

DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

VILÁGOK ÉS MÁSVILÁGOK VLADIMIR NABOKOV MŰVEIBEN

SÁRDI RUDOLF

2013

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

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WORLDS AND WORLDS APART IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S FICTION

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

by Rudolf Sárdi

Worlds and Worlds Apart in Vladimir Nabokov's Fiction

A doctoral dissertation submitted to
the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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in 2013 Fall Semester

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Rudolf Sárdi

Budapest, November 15, 2013

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ABBREVIATIONS

Citations of Nabokov's writings are abbreviated in this dissertation as follows:

<i>Ada</i>	<i>Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle</i>
<i>AL</i>	<i>The Annotated Lolita</i>
<i>BS</i>	<i>Bend Sinister</i>
<i>Des</i>	<i>Despair</i>
<i>Gift</i>	<i>The Gift</i>
<i>IB</i>	<i>Invitation to a Beheading</i>
<i>LATH</i>	<i>Look at the Harlequins!</i>
<i>LL</i>	<i>Lectures on Literature</i>
<i>LRL</i>	<i>Lectures on Russian Literature</i>
<i>Mary</i>	<i>Mary</i>
<i>NWL</i>	<i>The Nabokov-Wilson Letters</i>
<i>PF</i>	<i>Pale Fire</i>
<i>Pnin</i>	<i>Pnin</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>Poems and Problems</i>
<i>RLSK</i>	<i>The Real Life of Sebastian Knight</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Speak, Memory</i>
<i>SO</i>	<i>Strong Opinions</i>
<i>Stories</i>	<i>The Short Stories of Vladimir Nabokov</i>

Citations of Brian Boyd's two-volume work on Nabokov are abbreviated as follows:

<i>AY</i>	<i>Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years</i>
<i>RY</i>	<i>Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years</i>

The bibliographical details of the works listed above can be found in the "Works Cited" section of this dissertation.

Acknowledgements

While completing a doctoral dissertation calls for untiring perseverance and the necessary passion for the subject-matter, it is a far cry from being the sole product of its author. It is for this reason that I should like to express my sincerest gratitude to the people who have helped me, supported me, and most importantly, encouraged me throughout a project, the completion of which was hindered by unforeseen circumstances at several junctures over the years. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr. Ákos Farkas, my indefatigable supervisor, who not only shared the best of his wisdom with me during long conversations, but also kept the fire burning with his undiminished enthusiasm and his anticipation of every upcoming chapter for inspection and then detailed discussion. His efforts in improving every bit of this dissertation have been not only herculean, but also beyond the call of duty. I gratefully acknowledge his endorsement of the project right from the onset and also his willingness to offer his guidance and critical comments, beginning with initial contacts in the early stages of conceptual inception.

Others who pointed me in the right direction were former professors and fellow-students in the doctoral program, all of whom gave me very useful feedback on certain chapters of the manuscript and helped me with their critical comments in eliminating my remaining mistakes despite the veritably subjective nature of our discipline. I am especially thankful to Professor Zsuzsa Hetényi of the Department of Russian Language and Literature, whose constant interest in the project and her critical advice on some of my individual publications has been a source of great encouragement.

My very special thanks go to the Goswami family, Betty, Panky, Neal, Nicole, and Nancy, in Bennington, Vermont, whose contribution to the boosting of my command of the English language a decade and half ago in America will – hopefully – be reflected in the language of the dissertation in hand. The long-lasting and deep friendship with them has always given me inspiration to bring this dissertation to completion.

I also wish to “tip my hat” to my closest friends, Eszter Lendvai, Ágnes Kiss and her family, and Veronika Szandtner for their camaraderie and record level of tolerance. My sincerest thanks go to my childhood friend Dávid Hábetler, who always shared his personal experience and insight with me whenever I was desperately in

want of sensible, yet not necessarily professional advice. The family you have formed encouraged me in my explorations.

In the very first place, however, I should have expressed my undying gratitude to my small family, especially to Mother and Father, my late Grandmother and my caring, nonagenarian Grandparents, for their undivided support, interest and love – an expression of these qualities comes hard and cannot be condensed in a single paragraph. Without them and without their personality-shaping opinions, I would have been unable to initiate and, years later, give the finishing touches to this extremely challenging, yet all the more stimulating, project.

Budapest, November 15, 2013

for Csöpi

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Scene

Vladimir Nabokov's fictional writings drew comparatively limited attention initially in the by now rich tradition of Nabokov scholarship. Much has been said and written about one of the most widely disputed figures of twentieth-century American and Russian literature, whose verbal pyrotechnics and stylistic extravaganza were, for a long time, viewed as the quintessence of a highly gifted and none the less eccentric *homo scribens*. Over the last three decades Nabokov scholars have established that style is only one important quality of the author's fictional universe; his writings, patterned ingeniously and with scientific precision, present us with insoluble mysteries and a secret knowledge that the author was reluctant to share openly with his readers. One commentator points out that "[s]tyle was ... Nabokov's *linguistic personhood*: because it allowed him to join within one created structure the natural world of precise scientific observation and the abstract world of metaphysics and consciousness, it was his pledge of immortality, his active participation in the patterns of divine mimicry" (Bethea 696). Indeed, style, for Nabokov, was a largely private matter, beyond which lay the unattainable secret of the concept that scholars have been closely examining and even more closely re-evaluating from time to time – that of the secret of what the author referred to as the "otherworld."¹

The title of this dissertation expresses the insatiable desire of its author to study this important and broad-ranging feature of Nabokov's works without reductively attempting to answer a single question or to scrutinize a single theme, many of which have formed the bases of earlier argumentations about the Nabokovian oeuvre. While scholars have been inclined to *solve* what is often regarded as the mystery (or rather, the mysteries) of the otherworld, it seems to me that the notion itself is indicative of several aspects hidden in the author's texts, by the use of which the otherworld resists a facile definition (or even a simpler circumlocution) and requires plentiful exemplification of its protean and ever-elusive nature, rather than a justification of its very existence. Instead of our embarking upon

¹ Over the past few decades, the concept of the "otherworld" has developed into one of the most characteristic and widely known features of the Nabokovian oeuvre due to the painstaking exegetical and analytical work conducted by Nabokov scholars. It is the centrality of this concept and its variants (to be discussed later) which justifies the absence of the quotation marks throughout the dissertation henceforth.

a quest for *the* solution, the concept of the otherworld raises questions and suggestions, which do not necessarily oblige the reader to procure one answer to a specific text. It allows them to discover the unusual richness and depths of Nabokov's works by sternly or lightheartedly drawing attention to the existence of *worlds* and *worlds apart*.

What this dissertation seeks to offer in the way of originality and freshness of interpretation is not so much the recapitulation or reworking of the otherworldly as a theme in Nabokov's writings, but the demonstration that the many variations and approaches to how the otherworld has been studied according to different literary schools and –isms can be harmoniously juxtaposed within a single logical discourse. While multiple sources, theories, and philosophies constitute the foundation of my work, it is far from being a long, rambling attempt to create a *mélange* of content gathered from these sources into unity. It does *not* undertake to arrive at a single definition of the otherworld, but endeavors to synthesize the miscellaneous and often indistinguishable theoretical frameworks into which the notion of the otherworld has been thrown.

Theories of typifying the otherworld have been bountiful: critics often deal with it as a notion in its own right, unanimously accepted and shared with other figures of Nabokov scholarship, and pay little attention to the specificities that *each* conceptualization of the otherworld might suggest. Instead of obstinately following any of the theories elaborated so far, my work will 'rehabilitate' the otherworld by emphasizing the unity that the many forms of the otherworldly theme can create. In this dissertation, I shall examine the otherworld through the amalgamation of the approaches as follows.

The otherworld can be considered (1) from the perspective of *metaphysics*, which grows out of the writer's private intuitions of 'the beyond' blended with elements of the *supernatural*; it might be also conceived as (2) a *textual zone* – awaiting discovery – whose narrative planes call to mind the existence of the real world and an imagined, unreal one; (3) it can imply the possibility that the otherworld, *as a realm of idyll and longed-for memories*, is only accessible with the help of one's extraordinary power of concentration and a command of one's mnemonic faculty; (4) the question of *morality* is also regarded to be a significant constituent of the otherworld, as Nabokov believed that certain forms of immorality (cruelty, political persecution, annihilation of human life, torture, and so on) are

incommensurable with the otherworldly existence of a paradisiacal nature; (5) and most importantly, it can be claimed that the otherworld is always accessible for privileged characters, who share some artistic or other affinities with the author, and can participate in near-religious moments of *epiphany* (often preceded by the sudden coalescence of seemingly unrelated details that Nabokov called “cosmic synchronization”) which directly leads to another plane of existence. Irrespective of what may be a malign and inappropriate systematization of the otherworld theories, my dissertation will claim that the world and the otherworld exist simultaneously, and the presence of the latter can also be felt and noticed in what one refers to as the *real* world. Only a synthesis of these conceptualizations has the potential to offer a solution that can patch up the differences in interpretation. Models of coherent discourse are a distinctive feature of the majority of doctoral dissertations, yet I will attempt *not* to emphasize the focus on the epistemological, methodological, and theoretical frameworks into which Nabokov’s works are often forcedly placed. It is for this reason that I choose to dispose of any strict conceptual or theoretical system founded upon ideas of center and hierarchy, similarly to Nabokov’s works, which are structurally *not* built around any center, and the impression of coherence in his writings is created by congealing fragments – either through the sudden convergence of details that Nabokov called “cosmic synchronization” or through the systematic collection of details – constituting the very heart of Nabokov’s works. Hence the absence of any self-defeating and subject-alien attempt at enforcing any systematic essentialism from what is to follow.

Some three decades ago the critical bibliography of the author still had some lacunae, and it seems that the immeasurable quantity of worthwhile writings provides compelling evidence that Nabokov criticism has developed into a high-powered growth industry in terms of the number of volumes, books, chapters, articles, and online sources. Nabokov’s massive literary output has spawned the greatest bounty of plausible interpretation ever since Pekka Tammi appreciatively classified him among “the most energetically studied modern American novelists” (13) of contemporary literature. This assessment was made in 1985, when the critical reception of the author’s vast textual corpus had as yet inspired a disproportionately more limited number of studies than today. With a literary career of over six decades, Nabokov earned his reputation as a writer of fictional and non-fictional works, a poet, a

dramatist, a chess-puzzle maker, the creator of the Russian cross-word puzzle, and a lepidopterist *extraordinaire*. All of these vocations and gifts of Nabokov's have led scholars to address novel questions and offer up new sections of commentary and bibliographical information about the intersections of his life and art. Nabokov's richly deserved nimbus now shines more luminously than before as the critical appraisal of his works today is comparable in size to his own oeuvre.²

Over the last six decades several critical perspectives have been offered in various attempts to understand better the Nabokovian text, but it seems that the most recent approach, according to which his fiction gravitates beyond the text toward an otherworldly dimension, has successfully (yet oftentimes irrationally) ruled out the orientations of the purely "esthetic" or the predominantly "ethical" Nabokov. In lieu of unjustly viewing the Nabokovian text in light of its "metaphysical" qualities alone, I claim in my dissertation that the earlier approaches are *not* incommensurable with the freshest scholarly findings. They add to the complexity of Nabokov's writings by allowing us to catch a fleeting glimpse of the meaning of existence through the discussion of the different qualities and variations of the otherworld. As hinted above, the dissertation will not attempt to define or strictly categorize this oft-debated notion. Instead, it will set out to demonstrate, through detailed illustration, its manifold nature and investigate its evolution from the early short stories to the writer's longer fictional works.

Considering the range of critical bibliography to date, it should not be surprising that scholars both in America and Russia have been searching for new directions and approaches to better comprehend Nabokov's curiously patterned and intricately designed fictional worlds. One set of questions that has preoccupied minds from the early beginnings of Nabokov scholarship is the tradition of positioning Nabokov in a socio-cultural context. Critical writings also addressed questions as to what literary or other movement Nabokov might have belonged to. Looking for literary affinities and influences has been the subject of ongoing debates, and attempts to establish him as a modernist, a post-modernist, or perhaps a metafictional writer

² For a descriptive enumeration of Nabokov's early American criticism, see Jackson R. Bryer's "Vladimir Nabokov's Critical Reputation in English: A Note and a Checklist." Pekka Tammi's *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics* discusses chiefly the Russian (and, to a lesser extent, the American) reception of Nabokov's works (10-15). Stephen Jan Parker's "Critical Reception" (67-75) is a particularly informative checklist covering the critical corpus on Nabokov's Russian and American periods alike. A recent and thus more complete (and further updated) book on Nabokov's works appears in Michael Juliar's *Vladimir Nabokov: A Descriptive Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1986).

without any strong period-affiliation are plentiful even today. Analogies between Nabokov and the great lions of modern literature have been discovered and expatiated upon at length. It appears that listing all the articles, publications, and books written about his works would be nearly impossible. Nabokov is indeed difficult to fathom and has been proven even more difficult to tag or classify.³

One of the most challenging tasks that commentators have faced so far in Nabokov criticism is the establishment of the author's proper place in the literary canon. The question whether Nabokov should be considered as a star in the modernist or postmodernist firmament is an immense and contentious issue whose discussion is beyond the scope of the present work. It seems probable that he was an early postmodernist in American literature; Brian McHale, for example, argued that there were two Nabokovs, a modernist and a postmodernist. He added that "[t]he crossover from modernist to postmodernist writing also occurs during the middle years of Vladimir Nabokov's American career, specifically in the sequence *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), *Ada* (1969)" (18). Although this statement is among the first and most frequently cited ones in Nabokov studies, it is essential to remember (and most critics would concur with this) that classifying Nabokov is nothing but officious academic pigeonholing (especially now that the very category of postmodernism has come to be regarded a self-contradictory and somewhat passé). In addition to Brian Boyd, D. Barton Johnson, Gennadi Barabtarlo, whose devotion and widely recognized critical writings about Nabokov have been known and digested by generations of scholars, several other names are at the forefront of Nabokov studies, including those of Vladimir E. Alexandrov, Pekka Tammi, Ellen Pifer, Charles Nicol, John Burt Foster, Jr., Maxim Shrayer, Galya Diment, Julian Connolly, and a virtually endless list of names, many of whom are documented, highly praised or invoked in one way or another in this dissertation (see also the bibliography at the end of this dissertation).

It is beyond the shadow of a doubt that Nabokov's texts offer a bewildering variety of readings, and the recent developments in the field have stimulated intense discussion in several forums of scholars representing different approaches. Since the author's death in 1977, the focus (or rather, the foci) of Nabokov criticism has shifted

³ Maurice Couturier's thought-provoking essay, "Nabokov in Postmodernist Land" (*Critique*, 34:4 (1993), 247-250), should serve as a point of departure for all Nabokov scholars with a flair for categorization.

from the traditional modes of interpretation (that is, the esthetic and ethical preoccupations) toward the metaphysical, which is primarily concerned with the investigation of the author's otherworldly view. It would be imprudent to claim that any single critical school can hope to capture all aspects of the output Nabokov left to posterity; yet the concept of the otherworld has functioned as a cohesive device in attempting to unravel one of the major challenges in the field. The "new vogue in Nabokov criticism" (Parker 124) has served as a hitherto untilled soil for the interpreters of his oeuvre, academic and otherwise, all of whom take the initiative to present provocative and fresh approaches in the direction of the metaphysical, which, according to Vladimir E. Alexandrov, is "inseparable from [Nabokov's] ethics and aesthetics" and "all three are best understood as names for a single continuum of beliefs, not for separate categories of Nabokov's interests" (*Nabokov's Otherworld* 5).⁴ In the chapters that follow I will investigate through the close-reading of short stories, novels and occasionally some poems the different manifestations and qualities of the Nabokovian otherworld as formal indices of his mature psychological, ideological, social, and literary views.

Evaluating Nabokov merely as a stylist would lead one to superficial conclusions about the relationship between Nabokov's literary worlds and his creative genius. One must recognize that the complexity of Nabokov's *oeuvre* reaches far beyond the playful invention of anagrammatic names, labyrinthine narrative structures, amusing instances of paronomasia, cross-linguistic puns, spoonerisms, neologisms, alternating points-of-view, doppelgangers and related forms of doubling, and the other components of his fictional universe. In an attempt to rebuff the erroneous designation of Nabokov as a "heartless puppeteer" and literary impresario, Dmitri Nabokov (1934-2012) writes that "[t]here are those who, like the late Edmund Wilson, with his imputations of *Schadenfreude*, consider Nabokov to have been ... aloof and indifferent to the misfortunes of his characters and of the world around him. Those who were closely acquainted with him know that nothing could be further from the truth" ("Nabokov and the Theater" 19). Oleg Mikhailov, who wrote the first Soviet note on Nabokov and prepared the first Soviet volume of his works, would deprive the author of his rightful merits in literature by arguing that Nabokov's prose

⁴ Interest in Nabokov's metaphysics has been shown by Sergej Davydov, D. Barton Johnson, Pekka Tammi, Julian L. Moynahan, Alfred Appel, Jr., and, in the beginning of the 1990s, Brian Boyd, and Vladimir E. Alexandrov, both of whom have published pioneering interpretive works formerly lacking in Nabokov criticism.

is mainly a depository of “‘hoaxes, a play of imaginary hallucinations ... parodies ... literary crossword puzzles’ ” (qtd. in Zverev 298). Pekka Tammi claims that there is “an apparent need in Nabokov scholarship of comprehensive studies concentrating on the artistic system underlying individual texts” since too much emphasis has been laid on the process of annotation in Nabokov’s writings in an attempt to spell out “local textual problems” (14). These “local textual problems” are to be held partly responsible for the extolment of Nabokov as an excellent stylist at the expense of recognizing his genuine art influenced by his metaphysical view.

Solving a conundrum or two in, say, *Lolita*’s ostensibly uncomplicated plot, will not bring the “enchanted hunter” of the scattered clues to the real revelation which Nabokov was loath to share with his readers. In one of his “strong opinions” Nabokov concluded: “I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work in his turn – so much the better. Art is difficult. Easy art is what you see at modern exhibitions of things and doodles” (SO 115).⁵ In this oft-quoted statement the author does not go so far as to specify how the reader should attempt to grasp the complexities of his difficult art, but one thing we know for certain is that the solution – if any – emanates from the precise details, which Nabokov had the mastery to shroud in mystery. It is also a well-documented fact that Nabokov, as a professor, encouraged his students to pay attention to the smallest details, as “[o]nly myopia condones the blurry generalizations of ignorance” (SO 168). Julian W. Connolly writes that Nabokov took keen interest “in the way individual consciousness perceives and transforms experience, [and] he remained devoted to the belief that a central concern of this consciousness should include concrete, sensual experience itself – textures, smells, fine gradations of color” (*Nabokov and His Fiction*, 4). It is his alertness to consider

⁵ The difficult nature of art certainly does not originate from Nabokov. Some predecessors and coevals of his are as follows: “Beauty is difficult, Yeats’ said Aubrey Beardsley / when Yeats asked why he drew horrors / or at least not Burne-Jones / and Beardsley knew he was dying and had to / make his hit quickly ... / So very difficult, Yeats, beauty so difficult,” writes Ezra Pound in *The Pisan Cantos* (80.525). Joseph Conte notes that “Pound does not equate beauty with the elegant, the harmonious, or the mellifluous; but rather with the difficult, the discordant, and even the contentious. *The Cantos* are difficult; but they are also beautiful” (“The Smooth and the Striated,” 62). William Carlos Williams also proclaimed in *Paterson*: “Rigor of beauty is the quest” (Book One, Section One). “Beauty is difficult” is a truism Nabokov borrowed from the High Modernist credo of the 1920s. As for the work-value of difficult art: cf. Joyce’s remarks on the thousands of hours he spent working on *Ulysses* and, especially, on *Finnegan’s Wake*. The Hungarian poet, Mihály Babits, also remarked: “Whatever is beautiful is difficult; the material resists” (“Ever-blue sky beyond the clouds”) [“Ami szép, az nehéz; az anyag ellenáll” (“Örökké ég a felhők mögött”); translation mine].

the minutest and most life-like attributes of his surroundings that provides a unique approach to the representation of his experiences.

When asked in an interview about the motivating force behind any one of his books, Nabokov meaningfully answered: “For the sake of pleasure, for the sake of difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I have no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions” (SO 16). These riddles are waiting to be discovered by the attentive reader, but, after all, it is not the individual solution of single details (which might offer partial gratification to the uninitiated) that brings the reader closer to a longed-for revelation. As V., the protagonist-narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* explains, “It is *not* the parts that matter, it is their combination” (165; emphasis added). In his afterword “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Nabokov dubs the aforementioned revelatory process as the “aesthetic bliss,” which he famously defines as “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art [...] is the norm” (AL 305); or, in simpler terms, as J. B. Sisson puts it: “aesthetic bliss” is “the total effect the writer’s works have upon the reader” (qtd. in Shrayer 18). Closely related to Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss” is the author’s distinctly personal definition of “inspiration” which appears in his earlier lecture, “The Art of Commonsense and Literature”:

[I]t is like a jigsaw puzzle that instantly comes together in your brain with the brain itself unable to observe how and why the pieces fit, and you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic, of some inner resurrection, as if a dead man were revived by a sparkling drug which has been rapidly mixed in your presence. This feeling is at the base of what is called inspiration – a state of affairs that commonsense must condemn. (378)⁶

It is this combinatory ability that helps the reader disclose Nabokov’s “inbuilt *poetics*” (Tammi 1; emphasis in the original) and that constitutes the framework of a whole gamut of seemingly disjointed details, the several perennial thematic dominants, as well as the stylistic and structural components, all of which are considered so-called “surface elements” in Nabokov’s fiction. Only a profound

⁶ Nabokov’s view on the relationship between parts and wholes is relevant to Gestalt psychology, according to which “a structure, configuration, or pattern of physical, biological, or psychological phenomena [is] so integrated as to constitute a functional unit with properties not derivable by summation of its parts” (*Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*). According to Gestalt theory the human brain is holistic and has the shape-forming capacity of recognizing whole forms rather than a collection of separate figures constituting the whole.

understanding of this combinatory process will allow us to view Nabokov's worlds in their entirety, as unified, synchronous wholes.

In agreement with the opinions formulated by Vladimir E. Alexandrov, Julian Connolly, Maxim Shrayer, J. B. Sisson, D. Barton Johnson, Ellen Pifer, Pekka Tammi, and other lesser commentators engaged in Nabokov's metaphysics, I am less inclined to acquiesce to the view postulated by critics who do not at least acknowledge a clearly perceptible link between the author's art and his *sui generis* faith in metaphysics.⁷ To my mind, classifying Nabokov chiefly as a writer of metafiction is as faulty as examining his *oeuvre* on the basis of its having been "constructed," for which reason readers of traditional, realistic novels are often inimical to him. With this claim I do not suggest that Nabokov's status as a writer of predominantly metafictional pieces is completely erroneous (though several of his novels tend to openly comment on their own fictional status), but it would be a mistaken view to discard in my analysis the author's strong conviction in the transcendental, which enabled the author to expatiate upon the possibilities of the beyond.

My main interest in this dissertation will be to arrive at a mode of reading Nabokov's short fiction and novels by intertwining biographical elements with his poetics and metaphysics, without the combination of which his fictional worlds, as well as his seminal and ubiquitous theme of the otherworld, would prove meaningless. In approaching this edifice, I shall choose as the primary subject of this study Nabokov's prose fiction, which foregrounds the presence of his otherworld to a much larger extent than his dramatic, lyrical, and non-fictional writings.⁸ The scope

⁷ I shall refrain from overusing Alexandrov's term of "sui generis faith in metaphysics" in relation to Nabokov, as my claim is that the otherworld cannot be attributed to one reason or two, but to a combination of perspectives and approaches that no single critical school can fully encapsulate. Of course, this is not to undermine Alexandrov's postulation, which is incorporated into the present dissertation as one important rationale behind the intimations of the otherworld of Nabokov's works.

⁸ Although Barry P. Scherr (1995), Julian Connolly (1991), and J. B. Sisson (1994) have recently identified the otherworld as a principal thematic dominant in Nabokov's poetry, the number of critical articles focusing on the author's verse is still fairly scanty. It is now commonly believed that Nabokov's poetry is nearly as successful in providing an open expression of the author's otherworldly view as his oft-discussed fictional writings. While it is correctly assumed that the otherworld figures noticeably large in Nabokov's poetry, sustained interest in the analytical treatment of his poems has only been available since the early 1990s. Simultaneously with the critical recognition of Nabokov's poetry, the first otherworld conference was organized in Moscow in 1990. During the decades that preceded these two groundbreaking "discoveries," both themes (that of the author's verse and the omnipresent theme of the otherworld) had been undeservedly overlooked, particularly the correlation between the two. The hitherto insufficient analysis of how the otherworld is manifested in Nabokov's poetry will drive me to make occasional references to the poems whose understanding is relevant for

of this dissertation and Nabokov's vast literary output has prevented me from undertaking an all-encompassing examination of the Nabokovian *oeuvre* (this task has already been taken up authorities such as the early biographer-commentator Andrew Field and lately Brian Boyd). In order to argue convincingly for how the variations of the Nabokovian otherworld figure, I will subject to intense scrutiny two short stories ("The Return of Chorb" and "Terra Incognita") and three novels (*Pnin*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Lolita*), trying to demonstrate the complexity of the ways in which the author introduces and further cultivates his vision of the otherworld.

My approach to the short stories has been influenced by Shroyer's unique interpretation, which considers the otherworld to be a "depository of idealized memories of things unattainable or lost" (*The Worlds of Nabokov's Stories* 22). In the beginning, the focus of my attention will be exclusively confined to early short stories, which, as opposed to the recognizably self-sufficient and convoluted worlds of the author's longer prose fiction, aptly illuminate how Nabokov foregrounds the model of the otherworld within a tight unity of time and action. I believe that the examination of the two short stories will serve as an overture to help comprehend the more intricate otherworldly patterns found in Nabokov's Russian and American novels, especially in *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada*. In a discussion of the English short stories, Barabtarlo was right in observing that "his short story often being to his novel what the etude is to the concerto: a different modus of artistic expression, not a small-scale version" (*Aerial View* 103).

Chapter 1 offers a brief commentary on Nabokov's short stories from a broader perspective, while the subsequent chapters set out to accomplish two main objectives. Chapter 2 approaches the otherworld from the point-of-view of metaphysics, the underlying theme behind "The Return of Chorb." In Chorb's story of quest, which is also a cautionary tale about the irretrievability of the past, the mythical otherworld appears as a realm of idealized memories, and only the act of remembrance can help the protagonist embrace some beautiful moments of the past. This analysis is built on the central idea that the otherworld is a realm inhabited by the living (cf. Alexandrov, Shroyer, *et al.*) who descend into its fissures in order to relive magically the past and recollect memories, all of which, however, turn out to

my rendering of the Nabokovian otherworld. It is, however, not the aim of my dissertation to treat Nabokov's poetry in depth.

be ill-fated attempts to recollect the special moments of earlier bliss. Chapter 3 continues with a discussion of world-fashioning, exemplified in the short story “Terra Incognita,” which provides an important model of dialogue that the writer establishes between physical geography and the imaginative text. In this story, where the otherworld appears as a textual zone awaiting further explorations, I will argue that Nabokov places emphasis on the deliberate obfuscation of the story’s ontological planes by fashioning two geographical locations that are clearly set against one another, yet gracefully dovetail at the same time. I will then go on to conclude that the increasing complexity of the intertwined fictional worlds in Nabokov’s stories creates the image and the impression of an otherworld that calls attention to their own fictionality and also manages to examine the relations between life and death and the vanishing borderline between these two plateaux of existence.

In *Worlds in Regression*, D. Barton Johnson advocates the view that “there exists, beyond the scope of the intellect another, more real world, and that what man sees before him is but a shadow and echo of that true reality” (3). This statement will gain more validity and clarification in my reading of *Invitation to a Beheading* and provide a point of reference in the case of *Pnin*, whose metaphysical orientations have been long recognized by critics as being the most salient examples of otherworldly variations. The aim of Chapter 4, with *Pnin* in its nucleus, is to demonstrate, through a fine-grained analysis of the novel, that the author’s ethics, aesthetics, politics and metaphysics (four central domains, each of which would deserve a massive multi-volume treatise) are inseparable from one another, as they all gravitate toward the conception of an otherworld that is only accessible to the most favored Nabokovian characters. I shall claim that one’s attempt to remember the past (and to constantly refuse to engage in the act of calling to mind its manifold details, since the past is also a storehouse of soul-destroying memories and sentiments related to the death of our beloved) might have played a leading role in his fashioning of the otherworld in *Pnin*.

Among the novels under discussion, *Invitation to a Beheading* will be in the focus of my interest in Chapter 5, since this is one of Nabokov’s early Russian novels where the theme of the otherworld looms significantly large. I will claim that *Invitation* is far from being an unfathomably self-referential system or a predominantly political novel as opposed to a work of art dealing with moral and ethical questions. There is a complicated interplay among all these individual

approaches, pointing to a higher, transcendental and immaterial universe, that is to say, the omnipresent notion of the otherworld, whose complexities and intricate patterning only becomes comprehensible if the seemingly insignificant, minute details of the work are closely examined. Crucial to this chapter will be Nabokov's private intuitions about the existence of the otherworld, but quasi-political and moral questions will also be pondered on at length.

Chapter 4 focuses on a multiplicity of otherworldly variations in *Pnin*, an outwardly comic account of the adventures of an absent-minded Russian émigré professor in the United States, but, in actual fact, the novel is less of a lighthearted commentary on exile than a grave account and a relentless quest for the beauties of the otherworld amidst the horrifying circumstances of Nazi concentration camps. Instead of simply approaching the novel as an emblematic work of exile, I will continue to argue that many of the ideas developed throughout *Pnin* – moral, artistic, metaphysical – are closely interconnected with one another and gear towards the oft-cited question of the otherworld in varying contexts. I begin by establishing the claim that *Pnin* provides a meticulous description of the mental excursions – visions, to be more precise – that Pnin is submitted to whenever he is overtaken by a strange cardiac sensation that allows the protagonist to consider the problems of death, consciousness and the irretrievability of time. To explore these issues at length, Chapter 4 of *Pnin*, the most meditative and descriptive part of the novel, will prove ideal for us to emphasize the role that Mira Belochkin – once Pnin's beloved, a Jewish woman who perished in Buchenwald – occupies in the protagonist's contemplation on past and present, forgetting and remembering. Notions that have been discussed in earlier chapters, including Nabokov's use of cosmically synchronized, epiphanic scenes to account for an otherworldly revelation, will be taken up afresh in my discussion of the ubiquitous squirrel theme.

Also, central to my analysis will be the manifestation of Nabokov's well-documented philo-Semitic sentiments and the exploration of the Jewish theme, whose essentials are expatiated on in Chapter 6. In keeping with my earlier argument, it remains outside the scope of this dissertation to subject to scrutiny the religious aspects of this fundamentally important Nabokovian concern. Instead, what interests me is finding adequate evidence that Jewish characters in Nabokov's works are the ultimate pariahs, as I claim in my earlier chapter, whose castaway status between one

world and another enables us to understand more of the world and of the possible existence of a metaphysical yonder world than ordinary, mundane characters.

In order to orient ourselves better in Nabokov's metaphysics and his belief in the transcendental, it is vital for us to recognize that the involuted formations, intertextual stratagems, compositional principles, and covert esthetic assumptions of the author's later American novels do not allow for a purely metaphysical approach. The shifting between various diegetic planes and "the fusion of the apparent contradictions of alternative realities" (Sisson 155) in *Pale Fire*, and the countless modes of mirroring, inversions, and duplications in *Lolita* have called for the narratological analysis of the novels' surface structure, but it would be impossible to recognize the value of his *oeuvre* had it not been for the author's "transrational awareness of the existence of other worlds outside mundane reality" (qtd. in Shroyer 18). It will thus be concluded that Nabokov's otherworld is primarily but not exclusively the product of his metaphysical convictions. This guides me towards believing that resorting to metaphysics *only* and overlooking the relevance of the syntactic and semiotic structures of Nabokov's works prevents us from understanding the hidden depths of his fiction. The chapters in this dissertation will therefore exhibit more than one approach depending on what seems most appropriate for the subject matter, but a preponderant part of them always reverts, to a large extent, to the dominance of metaphysics, which bears so extensively on the writer's works. Intimately related to the rationale of this dissertation, yet offering a perspective that differs from the previous otherworldly analyses, Chapter 6 will raise the question of hybridization in Nabokov's *Lolita* of how the Old World (Europe) and the New World (America) of the novel are synthesized – as opposed to being contrasted with one another – through the two main characters, and I will also attempt to illuminate the important role of doubling that figures throughout the work.

The question of philo-Semitism in Nabokov's works has, for a long time, stood in the limelight of scholarly attention, and will thus be taken up in the concluding chapter of the dissertation. While the section does not specifically concern itself with the analysis of any individual work by Nabokov, it is worth observing some of the author's private views and *sui generis* faith in the metaphysical from the vantage ground of religion. Certain biographical impulses as well as the era in which Nabokov became a prolific émigré author (that is, during the interwar years) call for

the discussion of the Jewish theme and thoughts on the Judaic afterlife (although besides Judaism other religious codes of belief have their own views on the post-mortem survival of the soul). It is for this reason that the chapter ought to be considered as a coda to the body of the present work, which seeks to unite Nabokov's ideas on metaphysics, personal intuitions, and the act of remembrance as staple features of the otherworldly variations introduced in the foregoing chapters.

Consequently, Chapter 7 seeks to study the presence of Jews both in the author's private life and its possible bearing on his fiction. The analysis of the Jewish theme will be preceded by a slightly drawn-out subchapter on the realm of esthetics, morality, and metaphysics, which are closely linked with Nabokov's use of Jewish characters, their relationship with art, and, most importantly, their ability to enter a transcendental state of heightened consciousness. By considering the recent and extensive biography-based research on the subject by Shalom Goldman, a subchapter is devoted to the possible impact of Jews in Nabokov's own life, which, in more ways than one, must have inspired him to take up Jewish-related questions in his fiction. Nabokov was personally affected by the persecution of the Jews, as his wife, Véra, was of Jewish extraction; thus, the author formulated his insights about the atrocities against the Jewry of the world. Nevertheless, I will argue that Nabokov's inclusion of the theme is not contingent on the author's life course; rather, the Jewish characters of his fiction enjoy a privileged position by having access to another dimension where they can take refuge during moments of spiritual revelation.

Toward a Definition of the Otherworld

In 1979, two years after her husband's death, Mrs. Vera Nabokov was the first to call attention to the pivotal, yet commonly misconstrued notion of the otherworld. Announced in the preface to Nabokov's posthumously published *Stikhi* (*Verses*, 1916), it is this brief and somewhat incomplete rendering of the concept that has assumed a principal position in Nabokov criticism:

I would like to call the reader to a key undercurrent in Nabokov's work, which permeates all that he has written and characterizes it like a kind of watermark. I

am speaking of a strange otherworldliness, the “hereafter” (*potustoronnost*), as he himself called it in his last poem, “Being in Love.” (3)⁹

The poem that Véra Nabokova identifies here (“Vliublennost” in the Russian original) appears in the author’s last completed novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), where “Nabokov refers to the work as a ‘philosophical love poem’ and suggests ‘the hereafter’ as a translation of ‘potustoronnost’” (Scherr 615).¹⁰ The Russian language, which is otherwise “comparatively poor in abstract terms” (*LL* 378), has produced a concept whose rendering in English has clearly challenged many a scholar. Alexandrov’s meticulous circumlocution expresses best what the term may have been meant to denote in Nabokov’s mental lexicon. It is “a noun derived from an adjective denoting a state that pertains to the “other side” of the boundary separating life and death” (“The Otherworld” 567)¹¹. Other plausible renderings of the term include the “hereafter,” “afterlife,” “another world,” and the “beyond,” all of which are only near-translations of a concept and a belief that Nabokov treasured dearly, and, as a recurrent trait of his writings, it has become *something* he could not openly share with his readers. Since no uniform English translation for “potustoronnost” has been established so far, I will use the three terms interchangeably in this dissertation, though I would like to suggest that the “hereafter” is the most adequate of all, and is also the author’s preferred translation of the Russian word. The word “hereafter” better expresses our spatiotemporal qualities about the realm beyond our perception (“here” can refer to momentariness in time, that is, “here” is analogous with “now,” “at this point,” while “after” is also a spatial and a temporal determiner).

In his essay, entitled “The Otherworld,” Alexandrov points out that it is hardly probable that Nabokov had no means available to expound his otherworldly views, since he was “an acknowledged master of three languages” (567). There is to be an

⁹ Since the overwhelming part of Nabokov’s works was dedicated to his wife Véra, I believe that no one is capable of rendering his works as truthfully as she does. Kuzmanovich writes that “none of Nabokov’s books is dedicated to a theorist of the otherworldly” (36).

¹⁰ Scherr quotes the poem’s last stanza where the paraphrase of “potustoronnost” appears: “I remind you that [being in love] is not wide-awake reality, that the markings are not the same ... and that, maybe, the *hereafter* stands slightly ajar in the dark” (*LATH* 25-26; emphasis added).

¹¹ Ellen Pifer notes that Johnson has provided a linguistic analysis of the word “potustoronnost” in his *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: “The etymological meaning of the derived noun form is [borrowed from the Russian adjective, *potustoronni*, which means ‘unearthly, supernatural’], roughly, ‘on-that-side-ness.’ Note that the demonstrative pronoun *tu* in the middle of the word is the accusative feminine form of *tot* (as in *tot svet* ‘that world’) which [is] in opposition to *etot* (as in *etot svet* ‘this world’)” (qtd. in “Shades of Love” 75).

apparent contradiction between Alexandrov's parenthetical remark and Nabokov's position on the use of language. Nabokov was once asked in an interview what he considered his principal failure as a writer. He responded: "Lack of spontaneity; the nuisance of parallel thoughts, second thoughts, third thoughts; *inability to express myself properly in any language* unless I compose every damned sentence in my bath, in my mind, at my desk" (SO 34; emphasis added). Language, however, is an inadequate tool to explicate his otherworldly orientations, since Nabokov's "beyond" is first and foremost concerned with the construction of images and only then with a way of expressing them with the help of language. In my opinion, the Nabokovian otherworld is a spatiotemporal concept whose understanding presupposes that the reader can rely on his or her vision (and physical perception) because Nabokov once revealed that "I don't think in any language. *I think in images*. I don't believe that people think in languages" (SO 14; emphasis added). It would be a highly plausible proposition to say that polyglot (but also bilingual) writers, who have the mastery of several languages at the same time, would be more likely to think in images than in (pre)verbal terms despite the idioms available to them. It is not atypical then that "bilinguals process even *language* input at some common semantic level 'below' or 'beyond' the language specific" (Beaujour 42). Johnson also mentions in a footnote to his introductory chapter of *Worlds in Regression* that "Nabokov's metaphor of the writer as a painter is not an idle one. The writer once reminisced 'I *think* I was born a painter ... and up to my fourteenth year ... I was supposed to become a painter ...'" (qtd. in Johnson 5). Therefore, it is more fitting to claim that Nabokov was not able to elaborate on his otherworld in his cryptic remarks (such as his perception of God) or his reply in 1972, following the publication of *Transparent Things* whose theme, he said, is "a beyond-the-cypress inquiry into a tangle of random destinies" (SO 194).

In a poignant discussion of his father's belief in the transcendental realm, Nabokov's son, Dmitri concludes that "he carried within him a knowledge of otherworldly truths to which others could not be made privy" (17). In a response to Johnson's interpretation of the otherworld, Boyd writes that "Nabokov was fascinated by the possibility of a beyond, and rightly felt it would make all the difference to our sense of our lives if we could know whether there is anything beyond. But he also knew that despite all his own searching he had no 'conclusive evidence'" ("Prologue: The Otherworld" 24). Nabokov's bewildering response to the question whether he believed in God was the partial unearthing of his inexpressible mystery (somewhat

less accurate than Alexandrov's bookish definition): "To be quite candid – and what I'm 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). Kuzmanovich also believes that this periphrasis is expounded in the author's general views on language and art: "how we learn to imagine and express things is a riddle with premises impossible to express and a solution impossible to imagine" (SO 142). God's existence, art, and language for Nabokov appeared to be indecipherable phenomena – mostly intuitions of the author's formulations of the otherworld – whose understanding lies beyond human perception.

Retreating into silence, scholars were long unprepared to talk directly about the problems surrounding the incommunicability of the otherworld in the corpus, which only becomes graspable once we have ruled out of our interpretive process the conventional overtones associated with the notion of the otherworld. The precise dictionary definition of the word will help us clarify why the traditional reading of the term proves inadequate in the Nabokovian context. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines it as "a world beyond death or beyond present reality." What the aforementioned detachment from the conventional nature of the term implies is that the Nabokovian otherworld seems to have no connection whatsoever with the "domain where the souls of the deceased dwell in traditional metaphysical systems" (Shrayer 21). Critical consensus has it that Nabokov's otherworld is *not* analogous with the traditionally conceived realm of the dead; however, some associations of it (as shown, for example, by Pifer) with the spectral world of ghosts and preternatural occurrences demonstrate that traditional notions of the otherworld ought not to be completely discarded. Nevertheless, *Invitation to a Beheading* opens with an epigraph – quoted earlier – by the fictional philosopher Pierre Delalande. It can be presumed that entering another state of higher reality is clearly an *escape* to another world, though in his foreword to *Glory*, Nabokov writes that "art" is not "an 'escape' ..., but relief from the *itch* of being" (10; emphasis added), which Sisson associates with the "finiteness of the human condition" (172). This other realm is made accessible only for his privileged characters aspiring to communicate with a transcendent, timeless, and non-material world that exists on a higher level of consciousness, above the

mundane world of day-to-day reality.¹² Nabokov posited that average reality, or the way we see the world around us, gives rise to “a reality of general ideas” and is rendered a “dreamy and unreal aspect” when “faked by a mediocre performer” (*SO* 118). It is these “general ideas” with which the Nabokovian hero is seldom endowed: the author always made sure to equip his main character with qualities which somehow transform him into an author-equivalent, and, as such, Humbert in *Lolita* is portrayed as a privileged figure whose intellectual standing, highly refined rhetoric and sophisticated literary tastes enable him to stand at a vantage ground from where to observe and deride the small-mindedness of the people surrounding him. I claim throughout my dissertation that positive and reticent characters (such as Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading* or Pnin in the eponymous novel) are in possession of an untellable secret knowledge that even their closest relatives are unable to unravel, as for example Fyodor’s father in *The Gift*:

It sometimes seems to me nowadays that – who knows – he might go off on his journeys not so much to seek something as to flee something, and that on returning, he would realize that it was still with him, inside him, unriddable, inexhaustible. I cannot track down a name for a secret, but I only know that that was the source of that special – neither glad nor morose, having indeed no connection with the outward appearance of human emotions – solitude to which neither my mother nor all the entomologists of the world had any admittance. (*Gift* 115)

Characters partaking of otherworldly experiences in Nabokov’s fiction do not necessarily die in order to submerge into the realm of the “beyond,” since dying provides no clearly defined passage to the land of the deceased. Carl R. Proffer asserts that “instead [it] has them shift to some other plane or mode of existence, from which they are able to observe and gently bear on the fates of the living” (“The Double Life of Vladimir Nabokov” 59). Zoran Kuzmanovich also concurs that the subject of death in Nabokov’s novels should only be treated parenthetically “[s]ince consciousness is unable to grasp the cessation of its functioning. ... Suffice it to say that Nabokov himself when he contemplated the otherworldly seemed to concentrate

¹² Also, one may easily agree that Nabokov’s privileged characters often bear a resemblance to his privileged readers in that both must be in possession of more than one language, and, as Beaujour points out, “[m]any of the novel’s [*Ada*’s] riches and much of its humor are hidden from the monolingual reader, who does not have access to the personal polyglot idiolect, sometimes referred to as “Nabokese,” which overarches and underlies the three other languages at the author’s command” (41).

more on the things of this world than on making of this life an Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter” (38). Critics correctly conjecture that only Nabokov’s privileged characters are allowed to take part in an otherworldly experience whenever the door of the “otherworld” is left “slightly ajar” (*LATH* 25-26). In many of Nabokov’s writings the characters believe that the dead may be “hovering over them, trying to communicate with them through the things of space and time” (Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada* 94). For example, Martin, the protagonist of *Glory*

tried to comprehend his father’s death and to catch a wisp of posthumous tenderness in the dark of the room. He ... even made certain experiments: if, right now, a board in the floor creaks or there is a knock of some kind, that means he hears me and responds. (17)

Or, by the same token, Sineusov, the narrator of the short story “Ultima Thule,” is addressing a letter to his dead wife in an attempt to reestablish the connection with her: “Are you able to hear me? That’s from a banal questionnaire, which ghosts do not answer” (*Stories* 510).

