world (through his art).

> that King Charles/Kinbote ("a king-in-the-corner waiter of the *solus rex* type"[102]) uses to evade capture. This passage was first discovered whilst his guardians were diverted by A Game of Chess, this being the name of the second part of Eliot's *The Waste Land* parodied by Shade in the poem "Pale Fire" <...> (Haa05)

If this network of associations is valid, then Kinbote makes a dimensional move that amounts to motion into a chessboard—much as Luzhin does—when he escapes from his captors through a secret passage. Kinbote's motion is furthermore connected to a transition that is, if not metaphysical, at least associated with a dramatic transition to a new life.[103] Motion into a flat image is also addressed in the novel Glory. As a child, its protagonist, Martin, is told a fairy tale by his mother in which a boy enters into a picture of a forest that hangs on his wall (GL 4-5).[104] Later in life, Martin goes into a similar forest (and possibly to his death) in order to sneak into the USSR (GL 205).[105]

There may be some suggestions of elevation and juxtapositional perspectives to be found in Nabokov's use of moths and butterflies in his work. A moth begins its life as a caterpillar, which

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[102] A reference to a type of chess problem that Kinbote uses to describe his situation when he is imprisoned in his castle. Kinbote is very aware of the potential association between kingship and chess, and even uses a drawing of a chess crown as a signature (PF 107/N71).

[103] It is tempting to speculate that Through the Looking Glass, a work that is full of chess imagery and interaction with larger-than-life chessboards, acts in some sense as a prototype for such scenes, given that the novel depicts Alice moving into the flat surface of a mirror (and considering Nabokov's knowledge of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, which he translated into Russian early in his career).

[104] An autobiographical prototype for this scene can be found in Speak, Memory (SM 86). Boyd notes that Nabokov makes his own figurative entrance into a wood in his autobiography, where he describes a painting of a beech forest, and a few pages later recounts an episode that takes place within a beech forest (Boy91 158).

[105] In another case of entering the two-dimensional surface of a picture, a character in Nabokov's short story "La Veneziana" (*"Venetsianka,"* 1924) seems to physically enter a painting (or at least dream of doing so) through intense concentration.

is confined to two-dimensional movement along surfaces. Eventually it develops wings and gains freedom of movement in the third dimension. The butterfly's profound physical transformation in this way coincides with a change in the dimensions through which it is able to move. In turn, Nabokov frequently evokes the butterfly when his characters undergo metaphysical transformations. The name of the character Falter, whose transcendent and transformative epiphany is described in chapter three, is a German word for butterfly or moth. Death is often the transition with which the image of the moth coincides. A moth that is explicitly connected to the deceased Olga Krug in the novel's introduction appears at the end of Bend Sinister (BS xiii, 241). John Shade associates the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter (an organization apparently devoted to the study of the afterlife) with a "larvorium,"[106] (PF 52/L514-15) and Kinbote euphemistically explains the death of his supposed father King Alfin by saying "the angels chose to net his mild pure soul" (PF 103/N71). Nabokov says in an interview "I also intend to collect butterflies in Peru or Iran before I pupate" (qtd in Boy90 71). Likewise Van compares suicide to the pupation of a butterfly when he links Aqua's suicide with "prepupational locomotion" (A 56). Boyd associates the butterfly that appears before John Shade's death with the ghost of Hazel Shade (Boy99 136). Connolly links a butterfly in "The Return of Chorb" with the protagonist's deceased wife (Con92 15). The chrysalis sometimes serves as a token of death and survival beyond death. In the story "Christmas," a young man dies and his father by chance brings one of the son's cocoons (he was a butterfly hunter) near a fireplace where it opens:

[106] It appears Nabokov either meant to coin this word suggesting a place for larvae that are waiting to pupate, or that it is a misspelling of the extant "larvarium" (which appears in Ada) that has never been corrected in printings of Pale Fire. (This topic question has been discussed inconclusively on the NABOKV-L internet mailing list.)