Dying is not a precondition to enter the otherworld; however, it undoubtedly is one possible way for a character to make his or her yearned-for escape in search of another plane of reality (Hugh Person in *Transparent Things*, Luzhin in *The Defense*, Pilgram in “The Aurelian,” and an infinitely long list could be presented). Boyd (1991) correctly posits that the reason why one cannot look beyond death and chance upon something akin to mundane reality is that life reflects only life and death is a step outside life (*Nabokov’s Ada* 88). Pierre Delalande’s and Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s exceptional characters convincingly support Boyd’s argument:

I know 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 the part of its surroundings, like a tree or a hill. One has to get out somehow, “but I refuse to see in a door more than a hole, and carpenter’s job” (*Delalande, Discours sur les ombres*, 45) ... 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. (*Gift* 310; emphasis added)

Ellen Pifer claims that Nabokov’s local landscape is inhabited by ghosts who are attempting to exert their influence upon the living. However, the realm of the supernatural in Nabokov is not to be compared to the gruesome ways earlier writers of horror stories addressed the topic, and since all the nightmarish human flaws (guilt,

hatred, despair, and terror) are more often than not possessed by the living in Nabokov's novels, it would be pointless to look for "specter[s] of thought" among the dead. Pifer believes that it is the "most generous forms of human love" that "create a point of contact ... between the land of the living and the stylized representatives of immortality" ("Shades of Love" 76-77) and enables human beings to enter the strange realm of the hereafter. Sisson and Pifer agree that the inability to express love (either in the form of paternal or mature marital love) will prevent Nabokov's characters from taking part in otherworldly experiences: "In general, Nabokov's mediocre, despicable, or lustful characters engage neither in love nor in search for such clues, whereas his characters capable of love are almost always in some pursuit of a higher level of reality" (Sisson 169-170).¹³

In light of the above discussion, it can be established that designating the otherworld as "a world beyond death" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*) has proved unfruitful in our attempt to approach the notion from a traditional point of view. None of Nabokov's otherworlds are meant to represent the finiteness of human life and operate as a self-contained world beyond and outside our real-world existence, or a locus of no return; but, as Sisson contends, it always involves "some form of survival of consciousness after death" (qtd. in Shrayner, *The Worlds* 54). It should also be clear now that Alexandrov's rendition of the author's metaphysics, and, by extension, his otherworldly view, underscores the irrelevance to Nabokovian studies of the second half of the dictionary definition. In place of simply being "a world beyond present reality," the otherworld seems to "provide for personal immortality ... affect[ing] everything that exists in the mundane world" (Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* 5). It can therefore be concluded that the otherworld is not a self-sufficient realm detached from present reality, but that Nabokov's faith in the existence of the transcendental is to establish a perceptible link between our world and another reality, thus making the two worlds exist simultaneously.

Nabokov's "Sudden Flash": Some Words on "Cosmic Synchronization"

"Cosmic synchronization" is clearly the most fundamental element scattered throughout Nabokov's prose, though the term itself is first introduced in *Speak*,

¹³ See Sisson's list of love relationships in his essay, 169-170.

Memory. Paul. D. Morris convincingly demonstrates that its earliest and fullest expression germinates from Nabokov's poetic sources, which date as far back as the 1920s (*Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice* 115-119). Nabokov has been acknowledged for his verbal pyrotechnics and highly stylized novels, but his lifelong passion for Lepidoptera combined with a serious commitment to composing chess problems has inspired the most elaborately involuted patterns in his *oeuvre*. Nabokov's finesse in presenting arrangements of images in a skillfully orchestrated manner is a trademark of his works. The assertion that Nabokov's fictional worlds are not composed in the ordered linear procession of dates, places, and events, punctuating his own life and the lives he wrote about from birth to death is far from being a recent discovery. Nabokov's repeated invocations of "cosmic synchronization," both as a narrative technique and an organizing principle behind his works, will be illustrated through the discussion of selected short stories and the novels. Therefore, for the sake of brevity, and considering the fact that "cosmic synchronization" has been systematically treated by J.B. Sisson, I will only give a cursory introduction to the topic.

The Queen in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* memorably proclaimed that "[i]t's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards" (44). Readers have pondered the importance memory has in Nabokov's novels, because the recurring themes of the lost paradise and the beauties of childhood to be rediscovered in the minutest details form the hub of his works. He would have been the first to consent to the Queen's remark, for Nabokov's memory not only operates forwards and backwards, but is also capable of presenting arrangements of images which, at face value, create the impression of being composed of disparate elements and are seen to eventually coalesce in a unified, synchronous whole. It is this synchronicity, the opportune convergence of events that never ceased to fascinate the author – though the term "cosmic synchronization" only appears in his fictionalized autobiography –, which is reverberated similarly as "inspiration" in "The Art of Commonsense and Literature." It is worth taking a glimpse at Nabokov's explanation of "inspiration" in his *Lectures on Literature*.

In my example memory played an essential though unconscious part and everything depended upon the perfect fusion of the past and the present. The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire

circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner – who is already dancing in the open. (378)

The idea behind “cosmic synchronization” might be – somewhat distantly – related to Carl Jung’s theory of synchronization, and has numerous antecedents in world literature (one of the most memorable being “The Wandering Rocks” episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, whose 18 independent vignettes and one coda establish a synchronicity between the actions). Jungian synchronicity denotes the co-existence of past, present, and future “in a manner that is logically meaningful – but inexplicable – to the person or persons experiencing them” (web). Sisson compares the process of Nabokov’s “cosmic synchronization” to what Ezra Pound defined as an “image” in his manifesto, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”: “[a]n image is that which present an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” This is clearly related to T. S. Eliot’s remarks in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921):

When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (qtd. in Sisson 157)

While readers can encounter a plethora of instances of cosmically synchronized scenes in the Nabokovian *oeuvre*, it can be said that the technique the author uses is *not* without any antecedents in the High Modernist period. “Burnt Norton” in T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is an especially revealing example, in which a wealth of disjunctive details is captured and accumulated “[a]t the still point of the turning world” (“Burnt Norton”). Eliot hypothesizes that the past and the future are always encapsulated in the present, and it is impossible to separate them with any exactitude. So does the endless repetition of words reflect that time is infinitely circular, and only art has the ability to transcend the constrictions of the “still moment”: Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present. (“Burnt Norton”).

In calling attention to the fragmentary nature of modern culture, Eliot's poem offers a juxtaposition of random objects. Likewise, Nabokov's cosmically synchronised scenes are intended to accomplish something of a triumph over time. Nabokov's "cosmic synchronization" may also bring to mind one of Eliot's earlier observations with reference to the simultaneous existence of past and present, which he elaborated on in his landmark essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919):

[T]he historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (Eliot 38)

The organic unity of literary works has been a major concern in twentieth-century literature, especially for the modernists, and one way to achieve such unity was to bring together apparently unrelated, unpoetic elements in order to form synchronous wholes. Ezra Pound's poem "In a Station of a Metro" succinctly illustrates how diverse elements can be assembled to create what in the end becomes the "image": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough."

In this poem Pound superimposes images (the crowd and the bough) so that the perceiver sees them as a single, unified image. In this way, the pallid, hence somewhat ghostly, faces in the crowd become beautiful, like flower petals on a rainy day, while the petals become faces in the crowd. It is this new combined image that Pound calls the "apparition" – a term vaguely suggestive of the same uncanny effect that one associates with Nabokov's own conception of the otherworldly. While Nabokov's notion of "cosmic synchronization" evokes the holistic experiences of Pound's and Eliot's poetry, a better comparison would be with William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) that Sisson describes as the "sudden growth" extending "to a universal poetic awareness" (157). Nabokov's consuming zeal of the works of William, the elder brother of Henry James, is also an expression of the author's friendly reception of a possible kinship as opposed to the stringency and contemptuous disrespect he demonstrated toward others, including the novelist James himself. It is a widely known fact that as a young man, Nabokov had been an avid reader of William James's works and had thought highly of him, but "never grew to like the novels of ... Henry" (Boyd, *RY* 91). It is beyond the shadow of a doubt that

the “problems of reason and faith, human immortality, refuting the rational scientific arguments of the time which ruled out the possibility of infinite consciousness” (“The European Literary Tradition” 33) represented major realms of interest for both James and Nabokov. Immortality and the otherworld are strongly connected to each other, and it seems likely that the “beyond” for Nabokov can be traced back to James’s lecture on human immortality. Owen Flanagan also writes that in “Human Immortality”

James suggests that we assume that “Thought is a function of the brain” (ERM, 81). He then goes on to argue that his assumption creates no obstacle to the doctrine that our conscious self “may still continue when the brain itself is dead” (ERM, 92). In effect, a science of finite human mind, which assumes that consciousness is functionally linked to the brain, is compatible with the thesis that after the functional link between brain and consciousness ceases to exist due to bodily death, consciousness may continue to exist for all eternity. (27)

Of an equally paramount interest is James’s aforementioned *Varieties*, which discloses the predominance of mystical experiences and his conviction that mediumistic and supernatural abilities are needed to justify the workings of the universe. He advocated the idea that spiritualism and associationism (that is, the idea that one experience leads to another as if it were a chain of events) are best understood as schools supplementing one another, though, if separated, they are too simple. In *Varieties*, James compares the mystical experience to “windows through which *the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world*” (339; emphasis added), similarly to Nabokov’s cosmically synchronized scenes, which allow the reader to gain insight into the glimmerings of a metaphysical otherworld through a variety of means, which will be discussed in the chapters below.¹⁴

This is also to demonstrate that Nabokov’s cosmically synchronized scenes are not without antecedents in world literature, and the Modernist period proved particularly abundant in its attempts challenging the traditional notions of the linear progression of time. Joseph Frank’s *Spatial Form in Modern Literature* (1945) concerned itself with a radically changed literary formalism, according to which narrative structure in the twentieth century collapsed, and moments of time began to replace the logical succession of events, typical of what is designated as the “story.”

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of religious experience and trance-like events, see William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Frank's essay has been considered as an important depository of ideas linking literature with other forms of modern art (for example, visual arts), its relevance here lying in the fact that his innovative forms were composed of synchronic juxtapositions instead of temporal development. It can be noted that under the model of spatial form, time and structure violently collapse inward and, as a result, fashion a literary space from a single point of memory. It is this distinctive simultaneity of events – caused by the “implosion” of time and structure – that resembles the “still moments” during which Nabokov captures images dexterously juxtaposed to one another and creates the sensation of simultaneous actions and movements in a newly devised time-space continuum. Frank discusses several antecedents of how his non-linear narrative form had been already utilized by Joyce (*Ulysses*), Eliot (*The Waste Land*), Proust (*In Search of Lost Time*) and numerous other authors, causing difficulties for the reader to identify when and how the narrative comes to a closure.

Speak, Memory can be regarded as the main storehouse of “cosmically synchronized” scenes among Nabokov's fictional and non-fictional writings alike. In spite of the author's label as “strictly autobiographic,” *Speak, Memory* significantly differs from straightforward, traditional memoirs composed of chronologically ordered, continuous narrative passages. In swerving away from traditional fictionalizing modes, Nabokov here utilizes devices indicative of fictional works largely antithetical with autobiographies. The art of “cosmic synchronization” is in keeping with the numerous other techniques that often require readerly interaction with Nabokov's works. Alexandrov writes that “the moment when fragments coalesce transcends the linear dimension of time inherent in the act of reading, [thus] the reader has the impression of being lifted out of time” (47).¹⁵ In Nabokov's fiction, especially in the short stories, “cosmic synchronization” is often connected with epiphanic moments of bliss and freedom experienced by his most privileged characters (those who are in easy reach of the transcendent are highly intelligent or sensitive artists or *artists manqués*, psychologically disturbed individuals, who live in their intricately patterned, strangely solipsistic worlds, imperceptible to the uninitiated “lesser” characters). On a side note, it might be of some relevance to recognize – à

¹⁵ In “Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Autobiography” Galya Diment frowns upon those critics who consider *Speak, Memory* as a work of fiction, mere story-telling, and dramatizing. She concludes that “[w]hat Nabokov made of it was a highly crafted and introspective autobiographical narrative which he himself described in an unpublished introduction to *Conclusive Evidence* as “the meeting point of an impersonal art form and a very personal life story.” ... Like Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* is a work of heightened artistic self-consciousness” (37).

propos of Nabokov as a polyglot writer – that almost all main characters in the Nabokovian text have a native command of several languages at the same time. Elizabeth K. Beaujour also acknowledges that “[n]one of the narrators of Nabokov’s English works are monolingual native speakers of English either, and most, except for poor Pnin, are fluent polyglots – a ploy that ‘motivates’ the elaborate stylistic idiosyncrasies of Humbert Humbert and his fellows” (42). The author’s own instantiation of “cosmic synchronization” appears in the novel as he provides the reader with the details of how his first poetic piece came into existence:

[I]n a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one’s position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo’s natural members. Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, and old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cindergray 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 – *all forming an instantaneous and transparent parent organism of events*, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus” (*SM* 169; emphasis added).

In *Invitation* Cincinnatus’s ability to conjoin seemingly unrelated, multifarious sensory perceptions in a simultaneous fashion aptly mirrors the protagonist’s gift for “cosmic synchronization”:

I am not an ordinary – 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 – No, the secret is not revealed yet – even this is but the flint – and I have not even begun to speak of the kindling, of the fire itself (52).

One may hope that discovering the approach of “cosmic synchronization” will provide a better understanding of the poet, who positions himself fixedly at the center of things – in the *nucleus*, that is. Eliot’s famous concept of unified sensibility, Joseph Frank’s spatial form, contrapuntal narration in which images are juxtaposed at nearly the same time are characteristic features of the Modernist school, especially in relation to Eliot or Huxley and many another who were haunted by the same *Zeitgeist*.

It is worthwhile to look at Huxley's reworking of the theme in *Point Counter Point*: "The abrupt transitions are easy enough. All you need is a sufficiency of characters and parallel, contrapuntal plots. While Jones is murdering a wife, Smoth is wheeling the perambulator in the park (Chapter XXII 296).

It is this instantaneous amalgamation of temporal sequences, that of present phenomena and past memories resulting in a "sudden flash" (LL 378) that aptly defines the concept. Not surprisingly, "cosmic synchronization" is often equated with some kind of a unified vision that helps to create an effect of instantaneity so abruptly (hence the "sudden flash") that past, present, and future appear to come together in a single unity. Sisson tabulates three simple devices, which he considers to be a *sine qua non* of Nabokov's "cosmically synchronized" worlds. These include the catalogue of remote activities, the juxtaposition of contrasting images, and the metaphors of metamorphosis, which is also emphatically present in the famous lotus sequence of Eliot's "Burnt Norton." In this scene, the sunlight radiates upon the dried-out desert, and the poem, later on, ends in a moment of happiness, indicated by the hidden laughter of children in the foliage. This moment of illumination is preceded by the lotus pond scene, which contains a long series of juxtaposed images, captured in a single second:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.
The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
Appeasing long forgotten wars.
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars
Ascend to summer in the tree
We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars.
("Burnt Norton")

Only through the construction of this previously mentioned catalogue of remote devices can Nabokov's writings "stimulate in his reader an awareness of the process of cosmic synchronization, a pleasurable experience affording bliss," (Sisson 155) or

rather, the “aesthetic bliss” defined above.¹⁶ Kuzmanovich has some fine things to say about Nabokovian bliss: it is a “time-cancelling experience of oneness with sun and stone which makes of this world a grief-proof sphere where art and tenderness are the norm” (36-37). He also claims that his bliss of oneness is not necessarily the gift of ghosts, but “merely the pleasurable burden of feeling connected to the beauty and goodness of this world” (37).

Speaking of a “unified vision” with respect to Nabokov’s “cosmic synchronization” is perhaps not the ideal way to define this outwardly unproblematic, yet fairly complex process. In Nabokov’s case it may be more advisable to talk about “unified perception.” In order to demonstrate the validity of this, I will rely on Sisson’s example, in which he draws a parallel between Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Aleph” (1945) and John Shade’s poem “Pale Fire” in Nabokov’s novel of the same title. In Borges’s story, anyone who looks into a miraculous object can see the universe from every angle simultaneously, but in Nabokov’s poem “the mind not only sees everything in the universe but expands physically through time and space” (Sisson 158).¹⁷ It is this spatiotemporal nature of the author’s cosmically synchronized world that challenges the applicability of “vision” since the experiences that certain characters undergo do not only call for the visual but also for the physical perception of the world. Instead of analyzing the process of “cosmic synchronization,” Sisson uses “Pale Fire” to demonstrate the difference between the two types of perception:

I felt disturbed *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. (qtd. in Sisson 158; emphasis added)

¹⁶ For a detailed description of Sisson’s devices see his “Nabokov’s Cosmic Synchronization and ‘Something Else’” (155-177).

¹⁷ See also the woodcut print “Another World” (also known as “Other World”) of the Dutch graphic painter M.C. Escher (1898-1972). It depicts a cubical architectural structure, a five-sided chamber in which all the sides are interchangeable, allowing the observer to see a lunar surface, a lunar horizon, and cosmic space simultaneously. The work of art, painted in 1947, is noted for its focus on relativity, that is, how one object is seen in relation to another.

Synchronization is mentioned en passant in *Pale Fire*, in which fictional editor, Charles Kinbote, the self-styled commentator of Shade's poem, calls attention to the quaint simultaneity that takes place in the novel. The most revealing example of Nabokov's further experimentation with this simultaneity occurs in Kinbote's notes to *Lines 403-404*, where "time fork[s]" (PF 140) and the commentator commends his unique pattern of synchronizing scenes:

From here to line 474 two themes alternate in a synchronous arrangement: television in the Shades' parlor and the replay, as it were, of Hazel's (already adumbrated) actions from the moment Peter met his blind date (406-407) and apologized for having to leave in a hurry (426-428) to Hazel's ride in the bus (445-447 and 457-460), ending with the watchman's finding her body (474-477). I have italicized the Hazel theme.

The whole thing strikes me as too labored and long, especially since the synchronization device has been already worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce. Otherwise the pattern is exquisite. (PF 140)

The Otherworld as Dream

In spite of my earlier assertion that "cosmic synchronization" is inseparable from Nabokov's otherworldly views, or, by extension, his metaphysical beliefs, it is relevant that one should see the process *not* through its often deceptively dreamlike quality but as the "highest terrace of consciousness" whence "mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits" (SM 50). I will demonstrate that this heightened state of consciousness is one of the characteristic traits of all the short stories where the characters undergo otherworldly experiences. Alexandrov also postulates that "the experience [of entering the otherworld] does not resemble a trance or a dream; on the contrary, it is a state of highly enhanced wakefulness" (31). However, some of the author's poems seem to provide contrary evidence. Barry P. Scherr hypothesizes that it cannot be coincidental that the words "Son" ("Dream") or "Sny," "Snovidenie," or "Vidienie" ("Vision") appear in five of Nabokov's published poems (615). Although no further clarification is provided in Scherr's essay, I believe that more than one of Nabokov's poems deals with otherworldly visits when the protagonist or the poetic persona is asleep. In "The Dream," written as early as 1927, the speaker of the poem reminisces that once, in his slumber, a dead friend visited him from the beyond but "[a] long-ringing bell / summons to the performance: / the alarm clock repeats its

lesson / and daylight breaks through my eyelids” (*PP* 37). The otherworldly visitation occurs in the following two stanzas:

Then, *in sleep itself*, I’m possessed by a sort
of subordinate drowsiness. Dimly
I see a round table. I cannot make out
those sitting at it. We’re all waiting for somebody.

One of the guests has a pocket flashlight
that trains on the door, like a pistol;
and higher in stature, and brighter in face
a dead friend of mine enters, laughing. (*PP* 37; emphasis added)

I would like to argue that the state of being in a trance, dreaming, conducting somnambular activities, having nightmares, or their exact opposite, that is, being in an ecstasy, are often used to usher the characters to the gate of the otherworld. Dreaming represents an essential and oft-recurring source of inspiration for Nabokov inasmuch that his last three novels (*Transparent Things*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *The Eye*) investigate the relevance of the “semi, or unconscious realm of sleep and trance” (Pellérdi 129). In my discussion of *Lolita* (Chapter 7), I will yet again touch upon the important role that Edgar A. Poe might have played in Nabokov’s fixation with trance in order to explore the mysteries of the unconscious soul.¹⁸

In one way, Nabokov’s desire from the dreariness of the real world to another one grows out of Romantic literary and artistic themes prevalent in the 19th century. Instead of designating *Lolita*, for example, as a love story or a suspense novel, one could just as well call it a “romance.” Thomas R. Frosh explains that the “plot itself is composed of a series of typical romance structures, each one a version of the quest or hunt and each one an embodiment of a specific type of suspense or anxiety” (39). It is the romantic sensibility of a wealth of Nabokovian texts that enables the reader to turn to a new approach and discover in Nabokov a modicum of Victorian mentality and the world of the unreal as seen during that era. He had a genuinely passionate interest in the unreal world and how this world can be escaped with the help of trance and dreams that had been known to his predecessors. A whole host of fairies, sprites,

¹⁸ Pellérdi lists some of Poe’s stories with the afterlife being an organizing principle in them: “The Tale of the Ragged Mountain,” “The Premature Burial,” “Mesmeric Revelation,” “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” “Berenice,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” (134). Further research into the subject might allow for a complete list of stories where mesmeric trance assumes a crucial role.

and angels have dominated the skyline of Victorian literature, but earlier antecedents (Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest* and Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, etc.) were also captivated by this attractive, yet seemingly unsophisticated subject-matter, bordering on serious topics, such as the clash between the demonic and the angelic.

In order to counterweigh the materialistic science of the Victorian era, artists deliberately turned away from the unromantic, overly pragmatic, and scientific age; instead, they started to develop modes entering a less heinous and less troublesome reality that the placidity and magnetism of Nabokov's otherworld introduces. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (1846), and Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) are an apt demonstration on the anti-intellectual attitude that rose to such prominence in their time. Kingsley's book ought to be read as a manifesto, according to which there is a need for the spiritual and the supernatural, because the scientific approach is not enough to understand life itself. Just like fairy paintings represented an antidote against the vices of real life, Nabokov also followed an escapist tendency from the outer world by creating contemptible Humbert to be a hero of his romance, which is presented as a major quest for the unattainable past and his childhood Arcadia. His reclusion from everyday reality and resorting to techniques and subjects indicative of the world of magic, spiritualism, and the preternatural reflect his interest in and adherence to the popular tendencies of Romantic and Victorian literature. Every detail in *Lolita* suggests that Humbert had a genuine admiration for the enchanted and the marvelous, and his constant search for the justifiability of grisly act of nympholepsy is similar to the quest of the wistful romantic hero, who is full of anxieties and carries the romantic sensibility in his bosom. In fact, Humbert is the parodic antithesis of this sensibility, though his narrative is a veritable storehouse of dreams and daydreaming. "A Nursery Tale" (1926) with its mystic number "thirteen" or *The Enchanter* – with its apparent theme of pedophilia, but also celebrated for its excellent use of fairy tale technique – illustrate the author's interest in the themes of the otherworldly and the unreal. He never failed to take notice of the mysterious side of life, yet the exaggeratedly romanticized themes, such as the departure from ossified forms, the constant fixation on the inner states of consciousness, a search for and a return to the forgotten sources of life, predominant in earlier authors, are blended with a special kind of realism and acuity.

The Victorian period gave birth to an increased awareness of the unreal. Paintings of fairies, from the brush of Richard Dadd (*Come Unto These Yellow Sands*) or John Anster Fitzgerald (*The Enchanted Forest*) are painstakingly minute creations, which call attention to the existence of what had formerly been undisclosed. It is a widely known fact that many authors in the Romantic and Victorian eras composed poetry, induced by trances, which helped them conjure up images and fantasies which are impossible to have when one's consciousness is wide awake.¹⁹ Pellérdi exemplifies this innate tendency, underlying the worldview that poets of these epochs markedly expressed: Coleridge's famous opium-induced poem, "Kubla Khan" and his long narrative, *Christabel* are both written in a fashion that emphasizes the aphrodisiac quality of his works.

Nabokov had an admiration for "Kubla Khan" and its dream-like features that he even incorporates into *Lolita*. Coleridge's unwelcome visitor supposedly interrupted the whole course of the composition of the poem, which resultantly remained incomplete. Humbert writes: "and one hardly had to be a Coleridgean to appreciate the trite poke of "A. Person, Porlock, England" (AL 250). His dream is suspended in a similar manner as Quilty emerges in the story and elopes with Lolita. Alfred Appel also discovers that the Person from Porlock is also alluded to in "The Vane Sisters" – a short story primarily dealing with questions of the preternatural – whose eccentric librarian is named Porlock (AL 426). Sexuality, nightmares and the sudden awakening from polluted dreams are taboo topics, indicative of the dark secrets of the subconscious, form an integral part of Victorian mentality and its manifold treatments of the world of the unreal.

It is in this light that I also believe that the influence of certain Romantic and Victorian ideals on Nabokov is undeniable and constitutes the basis of scholarly discourse. Of especial importance is the question of trance (hallucination, somnambulism) or trance-like states (dreams, nightmares), which, according to

¹⁹ In addition to borrowing themes from Victorian literature with respect to the fairy tale aspects of the Nabokovian oeuvre, Nabokov also incorporated ideas which preoccupied many a male mind during the Victorian era. Nabokov wrote that "[Lewis Carroll] got away with it, as so many other Victorians got away with pederasty and nympholepsy. His were sad scrawny little nymphets, bedraggled and half-undressed, or rather semi-undraped, as if participating in some dusty and dreadful charade" (SO 81). It is a well-known fact that girl-children in Victorian literature had a special role. Pubescent girls possessed great sexual power and were seen as an embodiment of evil as well as virtue (angelic virgins vs. demonic children). The myth of ideal girlhood (that is to say, maiden purity) was a major appeal for Victorian men.

Pellérdi, become “a metaphor for two types of distinctive experience: the ecstasy of creative imagination, inspiration, which was one of the components of what he called ‘aesthetic bliss’ [...] or its darker aspect when the realm of nightmare and unconsciousness, similar to the state of death, becomes filled with the shadows of the otherworld” (131).

The experience of entering the otherworld finds its way into the preponderant part of Nabokov’s less commented-upon poems and plays. In “La Poésie de la Tradition: Étude de Recueil *Stixi* de V. Nabokov,” Pascal Rabaté considers poetry to be more strongly correlated with Russian literary and cultural tradition than his prose works which, at some stages, also represent a break with his homeland and his Russian heritage. Poetry should not be seen as a marginal activity of the Nabokov corpus but “that in discussing the poetry and prose one is talking not of opposed phenomena but of two poles within a single body of work” (qtd. in Scherr 614). The period most heavily drawing on the author’s metaphysical views is one of the several distinctive stages of his poetry: “a period of a kind of private curatorship, aimed at preserving nostalgic retrospections and developing Byzantine imagery” (*PP* 13), which has been mistakenly associated with the author’s interest in religion; one can safely assert that religion – at least in an institutionalized form – had little, if any, relevance in Nabokov’s artistic vocation.²⁰

In the closing paragraph of a subchapter which centered round “cosmic synchronization,” the importance of trance and dreams, as well as some related themes, one must reassuringly acknowledge the fact that, contrary to expectations, what emerges at the closure of any work by Nabokov is not merely a heap of disconnected details but the prospective or the picture of a new world that is founded on different paradigms. “Cosmic synchronization” will be taken up yet another time as a pivotal issue in my analyses of the works under discussion, especially in my analyses of *Pnin* and *Invitation to a Beheading*.

²⁰ See Chapter Seven of this dissertation, dealing with the oft-recurring Jewish theme in Nabokov and the manifestation of the Judaistic notion of the hereafter.

Time, Space, and Consciousness: an Overview of Nabokov's "Spiral of Being"

The concepts of time, space, and consciousness have been submitted to complex critical scrutiny in recent Nabokov scholarship. It is not the objective of this subchapter to devote attention to these subject-matters independently from one another, but to show how the temporal and spatial considerations of Nabokov's worlds become interspersed with consciousness. Instead of the systematic treatment of what role the three arcs in Nabokov's "spiral of being" occupy in his works, I felt an urgent need to give some elucidation on the subject.

The question of human consciousness and the possibility of states beyond consciousness have occupied a central role in Nabokov criticism. The energizing force behind Nabokov's writings, as the author himself also admitted, is entwined with the "immemorial urge" of mankind "to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness" (*SM* 218). One quandary that Nabokov's works often call to mind is bound up with the finiteness of human consciousness in the universe, or, as Boyd formulates in relation to *Ada*: "Is human consciousness final in the universe, or is it an arc of a continuing spiral of being? May it even *itself* become, after death, the next arc?" (Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada* 85). Evidently, it is difficult to find a definitive answer to these questions with *any* degree of certainty, as Nabokov also clearly demarcated the boundaries of human imagination: "We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought" (*SO* 45). Greatly enthralled by the possibility of the "beyond," Nabokov knew that human thought and man's knowledge about the universe are compressed into an imaginable world, that of predictability and logical reasoning. In *Speak, Memory*, he conjectures that human consciousness is a circular prison set by the mind's own limits, while the possibility of the "beyond" does not resemble a vicious circle: "The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free" (*SM* 275). Mindful of not making his audience privy to his partial (and perhaps even putative) knowledge of the otherworld, Nabokov mystifyingly (akin to his abstruse rejoinder concerning the existence of God) refers to his sought-after "something else" in the poem "Slava" ("Fame").²¹

²¹ In his enumeration of the "nine deceptive hubs that would ... keep the hereafter's door ajar" – consciousness, art, mimicry, bliss, reality, imagination, death, ghosts, and evil – Kuzmanovich links

I am that the night has been ciphered right well
but in place of the stars I put letters,
and I've read in myself how the self to transcend –
and I must not be overexplicit.

Trusting not the enticements of the thoroughfare
or such dreams as the ages have hallowed,
I prefer to stay godless, with fetterless soul
in a world that is swarming with godheads.

But one day while disrupting the strata of sense
and descending deep down to my wellspring
I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world,
something else, something else, something else.
(PP 111, 113; emphasis added)

In his heavily criticized essay, “Chronophilia: Nabokov and the Time of Desire,” Martin Hägglund reiterates some well-known facts about the concept of time that Nabokovians have elaborated on extensively, and the author himself also laid bare.²² Hägglund describes Nabokov both as a chronophobiac and a chronophiliac. It is convincingly argued that Nabokov’s works seriously challenge the notion of time and its traditional manifestations in literature in that there exists another relation to time beyond human consciousness, or, put simply, a kind of time where past and present coalesce. Unwelcoming as his reply to Hägglund may sound, Boyd points out that *timeless consciousness* for Nabokov, as Hägglund argued, is *not* at all analogous with a lack of awareness of time. Nabokov’s formulation runs like this: “time without consciousness – lower animal world; time with consciousness – man; consciousness without time – some still higher state” (SO 30).²³ Boyd assumes, rightly as it seems, that “consciousness without time” does not imply “consciousness without access to time or without any sense of time, but consciousness [...] operating in a time that

Nabokov stylistically to the poets of the Russian Silver Age and temperamentally to the occultist P.D. Ouspensky. He interprets this “something else” to connote a transcendent and higher dimension of consciousness, or some higher authorship of artifice in nature (28, 33). See Vladimir E. Alexandrov’s discussion entitled “Nabokov and the Silver Age of Russian Culture” in *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, 213-234.

²² Boyd’s cold reception of the essay stems from the fact that “Hägglund then accuses me of foisting on Nabokov a desire to transcend time, to escape from the prison of time, which he thinks is my personal philosophy of time and not Nabokov’s. It is not mine, but it is Nabokov’s, quite explicitly, and many things about timelessness that Hägglund wishes to claim are logically impossible are actually demonstrated in Nabokov works Hägglund does not know, does not remember, or suppresses” (“Nabokov, Time, and Timelessness,” abstract).

²³ It appears somewhat paradoxical that Nabokov’s reflections on higher consciousness appeared, of all places, in Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* (Diment, “Strong Opinions” 693).

allows direct access to the past” (475). I personally believe that one very important aspect of this “timeless consciousness” is that time for Nabokov is not a means to reconstruct the past but a “purveyor” that helps him find a new world, in the future, beyond death.

In a stimulating essay on the analogy in the works of Proust, Merrill, and Nabokov, it is assumed that, for example, “Pale Fire” in the eponymous novel is not “*A la recherche du temps perdu* but *A la recherche du monde prochain*.”²⁴ ... Just as Kinbote wants his Zembla immortalized in Shade’s poem, Shade wants his mind, and the mind of his loved ones, to be immortal in another world” (Trousdale 197).²⁵ In Nabokov’s works time is a major organizing principle, but, as opposed to Proust’s meticulous reconstruction of his lost past, Nabokov seems to offer a universal, idealized outline, because “[h]e is not interested in the accuracy of fact but the accuracy of feeling” (Trousdale 193). One way Nabokov reconstructs the past is by synchronizing bygone memories and the moments of the present, the outcome of which is that the moment he describes becomes permanent and immovable. Unlike Proust, Nabokov believes that certain memories, images, and sentiments can never be lost or forgotten; they continue to live on in our present reality.²⁶ Therefore, the fondly cherished Russia of the author’s childhood is not lost after all but only becomes accessible in rare moments, when the door of the otherworld stands “slightly ajar” (*LATH* 25-26). Trousdale concludes that “Nabokov takes Proust’s original goal – the reconstruction of the past – and changes the means; *he prefers eternalized moments to a real-time reconstruction*” (202; emphasis added).

Nabokov’s escape from a harsh negation of time is recurrent in his works: “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* 139); “the future does not exist” (*SO* 184). Human consciousness, for Nabokov, only operates within the present, and the future is non-existent since it is “assumed to contain *events*, not possibilities. Somehow events are considered to exist before they become,” or, put more clearly, the future “is only continuity hypothesized on the basis of ‘our

²⁴ “*Not in search of lost time but in search of a world to come*” (my translation)

²⁵ For further references and allusions to Proust and the question of time are found in John Burt Foster, Jr. “Nabokov and Proust,” 472-480. Micheal Wood’s essay entitled “Broken Dates: Proust, Nabokov, and Modern Time,” 156-170 is also an illuminating study on how time operates in Nabokov’s works.

²⁶ Conversely, Michael Wood writes that both Proust and Nabokov believe that “time can be regained, that the past is not lost and does not die: because it is mislaid or hidden (Proust); because a memory that keeps itself fit can always get at it (Nabokov)” (“Broken Dates” 167).

experience of succession, on our faith in logic and habit,' and it consists not of future events," which do not exist, but of possibilities compounded instantaneously" (Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada* 72-3). By the same token, the past is only accessible to the human mind as part of our present consciousness. It consists of past events, all of which have already taken place, but this past ceases to exist because only traces of it (in the form of recollections) are left to our present consciousness. In the future, Boyd postulates, events do not exist, only possibilities which may or may not materialize as anticipated.

Attempting to define time through language has been a perennial urge of mankind. Enthusiastically discussed as it is in his work, the comprehension of time is one of the few mysteries that has set hurdles in Nabokov's way. In "El Tiempo y J.W. Dunne," Jorge Luis Borges, otherwise a major influence on Nabokov, also found it impossible to define time: "I don't claim to know what sort of thing time is (or even if it is a thing), but I suspect that time and the course of time are one mystery and not two" (24). Ada in the eponymous novel is unable to finish her sentence (that is, she finds it impossible to wind it up) when replying to Van Veen's question: "Why is it so difficult – so degradingly difficult – to bring the notion of Time into mental focus and keep it there for inspection?" Instead of giving a definition or circumscribing the notion of time, Ada blurts out: "We can never know Time. Our senses are simply not meant to perceive it. It is like –" (*Ada* 563). The arcane nature of time and the fact that it rejects a single definition caused Nabokov to develop a certain sense of respect toward mysteries unfathomable to mankind. In "Broken Dates: Proust, Nabokov, and Modern Time," Micheal Wood also argues that the abandonment of time in Nabokov's works is not really an escape. It is, as he writes,

[a] perception which takes place both in the past and the present allow[ing] us not only to escape from time but to comprehend pure time, to grasp 'a fragment of time in the pure state,' 'un peu de temps à l'état pur.' ... Out of time, pure time. Can we reconcile this contradiction? Yes, but only in time. The experience of Proust's narrator feels like an escape from time, and like a discovery of time itself, because it is not an ordinary piece of time, it is a fast, ephemeral moment – like a flash of lightning, Proust's narrator says. (163)

In Nabokov's works time is shunned, abolished, and transcended; nonetheless, it would be erroneous to claim that the cessation of time is a simple escape from it into

aesthetics.²⁷ I think that the liberation of time is also seen as an immersion into time, whereby the boundaries of past and present are blurred. One is no longer reliant on restrictions of “[t]he horrible ‘here’” that “holds and constricts [us]” (*IB* 93). Escape from time and, at the same time, access to it, are the only means with which Nabokov’s characters are able to reach a fourth dimension, a higher sense of consciousness. Time, space, and consciousness come together as a quintessential and indivisible theme in Nabokov’s fiction. The origins of all this are best summed up by Boyd, who asserts that “[a]lready as a schoolboy Nabokov had reinterpreted the Hegelian dialectic of history as an opening out of the closed circle into a spiral in which the first arc, the thesis, leads into the ampler arc of the antithesis, and that in turn into the synthesis, thesis of a new series” (*RY* 295).

Separating Time and Space: Bergsonian Echoes

The study of time and space in Nabokov’s works is a highly relevant pursuit. Some possible antecedents, influences, and kinships (Jung, Eliot, and Frank) have been mentioned in the foregoing passage, yet the most significant one – Henri Bergson – has been so far deliberately omitted from the discussion, as the prominence of the French philosopher’s ideas in the Nabokovian *oeuvre* calls for an in-depth analysis.

Nabokov owed an intellectual debt to Bergson, whose direct and indirect impact on him is often overlooked in favor of other great minds who played an unconscious but effective part in the formation of Nabokov’s works. In addition, it is noteworthy to comment on Bergson that, in the interwar years, the then ageing philosopher was instrumental in offering Nabokov a more complete picture of modernism than his other contemporaries. John Burt Foster points out that Bergson, taken together with Flaubert, “defines Nabokov’s attitude toward modernism” (13). It is a well-known fact that during the years leading up to the First World War masses Bergson had a massive following as a psychologist, and Foster surmises that

²⁷ In *Escape into Aesthetics* (1966), Page Stegner argues that Nabokov considers arts as a way of egress from the intolerable external reality to another world where beauty, bliss and imagination exist in perfect harmony. However, Nabokov’s conviction that a work of art has its existence proper, contradicts the idea that escape into aesthetics is indeed a modus of reaching a long-sought-after world of beauty. Julia Bader also remarks that “[f]or Nabokov and his characters, aesthetic patterns are not a way of escaping from the empirical world but rather a way of creating a self-contained and complete world. When the characters attempt to escape from their aesthetically created selves and circumstances, it is through shifting levels of fictional reality rather than from reality to art” (5).

“Nabokov must have discovered Bergson in a Russian setting, perhaps from the Acmeist poets [under the leadership of Nikolay Gumilev] or the formalist critics, both of which were modernist groups with aims paralleling his own” (14).

In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov ranked the philosopher among his “top favorites” (43) alongside Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Joyce, Pushkin, and Proust; however, instead of acknowledging that Bergson had ever influenced his creative genius, he only recognizes an affinity between their distinct, yet not too distanced theories on experience and intuition as opposed to a purely scientific way of thinking, which is used to comprehend what *reality* is. In her essay on the aesthetics of the subliminal, Leona Toker mentions that the three writers’ [Bergson’s, Joyce’s, and Nabokov’s] “minds meet at an impasse which the novelists seem to acknowledge more readily than the philosopher” (“Minds Meeting” 198). Critics have discerned an abundance of plausible links connecting Bergson and Nabokov, such as the Kantian motif of “disinterest”, the *élan vital* identified with creative consciousness, memory as opposed to matter, and the convergence between matter and consciousness. Yet it is the question of the time-and-space continuum with respect to *human recollection* that appears to be most widely applicable in an attempt to shed light on the philosophical kinship. Foster mentions that Nabokov advocated the philosophy of Bergson, who was more concerned with “the lived experience of time, the enriching effects of memory, and the importance of creativity” (14) than, for example, Sigmund Freud, Nabokov’s archenemy, whose worldview he believed to be dominated by his fixation on the psychoanalytic reading of texts as well as the supremacy of the unconscious as the idea underlying everything.

Spatial and temporal preoccupations are formulated in Nabokov in as early as the 1920, when his first novel, *Mary* as well as a couple of short stories (“The Return of Chorb” and “A Guide to Berlin”) were published. Boyd establishes that “Nabokov heartily approved Bergson’s cutting time off from space in order to emphasize the indeterminism of the world, and he accepted Bergson’s stress on time as a richer mode of being than space, although the insistence on the absurd contrast between a possible return in space and an impossible return in time is his own” (RY 294). In his dissolution of the traditional concept of time and space, Nabokov clearly distinguishes between qualitative “time” (that is, duration) and “the most highly prized artistic tool, memory in human life” (Pellérdi 115) as Van Veen, the protagonist of *Ada* – the novel that constitutes Nabokov’s most durable ideas on time

and space – reflects on Bergson’s doctoral thesis, *Time and Free Will*. Van, similarly to Bergson, composes his treatise on the “Texture of Time” and comically labels “[s]pace” as “the comedy villain, returning by the back door with the pendulum he peddles, while I grope for the meaning of Time” (*Ada* 421).²⁸ Van rejects the traditionally accepted space-time continuum and writes his memoir by divorcing the two notions from one another. Interestingly, not only Bergsonian echoes are audible throughout the text, but the philosopher is mentioned by name twice in the novel:

Space flutters to the ground, but Time remains between thinker and thumb, when *Monsieur Bergson* uses his scissors. (453; emphasis added)

...

She [Ada] said she had been somehow responsible for the metamorphoses of the lovely larvae that had woven the silk of “Veen’s Time” (as the concept was now termed in one breath, one breeze, with “*Bergson’s Duration*,” or “Whitehead’s Bright Fringe”).” (430; emphasis added)

The first example demonstrates Bergson’s and Nabokov’s eagerness to do away with the “space-contaminated view of time” (Toker, “Nabokov and Bergson” 370), whereas the second passage brings forth a significant Bergsonian idea of evolution, also found in Nabokov. Boyd also affirms that Nabokov “sees life as inherently creative, evolving into ampler modes of being, each with more freedom and creative scope than its predecessors: from egg to caterpillar to the winged splendor of a butterfly, from the single cell to homo sapiens, from the rain chant to Tolstoy” (*RY* 294). Nabokov’s constant reliance on the image of the butterfly as a connecting device between the physical and the spiritual world (that is, the otherworld) bears a striking resemblance to Bergson’s attempt to bridge this abyss through the use of memory. I agree with Toker’s claim that “Bergson regards the brain not as a storehouse of memories but as an instrument of recall, selection, and blockage. Total recall is inimical to purposeful action” (“Minds Meeting” 195). Similar tendencies are discernible in Nabokov, whose protagonists are equipped with the ability to evoke fragments of the past not in their totality, but in a piecemeal fashion, as for example,

²⁸ In addition to the exploration of “the texture of time” in Van Veen’s mental excursion, Bergson’s all-pervading influence – and, by extension, that of French modernism – cannot be denied in “Reunion” (1931) and “The Circle” (1934). John Burt Foster discusses both stories in a Bergsonian framework. In his reading of “The Circle,” Foster claims that Nabokov and Bergson both “insisted on memory’s power to preserve everything” and that “the details of our past experiences generally remain hidden even from ourselves.” (85). For an in-depth discussion of Bergsonian echoes in *Kamera Obscura* see Part Two of Foster’s book (73-90).

Humbert reconstructs the faint image of Lolita or Chorb recreates his dead wife out of fragments. It is important to mention here that lucid and immediate recollection of events never occurs in the Nabokovian novel, in which dreaming often evokes memories in non-linear patterns. Interestingly, dreams serve as an auxiliary device in bringing up fragments of the past that one's wide-awake consciousness is incapable of reconstructing. Only subliminal consciousness, Toker argues, "deployed in dreams prefers the insignificant, the elements of the past discarded by active consciousness" ("Minds Meeting" 203). Such insignificant recollection, as Bergson refers to it in *Mind-Energy*, plays an important role in recapturing the past and helping to come to terms with the given work's metaphysical implications.

Throughout his exploration of time, Van Veen believes that the workings of memory play the most crucial role in human life, because, as Pellérdi claims "[w]ith memory ... time was reversible, and the long lost places could be revisited, people who were dead could be revived. These experiences could be molded into a form of artistic expression in his novels" (*Palace* 115). Van aptly demonstrates in *Ada* that his creator had a chronoscopic view of time, according to which he attached no significance to the lapse of time, or time flown, but to the duration of time, or time flowing. Nabokov's formulation on time is clearly stated in *Strong Opinions*:

He [Van Veen] and I in that book attempt to *examine the essence of Time, not its lapse*. Van mentions the possibility of being "an amateur of Time, an epicure of duration," of being able to delight sensually in the texture of time, "in its stuff and spread, in the fall of its folds, in the very impalpability of its grayish gauze, in the coolness of its continuum." He also is aware that "Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors."

Time, though akin to rhythm, is not simply rhythm, which would imply motion – and Time does not move. Van's greatest discovery is his perception of Time as the dim hollow between two rhythmic beats, the narrow and bottomless silence between the beats, not the beats themselves, which only embar Time. In this sense human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat. (185-6; emphasis added)

Van Veen's notion of time as "the Tender Interval" (*Ada* 538) corresponds to Nabokov's above-cited postulation of the "missed heartbeat" (*SO* 186) and also has intimations of the otherworld. Likewise, Bergson knew well that measuring a moment is impossible, because time itself is moving forward and thus remains incomplete as opposed to one's general notion of time as measurable and immobile. Newtonian

science posited time as a constant, an absolute, whereas one's subjective sense might imply that time stops, decelerates, or accelerates. Bergson writes that time

is not the moving act itself which is never indivisible, but the motionless line it lays down beneath it like a track in space. Let us take our mind off the space subtending the movement and concentrate solely on the movement itself, on the act of tension or extension, in short, on pure mobility. (*The Creative Mind* 194)

Bergson thought that duration itself is indefinable, because the only way to arrive at any definition of it is to show that images are always “on the move” and, due to their mobility, cannot provide a picture as a whole. Nabokov's elaborate concept of time might have been, in addition to Bergson, attributable to William James (his works psychology and mysticism which inspired the author to rely on his techniques), whose view of the “specious present” is a reworking of E. Robert Kelly's ideas (1882). In *A Critical History of English Literature*, David Daiches provides his summary of “specious present” as the present “which does not really exist but which represents the continuous flow of the ‘already’ into the ‘not yet,’ of retrospect into anticipation, and Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, of time as flow and duration rather than a series of points moving chronologically forward” (1129) also influenced the Russian-American author. It is noteworthy that the plot of the Nabokovian novel ceases to follow a chronological order, according to which one event follows another event, and only some remaining fragments are used to create the simultaneous coexistence of different levels of consciousness and unconsciousness.

While Nabokov's theory of the otherworld does not directly stem from Bergson's philosophy, several ideas on memory, the question of the time-space continuum, and evolution, shared by both authors to some measure, provide us with a better understanding of Nabokov's metaphysics and intimations of the otherworld. It is also important to reiterate at this stage that Nabokov's alleged belief in mysticism might be somewhere connected to his consciousness of two worlds. Toker is right in claiming that “if one is to make a case for the possibility of subsuming the two-world cosmogony [of Nabokov] within a monistic vision, one must take into account the twist that also occurs in Bergson's system: inert matter is at certain points transmuted into creative consciousness” (369).

Loss and Displacement: the Self-Encoded Nabokov

The question as to what extent the biographical circumstances of Nabokov's turbulent life contributed to the manifestations of his fictional otherworld has been accorded comparatively little attention in Nabokov scholarship, which is principally attributable to the fact that he was an emigrant writer both in Europe and in the United States and displayed a number of traits indicative of bilingual (and even trilingual) writers. He became a citizen of the world when the Bolshevik Revolution forced him into exile, and owing to the Jewish lineage of his wife and his antipathy to Nazi Germany, World War II forced him into exile for a second time. In the foregoing chapter I postulated that the author's otherworld is not so much the by-product of his life fraught with losses and endless wanderings among the worlds and the levels of reality he knew well and called to life so vividly in his fiction *but* is partly linked to Nabokov's metaphysical convictions, his firmly anchored faith in a higher state of consciousness, or, more precisely, a kind of reality beyond the ken of what the human cognition under normal circumstances. Only during these exceptionally rare moments of epiphany (to be discussed at length in relation to the short stories and novels) are Nabokov's characters able to come close to what the author has called "aesthetic bliss" and defined as "a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art ... is the norm" (*Lolita* 305). This is an experience shared merely by a limited number of the author's characters – privileged figures of positive behavior, the elect few who are endowed with the exceptional gift of being in the know of some great mystery. Could it not be convincing to conjecture that, aside from metaphysics, the manifestation of the otherworld is also intricately connected with biographical circumstances and external conditions?

I believe that labeling Nabokov as an autobiographical writer is almost as simplistic and flawed as the assumption according to which the vicissitudes and the eventual beauties of the author's private life have no connection whatsoever with the manifestations of his otherworldly views. In the upcoming subchapter, I will attempt to provide some reasons for Nabokov's strong propensity toward the topos of the otherworldly, which, for the most part, occupies a central role in his fiction as the result of his metaphysical beliefs, and, to a lesser extent, germinates from the impulses and biographical circumstances he experienced.

I begin my discussion by touching upon the issue of Nabokov's self-representation in his works.²⁹ Alfred Appel, Jr. asserts in his introductory note to *The Annotated Lolita* that "Nabokov did not write the kind of thinly disguised transcription of personal experience which too often passes for fiction. ... [H]is novels are improvisations on an autobiographic theme" (xxii). In an interview, when asked about *The Gift*, Nabokov replied: "I am very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity. Only the background of the novel can be said to contain some biographical details" (SO 13-14). In spite of Nabokov's truculent attempt to parry off any claim that seeks to associate his fictional characters with their creator, it is correct to posit that at least some traits of the author's fiction spring from his biographical circumstances. Shapiro notes that "Nabokov was fascinated with manifestations of authorial presence" and "tended to encode his own presence as author in his texts" (15), one of the most notable characteristics that has long been discerned in his fiction.³⁰ All of Nabokov's favorite characters seem to bear a striking resemblance to their creator: Humbert Humbert, Pnin, Luzhin, V., John Shade, Fyodor, and many others, akin to the author, carry a mystery in their soul "that [they] neither may nor can betray"; it is what "gave him his imperturbable love of life ... and lucidity even during life's most difficult trials" (qtd. in Alexandrov, "The Otherworld" 567). Thinking of Humbert as one of the author's "favorite" might (probably due to the many affinities in terms of their education, polyglotism, intellectual stance, and so on), as many assume, appear to be a misnomer. Humbert's behavior borders on the malefic and is renounceable. Even the author gives voice to his antipathies toward the male protagonist (although authorial expressions about their own works are to be taken with a grain of salt): "The double rumble is ... very nasty, very suggestive. It is a hateful name for a hateful person. It is also a kingly name, and I need a royal vibration for Humbert the Fierce and Humbert the Humble" (SO 26). In the preface of *Despair*, Nabokov contrasts Humbert with Hermann by saying that "[b]oth are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann" (11). In an

²⁹ A comprehensive examination of Nabokov's self-representation in his works is beyond the scope of this dissertation, though the topic is also treated here to some extent. For a discussion on the application of the authorial mask, chromesthesia, anagrammatic encoding, fatidic dates, iconicism, and encoding, see Gavriel Shapiro's essay "Setting his myriad faces in his text: Nabokov's authorial presence revisited" in *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*.

³⁰ See Andrea Tompa "Szerepek és maszkok Nabokov élet/művében" ("Roles and masks in Nabokov's life and artifice" [my translation]). Another thought-provoking discussion on Nabokov's self-representation and cameo-appearances is found in Ákos Farkas: "As McFate Would Have It."

interesting analysis of *Lolita*, Ellen Pifer's claim is to prove its inverse: Humbert, akin to other positive characters, is capable of mature, genuine love and is thus allowed to enter the otherworldly realm, which is forbidden to enter for negative characters ("Shades of Love"). Idealistic as Pifer's reading of the novel's protagonist seems, it would be ill-advised to sympathize with Humbert's depraved personality. Stéphane Mallarmé, whose symbolist works inspired many twentieth-century artists, might have had a direct effect on Nabokov when he created the pitiable figure of Humbert. Mallarmé's *The Afternoon of a Faun* (*L'après-midi d'un faune*, 1876) is never mentioned directly in *Lolita*, yet "the French symbolist poet's texts always hover in the background [of the novel]" (Pellérdi 50). While Mallarmé is infrequently mentioned alongside Nabokov, it cannot be called into question that the faun (known from Roman mythology as a hybrid creature of a man and a goat) of the poem has certain associations with Humbert. In the poem, the faun is hovering between awakening and sleeping in the middle of a grove; as he wakes up, he talks about his encounters with several nymphs, and expresses his desire to perpetuate them: "Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer" ("I would perpetuate these nymphs"). Similarly, Humbert is also intent on "fix[ing] once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (AL 134). Just as the faun, Humbert also faces difficulties differentiating between the world of dreams and the world of realities; and this is perhaps the only plausible pretext for Humbert to be considered *at least* a pitiable character to some extent. In addition to Márta Pellérdi, who draws attention to the faun theme, it is also worth mentioning that Will Norman undertakes a critical analysis of certain intertextual links between *The Afternoon of a Faun* and *Bend Sinister* (Nabokov, *History, and the Texture of Time*, New York: Routledge, 2012). He writes that Nabokov was fascinated by Mallarmé's work, as the the author's adolescence in the French version of "Mademoiselle O" was watched over by "Verlaine and Mallarmé" (quoted in Norman 85). I have also discovered that passing mention is made of the mythological faun in *Lolita* at several points of the text ("a laughing faun" [AL 230], "faunlets and nymphets" [AL 169] and "faunish faces" [AL 108]), which might suggest an allusion to Mallarmé and, naturally, to Roman mythology.

It is not surprising that Nabokov's protagonists include belletrists, writers, poets, chess masters, polyglots, entomologists, and scholars, all of whom are similar to the author in one way or another. Shapiro calls attention to the fact that "[i]t has become a commonplace throughout Nabokov scholarship to speak of the author's

self-encodement via full or partial anagrammatization of his name” (22) and numerous other carefully devised, artistic techniques. Adam von Librikov in *Transparent Things*, Vivian Darkbloom in *Lolita*, or Van Bock, an imaginary landscape painter in *Strong Opinions* are widely known and celebrated examples of how Nabokov, an otherwise self-effacing punster and riddle-maker intrudes upon his fictional worlds. Concomitant with the mapping of these often demanding textual games – most of it more of an apparent display of academic intellect and erudition than anything else – scholars have taken extreme delight in identifying the author in his protagonists, and Nabokov was no exception either to this generally employed literary and cinematographic device.³¹

If one concurs with the somewhat recursive yet pertinent statement of William York Tindall that “Finnegans Wake is about Finnegans Wake ... about everything,” then a similar observation can be made about the all-encompassing quality of Nabokov’s work, too (38). Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* is as much a dream as *Finnegans Wake*, in which the “I” of the novel is the dreamer of a dream. Krug is not only the dreamer but also the participant in it; and there appears in the plot “a nameless, mysterious genius who took advantage of the dream to convey his own peculiar code message ... the presence of someone in the know,” who is identified in the Introduction as “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (*BS* 64 and xii). In his famous lecture on *Ulysses* Nabokov speculates at length as to the identity of the Man in the Brown Macintosh, who reappears in the novel on several occasions:

Do we know who he is? I think we do. The clue comes in chapter 4 of part two, the scene at the library. Stephen is discussing Shakespeare and affirms that Shakespeare himself is present in his, Shakespeare’s, works. Shakespeare, he says, tensely: “He has hidden his own name, a fair name, William, in the plays, a super here, a clown there, as a painter of old Italy set his face in a dark corner of his canvas ...” and this is exactly what Joyce has done – setting his face in a dark corner of his canvas. The Man in the Brown Macintosh who passes through the dream of the book is no other than the author himself. (40)

Just as Joyce orchestrates the diverse elements of Earwicker’s dream, so too does Nabokov keep authorial control over those of Krug and everything else he had created in his private, fictional world (41).

³¹ The works of Alfred Hitchcock share certain affinities with those of Nabokov. Similarly to Nabokov and Joyce, Hitchcock is also noted for his cameo-like appearances and the use of authorial doppelgangers or alter egos in his films.

Nonetheless, based upon the numerous associations that bring together Creator and Creation, referring to Nabokov as an autobiographical writer is also a misnomer. Humbert's scholastic aspirations, Pilgram's intense yearning to undertake a lepidopterological expedition in "The Aurelian," or Fyodor's poetic career in *The Gift* all raise the question whether these characters are really indistinguishable from Nabokov.³² And the answer is in the negative. Certain minutiae might have something to do with Nabokov's life, but the author himself – should one give credence to his confession – admitted that he had never felt a penchant for underage girls nor did his butterfly expedition go awry on account of a heart failure.³³ However, most importantly, it ought to be borne in mind that all of Nabokov's characters are "galley slaves" (SO 24) in some ways, subjected to the tyranny of the despot-author, who eventually may become a temporary player of his theater, an inmate in his own prison. In Henry Fielding's *The Author's Farce* (1730), a play-within-a-play "puppet show," the auctorial hand is clearly visible (*auctor ex machina*) as opposed to the theory of *deus absconditus* (disappearing god) that leaves humankind to overcome their own problems without the intervention of a superior force (see Pascal and Flaubert on the full elaboration of the Latin term).³⁴ Nabokov's god-like stature in the process of conceiving his characters remains elusive during his Russian years, while the signs of moving toward the intensification of the authorial presence are more

³² Dmitri Nabokov's observation is to set one's doubts at rest as to the question of authorial presence in "Nabokov and the Theater:" "Two of his [Nabokov's] intense yearnings ... did remain unfulfilled, and both were related to travel. The first was to return to a non-Bolshevik Russia. Transformed by the kaleidoscope of his art, this idea finds its way, *inter alia*, into *Glory* (Martin's disappearance into the depths of the Soviet Union), "A Visit to the Museum" (until an orthographic detail makes the hero realize that his nightmarish traverse of the museum has transported him spatially but not temporarily, and he has exited into contemporary, Soviet Russia), and, of course *The Man From the USSR*." ... Nabokov's second unfulfilled longing was for a lepidopterological expedition to some exotic, uncharted region. Father had dreamed of the Caucasus, of Mount Elbrus, but in later years, spoke most often of the Amazon. Again, what is fascinating here is not the simple association of ideas or the romanticizing of an unrealized fantasy, but the poetry of the pattern into which the thoughts were recombined to produce "Terra Incognita," the elder Godunov-Cherdyntsev's fantastic entomological journeys in *The Gift*, the prophetic space adventures of "Lance," and the touching mini-tragedy of *The Pole*" (6, 10).

³³ Nabokov said in an interview that "*Speak, Memory* is strictly autobiographic, there is nothing autobiographic in *Lolita*" (SO 77), though the former view has been subjected to serious criticism (see my note below).

³⁴ Worthy of mention at this point is the concept of "immanent transcendence" according to which God is inside and beyond the universe at the same time. While the two concepts (immanence and transcendence) express contrary views on the role that God occupies, it can be said that the notion of "immanent transcendence" denotes that God is in the universe, but not of it (cf. Edgar A. Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd"). In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley also expresses his opinion about the simultaneous role of God, who pervades and surpasses the universe at the same time: "Looking up from planes that are lower, God is radically transcendent (*ganz anders*; "wholly other"); looking down, from heights that human vision (too) can attain to varying degrees, God is absolutely immanent" (qtd. in Smith 65).

salient in his later American novels. However, the only difference between him and his prisoners is that only Nabokov has the key to the exit and he is the only one who is allowed to take his leave whenever he feels that his presence becomes overbearing or is likely to disclose his true identity. The gap between the author and his characters – threadlike as it may seem at points – remains unbridgeable, and “however striking the resemblance might seem between the author and his look-alike, it merely remains a look-alike, a replica, the author’s mimicry, mask or the object of his parody” (Tompkins 70; my translation).

One interesting case with respect to the author’s autobiographical theme emerges in *Speak, Memory*. Although Nabokov labeled his oft-debated autobiography as “a memoir” in 1951 and “an autobiography” in 1966, many of his commentators have chosen to remain unconvinced as for the very classification of the work. The reason is that so much artistry and invention is interwoven into the narrative structure of *Speak, Memory* that no single genre could easily accommodate what Boyd has called “the most *artistic* of all autobiographies” (RY 149; emphasis in the original).³⁵

Points of Intersection: Morality, Biography, and Metaphysics

The profounder merits of Nabokov as a writer – who was instinctively viewed as an exponent of modern movements, which purportedly evinced little or no interest at all in literature that aims to teach a moral lesson – had been unjustly obscured until his death in 1977. An adamant opponent of literary schools and artistic movements, Nabokov resolutely believed in his role as a supreme individualist and claimed that “the hero of his fictions is always the individual human consciousness left free to either grow in health or expire in misconceived obsession” (Parker 5). Critics attempting to make the author’s name one and the same with the misleading cognomina of a “heartless puppeteer” and a “literary agent provocateur” are now thought to have committed a *faux pas* no smaller than eclipsing the deep moral significance – philosophical and religious – of his *oeuvre* by overestimating, as it were, the esthetic qualities of his fiction. Meyer also points out that the fictional universes of Nabokov were, for a long time, considered as hermetic, arcane self-

³⁵ In citing Boyd, Galya Diment writes that Nabokov “himself described in an unpublished introduction to *Conclusive Evidence* [the first version of *Speak, Memory*] as ‘the meeting point of an impersonal art form and a very personal life story’” (37).

referential systems designed as metaliterary manifestos (“Nabokov’s Biographers” 326). The critics who mainly ventured in the metaliterary direction now seem to have been somewhat mistaken; of course, by stating this, I do not suggest that any reader or critic should overlook the stylistic bravura for which Nabokov as a writer has enjoyed lasting reputation.

In my view, the metaliterary approach to Nabokov’s fiction is partly invalid because it refuses to take into consideration the author’s deeply held conviction in metaphysics, religion, moral issues, cosmology, and his capacity to represent an esthetically heightened visionary state of consciousness. In the postscript to *Lolita*, Nabokov announces that “[t]here are gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and despite [the fictional editor of the novel] John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow” (314). What was to be an act of converting pedophilia into a “blissful” thing (“For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call *aesthetic bliss*” [AL 314; emphasis added]) and labeling *Lolita* as a “highly moral affair” understandably aroused the ire of many readers, who, after the novel was released, deprecated it for its apparently sympathetic treatment of child-abuse and sexual aberrations as socially unobjectionable phenomena. Contrary to the widely held belief that *Lolita* is a pornographic *succès de scandale*, critics have highlighted that several ethical and moral issues are broached in the novel, encompassing themes, such as sexual taboo, victimization, solipsism, moral development, mature adult love, questions of religious and racial discrimination, and other related issues possibly deserving of a thesis-length discussion each.

The questions of morality and esthetics in Nabokov’s works have caused many critics to speculate over the author’s discontent with writers who accentuated the didactic purpose of literature. He coldly disapproved of the “mystical didacticism of Gogol [and] the utilitarian moralism of Tolstoy” (SO 65), who, in a long list of his *bêtes noires* (in particular his constantly ridiculed “old Dusty,” Dostoyevsky, that is), always come under fierce attacks. Interviews with and articles by the author also underline that Nabokov was convinced that a writer’s duty was not to mend society’s ways by sending off sociopolitical or ethical messages through his works. In one of his famous “strong opinions,” he stated that “I don’t give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth. ... [T]here can be no question that *what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only*

its art” (SO 33; emphasis added). Indeed, it is the opposition between the ideology of collectivism and individual human consciousness that lies at the heart of Nabokov’s art. *Bend Sinister*, for example, demonstrates that “[f]or Nabokov the claim of the primacy of the crowd or the general good over the individual is absurd: the crowd after all is composed of individuals who may have as many different notions of their interest as there are members of the crowd” (BS 97).

The decade following the author’s death marked the advent of a new era in Nabokov scholarship. Grayson’s postulation that “in the 1980s and 1990s the academic focus of interest in the *tut/tam*, ‘here/there’ theme shifted from the biographical and the aesthetic to the metaphysical” seemed to be an epoch-making assertion.³⁶ This dichotomy was advocated by other illustrious commentators who shared the view that the author’s otherworldly theme is *not* wholly built upon his involuntary peregrinations in place and time, but has much more to do with his belief in the transcendental. However, the biographical and the metaphysical are not two conflicting fields in Nabokov scholarship – culminating in his poetics – but function as each other’s complementaries. Already residing in the New World, Nabokov poignantly expressed his loss in an interview: “My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English” (SO 15). The widely accepted perspective that the manifestation of the otherworld is *not* necessarily correlated with the author’s endless wanderings has been promulgated by critics obsessed with Nabokov’s metaphysical beliefs. I slightly disagree with these assumptions on the ground that the otherworld in Nabokov’s fiction is not merely a literary and philosophical topos “having its origins in Classical philosophy, in Platonism and Gnosticism, and development in the poetry and thoughts of European Romanticism and French and Russian Symbolism” (Grayson 12), but also the manifestation of his actual worlds, including Russian, European, and American settings. Had it not been for the author’s forced

³⁶ It would be a crass mistake to call this a discovery. Investigation – cursory as it was – into the metaphysical nature of Nabokov’s oeuvre was begun in the 1930s by an exiguous number of Russian critics and the author’s coevals. In his *Nezamechennoe pokolenie* (*The Generation Unnoticed*) Vladimir Varshavskii made the following observation about Nabokov’s work: “at times...one even regrets that Nabokov is engaged in belle-lettres rather than metaphysics” (qtd. in Shroyer 17-18). Similar claims have been repeatedly made ever since, but, as Shroyer claims, “Western students of Nabokov did not turn their attention to his metaphysics until the late 1970s, and it was not until the 1990s that their voices became audible in the chorus” (18).

circumstances to write in another language in other cultures, he would likely have been less successful in creating his metaphysical *otherworld* and the actual *other worlds*. While the boundary between these two realms can be clearly expressed in typography (that is, written in one word or separately), it is impossible to maintain this distinction because of the abyssal depths of the Nabokovian text: it should thus be speculated that his actual other worlds, his Russia, Germany, France, America, and Switzerland are partially, yet significantly accountable for the inception of his imaginary lands, including his Zembla in *Pale Fire*, Terra and Antiterra in *Ada*, the fierce police state of *Bend Sinister*, the bizarrely realistic but fictional “umber and black Humberland” (AL 166) in *Lolita*, and all the other worlds – metaphysical and physical alike – found in Nabokov’s fiction.

The author’s loss of his homeland and native culture, his “infinitely docile Russian tongue” (SO 15), and his national identity seemed to represent a major impediment in his gradually growing literary career. What was initially seen as a disadvantage in young Nabokov’s early endeavors to habituate himself to his new surroundings in England was later transformed into a source of inspiration. Early on in his artistic career, Nabokov’s intense emotional attachment to his homeland gravely hindered him from incorporating the “feel” of Englishness into his forthcoming works. Johnson writes that during his Cambridge years (1919-1922) Nabokov appeared to be “a young man immersed in the recreation of a lost Russian world and relatively indifferent to his English surroundings” (“Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke” 177), and only much later did he resort to English as an instrument for his creative art. Johnson goes on to add that the fact that

Nabokov appears to have been more profoundly “Russian” at Cambridge than before was reflected not only in his poetry but in his essay “Kembridzh” (Cambridge) which he wrote after two years in England. Gracefully done, it is nonetheless a recitation of the hackneyed stereotypes of the soulless English and the famous Russian “shirokaia dusha” (broad soul). (*ibid.* 178)

Once in Western Europe, Nabokov always wrote broodingly of his homeland, summoning up with longing the memories of his idyllic childhood; yet, he was unwavering in his belief that “I will never go back, for the simple reason that all the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood. I will never return. I will never surrender. And anyway, the grotesque shadow of a

police state will not be dispelled in my lifetime” (SO 10). It was only in America that all the external circumstances that uprooted Nabokov from his fondly cherished Russia and the culturally thriving émigré atmosphere of Europe, where he felt at home with his coterie of expatriate writers, no longer stood as a stumbling block in the way of the author’s rising genius. Despite all this, he managed to turn all these vicissitudes to his advantage. While Western Europe helped him to establish his reputation as an émigré writer publishing in Russian and to bask in the admiration of his readers and peers alike, America launched him to world fame by introducing to the world a man of letters “not trapped in knowing just Russian. By moving over to English he could transform the clichéd émigré topos of the lost homeland, the *tut/tam*, the ‘here’ and ‘there’, into something dynamic: not a see-saw, but a spiral. ... He had an enviable ability to turn negatives into positives” (Grayson, “The Shade of Nabokov’s World” 8). Nabokov himself also wrote that “[i]n America I’m happier than in any other country. It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America. It is a second home in the true sense of the word” (SO 10). Grayson also notes the following:

“[w]riting in Russian never made Nabokov’s fortune, but it did make him famous. It may have been a small pond, but Nabokov was a very big fish in it. His reading public was not large, but it was very well read, highly discriminating and passionately devoted to literature. When ‘Sirin’ gave a reading in Berlin or Paris, he spoke to packed halls. (5)

Nabokov’s sense of loss was further aggravated when in 1922 his father (a progressive statesman during the last years of the Russian Empire) was mistakenly murdered at a public meeting by two royalist assassins. This devastating event is reverberated most markedly in *Pale Fire*, for example, in which an assassin accidentally murders the poet John Shade at the novel’s closure, though his actual target is a fugitive European monarch – at least in the account of Kinbote, the novel’s narrator figure of dubious reliability. Toward the end of the 1930s most Russian émigré writers were leading a miserable social and financial life, and the closing down of the publishing houses as well as the Nazi advance on Paris all weakened Nabokov’s and his family’s relative stability. By this time he had already married Véra Slonim (1902-1991), and by Véra had had a son, Dmitri (1934-2012), who later

became a celebrated bass opera singer and the translator of some of his father's works. In an interview, Nabokov woefully writes:

The era of expatriation can be said to have ended during World War II. Old writers died, Russian publishers also vanish, and worst of all, the general atmosphere of exile culture, with its splendor, and vigor, and purity, and reverberative force, dwindled to a sprinkle of Russian language periodicals, anemic in talent and provincial in tone. (SO 37)

Nabokov's move to America – which is often referred to as the second displacement – was propelled by a force of circumstances and, oddly enough, leaving Western Europe with all he had accomplished in two decades affected Nabokov more gravely than the loss of his native land. In her introduction to *Nabokov's World*, Jane Grayson claims that Nabokov's loss was three-fold: "the loss, firstly, of his native Russian language, secondly, of his reputation as a Russian writer and, thirdly, of cultural identity" (4), the latter being the one "that Nabokov felt most keenly" (6). Distressed at his removal to the New World, he finally found his place and happiness in America, where the publication of *Lolita* launched him to world renown. He liked to think of himself as an American writer, who had once been Russian (SO 63), or more fittingly, as John Updike put it, Nabokov was "the best writer of English prose at present holding American citizenship" (qtd. in Appel xix). Should one concur with Nabokov in that the "nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance" (SO 63), one should not think of the devastating nature of his losses, but see his peregrinations as an inspiring disconnection from the parent culture and a removal into a different and new social and intellectual milieu.

The loss of the parent culture and the author's forced circumstances to write in a foreign language are a rare yet not unparalleled phenomenon in literature. Critics often mention the Polish-born writer Joseph Conrad alongside Nabokov; the only reason why this contrast is partially inadequate rests on the fact that Conrad had never used his native tongue for artistic purposes before embarking upon his career as a writer of English at the age of thirty. In her MA thesis, the Hungarian scholar Katalin Juhász writes that "it is more appropriate to compare [Nabokov] to ... Samuel Beckett: Beckett wrote in English and French, and like Nabokov, he also became a self-translator." (12) In "Doubles in Conrad and Nabokov," Ludmilla Voitkovska (web) notes that both Conrad's and Nabokov's loss of the parent culture and their

displacement from one world into another are often seen as the energizing force behind their persistent treatment of the double topos. G. M. Hyde also acknowledges that it was his loss of the parent culture that caused Nabokov to direct “all his art to the transcendence of this fatal nostalgia and the divided self engendered by it” (101). Voïtkovska believes that both writers use narrative doubles to represent the process of reading an expatriate text.

Nabokov’s disconnection from his parent culture and his partial failure to connect with his new, adopted culture resulted in the self-conscious duplication of his characters and is aptly mirrored by his constant shifting between multiple worlds, more than one culture, and several languages and quite often by the loss of all cultural backgrounds and the creation of unknown literary universes. In *Lolita*, for example, Humbert must acquiesce to the death of his childhood love Annabel, who is a part of his *past in Europe*, and loses Lolita too, who is the creation of his *adopted culture*. The relationship with both cultures reflects Nabokov’s nostalgia for Russia that literally slipped out of his hands as a young writer.

It is important to recognize and subject to critical evaluation in Nabokov’s novels what D. Barton Johnson has called the writer’s “two-world theory” (*Worlds in Regression*). Scholars were, for a long time, of the opinion that the “two world” theme is simply a product of biographical circumstances, but its classical and philosophical associations (as quoted earlier from Grayson) must not be forgotten either. Johnson is right in claiming that Nabokov’s esthetic and philosophical views owe much to the Symbolist movement in that “there exists, beyond the scope of the intellect another, more real world, and that what man sees before him is but a shadow and echo of that true reality” (*Worlds in Regression* 3). In addition to some striking affinities with the Symbolists, one cannot deny the fact that several “Anglo-American sub-texts and inter-textual patterns ... show that Nabokov’s novels continue and become a part of this literary tradition” (Pellérdi 1), whereby it is clearly illustrated that “alternatively valid interpretations” (2) are available to read and analyze the Nabokovian text. Johnson’s “two-world” terminology has proved both unsatisfactory and restrictive. It is more advisable to speak of the plurality of levels and not merely of the binary division of his worlds, hence the title of the dissertation, which stretches beyond the metaphysical “limits” of the otherworld and calls for the intense discussion of the permutations of the theme in ways represented through the close-reading of each short story and novel.

Boyd explains that by relying on the “two world” terminology one is unlikely to see the complexities of Nabokov’s worlds. The scholar identifies three fundamental reasons why Johnson’s terminology is inadequate: “First, because Nabokov stressed in numerous ways that the ‘other’ world he suspects surrounds the one we see is somehow *in* as well as *beyond* this one. Second, because ‘two worlds’ collapses or ignores several more or less distinct possible levels in the Nabokovian ‘beyond’ ... Third, that ‘two worlds’ overdefines as it undercounts. Nabokov suggests possibilities, and possibilities within possibilities, or, if you like, worlds within worlds: worlds in regression” (24). The reader may well have identified one of the possible underlying philosophical currents of Nabokov’s worlds by seeing the echo of that true, otherworldly reality as a resemblance to the model of the universe portrayed by Neo-Platonism. It has been convincingly demonstrated that Nabokov seemed to have stronger affinities with the nineteenth century than with the twentieth. In her doctoral dissertation Pellérdi also argues that the author’s world is more tightly connected to the European modernism of the first half of the twentieth century than to the American postmodernism in the latter half. In an interview, he named Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and Emerson as “the great American writers” he most admired. All of them are classic figures of the American Romantic period (Morton 5). It is widely accepted today to think of Nabokov as a Romantic in the Platonic tradition.

I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato whom I do not care for, but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to. (*SO* 69)

In closing – and, at the same time, ushering in the initial thoughts to be formulated in the first chapter of this dissertation – it is more appropriate to speak of a Nabokovian otherworld instead of making a split or a clearly observable bifurcation, as it were, within his literary galaxy. It seems reasonable to assert that Nabokov’s art, as has been demonstrated earlier, grows out of Romanticism, because he viewed this world as a pale reflection of the otherworld (Meyer 175). The many varieties of doublings, mirrorings, and inversions appear to be a key organizing principle of his fiction, connecting worlds and worlds apart: our reality and realities beyond human consciousness.

This, of course, does not mean that Nabokov's novels do not offer a sense of doubleness: Nabokov's otherworldly themes have been critically attested, and are claimed to be instrumental in the process of generating doubling, tripling, and the multiplication of characters, names, places, scenes, and so on. Although Nabokov "did not write the kind of thinly disguised transcription of personal experience which too often passes for fiction" (Appel xxii), it is important to recognize that the worlds vibrantly depicted in his novels would not have been brought into play had it not been for the author's sense of loss and displacement, which provided him with inspiration throughout his life. When one inspects Nabokov's trajectory, it becomes clear that in some sense his short stories offer the first glimpses into his theme of the otherworldly.

CHAPTER 1

Nabokov's Smaller Butterflies:

Metaphysics and World-Fashioning in the Stories

The second chapter of this dissertation will continue to claim that in recent decades Nabokov scholarship has seen revolutionary developments in the interpretation of the theme of the otherworldly in the author's involutedly composed fiction. Special emphasis has been laid on his short fiction and, to a smaller measure, on his poetry.³⁷ As pointed out earlier, studies which were published until the early 1970s primarily focused on the underlying analogies among Nabokov's works, while subsequent criticism was interested to learn to what degree his novels can be considered to be artifices. The Nabokovian novel cannot merely be seen from the perspective of form as opposed to content, playfulness as opposed to moral seriousness, influences as opposed to originality, collectivism as opposed to the creative power of the individual, and the like. Andrew Field, Carl R. Proffer, and Page Stegner rightly claimed that Nabokov, among other things was also an excellent esthete and a literary agent provocateur. Considering him as a mere esthete would be just as erroneous as seeing him as a writer engrossed only in social, political, and moral issues (as Nabokov did), and could result in a purblind approach to the full comprehension of his world. It cannot be stressed enough that Nabokov was indeed an esthete to some extent, but also a moralist and a humanist, the bearer of what he believed to be an inscrutable metaphysical secret a quandary to which even *he* could not find a satisfactory explanation. However, it may be ventured that perhaps the quest for this mystery might have only been a postmodern element of playfulness in order to confuse the unmindful reader. All of his characters, plots and emotions were not simply dramatizations of "ideas" about art,³⁸ but always gravitated toward a higher, transcendental state, labeled as the otherworld and recurring as an overarching theme throughout his literary career.

³⁷ Paul D. Morris devotes an entire book to Nabokov's poetry in *Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction*, edited by Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993) offers the most extensive analyses of the short stories to date.

³⁸ In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov makes the following caveat: "My advice to a budding literary critic would be as follows. Learn to distinguish banality. Remember that mediocrity thrives on 'ideas'. Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint" (66).

While a satisfactory assessment of Nabokov's *oeuvre* calls for historical, cultural and biographical contextualization, one should not conceal the fact that a prevailing pattern in his fiction is the interplay of his languages and the imaginary world that evoke the atmosphere of distant and inexistent, yet quaintly familiar, recognizable worlds. This chapter attempts to examine the notion of the otherworld through the discussion of two short stories, "The Return of Chorb" (1925) and "Terra Incognita" (1931), both of which encapsulate some staple features observable later in the author's more widely known fiction.³⁹ In what ways do the protagonists of these short stories – overtures to the novels addressing, to a greater measure, the questions of life and art, morality and ethics, language and culture, reality and imagination – serve as bearers of a thinly veiled truth about the existence of the otherworld? How do these stories become springboards of the fictional worlds that Nabokov creates in his later fiction only to demonstrate that the seemingly incommensurable lands, cultures and languages begin to interpenetrate one another, forming unified wholes instead of setting the hermetic confines of an isolated universe? Using two paradigmatic examples of how Nabokov fashions his worlds and worlds apart – invented countries, identities constantly at war with themselves, alternate histories, supernatural locations and worlds bordering on realities germane to science fiction – I shall continue to argue that the otherworld is the most pervasive conceptual grab-bag that still inspires, in one way or another, the most intense scholarly discussion in Nabokov studies. In accordance with the rationale of this dissertation, the analyses of the two short stories will show that evidence supporting the topical relevance of the otherworld even today is not thin when it is applied to the issues listed in this introductory note.

While most criticism of Nabokov has attempted so far to label the author as being an exponent of one philosophical, literary or critical school or movement or to compare him, based on a similar set of values, to likeminded authors, I attempt here to dispel any idea that would lead me to pigeon-hole Nabokov. Instead, it seems more fitting to conclude that Nabokov's works are most reassuringly understood as being positioned in what Brian McHale designates in *Postmodern Fiction* as "the zone" existing between two countries, two nationalities and two languages. Commonly

³⁹ "The Return of Chorb" was published in 1925 under the title "Vozvrashchenie Chorba," and was translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. "Terra Incognita" came out in 1931 under the same title in Russian, and was translated by Simon Karlinsky and the author. "Cloud, Castle, Lake" was first published in 1937 under the title "Oblako, ozero, bashnya," and was translated by Peter Pertzov in collaboration with the author.

categorized as works of transnational literature, such literary pieces create textual zones that “continually renegotiate the balance between the physical and the abstract, the historical and the fantastic, and the real and the speculative” (Trousdale 2). Convincing as the interpretation of Nabokov’s works as emblematic examples of transnational literature might appear, one should also be alert not to discard, at the same time, the metaphysical prism through which the writer’s works are seen even today.

Consequently, this chapter seeks to accomplish two objectives. First, it will offer a brief overview of the otherworld from the point-of-view of metaphysics, the underlying theme behind “*The Return of Chorb*,” second, it will continue with a discussion of world-fashioning, exemplified in “*Terra Incognita*” that provides an important model of dialogue that the writer establishes between physical geography and the imaginative text. The first analysis is built upon the central idea that the otherworld is a realm inhabited by the living (Alexandrov, Shrayner, *et al.*) who descend into its fissures in order to relive magically the past and recollect memories, all of which, however, turn out to be ill-fated attempts to recollect the special moments of bliss experienced earlier.

It will be argued that in “*Terra Incognita*” Nabokov places emphasis on the deliberate obfuscation of the story’s ontological planes by fashioning two geographical locations that are clearly set against one another, yet gracefully flow together at the same time. Following these surveys, I will try to conclude that the increasing complexity of the fictional worlds intertwined in Nabokov’s stories create the image of an otherworld that helps to call attention to its own fictionality and also manages to examine the relations between life and death and the vanishing borderline between these two plateaux.

While the objective of this chapter is by no means to offer an extensive analysis or a chronological survey of Nabokov’s shorter fiction, any discussion of the otherworld in his works would be inadequate without surveying a set of properties in his short stories – such as themes, mode of composition, tone, mood, narrative register and techniques – which were later to become the most distinctive trademarks of his full-fledged prose writings. Gennady Barabtarlo and Charles Nicol claim that for Nabokov “the short story could be regarded as an undersized form of the novel, a dwarf variant of the regular species” (78). However, we must note that the short stories constitute *not only* a tangential part of Nabokov’s early output which account

for his prevalent thematic concerns, but must be given full credit for their achievements in their own genre, or rather as texts belonging to well-defined generic categories.

It would be worth considering the body of criticism with respect to Nabokov's shorter fiction. Short stories written during his Russian years – from the early 1920s until 1939 – were collected in three volumes (*The Return of Chorb* [1930], *The Eye* [1938] and *Spring in Fialta* [1956]). The stories in English (including some stories translated by him in collaboration with his son after they had moved to the United States) appeared in the following collections: *Nine Stories* (1947), *Nabokov's Dozen* (1958), *Nabokov's Quartet* (1966), *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (1973), *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories* (1975), *Details of a Sunset* (1976), and, most recently, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1995), whose 2002 edition is used in the parenthetical citations of this dissertation.

Up until the late 1970s serious scholarly discussions about Nabokov's short stories were eclipsed by the critical assessment that concentrated largely on the author's longer prose fiction. The apparent lack of critical studies in the Anglo-American world was due to the fact that the majority of Nabokov's stories had been, for the most part, inaccessible in English translation until this time. The first systematic analysis of the early Russian short stories from Nabokov's émigré years in Berlin emanate from the pen of Marina Turkevich Naumann (*Blue Evenings in Berlin*, New York: New York UP, 1978), which was first published as a doctoral dissertation and later released in book form. Ljubo Dragoljub Majhanovich's *The Early Prose of Nabokov-Sirin: A Commentary on Themes, Style, Structure* (University of Illinois, 1976) was a large-scale doctoral dissertation, exclusively devoted to the close-reading of the short stories. Although never published independently as a book, Linda Nadine Saputelli's dissertation from Harvard University (1978) is a seminal work contributing greatly to Nabokov scholarship. Douglas Fowler (*Reading Nabokov*, 1973), Pekka Tammi (*Problems of Nabokov's Poetics*, 1985), Julian W. Connolly (*Nabokov's Early Fiction*, 1992), Charles Nicol and Gennadi Barabtarlo (*A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction*, 1993) as well as Andrew Field's early biographical account and study guide and Brian Boyd's two-volume "encyclopedia" are important sources dealing in part with the short stories. Individual articles were published as early as the 1930s, mostly in Russian, French and German, and later in English. A major landmark in Nabokov criticism as regards the short

stories is Maxim D. Shrayer's *The Poetics of Vladimir Nabokov's Short Stories, with Reference to Anton Chekhov and Ivan Bunin* (Yale University 1995), which was published as a book, entitled *The World of Nabokov's Stories*.

Throughout his Russian career in the interwar years, Nabokov produced accessible texts that create characters and fashion plots, present Russian litterateurs and members of the intelligentsia-in-exile as their protagonists, and, most interestingly, the settings are predominantly German. At this point a short digression is called for to underscore the importance of the German theme in Nabokov's works in the 1920s. In her discussion of German-related subject-matter, Priscilla Meyer ("The German Theme" 11) vigorously comments that the protagonists' endeavor to overcome loss and despair is one of the central concerns of these short stories. Note should be taken that it happened in 1922 (at the time when the author settled in Berlin) that V.D. Nabokov was assassinated by a far-right Russian activist, Pavel Miliukov. This calamity must have compelled the author to turn immediately to the issues of murder, insanity, exile, spiritual and physical survival, the hereafter and the transcendence of the soul. Germany in the stories, written between 1922 and 1939, functions not only as a geographical location that provides a mere setting, but rather as a *synthesizing element* that sets against one another cultures, traditions, and beliefs. Meyer states that Germany for Nabokov has a similar role as the United States in bridging the discrepancies between more than two worlds (Germany vs. Russia, death vs. the survival of the soul, reality vs. the fantastic, and the like). Meyer persuasively argues that "in Nabokov's earlier work, Berlin plays the role later given to America" (6). It can thus be argued that Germany, like the United States, France or Switzerland, is a typical Nabokovian space of geographical, cultural and thematic liminality qualifying as a sort of otherworld. In a large-scale comparative analysis of the *oeuvres* and trajectories of Hitchcock and Nabokov, Barbara Straumann touches on the question of liminality by pointing out that "exile denotes a state of radical liminality which can be located neither here nor there since it oscillates between an estranged past and a dislocated presence" (17).

Generically not fitting among the stories (as, for instance, *The Eye* or *The Enchanter*), "A Guide to Berlin" is a skillfully composed hybrid of a short story and a series of random observations, sharply inspecting the smallest of details along the streets of the German town in what can be best described as plotless musings about the figurations of space and time. Nabokov uses this fictionally constructed Berlin as

a launching pad for his contemplations on memory, time and evanescence. The story comprises five vignettes – akin to the postcard-like imagery in T.S. Eliot’s “Preludes” – to introduce the German town in its minutiae while dealing with the much larger question of identity and time. The first systematic study of the German theme in Nabokov’s works was undertaken by Dieter E. Zimmer (2002), who suggested that the author took little interest in German affairs (in fact, Nabokov thought of Germany as the epitome of *poshlost*’ and claimed not to have had a command of the language). Nonetheless, Zimmer conclusively demonstrated that “no other city is as tightly interwoven into Nabokov’s work as Berlin. There are hundreds of passages in his work dealing with some details of the place. He had an uncanny eye for detail that nobody else seemed to take note of. [...] In his books there definitely is Nabokov’s Berlin, a city distinguished by his keen and personal way of looking at it” (“Nabokov’s Berlin” web).

To date, Marina Turkevich Naumann has offered one of the most exhaustive analyses of the Russian short stories written in Berlin, emphasizing that the fullest appreciation of these stories is only available to those English-language readers who “understand the Russian émigré audience for which they were originally created. These exiled compatriots of his not only enjoyed Nabokov’s work but, more importantly, surrounded and influenced him” (4). The stories that appear under the title of “blue evenings in Berlin,” all reflect a German social and intellectual environment, featuring Russian émigré protagonists and the typical predicaments and issues with which they were confronted during those years. To my mind, the early apprentice stories and subsequent short stories by Nabokov from the 1930s can indeed be examined as a generic corpus independent of his later works. Nevertheless, one cannot but concur with Gennady Barabtarlo, who claims that the author’s stories relate to his novels in a similar manner as an étude does to the concerto: it is a different modus of artistic expression, not a small-scale version of it (“Nabokov’s Little Tragedies” 80). In an interview given to Stephen Jan Parker, the author claimed: “In relation to the typical novel the short story represents a small Alpine, or Polar, form. It looks different but is conspecific with the novel and is linked to it by intermediate clines” (qtd. in Parker 69). Meyer points out that the reason why Nabokov alluded to the short stories as being “a small Alpine form” of the novel is that the stories present a much greater unity of time and action than his longer prose, yet the same themes and *modus operandi* are characteristic of both genres, applying

the prism of his art to reflect the periods of his own life (“Nabokov’s Short Fiction” 119).

In a more recent analysis of the stories, Shrayner also notes that the “biggest achievement of [Barabtarlo’s] collection lies in its insistence on recognizing Nabokov’s “smaller butterflies” not merely as footnotes to his novels but as deserving a place among the world’s finest short stories” (3). Nevertheless, instead of focusing on the short stories as being generically separate from the novels, I want to argue that the stories discussed in this chapter form a single continuum mainly with his Russian novels but also encompass the overarching motifs of Nabokov’s subsequent works, particularly as regards the thematic dominance of the otherworld. In his introduction to the detailed analyses of Nabokov’s short stories, Barabtarlo maintains that the Russian short stories share with the novels “many essential features and evolutionary traits, [and] differ from them not merely in scale but also in structure, in narrative mode, and in the choice of dramatic and temporal conditions” (*Aerial View*, 78). Consequently, the approach of this chapter will be to set a paradigm that establishes a common ground between the short stories and the novels, while – in keeping with Shrayner’s postulation – it does not fail to acknowledge Nabokov’s original contribution to the Russian tradition, to the genre of short story as well as elaborating on the theme of the otherworld.

Sometimes we read Nabokov’s early stories convinced that what we read is the prefiguring of the sophisticated designs and recurrent themes of his novels. However, one must be warned not to consider the stories merely as hermetic, self-contained units, but rather as “slice-of-life” style pieces, each constructed as a series of observations; writings which concentrate largely on the nature of existence, memory and exile, self and the other, love and adultery, the artist in the modern world and,⁴⁰ most significantly, the ordering presence of a superior, otherworldly force, made apparent at the most decisive stages of the text. Thanks to the scholarship succeeding the author’s death, it has become clear that the search for the knowledge of a transcendental and unattainable metaphysical truth is a formative property in both the short stories and the novels. In Nabokov’s works, the experience of the *here* and *now* is set against the *there* and the *then*, emphasizing the importance of remembrance and

⁴⁰ In his introductory chapter to his book on Nabokov’s short stories, Shrayner points out that in addition to discussing the narrative poetics of the Nabokovian text (see Pekka Tammi’s *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics* [1985], a seminal narratological study of the entire corpus), these themes have been taken up most frequently by Western commentators and critics.

celebrating the creative capacities of the human mind, a lexicon that encapsulates and idiosyncratically structures the fragments of a past never to be recaptured in their entirety.