> And its wings—still feeble, still moist—kept growing and unfolding, and now they were developed to the limit set for them by God, and there, on the wall, instead of a little lump of life, instead of a dark mouse, there was a great *Attacus* moth like those that fly, birdlike, around lamps in the Indian dusk. (S 136)

The story strongly suggests a link between the son and the moth, especially since he has mentioned a "great Oriental moth" in his delirium before death (*Attacus* moths are indeed found in Asia and are among the largest Lepidoptera in the world (Wat75 165)). It is appropriate that the transformation into a moth here involves reaching "the limit set <...> by God," in contrast to the earthly limits that Nabokov associates with lower dimensions (S 136). Nabokov of course does not invent the metaphysical associations of the butterfly. The ancient Greek word *psyche* referred to Lepidoptera as well as to the soul, and the Greeks capitalized on this lexical relationship in art (Joh99 32). I argue that Nabokov associates the butterfly or moth with death precisely because he views death as a dimensional transition, and the butterfly or moth as an emblem of a transition into a less restricted dimensional experience. The best evidence for this assertion comes from Nabokov's tendency to use butterflies in scenes where characters consider or succeed in breaking free from limitations of their physical immobility (which may be associated with lower dimensions—cf. the point and line beings in Flatland). The protagonist of "The Aurelian," a work filled with metaphorically-potent butterflies pinned beneath glass, attempts to exit his mundane and confined world to undertake a far-reaching butterfly-hunting expedition. In "Cloud, Castle, Lake," a moth "dash[es] about the ceiling" of a room in an inn where the group stays prior to Vasiliy Ivanovich's attempts to break free from

his obligatory trip (S 434). And Barabtarlo has the following to say about the moth whose escape coincides with Cincinnatus's execution in Invitation to a Beheading:

> Judging by the brief but precise description, one can assume that the insect is a female of the Emperor Moth, *Saturnia pavonia* Linnaeus, the largest European moth, whose cocoon, most curiously, has an "exit-only" trapdoor that allows passage for the emerging moth but does not let parasites in. <...> The moth frees itself from Rodion's clumsy clutch, frightening him to death, and alights beside Cincinnatus's cot, unnoticed by the jailer. When minutes later Cincinnatus leaves his cell, which has already begun to crumble, he quickly reflects that come night the moth will fly away through the window that Rodion has shoved out, grating and all, with his broomstick. (Bar93 28)

Thus in addition to capitalizing on the dimensional image of flight by using Lepidoptera in scenes of death, Nabokov (notwithstanding Nabokov's claims that the use of the butterfly as a symbol does not interest him)[107] seems to leverage the butterfly's freedom of movement (which could be called dimensional) to echo his characters' confinement and hopes of escape.

Perhaps the most compelling instance of a dimensional transition accompanied by a metaphysical one occurs in Nabokov's poem "The Ballad of Longwood Glen." Its protagonist, Art Longwood, travels with his family to a park—later to be named for him—for a picnic. When a ball gets stuck in a tree, Art climbs it (i.e. leaves the second dimension for the third) and disappears forever from the earth. The reader is given to know that Art has been assimilated into the "celestial crowds." But the characters in the poem fail to understand the metaphysical

[107] "That in some cases the butterfly symbolizes something (*e.g.*, Psyche) lies utterly outside my area of interest" (SO 168). However, Nabokov cannot reject the functional potential of certain images to call up associations, and his dislike for "symbols" seems instead to refer to the complete systemization of art into sets of unchanging representations.

import of the disappearance and turn the site into a tourist attraction. "The Ballad of Longwood Glen" was written in English and consists of thirty-two stanzas of rhyming couplets. It remains relatively unstudied, although Nabokov once called it "the best poem I have composed—far superior, for instance, to the *Evening of Russian Poetry*" (qtd in Boy91 304). In spite of this evaluation, the poem's simplistic tone and fairy-tale logic (in some ways reminiscent of the work of Nabokov's acquaintance Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel) may be the cause of the dearth of attention it has received. On the other hand, these clearly deliberate elements suggest that the pride Nabokov takes in the poem springs more from its thematic content than from its form. Writing to The New Yorker's fiction editor about the poem, Nabokov promises that "all kinds of interesting shades and underwater patterns will be revealed to the persevering eye" (qtd in Boy91 304). "The Ballad of Longwood Glen" is sufficiently rich in points related to the present discussion that I will undertake an extended analysis of several important stanzas.

1. That Sunday morning, at half past ten,

Two cars crossed the creek and entered the glen.

The first couplet places the events at mid-morning on a Sunday. This temporal orientation may be an indication that the events of the poem take place as the Longwoods are returning from church. If this is Nabokov's intent, then the metaphysical exit taken by Art later in the poem stands in contrast to the metaphysical explanations of reality offered by religion, an institution that Nabokov generally looks upon with disdain. The motion of earthbound vehicles, as we have seen in Laughter in the Dark and "Cloud, Castle, Lake," can be associated with

limited dimensionality.[108] It is notable that Art arrives by a two-dimensional form of conveyance along flat ground, and will be conveyed out of the poem by upward, three-dimensional, motion.

2. In the first was Art Longwood, a local florist,

With his children and wife (now Mrs. Deforest).

Stanza two introduces Art and his wife. Art's wife's name itself—Mrs. Deforest—foreshadows her complicity in the destruction of the tree, while "Longwood" anticipates the fact that Art will leave the world by climbing it. Art's first name brings to mind art itself, the ideal apprehension of which is the ultimate goal of Nabokov's fascination with various forms of perception (including dimensional perception) that bypass distortion. The fact that Art is a florist, and the consequent implication that he has special knowledge of plants as well as some aesthetic sensibility suggest that he may be suited to making a metaphysical journey involving a tree.

3. In the one that followed, a ranger saw

Art's father, stepfather and father-in-law.

The mention of the three "father" figures calls to mind the juxtapositional perspective enabled by dimensions. Humor comes from the fact that English has several terms to describe family relations, all constructed from the word "father," and the resulting repetition may only be appreciated by one who is in a position to apprehend multiple things at once.

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[108] It may additionally be noted that vehicular conveyance is sometimes associated with deficiency of vision. Pnin is unaware, while he is on a train, that he is travelling to the wrong destination (P 8). Humbert and Lolita's second cross-country car trip is marked by Humbert's frustration at his inability to establish the identity of the person who is following them. Nabokov uses an image of vehicular motion and limited vision to convey the potentially unsatisfactory outcome of Lolita's conversion to film: "it may turn out to be the swerves of a scenic drive as felt by the horizontal passenger of an ambulance" (SO 6-7).

The perspective of stanza three is that of a forest ranger. It is not clear whether this ranger is high up in a ranger station, but the observation of moving cars, if works like Pnin and Laughter in the Dark can be considered an indication, is often conducted from above in Nabokov's fiction.

Stanza six provides clues to Art's personality.

6. Silent Art, who could stare at a thing all day,

Watched a bug climb a stalk and fly away.

Although he is not a typical hyperconscious Nabokovian hero, this description of Art brings to mind both Nabokov's own entomological interests and his ability to be captivated by minute details of nature. The bug that climbs the stalk and flies away anticipates Art's ascent of the tree and the metaphysical transition that will accompany it. A similar transcendental implication is at play when John Shade contrasts the fate of a cicada and an ant in "Pale Fire." He recalls seeing "An empty emerald case, squat and frog-eyed, / Hugging the trunk; and its companion piece / A gum-logged ant <…>" (PF 41/L238-40). Alexandrov says of this passage: "The symbolism is clear—the cicada, or other insect with a comparable life cycle, has undergone a metamorphosis into another form of being and flown away, while the ant is entombed in a future bit of amber" (Ale91 197). I also noted above that Lepidoptera may be intentional emblems of dimensional (and therefore metaphysical) transitions.

7. Pauline had asthma, Paul used a crutch.

They were cute little rascals but could not run much.

Stanza seven emphasizes the immobility of Art's children. One has asthma and another uses a crutch—they therefore cannot run. Lack of freedom of movement—an attribute of the line

and point creatures of Flatland, and an element in "Cloud, Castle, Lake"—can be interpreted as a limitation that contrasts with the full freedom of motion provided by the higher-dimensional metaphysical world.[109]

10. And the grave green pilgrim turned and stopped,

The children waited, but no ball dropped.

In stanza ten, the term "green pilgrim" evidently refers both to Art's adeptness with plants as well as indicating that the transition he is about to make is a metaphysical one.

12. Now and then his elbow or knee could be seen

In a jigsaw puzzle of blue and green.

In the twelfth stanza, the "puzzle" of sky and foliage is reminiscent of Nabokov's statements on the dawning of consciousness through the development of the ability to differentiate between foliage and sky and a thing hidden within them, a process that Nabokov calls a

> <...> journey *into the next dimension*, the newly established nexus between eye and reachable object, which the career boys in biometrics or in the rat-maze racket think they can explain. It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind's birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird. (SM 298, italics mine)

14. What tiaras of gardens! What torrents of light!

How accessible ether! How easy flight!

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[109] There are some similarities to Marthe's children in Invitation to a Beheading: "lame Diomedon and obese little Pauline" (IB 99). Physical immobility is a running theme of that novel that, most profoundly, afflicts Cincinnatus and Quercus.