In light of the foregoing, this chapter is devoted to the discussion of two short stories from Nabokov's émigré years, which have been subjected to critical assessment so far. Any claim that the following two chapters may have to originality rests on the discovery that instead of assuming a unilateral approach of reading the stories as manifestations of a purely metaphysical hereafter, Nabokov introduces several ways of foregrounding the model of *different types and degrees* of the otherworld and utilizes them as a device governing the texts under analysis and occasionally linking them with the novels to be examined later. I demonstrate through the process of close-reading that the short stories chosen for this purpose embrace a set of themes, situations and technical devices expertly wrought into Nabokov's subsequent fiction.⁴¹

While the two short stories examined in this dissertation render themselves suitable in a formula that is generally identified as a "two-world model" (Johnson), several other stories only partially fit this pattern. As suggested above, the "two-world model" is too restrictive, which is why the introduction of a "multiple-world scheme" becomes necessary to expound the subtle operations in the text. In addition to the short stories scrutinized in this section, all of Nabokov's novels disclose another dimension into which their characters escape, highlighting, as it were, their disillusionment with the imperfections of the mundane world of reality known to average human beings. It has been shown that the otherworldly as a theme can function both as a repository of ideal memories and the antithesis of it.

The readings of the two short stories will demonstrate that the otherworld can assume a variety of forms, ranging from epiphanic episodes to the submersion into the unusually dystopian otherworld of unsettling phantasmagorias. Whatever the case may be, one must always be careful not to draw any clear dividing line between this world and the worlds beyond in the Nabokov's fictional universe. The author's faith in the metaphysical allowed him to establish a perceptible link between two or more worlds, reinforcing the view that the otherworld is never a self-contained realm

⁴¹ It is important to note that the Russian stories inherently differ from the novels in that they present a unity of time and action, and are open-ended and expansive rather than circular. The mode of narration in these works is third-person singular as opposed to the 'I'-narration of the stories written in English after 1939.

detached from present reality nor is it a dwelling place for the dead. It never supplants the real world but exists as an alternative to and compensation for its dissonances, offering an egress from the obscurity of one universe and an entrance into the brilliance of another one.

CHAPTER 2

The Chords of Fate in “The Return of Chorb”

Glimpses of Chorb in Nabokov’s Early Prose

Nabokov’s fifteen short stories, published in his collection *The Return of Chorb* (1930) under the pseudonym V. Sirin, are imbued with a strong sense of personal emotions and are thus often interpreted as the author’s reflections on the biographical impulses to which he was subject in the early 1920s. The analysis of the short story “The Return of Chorb” in this chapter will examine as to what extent the otherworld becomes accessible for Nabokov’s privileged characters through the supremacy of imagination and one’s ability to invoke the idylls of the past and bring into play mnemonic skills which help the protagonist to temporarily submerge into the otherworld consisting of a profusion of memories.

Nabokov would imply in the first, embryonic version of his autobiography, *Conclusive Evidence* (later published as *Speak, Memory*), that his works are best seen as points of connection between an impersonal art form and a personal life story (*SM* 37). It is beyond doubt that one of the most powerful thematic currents of his writing is the incessant search for his personal past, the idyllic, paradisiacal episodes of his youth, followed by the pain of loss, geographical dislocations and a future career that is more insecure than the famous “cradle rock[ing] above the abyss” in the opening passage of *Speak, Memory*. In this high-energy prose, Nabokov makes use of the image of the abyss, which separates one world from another, past from present, freedom from captivity, life from death, the conscious from the unconscious, and a series of other binary oppositions thematized in his fiction. It is this very abyss that renders itself unbridgeable, though Nabokov claimed to have actually “bridged the ‘esthetic distance’” in [his] own way by means of such absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism as [his] novels *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*” (*SO* 156). It seems that only the world of art – timeless and ideal – allows the imagination to overarch the abyss and enable one finally to endure the sufferings of one’s earthly existence, as demonstrated in the two texts mentioned by Nabokov in the previous quotation.

It is important to note that the early stories in this collection, written between 1924 and 1929, present characters and plots that deal with questions of death, exile

and nostalgia as their quintessential themes.⁴² In his discussion of “A Guide to Berlin” – a short story consisting of five independent vignettes, introducing, minutia of Berlin’s life in the 1920s – D. Barton Johnson argues that the stories in *The Return of Chorb: Stories and Poems* [...] were “the young writer’s laboratory [because] *these stories show a greater stylistic diversity than is to be seen in Nabokov’s later work*” (“A Guide to Berlin” 353; emphasis added). The stories from this period clearly indicate the Nabokovian concern that regaining one’s past in its entirety must be abandoned, because only through memory and consciousness is it possible to move into the future and make the past part of the presence. I agree with Meyer, who also posits that “[f]or the émigré, a return to Russia can take place only in fantasy or in the otherworld: in Nabokov’s art the two spaces overlap and death can be envisioned in terms of a return to Russianness” (“Nabokov’s Short Fiction” 122). In this section of my dissertation, I would like to argue that Nabokov’s short story, “The Return of Chorb” (1925) contrasts the mortal and static life – the “real” world, that is – in the Chekhovian ambiance of human seclusion in Berlin’s émigré environment with the irresistible beauties of the otherworld, which remains largely inaccessible for those unprivileged characters who lack the artistic vision and the sensibility with which to observe the glimmerings of the hereafter.

While the title story of the collection is an emblematic text that points towards the author’s preoccupation with the idealized realm of the hereafter, as Shroyer claims (1999), one should try to read Chorb’s tragic tale both as being indicative of Nabokov’s lifelong attempt to recapture the past with the help of memory and as a heart-rending response to the state of being bereft of one’s motherland. The affirmation of the inescapability of death and the keenly anticipated reunion between lovers provide a framework for the unity, coherence and themes of the story. Written in 1925, following the publication of his first novel *Mary*, the author not only

⁴² Meyer makes it clear that the stories from this period “may also be read as transpositions of Nabokov’s thought about his father” (“The German Theme” 5), who was accidentally killed in 1922 when a far-right Russian activist opened fire on liberal politician, Pavel Miliukov, whom Nabokov senior tried to defend with his own body. Justifiable as Meyer’s observation is, one should avoid examining the stories written in the 1920s from a solely biographical perspective. While Nabokov would speak proudly of his “gift of imagining facts” (*Nikolai Gogol*, 119), it would be fatuous to discount the importance of the infusion of personal records concerning his father’s assassination. Yet, it seems to me that Meyer – whose works about Nabokov should be appreciated for the clarity of their thought – overstates the importance of the autobiographical theme in these stories, emphasizing that the themes of murder, insanity, exile and the otherworld appear in the texts as direct consequence of his father’s murder. See also Nina Allan’s study *Madness, Death and Disease in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov* (University of Birmingham, 1994).

considers the impossibility of recapturing the object of his affection, but he also draws a parallel between the irretrievability of his Russian past in the author's life and the death of the beloved woman as thematized in his tale. In his exhaustive online analysis of Nabokov's short stories, Johnson discovers that the author tendentiously uses the analogy between the beloved woman and the image of Russia, claiming this to be a leitmotif in the early stories ("Spring in Fialta" being regarded as the culmination of the theme). *Mary*, through its uncomplicated narrative structure, describes how Ganin, the protagonist, recollects his youthful memories in Russia and manages to retain the image of his first love by journeying into the past with the help of memory and surviving letter fragments. I would like to refer briefly to an interesting connection between *Mary* and a lesser known Nabokovian short story. The original idea Nabokov had in mind was to write a novel entitled *Happiness* (*Schast'e*), but only one chapter of it was published and that as an independent short story ("A Letter That Never Reached Russia," 1925). Its protagonist is a young man who is composing a letter to a woman he had met and courted eight years earlier in Saint Petersburg. In his essay on *Mary*, Zimmer posits that the short story "is virtually undistinguishable from the one with the 'Mary' of the novel and the 'Tamara' of *Speak, Memory*" ("Mary," 347). The story is so titled because the narrator's attitude to the lost homeland is depicted with the immense happiness that only those can experience who have successfully detached themselves from their Russian past. He describes at length the most minute details of the city of Berlin that fill him with a "blissful, melancholy sensation" (*Stories* 137-8) instead of his pining away at the thought of the lost homeland. Roy Johnson states that these moments are best likened to the esthetic pleasure which is provoked by ordinary objects and quotidian happenings, akin to the Proustian or Woolfian "moment" or Joyce's "epiphany" (web).

Critics have found numerous similarities between Chorb's story and *Mary*, and among other things, argued that both protagonists are intent on reviving the memories of the women they treasured dearly, while resurrecting them also implies a largely abortive attempt to make their return to the Russia that had existed before the Bolshevik Revolution. Nabokov's famous caveat in his introduction of the English translation of *The Gift* must be mentioned here to the extent of a side note. He writes: "The world of *The Gift* being at present as much of a phantasm as most of my other worlds, I can speak of this book with a certain degree of detachment. ... *Its heroine is*

not Zina, but Russian Literature” (9; emphasis added). This statement also applies to a number of works by Nabokov, which seek to recapture the image of a beloved woman (Humbert’s *Lolita*, Nabokov’s *Tamara*, Pnin’s *Mira*, Chorb’s wife, and so on) in a similar manner as the fragments of the Russian homeland are brought together with the aid of memory and the power of Russian, as well as world literature. Using the subtle analogy between the Russian land and the beloved woman as a springboard, Leona Toker maintains in her essay that the reunion between Ganin and Mary is symbolically inadequate, because the protagonist’s “decision to avoid meeting Mary is parallel to giving up hope of returning to his motherland: he can only go there in his memories – without any passport” (“*Mary*: ‘Without Any Passport’”). Just like in *Mary*, where Ganin struggles persistently to cull information from surviving letters, rumors and other sources to recreate the image of the girl, Chorb too must embark upon a quest to resurrect the image of his dead wife by descending into a mythical underworld. It is interesting to note that in both cases the heroines only appear in the focal point of discussions and mental excursions, but never in the textual presence, that is, the story. Supporting this argument, I wish to demonstrate that the recollections of both protagonists reveal that coming into possession of an object, a person or a place is less important than the actual longing to have it. In *Nabokov, Marvell: Childhood and Arcadia*, Long appropriately states that in addition to the realistic portrayal of the émigré milieu in the 1920s of Berlin, *Mary* is a novel that shows “[l]ife in the present for Ganin [as] post-Arcadian, life after the severance, lived in what he calls ‘dispersion of the will.’ So too is it for the other Russian exiles whose memories are all dominated by the image of a Russia ‘before time began’” (23-4).

Narrative Closure: Transcending Boundaries

Several correspondences have been spotted between *Mary* and “The Return of Chorb,” which are developed more extensively in the later stories and novels. These include the flashback technique, discreetly wrought into the texts, the modes of narration they apply and the jumbled chronology of the events. It is therefore appropriate to focus on the short story for the light it may shed on the otherworldly as a theme in Nabokov’s oeuvre and on several other aspects of his novels, which are seen as trademarks of his mature style.

Chorb's story begins as the Kellers, a German married couple, are leaving the opera house, where they watched Wagner's *Parsifal*, and return home only to learn from their maid that the eponymous hero, the quaintly named Chorb, their son-in-law has returned from his honeymoon to "that pacific German city" (*Stories* 147) with the news that his wife had been taken ill. The reader gets to know right at the outset that Chorb's wife had suffered a fatal accident during their nuptial journey when "she had touched, laughing, the live wire of a storm-felled pole" (*Stories* 148).⁴³

With the news of the fatal occurrence, still unbeknownst to the in-laws, Chorb begins to catalogue restored memories by retracing his and his bride's journey to France and garnering details and piecing them together from the moment of their elopement through their nuptials until the narrative present. Upon his return to town, Chorb chooses to find accommodation at the selfsame "vile hotel" (*Stories* 148), where he and his wife spent their wedding night. He takes this opportunity to frantically attempt to recreate his dead wife's image by hiring a prostitute, with whom he does not engage in sexual intercourse.⁴⁴ It turns out that not only Chorb but also the prostitute had visited the same hotel room: both of them recall the same pink ornament – a *baigneuse* for Chorb, a picture for the hired woman – hanging on the wall.

A pale but jaunty lackey led Chorb down a crooked corridor reeking of dampness and boiled cabbage into a room which Chorb recognised – by the picture of a pink *baigneuse* in a gilt frame over the bed – as the very one in which he and his wife had spent their first night together. (*Stories* 149)

⁴³ Not everyone who stands in the limelight in Nabokov's works is bound to die of electrocution, nor does lightning always precipitate so miserable an end. In *Ada*, Nabokov writes about the nocturnal phenomenon of "the bothersome link of remote sheet lightning" (92), which later turns out to have been mistaken for a photographer's flash. See more on "sheet lightning" in Brian Boyd's online notes on *Ada*, 117.12-15. Peripheral to the main action as it is, I would like to digress briefly to the discussion of electrocution as one peculiar form of incidental death that also reappears in *Lolita* in a somewhat modified form. It is revealed early on in the novel that Humbert's "very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning)" (*AL* 10) when the protagonist was still a child. Several other references to lightning are scattered throughout *Lolita*. Humbert, for example, complains of having hallucinations "at periods of electrical disturbance and crepitating lightnings" (*AL* 217), while Lolita cries out in fear: "I am not a lady and do not like lightning" (*AL* 220). This subtle suggestion directs the careful reader's attention back to the encyclopaedia entry of *Who's Who in the Limelight*, inserted in Chapter 8 of Book One, in which Clare Quilty's play (in collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom), *The Lady Who Loved Lightning*, bizarrely reiterates the importance of the natural phenomenon. It cannot be mere serendipity, of course, that the keyword of volume's title immediately indicates this peculiarity.

⁴⁴ This scene bears striking resemblance to a scene in *Lolita*, in which Humbert Humbert seeks the company of Monique, a childlike prostitute in Paris, to spiritually and physically return to his adolescence, marked by his love for Annabel Leigh, Lolita's famous precursor.

She [the prostitute] switched off the light and stretched on the bed beside Chorb. Just before falling asleep she caught herself thinking that once or twice she had already been in that room: she remembered the pink picture on the wall. (*Stories* 153)

Chorb merely uses the prostitute to implant the image of his dead wife in his mind forever, but more importantly, the prostitute is presented here as a wife-surrogate and thus becomes an appropriate narrative device for him to be launched on a desperate quest in the otherworld. The moment of absolute proximity that Chorb seeks to establish with his wife occurs during the night when the protagonist is fast asleep. He awakens from his dream, crying out in horror:

He had woken up sometime after midnight, had turned on his table, and had seen his wife lying beside him. He screamed horribly, with visceral force. The white specter of a woman sprang off the bed. ... Then he slowly uncovered his face, slowly recognized the girl. With a frightened mutter she was hastily putting on her chemise. (*Stories* 153)

As the prostitute flings open the door, Chorb's irate in-laws arrive only to discover that the woman in the room is not their daughter. The story then ends on an indeterminate note as the harlot makes her exit, the in-laws enter the room, the lackey stands outside, and a sudden, eerie silence descends over the place. It can be rightly maintained that the unanticipated non-ending on the last page and the narrative twist that resourcefully brings together the beginning and the ending of the text are indeed great merits of this short story. It is for this reason that one cannot fully give credit to the claim made by Johnson, who stated that "[a]lthough occasionally tinged with Nabokov's verbal virtuosity, the stories are mostly straightforward in their structural aspect. It is perhaps in this area that they most sharply contrast with the later novels whose brilliance stems from an almost uncanny integration of verbal stylistic detail and intricate plot structure" ("A Guide to Nabokov's" 353). The narrative structure and Chorb's recounting of the minutiae of the tale accommodate repetitions, reminiscences and devices of anticipation. Turkevich Naumann is therefore correct in claiming that the "*siuzhet* is classically balanced and can be patterned as ABA" (21). It is worth observing how the opening scene of the story is connected with the ending of the dramatic night Chorb spends with the prostitute, interrupted by the long descriptive passages of his mental excursion. The sequence of events is cleverly orchestrated so as to create a high-pitched dramatic closing of the story: the first

narrative stratagem that readers recognize is the structural circularity that brings together the scene when the Kellers are leaving the opera house and the moment when the prostitute draws aside the window curtain, behind which “the casement was open and one could make out, in the velvety depths, *a corner of the opera house*, the black shoulder of a stone Orpheus outlined against the blue of the night” (153; emphasis added). The intervening time, which encapsulates the events from the elopement of Chorb and his wife until the present time, spans approximately six months. “Numerous flashbacks are combined with frequent indications of seasons, months, and hours that convey a realistic sense of extended time in a very few pages” (Naumann 23).

Akin to the prototypical Chekhovian zero-ending, Nabokov also leaves the ensuing conflict unresolved at the story’s apparent closure, allowing readers to prefigure the continuation, or rather, the augmentation of narrative space. I am convinced that the zero-ending in this case is not merely an instrument for arranging a dramatic confrontation, as Roy Johnson maintains in his brief analysis, but it also provides for the continual presence of the protagonist and his surroundings in a world which is only attainable through artistic sensibility and the reader’s imaginative ability. Most crucially, though, the closing scenes of several works by Nabokov precipitate an entry into a higher dimension, a different plane of reality, instead of affirming the finitude that mortal life signifies. It seems appropriate to think about the final lines of *The Gift*, which invite the reader to see the glimmerings of another existence. Fyodor, the novel’s hero bids farewell to his book, and concludes in beautifully composed poetic tropes, also reverberated in the title of this chapter:

Like mortal eyes, imagined ones must close some day. Onegin from his knees will rise – but his creator strolls away. And yet the ear cannot right now part with the music and allow the tale to fade; the chords of fate itself continue to vibrate; and no obstruction for the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow’s morning haze – nor does this terminate the phrase. (333)

In addition to being a characteristic feature of his early short stories, zero ending is not only used by Nabokov as a time-honored narrative device to divert the narrative from its expected denouement, but also to refer to metaphysical immortality, which would be nearly implausible to achieve had the author chosen to bring his work full circle, which would not have allowed the chords of fate itself to continue to vibrate.

“The Return of Chorb” is an illustrative text that helps immortalize the image of Chorb’s wife even though the protagonist fails in his attempt to recapture her from what is most likely to be reminiscent of a mythical otherworld. I have pointed out earlier in this chapter that to come into possession of the coveted person is of secondary importance in comparison with the sensation of desire to have her. Neither Chorb, nor Ganin was able to bring their loved ones back to the “real” world. The two main characters in *Mary* cross paths and indirectly communicate with each other as more and more letter fragments are shared with the readers. Likewise, Chorb’s wife, as mentioned above, never appears in the story, only through her husband’s mental meanderings, spanning half a year and inserted between the two ends of the story.

Criticism has remained divided over the interpretation of Nabokov’s worldview, and controversial approaches are encountered even today. In *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Richard Rorty states that the author’s works jam his esthetic concerns, his constant preoccupation with cruelty (one might, I believe, call this a moral philosophy) and his faith in a type of immortality or timelessness which is conferred on a select number of his characters (often referred to as the Nabokovian favorites). Rorty writes that Nabokov’s works point to the existence of metaphysical and literary immortality:

Over and over again, Nabokov tried to tie this highly unfashionable concern for *metaphysical immortality* together with the more respectable notion of *literary immortality*. He wanted to see some connection between creating tingles, creating aesthetic bliss, being an artist in the sense in which he and Joyce and Dickens were artists and Orwell and Mann were not, and freeing oneself from time, entering another state of being. He is sure that there is a connection between the immortality of the work and of the person who creates the work – between aesthetics and metaphysics, to put it crudely. But, unsurprisingly, *he is never able to say what it is*. (150; emphasis added)

In my opinion, it is a remarkable quality of Nabokov’s prose that he often chooses to leave the conclusion of his works open-ended in order to provide for the existence of a transcendent realm, which can be conceived of as the continuation of a journey, signaled as early as in the epigraph of *Invitation to a Beheading*. The idea apparently derives from a philosopher (one of the author’s invented characters) and functions as a hallmark of the whole Nabokovian world: “Comme un fou se croit Dieu, nous nous croyons mortels” (“As a madman believes himself to be God, we believe ourselves to be mortal”). However, immortality in the case of Nabokov may imply something

different from survival after death, as it does, for example, in *Invitation to a Beheading*. It is for this reason that the open-endedness of “The Return of Chorb” provides further intellectual impetus for the reader to conclude that the story transcends the limitations of the written page and the glimmerings of the otherworld can be still sensed even after the text comes to an end. Such otherworldly glimmerings are also observable in the case of Chorb’s wife, who is temporarily transferred back into the present through the workings of her husband’s memory. Similarly to the uncertain, ethereal nature of the otherworld expressed by the non-ending of the short story, one must come to the realization that in Nabokov no certainties about immortality or timelessness can be posited. Only intuitions about it exist. In keeping with the inexpressibility of ideas, Nabokov gave an elusive reply to the question whether he believed in God (see *SO* 45), and appeared equally reluctant to solve the inscrutable mystery of the nature of the “real” world and the otherworld.

Dark and Light Tonalities in Chorb’s Story

Not only does the colorful imagery (shades and reflections, contrasts of black and white and the use of the chiaroscuro technique) of the story set an otherworldly, eerie mood for the story, but also the subtext of the Orpheus myth and other allusions create a similar atmosphere. Shroyer (*The World*) points out that Nabokov experiments with black and white, each drawing attention to the dissimilarities between Chorb and his wife. Innocence and purity – traditionally represented by the color white – are associated with his wife, whereas the fact that Chorb’s past is shrouded in darkness and his intentions are unclear for the in-laws induces readers to think of him in terms of dark shades and blackness. In the passage below black pebbles, a black fir tree, a hut of silvery-gray scales are starkly counterbalanced by the whiteness of the natural environment:

And just as he had tried, on the southern beach, to find again that unique rounded *black pebble* with the regular little *white belt*, which she had happened to show him on the *eve of their last ramble*, so now he did his best to look up all the roadside items that retained her exclamation mark: the special profile of a cliff, a hut roofed with a layer of *silvery-gray scales*, a *black fir tree* and a footbridge over a *white torrent*, and something which one might be inclined to regard as a kind of fatidic prefiguration: the radial *span of*

a spider's web between two telegraph wires that were beaded with *droplets of mist*. (Stories 148)

While Shrayner's (1999) analysis of the story comes close to being one of the most exhaustive in terms of the role of colors and shades, he is somewhat oblivious of the importance of phrases in the text which further elucidate the juxtaposition of black/white and dark/light in Chorb's world. In the passage above, the couple appears "on the eve of their last ramble" after the setting of the sun. "The radial span of a spider's web" also underscores the role arthropods have played in mythology, symbolism and popular culture as a venomous species fueling fears and often being harbingers of death; similarly to the thick and impervious cobweb, the "droplets of mist" also create dark atmospheric conditions.

Connolly provides an insightful treatment of the subject of color imagery in Nabokov's works by making the claim that "in certain works [Nabokov] brings the colors of black and white together in contexts associated with death or the cessation of consciousness" (54). Listing the major works where this recurrent pattern crops up (*Bend Sinister*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Laughter in the Dark*), Connolly comes to a conclusion – plausible, yet somewhat reductive in such a serious context – that Nabokov's use of the black and white color imagery is attributable to the fact that

[t]he process of dying, it appears, takes one away from the pulsating, vibrant richness of life's experiences. It entails a withering away of possibilities. ... There is ample evidence in Nabokov's work to suggest that the otherworld into which a dead person may step could have unfathomable riches of its own. However, as long as one remains on *this* shore, on *this* side of the divide, the loss entailed in the waning of life can perhaps be given emblematic representation through color, as if the full spectrum of colors drains away, leaving only the stark contrast of black and white. (62-3)

Interesting as the intensity and changing of dark and light colors in the English text may be, the original Russian version of Chorb's story also creates a correspondence of colors and sounds (Shrayner 92) by using words that include the phoneme *ch* (also the word-initial sound of "chërnyi," meaning "black" in Russian and constituting the first sound of the protagonist's name, that is, Chorb). Shrayner also discovers a telling connection between "Chorb and *chërt*, the Devil/Satan of the Russian popular imagination and pre-Christian mythology. In fact, an alternative spelling of the word,

chort, prevailed in the pre-1918 Russian orthography, which Nabokov the émigré followed as a matter of principle” (91).

Besides identifying the role of color imagery in the short story, neither Shrayer (1999) nor Connolly (2005) hint at the loose chess analogy that should have at least been marginally mentioned in relation to black and white and the importance the two colors have in the patterning of the short story. While several narratives (most notably *The Defense*) have been analyzed on the basis of chess motifs and the multiple meanings they convey, the black and white analogy in Chorb’s story is definitely not woven into the text that seeks to solve a literary chess problem. Nevertheless, it is the opposition of black/white and dark/light that reminds one of the highly elaborate patterning and the extravagant chessboard moves of many other novels. In the short story, black and white might demonstrate two opposite ways of understanding national identity: the battle between good and evil forces, and mankind’s imperfect earthly existence as colored black is contrasted with the purity, elegance and non-violent nature of the otherworld that is associated with whiteness and lighter tones. However, the sophisticated narrative twist at the story’s closure justifies the claim that chess *games* are a contest between two opposed forces, white and black, but competition in chess *problems* is “between the composer and the hypothetical solver” (*SM* 290), that is, the reader in the case of Chorb’s story, who is invited to search for the keys in the text in order to work out a solution or two for the prefabricated problem. A propos *The Defense*, the author’s only book where chess is given a leading role in the plot, Brian Boyd claims that Nabokov “was also a composer of chess problems. In *The Defense* he learned not only to pile pattern upon pattern but to pose problems as exact as those he could set in a chess diagram. And like his chess problems, he expected his fictional ones to be solved” (*RY* 332). Worthy of note is the fact that that “[i]n both chess problems and chess games, the sequence of events is controlled by predetermined principles” (Gezari web), which also explains that one specific chess problem calls for one predetermined solution. Nabokov’s modern art from the 1920s is characterized by elegant and streamlined design, encouraging readers to agree that meaning is objective and that each puzzle has only one solution to be produced by the careful reader.

Even though the author’s earliest literary efforts proffer some sort of solution to the mysteries of life and seldom leave questions entirely open, it would not be fair to promptly label these works as exemplary works of modernist literary scholarship.

Chorb's story – a modernist piece at face value, as has been pointed out in the previous passage – calls for the participation of the reader by actually asking them to make moral judgments about Chorb on the basis of the intense use of dark/light juxtapositions and the subtle references to closely guarded secrets. I should like to marginally (and somewhat hypothetically) remark here that the *playfulness* which is given such an evident and leading role in Nabokov's later postmodernist fiction (for example, in *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*) can be discerned in traces in this early short story. One would heedlessly choose to believe – based on the textual indications of colors, shades and sounds in "The Return of Chorb" – that the protagonist is doubtless a negative and treacherous character; this notwithstanding is a false indication, a false key, cajoling the reader into recognizing the story for its serious tone rather than the amount of playfulness it conveys. It is *not* the objective of this chapter to state anything conclusively, let alone classify Nabokov as an artist belonging to any school.

Exploring the Orpheus Motif: the Story of a Quest

In order to relive the past and create the atmosphere of an otherworldly peregrination – where Chorb, as a modern Virgil, takes the role of our guide for the journey – Nabokov incorporates the Orpheus myth into the tale to provide its framework. It will be instructive to take a look at the passage where Nabokov makes a reference to the Greek mythological figure, whose statue appears just before the story takes a dramatic turn:

Presently she [the prostitute] straightened up, yawned, scratched her thigh, and, just as she was, naked, but in her stockings, drew aside the window curtain. Behind the curtain the casement was open and one could make out, in the velvety depths, a corner of the opera house, the black shoulder of a stone Orpheus outlined against the blue of the night, and a row of light along the dim façade which slanted into the darkness. Down there, far away, diminutive dark silhouettes swarmed as they emerged from bright doorways onto the semi-circular layers of illumined porch steps, to which glided up cars with shimmering headlights and smooth glistening tops. (*Stories* 153)

While a series of critics have elaborated on the importance of the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus in this crucial episode of Chorb's tale, Shroyer (*The World*) has offered the most exhaustive analysis of the story in terms of its biblical, mythological, and

literary associations.⁴⁵ The allusion to Orpheus in the text instantly draws the reader's attention to the classical story, in which the distinguished Thracian poet, who played the lyre – the instrument, provided by Apollo – so beautifully that he could charm all objects animate and inanimate. Orpheus descends into the netherworld to search for Eurydice, his dead wife, who had inadvertently stepped on a viper and died on the spot. After he is admitted to enter Hades and meet his wife anew, Orpheus is allowed to return with her to the world above on condition that he walks in front of her and never looks back. Not heeding the warning, Orpheus turns back only to see his wife begin to fade away. In like manner, Chorb uses his “creative laboratory” (Shrayer 1999) to travel to the otherworld and regain his wife, but fails to complete his undertaking. In his analysis of the thematic dominance of the supernatural in several short stories, Connolly claims that Nabokov included the statue of Orpheus in order to signal the impracticability of Chorb's quest, “not so much because the dead are irrevocably lost to us, but because one must trust that they are with us all along: one should not pause and attempt to verify their presence through a physical sighting” (*The World* 30).

It is in this regard that one should evince one's interest in taking a side-glimpse at the question of myth in Nabokov works. His constant renunciation of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound is based on the fact that both poets advocated anti-liberal political views, but more cogent was the author's reason in rebuffing both of them on account of their reliance on the “mythical method” in modern literature. In his epilogue of *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*, Foster, Jr. states that the author “viewed the systematic, all-embracing use of myth as an artistic mistake” and preferred showing “the expressive power of the narrative method, the very approach Eliot had rejected forty years before” (224). Nabokov is known to have loathed myth wherever he encountered it (Mann's *Death in Venice* is a prime example of his abhorrence), and labeled it with the term *poshlost'* for reasons to be established later in this chapter. In his lecture on *Ulysses*, Nabokov writes that “there is nothing more tedious than a protracted and sustained allegory based on a well-worn myth” (LL 288). As we have seen with Nabokov, myths are similar to stereotypes in many ways, because neither

⁴⁵ Julian W. Connolly's reading in *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992, 11-16) is a notable example. Linda Saputelli Zimmermann devotes a lengthy analysis of “The Return of Chorb” in her PhD dissertation, “The Russian Short Stories of Vladimir Nabokov: A Theatrical and Structural Analysis” (Harvard University, 1978).

has “parody’s power to intervene in some cultural corpus and creatively rework it” (Foster 209),

There is, however, a common denominator in the case of parody and myth, as they both allude to something not contained within the text. Instead of applying Eliot’s term, the “mythical method” to the Orpheus analogy in the short story at hand, it would be tempting to read the tale as a “close parody” of the Greek myth (the phrase comes from Nabokov, who so referred to the Homeric analogy in *Ulysses*). Nabokov parodies the myth (also that of *Parsifal*) when pitiable Chorb is sitting on the edge of the bed, “clasping his hairy shin” (*Stories* 153).

The image of Orpheus recurs elsewhere in Nabokov as an *aide memoire*, portending that irrespective of how painstaking the quest is the protagonist has engaged in, the harmony and perfection of the otherworld can only be had for a transitory moment. While it seems that Chorb falls into a state of near madness as he tries to cope with his wife’s death, he oddly enough undergoes a spiritual experience, a journey into the mind and the soul, which does not lead him to a cul-de-sac, as it were, but allows him to imbibe the purity, freshness and uniqueness of the air of the coveted otherworld. When Chorb returns to each locus of his and his deceased wife’s honeymoon and attempts to garner their common impressions, he comes to realize the omnipresence of his dead wife in all the natural objects surrounding him. Chorb, as it is indicated in the following passage, sees his dead wife in every small detail of the landscape that keeps disclosing the world in a way that resembles the vertiginously rapid succession of motion pictures:

[S]o now he did his best to look up all the roadside items that retained her exclamation mark: the special profile of a cliff, a hut roofed with a layer of silvery-gray scales, a black fir tree and a footbridge over a white torrent, and something which one might be inclined to regard as a kind of fatidic prefiguration: the radial span of a spider’s web between two telegraph wires that were beaded with droplets of mist. She accompanied him: her little boots stepped rapidly, and her hands never stopped moving, moving – to pluck a leaf from a bush or stroke a rock wall in passing – light, laughing hands that knew no repose. (*Stories* 148-9)

One staple feature of the story as well as other works by Nabokov is the amplification of minute details in such a way that they begin to convey the significance which would be otherwise overlooked or regarded as inconsequential bits of a descriptive passage. The fact that everyday objects are elevated to a metaphysical level is most

pertinently reflected through Nabokov's subtle reference to "a moth [that has] struck the lamp with a ping" (*Stories* 150), perishing in the same morbid fashion as did Chorb's late wife. Independently from this story, some thirty years later, Nabokov invokes a similar scene as Humbert and Quilty converse on the veranda of The Enchanted Hunters hotel and observe "the hundreds of powdered bugs wheeling around the lamps in the soggy black night, full of ripple and stir" (*Lolita* 126). I agree with Nina Allan, who conjectures that being struck by lightning (or electrocuted in any other form) resembles "some sort of call from on high" (59), usually implying an angelic or otherworldly status in the protagonist's eyes.

The spectral world of shadows, the constant shifts in narrative focus and the incomplete closure aim to have a specifically dramatic purpose, namely the attempt to throw the reader off balance as regards their expectations. On the face of it, Chorb's story appears to be a maniacal quest to resurrect his wife, yet the final bedroom scene indicates that *immortalizing one's image in the human mind has little in the way of bringing the deceased back into physical reality*. Wyllie concludes that Chorb's intention was to implant the image of his dead wife into his memory, because "memory enables him to preserve a set of associations that are controllable and inviolable. He does not want to bring her back from the dead, for his sense of her spiritual presence terrifies him" (10). The "return" that is mentioned in the title has been interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, including the obvious transition (or rather, a constant shift) from past to present, from France to Germany, from the mythical, idyllic otherworld back to harsh reality, and from the waning autumn days to regenerative spring. Nabokov has been praised for his achievement of incorporating references to myth and legend from the tale of Orpheus as well as *Parsifal*, both of which seek to reinforce the subliminal implications of the story.

On a side note, it would be important to call attention to a quaint affinity that Priscilla Meyer also writes about. She implies in her essay, analyzing the pervasiveness of the German theme, an obvious analogy between Gustave August Bürger's romantic ballad, *Lenore* and Nabokov's short story. William, Lenore's young fiancé, has not returned from the Seven Years' War. Only his ghost returns when the clock strikes midnight, and he elopes with the woman on horseback to their bridal bed. As their nocturnal journey comes to an end, the equestrian knight arrives at the graveyard, and the bridal bed is transformed into the grave that Lenore shares with Death himself (he indeed appears as a skeleton here with scythe and hourglass in

hand). Similarly, Chorb's wife awaits the coming of her husband in the otherworld, where the couple meets for the last time, only to confirm the trite inscription that the in-laws had imprinted in the bridal rug: "We are together unto the tomb." The tomb in the inscription might as well correspond to the eternal conjugal bed of the couple, calling into mind Bürger's ballad where the graveyard (in Chorb's story, the otherworld) grotesquely comes to represent the final reunion between the beloved (also note that the "white specter of a woman" [*Stories* 153] jumping off the bed in the dead of the night can be regarded as the coming of Death). Convincing as Meyer's analogy might appear, one important correspondence must be noted at this point: Lenore and the ghost of William are riding the horse at a high speed, just as Chorb and his wife are being transported in a fast-moving, horse-drawn fiacre. I have discovered that the similarity is notable in the following passage: "A fiacre took him through the town. The cabby kept indolently flapping his reins, while steadying the trunk with one hand. Chorb remembered that she whom he never named liked to take rides in cabs (*Stories* 149)." ⁴⁶

Wagner's opera (*Parsifal*) appears as an important subtext in the story, implying that Chorb's longing for his deceased wife has something in common with the grail-quest of Parsifal: "The same black poodle with apathetic eyes was in the act of raising a thin hindleg near a Morris pillar, straight at the scarlet lettering of a playbill announcing Parsifal" (*Stories* 149). Plodding along the main avenues of what is described as a "quiet and chaste town" (*Stories* 152), Chorb creates the impression of a farcical, gawky individual, who is the parody rather than the embodiment of an epic hero like Parsifal. Although Chorb is seen to have been immersed into the ritual resurrection of his dead wife, the reader is thrown off balance when the alleged tragedy of a legendary hero turns out to be comic relief at its finest. Nabokov succeeds in mitigating the dramatic tension and the subsequent denouement by metamorphosing his rootless hero into the converse of a triumphant individual. On realizing, in a state of delirium, that the prostitute on his bedside is not his wife, Chorb feels relieved of a great weight: "And Chorb heaved a sigh of relief, for he realized that the ordeal was over. He moved onto the green couch, and sat there,

⁴⁶ Meyer's choice to consider the intricacies of Bürger's ballad was not accidental, as Nabokov points out the importance of *Lenore* in his commentaries to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (253, 330, 500), where Vasily Zhukovsky's *Svetlana* (1813) is recalled as a famous ballad that parodies "the equestrian and funereal theme of Bürger's *Lenore*" (330). While it is a translation of *Lenore*, Zhukovsky's work is also an idiosyncratic rendering of the original German ballad (*Ludmilla* [1808] precedes the publication of the ballad, and is also a translation and the rewriting of Bürger's work).

clasping his hairy shins and with a meaningless smile contemplating the harlot” (*Stories* 153).

The myth of Orpheus in the short story is not only used as a key component to validate the importance of the quest motif, but the rhythmical nature of the Nabokovian text is also intimately linked with the figure of the Greek hero. It is for this reason that I should like to make a comment on the prosodic structures in the short story. However, it is also necessary at the same time that I reflect on Nabokov’s rich appreciation of the Orpheus myth in “The Visit to the Museum.” Its narrator, who has been asked by a friend to purchase a portrait of his grandfather, becomes disoriented in the labyrinthine interior of a small provincial museum and suddenly finds himself *not* in the paradisiacal Russia of his dreams, but “in the factual Russia of today” (*Stories* 285), a totalitarian dictatorship characterized by bleakness, oppression, and the sheer theatricality lying in all the details. The protagonist directs the reader’s attention to a number of objects surrounding him as he gradually enters the otherworldly realm through a corridor connecting this world with another one. Similarly to Chorb’s quest, he also describes the figure of Orpheus: “the walls, all mirror, reflected an enfilade of grand pianos, while in the center there was a pool with a bronze Orpheus atop a green rock” (*Stories* 283). The reappearance of the mythical hero in the short story also suggests the impossibility of the mission of transporting anything back to the appalling Soviet version of his beloved Russia. The netherworld here represents the Russia of his dreams, whereas the shocking reality is embossed by the tyrannical state with its very theatricality, artificiality and drabness. I believe that Nabokov’s decision to use the Orpheus myth as a leitmotif for Chorb’s story cannot be mere serendipity, but rather a “fatidic prefiguration” (*Stories* 148), a concatenation of events, and the result of the elaborate patterning, all of which are the essential thrust of the author’s philosophy. In addition to the otherworldly resonances of the story, the role that the statue of Orpheus plays is, to my mind, *also* a clear indication of the significance that musicality occupies in Nabokov’s early prose. Orpheus is known for the captivating power he possesses as a musician, similarly to Nabokov, who also composes his lines with particular precision (despite his openly expressed disavowal of music as a form of entertainment [*SO* 34-35]). Turkevich Naumann claims that “[t]he magic of prosody may improve upon what we call prose by bringing out the full flavor of meaning, but in plain prose there are also certain rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by

recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation” (32). Shrayer has been excessively careful not to overlook the importance of Nabokov’s metricized prose (or “fancy prose style” as David Lodge refers to this important feature of the author’s works in *The Art of Fiction* [94]) “in which prosodic markedness signals the privileged nature of the protagonist’s memories” (108). While Naumann (1978) posits early on in her dissertation that the poetry of Nabokov’s prose was characteristic of his early period, she fails to notice the subtle analogy between musicality and the special, revelatory moments that the Nabokovian protagonist often undergoes. In one of his “strong opinions” Nabokov underscores the importance of the union of poetry and prose:

Well, poetry, of course, includes all creative writing; I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme. The magic of prosody may improve upon what we call prose by bringing out the full flavor of meaning, but in plain prose there are also certain rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation. As in today’s scientific classifications, there is a lot of overlapping in our concept of poetry and prose today. The bamboo bridge between them is the metaphor (*SO* 44).

Critics have claimed, and convincingly so, that most of the author’s short stories serve as vehicles of epiphany, which is traditionally conceived as the striking realization or illumination of some great truth.⁴⁷ Nabokov used these moments of revelation within his short stories to account for something manifest that the protagonist had long cherished, coveted, anticipated or judged as true or imminent to happen. Epiphany as a literary device has become widely known through Joyce’s mosaics of Dublin’s sparkling social and intellectual life (most notably in *The Dubliners*), and it always appears in Nabokov as a moment of truth, a flash that illumines the holistic understanding of the world, comprising a near-religious, near-poetic manifestation, often indicated by the prosody and musicality of the text or by the euphony of the words. Through the conflation of the Russian and English text, Shrayer concludes that “both [versions] contain units of metricized prose in which prosodic markedness signals the privileged nature of the protagonist’s memories” (*The World* 108). Shrayer establishes a clear link between epiphanic glimpses of the otherworld and metric

⁴⁷ In relation to Nabokov’s short story “A Guide to Berlin,” Field calls attention to the fact that in several places the story “comes extremely close to the form of the prose poem” (*Nabokov: His Life in Art* 141).

prose in the story and buttresses them with textual evidence taken from the Russian text. He applies prosodic and metrical analysis to Chorb's story, and it seems likely that Nabokov's prose style is saturated with the use of passages which often remind one of elaborately crafted verse at climactic moments or moments of dramatic power.⁴⁸ He also mentions that such is the composition of the corresponding English passage that traces of "prosodic organization of prose" (108) are evident and serve an important role in creating euphony in the text.⁴⁹

It is through the process of identifying prosodic markers in the short story that readers are reminded that the protagonist is made privy to the beauties of the otherworld. Such privileged, visionary moments are most suitably described in verse, and prosody is by definition a quality most often connected with poetry. In addition to writing novels and short-stories, Nabokov was indeed a prolific poet of exceptional talent, whose verse concentrates on the loss of time and one's homeland by making use of traditional rhyme schemes (note, for example, the 999-line "Pale Fire," written in heroic couplets and incorporated into the novel of the same title). Appreciative students and scholars of Nabokov are aware that the first poem the Russian master composed at the age of fifteen was entitled "Music" and described the splendor of a fountain in an elegantly melodic fashion as "its wondrous, its silvery voice, / plashes, and quivers" (qtd. in Frascella web). It is this musicality that Nabokov – despite his avowed abhorrence for music and musical occasions – establishes in much of his prose to the extent of some brief and special moments. Nevertheless, he was "perfectly aware of the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature, especially in matters of structure" (SO 35), and his pronounced aversion for music opened avenues of enquiry among scholars.⁵⁰ Morris writes probingly about

⁴⁸ Cf. Joyce's use of special sound effects and rhythms. Cheng quotes Samuel Beckett's well-known comment about the musicality of *Finnegans Wake* that "[it] is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. [Joyce's] writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (Beckett 1972, 14)" (391). (Of course, any true Nabokovian would consider such a statement a cardinal sin, as the author himself compared *Wake* with a "persistent snore in the next room" [SO 71]). Joyce is also known for using metrical patterns intentionally for specific purposes, usually at the moment of something exquisite happening in the story. For example, metrical prose and Joycean epiphany are most illustratively tied together in the famous bird-girl scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

⁴⁹ Ample evidence is provided in Shroyer, 107-8.

⁵⁰ Nabokov at the Limits: Redrawing Critical Boundaries (Ed. Lisa Zunshine. New York: Garland Publishing, 1999) is an excellent discussion of how musicality permeates the Nabokovian text. Different musical forms and genres are dealt with in the book, including opera, folk songs, popular music, natural melody, ballet, etc. The incorporation of popular music in *Lolita* was important for Nabokov, who expressed, in this way, not so much his appreciation for music but rather to the role that music occupies in American popular culture. See Barbara Willie's "Popular Music in Nabokov's

the lyrical aspects of Nabokov's prose, claiming, in relation to *The Gift* and other works where lyricism plays a dominant role, that "Nabokov the poet is always present behind Nabokov the novelist. Replete with alliteration and assonance, rhythm and rhyme, metered prose and startling metaphors, Nabokov's prose famously exhausts the aesthetic potential of expository prose" (281). On a concluding note, I should point out that it cannot be accidental that Nabokov chose to include, of all the mythical characters, the legendary figure of Orpheus whose relationship both with music and the otherworld is more than remarkable.

Chorb and the Kellers: the Question of *Poshlost*' Revisited

Chorb's story is saturated with numerous religious references, confirming that the protagonist represents higher social standing and embraces an extremely refined intellectual and emotional world that is without equal in the petty bourgeois German milieu of the 1920s, symbolized by his in-laws. Shrayner explores the story's biblical implications, claiming that the protagonist is noticeably alien to his world in comparison with a set of characters that can contentedly find their rightful place among the average members of society. Of all the biblical allusions, the sound resemblance of Chorb's name has been mentioned by critics in conjunction with *cherubim*, the second of the nine orders of angels in mediaeval angelology, who are seen as the embodiment of God's highest potencies, including intelligence, sovereignty and the lust for learning about the secrets of life and death. Nabokov's protagonist attempts to come to grips with his wife's death and, similarly to the cherubim, understand the nature of human existence. Shrayner maintains, by the same token, that Chorb's name evokes the tribulations of the Jews as they make their homecoming from the Babylonian captivity. Cherub thus "refers either to the leader of a group of Jews who returned to Israel but failed to prove their genealogy or to an unknown place in Babylon where these people came from. ... Chorb, like the biblical Jewish exiles, is an émigré with a keen sense of uprootedness. In fact, the reader knows nothing about his background" (95). However, a more careful look at the short story reveals that, in fact, the reader is able to obtain some information about

Lolita, or Frankie and Johnny: a New Key to Lolita?" in *Revue des Études Slaves* 72.3-4 (2000): 443-52.

the Kellers. Chorb is “a destitute Russian émigré and littérateur,” (*Stories* 150), and, incidentally, Frau Keller is also Russian, and so is her husband in all likelihood: “Frau Keller’s chubby face, whose everlasting freshness somehow agreed with her Russian merchant-class parentage, quivered [...] Keller punched his gibus open and said in his precise, slightly guttural Russian” (*Stories* 147-8).