In stanza fourteen, Art seems to enter the celestial realm, where "flight" is "easy." I have earlier noted the link between flight (e.g. of a butterfly or the airplane in Laughter in the Dark) and the distortion-resolving manifold awareness provided by access to higher dimensions. Ether brings to mind the concept of the luminiferous ether, which, as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, was regarded as a medium that facilitated light's travel through space. Given that the ether was thought to occupy all space, the fact that it has been rendered "accessible" to Art implies that he has gained mastery over the spatial dimensions—another freedom afforded by Nabokov's metaphysical outerworld and a means for achieving manifold awareness.

16. None saw the delirious celestial crowds

Greet the hero from earth in the snow of the clouds.

Stanza sixteen mentions the "celestial crowds," apparently beings who populate the realm that Art enters. They recall the ending of Invitation to a Beheading, where Cincinnatus joins, "to judge by the voices, <...> beings akin to him" (IB 223). The position of the words "earth" and "clouds" at the tails of nearby anapests in this stanza suggests a deliberate contrast between images of two and three dimensions.

17. Mrs. Longwood was getting a little concerned.

He never came down. He never returned.

18. She found some change at the foot of the tree.

The children grew bored. Paul was stung by a bee.

19. The old men walked over and stood looking up,

Each holding five cards and a paper cup.

The next three stanzas underscore the incomprehension of Art's family. They mill around, oblivious to the metaphysical transformation that has taken over Art and waiting for him to climb down (fairy-tale logic allows for the preposterous idea that he is still searching for the ball, and so high up and obscured by foliage as to be completely invisible and presumably unresponsive to calls).

20. Cars on the highway stopped, backed, and then

Up a rutted road waddled into the glen.

In stanza twenty, attention is again returned to the limitations of vehicular motion. A car goes along, but evidently makes a wrong turn and has to back up. The vantage point here is suggestive of the elevated views of Pnin struggling with his car while lost, as well as the birds-eye-view narration during the car accident scene in Laughter in the Dark.

26. And from Cape Fear to Cape Flattery

Every paper had: Man Lost in Tree.

Stanza twenty-six conveys the failure of the masses to appreciate the metaphysical import of Art's disappearance. His transcendental experience becomes a four-word headline in local newspapers. The reference to the two capes, both of which are real places on opposite ends of the United States, speaks to the breadth of vision provided by the advent of a new dimension.

27. And the sky-bound oak (where owls had perched

And the moon dripped gold) was felled and searched.

In stanza twenty-seven, the image of the tree being cut down is presented alongside metaphorical descriptions of natural beauty, highlighting the tragedy of the destruction (and the ignorance of those who eradicate the "sky-bound" instrument of dimensional transition).

28. They discovered some inchworms, a red-cheeked gall,

And an ancient nest with a new-laid ball.

The inchworms in stanza twenty-eight recollect limited-dimensional motion. They may also be a clue about Art's fate: Inchworms are moth pupae, and as I have argued, moths are often associated with both dimensional freedom and metaphysical transcendence. The "new-laid ball" in the ancient nest may be an egg that recalls the ball Art was chasing when he climbed the tree—or is the ball itself, in which case the implication could be that Art's metaphysical transition has involved discarding worldly things. A possible allusion involving the ball may be traced to The Gift: Fyodor's book of poetry, whose theme is childhood (G 21), begins with a poem called "A Lost Ball" and closes with "The Found Ball" (G 40). If these two events emblematize the beginning and end of childhood in The Gift, the fact that Art has left the ball behind may indicate that his spiritual "childhood" (or perhaps, more accurately, his "larval" stage) has run its course and he has entered adulthood.

29. They varnished the stump, put up railings and signs.

Restrooms nestled in roses and vines.

In stanza twenty-nine the tree is cut down and varnished—a vulgar end. The site is turned into a tourist attraction.

32. Munch their lunches, look up and down,

Wash their hands, and drive back to town.

The poem closes with an image of dimensional limitation. The visitors *look* up and down, but do not actually *go* up. Ultimately, they wash their hands of the situation—a potentially

Biblically-suggestive image indicating a reluctance to acknowledge the presence of the metaphysical on earth.

"The Ballad of Longwood Glen" is a rich web of images that can be traced to Nabokov's interest in dimensional transition. It creates several contrasts between two-dimensional experience (associated with motion on flat ground) and three-dimensional experience (attained by climbing the tree). Art's motion into another dimension is accompanied by a metaphysical transition, analogous to scenes in Pale Fire, The Defense, and Glory where motion into a flat surface signals death or transformation.