On the basis of these two sets of connotations, it seems all the more appropriate to establish that Chorb, the ultimate exile, comes to represent displacement and alienation in a society where the moral and ethical views of everyone else seem substandard. Indeed, Chorb exemplifies “an exile par excellence” (Shrayer, *The World* 95), whose peripheral place in society makes him a virtual antithesis to the other characters, all of whom stand for shallowness and mediocrity, including his in-laws, the prostitute and the lackey at the motel. Intermittently comic as he appears at the denouement of the bedroom scene, the qualities with which Chorb is constantly associated in the story proclaim him both as a higher order biblical creature (a *cherub*, that is) and a modern, solitary hero, refined, persevering in his quest and ready to overcome the loss he has suffered. Chorb throws down the gauntlet to those who represent the quintessence of philistinism or *poshlost’* – a term that Nabokov expatiated on in his famous essay “Philistines and Philistinism” and applied to whatever he disliked or thought should be discarded by society. Nabokov’s enumeration of what he conceives as *poshlost’* seeks to encapsulate the essence of the term, though his definitions go much farther than rendering it as a facet of contemporary writing, as suggested by his interviewer in the *Paris Review*:

Corny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic, and dishonest pseudo-literature – these are obvious examples. Now, if we want to pin down *poshlost* in contemporary writing, we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories ... and the journalistic generalities we all know. *Poshlost* speaks in such concepts as “America is no better than Russia” or “We all share in Germany’s guilt. (SO 101)

Several interpretations, deserving book-length studies, have been circulating with respect to Nabokov’s implications of *poshlost’*, and critics have demonstrated their aptitude in pointing out those characters who the author deliberately put into this category. However, it must be emphasized that *poshlost’* is not only a means to

allude to a lack of taste or morals, but, in a much broader sense, it constitutes the rudiments of most dictatorial regimes, where the qualities of *poshlost'* are allowed to spread like wildfire. With it, Nabokov scoffs at the totalitarianism that the Nazis and the Communists brought into existence in the twentieth century, and while he pokes fun at characters that he views as *poshlyaks*, his concerns about the rise of these oppressive machineries are also voiced:

It is possible that the term itself has been so nicely devised by Russians because of the cult of simplicity and good taste in old Russia. The Russia of today, a country of moral imbeciles, of smiling slaves and poker-faced bullies, has stopped noticing poshlism because Soviet Russia is full of its special brand, a blend of despotism and pseudo-culture. (LL 313)

Nabokov's leniency toward the philistinism of ordinary people shows that such behavior is not only entertaining, but largely pardonable or piteous at times; however, no acts of *poshlost'* are acceptable when perpetrated by members of the intelligentsia, politicians and thinkers, or by extension, authorities which assert the prerogative to make decisions over the fates of people or groups of people. Although "The Return of Chorb" is not structured around the central dynamic of *poshlost'* (as opposed to *Lolita*, *Pnin* or *Invitation to a Beheading*, all of which lay bare the eerie vulgarity of a cohort of characters whose behaviors and worldviews are associated with the notion), the portrayal and the actions of the protagonist's in-laws, the Kellers, calls to mind the triviality and petty-mindedness that Nabokov denounces with full ardor. It can be rightly maintained that the bourgeois in-laws not only suffer from the insipidity that their social mannerisms and straitlaced demeanor suggest, but they also lack and thus fail to understand the artistic predilection with which Chorb is endowed. He is frowned upon by the in-laws because of his precarious status quo and the nuptial night that the newlyweds spent together at a filthy motel comes close to being regarded as a criminal activity. It has long been attested that in almost every novel Nabokov has artists (or, in many instances, *artists manqué*) for heroes. Of course, this sounds like a sweeping generalization, were we not to establish that the Nabokovian hero is only a refraction of the artist figure, carrying some of its essential traits while thrusting aside the residuum (for example, Humbert in *Lolita* might be taken for an artist based on his vision and creative talent, while his musings

on executing Quilty are a far cry from what one would consider artistic virtues).⁵¹ One might assume that the hero-as-artist designation can be legitimized in the case of Chorb, because his actions are guided by the dictates of his heart, his emotional universe, while the headstrong rationalism associated with the Kellers makes them ideologues of what Nabokov jocularly calls *poshlust*. On account of his intellect, emotions, independence and the rebellious traits he displays against the constrictions imposed on him by society create an aura around Chorb, which is impassable to the dim intelligence of the Kellers (note the easily discernible idea behind the name Kellers, whose attitude is indeed deadlier, more ‘killing’, so to say, than that of Chorb). Nabokov describes the in-laws as representatives of a class whose attention is merely focused on social activities, etiquette and the use of hackneyed expressions.

[Frau Keller] with tender emotion, whispering under her breath ... pointed out the colossal eiderdown, the orange blossoms, the two pairs of brand-new bedroom slippers – large checkered ones, and tiny red ones with pompons – that she had aligned on the bedside rug, across which a Gothic inscription ran: “WE ARE TOGETHER UNTO THE TOMB”. Presently, everybody moved toward the hors d’oeuvres – and Chorb and his wife, after the briefest of consultations, fled through the back door, and only on the following morning, half an hour before the express train was to leave, reappeared to collect their luggage. Frau Keller had sobbed all night; her husband, who had always regarded Chorb (destitute Russian émigré and litterateur) with suspicion, now cursed his daughter’s choice, the cost of the liquor, the local police that could do nothing. And several times, after the Chorbs had gone, the old man went to look at the hotel in the lane behind the opera house, and henceforward that black, purblind house became an object of disgust and attraction to him like *the recollection of a crime*. (*Stories* 149-150; emphasis added)

It must be stressed that the in-laws consider the hotel with its “crooked corridor reeking of dampness and boiled cabbage” (*Stories* 149) as a locus of crime and drabness, whereas Chorb wants to look at it as the source of a happy past, thwarted by the invisible hand (or rather, wires) of fate. In her early reading of the story, Naumann draws attention to this sharp contrast, putting it down, with a modicum of naïveté, to the fact that “[t]he older generation is completely blind to the

⁵¹ Cf. *Art, Crime, & Madness: Gesualdo, Caravaggio, Genet, Van Gogh, Artaud* by S. Giora Shoham. In it, the author explores the relationship between one’s creative faculty, morbidity, and madness through historical case studies. At the very core of art lies creative innovation, which requires the ability of the individual to transcend the confines of consciousness. S. Giora Shoham writes that the mentally ill are also equipped with this ability to ‘innovate.’ This train of thoughts – although antithetical to my parenthetical claim above – also opens new routes of investigation as regards Humbert’s attitude to murder vs. art. Equally important is Hermann’s observation of murder as a form of art in *Despair*.

love felt by the younger” (26). Only a later, a marginal remark of hers justifies the importance of the *poshlost*’ that stands in the moral and philosophical nucleus of Nabokov’s finely crafted works. She is correct in positing that “[i]n the Keller home the scatter rug with the words “Together unto the tomb” was not just an indication of the Keller’s [*sic*] *poshlost*’; it was also a grim sign of what lay ahead of the couple” (28). The disparity between the protagonist and his in-laws permeates the entire short story and reaches its pinnacle at the conclusion when the prostitute’s departure conjures up the mistaken and preconceived idea of the Kellers, or rather, the growing, yet irrational fear with which they were gripped is proved true.

CHAPTER 3

European Ceilings in Badonia:

Other Models of the Otherworldly in “Terra Incognita”

Fear of death in a world rife with perils (both existing and non-existing) forms the basis of the present chapter, in which another, uncanny and nightmarish variation of the otherworld is presented through the detailed analysis of the short story of “Terra Incognita.” In this story, the otherworld appears as a textual zone that awaits discovery and is also an apt exemplification of how the different levels of perception disturbingly blend beyond recognition and complicate the ontological horizon of the work. While the reading of “The Return of Chorb” in the previous chapter successfully illustrates how the otherworld can be attained with the help of one’s command of one’s mnemonic faculty and the power of imagination, the story under discussion demonstrates how the merging of and constant shifting between various layers of reality construct a highly elusive otherworld of dream, hallucination, and delirium, in which one can only speculate which of the realities seems more plausible to conceive.

Vladimir Nabokov entertained persistent animadversions against some of the greatest lions of world literature, yet an assortment of those who he classified as being lesser mediocrities reveals his rare admiration for a select number of writers. One criterion for Nabokov to augment his scanty list of preferences was that the given novelist should embrace a worldview similar to that of his own. Nabokov was known to have “operated a landfill for literary reputations into which he tipped any number of the late nineteenth centuries’ prominent authors and their acclaimed works” (Moynahan 433). Alongside Tolstoy, Flaubert, Pushkin and Joyce, whom Nabokov eulogized throughout his long and prolific literary career, he spoke with enthusiasm about H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar A. Poe, whose works he relished as a child (*SO* 42-3) and even continued to hold in high esteem as an adult. The primary reason for his partiality for them was that the works of these authors functioned as veritable storehouses of the merits that the ideal work of literature should, in his opinion, contain (*LL* 1-9).

One of the questions that Nabokov would always treat enthusiastically is connected with layers of reality described in his fiction:

You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. (*SO* 11)

An oft-recurring question that Nabokov scholars, such as Ellen Pifer, have been interested to answer was to what extent the author attempts to hold a mirror up to reality? Some of Nabokov's own endeavors to mediate among various levels of reality and manifold ways of perceiving the world are lucidly expressed in the majority of his short stories. This chapter will identify "Terra Incognita" (1931)⁵² as one of the early examples of Nabokov's short fiction that focuses on the nature of the relationship between everyday reality and other, higher forms and states of existence. I claim, among other things, claim – albeit without providing a conclusive evidence for the *truth* that the author was so unremittingly searching for throughout his life – that the fictional world of "Terra Incognita" cannot be fitted into Johnson's "two-world model," as has been introduced and elaborated on in earlier chapters, but instead proves to be effective in demonstrating that Nabokov's worlds contain different layers of reality juxtaposed to and often blending in with one another. This chapter sets out to argue – based on an earlier analysis by Shroyer – that the undiscovered land (the *terra incognita*, that is) presented in the story can be read and thus explored as an unknown textual zone. Therefore, the Nabokovian otherworld functions both as the coveted transcendental realm of the mythical and the preternatural and as a narrative space awaiting further probing and textual excavations. In the end, I assume that the otherworldly associations that the short story has – metaphysical and philosophical, as discussed with regard to Chorb's tale in the previous chapter – might aptly be linked to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, according to which the parallel spaces of otherness are neither *here* nor *there* but exist in simultaneity, "inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are ... not superimposable on one another" ("Of Other Spaces" 23).

Levels of Perception

In his prefatory chapter to *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov famously maintains that "[g]reat novels are above all great fairy tales ... literature does not tell the truth but

⁵² "Terra Incognita" was published under the same title in *Poslednie Novosti*, Paris, 1931. Its English translation first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1963.

makes it up” (LL 3). The censorious remarks and the sweeping dismissals, expressed with the draconian rigor that characterizes the entire system of private convictions of Nabokov, an otherwise suave and convivial author, lay bare the overarching importance of artistic originality as the most important feature in his construction of *terrae incognitae*, hitherto uncharted and unexplored universes. Nabokov would always open his lectures at Cornell University by underscoring that

[w]e should always remember that the work of art is invariably *the creation of a new world*, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge. (LL 3; emphasis added)

Nabokov’s works of fiction can be read as great fairy tales, original works of the imagination, which often challenge the reader to differentiate between the various levels of perception and several layers of realities. It has been already noted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation that “Nabokov’s art grows out of Romanticism in the Platonic tradition; because he sees this world as a pale reflection of another, his novels abound in doublings, mirrorings and inversions” (Meyer, “Infinite Reflections 197), and the world we inhabit is but the sham imitation, the imperfect replica of Plato’s well-ordered ideal state. D. Barton Johnson believes that “there exists, beyond the scope of the intellect, another, more real world, and that what man sees before him is but a shadow and echo of that true reality” (3). The realities that Nabokov creates in his works strikingly diverge from the one we have come to term as formal realism, where objective reality is accomplished by the author attempting to produce an air of authenticity.

Considered for a long time as quintessentially self-conscious works of literature, it would be rash to make any pronouncement that Nabokov’s works deny or evade reality. He posited that consensual reality, or the way most people see the world, creates the impression of conventionality, “a reality of general ideas” and it renders a “dreamy and unreal” aspect (SO 18) to a given work. Nabokov sets out, instead, to build for his audience a uniquely authentic yet highly unorthodox world and keeps unsettling “our most entrenched assumptions and our faith in adopted cultural formations” (Pifer 131). Nabokov undoubtedly belongs to this tradition: his

works are always in pursuit of a new, elusive reality that swerves significantly from the widely recognized formulae of the traditional novel form. It is now a widely accepted view that – contrary to the simplistic conviction that Nabokov is merely a juggler of words and lexical games – the author has not expelled from his works all elements of the real world. It can be confidently stated that no such thing as collective or consensual reality exists for Nabokov, because the perception and the understanding of a given world is always dependent upon the individual perceiver. In his analysis of Nabokov's science fiction short story "Lance" (1952), Charles Nicol enunciates a notion accepted by most contemporary commentators: "Any great work of fiction is itself an alternate universe ... [and] every great book builds its own reality from the ground up" (19). In a letter addressed to Edmund Wilson (January 24, 1952), Nabokov warns his friend not to miss the story "Lance" in one of the forthcoming issues of *New Yorker*. Simon Karlinsky, editor and annotator of *The Nabokov – Wilson Letters, 1940-71* writes that "[w]ithin its brief span, the narrative of "Lance" combines three distinct superimposed levels of reality: inter-planetary exploration, mountain climbing and medieval romance" (301). He also adds that the themes incorporated into "Lance" can be read as "a preliminary study pointing toward the literary method of *Ada*" (301), in which different versions of reality are presented in simultaneity. In it, two sibling planets constitute the universe: the events take place on Antiterra, whereas the existence of Terra is a constant subject of dispute.

Scholars, who have labeled Nabokov as being a scintillating mind yet mainly an artist whose "audacious style calls attention as much to itself as to what it means to convey" (Parker 17) are adherents of an earlier belief, prevalent especially throughout the 1970s, when the sum of criticism focused on the importance of language and form, even if the deeper moral significance of his novels has never been completely overlooked – only dealt with somewhat marginally. The fact that Nabokov's name was for a long time associated with language and form was in no way the denunciation of the artist, but rather the critics eulogized him for his ability to make use of the malleability of language in the proper form. While this phase of Nabokov criticism represented a move away from the ossified approaches of regarding the author predominantly as an esthete, it must be strongly emphasized that the Nabokovian otherworld is not *only* an imaginary realm envisaged instinctively by

the author, but it can be considered, through the increasing complexity of ingeniously intertwined worlds, as having been produced by the texts themselves. Nabokov was also well-known for abiding by the conventions of the romance that integrated elements of the fantastic, the preternatural and the unrealistic (for example, Edgar A. Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, and so on). Nonetheless, even those works which have no connection whatsoever with the involution that his more advanced fiction encompasses build on their own, individual realities from bottom to top. Supporting this view is the closing scene of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), in which the eponymous protagonist is shown lying on the floor after having finished writing his book, *Success*. Sebastian says: “No, Leslie, I’m not dead. I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest” (*RLSK* 90).

The Otherworld as a Textual Zone

It has been repeatedly underscored that the central dichotomy between the world of the ‘here’ and the imagined otherworldly ‘there,’ which stands in sharp contrast to one’s earthly existence, has been in the focal point of Nabokov’s works and, at first glance, also lies at the very heart of “Terra Incognita,” an early short story, published in Russian in 1931. Instead of attempting to justify the overbearing literary influence of the predecessors frequently cited in conjunction with the Nabokovian novels, the present chapter will explore the author’s conceptualization of the otherworld as it emerges in the short story and foregrounds its subsequent interpretations in his later fiction. While the story received unjustifiably meager academic attention, the various narratological and thematic devices it employs have prepared the ground for the development of the subjects that would preoccupy Nabokov’s mind at the time of writing *Invitation to a Beheading* and his even more courageous enterprises which have secured the author his place in the literary pantheon.

Scholars have long been intrigued by the fact that Nabokov’s fictional characters contemplate the existence of *at least* two possible realities, one of which is frequently perceived as a metaphysical otherworld, where “art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” 315). It has been underscored repeatedly that one of the central dynamics of Nabokov’s

imaginary universe is the relentless yearning of the solitary hero to liberate himself from the confining artificiality of the transparent, unimaginative, dreary world that holds him captive. Instead of envisaging the world as a garden of paths, forking into mundane reality and the ecstatic, as Johnson's "two-world" cosmology suggests, the majority of Nabokov's works center round the author's attempts to unify these two universes during moments of spiritual revelations that Nabokov described as "aesthetic bliss" in the famous epilog of *Lolita*. Instead of describing the otherworld as a domain of idealized memories which is desperately coveted by characters who are made privy to the author's worldview, "Terra Incognita" represents a modus of expression different from those found elsewhere in Nabokov's fiction. It offers no solace for the restless soul in pursuit of the perfect alternative to his mind-numbing earthly existence, and the otherworld here comes to represent a land of horror, an unknown geographical and textual zone that awaits to be explored by the reader and the protagonist alike (Shrayer, *The Worlds*).

Nabokov attributes a special role to the relationship among imagination, time and space in the story, prefiguring some of his finest and most enduring themes taken up in his later fiction, which "contain more than one world in varying degrees of presence" (Johnson, *Worlds in Regression* xi), contrasting the world of the novelist and the world of the novel as well as setting against one another the diegetic planes which frame his novels, such as *Pale Fire* or *Ada*. In order to preserve the entirely realistic sensation of a newly created world of the fantastic, in "Terra Incognita" Nabokov positions the fictional land of Badonia on the world atlas, and conceives fragments of a self-contained language and the invented taxonomical designations of the land's flora and fauna, contributing significantly to the atmospheric portrayal of an exotic rainforest. Nabokov's manipulation of narrative conventions and the occasional incorporation of arbitrarily coined words into the text serve as an anticipatory device in the construction of the complex worlds of Zembla in *Pale Fire*, Zoorlandia in "Tyrants Destroyed" and Terra/Antiterra in *Ada*, all of which are seen as amplified versions of the microcosm that the unknown geography and textual zone of "Terra Incognita" encapsulates. While the short story seems to offer barely any innovation as regards their plots, one would be ill-advised to discount its several merits because of the strikingly superficial narrative simplicity. It has been concluded that "Terra Incognita" harks back to a number of literary models, which

may have led Nabokov to rely on a variety of works: Edwardian boys' adventure stories, Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" (1896), H. G. Wells's "The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes" (1895), and Vladimir Amfiteatrov-Kadshev's "Zelenoe tsarstvo" ["The Green Kingdom"] have been suggested, *inter alia*, as probable sources of Nabokov's short story (Tolstaia and Meilakh 652). In spite of the analogies indicated here and elsewhere in Nabokov criticism, "Terra Incognita" is far from being a story that merely subsists on other works of adventure and suspense.

Valliere, the first-person narrator of the entomological expedition that Nabokov, a first-class lepidopterologist himself would have also willingly joined, is providing a written account of the tropical hell of Badonia, where he is accompanied by his friend Gregson, the faint-hearted Cook, and eight local porters. The theme of the unknown land is turned into *terror incognitus*, that is, a nightmarish locus of absurdity (Shrayer, *The World*), as Valliere develops a terminal illness, the porters vanish, and his two companions kill each other in the ensuing scuffle. The high fever casts Valliere into a half-delirious state, inducing hallucinations, whose intensity increases as the expedition penetrates deeper and deeper into the fetid marshland. Once the reader has realized that the credibility of the narrator can be called into question, it seems that his narration too gradually slips out of grasp, causing a feeling of uncertainty at the narrative level. What comes to be seen as the most disquieting aspect of the short story is the recognition that the episodes of the whole expedition might after all be only figments of Valliere's imagination. He visualizes two simultaneous scenes incorporated into one another as part of a single integral world that allows for the peaceful coexistence of two opposing realities: as the narrator describes the lush and exotic scenes of the tropical rainforest, he begins to be tormented by strange hallucinations, which creates an air of ambivalence and indeterminacy for the reader. In a story that appears to be Nabokov's maiden effort to employ an entirely unreliable narrator, Valliere fills the tropical scenery with the accoutrements of a European middle-class apartments. Window curtains, an armchair, a crystal tumbler, a teaspoon and other objects, all incompatible with the verdant locus of a jungle, emerge intermittently in the narrative, making it impossible to determine whether the protagonist is being afflicted by a horrible nightmare in the tropics while treated in hospital, or is it the other way round?

I gazed at the weird tree trunks, around some of which were coiled thick, flesh-colored snakes; suddenly I thought I saw, between the trunks, as though through my fingers, the mirror of *a half-open wardrobe with dim reflections* ... I, however, was much more frightened by something else: now and then, on my left (always, for some reason, on my left), listing among the repetitious reeds, *what seemed a large armchair but was actually a strange, cumbersome gray amphibian*, whose name Gregson refused to tell me, would rise out of the swamp. (*Stories* 298; 300; emphasis added).

How can one conceive of two strikingly different spaces as the exotic rainforest and European middle-class apartment being absorbed in one single space?

“Terra Incognita” as Heterotopia

It is refreshing to find in Michel Foucault the philosopher whose concept of heterotopia can be straightforwardly applied to “Terra Incognita” as one illuminating example of how worlds of entirely conflicting structures can be juxtaposed. In *Postmodern Fiction*, McHale discusses the very nature of heterotopias, describing them as a problematical world, or rather, a “kind of space [that is] capable of accommodating so many incommensurable and mutually exclusive worlds” (44). Instead of designating it as the confrontation, superimposition, juxtaposition, misattribution or interpolation of worlds (in line with Umberto Eco, who also refused to call this a “world”), McHale considers heterotopias as being “the zone.” It can be thought of as a “space of overlapping subjectivities, including shared fantasies and nightmares” (44) instead of representing any clear demarcation line between one world and another. Through the concept of “the zone” it becomes clear that the coexistence of different worlds – and therefore different realities – blurs the distinction between worlds and offers instead an in-between space where *logic is no longer ruled by binary oppositions*. Differences are not highlighted but come into contact with one another and unsettle all fixed identities and unitary meanings that are constructed around oppositions. It is worthwhile to compare this theory to Homi Bhabha’s introduction of the notion of the “third space” in “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” where communities cease to form homogenous entities, and texts become shape-shifting, vibrant tissues. McHale quotes that

heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite to one another) to “hold together.” (44)

The “mirror of a half-open wardrobe with dim reflections” (*Stories* 298) is utilized in the story not merely as an indiscriminate device found in an ordinary bedroom; nor is it meant to be taken as the object that mirrors the existence of another world (or rather the possibility of its existence) and symbolically distinguishes the real from the phantasmagorical. It is stretched beyond its limits by making the reader consider the mirror as a utopia for its ability to reflect a “placeless place” (Foucault 24); however, at the same time, it can be thought of as an obvious example of what Foucault famously calls heterotopia in his essay, “Of Other Spaces.” He writes that

in the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over here, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. (24)

The idea that our world is merely a pale reflection of an ideal universe does not germinate from Nabokov, but has been implanted in the minds of philosophers since Plato, who claimed, in his contemplations on metaphysics and epistemology, that the physical world is but a shadow of the world of the form. One of the oft-recurring fictionalizing devices in Nabokov is the mirror either as an object or any other physical surface which reflects undiffused light to create an image of an object placed in front of it. In “Music” (1932), the doubles of the pianist’s hands “are engaged in a ghostly, intricate, even somewhat clownish mimicry” as they are reflected in the “lacquered depths of the open keyboard lid” (*Stories* 332). During his mysterious wanderings in the museum, the narrator of “The Visit to the Museum” (1931) is reluctantly transported back to Soviet Russia: the corridor that bridges the coveted, yet unattainable otherworld is pictured as a storehouse of “a thousand musical instruments; the walls, all mirror, reflected an enfilade of grand pianos, while in the center there was a pool with a bronze Orpheus atop a green rock” (*Stories* 283). Not only the mirror, but also the statue of the classical mythological

figure of Orpheus, who descended into the underworld to regain his dead wife, is a clear indication that mirrors, reflections, shadows, and the like establish a dialogue between this world and worlds apart, and as such outgrow the limitations of being a textual object that copies, reproduces or distorts the original image. Vision plays an excessively important role in “Terra Incognita”: several natural objects in the story cast reflections, thus allowing the reader to catch a glimpse of yet another layer of reality. Arceana bushes deceptively glimmer, enormous marches shimmer, the hills appear as a mirage, clusters of soap bubbles create a mirror-like effect, characters become transparent and multiply, and the protagonist is offered an insight into another world as he observes the sky with recalcitrance. The existence of another dimension is also emphasized by a probably deliberate string of alliterative words: “I tried not to look up; but in this sky, at the *very verge* of my field of *vision*, there floated, always keeping up with me, whitish phantoms of plaster, stucco curlicues and rosettes, like those used to adorn European ceilings” (*Stories* 299; emphasis added).

The semiotic potentials of the mirror have been pinpointed by almost all commentators, especially a propos of *Despair*, the novel also known for being “the mother of all mirror scenes” (Motte 11).⁵³ The role of mirroring, mimicry and the models of polarized vision are a corollary of Nabokov’s view, and despite the fact that the actual object of the mirror is mentioned only once in “Terra Incognita,” reflections occupy a central role in the story’s structure by apparently making a balance between two separate loci, thus creating the impression as though a “two-

⁵³ Marina Grishakova discusses the importance of mirroring and doubling in *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov’s Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Forms* (Tartu University Press, 2006, 219-230). In a pivotal essay on the semiotic validity of the mirror, Marina Kanevskaya provides an in-depth analysis of *Despair* by using Umberto Eco’s interpretation to argue that the “narrator’s attempt to deal with the mirror image as if it were a semiotic sign serves as the main clue of his insanity” (“The Semiotic Validity of the Mirror Image in Nabokov’s *Despair*” in *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. Gavriel Shapiro, 20-29).

The focus of my MA thesis was to demonstrate that the theme of the double (the Doppelgänger, that is) occupies a central role throughout Nabokov fiction, and it departs from the traditional treatment of the double topos (for example, German Romantic philosophy). It claims that in Nabokov doubling is often no more than an obsession with likenesses that is held answerable for the confusion of identities (Humbert / Quilty, Hermann / Felix, etc.). It is sometimes believed that doubling is used for purposes of parodying the popular double tales and mystery stories. While my thesis marginally deals with the questions of the relationship between art and metaphysics, and the otherworld by extension, it fails to devote much attention to the mirror as a device that contributes to our better understanding of the deeper layers of Nabokov’s fiction, such as the author’s relentless investigation of an inscrutable metaphysical truth. My dissertation is also an attempt to reconsider this question and enunciate that the archaic uses of the metaphor of the double have a function beyond pointing to doubling as a lexical and fictionalizing device that carries no further implications.

world model” were applicable in the story, but then the interpenetration of the locations begin to render the equilibrium unstable. “The branches of porphyroferous trees intertwined with those of the black-leaved limia to form a tunnel, penetrated here and there by a ray of hazy light” (*Stories* 297).⁵⁴ The actual interpenetration of the tree branches appropriately demonstrates how the two levels of reality are obfuscated and become unified. Such interpenetrations at the textual level of “Terra Incognita” are not uncommon, because locations and characters deliberately flow in and out of one another.

Intimately related to mirroring, it is worth considering Nabokov’s treatment of the double topos in this early short story (that is, the doubling of characters, as is the case in several other works where the theme of the Doppelgänger looms large, or the various forms of mirrorings and reflections found throughout the Nabokovian *oeuvre* are presented). Valliere’s two fellow-explorers on his expedition are presented, time and again, as antagonistic doubles of each other, corresponding to the split and shared types of doubling: “At times Gregson and Cook seemed to grow transparent, and I thought I saw, through them, wallpaper with an endlessly repeated design of reeds” (*Stories* 299-300). It cannot go unnoticed that before the protagonist loses his consciousness (or dies) at the closure of the story, he witnesses the fierce, lethal scuffle between the porters, which uncannily resembles the final, farcical fight between Humbert and Quilty in *Lolita*. In “Terra Incognita” Gregson and Cook

[c]latched each other and started rolling their embrace, panting deafeningly ... Cook’s broad back would grow tense and the vertebrae would show through his shirt; but suddenly, instead of his back, a leg, also his would appear covered with coppery hairs, and with a blue vein running up the skin, and Gregson was rolling on top of him. ... From somewhere in the labyrinth of their bodies Cook’s fingers wriggled out, clenching a rusty but sharp knife; the knife entered Gregson’s back as if it were clay, but Gregson only gave a grunt, and they both rolled over several times ... ’ (*Stories* 302)

It is the constant rolling of the two bodies and the repeated confusion of their body parts that creates a hitherto unidentified intertextual link between the two works. Likewise, it is demanding to tell apart Quilty from Humbert in the last but one

⁵⁴ The similarly named *limia nigrofasciata* are in fact a type of fish. As in so many other instances in Nabokov, the reader’s leg is being pulled only to raise his awareness of the story’s theatrical setting with all its manmade accretions, including nonexistent species in the dreamed-up flora and fauna of a tropical rainforest.

chapter; even the protagonist himself struggles to establish his own identity by doing away with his evil “shadow” (LL 220). As their scuffle commences “the two are merged in a muddle of interchangeable pronouns as Humbert assimilates Quilty’s body of ordinary experience” (Moore 80). Humbert describes the scene as follows:

We fell to wrestling again. We rolled over the floor, in each other’s arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us. (AL 299)

Thus far we have seen that in presenting two simultaneously existing worlds, Nabokov deliberately complicates the ontological horizon of the story, which Sisson compares to Henri Rousseau’s painting *Le rêve* (The Dream, 1910), in which a woman is lying on the sofa as she is transported to a forest in her reveries. In his well-known discussion of examining paintings and reading texts, Nabokov argues that “in a sense, we behave towards a book as we do towards a painting” (LL 3). The fantastic and unrealistic aspects of the painting express Nabokov’s genuine interest in Romanticism (see my discussion on fairy paintings during the Victorian era above), and Henri Rousseau’s masterpiece also reflects on the subject-matters of Romanticism, expressed through dreams, hallucinations, and nightmares. The exhaustive analysis of “Terra Incognita” that Shrayner offers is very much in keeping with Nabokov’s observation of “reading a verbal text as a pictorial text” (*The Worlds* 50). Equally compelling is the story’s possible connection with the ontological uncertainty associated with the famous butterfly dream of the influential Chinese sage Zhuangzi, whose philosophical reasoning was a source of inspiration for many authors, including Lőrinc Szabó, the Hungarian poet. Upon awakening from his dream, Zhuangzi begins to wonder whether it was he, Zhuangzi, who dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreamed that he was Zhuangzi (Shrayner 49).⁵⁵ One Hungarian commentator points out that the levels of reality in *Ada* are similar to the mysterious and lunatic world presented in the short story of Jorge Luis Borges’

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A modern variant of the Zhuangzi-motif is *A gólyakalifa* [The Stork Caliph, 1919], a well-known novelette by Mihály Babits, the Hungarian writer and poet, who states: “I want to compile the files of life before I fall asleep again. I have got precise notes of everything. My life was like a dream, and my dreams were akin to life itself. My life was as beautiful as a dream; alas, I wish my life had been miserable and my dreams beautiful” (web; my translation). [In the Hungarian original: Össze akarom állítani életem aktáit, mielőtt még egyszer elaludnék. Mindenről pontos jegyzeteim vannak. Az életem olyan volt, mint egy álom, és az álmaim olyanok, mint az élet. Az életem szép volt, mint egy álom; ó, bár lett volna az életem szerencsétlen, és az álmaim lettek volna szépek!]

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940), in which an encyclopedia entry about Uqbar, a fictitious land, appears as a conspiracy theory of intellectuals to conjure up a world, called Tlön with its own internal rules of logic and physical laws. As the story progresses, the first-person narrator reveals more and more factual details about Tlön, and, by the end of the story, Earth is transformed into Tlön. A propos *Ada*, Tamás Bényei comments that

[t]he history of Terra gradually eclipses the past of Antiterria (one being a fictive past, while the other one is a less fictive past), similarly to the way as the reality of planet Tlön in the short story of Borges, existing only in obscure books, penetrates into earthly reality and begins to squeeze it out. (66; my translation)⁵⁶

With its nonexistent geographical settings and the taxonomical designations of imaginary plants “Terra Incognita” consistently calls attention to its being a fiction construct, in which the reader, who is introduced to the minutiae of a tropical rainforest as the story opens (and therefore associates the primary level of reality with the jungle), might be given the impression that the world of the tropical rainforest is ludicrously unreal and it is somewhat overridden by the more realistic middle-class apartment. While Nabokov’s early story cleverly obfuscates various levels of reality, it differs from Borges’ novella in that it does not present a world literally squeezed out by another one but speculates that alternative realities exist by showing how one zone penetrates, in a piecemeal fashion, another zone that is initially taken as believable and granted.

In light of the main theme elaborated in “Terra Incognita,” it is now a simple matter to pronounce that the intersection of time (*past* versus *present*) and space (*here* versus *there*) is a fundamentally important quality of the Nabokovian text – a quality with which the author had been long concerned, and eventually found a way to voice it in *Ada*, at the consummation of his career as a novelist. Foucault transparently explains that “[w]e do not live in a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (“Of Other Spaces” 23). In his exposition of heterotopia, Foucault says that the garden is

⁵⁶ “A Terra történetelme fokozatosan elhomályosítja az Antiterria múltját (az egyik fiktív múlt a másik, valamivel kevésbé fiktív múltat), valahogy úgy, mint ahogy a Borges-novellában a csak obskurus könyvekben létező Tlön bolgyó valósága behatol a földi valóságba és kezdi azt kiszorítani”.

one of the most illustrative examples of a heterotopia with its ability to “juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25). The tropical rainforest of Nabokov’s story can be taken to represent the microcosm that Foucault considers the “smallest parcel of the world and ... the totality of the world” (26) at the same time. With its lush vegetation and abundant wildlife, the rainforest (originally associated with threat and perils) of the story functions in a similar manner to the garden (normally standing, with its purity and innocence, in opposition to the forest): it stands as a microcosm of reality that resembles, in many of its components, the jungle known to most readers, while it also seeks to represent the wholeness of the world. Everything inside a garden varies considerably from the immediate surroundings, and so does the rainforest create a parallel impression by allowing the readers to alternate between two strikingly dissimilar loci. Just as the garden calls attention to its being a manmade construct in regard to its composition of flowers and plants, the rainforest of the story also *seems* to contain a variety of species from all around the world. In addition to orchids, acreana bushes, racemes, this jungle is home to several fictitious plants, such as “porphyroferous trees” (297), “black-leafed limia” (298) and the fragrant *Vallieria mirifica*, whose apparently Latinate origin immediately calls to mind the story’s protagonist of a similar name.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that some components of the textual rainforest do not comply with those of a real-life jungle, one cannot but agree that the imaginary world depicted in the short story appears neither impossible nor less real than the European middle-class apartment.⁵⁸ However welcoming it may seem for the reader to opt for the latter location as the real-life setting, the bewilderment that the story continues to raise at its closure is to confirm that both loci enjoy their

⁵⁷ Shroyer notes this similarity between the protagonist and the plant. He also hypothesizes that in the story the “narrator’s association with making wonders (*Vallieria mirifica*) suggests not only an explorer’s interest in a wondrous space, but also the narrator’s special powers: the narrative wonders which he creates in the story” (47). I believe that the choice of the protagonist’s name may not have been mere serendipity, as Nabokov was always keen to use his own anagrams (Adam von Librikov, Vivian Darkbloom, etc.) or one of his initials to draw the reader’s attention to his authority and authorship within his works (see, for example, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*). It would thus be too rash to assume that the plant’s name should only be decrypted to refer to the story’s protagonist, but it also convincingly implies the presence of Vladimir Nabokov in his work. An additional self-referential device in the story is Gregson’s passion for insects and an early mention of “a long-handled green butterfly net like a banner” (297), alluding to Nabokov’s lifelong interest in butterflies.

⁵⁸ Foucault considers hospitals as a “heterotopia of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons, and one should perhaps add retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation” (24).

legitimate existence and can be said to stand on an “equal footing” with one another as regards the “realness” of their own environment. Foucault concludes that the role of heterotopias is “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (27).

“Cosmic Synchronization” and Echoes of *Invitation to a Beheading*

The juxtaposition of two conspicuously dissimilar *loci* and the visions of the febrile protagonist establish a unique Nabokovian universe to foreground a nightmarish otherworld. It is this world that prohibits the infiltration of the beauty, desire and magnetism with which Nabokov’s idealized realm of the hereafter is usually connected in other short stories. While Nabokov scholars have been prone to discuss how reality blends with illusion, it may also be worthwhile to underscore that “Terra Incognita” cannot be conceived of as a short story consisting of two levels of existence set against one another. Several works of Nabokov have been noted for what the author calls “cosmic synchronization” in *Speak, Memory*, his semi-autobiographical novel. Nabokov’s concept refers to the simultaneous perception of two worlds in an instant of time, representing, as Sisson argues, the “posited desire of the artist to apprehend the entire universe by an awareness expanding rapidly outward from the artist’s consciousness to coalesce ostensibly unrelated fragments in one single moment” (155). Nabokov stimulates metaphysical suspense as he stands narrative conventions on their head and complicates the ontological horizons of the short story in order to create a world *sui generis*, which possesses the ability to compress time and space as a single continuum as though the actions, settings and temporal dimensions of the narrative were flowing into one another, providing outlets into sections of an otherworld. In the closing line of “Terra Incognita” uncertainty and instability rise to their acme as the narrator grapples for his blanket and lets his notebook slip out of his hand: “I absolutely had to make a note of something; but alas [the notebook] slipped out of my hand. I groped all along the blanket, but it was no longer there” (*Stories* 128). Various interpretations of this one crucial line have been entertained with the aim of explaining the narrative logic of “Terra Incognita” and reconciling the antagonism of what Field calls “the simultaneous cofunctioning of two distinct worlds” (*Nabokov: His Life in Art* 76). The conclusion of the story creates an air of further ambivalence as it challenges the

reader to determine whether it is the unnamed European city that we must regard as a *terra cognita* and the tropical rainforest as *terra incognita* or the inverse of the situation also stands to logic. Also, how can the narrator record the events of the story if he drops out of the game at its very closure?

The spatial and temporal speculations that the short story gives rise to are not unique to Nabokov's early prose but anticipate, as it were, several salient themes which prove sufficient to be elaborated on in his later novels. The title of "Terra Incognita" serves both as a depository of the popular theme of juxtaposing reality as it is known to human beings with its otherworldly counterpart through hallucination or extraordinary perception and creates a framework for the remainder of Nabokov's novels, which relate to the question of the elusive nature of time and space. It can be expressed with ultimate certainty that the *terra incognita* of the story, apart from referring to a "hitherto unexplored region" (*Stories* 297), also brings to mind a "textual space that Valliere's narrative creates for the reader to enter and explore" (Shrayer, *The World* 47).

The conjecturing that the story bears a striking and obvious resemblance to *Invitation to a Beheading*, as Connolly (1983) explains, is accurate as long as we deem worthy of contemplating the superficial observation of seeing Nabokov's works as the variations of one single theme. *Invitation to a Beheading* invites the reader to consider the novel as the extension of "Terra Incognita" from various perspectives. Valliere is imprisoned in an exotic world that strikes him as an unfamiliar otherspace in the composition of its many details, yet the European middle-class apartment seems equally fictitious. He tries to escape the menacing world that the central character associates with the lackluster and apparently sham settings of Europe. In like manner, Cincinnatus C., the protagonist of *Invitation to a Beheading*, makes repeated attempts at transcending the reality of the world that keeps him as a captive by allowing him to conjure up a picture of an enchanting, idealized realm of the imagination – a place where he is delivered during his mental excursions. Valliere admits that "the obtrusive room was fictitious ... an imitation of life *hastily knocked together*, the furnished rooms of non-existence" (*Stories*; emphasis added). Likewise, Cincinnatus's cardboard universe, created *ex tempore* by an invisible auctorial hand, collapses at the end of the novel, providing the opportunity to the imaginative individual to make his escape towards a world "where

stand beings akin to him” (*IB* 223). In both works, one will discover themes which demonstrate further analogies, such as the transparent nature of characters: “Gregson and Cook [seem] to grow transparent” while in *Invitation* everyone, except Cincinnatus, emerges as a shadow, unrealistic, intangible and plastic.

Interestingly, both “Terra Incognita” and *Invitation to a Beheading* use imagery that reflect the artificiality, unoriginality, and theatricality of a realm that is destructive because of its power to prevent the unfettered human imagination from breaking free from the limits imposed upon it by the world of reality. The bedroom world, whose dimly marked outlines become visible in the rainforest, is somewhat different from the world described in *Invitation*. In general, Nabokov thought of reality *not* so much in terms of something inhospitably dismal and antagonistic (unless it was a prototypical police state with its distinctly oppressive machinery crushing free will and creativity); instead, he saw reality as a highly stimulating subject-matter to write about. It seldom appears “humdrum” when setting *reality* and the *otherworld* as a pair of binary oppositions, because neither Nabokov nor his characters were determined to escape from it. In *Lolita*, for example, he takes pleasure in boldly painting the image of America in the 1950s with all its elements of the real. It is worth considering what Nabokov said about reality:

You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it’s hopeless.

He considered it to be an extremely subjective matter, because reality, by being composed of “an infinite succession of steps” was not only able to provide a detailed picture of the world as it exists (or seems to exist), but is also the subjective vision of the individual. He believed that *reality* is not something to be observed from the ivory tower of the esthete, who makes conclusive statements about it, but rather, it is about the individual perceiver standing on a vantage ground, experiencing his or her own version of reality, and formulating personalized impressions about it. Without an inner vision of reality, it would seem unlikely for the reader to comprehend the subtle mechanisms of the otherworld.

While Nabokov may have meant to attach special significance to “Terra Incognita” as an anticipatory short story to *Invitation* and a series of his later fictional works, Connolly’s (1983) interpretation that the two works are intimately connected to one another seems convincing only to the extent that the entire Nabokovian *oeuvre* is an attempt to demonstrate how human imagination can be cut loose from its limitations. One must thus conclude that “Terra Incognita” occupies a special position among all the short stories, because not only does it herald in the emergence of the otherworldly as a theme and its reversal in his later works, but because its suggestive title is also an indication that Nabokov’s works often require the active participation of the reader, an intrepid explorer, as it were, to enter what might be termed as textual otherspaces. Equally important is the fact that Nabokov’s obsessive preoccupation with alternative realities tempted him to introduce some characteristic properties of the science fiction genre that he himself had callously disparaged (*SO* 117).

On a side note, I should like to remark that while he debunked several of his contemporaries, his admiration for H.G. Wells is well-documented, calling attention to some major thematic correspondences between the works of the two authors as demonstrated, for example, in “Nabokov’s aesthetic search for a numinous pattern, revealed in mundane details, reflects the mystical sensibility of Wells’s George Ponderevo, [in *Tono-Bungay* (1909)] (Sisson, “Nabokov and Some” 533). Sisson also points out well-discernible analogies between Wells’s hallucinatory “The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes” (1895) and the short story under discussion in this chapter. One such parallel can be drawn between one hypothesis championed in Wells’s story. In it, a professor claims that there is “a kink in space,” according to which “two main points might be a yards away on a sheet of paper, and yet be brought together by bending the paper round.” Sisson’s observation that this untested conjecturing strongly resembles Nabokov’s image in his autobiographical novel, *Speak Memory*: “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” (139). Sisson correctly argues that Nabokov’s fiction often offers alternative realities, mutually exclusive and yet somehow coexistent, overlapping in suprarational transcendence of space and time” (535). Nabokov’s admiration of Wells’s works may be challenging to reconcile with the Russian master’s disapproving remarks of

science fiction. The feeling of unease that this question might have raised can be easily be dispelled, because “[w]hat Nabokov disparages is not work that *happens to be* SF, but work that is merely SF – merely genre fiction, merely formula fiction. Good fiction transcends any genre; ‘it is the individual artist that counts’” (Nicol 10). In his discussion of *Ada*, Appel (1970) reveals that time travel, automata, invisibility, immortality, identity transfer, space and time travel significantly broaden the list of the general attributes of the science fiction and, in a broader sense, speculative fiction genre found throughout Nabokov’s novels. The evanescence of truth is one of the prevailing qualities that Nabokov’s fiction foregrounds through the indeterminable nature of the otherworld that can be read both as a *terra incognita* of idealized memories or a hellish vision as captured by the punishments of Hieronymus Bosch’s fantastic imageries.

CHAPTER 4

Squirrels, Heartbeats, and the Otherworldly Variation of *Pnin*

Nabokov's outwardly most entertaining novel, *Pnin* sets out to respond to a multiplicity of questions which focus on pain, losses, suffering, nostalgia, or the tragedy of solitude. The present chapter seeks to draw attention, yet another time, to the irreconcilable nature of the mundane world of reality with an idealized otherworldly locus, where deceased friends and next of kin intensely bear on the lives of the living. *Pnin* provides an apposite demonstration of how moments of epiphany and their related experience of "cosmic synchronization" open avenues to the otherworld.

Heroically struggling with the English language, incapable of distinguishing between "what is advertisement and what is not advertisement" (*Pnin* 50) in an America that might momentarily turn into a safe haven for the hopeful traveler, Timofey Pnin, more so than any other character in Nabokov's swarm of immigrants, feels unequal to the task of making peace with the perplexing daily routine that the New World has in store for him. The outwardly amusing stories that farcical Pnin – completely forlorn and ridiculed out of all proportions – undergoes appositely reveal that pain, human suffering, nostalgia and the tragedy of solitude lie in the center of the novel, which has been incorrectly classified either as a prototypical campus novel or a postmodernist work of metafiction with one remarkable twist in the closing chapter.⁵⁹ It is, as Barabtarlo (2001) claims, due to the novel's relatively straightforward narrative technique that earlier critics regarded *Pnin* as "a string of more or less detachable story-length episodes, never really congealing into a novel."⁶⁰ This latter observation can easily be attributed to the fact that *Pnin* was

⁵⁹ Since its first publication in 1957, *Pnin* has been widely subjected to critical discussion, though the initial reception of the novel – a veritable deluge of articles in the first six months (Barabtarlo has counted 77 articles) – was outshone by the worldwide scandal that the release of *Lolita* triggered.

⁶⁰ Unanimous were the views expressed by the first wave of critics who reviewed the novel in 1957. Howard Nemerov called it a "collection of anecdotes ... held together (if it is) by one pretty device emerging at the finish" (314), while George P. Elliott also saw it as "a series of sketches none of which are short stories, though some were so published, and all of which hardly accumulate into a novel, though it is so categorized" (289).

published chapter-by-chapter in *The New Yorker* (1953-5), and was printed *in toto* in 1957 by Doubleday.⁶¹ Nabokov also rejected the label by saying that

I cannot tamper with either the plot or the construction of the thing ... You seem to regret that the book is, as you put it, not a “novel.” I do not know if it is or not ... All I know is that *PNIN* is not a collection of sketches. I do not write sketches. But must we pigeonhole him into any kind of category? (*Letters* 274)

Scholars, such as David Lodge, who have thus far discovered the possible influences of an array of subgenres in *Pnin* are correct in maintaining that the work can be read as, for example, the combination of a novel of manners, a campus novel and a *roman à clef*; however, as a whole, it remains to be “uniquely and quintessentially Nabokovian, having a family resemblance to his other works without being exactly like any of them” (Lodge web). It is at this juncture, prior to analyzing the otherworldly approaches in the novel, that I should like to make some digressive remarks about the generic properties of *Pnin*. In “Nabokov and the Campus Novel” Lodge claims that *Pnin* can be regarded as one of the prototypical members of the campus novels, prime examples of which include Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe* (1952), Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954), and a plethora of other works. Several other novels by Nabokov (*Pale Fire* occupying a central role) are concerned with the behavioral and stylistic norms of academia from the 1950s onwards. While *Pnin* is often seen as an early example of the genre, it also addresses questions on a broader moral, ethical, political and metaphysical scale, which are not necessarily generic characteristics of the campus novel. Although *Pnin* authentically demonstrates and derides the philistinism of academia (especially Chapter Six) as he experienced it first-hand throughout his teaching career in America, Nabokov is more inclined to deal with themes – elsewhere in the novel – which help prevent the reader from stigmatizing the work on the basis of the realistic and accurate portrayal of academic life. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that Nabokov was, as Karlinsky posits, a remarkable “social observer, amassing and storing away the supply of impressions that he was later to put to such good use in *Lolita* and *Pnin*. In fact, Letter 55 in *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971* can be read as a

⁶¹ See “*Lolita* into Print, *Pnin* onto Paper: Cornell, 1953-1955” (Chapter 12) in Boyd’s *The American Years* on the tortuous publication history of *Pnin*, which was both rejected by his American publishers, Viking and Harper.

preliminary sketch to certain passages in these two novels (96-98). In Chapter Five of *Pnin*, for example, Nabokov dramatizes the question of otherworldliness and also highlights the frequent appearance of the squirrel, which becomes – just as moths and butterflies in almost any Nabokovian novel – a recurring thematic element (and, to some critics, for example, Gennadi Barabtarlo, the central metaphor) of *Pnin*. Despite the claim that *Pnin* is far from being a mere campus novel, one cannot disregard the fact that more than 300 auxiliary characters inhabit the novel's academic landscape, many of whom had their actual counterparts in Nabokov's real life and make their debut in the book as fictionalized figures (particularly numerous are Nabokov's colleagues from his Cornell years). It cannot be ascribed to sheer coincidence that the character of Pnin has so many common traits with Marc Szeftel, who worked alongside Nabokov at Cornell, and they knew each other personally.⁶² I will yet again return to Szeftel in my discussion of the Jewish question at the end of this chapter. However, what preoccupies my mind in this chapter is not to authoritatively attempt to hurl *Pnin* into a category or two, but rather to see the novel as part of a broader schema that comfortably accommodates themes and ideas which are in conjunction with the central dynamics of the whole Nabokovian oeuvre – those of expatriation, exile, loss and displacement.

Instead of simply approaching the novel as an emblematic work of exile, I will argue that many of the ideas developed throughout *Pnin* – moral, artistic, metaphysical and supernatural – are closely interconnected with one another and gear towards the oft-cited question of the otherworld in varying contexts. I begin by establishing the claim that *Pnin* provides a meticulous description of the mental excursions – visions, to be more precise – that the hero is submitted to whenever he is overtaken by a strange cardiac sensation that allows the protagonist to contemplate the inscrutable problems of death, consciousness and the irrevocability of time. To explore these issues at length, Chapter Five, the most meditative and descriptive part of the novel, will prove ideal for us to emphasize the role that Mira Belochkin – once Pnin's beloved, a Jewish woman, who perished in Buchenwald – occupies in the protagonist's musings on past and present, forgetting and remembering. Notions that have been discussed in earlier chapters, including the author's use of cosmically synchronized scenes to account for an otherworldly revelation, will be taken up

⁶² Diment's exegetical work, *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* (1997) provides the most detailed account on the subject.

afresh in my discussion of the ubiquitous squirrel theme. Also, crucial to my analysis will be the manifestation of Nabokov's well-documented philo-Semitic sentiments and the exploration of the Jewish theme, whose essentials will be explored in Chapter 6 of this dissertation. In keeping with my earlier thread of argument, it will remain out of the scope of this chapter to subject to scrutiny the religious aspects of this fundamentally important Nabokovian concern; instead, what interests me is to find adequate evidence that Jewish characters in Nabokov's works are the ultimate pariahs, as I shall claim in the ultimate chapter, whose castaway status between one world and another invests them with the power and ability to understand more of the world and of the possible existence of a metaphysical beyond than ordinary characters.

Pnin's America: a Home for the Homeless

Pnin's new homeland is an eccentric place. What gives its eccentricity is that the America invented in the novel appears through the description of N., a Russian refugee, who introduces Pnin as a slightly droll, yet highly realistic character, someone who represents "humanity ... when it is faltering and foolish, and trying to rescue a few shreds of dignity and privacy" (Wood 162). N. is the story's *seemingly* omniscient narrator, whose "recollection of Timofey Pnin is connected with a speck of coal dust that entered my left eye on a spring Sunday in 1911" in St Petersburg (*Pnin* 146). Absconding from the reader's inquisitive eyes, the narrator – who, as it turns out, does share many affinities with the novel's flesh-and-blood author – intrudes upon the novelistic universe in Chapter Seven as Pnin's friend and self-styled confidante from the past, only to let slip that the insider's knowledge about the protagonist's private and public life directly come from him, a reliable and most authentic source of information.⁶³ Pnin and his allegedly all-knowing friend are both

⁶³ Critics have examined the novel so far were preoccupied with questions surrounding the novel's thematic structure or focused on the voice of the narrator, often discarding important aspects of the novel's treatment of moral problems, the pervasiveness of the Jewish question and the ever-elusive nature of the otherworld. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that the narrator's function is an important one: although the point-of-view of the narration is in the third person, N. assumes the role of an active participant, laying claims to false omniscience. Stephen Jan Parker makes an interesting observation when he quotes N.: "I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is discreetness" (quoted in Parker 86). In other words, what the narrator does is an intrusion into one's discreet, private life "with a narration based on the impossible assumption that

refugees, who “have lost two worlds, a home and an exile, the first to the Russian Revolution, the second to Hitler” (Wood 168-9). The ambiguous position that leaves Pnin (and his narrator-confidante) without a home proper makes him see America as the locus of his dual exile, a no man’s land, which he considers menacing and incomprehensible mainly because it further destabilizes his already unstable status as an émigré. The closing chapter of the book reveals that Pnin’s fears of being unable to adjust to the new surroundings were not the least unfounded: Nabokov cruelly aggravates Pnin’s unsteady situation by terminating his tenure and instead offers his position to the narrator, leaving the jobless protagonist embittered and without a proper income. Boyd writes that Pnin “will have to leave Waindell and face a future more homeless than ever” (AY 276). It comes as a reassurance only in *Pale Fire* that Pnin eventually ends up teaching at Wordsmith College, where he becomes “Head of the bloated Russian Department” and is described as a “regular martinet in regard to his underlings” (PF 112). In his treatment of Pnin, Nabokov emerges at his most benevolent: several characters in his other novels and short stories (Charlotte in *Lolita*, Felix in *Despair*, Krug in *Bend Sinister*, and so on) are automatically knocked out of the intricate game whenever deemed superfluous. In “A Resolved Discord (Pnin)” Barabtarlo (1993) claims that this is Nabokov’s only novel where no one dies on or off stage and cases of death (like that of Mira Belochkin’s execution) are narrated only in retrospect. He considers Pnin’s intermittent heart seizures, which I will discuss at length, as premeditative steps in Nabokov’s original plan. In other words, Pnin was bound – or it seemed so – to die of his weak heart, but the seizures he suffers in the novel are in fact only meant to strengthen the import of the mental errands that he makes in his past rather than to call attention to the physical pain a cardiac compression might entail. Despite Nabokov’s purported plan to dispatch his protagonist from the pages of his novel, Pnin escapes unharmed, though it seems at times that his continued existence in an unwelcoming country, where he is mocked, imitated and spurned by his colleagues, is downright senseless, and death – or rather, moving on to a different plane of existence, as it were – could easily equal redemption for a man who claims to “haf nofing left, nofing, nofing” (*Pnin* 51) in the world.

Pnin’s thoughts and feelings are known to him and that he is able to present and discuss them with full objectivity” (86).

In spite of his most valiant attempts Pnin never succeeds in responding to the challenges of the New World, nor does he manage to fully preserve his Russian identity in his newly discovered America. Mizener's reading of *Pnin* is concerned with the question of seriousness. He believes that Pnin can be absurd and tragic at the very same time because he fails to make a conscious effort to persevere in this alien world his identity – he sees his own attitudes as absolutely natural (659). However, one should not overlook the constant vigilance that Pnin exercises in his new homeland: “he was perhaps too wary, too persistently on the look-out for diabolical pitfalls, too painfully on the alert lest his erratic surroundings (unpredictable America) inveigle him into some bit of preposterous oversight” (*Pnin* 12). The fact that Pnin is an émigré who knows little about the country he lives in helps him “form (to invent) a territory which is quirky and precise, historically recognizable and recognizably personal” (Wood 162). What makes America an eccentric place in the novel is not merely the fact that its disparate components – the colorful advertisements, the electronic contrivances, the academic backbiting and an oddly spoken idiom – are seen through the eyes of a foreigner. It is also eccentric because the process of discovering and reinventing an already existing physical location is done by an émigré who has lost his home for good that he can only revisit through the act of remembering and reimagining it. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov admits that he “had to invent America and *Lolita*. It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced by a similar task, with a lesser amount of time at my disposal” (26).⁶⁴ Parker claims that Timofey Pnin is “the quintessential exile” (87), whose life is punctuated by irreparable losses, including that of his native Russia, his home culture, his mother tongue, his once beloved Mira, his fraudulent wife and eventually his professorship at Waindell that provided him with existential security, geographically and financially. While Parker's observation of Pnin's status reminds us of a central issue in Nabokov scholarship, one should

⁶⁴ Slightly out of the ken of this dissertation is what Rachel Trousdale calls “transnational world-fashioning” (2), a notion which has been successfully applied to *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*. The tread of argument Trousdale traces is that “[t]ransnational literature is full of fictional countries [as Humbert's or Pnin's America or Van Veen's Antiterra], alternate history and science-fictional world because fantastic locations create communities [exiles, Jews and other pariahs] that replace national cultures” (2). It may be worthwhile to mention parenthetically that certain geographical locations in Nabokov's works appear easily identifiable, though, as Nabokov wrote to Edmund Wilson in 1941 about “Cloud, Castle, Lake”: “I thought of showing it to Klaus Mann for *Decision*, but I am afraid it might strike him as anti-German, – not merely into-Nazis, – although really it could have happened in other countries too” (45).

bear in mind that considering the hero merely as a pathetic exile, whose “sad case” (*Pnin* 11) needs to be diagnosed as the narrator implies, would be just as egregious a mistake as reading the novel as a depository of several stereotypes that first-time readers might associate with Pnin. Among such *idées fixes* is the “type of that good-natured German platitude of last century, *der zerstreute Professor*” (*Pnin* 11-2), who easily loses his bearings in the new environment or becomes a victim to “some bit of preposterous oversight” (12). In fact, Pnin is portrayed as a person who is too vigilant and circumspect not to commit the trivial mistakes that his stereotypical image might imply.

In a letter, dated on 17 March 1957, Edmund Wilson praises the book for its genial tone and outwardly lighthearted subject-matter:

The arrival of *Pnin* has done something to cheer up this rather desolate household ... I think it [*Pnin*] is very good, and also that you may at last have made contact with the great American public. My reason for thinking this is that the reviews I have so far seen all say exactly the same thing: this shows that no one is puzzled, they know how they are meant to react. (343)

One of the reasons why Wilson may have thought of the novel as a source of refreshment is because Pnin’s grim status also has something to do with the freedom and self-determination that one’s exile is capable of generating. The fact that Pnin is an exile by default signifies that he belongs to no group whatsoever and is thus able to liberate himself from the infringement of other characters, be it either a cohort of his spiteful colleagues at college or the high-handed narrator, who finally appropriates his teaching position. Of course, Nabokov’s characters are never allowed to completely liberate themselves from the firmness of the auctorial hand. Careful readers will contentedly rediscover Pnin in *Pale Fire* as “Head of the bloated Russian Department.” The amount of freedom Pnin is provided with seems limited as he appears yet again as a fictional character in Nabokov’s novel, solipsized in the imagination (or perhaps having an existence of its own) of demented Kinbote. When he makes his memorable statement in Chapter Six that “[t]he history of man is the history of pain” (141), he also alludes to his own predicaments that *seem* to govern almost the entire narrative. Only a chapter before a fundamental exchange of ideas takes place between Pnin and Hagen, the protagonist visits “The Pines,” where, in the cheerful company of other Russian émigrés, he can finally set his mind at ease

and diminish the intensity of the alertness that makes him a slave to the daily routines he tries to observe closely, lest he should err irretrievably. It is in this vital chapter that laughable Pnin metamorphoses into the fearless hero he really is. After dinner he participates in a game of croquet, allowing his true self to be noticed by others:

It became immediately clear that Pnin, who teamed with Madam Bolotov against Shpolyanski and Countess Poroshin, was by far the best player of the lot. As soon as the pegs were driven in and the game started, the man was *transfigured*. From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering mute, sly-visaged hunchback. It seemed to be always his turn to play. (108-9; emphasis added)

Pnin emerges here not as the ultimate pariah, peregrinating from one world to another, but more as a full-fledged individual, who speaks his native tongue mellifluously and communicates with ease and refinement with the group to which he wishes to belong. Parker also claims that “in the Russian émigré milieu which is his natural element and where he is no longer a displaced person, Pnin appears neither humorous nor inept” (88-9). I agree with Bethea, who writes that “[s]ociability is inevitably a mark of vulgarity (‘poshlost’)” in Nabokov: negative characters, such as M’sier Pierre in *Invitation to a Beheading*, tend to be full-bodied, crudely gregarious and ingratiating, while positive characters, such as Cincinnatus in the same novel, tend to be lithe and fine-featured (to the point of being virtually “disembodied”), shy and standoffish, and self-enclosed in their world and in their gift (700).

Pnin’s life, interspersed with tragic elements as it is, cannot only be a life of pain and anguish, but – as careful readers may often note – his constant reminiscences of his homeland and the Russian fellow-émigrés he meets at “The Pines” provide him with a sense of security.⁶⁵ This sense of security does not come from the protecting walls of a home proper, but rather from his ability to communicate – through mental errands, that is, with the help of a retentive memory, his prodigious imagination, sensibility and creative powers – with the world he has ceased to have physical contact with as a result of his having gone into exile. It is for

⁶⁵ It is important to quote in a biographical aside what Bethea says about Nabokov and contrast the author’s personality with that of his character: “He [Nabokov] knew and freely acknowledged, for example, that he was not a good impromptu speaker. Self-conscious and not naturally warm and gregarious in large groups, he was made uncomfortable by the role of featured guest at a gather or party, where conversation ‘flowed’ spontaneously and he could not, with his native wit and eloquence, get outside and shape it” (700).

this reason that the claim made by an early critic should be regarded with a modicum of skepticism: “the actual life that Pnin lives makes an image of *human loneliness* and exile, of the brevity in time and isolation in space of all life” (Mizener 662-3; emphasis added). Instead, what I believe is that the chronic and intense pain Pnin experiences does not stem from the fact the he is, for the most part, without a strong family support and friends but because he must try hard to reconstruct the past, feed upon both happy and unhappy memories, ensuring he never loses his “infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English” (*SO* 15). Akin to Nabokov, who vowed never to return to Russia again because “the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood” (*SO* 9), Pnin is also firm in his belief that by simply remembering, he can preserve his true identity in a world so alien to him. He possesses one of the most important traits of the Nabokovian character that differs largely from the social man, whose mind is preoccupied by minute, quotidian affairs: Pnin is equipped with the *mnemonic faculty* others – the *poshylaki* people – fail to have.⁶⁶

In his discussion of *Pnin*, Barabtarlo claims that “[m]emory is a universal instrument of human creativity because not only recollection, but also imagination and attempts to envisage are acts of remembering” (*Aerial View* 184). It is rightly believed that going into exile is not merely a change of geographical location, but it also represents the cessation of time, a hiatus that gets in the way of progress, because, as the Hungarian scholar Miklós M. Nagy says, “whatever happens to the writer after immigration, is only a persistent attempt to reconstruct the lost Paradise in an alien, fable-like world, amongst spectral figures” (38; my translation).⁶⁷ Most of Nabokov’s protagonists are resolutely looking for ways to piece together the details of the past, hoping that Paradise can be regained in due course. The moments of remembering are, for the most part, connected with or signaled by objects, sensations and events recurring time and again, and generally having something of a link with the character’s past: for example, such a thematically important device in *Lolita* is a pair of sunglasses that belongs to Annabel and helps Humbert turn to his past. Supporting this conjecture, that certain phenomena indicate the commencement

⁶⁶ See Nabokov’s discussion “Philistines and Philistinism” in *Lectures on Russian Literature* (A Harvest Book, San Diego, 1981), 191-5. The author’s partial elucidation of the subject-matter is especially revealing in *Strong Opinions*, 100-1.

⁶⁷ The original text reads: „az emigrálással az író számára megállt az idő, ami utána történt, az csupán egy idegen, mesészerű világban, fantomlények között folytatott szakadatlan kísérlet az elveszett Éden rekonstruálására” (Nagy M. Miklós 38).

of the protagonist's mental excursion, it cannot be accidental that the eponymous hero of *Pnin* suffers a number of cardiac arrests throughout the novel. Closely related to the spiritual sensation that Pnin and diverse characters in other Nabokovian works undergo during these privileged, often revelatory moments is the Joycean experience of "aesthetic arrest" expounded by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He compares this instant to a cardiac condition in the following passage:

The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called *the enchantment of the heart*' (164; emphasis added).

Joyce theorizes that when the beholder experiences extreme beauty and pleasure in the world, his or her mind is held in esthetic arrest, a moment similar to the sudden cardiac compression of the Nabokovian hero. In Joyce, it is during these idealized instants of time that "the mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing" (*Portrait* 158). In his reading guide to *Ulysses*, Anderson points out that one should consider the "common aspects shared by aesthetic arrest and general Buddha-like detachment, in whose arms the ego-induced emotions of aggression and desire are arrested" (13). Similar is the stillness of the mind that the Nabokovian hero experiences when his heart becomes enchanted and is thus capable of arresting time, beauty and pleasure, and treasuring moments which would ordinarily go unperceived.

What role does this strange, oft-recurring physical phenomenon occupy in a novel that enthralls the reader with its initially comic tone and enjoyable subject-matter only to be transformed into a serious work of art? How are Pnin's cardiac seizures related to memory, the irrevocability of the past and the otherworld, a notion that has been a conceptual grab-all for a set of esthetic, moral, ethical and political questions that Nabokov's fictional universe holds?

Shadows and Hearts in *Pnin*

By having a look at Pnin's repeated cardiac seizures at the most unanticipated turns of the narrative, we will touch upon the central nerve of the novel, which also facilitates our understanding of the otherworld and its relation to epiphanic moments, often presaged by "cosmic synchronization"-like leaps in the narrative. Pnin's cardiac seizure, from the novel's outset, functions as a momentary departure from one narrative plane to another, where "all the past occasions of similar discomfort and despair" (*Pnin* 18) of the protagonist's life are recalled. Nabokov's works, as has been demonstrated in relation to "The Return of Chorb" and "Terra Incognita," abound in similar excursive techniques by dint of which the protagonist submerges into his memory, which often carries him off to another level of reality. In other words, these analeptic accounts of events stir up important and mainly unpleasant memories from the protagonist's past. Boyd claims that "it appears as if Nabokov has designed Pnin's seizure to revive in Pnin that rich collection of his past, that generous measure of his having lived through so much, and to awaken our sense of the poignant reality of Pnin's inner self" (283). Nabokov's constant references to the human heart (in the form of seizures and otherwise) and its association with analeptic mental errands can be traced back all the way to Aristotle, who saw the heart as the seat of the mind, thought and intellect. In *Pnin*, the human organ is not meant to signify bodily pain or the deterioration of the hero's physical condition, but to metaphorically stand for the mental journeys the protagonist undertakes.⁶⁸ In the novel's opening chapter, Pnin suffers his first important cardiac seizure, which the narrator describes as follows:

The sensation poor Pnin experienced was something very like *that divestment, that communion*. He felt porous and pregnable. He was sweating. He was terrified. A stone bench among the laurels saved him from collapsing on the sidewalk. Was his seizure a heart attack? I doubt it. For the nonce I am his physician, and let me repeat, I doubt it. My patient was one of those singular and unfortunate people who regard their heart ('a hollow, muscular organ', according to the gruesome definition in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, which Pnin's orphaned bag contained) with a queasy dread, a nervous repulsion, a sick hate, as if it were some strong slimy untouchable monster that one had to be parasitized with, alas. (17; emphases added)

⁶⁸ The two most relevant cases of Pnin's cardiac seizures occur on pages 17-18, 23 (Ch. 1) and page 109 (Ch. 5).

It is this intermittent sensation, “that eerie feeling, that tingle of unreality” that Pnin interprets as a “divestment” and a “communion” (17) in the beginning. It must be noted that the moment when Pnin is overpowered by the strange sensation, he feels as though he were detached, or divested, as it were, from the surroundings of his reality, the horrible here-and-now that all Nabokovian heroes strive to escape by means fair or foul. Every occasion when Pnin suffers a cardiac arrest, the sensation always includes “the sharpness of retrospective detail” (18), which helps Pnin temporarily regain his childhood Arcadia by gradually entering the world of his dreams.

It must be marginally remarked that occasional heart seizures, thumping hearts, missed heartbeats, palpitations, symptoms conducive to tachycardia, and even fatal heart attacks abound in Nabokov’s works. Lolita’s Humbert dies of coronary thrombosis in a mental asylum; on his return to London, Sebastian suffers a serious heart attack in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; Pilgram in “The Auerlian” is about to travel to Spain, but when his wife returns from the wedding later that day she finds him on the floor, “his livid face knocked out of shape by death” (*Stories* 258), dead from a heart attack; Vasiliy Ivanovich in “Cloud, Castle, Lake” “presse[s] his hand to the heart prior, as if to see whether his heart was there in order to give it away” (*Stories* 435) prior to experiencing moments of epiphany; in “Music”, Victor’s irregular heartbeat is accompanied by the constriction of his chest (*Stories* 333); the main theme of *Bend Sinister* is “the beating of Krug’s loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to” (*BS* viii).

In his afterword to the novel, Wood considers Pnin’s heart attacks as “an attack of history” that comprises “a memory of not only of individual loved ones but of the damaged life of modern times” (169). To my mind, Nabokov’s choice of *cardiac arrests* for Pnin’s ailment is particularly pertinent: if one’s heart metaphorically stands for the mind, as it were, it is capable of *arresting* all the good and bad memories of the past and measuring them out to the protagonist in varying doses. Pnin’s past – and his heart, in a more concrete sense – acts as a depository of such memories; it is a locus figuratively inhabited by the deceased, or rather, the images of the deceased. In this context, cardiac sensations function as an indication of the existence of an otherworldly place, where friends and his next of kin also look for ways to communicate with the living, as, for example, Nabokov’s short story “Christmas” aptly demonstrates: in it, Sleptsov’s dead son communicates from the

beyond by breathing new life into the chrysalis of a butterfly, which bursts out of a tin box, representing the re-birth of the son and his subsequent communication with his father. It can be concluded here that the physical pain Pnin experiences at the time of the sensation is, as Boyd convincingly asserts, “*not* part of some wantonly malevolent design but a means of extracting the treasures of the character’s private past and our present pity” (Boyd, AY 283). I believe that it is important to mention here – somewhat marginally – that Pnin’s evocative name has often been in the focal point of the novel’s close-readings: the similarity between the spelling of “pain” and “Pnin” (with the difference of two letters) also confirms that, in addition to other pivotal themes, the novel encapsulates several sources of pain, cruelty and maltreatment: Mira’s death in Buchenwald, Pnin’s lost childhood, his separation from Liza, the cruel wife, and the like are all there to buttress this argument. Nabokov scholarship has always paid special attention to an obscure exchange of ideas that occurs in Chapter Five between Pnin and Chateau:

Chateau, who looked so jaunty, with one hand in the pocket of his white flannel trousers and his lustrous coat rather rakishly opened on a flannel waistcoat, cheerfully said that in the near future he would have to undergo an exploratory operation of the abdomen, and Pnin said, laughing, that every time *he* was X-rayed, doctors vainly tried to puzzle out what they termed “*a shadow behind the heart.*”
“Good title for a bad novel,” remarked Chateau. (105; emphasis added)

While early Nabokov scholarship is at times devoid of the acumen with which recent critics have examined the otherworldly aspects of *Pnin*, Fowler rightly maintains – though he approaches the novel as shining example of *l’art pour l’art* – that “[a]lways in Nabokov the most sensitive consciousnesses are those made to bear pain” (128) and only they can “illuminate the highest possibilities of human consciousness” (129). The novel is seen at its most successful as it demonstrates how an individual who has lost almost everything he had fondly cherished with the exception of his ability to remember (a very important Nabokovian constant indeed) is invested with the amount of power that no one else is allowed to possess in the novel. The *power to remember* and thus to better understand the existence of the beyond is the result of the hero’s actual frailty in an alien society and his susceptibility to develop heart troubles. Fowler argues that loss always implies value

in the Nabokovian world; however, only his most privileged characters, his favorites, are allowed to cope with the questions of life and death.

Several others in the novel appear as typically average and small-minded individuals, whose negative traits are in keeping with Nabokov's definition of *poshlost*'. Márta Pellérdi writes that "[a]lthough for Pnin America is a place of refuge where he can feel safe from political persecution and pursue his research, the academic environment is not exempt from mediocrity" (61). *Pnin* teems with characters whose philistinism clearly manifests itself through their incompetence in the scholarly world and their contentment with the mediocre milieu in which they have gratuitously gained a highly venerated position in their community. In spite of his ability to speak English in a native-like manner, Nabokov's hero fights his battle against an academically amateurish army of diverse nationalities, and is transformed from – in the eyes of his community – his sorry status to becoming the textbook example of scholarliness. He is seen as a scholar *par excellence* in contrast with others: Leonard Blorengé, the Chairman of the French Department, who would travel "tremendous distances to attend Modern Language conventions, at which he would flaunt his ineptitude as if it were some majestic whim" (117); the "reactionary and Sovietophile blend presented by the pseudo-colorful Komarovs" (59) whose social recognition was due to the fact that they expressed themselves by using the commonplace ideas of their age; Dr. Eric Wind, "a completely humorless pedant who believed that his English (acquired in a German high school) was impeccably pure" (72), married Liza Wind, who was a psychiatrist, hence an archenemy of humankind from Nabokov's point of view. Mrs. Wind's own child Victor looks at his mother contemptuously on account of her profession, against which Nabokov also fought an endless and fierce battle.⁶⁹ One important remark that Pellérdi makes as she draws up a tentative inventory of mediocre and philistine characters is that

⁶⁹ Pellérdi claims that "the main problem that Pnin sees in psychiatry concerns the violation of the individual soul, and the conformity that is required of the individual to meet the standards of the 'group.' Talent, any deviance from the ordinary, is not respected; the complex mechanism of the soul and mind is over-simplified through Freudian doctrine to suit the general and reject the unique" (66). I personally believe that the most glaring example of the conformity vs. non-conformity opposition come to the forefront of observations in "Cloud, Castle, Lake," where the pitiable, abused protagonist is reluctant to obey the instructions of the leader of a group, who imposed his wills on a cohort of strong-headed German tourists, all being identical as regards their behavior and antagonism against the uniqueness of the individual. Individuals that are unable to take notice of the fine details of the world and are thus incapable of constructing or understanding the "patterns" leading to the gate of the otherworld should be seen as 'conveyors' of truisms and generalizations instead of focusing on the "details ... the divine details" that the conscious perceiver transforms into experience (qtd. in Connolly, "Introduction" 4).

Pnin “teaches and teaches in the New World where he faces the same kind of *poshlost*’ that he had encountered in the old one. Nabokov, however, makes sure that his philistines are either German (Eric Wind), or Russian (the Komarovs), not only American, to show that philistinism is not nation-specific” (72). Liza Wind, the hero’s ruthless ex-wife, is in fact a catalogue of some of the attributes Nabokov sallies forth against: she studied psychodramatics, and has become an adherent of Freud; repeatedly takes advantage of Pnin; writes shoddy verse “in halting anapest” (37); is a liar and an ardent supporter of group activities. Jack Cockerell, who is able to mimic Pnin *ad nauseum*, “the mildly anti-Semitic” (Boyd AY 289) Professor Hagen or Pnin’s driving instructor who treated “his intelligent pupil with expressions of vulgar detractions” (*Pnin* 94) are mostly stock characters, embodying a large degree of the petty-mindedness that serves as the basis of what Nabokov designates as “poshlism.” It can be correctly surmised that Joan and Laurence Clements, who take notice of Pnin’s gift as artist and scholar, are devoid of the characteristics that give rise to *poshlost*’. Pellérdi writes that “Clements first has reservations about having Pnin for a roomer, [and only later] he comes to recognize in Pnin a true fellow scholar” (71).

In his lecture, entitled “Philistines and Philistinism” (1950), Nabokov elucidates – or rather, circumscribes – the meaning of the obscure Russian term jocularly anglicizing it as *poshlust*. He states that the notion might allude to an array of cultural, socio-political phenomena as well as questions of art and literature, some aspects of which he subjectively considers as inferior in taste and quality. Nabokov reviled “petty bourgeois smugness” (*SO* 97) and treated with resentment the “smug philistines” (*LRL* 309) who represented any aspect or a combination of aspects characteristic of “poshlism”. For Nabokov, it was not merely a question founded on esthetic value-judgment, but he also intended to put the deadly label of *poshlost*’ on anything or anybody that had no proper place in his moral universe. In spite of Nabokov’s prolix explanatory note on *poshlost*’, Davydov speculates that it is an elusive concept (and indeed, the word itself is not found in most English collegiate dictionaries) whose emergence in the Nabokovian oeuvre can be ascribed to “the cultural background that shaped Nabokov’s values and contributed to such a low tolerance for anything that did not meet his high standards” (“Poshlost” 633). Opposed to the above-cited characters stands frail and despondent Pnin, whose vulnerability – most of all, his heart condition – makes him endure the least

benevolent treatment in the novel, yet his imagination, intellect and human warmth lend him the ability to come to grips with the nature of death. Whenever Pnin suffers a cardiac seizure, he immediately slides back into his past. Similar is the goal that Nabokov strives to accomplish as he breaks up the narrative with scenes of “cosmic synchronization.”

Let me make an important digression at this juncture before I get down to elaborating more fully on the novel’s cosmically synchronized episodes and their connection with the hero’s cardiac seizures. In what Pnin’s doctors consider “a shadow behind the heart” (105), critics have often noted the importance attached to shades and shadows in Nabokov’s works (consider *Transparent Things* as the most ‘shadowy’ of all the novels, “The Vane Sisters” as an insight into the preternatural or any other work – *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* being the most salient examples – where the living are constantly surrounded by images and shadows of the dead). The obscure phrase has found its way in *Pnin* by dint of an autobiographical snippet that Boyd explains: “[i]n February, a routine X-ray revealed Nabokov had a ‘Shadow behind the Heart’ – something that has been haunting me for more than ten years and that no doctor has been able to explain – but what a wonderful title for an old-fashioned novel!” (AY 216).

Careful readers will agree that *Pnin* contains an overabundance of shadows and also introduces the otherwise maladroit protagonist as someone capable of performing trivial activities, such as the creation of shadowgraphs, which requires a sleight-of-hand:⁷⁰

He was inept with his hands to a rare degree; but because he could manufacture in a twinkling a one-note mouth organ out of a pea pod, make a flat pebble skip ten times on the surface of a pond, *shadowgraph* with his knuckles a rabbit (complete with blinking eye), and perform a number of other tame tricks that Russians have up their sleeves, he believed himself endowed with considerable manual and mechanical skill. (*Pnin* 12; emphasis added)

⁷⁰ For a longer discussion of the theme of doubling, see my MA thesis, “The Questions of Identity in Nabokov’s Fiction” (2006), where I investigate the doppelgänger theme in *Despair* and *Lolita*. See also Ellen Pifer’s “Shades of Love: Nabokov’s Intimations of Immortality” for an excellent treatment on the theme of the otherworldly in several novels and Priscilla Meyer’s “Dolorous Haze, Hazel Shade: Nabokov and the Spirits,” which is concerned with the supernatural and otherworldly elements in *Pale Fire*, especially with the death of John Shade’s daughter, the central topic of “Pale Fire,” the poem. John Shade’s name is also highly suggestive of the novel’s otherworldly nature, inasmuch as Humbert Humbert’s duplicated name (deriving from *umbra*, Lat. for shadow) can be interpreted as the shadow of a shadow, that is, the shadowy other self of Clare Quilty.

Pnin and Victor are familiar with the technique of creating pictures made up of shadows or outlines. Known in medicine as “skiagraphy” in medicine, the related process involves the production of an image on a radiosensitive surface, especially by X-rays passed through an object. Pellérđi correctly conjectures that Victor and Pnin have much in common with respect to the full use of their creative faculties. As opposed to a multitude of philistine characters in the novel, Victor stands out as the real artist, “whose genius lies in his Emersonian individuality, his non-conformity to artistic movements, or schools and his indifference to the ‘Ashcan School or the Cache Cache School or the Cancan School’” (Pellérđi 69). His true artistic genius, his spiritual affinities with Pnin, and his reluctance to strong-headedly kneel down to ideas promulgated by various schools make Victor one of the novel’s key characters, whose sensitivity enables him to understand the small details through which the otherworld becomes accessible. The novel’s narrator even claims that Victor, who – at the age of eight wanted to learn to paint air in a similar fashion to 17th-century Dutch painters – attended the “workshop of some great Italian skiagrapher” (81). Visual arts and medicine are also deftly brought together in Nabokov’s all-too-famous *Lolita*: Humbert toys with the convention of shades, shadows and doubles throughout the novel. In addition to alluding to Clare Quilty as his Humbert’s shadow, the process of skiagraphy is mentioned by Lolita herself, who recounts to Humbert that they had “made shadowgraphs” (AL 114) of each other’s bones at school.⁷¹ The shadows and shades in *Pnin*, through the continued references to visual arts (expatiated by Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson), are meant to emphasize the existence of the hereafter, a place beyond all human understanding that one can “safely believe in [but] *knowing* anything of it is a self-destructive condition because such an experience must annihilate the concept of knowledge” (Barabtarlo, *Aerial View* 178; emphasis in the original). More than that, it might be worthwhile to point out that the repeated references to shadows in the novel reinforces Plato’s mature philosophical thinking developed in *The Republic*, arguing that the world we inhabit is but the sham imitation, an imperfect replica of the Ideal State. As I stated earlier, Meyer is correct in maintaining that “Nabokov’s art grows out of Romanticism in the Platonic tradition; because he sees this world as a pale reflection of another, his

⁷¹ In their pioneering study of the relevance of pictorial arts in Nabokov’s novels – including *Pnin* – Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson claim that Apollodorus was “the first man to discover the gradation and change of color in shadows” (21-2).

novels abound in doublings, mirrorings and inversions” (“Infinite Reflections” 197). It is for this reason that I must discard Nicol’s early, one-sided, formalistic interpretation of the relevance of shadows: he claims that Nabokov’s use of shadows does not go beyond the interest of commandingly expressing his authorial control over his characters, who are “only shades, shadows, figments of the imagination of “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me”” (203).

Following this brief digression on the shades and shadows that keep appearing in Nabokov’s novels, I would like to pick up yet again the thread of how the author manages to reconstruct past memories by inflicting physical pain on the protagonist. I stated at the outset of this chapter that the only plausible way for the Nabokovian hero to regain the lost Paradise is to revisit the loci of his jubilant past through the act of remembering. Toker claims that Pnin, akin to Nabokov, is “a fugitive from pain” (*Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* 31); consequently, he is unable to recall the past on his own, fearing that the faces of his loved ones would reappear and further aggravate his vicissitudes.⁷² In “The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty,” Rorty famously claims that Nabokov was so inclined to describe his immeasurably large capacity for joy and bliss that he was unable to “put up with the thought of intense pain” (155). Rorty believes that Nabokov not only feared of being cruel but also of simply ignoring the suffering others. In like manner, Pnin also loathes pain and will do everything in his might to curb human suffering. He is optimistic and childishly naïve as he remarks the following to Hagen:

You and I will give next year some splendid new courses which I have planned long ago. On Tyranny. On the Boot. On Nicholas the First. On all the precursors of modern atrocity. Hagen, when we speak of injustice, we forget Armenian massacres, tortures which Tibet invented, colonists in Africa. ... The history of man is the history of pain! (141)

Pnin tries to stand outside his own past, but – by means of his cardiac fits – the narrator keeps close control of his imagination by breaking up the narrative through the insertion of “cosmic synchronization”-like leaps, the best example of which is found in Chapter Five. It is evident that this excursive device allows the protagonist to submerge into an otherworldly realm, where he suddenly encounters all those people and experiences he would rather expel from his memory. However, as one

⁷² For an excellent article on cruelty in *Bend Sinister*, see Zoran Kuzmanovich, “Suffer the Little Children,” in: *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. Gavriel Shapiro, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003, 49-58.

commentator claims, “[o]ne of the main characteristics of Nabokov’s otherworld, in whatever form it appears to mortals, is that it is not there to bring pain but to support and comfort the protagonist in their misfortunes” (Sommers 49). I would like to continue with some general remarks on “cosmic synchronization” and its relatedness with several features of the otherworld.

Gunshots, Squirrels, and the Compassionate Eye

Careful readers of Nabokov will agree that the author’s stylistic bravura is not merely dependent on the refined way he uses Russian and English throughout his works, but also on his formulation and extensive use of the technique he refers to as “cosmic synchronization” in *Speak, Memory*:

.... 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. ... Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time ... – *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.* (118; emphases added)

On the one hand, “cosmic synchronization” can be thought of as a rhetorical or stylistic device that catalogs and connects seemingly incongruent images in one single flash of time to provide a unified perception of the world; on the other hand, cosmically synchronized scenes are a means to imply the imminence of the otherworld, whose understanding relies on one’s knowledge of the particulars (ideas and sensations) that constitute the universe, as it is known to mortals, and a parallel world that becomes accessible only to some privileged heroes. Closely related to the notion is what Nabokov calls “aesthetic bliss” in *Lolita*, which forms an indispensable component of the beyond (and perhaps of the whole of Nabokov’s art and philosophy) and is famously defined as “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (*Lolita* 305). Christian Moraru claims that Nabokovian synchronization has its possible antecedents among French structuralists and Russian formalists (Roman Jakobson, Jean Cohen and Michael Riffaterre), who also believed that the mind of the poet is capable of capturing several images at a time. He calls

this a “referential-agglutination” model that has come to be seen as an influence on several postmodernist authors, including Barth, Pynchon, Sorrentino and George Perec (50).

Any attempt to discuss the relevance of “cosmic synchronization” would be impossible if one failed to remember that allowing the reader to submerge into a state of “aesthetic bliss” was one of the author’s preeminent concerns when writing his works. In a sense, Nabokov liked to don the mask of an artist who is overanxious about the esthetic value his novels create and cares little for pragmatic, moral or ethical questions at large. He states that “I have no purpose at all when composing my stuff except to compose it. I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure” (*SO* 115). Indeed, the mellifluity and lyricism of Nabokov’s prose are an important and highly perceptible feature, which emerges during the revelatory seconds of “cosmic synchronization,” when time freezes and all the minute details begin to coalesce. Nonetheless, one cannot overlook the importance of questions which go beyond simple esthetic preoccupations, such as the manifestly poetic characteristics of the author’s prose (for example, David Lodge examines *Lolita* by shedding light on its “fancy prose style” [*The Art of Fiction* 94]) and several others, on the basis of which Nabokov’s works were, for a long time, seen as hermetically closed metaliterary manifestos. It can be safely maintained now that “aesthetic bliss” is always bound up with questions pertaining to the transcendence of the self and the existence of the beyond that yields itself accessible during moments of spiritual revelation, which foreshadows the joining of the two universes, the real and the ecstatic. Sisson, who has offered the most comprehensive study of the scheduled recurrence of the Nabokovian phenomenon of “cosmic synchronization” so far, states that the notion itself “corresponds to the secular and spontaneous ecstasy of universal oneness” (155), which allows one’s perception to be formed round three major pillars: (1) the personal mental world, (2) the physical space surrounding the perceiving individual and (3) the principles governing the universe. Nabokov employs this technique repeatedly in order to illumine the existence of an otherworld that would be impossible to approach through the use of ordinary syntax and the conventional juxtaposition of images.

Let us now examine *Pnin* in this context. While Nabokov’s syntax in Chapter Five shares no common traits with the unorthodox grammatical structure that, for

example, the ending of the short story, “Perfection”⁷³ displays, it *does* demonstrate the author’s longing for the unified perception of the world. It is the shape of this realm that Pnin dexterously reconstructs with his own hands at a sports shop as he outlines “a portable world” with the “same gesture he used in class when speaking of the ‘harmonical wholeness’ of Pushkin” (*Pnin* 82). The moments of tranquility “[u]nder the pale sky” (96) in the forest are followed by the vertiginously rapid succession of movements, signaled a gunshot and other minute details:

Presently, however, a gun shot popped, and a twig leaped into the sky. The dense upper boughs in that part of the otherwise stirless forest started to move in a receding sequence of shakes or jumps, with a swinging lilt from tree to tree, after which all was still again. Another minute passed, and then everything happened at once: 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 hopelessness, found himself on a paved road with a rusty but still glistening sign directing wayfarers ‘To The Pines’. (96)

In our delineation of “cosmic synchronization,” it is imperative that we do not merely consider it as a randomly emerging technique, a narrative or technical twist applied to its own end, but more so as a pervasive device that fastens together the seemingly disparate sections of the plot, allowing the protagonist to have an occasional foreglimpse of the transcendent. In providing a haphazard list of objects at the outset of Chapter Three, Nabokov makes use of the selfsame technique – “cosmic synchronization,” that is – as Pnin contemplates how he changed his lodging every semester or another. The passage that follows aptly demonstrates the precariousness of Pnin’s position in the world of spatial and temporal distinctions, where realities meet and blur, and the protagonist’s recourse to memory becomes a muddled, non-linear procession of events and images.

The accumulation of consecutive rooms in his memory now resembled those displays of grouped elbow chairs on show, and beds, and lamps, and inglenooks which, ignoring all space-time distinctions, commingle in the soft light of furniture store beyond which it snows, and the dusk deepens, and nobody really loves anybody. (52)

⁷³ “Perfection” (1932) is one of Nabokov’s lesser known short stories, which expands upon the relationship of Ivanov, an impoverished geography graduate and his private student. While Ivanov’s death at the closing of the story is foreshadowed throughout the plot, we only learn about it with the help of an adept narrative technique. The final sentence of the story is a famous example of the Nabokovian “cosmic synchronization,” accumulating a plethora of details about the surroundings and the beauties of everyday life.