Although dimensional imagery plays many roles in Nabokov's work, including as an indicator of value and an emblem of transcendence, I argue that it is primarily important in the context of distortion. Just as ideas must be redrawn in the one-dimensional terms of a text when literature is created, the "ideal" and "original" of life, undoubtedly multidimensional, has been absurdly redrawn in the three- or four-dimensional terms of the mortal mind and body. In both cases the possibility of adding a dimension implies the possibility of getting beyond the barricades and accessing a clear, meaningful view of life and art.

Conclusion

I have focused in this dissertation on pointing out the presence of distortion in Nabokov's aesthetics. But many questions regarding the nature, role, and extent of distortion remain unanswered. Distortion could, for example, serve as an avenue to study Nabokov's connections with other philosophies and artistic movements. A bolder and more knowledgeable researcher might explore links between containment and the two-world cosmology and metaphysical ideas of Russian Symbolism. I have avoided the question of Platonic idealism, although a study of the extent to which more formal notions of "ideals" play a role in Nabokov's conception of distortion would most likely be productive. (Indeed, Nabokov is known to use somewhat "Platonic" terminology, especially when describing the creative process (Ale91 29).) The question of whether distortion resembles Frank's notion of spatial form is another that remains to be answered. For those interested in such matters, conclusively establishing spatial form (inasmuch as it is considered by some to be a concern of Modernism) as a feature of Nabokov's work might fortify the Modernist designation that is sometimes applied to him. Much remains to be said about Nabokov's use of the implicative properties of distortion to sustain his metaphysical and anti-materialist views: For Nabokov, the presence of distortion in life serves as evidence for a superior outer level of existence, whereas materialist philosophy would detect in it only the chaos of an arbitrary universe.

The consistency with which Nabokov uses imagery of "clarity" in conjunction with the ability to perceive many things simultaneously—which I discussed only briefly in chapter four—could constitute an entire study. I stated that transparency is important to Nabokov as an emblem of optical superimposition—and therefore as an emblem of manifold awareness. Many details of

this general observation remain unexplored—for example, the question of Cincinnatus's criminal "opacity" or why Paduk, at the close of Bend Sinister, protects "his dimming face with his transparent arm" as Krug tries to attack him (BS 240). The ultimate structure of this dissertation has compelled me to discuss separately the topics of transparency, blindness, physical barriers to vision, the advent of unrestricted sight as one achieves contact with the metaphysical, light, mirrors, and eyes. However, I suspect that a close examination could lead to the illumination of a single underlying "optical framework" that unites these. The researcher would most likely find, among many other interesting things, that Nabokov presents a spectrum, at one end of which distorted perception is associated with darkness, blindness, etc., and on the other, ideal or undistorted perception is connected to flawless vision. I imagine that scenes of imprisonment, death, dreams, and dimensional imagery would all find a comfortable place within such a framework.

Although memory is a tremendously important theme in Nabokov's work and has been studied extensively, it would be productive to examine in detail how memory facilitates the reversal of distortion. Alexandrov identifies in Nabokov's writing a

> <...> narrative tactic [that] puts the burden on the reader either to accumulate the components of a given series, or to discover the one detail that acts as the 'key' for it; when this is achieved, the significance of the entire preceding concealed chain or network is retroactively illuminated. <...> Since the conclusion that the reader makes depends on his retaining details in his memory, he appears to have an atemporal insight into some aspect of the text's meaning; he is thus *lifted out* of the localized, linear, and temporally bound reading process in a manner resembling the way characters'

> epiphanies remove them from the quotidian flow of events within the world of the text. (Ale91 7, italics mine)

Barabtarlo uses similar imagery of elevation to explain the effect of rereading:

> <...> from an upraised vantage point, [the reader] observes the novel's landscape—its thematic lines running lengthwise. The higher the elevation, the more of the layout becomes visible. At any given point the re-reader knows what will happen next and is therefore free to break or even reverse the illusory chain reaction of cause and effect <...> and study instead etiology of a higher order, where some plain-looking objects and events turn out to be markers that conspire to call one's attention to this or that detail in the master plan and, hence, to the master's invisible presence everywhere in the book. (Bar90 390)

I think it is telling that memory, and the fact that memory can be used to gain a better aesthetic sense of a work, lends itself naturally to the metaphor of dimensional perception. Memory could, in fact, be considered a sort of pseudo-dimension—a means to mentally create a view of the "landscape" of a work that resembles the juxtapositional point of view provided by elevation or other dimensional vantages.