What this passage reveals is that the protagonist is endowed with the ability to conjure up images, sensations and impressions simultaneously, which is meant to bolster Sisson's reasoning – also elaborated on in the opening chapter of this dissertation – that “cosmic synchronization” “give[s] the reader a sense of moving rapidly, seemingly instantaneously, from a nucleus to the outermost boundaries of ‘cosmic synchronization’” (177).⁷⁴ In Chapter Five, Pnin is about to take a mental excursion in what appears to be an experience that comes close to “cosmic synchronization” as “a Baltic summer resort, and the sounds, and the smells, and the sadness” (95) begin to amalgamate, but the special moment disintegrates when the uncouth gas station attendant wipes the windshield of his car. This intrusion implies that the transcendence of the self and the attainment of the “aesthetic bliss” of the Nabokovian beyond is the gift of the select and is not always in easy reach.

Several other mental meanderings of Pnin are interrupted in a similarly abrupt, bathetic manner in the novel: as he suffers his first cardiac fit in Chapter One, he is startled out of his brief vision (“And suddenly Pnin found himself sliding back into his own childhood” [18]) by a grey squirrel. Nabokov scholarship has attached particular significance to the small forest animal, which appears intermittently in the novel when Pnin dolefully evokes the tragic events of the past. Critics and careful observers have noticed the thematic reappearance of the squirrel, often coinciding with events that reveal a great deal about Pnin's personal history. Nicol meticulously tabulates – chapter by chapter – all the recurrences of the squirrel (see “Pnin's History,” 198-9), which, in addition to its simplest metaphorical interpretations early critics had entertained, has evolved into “a complex symbol of pain bordering on the otherworldly” (Sommers 46) with important implications gearing towards a transcendental state. On a parenthetical note, it is interesting to remark that squirrels also recur elsewhere in Nabokov's fiction. In *Bend Sinister* “a girl's tiny slipper [is] trimmed with moth-eaten squirrel fur” (140), while in *The Defence* stands “an étagère [showcasing] a globe and a stuffed squirrel.” In *Laughter in the Dark*, Margot is longing to catch a squirrel, and complains that “[t]here are too many

⁷⁴ It must be noted that the “Wandering Rocks” episode of *Ulysses* is a classic instance of rendering simultaneity in modern fiction, and the concurrent and rapid succession of events are similar to those demonstrated by Nabokov. Of all episodes in Joyce's tour de force, the “Wandering Rocks” is the most radical example of synchronized movements. It consists of 19 sections, which follow various characters around Dublin in the duration of a single moment of time, similarly to the method observable in Nabokov.

sounds here. Trees, wind, squirrels, and things I cannot name. I don't know what's happening round me ... It's all so noisy." In *Lolita*, a squirrel appears at a crucial point in the narrative: "It was she, however, who broke the silence: 'Oh, a squashed squirrel', she said. 'What a shame'. Irene Masing-Delic quotes one Russian scholar, who is convinced that the squashed squirrel acts as a symbol of Lolita's crushed childhood (26). In *The Gift* "[t]he squirrel he had just seen climbed up the bark of a tree with a spasmodic, scrabbly sound" (305). Conspicuous as the squirrel imagery in *Pnin* is, it would be erroneous to attach too much importance to the random squirrels jumping hither and thither in *other* Nabokovian texts.

Nevertheless, akin to the moths, butterflies and winged insects everywhere else in Nabokov's works, it is the ubiquity of squirrels in *Pnin* that explicitly calls for symbolic and, at a deeper level, metaphysical interpretations. Interestingly, *Pnin* contains only an exiguous number of the lepidopterological references that permeate the majority of the author's texts and have been thus recognized as his trademark, establishing a bond between real life (both scientific and natural) and the world of art. Entomology-obsessed readers might grumble that the novel lacks the generous amount of Lepidoptera that play so determining a role everywhere else in Nabokov's fiction. The only butterfly scene worthy of regard in *Pnin* captures one's interest not because of the transcendence of the soul that the insect usually stands for, but because it pinpoints Nabokov's partially recognizable authorial presence under the guise of Vladimir Vladimirovich within the fictional construct:⁷⁵

A score of small butterflies, all of one kind, were settled on a damp patch of sand, their wings erect and closed, showing their pale undersides with dark dots and tiny orange-rimmed peacock spots along the hind-wing margins; one of Pnin's shed rubbers disturbed some of them and, revealing the celestial hue of their upper surface, they fluttered around like blue snow-flakes before settling again.

'Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here', remarked Chateau. 'He would have told us all about these enchanting insects'. (107)

⁷⁵ Self-reflexive devices highlighting the occasional and arbitrary recurrences of the flesh-and-blood author abound in *Pnin*. He surfaces as the famous literary man whose life has coincided with that of Pnin. An incomplete list follows: Liza once had "a rather silly affair with a littérateur who is now – But no matter" (38); Pnin and Chateau are discussing "[é]migré Russians – liberals and intellectuals who had left Russia around 1920's among whom 'Bunin, Aldanov [and] Sirin'" are the most relevant, the latter one being Nabokov's penname; and the man that takes over Pnin's professorship as the novel's end is "a prominent Anglo-Russian writer who, if necessary, could teach all the courses that Pnin must keep in order to survive" (117).

Early critical assessments of *Pnin* compound that “a series of associational cross-references duly recorded by the narrator” (Parker 89) provide a key to the novel’s intricate patterns, which helps unearth Pnin’s painful history. In order to understand the deeper strata of the novel in relation to the otherworld, one cannot disregard the thematic recurrence of the squirrel and its mysterious association with Pnin’s once beloved Mira Belochkin, who was “selected to die and was cremated only a few days after her arrival in Buchenwald, in the beautifully wooded Grosser Ettersberg” (113). Squirrels appear – unobtrusively, as the latter example shows, or visibly – at the most crucial and emotionally most disquieting stages of the narrative. It was assumed for a long time that of all scheduled recurrences it is the squirrel’s earliest association with Pnin in Chapter Three that plays the most important role in the novel, where a “skimpy squirrel” is seen “dash[ing] over a patch of sunlit snow” (*Pnin* 61) and Pnin is later compared to the arboreal rodent as he pulls out a catalogue drawer (*Pnin* 64). It has been rightly posited ever since that “the squirrel motif in the novel is associated with all its major characters – positive and negative, present and past, alive and dead” (Masing-Delic 25). So far, much has been written extensively about the plausible interpretation of the squirrel motif in *Pnin*. Boyd believes that the squirrel pattern “seems to intimate a number of possible metaphysical answers to the problem of human pain” (AY 282), while Charles Nicol in “Pnin’s History” and Stuart in *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody* draw parallel between the squirrels and the Pnin’s research heavily dominated by linguistics (consider the apparent connection between glass and squirrel fur and the relevance of Cinderella’s glass slippers). In “A Resolved Discord (*Pnin*)” Barabatarlo posits that the squirrel theme does not necessarily have “special allegoric mission, besides sharing in the general symbolism of all artistic expression” (web).

In the process of collecting material for his *Petite Histoire* of Russian culture, Pnin “pulls out a catalogue drawer from the comprehensive bosom of a card cabinet” only to “take it, *like a big nut*, to a secluded corner and there make a quiet mental meal of it” (64; emphasis added). Temporarily transmogrified into a squirrel that garners food in a similar fashion to the litterateur gathering material in the library, Pnin’s movements are compared to that of the arboreal rodent when he removes the drawer and carries it, as though it were a nut, into the other cranny of the room. It is at this point that I must mention yet again Nabokov’s abhorrence of T. S. Eliot and

his preferred “mythical method,” which has been noted by prominent scholars.⁷⁶ Instead of unconditionally believing in the effectiveness of Eliot’s “mythical method,” Nabokov was clearly in favor of the narrative method. Nonetheless, it seems plausible to me that the image of the squirrel, as a structural and organising device, comes very close to the role Eliot’s scurrying rats occupy in *The Waste Land*. Akin to these creatures, which collect and recycle materials of earlier times, squirrels are also used in Nabokov to garner bits and snippets of the aggrandized past – Pnin’s childhood arcadia, his first and delicate love, Russian poetry and so on – and, in doing so, help create narrative shape and order.

The intimations of Pnin metamorphosing into a squirrel as well as the numerous other references to it in the novel enable readers to act as literary detectives in pursuit of an ultimate meaning of the mysteriously reappearing bushy-tailed animal.⁷⁷ In Chapter Six, a revealing, yet highly trivial exchange, infused with a painstakingly particularized etymological analysis, takes place between Mrs. Thayer and Pnin as they contemplate a glass bowl, a gift that Victor presented to Pnin.

Margaret Thayer admired it in her turn, and said that when she was a child, she imagined Cinderella’s glass shoes to be exactly of that greenish blue tint; whereupon Professor Pnin remarked that, *primo*, he would like everybody to say if contents were as good as container, and, *secundo*, that Cendrillon’s shoes were not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur – *vair*, in French. It was, he said, an obvious case of the survival of the fittest among words, *verve* being more evocative than *vair* which, he submitted, came not from *varius*, variegated, but from *veveritsa*, Slavic for a certain beautiful, pale, winter-squirrel fur, having a bluish, or better say *sizily*, columbine, shade – from *columba*, Latin for ‘pigeon’, as somebody here well knows – so you see, Mrs. Fire, you were, in general, correct’. (132)

⁷⁶ For the most seminal article a propos of T.S. Eliot, see John Burt Foster Jr., “Epilogue: Proust over T.S. Eliot in *Pale Fire* (1962)” in *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁷⁷ Masing-Delic calls attention to several less frequently recorded squirrel-related scenes and objects in *Pnin*. See “Belkin, Belochkiny, and Belka Chudo-Divo”: Pushkin’s “The Fairytale of Czar Saltan” in Nabokov’s *Pnin*, 25. She convincingly claims that Mira, akin to a squirrel, is brown, small and soft, has married a “fur dealer of Russian extraction” and died in Buchenwald (‘Wald’ meaning ‘forest’ in German, that is, the natural habitat of squirrels). Pushkinian subtexts loom large in other works by Nabokov. An incomplete list includes: Sergei Davydov, “Nabokov and Pushkin,” in *Transactions of the Association of Russian-American Scholars in the U.S.A.*, 1987, Vol. 20, 190-204; Sergei Davydov, “Weighing Nabokov’s Gift on Pushkin’s Scales,” in *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*, ed. by Boris Gasparov *et al.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 415-439; Sergei Davydov, “Nabokov and Pushkin,” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. by Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 482-495.

Less vigilant readers might plump for the conclusion that Pnin, through his interminable lectures on a variety of topics (including the above-cited passage on the linguistic connection between Cinderella's shoes and squirrel fur), is presenting fanciful and nationalistic folk-etymology in an incorrect manner, whereby he makes a distinctly Kinbotean fool of himself. Of course, no evidence can easily validate the idea about Pnin's alleged pedantry and inaccuracy. In one way or another, Pnin acts in a singularly pedantic fashion when it comes to lecturing, teaching, and enlightening those surrounding him, but his investigative and argumentative commentaries illustrate his true scholarly interest in the humanities and make him appear as an individual who is disinclined to accept pseudo-scholarship and superficiality. He always attempts to extract some kind of meaning from the underlying semantic content of the (for instance, his explication of the Cinderella case), because, as Pnin thinks, "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" (*Pnin* 11). Indeed, Pnin is an epitome of scholarliness, whose incessant lectures reflect on his attention to small details. If Pnin is compared to other characters of the novel (most of whom are archetypically mediocre figures of academia), he comes off victorious through his accurate presentation of details at all time. Pellérdi concludes her chapter on *Pnin* by calling attention to the difference between Pnin the scholar and the narrator-writer of the book, who only takes over the control of the fictional universe in the novel's last chapter. Vladimir Vladimirovich "has a rich imagination that is bound to distort and fictionalize facts during the process of creation ... But through the distorted narrative, Pnin's life becomes molded into a version that he cannot recognize as his" (76). Escaping the invented and entirely imprecise narrations from the pen of a seemingly omnipresent and omnipotent narrator-writer is an important pursuit that Pnin has. "The fable the narrator is telling is the untrue story of Pnin, who successfully flees from the clutches of Vladimir Vladimirovich" (77).

With repeated reading, it becomes evident that the squirrels which populate the novel are the "metempsychic incarnation of Pnin's dead fiancée whose spectre interferes in his life at critical turns" (Barabtarlo, "Pnin" 603). Rowe suggests that the rodent should be regarded as Mira Belochkina's resurrection, who "acts through the uncanny squirrel to exercise a faint influence upon Pnin's life" (quoted in

Sommers 45). The latter assertion is unlikely to take speakers of Russian by surprise, who all are conscious of the fact that “belka,” the stem of Mira’s family name, means “squirrel,” consequently the signification of Belochkina is “little (female) squirrel.”

In Nabokov’s fictional universe, I believe, the deceased always wield pervasive, yet indirect influence on the living. Pifer convincingly suggests that it is these shades and spectral figures of the hereafter that dictate or determine one’s fate, and “by creating sudden shifts in the atmosphere, they encode phenomena with cryptic signs and messages” (“Shades of Love” 76). It can be said of the squirrel that it also functions as an encoding of Mira, who first appears by name in Chapter Five but careful re-readers will be able to detect her figure in the image of the rodent even before Roza Shpolyanski explicitly divulges to Pnin the minutiae of Mira’s agonies and subsequent death in the concentration camp of Buchenwald: “It is of no importance, anyway. I don’t think we ever met. But you knew well my cousins, Grisha and Mira Belochkin. They constantly spoke of you. He is living in Sweden, I think-and, of course, you have heard of his poor sister’s terrible end. ...” (*Pnin*)

In a sense, Mira is the metaphorical representation of Pnin’s (and Nabokov’s) idea of the otherworld, and the squirrel, as Shroyer correctly claims in his analysis of the Jewish theme in *Pnin*, “surfaces in the novel to remind Pnin of his moral responsibility and direct his increasingly unorthodox metaphysical quest” (“Jewish Questions” 84). In fact, Nabokov’s choice of the rodent may not have been accidental, as the English word ‘squirrel’ comes from the Greek where its lexical precursor means “shadow-tail” (Nicol 200) and, as a shadow, it is indicative of Mira’s spectral presence, who is able to watch over Pnin’s fate from the beyond and perhaps even exert her influence upon him. It must be posited that Mira emerges as a central figure in the novel: although she seemingly occupies only a marginal role in Pnin’s reminiscences as a summertime flame (section five of Chapter Five), who is later brutally exterminated, Mira looms so large at the edges of the novel that it would be difficult *not* to agree with Boyd in that she stands in the “moral centre” of *Pnin* (AY 279). On the basis of this conjecturing, it seems reasonable, yet not entirely justifiable, that “the observer on the lookout tower” who accompanies Pnin’s inept maneuvering of his automobile (Chapter Five) with “a compassionate eye” is the protagonist’s dead fiancée:

his various indecisions and gropings took those bizarre visual forms that an observer on the lookout tower might have followed with a compassionate eye; but there was no living creature in that forlorn and listless upper region except for an ant who had his own troubles ... (96)

Mira's first mention by name in Chapter Five coincides with one of the climactic points of the novel: Pnin engages into a memorable bit of conversation with Roza Shpolyanski, a Jewish woman whose two cousins died in a concentration camp in Buchenwald. I agree with Barabtarlo, who writes that *Pnin* is the only novel by Nabokov in which deaths – including that of Mira – never occur on or off stage, only in the protagonist's recollections (web). However, this statement ought to be taken with certain reservations, as death-like experiences (for example, Pnin's heart seizures) occur throughout the novel; for Nabokov, invoking the past – together with its personal losses of loved ones, agonies, and vicissitudes of the war – might create an even more sinister atmosphere than the presentation of often stylized scenes of death, such as Luzhin's fatal jump from the window, during which he dies, but which also symbolically represents his entry into another, more serene world. Once Pnin learns about the tragic death of his ex-fiancée, he is suddenly flung back into his young adulthood when Mira was still alive and history had not yet separated them. A lengthy, descriptive passage, poetic in tone, ensues in the wake of Roza Shpolyanski's revelatory account, giving a somewhat fragmentary picture of the romantic affair between the two lovers at a time when "Timofey Pnin was ... the clumsy, shy, obstinate, eighteen-year-old boy, waiting in the dark for Mira" (111). Pnin is yet again confronted with the memories of his early years, which, despite his will, hark back to him with images that call to mind Nabokov's descriptions in *Speak, Memory*. In this poignant recollection of the past, the circumstances of Mira's death are invoked indistinctly, akin to the "vibrating outline of verses you know you know but cannot recall" (112). It is a conspicuous feature of the Nabokovian novel that his protagonists are often unable to conjure up the past with the exactness of details but would rather rely on the vivid impressions they have clustered around a distinct memory of the past. Pnin, for example, lucidly remembers the last time he met Mira "on the Neva embankment in Petrograd, and the tears, and the stars, and the warm rose-red silk lining of her karakul muff" (*Pnin* 112) and other apparently inconsequential details of their encounter, still he appears reluctant to conjure up the very image of Mira in detail, so much so that her own existence is enveloped in

obscurity until this crucial chapter. One remarkable aspect of Pnin's past is his paradoxical attitude towards Mira's death: while he denies himself the ability to recreate the image of his ex-fiancée, he imagines the *modus operandi* of her execution several times throughout the years. It is worth pondering these two opposing passages:

In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never *to remember Mira Belochkin* – not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind ..., but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. (112; emphasis added)

And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, *Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind*, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. (113; emphasis added)

Mira's figure occupies a central position in Pnin's metaphysical quest in the novel. Let me make a brief, parenthetical remark at this juncture. I commented earlier that Mira's furtive presence – in the form of a squirrel or possibly the hawk-eyed observer in the lookout tower – permeates the entire novel, and by doing so, I claim that *Pnin* abounds in hidden references to her. So far the scholars whose works I have surveyed have not yet noted that a more vigilant reading of Chapter Five would help readers identify that the “adventurous summer tourists” (93), looking down at the vast greenery from a prospect tower might arbitrarily be named *Miranda*, *Mary* or even *Almira*, which are near-cognates or variations of Mira, and therefore intimate the dead woman's presence at a textual level already from the onset. It has been put down as a fact that Tamara can be seen as the reincarnation or repetition of ill-fated young Mira, note must also be taken of the etymological importance of Nabokov's peculiar choice of the character's name. The Russian word ‘mir’ has a number of significations, two of which provide a rational justification for the novel's otherworldly theme: it means ‘peace’, as well as ‘world’. Whether Nabokov was purposely bent on alluding to either signification will for ever be shrouded in mystery. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the author often relied on the plurality of meanings a word or morpheme offers in order to account for the existence of

another world. It is due to Mira's spectral presence that Pnin has the ability to be transferred into a world different to the one he inhabits, a world that the protagonist would normally resist to recapture in memory, but his deceased fiancée eventually becomes a catalyst for him to communicate with the otherworld. In this sense, Mira metaphorically stands for peace and happiness, which are seen as the most fundamental elements of the *otherworld*, akin to the locus so enchantingly worded by Charles Baudelaire in "Invitation to a Voyage": "There all is order, naught amiss: Comfort and beauty, calm and bliss."⁷⁸

Independent of the possible Russian etymological interpretation discussed above, an equally adequate explanation for Nabokov's choice does stand to logic: the Latinate 'mir' (Latin *miraculum* "object of wonder" and in Church Latin "a marvelous event caused by God") is present in the English word 'miracle', which reflects the outstanding qualities Nabokov's heroes are always known to possess. In "Terra Incognita," for example, the tropical plant, *Vallieria mirifica* (*Stories* 297) contains within itself the name of Valliere, the story's intrepid narrator. Speculative as the *mir/miracle* hypothesis may appear, it seems convincing to me (especially based on my observation in *Pnin*) that "the narrator's association with making wonders (*Vallieria mirifica*) suggests not only an explorer's interest in a wondrous space, but also the narrator's special powers: the narrative wonders which he creates in the story" (Shrayer, *The Worlds* 47). While Mira Belochkin should by no account be considered as a main character of the novel, one cannot pass over the fact that she is indeed the most *miraculous* figure of all. She both occupies an instrumental role among Pnin's (often uninvited) recollections and is placed upon a vantage ground (disguised either as a squirrel or metaphorically standing for a "compassionate eye" in a lookout tower) for her task to responsibly look after Pnin.

The Jewish Question in *Pnin*: an Overview

In view of what has been said so far of Mira's miraculous presence, it will be necessary to probe deeper into what actually follows from Nabokov's faith in metaphysics, as Alexandrov claims, and, more specifically, his attempt to "reconcile Jewish philosophy of the afterlife and the incomprehensible reality of the Holocaust"

⁷⁸ "Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté / Luxe, calme et volupté."

(Shrayer “Jewish Questions” 86).⁷⁹ In spite of the fact that Nabokov was disinclined to deal with the Holocaust or the plight of the Jews in an overt manner (in fact, his most explicit treatment of it can be found in *Pnin*), he attached primary importance to universalizing and homogenizing the Jewish experience of one of the most tragic events that was inflicted on humankind in the twentieth century. *Pnin*, for example, in having Mira Belochkin at the moral center of the novel, problematizes Anti-Semitism, channeled through Dr Hagen’s “mildly anti-Semitic” anecdote, which causes Pnin to snap: “I have heard quite the same anecdote thirty-five years ago in Odessa, and even then I could not understand what is comical in it” (quoted in Boyd *AY* 279). Several of Nabokov’s works embrace a worldview, and this is accepted by the majority of critics, that Nabokov’s solipsistic universe has its moral dimensions. For example, one of the moral commitments Nabokov openly expressed was his attitude toward those living under “the grotesque shadow of a police state” (*SO* 10) and an acute awareness of the plight of all persecuted minority groups, including Jews.

In his all-embracing analysis of the Jewish theme in Nabokov’s works, Shrayer compellingly argues that the “memories of Mira’s death help Pnin intuit a model of post-mortem survival that validates his experience in a post-Holocaust world” (87). Instead of trying to cope directly with the literary responses to the historical crisis, Nabokov makes use of Mira to reiterate a plethora of questions dealing with the concentrated extermination of Jews. One might hypothesize that Mira is portrayed both as Pnin’s miraculous redeemer, standing sentinel over him, as well as the fragile and defenseless Jew waiting to be redeemed. In other words, Mira appears as the long-suffering Jewish woman, whose untimely death raises the question of how one can rationally exist after a calamity like the Holocaust, but at the same time it is Pnin’s quandary of being bereft of his home that makes him a prototypically Jewish figure.⁸⁰ Despite all his efforts to put up a stiff resistance to remembering, memory triumphs, and Mira’s image makes Pnin brood over human existence itself.

While the Jewish questions and themes in Nabokov’s works have preserved their topicality since Alfred Appel alluded to it in the first edition of *The Annotated Lolita*

⁷⁹ See more on Judaic afterlife in Chapter 7 of this dissertation.

⁸⁰ The centrality of the Jewish theme in Nabokov’s works has been illuminated by a growing number of scholars. See Shrayer’s “Nabokov’s Use of Hebrew in ‘Easter Rain’” in *Nabokov Online Journal* Vol. 4 (2010) for a complete list articles centered round the Jewish and Judaic themes and questions in Nabokov criticism. For a partial list of Jewish characters in Nabokov’s works see the notes at the end of Shrayer’s excellent article, “Jewish Questions in Nabokov’s Art and Life” (89).

(1970), one must be reminded that it is not the religious or theological aspects of the author's Jewish characters that make their presence so conspicuously relevant but rather the fact that they constitute an all-encompassing notion in that they metaphorically stand for the archetypal biblical migrant, known as the wandering Jew, a Leopold Bloom-like figure, hovering between past and present, existence and non-existence. In his exploration of the intriguing relationship between Nabokov and Marc Szeftel (a Russian historian of Jewish extraction, who taught together with Nabokov at Cornell University and was allegedly the prototype of the fictional character of Pnin), Diment highlights that it is "not the biography but the 'notion' of Marc Szeftel that served as an inspiration for the novel" (54). She recounts – based on Andrew Field's account – a memorable encounter between the two Russian professors in an elevator on campus, which gave Szeftel the opportunity to express his view similar to Tivadar Thienemann's observation, which I discuss at length in the next chapter. Nabokov's novel was published in instalments in the *New Yorker* at the time of their meeting: "Szeftel gave a deep sigh and said 'Ve arre all Pnins!' 'He had forgotten that I [Nabokov] was writing that book and did not see that he was a character speaking to his author!'" (quoted in Diment 57). If we consider being a "Pnin" to be a metaphor for memory, the figure of the wandering Jew facilitates our perception of the quandary that all the Nabokovian favorites undergo irrespective of their race, religion or language. One critic even posits that similar to the wandering Jew, these author-equivalents also "exist at the point of intersection of the creative memory of an artist and the cultural memory of descendents" (Skonechnaia 186). It can be safely stated that the characters who are either Jewish or sympathize with them fall into the category of the Nabokovian favorites *not* simply because of their origins, but also because Jews usually stand out as the archetypal pariahs, the artists-in-exile, the perpetual aliens, who are – in Nabokov's works – quintessentially different (in a moral and ethical sense) to the ordinary people who encircle them. In like manner to other Nabokovian characters, who face homelessness and are thus shown to exist in a transitional, liminal status between past and presence, consciousness and unconsciousness, are intent on assuming their own identities in their adopted cultures, into which they never manage to fully integrate. Nabokov's ultimate goal, we might conclude, is to supply his protagonist with the tools and the faculties to try to transcend this psychological and physical state of simultaneously being on a threshold of two existential planes as well as to survive the unspeakable

tragedy of loss and displacement that each émigré undergoes in his or her own way. On a marginal note, it must be mentioned that Nabokov utilizes the conventional topos of the Doppelgänger – the uncanny double, that is – in the majority of his works, enabling his characters (Humbert – Quilty in *Lolita*, Hermann – Felix in *Despair*, Ganin and his shadow in *Mary*, etc.) to ponder over their existence, look back at themselves and thus amalgamate the memories of the past with their presence. Only in this way can they gratify their pressing need to become ‘complete’ human beings.⁸¹

⁸¹ My MA thesis on the question of identity in *Despair* and *Lolita* (Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University, 2006) deals with the Doppelgänger topos in Nabokov’s fiction at length.

CHAPTER 5

Moving with the Headman's Swinging Hips: the "Here" and "There" of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*

The imaginary world of Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935/1959), poorly assembled out of theatrical props and populated by quasi-identical human automata as it is, falls to pieces all of a sudden as though it were merely the absurd collapse of a universe created *ex tempore* only to be destroyed by a powerful auctorial hand in the end. In his *Anniversary Notes*, which Nabokov published in response to the diverse views expressed in a *Festschrift* on the occasion of the author's seventieth birthday, he notes that *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* are "the two bookends of grotesque design between which my other volumes tightly huddle" (SO 287). The initial draft of the novel – the last one to be completed during the author's exile in Berlin – was written "in one fortnight of wonderful excitement and sustained inspiration" (SO 68), in an apparently shorter period of time than what Cincinnatus C., the novel's young hero, had been granted before his decollation took (or did not take) place on the twentieth day of his incarceration.⁸²

The central dichotomy between the world of reality and the idealized realm of the otherworld, established in many Nabokovian works, also lies at the heart of *Invitation*, which remains to be the novel towards which Nabokov felt "the greatest esteem" (SO 92) throughout his life. Of all his longer fiction, it is, without doubt, the plot of *Invitation* that can be subjected to the most concise summary. As the novel opens, Cincinnatus C. has been sentenced to be beheaded for having committed a capital crime, which is alluded to as "gnostical turpitude" (*gnoseologicheskaiia gnusnost'* in the Russian original). In its very essence the charge is that Cincinnatus is the only "opaque" character in a fictional society where everyone else is "transparent." All of the novel's action (or rather, non-action) takes place in the

⁸² Over the past half a century Nabokov scholarship has produced an immense number of critical works in response to *Invitation*: Julian W. Connolly and Vladislav Khodasevich discussed the novel's allegorical nature; Dale E. Peterson saw the work as a social and political satire with an emphasis on the totalitarian character of Cincinnatus's keepers; Toker ("Who Was Becoming Seasick?") discussed the possible manifestations of the Soviet regime in the novel; the metaphysical underpinnings (and, by extension, the otherworldly) have been taken up recently by Vladimir E. Alexandrov, Sergei Davydov, Brian Boyd and D. B. Johnson; the questions of reading and writing emerged as a principal preoccupation in the works of Stephen Blackwell. It would seem pointless at this point to provide a more complete list of the critical works dealing with the novel; for the sake of simplicity, only the exponents of the most important orientations discussed in this chapter are mentioned in this footnote.

protagonist's prison cell, where he is attended by a cohort of strange, chimerical figures, including Rodion, his jailer, Roman, his attorney and Rodrig, the prison warden, who seem to "dissolve or swap identities without rhyme or reason" (Connolly, "The Major Russian Novels"139) as the story progresses. Additional characters include Marthe, the convict's treacherous wife, Cecilia C., his mother and Emmie, the warden's impish daughter. Cincinnatus is called on by a bizarre M'sieur Pierre, his putative bosom buddy and fierce executioner-to-be, whom he is virtually compelled to befriend before mounting the scaffold. The novel then ends with the highly dubitable execution of Cincinnatus and the collapse of the imaginary world that Nabokov created for him.

In this chapter I demonstrate through an in depth analysis of the novel discussed, that the author's ethics, esthetics, politics and metaphysics are inseparable from one another, as they all gravitate towards the conception of an otherworld that is only accessible for the most favored Nabokovian characters. I claim that all the critics who have thought of *Invitation* as an unfathomable self-referential system or called it a narrowly political novel were somewhat misguided for the simple reason that there is an intricate interplay among all these individual approaches, pointing to a higher, revelatory state. I want to argue that classic Nabokovian scholarship was sometimes unduly preoccupied with the textual minutiae of his works. In line with more recent studies, this chapter will attempt to demonstrate that the focus on the broader moral analyses of Nabokovian fiction together with the omnipresent notion of the otherworld can help us dispose of the previously mentioned stigmata that early criticism attached to his works.

In his foreword to the English translation, Nabokov admonishes his readers not to adopt so gullible a view as to espouse any political reading of the novel, as it is – contrary to the widely held belief – far from being an indictment of existing or past dictatorships:

I composed the Russian original exactly a quarter of a century ago in Berlin, some fifteen years after escaping from the Bolshevik regime, and just before the Nazi regime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether or not my seeing both in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book, *should concern the good reader as little as it does me.* (SO 5; emphasis mine)

It can be safely said that the novel has been the object of starkly different interpretations so far; however, in addition to the historic-political approaches, later developments of Nabokov criticism geared toward the otherworld, significantly enlarging the scope of possibilities. Tempting as the various metafictional and otherworldly models may first appear, it would be heedless to discard all the historical and biographical forces, including the author's personal and artistic credo as well as other potential inspirational factors which may have contributed to the novel's conception.⁸³ Instead of committing myself to unconditionally endorsing any of these views as a singular route to a specific truth, I will continue to claim that approaching the novel by only examining its metaphysical components would greatly eclipse the importance of additional orientations, which impel us *not* to do away with the political and metaphorical interpretations either. I will, as Blackwell does, reject "the notion of a stable *potustoronnost*," as it is not the only plausible "source for such a structural variety as can be found in Nabokov's works" (Blackwell 50). Boyd discusses the novel's possible biographical background when he reveals that Nabokov, similarly to his father, was known to be a forthright opponent of capital punishment:

[He] was obsessed throughout his work with the moment of death, the role of fate in death, the idea of execution. ... Nabokov [in *Invitation to a Beheading*] condemns both the normal pressure of the group upon the individual mind and its ultimate expression in the death penalty. Just as his father developed his grandfather's implicit inclinations into more explicit and far-reaching arguments, so he in turn develops his father's idea to point where the contrast between individual and group becomes not only ethical, a question of human rights, but also epistemological and metaphysical, a matter of seeing and being. (AY 35-36)

This passage also demonstrates that instead of simplistically trying to reduce the matter to a question whether *Invitation to a Beheading* can or should be perceived as an anti-totalitarian manifesto that, among other things, opposes the death penalty, Boyd prompts us to develop a more holistic view, and consider accordingly a flexible interpretation, in which the otherworld, philosophy and history all have their rightful places. There is reason enough to believe that critically assessing Nabokov without

⁸³ The political reading of *Invitation to a Beheading* was taken up by Vladimir Varshavsky (*Nezamechennoe pokolenie*, New York: Chekhov, 1956, 205-225) and David Rampton (*Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 31-63).

an understanding of the spirit of liberalism characterizing his family, the loss of his homeland, his national literature and his individual faith in a timeless, metaphysical realm would greatly reduce our perspectives. Any attempt to read Nabokov without having a combination of these elements readily available for the reader would prevent us from finding Boyd's argumentation convincing enough:

[W]riters from Pushkin and Chernyshevsky to Dostoevsky and the aging Tolstoy made their *protests for freedom or against the death penalty*, [and] Nabokov's own imagination turned away from the issues of his times to the issues of eternity. He fought for freedom too, but his struggle was not so much a social as a metaphysical one: *an incessant effort to find a way out of the goodly prison of consciousness*, a lifelong campaign to repeal the death sentence nature has imposed on us all. (RY 36; emphasis mine)

Instead of hunting for literary, historical or biographical sources underlying the inception of *Invitation*, what remains to be a major task is an investigation of the transcendental in the novel, which anticipates an approach drawing on a multiplicity of aspects in Nabokov's works at the same time.⁸⁴

Morality and Nabokov's Art of Politics in *Invitation*

Invitation is not only, as Dragunoiu maintains, "an attack against totalitarianism, but also a refutation of the key propositions that played [...] an important role in the establishment of Soviet Marxism" (évsz 55-56), championed in Lenin's philosophical piece, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908). One cornerstone of what is known as materialistic monism is that a man's physical needs *can be* met during the period of his actual imprisonment, but "[t]he needs of the soul are ignored, and the existence of the soul as an immaterial entity is denied" (Dragunoiu 56). Challenging its fundamental tenet, in conformity with the idea of dialectical materialism, that only matter exists and the spiritual realm is nonexistent, underlies

⁸⁴ Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926) are often noted as being thematically related to and thus may have had an impact on Nabokov's *Invitation*. At the time of the novel's serial publication in the Russian émigré magazine, the *Sovremenniya Zapiski*, critics were convinced that certain Kafkaesque echoes were audible in *Invitation* (and also present, not less powerfully, in *The Eye* [1930], *Despair* [1933] and *Bend Sinister* [1947]). Nabokov was careful enough not to let anyone question the originality of his craftsmanship: he rejected all possible influences of the Czech master by claiming that "I do not know German and so could not read Kafka before the nineteen thirties when his *La metamorphose* appeared in *La nouvelle revue française*, and by that time many of my so-called "kafkaesque" stories had already been published" (151-52).

the creation of *Invitation*, too. In the first chapter of the novel, a brief note is read out to Cincinnatus, in which the prison director assures him that all the amenities the convict should require will be provided: “It is my lot – and this I will never forget – to provide thy sojourn in gaol with all that multitude of comforts which the law allows” (17). In order to contest the philosophy proposed by materialistic monism, Nabokov exchanges the traditional notions of spirit and matter: the soul, which is traditionally thought of as being transparent and intangible, becomes, in the case of Cincinnatus, opaque and impregnable, while matter is described as irrelevant and unstable. In his description of the core of his being, Cincinnatus uses the terms with which the philosophical tradition of Gnosticism defines the soul: “it is final, indivisible, and fundamental to the existence of a human individual” (Dragunoiu 60). The fact that he is the only visible entity in a society where everyone else is transparent makes him guilty of a turpitude punishable by execution, or, as Pifer remarks: “what makes him human ... also makes him a criminal” (“Nabokov’s ‘Invitation’” 49). The totalitarian state, whose inhabitants are shorn of their individual traits (appositely exemplified by the interchangeability of the roles among the characters Rodion, Roman and Rodrig) and transformed into one formless material, denounces Cincinnatus for “his inability to participate fully in the collective modes of perception adopted by his peers” (Dragunoiu 64).

In contrast with *Bend Sinister*, which is generally, and not unduly, regarded as Nabokov’s most grimly political novel, *Invitation* critiques totalitarianism in a less straightforward manner. When *Bend Sinister* was published in 1947, Nabokov had already experienced the devastations of World War II and had good grounds for considerable pessimism that he voices clearly in the novel. However, *Invitation* was composed before the war broke out, and he managed to “keep his invented world lightly comic” at a time when the wheels of the Nazi propaganda had not yet been set into full motion (Boyd, *RY* 411). Nevertheless, by this time, the oppressiveness of the Soviet regime and its established doctrine had already existed and Nabokov knew all about it. Should this comparison between the two novels serve as the basis of our critical judgment, it is all the more reasonable to claim that *Invitation* provides little if no insight at all into the minutely depicted, realistic features of any extant totalitarian regime. I strongly believe that Toker is right in maintaining that one crucial circumstance setting apart the two works is that *Invitation* introduces the reader to a defective system on the verge of breaking down, whereas *Bend Sinister*

reveals how totalitarianism comes into being and entraps Krug, an enlightened man, who, unlike Cincinnatus, is unfamiliar with the despotic nature of the system on account of his not having been born into it (“Who was becoming seasick?” web).

The “dull beastly farce” (*IB* 5) mentioned in the foreword reflects both on the absurdity of the novel’s playful title as well as on the light-hearted, yet deadly serious manner in which the execution and the path leading up to it are presented.⁸⁵ Toker contends that “Nabokov’s dystopian fictions refer to various totalitarian regimes yet certain specifically Soviet realities are most clearly refracted in them” (web). Of all dictatorships in the twentieth century, it is the Bolshevik and Nazi regimes which, due to their all-powerful nature and methods of propaganda, exerted the largest emotional and physical impact on their respective societies. One cannot but concur with the remark that Peters Hasty makes in a recent essay: while totalitarianism is more often than not associated with power, the regime described in *Invitation* is different in that Cincinnatus is held captive by “a petty totalitarian system defined by baseness and triviality” (4), where “Rosy M’sieur Pierre” genially accompanies his convict and mollicoddled former cellmate “to do chop-chop” (*IB* 207) on the block.

It is stating the obvious that *Invitation* does not display the particularities of either the Stalinist or the Hitlerite regimes but rather portends in a pellucid way the eventual collapse of the world that Cincinnatus inhabits, and, by extension, foresees the prospective downfall of all dictatorships. The novel unmistakably strengthens us in the belief that the tyranny depicted in the novel is merely, as Peterson writes, a “transparently fraudulent tyranny of appearances” (832), and as such, existence, secular or otherworldly, is rendered impossible if it continues to rest on illusions and false convictions. A comparison of the characteristic traits of a real dictatorship having existed earlier with that of the novel’s parody of totalitarianism makes it clear that besides the psychological and emotional maneuverings applied by Cincinnatus’s captors, nothing actually bears a resemblance to the sheer reality experienced in the

⁸⁵ In the murder scene of *Lolita*, Quilty also extends to Humbert what appears to be a cordial invitation to executions: “I can arrange for you to attend executions, not everybody knows that the chair is painted yellow –” (*AL* 302). Preceding the inception of *Invitation*, Vasily Ivanovich, the hero of “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” an early short story, creates an intratextual link with *Invitation* as he cries out in horror: “Oh, but this is nothing less than an invitation to a beheading” (*Stories* 436). In “Lance” (1951), a relatively little known short story, the young interplanetary traveller embarks on his journey “with the casual lightness of one walking to the newsstand – or to a glorious *scaffold*” (636; emphasis added).

torture chambers and extermination camps of the two most powerful dictatorial regimes in the last century.⁸⁶

Indeed, readers are left without the knowledge of the details of where exactly Cincinnatus is held captive or what kind of juridical system delivers the verdict of his death sentence. The fact that Nabokov “refuses to deal directly with the things that he does not know profoundly at first hand” makes his preference for describing the “moral-aesthetic choices” (Toker web) of the novel more understandable. In fact, it is his *indirect treatment* of the subject that saves the reader from learning about the brutality brought about by a tyrannical system. The next chapter of this dissertation will deal with the equally controversial question of philo-Semitism in Nabokov’s works, and underscore that the circumstances of physical suffering in his novels are generally replaced by an expression of anguish emanating from the protagonists. Instead of realistically depicting the atrocities of the extermination camp mentioned, for example, in *Pnin*, it is but the post-traumatic effects, the intermittent cardiovascular failure of the eponymous hero, which help the author voice the seemingly inexpressible physical torture and eventual death of Mira Belochkin.

Similarly to *Pnin*’s ailing heart, Cincinnatus’s anguish appears less manifest: it is successfully subdued by all the comic details, which often make the novel seem to operate at the level of an absurdist work.⁸⁷ Toker appositely points out that, for example, the favorable treatment Cincinnatus receives during his incarceration is pure luxury compared to the atrocities and dire conditions that the prisoners of the Gulag had to endure in reality.⁸⁸ In an attempt to ostensibly alleviate his suffering

⁸⁶ Dale E. Peterson correctly points out that, for example, Russian émigré readers, like Nabokov himself, interpret the novel from a different point of view, because, due to their personal involvement in crucial historical turning points, they were more prone to read the novel as Nabokov’s “disguised commentary on coping with totalitarianism in the twentieth century” (826). This attitude, for obvious reasons, is generally absent from the analyses of English and American readers. In his afterthought to the first Hungarian edition of *Invitation*, Nagy also sees the novel as an inadequate source of portraying the mature dictatorships of the century. Instead of demonstrating the very essence of either Nazism or Bolshevism, *Invitation* faintly resembles the entropic literature in America after the 1960s, which claims that the world is destined to die at last (195).

⁸⁷ It is difficult *not* to concur with Clancy, who argues that “when[ever] Nabokov wants to state his theme most passionately he mode of surreal and grotesque comedy tends to be discarded” (70). Chapter Eight, which is the only section of the novel written exclusively from Cincinnatus’s point of view, completely lacks the absurd elements and persistently comic tone that permeates the rest of the novel.

⁸⁸ Toker (web) convincingly argues that the best part of Gulag narratives shares numerous attitudes, themes and technical devices with Nabokov’s works. Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is the first work that “explicitly questioned the rationale of Soviet power” by “[la]ying bare the raw facts of life with the Gulag, but also showed that the Gulag was the system” (*Routledge Russian Literature* 225).

(but rather, as it would apply to any tyrannical system, in order to make him collaborate with his keepers), Cincinnatus becomes the mollicoddle of the prison personnel, who continue to seek, until the day of the execution, various ways of gratifying the convict. Cincinnatus is promised that “a new prisoner [M’sieur Pierre] will be moving in to one of our deluxe cells” (*IB* 39). However, in reality, Cincinnatus is introduced to a series of absurdly vindictive treatments even prior to his imprisonment: after assuming his duties as a kindergarten teacher, he is locked up by members of the educational committee and consequently exposed to various irrational tests:

For several days in a row he was not allowed to sleep, and was compelled to keep up rapid senseless small talk until it bordered on delirium, to write letters to various objects and natural phenomena, enact everyday scenes, and to imitate various animals, trades and maladies. (*IB* 30)

Compassionate as the conduct of the prison personnel may appear throughout the novel, Cincinnatus constantly struggles to exonerate himself from the nonsensical rules set out in the prison regulations. While it is true that his living conditions are far better than those of any Gulag prisoner were in reality, Cincinnatus must be seen as a victim of psychic and emotional ordeal not only during his twenty days of imprisonment but even preceding it. He is also described as a misfit in his private life: in Chapter Two, Cincinnatus is blinded by scalding and uncontrollable tears as he learns that “Little Marthe did it again” (*IB* 31), that is, his wife had been having yet another extramarital affair. Nabokov’s description of the inconsolable young man is rendered poignantly, reinforcing the fact that in spite of all the luxury and pseudo-parental pampering offered by his keepers, Cincinnatus is unhappy:

He would look at her for a few seconds, pressing his palm to his cheek like a woman, and then, whining soundlessly, would go off through all the rooms full of her relatives and lock himself in the bathroom, where he would stamp his feet, let the water run and cough so as to cover up the sound of weeping. (*IB* 31)

He is constantly on the lookout to find solace from a world that treats him as a pariah: while it is difficult to survive in a totalitarian system bereft of soul and individualism, where all the roles, except that of the autonomous and opaque hero, are farcically doubled or even multiplied, Cincinnatus succeeds in digressing from

the main narrative line of the story by consciously meandering in the labyrinthine paths of his memory. Blackwell posits that the recurring ruptures in the novel are “moments in reading when the process of assimilating the text is interrupted by the nature of the text itself” (46). The difficulty of reading *Invitation* lies in the reader’s inability to find their bearings in a disjointed narrative line, incessantly disrupted by the musings and mental meanderings of the protagonist. One scene in Chapter Three pertinently reflects on the reader’s predicament as well: Cincinnatus is engaged in a similar unifying process as he collects a handful of scraps and “trie[s] to reconstruct at least one coherent sentence, but everything [is] mixed up, distorted, disjointed” (*IB* 38), akin to his own composition. These digressions, as Boyd points out in another, but related, connection, are employed throughout the Nabokovian *oeuvre* to present his major themes, namely “the nature of time; the mystery and the privacy of the human soul, and its simultaneous need to breach its solitude, the scope of consciousness beyond death; the possibility of design in the universe” (*AY* 601). The rigidity with which Cincinnatus’s physical isolation in the fortress is generally associated begins to weaken as the hero embarks upon his mental excursions, thereby leaving the confines of the prison and augmenting the novel’s inner space. Nabokov bequeaths to his protagonist the gift of making spatial and temporal digressions only to drag him back at last into the alleged reality of the novel’s universe:

Leaving behind the misty mass of the fortress he began to slide down a steep, dewy bank of turf, reached a pale path between cliffs, twice, three times crossed the bend of the main road – which, having finally shaken off the last shadow of the fortress, ran more straight and free – and a filigrane bridge across a dried-up rivulet brought Cincinnatus to the city. ... Cincinnatus ran up the front steps, pushed open the door, and entered his lighted cell. He turned around, but already he was locked in. O horrible! The pencil glistened on the table. The spider sat on the yellow wall. (*IB* 20)

I am of the same mind with Blackwell, who believes that the ruptures in the novel “heighten the reader’s uncertainty about the narrated world” (38), suggesting that the real world is as unstable as our knowledge is of Cincinnatus’s universe. Of the numerous metaliterary interpretations the novel has received, it is perhaps Langen’s article that holds the most innovative and lasting thoughts on the textual function of the hero’s reminiscences. He believes that the novel’s thematic order (if any, as the text itself gradually succumbs to entropy) rests on the motif of confinement and

escape, which is manifested both at a mental and metaphorical as well as local, textual levels (62-3). As everything that is in the book seems to be contained within the book *per se*, the novel offers no escape for its characters: even the hero's reveries are sentenced to the same confinement as the hero himself.