Furthermore, the goal of rereading is to mentally reconstruct the initial instantaneous impression of a work by becoming so familiar with it that one is no longer confined to thinking about it in linear terms; and dimensions are themselves directly connected to overcoming linearity. I speculate that a study that addresses memory specifically as a phenomenon closely tied up with Nabokov's "dimensional" impulse would lead to many intriguing revelations.

Another lingering question about the nature of distortion in Nabokov's work is whether distortion itself somehow contributes to the creation of aesthetic value. Recall the "bridge scene" from Speak, Memory, in which Nabokov's interaction with General Kuropatkin is abruptly terminated, only to be picked up years later by Nabokov's father. It is hard to imagine that this pair of events would appear meaningful at all if they were *not* separated by the distorting forces of time and space. A related question is that, if distortion is a fundamentally an obstruction to aesthetic appreciation, why does Nabokov seem to deliberately create distortion in his work? He suggests that a good work—one that originates in an intense apprehension of an aesthetic entirety, is naturally distorted when the artistic whole is projected into the linear text. But in his writing he often withholds information from the reader so that certain plot points cannot be appreciated or understood until the missing details are provided later. This technique can be found in the opening pages of Ada, in which Van and Ada first realize that they are siblings (A 8). The details of their conversation and the route they take to deduce the fact are virtually impossible to decipher (and probably the cause of many a potential reader putting the book down forever) until the conversation is made clear several pages later by a more coherent account of the children's parentage. Another example is Humbert's discovery of an entry on "Quilty, Clare" in a copy of the book Who's Who in the Limelight from the prison library, an episode that is recorded at the beginning of Lolita, but whose many allusions do not become meaningful until the reader is made aware, much later, of Quilty's role in Lolita's destiny. Quilty's hobbies are listed as "fast cars, photography, pets" (AL 31): He will pursue Humbert and Lolita in fast cars and ask Lolita to take part in lewd photography while keeping her as his "pet."

Although the rereader of Lolita can recognize the ironic significance of Quilty's entry or, in general, can appreciate a story despite the distortion introduced by the linear text, a writer could conceivably offset the rereader's burden by presenting information in an order that explains it best. Nabokov might have, for example, introduced Quilty's Who's Who in the Limelight entry at the end of Lolita, where its relevance would be clear to the reader. Instead, Nabokov creates distortion by deliberately constructing convoluted narratives that cannot be appreciated on the first reading.

A possible explanation for deliberate distortion would be that Nabokov believes that the very process of reversing distortion is a source of aesthetic enjoyment. Humbert, for one, indicates that he has deliberately structured his monologue so the reader will feel the same retroactive illumination that he does upon realizing that Lolita's abductor was Quilty:

> I, too, had known it, without knowing it, all along. There was no shock, no surprise. Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment; yes, with the express and perverse purpose of rendering <...> that golden and monstrous peace through the satisfaction of logical recognition, which my most inimical reader should experience now. (AL 272)

However, the notion that distortion is the source of aesthetic enjoyment—rather than an obstacle to it—is drastically at odds with many overt statements Nabokov makes on the topic of aesthetics, including his metaphor of the painting and his desire to escape from time in order to apprehend the aesthetic content of life. I think it is more likely that Nabokov deliberately places obstacles between us and artistic appreciation in order to better acquaint the reader both with

the distortion that seems to inhibit experience at every turn, as well as with the possibility of seeing beyond it. In any case the scholar of Nabokov must be prepared for apparent paradoxes. Nabokov's worldview, I believe, is fundamentally similar to his aesthetic output: ideally instantaneous, and therefore inclined to distortion when it is explored in sequential terms. The best way to introduce Nabokov's philosophy would be to present a list of ideas, including, perhaps: timelessness, spacelessness, imprisonment, infinite consciousness, egolessness, and transcendence, and ask the reader to apprehend these things simultaneously, disregarding questions of cause and effect. In other words, the very texture of Nabokov's art and philosophy encourages us to wonder if there is indeed a "place"—a dimension, an otherworld or an outerworld, where all ideas and impressions are presented together and at once, undistorted and exquisitely meaningful, and if, by finding just the right way of looking at our world, we can reach it.

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