Nabokov's "Radiant Points"

Cincinnatus realizes that the world he inhabits – a microcosm of a fictional dictatorship – is but an imperfect imitation of the ideal world, incongruent with Plato's well-ordered state.⁸⁹ The events taking place in the farcically sinister opening chapter of the novel would do justice to any absurdist play or might even stem from slapstick comedy were it not for their appalling subject matter. The apparent unconventionalities of the legal system prevailing in Nabokov's dystopian fable require the judge to announce the death sentence to "Cincinnatus C. in a whisper" (11), which is then followed by simultaneous actions performed by the defense counsel and the prosecutor "both wearing makeup and looking very much alike (the law required them to be uterine brothers but such were not always available, and then makeup was used) spoke with virtuoso rapidity the five thousand words allotted to each" (21). In "*Invitation to a Beheading: Nabokov's Absurdist Initiation*," Penner states that the novel is indeed "a classic work of absurdist literature" (33): he compares Cincinnatus's progression of consciousness and a "renewed awareness of his existence" (Penner 34) to the key underpinnings of the works of Camus and Ionesco. Penner establishes the claim that Cincinnatus's exclamation, "I am!" is in conjunction with Ionesco's reasoning in *Present Past: Past Present*:

I understand that I am a being, a man, in the center of the world and I see the sky and I am aware that I see these streets, and I am aware that I exist, or rather I become aware that I *am*. It is being that fills me with joy and amazes me,

⁸⁹ In "The Utopia of Truth and the Gnoseology of the Severed Head in *Invitation to a Beheading*" Kozlova argues that the underlying idea behind *Invitation*, *Bend Sinister* and *Ultima Thule* is rooted in Plato's teachings. In spite of Nabokov's open renunciation of Plato, as expressed in *Strong Opinions* (78), *Invitation* is thought to be a "poetic paraphrasing of Plato's *Timaeus*" (Kozlova 7) and introduces at the same time how the author burlesques Romantic stereotypes (escaping from reality, individualism vs. collectivism, villains and victims, etc.). She elaborates on how the souls of the first people were "created by the Demiurge from a divine "indivisible and impenetrable" stellar essence" (7) which she connects with "indivisible, firm, radiant point" inside Cincinnatus. Sergei Davydov also addresses the issue of Platonism, alongside Gnosticism, in *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* ("*Invitation to a Beheading*," 188-203).

being astonishes me more than existing. ... I have the key to happiness: remember, be profoundly, totally conscious that you are. (quoted in Penner 34)

Early on in the novel, Cincinnatus is paralyzed by fear at the sheer thought of his execution; however, on making the discovery that he is the only one “who is alive” (92) of all the characters, he excitedly looks forward to his final moment on the block. Similarly to Vasiliy Ivanovich in “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” he anticipates, as a corollary of his execution, the understanding of something that even he himself is unable to express in words: “I know something. I know something. But expression of it comes so hard!” (91). Barabtarlo believes that Cincinnatus’s sudden realization originates from “Fame,” a poem written in 1942, where Nabokov claims: “I drugoe, drugoe, drugoe,” which loosely translates as “And something, something, something” (205) in English as though the narrative voice were suggesting that he is in possession of *something* not known or perceived by others. The citation can therefore be perceived as the reversal of Socrates’ famous saying in his *Apology*: “I know that I know nothing” (“Hen oída hoti oudén oída”), which means that one is unable to know anything with utmost exactitude. As, for example, one cannot rationally have the absolute knowledge about life after death, one is unlikely to portray the hereafter as it really is. Cincinnatus is only capable of accessing *certain truths* of his earthly existence, and it is principally for this reason that Stephen Langen, whose approach to the novel is a chiefly metaliterary one, considers the existence of a Nabokov hero unbearable: one’s suspicion, however vague it is, that there is an outside world beyond our own, is “what makes life *here* (inside the fictional world) intolerable” (62; emphasis in the original).

In the novel’s opening chapter Cincinnatus’s attempt to complete a crucial sentence sinks into fiasco. As he struggles to write it down, the sentence comes to an abrupt, unanticipated end: “[i]n spite of everything I am comparatively” (12). Contrary to the view that the unfinished verbal structure reveals a lack of self-knowledge on Cincinnatus’s part, as Peters Hasty states, it sounds more convincing that the fragment really is complete after “I am.” Penner argues that it is “an affirmation [that] one’s existence is the ultimate key to awareness that releases one from all prisons, whether of bricks, body or mind” (30). Unaware of where exactly his qualms originate, Cincinnatus goes out of his way to investigate the date of his execution. Surprisingly, he is more intensely tortured by the uncertainties of his

situation than by the very fact of his decapitation. When he comes to the realization that, similarly to the predicament of other mortal beings, the hour of his death cannot be presaged, Cincinnatus submits himself to a fundamental experience of awakening, which the champions of the theme of the otherworldly are often inclined to describe as a moment of epiphany. Cincinnatus notes:

I had a strange sensation last night – and it was not the first time –: I am taking off layer after layer, until at last ... I do not know how to describe it, but I know this: through the process of gradual divestment I reach the final, indivisible, *radiant point*, and this point says: *I am!* Like a pearl ring embedded in a shark's gory fat. (IB 90; emphases mine)

Epiphany corresponds to a sudden spiritual revelation, an occurrence that is joyous and even secretly longed-for, as is the case of the angst-ridden hero of "Cloud, Castle, Lake," who believes that the "trip which he had accepted so reluctantly, would bring him some wonderful, tremulous happiness" (*Stories* 430). If this were also a pertinent observation in *Invitation*, the "radiant point" during the hero's imprisonment would allow him to discover the truly blissful nature of the otherworldly realm where, in the end, he is allegedly transported. Instead of the bliss whose idea preoccupies his mind from the outset and is appositely described in, say, the mellifluously composed Tamara Garden scene – the nostalgia-drenched, paradisiacal patch of his yearning, where he travels back in his imagination – Cincinnatus is only made to observe the world around him as artificial, cruel and tedious. On a parenthetical note, it is worth mentioning that critics have failed to mention so far the thinly disguised (yet, most probably unintended) connection that the name of the Tamara Gardens echoes. Those who are capable of appreciating the niceties of Nabokov's incessant punning will hear the resonances of "tomorrow" (a near-homophone of Tamara) through the name of the coveted garden. One of the questions that keeps Cincinnatus preoccupied in the novel is the date of his beheading, which, he ponders, might as well take place the next day, that is, "tomorrow." Through the "radiant point" he reaches in Chapter Eight – the only section of the novel from the hero's own pen – he comes to understand the finiteness of his own existence, which, he is astonished to learn, does not differ from that of any mortal being. In discussing epiphanies in the case of Nabokov, it may be worth our while to observe a thought-provoking comment that Leonard makes regarding the epiphanies prevalent in Joyce's *Dubliners*:

Joyce's notion of the epiphany – the rearrangement of a fantasized reality into an actual one – may well be intended as a specific antidote to moments such as those in *The Irish Homestead* where all the difficult realities of life in Ireland are ignored and replaced by the pleasant image of an Irish lass waving from her cottage window at a man happily tilling the ground with his hoe, only pausing to acknowledge her adoring gaze. (94)

It seems that the “radiant point” of Nabokov’s narrative does *not* operate as a Joycean antidote to help the protagonist endure reality as it is (nonetheless, it must be added that dark epiphanies in Joyce are also numerous). It can be said of *this* specific instance of Nabokovian epiphany in *Invitation* that it does not correspond to a wondrous moment which opens up the gates of the otherworld but rather functions as a focal point where the hero has the “capacity to conjoin all” his thoughts, discoveries and observations “in one point” (Leonard 52). I shall come back to the question of bringing together details in a seemingly disjointed, yet, in some way, logical manner as I parenthetically discuss the notion of “cosmic synchronization,” as a means of pattern-making at the end of this chapter of my dissertation.

As pointed out earlier, the microcosm of the prison in Nabokov’s novel is but the comic reproduction of the world known to mortal beings.⁹⁰ Similarly to Beckett’s and Pinter’s heroes, Cincinnatus encounters the futility of escaping from the physical world he inhabits, which disables him to “break through the walls of the prison-house of language” (Johnson, “Spatial Modeling”124). Supporting the idea of the imprisonment – expressed both at a physical and a linguistic level – are numerous graphic examples in the text pointing to the hero’s inability to escape: both Johnson and Peters Hasty emphasize the circularity of the fortress, which functions as a self-contained cosmos without allowing the hero a glimpse of the outside world (or rather, he is temporarily allowed to rely on his memory and imagination to the extent

⁹⁰ To support his argument that *Invitation* resembles an absurdist play, Penner argues that the plight of Cincinnatus and Sisyphus (*The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942] by Albert Camus) are fairly similar. What Penner fails to highlight in his analysis is that the comparison stands to logic *mainly* because Camus’ work contains the most interesting statements on the theme of the absurd, which are also traceable in *Invitation*. The absurd vision of life is bolstered in both works by their depiction of the feeling of solitude in a hostile world, a sense of isolation from human beings and the destructive nature of time. However, most significantly, Nabokov shows that language, in *Invitation*, is a barrier to communication rather than a tool to establish links between individual members of the society. A more elaborate discussion of the theme of the “prison-house of language,” as introduced by Johnson, reappears in my analysis of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and its well-detectable kinship to several works by Nabokov (See Sárdi “Nabokov’s Cold Pudding: The Stylistic and Structural Impact of *Finnegans Wake* on *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Bend Sinister*.” *The AnaChronisT* 14 (2009): 121-134.)

of a few pages, but the digressions discussed in the previous subsection are always accompanied by the hero's realization that no escape is permissible in the end). Nabokov makes ample use of several symbols in the novel to account for the illusoriness and the impracticability of breaking free. Instead of assisting Cincinnatus in his flight, both M'sieur Pierre and Emmie – the jailer's daughter, who, incidentally, display many of the traits of Nabokov's nymphets – lay snares for him: the former digs a tunnel that circuitously leads to the executioner's cell, while the latter spuriously carries him to the prison director's luxury apartment. Affirming this conjecture is Langen's essay, "The Ins and Outs of *Invitation to a Beheading*," in which he discusses the novel's loopy or circular structure, for whenever Cincinnatus is cajoled into believing that digging out his way would grant him total freedom, he is always made to return to his point of origin, indicating that "[e]verything in the book is in the book – there is no escape" (63).⁹¹ The import of Cincinnatus's thoughts appears intangible for his implied audience, because, as Johnson highlights, "language is hermetic" (124), and no matter how hard the protagonist marshals his resolve to flee from his closed universe, he will bump into walls and sham exits. Inscriptions enticing the hero to make his escape turn out to be false indicators:

Finally he climbed up himself. But of course he could see nothing, only the hot sky with a few white hairs thinly combed back – the remnants of clouds that could not teltrate the blueness. ... There, on the side, written in the same neat, contemptuous hand as one of the half-erased sentences had read before, was the inscription: "You cannot see anything. I tried it too" (*IB* 29).

Throughout the novel, Nabokov uses highly stylized scenes, theatricalized figures and innumerable stage props to account for the existence of a world that comes to be seen as "real" within the boundaries of the novel. There exists, in Cincinnatus's imagination, the vision of another, original world as opposed to the unreal settings and the constant charades he encounters during his terrestrial existence. Even the passage of time is regulated by the prison watchman, who "washes off the old hand

⁹¹ Although it may have been tempting to read the novel along these lines, Langen's idea, in one way or another, clearly gainsays the central thesis of Nabokov's belief in an otherworldly realm, which is transcendent to language and literature, too. The author's preoccupation with the aspects of circularity is revealed through his extensive reliance on narrative ruses, which help present his fictional world as a self-referential entity. It may not be accidental that the name of Krug, the protagonist of *Bend Sinister*, translates as "circle" in English, and becomes the sign of infinitude in the conclusion of the novel, as Krug establishes connection with the anthropomorphous deity, responsible for the invention of the fictional universe (M. Nagy (217).

[from the clock] and daubs on a new one” (*IB*135), and the moon is either attached to or removed from the sky by an invisible (possibly auctorial) hand. Cincinnatus himself is conscious of the artificiality and theatricality of his surroundings and that everything in the fortress is staged and acted out. One possible reason for Nabokov to expose Cincinnatus to a series of meaningless games was to sidetrack the hero’s incessant fixation on the end that awaits him.⁹² Unwilling to submit himself to the faulty construct of this world, he voices his dissatisfaction terms as he converses with his wife, Marthe: “No, you’re still only a parody” (135). In the passage below, Cincinnatus envisions the original, Edenic world of his dreams:

It exists, my dream world, it must exist, since, surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy. ... *There, tam, là-bas*, the gaze of men glows with inimitable understanding. ... *There, there* are the originals of the garden where we used to roam ... there everything strikes one by its bewitching evidence, by the simplicity of perfect good; *there* everything pleases one’s soul, everything is filled with the kind of fun that children know. (*IB* 93-94; emphasis in the original)⁹³

At a textual level, Cincinnatus’s multilingual repetition of the demonstrative pronoun is far from being the only implication of the existence of an immaterial beyond. It is the author’s perpetual concern with a dualistic worldview (the *tut* and the *tam*, that is, the “here” and “there” in English translation), as has been noted above, that lies at the center of the novel and emerges in the text in more form than one. Alexandrov

⁹² One should not discard a subtle analogy between Cincinnatus and James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* who, like Nabokov’s hero, is approached by others disdainfully as if he were a mere conundrum never to be fully understood. As Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses* addresses Joyce’s adult hero at the novel’s outset, he calls attention to his “absurd name, an ancient Greek” (3). On a side-note, one should also be aware of the subtle allusion that Miklós M. Nagy, the Hungarian Nabokov scholar and the annotator of the author’s several early Hungarian translations points out in conjunction with Joyce’s *magnum opus*. It cannot be accidental that Cincinnatus reads *Quercus* while in his cell: the Latin name of the oak translates as “dub” in Russian, which evokes Joyce’s *Dublin*, his hometown, and his famous work, *Dubliners*.

⁹³ Julian W. Connolly (2005) notes that the choice for the otherworldly theme of *Invitation* may have emanated from Charles Baudelaire’s famous poem, “L’invitation au voyage” (“Invitation to the Voyage”), where the French *là* denotes the existence of an aesthetic utopia, similarly to Nabokov’s “[t]here, tam, là-bas” in the novel. The otherworldly vista of Baudelaire’s poem clearly reverberates in the novel: “Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme et volupté” (“There’ll be nothing but beauty, wealth, pleasure, / With all things in order and measure”). In *Ada or Ardor, A Family Chronicle*, Nabokov alludes to the poem’s first line (“Mon enfant, ma soeur” [“My daughter, my sister ...”]) as part of a parodic homage to Baudelaire’s work, which constitutes an important subtext of *Invitation* (*Ada* 86). In like manner to John Burt Foster’s postulations, Hungarian scholar Márta Pellérdi also demonstrates how Nabokov’s art of memory is interconnected with early twentieth-century modernism, highlighting the importance of Nabokov’s reflections to Baudelaire and Nietzsche as theorists of modernity.

posits that the repeated mention of Tamara Gardens in the novel is not merely a reference to the “freedom of a sylvan setting but also the otherworldly realm that glimmers in Cincinnatus’s consciousness” (*Nabokov’s Otherworld* 95). The special semantic and phonological importance (the repetition of the letter *t*) is attached to the word *tam* is best exemplified in the following passage:

Now and then a wave of fragrance would come from the *Tamara* Gardens. How well he knew that public park! *There*, where Marthe, when she was a bride, was frightened of the frogs and cockchafers ... That green turfy *tamarack* park, the languor of its ponds, the *tum-tum-tum* of a distant band. (19; emphasis added).

Intimately connected with the theme of the otherworldly is the dualistic vision the hero embraces and overtly voices throughout the novel as he takes cognizance of his power of expression, harbored in his creative imagination. The motif of writing constitutes a central dynamic in *Invitation* and in many other works: Cincinnatus fully devotes himself to the process of writing, which offers him a refuge from the atrocities around him and also a means to achieve immortality. Nabokov bestows upon his protagonists a creative faculty that enables them to write their names into the book of immortals. It is the gradually strengthening artistic aptitude of the Nabokovian hero that allows him to evade death and “survive in a richly imagined afterlife beyond the text’s last word” (Peterson 833). At times, for example, in the case of *Despair*, Herman Karlovich, the novel’s solipsistic hero, believes that he can secure his immortality outside the confines of the novel by murdering his alleged alter-ego. Cincinnatus and Herman, though the latter is but a neurotic scoundrel, stand in something of a relationship with one another in that both of them make a great deal of effort to express their ideas in writing. As with other main characters of postmodernist works, the process of writing is an anxiety-provoking activity, hence a major stumbling block in the creative process the writer wishes to accomplish.

Instead of being *consumed* by the grim thought of the execution, Cincinnatus is given the apparatus (a sheet of paper, a pencil and his prison-cell) to give vent to his creativity, turn the situation to his own advantage and eventually *produce* something durable, though only a small portion of it may be understood by the self-satisfied, dim-witted, transparent lot surrounding him. The fact that Cincinnatus is presented with a *fait accompli*, the impending execution that is, demands that he should find an adequate way to combat the oppressiveness of the temporal limitations as well as the

system that imposes such limitations upon him. I agree with the observation that Hasty makes: the motif of writing in the novel (and elsewhere in the Nabokovian *oeuvre*) is a “consciousness-raising experience” that helps the protagonist overcome the thought of being decollated and may eventually triumph over death (3). In Chapter Four, Cincinnatus realizes for the first time that the only possible way to conquer the “horrible uncertainty” (Hasty 51) of his situation is to fashion his thoughts into a more organized and coherent form:

I ... am gradually weakening ... the uncertainty is horrible – well, why don’t you tell me, do tell me – but no, you have me die anew every morning ... On the other hand, were I to know, I could perform ... a short work ... a record of verified thoughts ... Some day someone would read it and would suddenly feel just as if he had awakened for the first time in a strange country. ... But how can I begin writing when I do not know whether I shall have time enough, and the torture comes when you say to yourself, “Yesterday there would have been enough time.” (52-3; ellipses in the original)

Early on in the novel Cincinnatus appears debilitated in his efforts to come to grips with the quandary into which he has been cast. The most evident sign of his inner struggle is represented through his initial failure in composing coherent, meaningful sentences:

Cincinnatus said: *Kind. You. Very.* (This still had to be arranged.)
“You are very kind,” said an additional Cincinnatus, having cleared his throat.
(15; emphases mine)

With its disorderly sentence structures and disjointed monologues the novel substantially differs from all the other works by Nabokov in that he employs in *Invitation* a method that deviates from the artistic perception so assertively expressed throughout his *oeuvre*. M. Nagy (1991) suggests that the total confusion of the world is in direct proportion with the collapse of style, exemplified through the inaccurately arranged words: “Despite their poetic quality, Cincinnatus’s fragmented monologues are different from Nabokov’s real style, because on other occasions he constructed perfect sentences and images of the “secret” which render themselves inexpressible with the words of a human being” (183; my translation).⁹⁴

⁹⁴ “Cincinnatus töredezett monológjai minden költőiségük ellenére különböznek Nabokov igazi stílusától, hiszen máskor a “titok” emberi szavakkal való kimondhatatlanságát is tökéletes mondatokban és képekben fogalmazta meg.”

The fact that Cincinnatus is unaware of the exact day of his execution causes him to seethe with bitter frustration, and his recurring preoccupation with the passage of time induces him to write his chronicle, but simultaneously with this, it is also a key factor that initially prevents him from channeling his sequence of thoughts into a creative project.⁹⁵ In most commentaries of the novel Cincinnatus's cell has been equated with a dystopian, nightmarish realm of his imprisonment. Contradictory with this view is Peters Hasty's postulation that instead of being a "waiting room for death," the hero's cell is in fact a "locus of life" (11), where he can eventually find expression for his intuitions by relying on the workings of his memory and fertile imagination. In the absence of other forms of enjoyment, writing, for Cincinnatus, remains the only creative activity for the last twenty days of his life. Peters Hasty argues that "[t]his is not a matter of *ars longa, vita brevis*, or of the writer living on in his works, but rather the insistence that the process of writing in and of itself makes for a fully lived life" (11). Inadequate as the stimuli of his surroundings are, Cincinnatus adopts the idea of living life to the fullest – expressed in the fictional works of Walter Pater and Henry James – by narrating his thoughts and feelings in the novel. The writer's block Cincinnatus experiences at the beginning is a distinctive trait also displayed by other Nabokovian heroes struggling to reveal their narratives in a coherent fashion. The reason for this might be that they are all disconcerted with the fact that the real world intrudes upon their reveries, their artistically constructed dreamlands or phantasmagorias. Herman Karlovich, the protagonist of *Despair* is equally unsuccessful at overcoming the writer's block: he identifies himself as an artist, who possesses the "marvellous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness ..." (13), yet he is even unable to bring to full circle the novel's first sentence. In the penultimate chapter of *Invitation*, Cincinnatus becomes conscious of the ineffectuality of his creative product as he realizes in a rump sentence the following: "[t]o finish writing something," whispered Cincinnatus

⁹⁵ The temporal aspects of the novel are worth observing as regards the hero's death (or rather, transcendence) on the last page. The size of Cincinnatus's pencil diminishes in direct proportion with the time he has at his disposal to give the finishing touches to his chronicle: the nearer his day of judgment is, the smaller his pencil becomes. It has been noted by almost all critics that the diminution of the pencil is also an indicator of time's elapse in the novel. In Chapter 5 of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov provides a poignant recollection of the colored pencils from his childhood, which he concludes nostalgically: "Alas, these pencils, too, have been distributed among the characters in my books to keep fictitious children busy" (80). It is plausible that one of these pencils made its way into *Invitation* to serve as the writing instrument of puerile, hence innocent, Cincinnatus.

half questioningly but then he frowned, straining his thoughts, and suddenly understood that *everything had in fact been written already*.” (209; emphasis added).

Gogolesque Mediocrity and the Inaccessibility of the Otherworld

One might agree with Peters Hasty, who claims that “the inanity of the entire system” (7) of the book boils down to the fact that the wardens fail to recognize the importance that the act of writing occupies the most crucial role in the novel. Such detrimental attitude is displayed through M’sieur Pierre’s mordant and macabre wit, who, according to Sergei Davydov, is an epitome of “quintessential *poshlost*’ or self-satisfied vulgarity” that Nabokov himself harshly condemns in all of his works (193).⁹⁶ Contrasted with the genuine artistic desires that Cincinnatus possesses, Pierre is generally viewed as the most shining example of the kind of *poshlost*’ mediocrity that Nabokov describes at length in *Lectures on Russian Literature* and elsewhere.⁹⁷ The speciousness of the world with all its pretences and artful imitations of a higher, transcendental realm are all channeled through the brashness that the executioner exhibits. In Chapter Seven, as the two inmates are introduced to one another, Nabokov takes pains to present Pierre as an articulate and exceedingly politic character, who, in spite of the superficial charm with which he may be initially associated, is but a hollow, self-opinionated and solipsistic individual. In stark contrast with the dignity that Cincinnatus’s “imperial” name suggests, clownish

⁹⁶ Barabtarlo (1990) points out that a scenario similar to the ending of *Invitation* is enacted in “The Cyclops’ episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The analogy she discovers is particularly striking: the jovial, muscular headsman is greeted by a cheering crowd that has gathered to join in the “general merriment” only to “rock with delight” (358) on the occasion of the charade-like execution, acted out with brio by all the participants. The entire scene reminds one of the grand absurdist finale of *Invitation*: the multilingual acclamation in *Ulysses*, including one in Hungarian (“hoch, banzai, eljen, zivio, chinchin, polla, kronia, hiphip, vive, Allah” [358]) is replaced by simple “[c]ries of ‘Bravo!’” (185) in Nabokov’s novel. Akin to Cincinnatus, the convict in *Ulysses* is made to express his gratitude to the prison personnel: “the central figure of the tragedy ... was in capital spirits when prepared for death and evinced the keenest interest in the proceedings from beginning to end but he, with an abnegation rare in these our times, rose nobly to the occasion and expressed his dying wish ... that the meal should be divided in aliquot parts among the members of the sick and indigent room keeper’s association as a token of his regards and esteem” (358). One important aspect of the text that Barabtarlo fails to highlight is that right before the execution, the widow-to-be in *Ulysses*, similarly to the mental excursions Cincinnatus takes now and then, poignantly recalls the childhood days of the convict: “She brought back to his recollection the happy days of blissful childhood together on the backs of Anna Liffey when they had indulged in the innocent pastimes of the young, and oblivious of the dreadful present” (358).

⁹⁷ See Nabokov’s discussion “Philistines and Philistinism” in *Lectures on Russian Literature* (A Harvest Book, San Diego, 1981), 191-5. The author’s partial elucidation of the subject-matter is especially revealing in *Strong Opinions*, 100-1.

Pierre is repeatedly mentioned by his Christian name, and no wonder: after all, the man is not only the hero's concealed executioner but also the figure who executes, as it were, the collective will of a transparently open and banal society where all common men become interchangeable. One cannot but concur with Penner that, on account of his vulgar taste and pretended sympathy, Pierre is Cincinnatus's "antithetical double" (Penner 33), strutting into the cell to present his compliments to his putative inmate and "produce[s] from the breast pocket of his pajama top a bulging wallet, and from it a thick batch of home snapshots of the smallest size" (82). Rodrig Ivanovich talks deferentially to Pierre as he comments on the pseudo-artistic photographs, and acknowledges without skepticism the superiority of an otherwise commonplace M'sieur Pierre:

The pictures showed M'sieur Pierre, M'sieur Pierre in various poses – now in a garden, with a giant prize tomato in his hand, now perching with one buttock on some railing (profile, with pipe), now reading in a rocking chair, a glass with a straw standing near him ...

"Excellent, marvelous," Rodrig Ivanovich would comment, fawning, shaking his head, feasting his eyes on every shot or else holding two at a time and shifting his gaze from one to another. "My, my, what biceps you have in this one! Who would think – with your graceful physique. Overwhelming! Oh, how charming, talking with the little birdie!" (83)

The conflict between the commonplace world – barren, predictable, incarcerating and transparent – and the private or individual world of the genius forms a central dynamic in *Invitation*. Several other Nabokovian characters, minor or major, like Quilty in *Lolita*, Paduk in *Bend Sinister*, psychiatrist Eric Wind or Leonard Blorengé, Head of the French Department, in *Pnin* or the German excursionists in "Cloud, Castle, Lake," are representative of the *poshlust'* that the author so pungently attacked and thus they act as a foil to artistically inspired, creative figures. The opposition between Cincinnatus and Pierre is particularly revealing. The claim that Nabokov's "protagonists are often artists or persons engaged in pursuits that imitate or stand as metaphors for art" (Nyegaard 361) is also a pertinent observation in the case of the novel under discussion. What sets Cincinnatus apart from the low-principled, earth-bound creatures of his fictional dictatorship is not only the fact that he is the only person who, on account of his refusal to belong to a world of transparency, is something of an artist, but, most significantly, he alone turns out to be the sibylline bearer of some unutterable truth. Miklós M. Nagy correctly posits

that Cincinnatus carries in his bosom “a mysterious power, an *élan vital*, which, on the one hand, is alone able to inspire artistic thoughts, while on the other hand, without it, the world would solidify into a state of some false and inert perfectness, some sultry and repulsive utopia (or dystopia)” (191; my translation).⁹⁸ The reader of Nabokov’s fiction will oftentimes encounter premature judgments on characters that are only mistakenly viewed through the prism of *poshlust’*: the precocious heroine of *Lolita* is consistently described by his pedophilic stepfather as an obtuse, insensitive and “cynical nymphet” (AL 112). It is interesting to note that far from being the dull-witted creature she is depicted in Humbert’s sumptuous sentences, Lolita appears to have acquired a mature way of thinking as she utters a “heartfelt and private truth” (AL 284) to Eva, her ordinary friend: “You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own” (AL 284). Humbert’s rejoinder clearly betrays his astonishment as the girl seems to embrace something of the solemn, epistemological or even metaphysical truth that Nabokov seeks to convey in *Lolita* (Nyegaard 359):

[I]t struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, *there was in her a garden, a twilight, and a palace of gate.* (AL 284; emphases added)

Nyegaard’s conjecturing throws a new light on Humbert, whose erudition and linguistic extravaganza cleverly inveigle the reader into believing that the hero is quintessentially artistic and thus venerated by the philistine members of his society.⁹⁹ He also claims that “Humbert solipsizes the world [including Lolita in the famous davenport scene], paints and represents it according to his own artistic taste” (Nyegaard 361). While most readers would embark upon a quest to find the worst philistine (Quilty, perchance) among the numerous minor characters, only few have realized so far that Humbert’s failure as an artist makes him the worst *poshlyak* of the novel (Nyegaard 361). That Cincinnatus alone is capable of comprehending the rudiments that endow an individual with an artistic vision and sensibility also raises

⁹⁸ Cincinnatus “annak a megfoghatatlan erőnek, “élan vital”-nak is a birtokosa, amely egyrészt egyedül képes művészi gondolatok ihletésére, másrészt nélküle a világ valami hamis és renyhe tökéletesség, valami ragacsos-undorító utópia (vagy antiutópia) állapotába dermedne.” (191).

⁹⁹ Some notable examples from the novel are the Haze woman, Mrs Pratt and, most interestingly, even the pseudo-philistine Zempf/Quilty duo that is both a *poshlyak* and a parody of it at the same time as well-disguised Quilty tries to investigate the “home situation” at the Humbert Residence.

the question of doubling, which constitutes a central pillar everywhere in the author's massive body of writings. Nabokov's earlier treatment of doubling and multiplication (in the form of applying a cohort of Doppelgangers) in novels like *Glory*, *Laughter in the Dark*, *Despair* and many others envisaged the idea that the kinship between the protagonist and his (alleged) lookalike is used to shed light on the characteristics lying deep within each main character. On account of his artistic faculty and worldview, Cincinnatus is superior to all the others, and, as a result of his prominence, he will no longer have a double, as it were, while everyone else becomes interchangeable in the novel.¹⁰⁰ I agree with Clancy when she suggests that that this phantasmagorical quality in the characters is "one of the many elements in the novel that helps to create its air of hallucinatory unreality and illusion" (68). Whilst *Despair* is principally built on Nabokov's treatment of his preferred *doppelganger* theme, *Invitation* lays more stress upon the question of multiplication and describes how different characters peregrinate from one identity to another. It is true that Cincinnatus has no flesh-and-blood double in the traditional sense of the word, as Felix is to Hermann in *Despair*, he himself becomes inseparable from his complementary self that emerges time and again in parentheses:

Cincinnatus said, "I obey you, specters, werewolves, parodies. I obey you. However, I demand – yes, demand" (and the other Cincinnatus began to stamp his feet hysterically, losing his slippers) "to be told how long I have left to live ... and whether I shall be allowed to see my wife." (*IB* 40)

The mission that the other Cincinnatus attempts to accomplish is that of breaking away from the original Cincinnatus whose consciousness imprisons the double. In Chapter Ten, the hero expresses a modicum of optimism as regards his future escape by claiming that "imagination" (*IB* 114) is the savior he has been awaiting. Clancy argues that the end of the novel illustrates how "the imagination has gained ascendancy over its physical cage" (71) as Cincinnatus's makes his exit amidst the falling debris.

¹⁰⁰ See Gyürki's recent article on the doppelganger theme in these three novels in *Jelenkor*. ("Hasonmások a sötétben" [Doppelgangers in the dark]). Web: <http://jelenkor.net/main.php?disp=disp&ID=1706>.

Revisiting the Otherworld: Butterflies, Doubles, and the Lost Paradise

All through the story Cincinnatus entertains the idea of crossing the threshold of what he perceives as an unreal world. In the end, he comes to the realization of what Fyodor, the hero of *The Gift* also states explicitly as the author's central theme, which, as I have said earlier, has been the subject-matter of the most polemical discussions in Nabokov scholarship:

Life as a kind of journey [is] a stupid illusion: we are not going anywhere, we are sitting at home. *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 though the crack. (310; emphasis added)

In spite of the forces which work against him, Cincinnatus summons courage and confidence as he writes his memoir only to appear undaunted at the moment of death. He mounts the scaffold with equanimity, firm in his belief that there exists a parallel universe beyond the confines of mortal life. The tyranny of the "real" world and all its vices, to his mind, can thus be eschewed: death for Cincinnatus offers a "joyful awakening from the nightmare of reality" (*IB* 196) when he leaves behind his *poshlyaki* tormentors and makes "his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (*IB* 223).¹⁰¹ The possibility of transcending the world that keeps Cincinnatus incarcerated is also indicated by Nabokov's constant references to moths and butterflies, which symbolize resurrection and the survival of the spirit after death in Christian iconography. Those who do not belong to the ideal re-readers of Nabokov's works may not immediately take notice of the intermittent appearance of butterflies, moths and various insects as being the symbols of life, resurrection and the desire to reach a state of transcendence.¹⁰² The study of the multifarious meanings of Lepidoptera in Nabokov's works has by now developed

¹⁰¹ Ferber writes that Greek vase paintings sometimes depicted a butterfly leaving the mouth of a dying person. Ovid refers to "funereal butterflies" (*Met.* 15.374), because they were often portrayed on graves. "The idea is that the soul undergoes a metamorphosis at death, leaving behind its earthbound larval state to take wing in a glorious form" (38).

¹⁰² A notable exception for the novices of Nabokov's fiction would be "The Christmas Story" (1928), which revolves round the suicidal death of the protagonist's son and reveals a metaphysical connection between butterflies and the hereafter. The metamorphosis of the chrysalis (that is, the pupa of the butterfly) at the conclusion of the story points to the direction of the otherworldly as it functions as a principal device in re-establishing the communication between the dead son and his anguished father.

into a scientific discipline in its own right. All of his works – with few exceptions only – are populated by diverse species of butterflies and moths, which appear at the summation of the narratives. Barabtarlo explains how insects “fly out” with the protagonists as they leave the stage: a race of mosquitoes in *Ada*, a swallowtail in *Glory*, a Red Admirable (a Red Admiral, that is) butterfly in *Pale Fire*, a hawkmoth in *Bend Sinister* and a green ephemeral trichopteron in *Pnin* are obvious markers of the hero’s “sliding into” an otherworldly realm (“Within and Without Cincinnatus’s Cell” 394). In “Lepidoptera Studies,” Charles Lee Remington gives a sketch of the author’s scientific body of writings and its related scholarly publications in Lepidoptera studies and in the humanities, too. In his jargon-laden study, Remington, who was personally known to Nabokov on account of their common entomological interest, says that the author’s “hauteur shows up in unexplained imagery in his writings, not least in his use of butterfly species to symbolize events in the novel” (274). He divides Nabokov’s perpetual contentment in stratifying meanings in his passages: while the first and second strata of meaning is understandable to any reader, only the most refined consumers of the Nabokovian text can grasp the true essence of the third, deepest layer. Only Nabokov’s most favored protagonists are permitted to develop a special kinship with butterflies. Cincinnatus (an allegedly kindred spirit with Nabokov) encounters an accurately drawn moth only in Chapter Nineteen, at the very moment of his writing down and immediately crossing out the word “death”.¹⁰³

Here the page ended, and Cincinnatus realized that he was out of paper. However he managed to dig up one more sheet.
 “... death,” he wrote on it, continuing his sentence, but he immediately crossed out that word; he must say it differently, with greater precision ...”
 (205-6)

The critical literature that has focused on the ending of *Invitation* so far cannot present an undivided reading with respect to the final scene and the ambiguity it creates at the narrative level. Critics and readers alike are inclined to pose the question whether Cincinnatus is decollated in accordance with the law that is announced at the outset or it is the *other* Cincinnatus that perishes on the scaffold. Also, one may safely ask whether the long-anticipated execution takes place after all or the protagonist simply shuffles out of the shoddy, disintegrating world to make his

¹⁰³ The moth can be identified as *Saturnia Pyri*, the Great Peacock Moth.

way in the direction where “stood beings akin to him” (*IB* 223). In his discussion of the interplay between reading and writing in *Invitation*, Blackwell, for example, posits that the author’s created world and the reader’s mental, creative world come together in the process of reading. Cincinnatus’s immortality, therefore, is established in an otherworldly dimension, but, unlike Alexandrov believes, this is not a metaphysical otherworld but the “other world” of the reader (45). Of course, this interpretation would stand in stark contrast with Langen’s postulation that “[e]verything in the book is in the book” (63), because what Blackwell states so firmly is that Cincinnatus’s “web of ideas” is transferred off the page into the world of the reader as the novel comes to an end. Uncertainties abound in this decisive final scene, which has been far open to a plethora of interpretations insomuch that it may seem pointless to take into account all the possibilities of what might have been Cincinnatus’s fate on the block or to what extent is one allowed to perceive the metaphysical approach as the only valid approach to the novel’s indeterminate ending. In the closing scene of the novel, it is well worth observing the response of the “pale librarian,” who was watching the execution from the steps, where he “sat doubled up, vomiting” (*IB* 222). This seemingly irrelevant detail challenges the view that Cincinnatus unhurriedly shuffled off from the execution scene, as the librarian’s biological reaction is likely to have been activated by the gruesome sight of the actual decollation.

It is worthwhile, at this point, to pay some attention to Nabokov’s careful selection of the novel’s title, which he elaborates on in his highly provocative foreword, confessing that he would have “suggested rendering it as *Invitation to an Execution*” (*IB* 5) rather than plumping for the more explicit “beheading.” Any reader who is ideally conversant with Nabokov’s fictional world will *not* disregard rashly the semiotic importance of execution, which becomes the operative term with respect to the ubiquity of an auctorial hand that carries out, performs, or rather, *executes* various tasks, such as the removal (or, in a more humanizing sense, the execution) of often unnecessary characters (note how, for example, the auctorial hand does away with Charlotte in *Lolita* or orders the expulsion of Vasily Ivanovich at the end of “Cloud, Castle, Lake”). The lexical ambiguity that the word *execution* carries in *Invitation* would understandably have been in the focus of attention among those scholars who examine Nabokov’s fiction on the basis of their formalistic qualities, such as the linguistic ingeniousness the author had accomplished

throughout his *oeuvre*. Nonetheless, the semiotic relevance of the word concerns me for the only reason that the execution of Cincinnatus also denotes the author's active involvement in launching the protagonist into a transcendental dimension – a task that Nabokov handles so dexterously.¹⁰⁴ This is somewhat contrary to the idea (developed fully by Alexandrov) that Cincinnatus is allowed to enter the idyllic realm of the hereafter by dint of his intuitions, his dissimilarity with the earth-bound creatures of the fictional dictatorship. I must emphasize here that one should not entirely reject the metaliterary orientation, which draws attention to the author's indubitable role in determining the fate of his characters. In one interview Nabokov admitted that his "characters are galley slaves" (SO 95) and that none of them could ever take so dominant a position as to outshine the inventiveness and supremacy of the godlike author. In addition to several other traits which point to a perceptible link between the author and his most favored protagonists, it can be said of Cincinnatus that, akin to his creator, he also possesses the craftsmanship and a certain degree of intellectual freedom, the preservation of which is the strongest imperative for Nabokov (Morton 4).

Cincinnatus, therefore, is typically seen as the author's alter ego. The privileged role he assumes makes him share the plight of the long-suffering émigrés in Europe, who were often driven by force of circumstance into living a life fraught with losses, rootlessness and the overwhelming sensation of the irrevocability of the past. Directly exposed to the unfavorable living conditions of exiles and émigrés both in Berlin and Paris in the first half of the twentieth century, Nabokov was resolutely searching for the paradisiacal happiness that his childhood offered to him. It is this pursuit of the lost paradise that has become an unmistakable hallmark of the Nabokovian *oeuvre*, and prevails in an equally manifest way in *Invitation*. Gyürki postulates that "in Nabokov's creative world of ideas the re-discovery of a lost paradise on earth is only a privilege of the elect. ... In addition to possessing an artistic vision in Nabokov's works, only those characters are permitted to make their return to this earthly paradise, who are also doubles of the author" (web).¹⁰⁵ Whilst

¹⁰⁴ *Invitation* is not the only work where execution occupies such a central role. Nabokov's poem, written in Berlin in 1927, is entitled "Execution," its speaker expresses his genuine desire to be executed in Russia, where "the stars, the night of execution / and full of racemosas that ravine!" (PP 47) await him.

¹⁰⁵ "Nabokov művészi eszmerendszerében az elveszett földi paradicsom újbóli megtalálása csak kevesek privilégiuma. ... Nabokovnál ugyanis a művészi látásmóddal rendelkezők mellett csak az a

Nabokov's chronic indifference to religion is as intensely stressed as his disavowal of group activities and movements (*SO* 48), it seems justifiable that Cincinnatus is not only the author's double but also that of the Messiah. One critic claims that the death of the protagonist offers a suggestive analogy with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ at the very same time because almost all of the author's novels are paraphrases of the Old and the New Testament in that they present as their central theme the Fall of Man (Book of Genesis, Chapter 2) and the incessant search for the lost Paradise (M. Nagy 192). In the next chapter dealing with Nabokov's treatment of the Jewish theme, I will claim – among others – that the fate of his protagonists resembles also that of the Wandering Jew, the eternal pariah, who, as legend has it, is affronted by Jesus Christ on his way to Mount Golgotha and is cursed to wander aimlessly until the Second Coming, between this world and the other, without ever being permitted to take shelter. Supporting this idea are the several religious implications made manifest throughout the text. One is reminded of the biblical miracle Jesus Christ performs when he walks on water: as the novel opens *Cincinnatus*

was calm; however, he had to be supported during the journey through the long corridors, since he planted his feet unsteadily, like a child who has just learned to walk, or as if he were about to fall through *like a man who has dreamt that he is walking on water* only to have a sudden doubt: but is this possible? (*IB* 11; emphasis added)

Likewise, in a more general sense, Cincinnatus could justifiably be perceived as a Christ figure for his artistic inclinations and also appears as the man expelled from Paradise because having figuratively eaten of the fruit of knowledge. To my mind, however, he seems more as an outcast, as the Jewry of the world has understandably been throughout history, though he is in some ways also representative of Christ, who suffers severely on the Way of Sorrows.¹⁰⁶ The reason why I believe that the former interpretation is more convincing than associating Cincinnatus with Christ

szereplő találhat vissza a földi paradicsomba, aki a szerzőnek is hasonmása” (“Hasonmások a sötétben”; my translation).

¹⁰⁶ On a marginal note, it must be added that Christ, too, was guilty of ‘moral turpitude’ (treason, sacrilege, blasphemy, and so on) in the eyes of his persecutors, but neither Cincinnatus nor Christ ever committed a sin. Some theologians argue that Christ never sinned but was tempted, for the divine qualities he possesses (omniscience, omnipotence and immutability) prevent him from engaging in any sinful activity. Nevertheless, the Christ analogy is still not plausible enough, because if Cincinnatus suffers, he suffers for himself alone, and if he is some sort of a savior figure, he saves himself alone.

(although the word-initial letters in the two names would suggest a happy and subtle link) is that the resurrection of Christ and his *subsequent* miracles are not displayed through Nabokov's protagonist. Quite the reverse, Cincinnatus could be more persuasively equated with the Wandering Jew because, akin to Ahasver, the novel's hero is also responsible for the moral turpitude of taunting Jesus Christ, that is, displaying his opacity in the disintegrating world of all-transparent beings.¹⁰⁷

It is in this virtually nightmarish locus – or rather, the *non*-locus of restlessness and hovering between a romanticized otherworldly realm and the horrible here-and-now – that Cincinnatus, who possesses the gift to comprehend something sublime and profoundly human, gives utterance to his intuitions with which even he himself is unable to come to terms. Akin to Humbert Humbert, Grandmaster Luzhin, Timofey Pnin and several protagonists of his short stories (Chorb, Vasily Ivanovich, Pilgram, Falter and others), Cincinnatus should be seen as being equally privileged in his aptitude to make sense of a transcendental dimension, inaccessible for those who live in the “sordid world of matter” (Alexandrov, “*Invitation*” 87). Death, for Cincinnatus, is certainly on a par with the liberation of the soul from the spiritual thralldom that the state and its see-through inhabitants impose on him and the understanding of a secret that he reiterates time and again (a secret that in fact remains unexpressed in the novel, similarly to that of the mad mathematician of “Ultima Thule,” who claims to have discovered the Truth of the world but is reluctant to reveal it). Cincinnatus is endowed with the genius of making out a pattern of the unorthodox combinations, which comes closest to the “cosmic synchronization” discussed in full particulars in the introductory chapter of my dissertation. He contemplates on his abilities in his diary:

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*. No, the secret is not revealed yet – even this is but the flint – and I have not even begun to speak of this kindling, of the fire itself. (52; emphasis added)

Cincinnatus conjectures that he must resort to the method of “cosmic synchronization” to mitigate his spiritual and physical agonies inflicted upon him by his tormentors. The claim may not sound unconvincing that Cincinnatus refuses to

¹⁰⁷ I elaborate at length on the questions of philo-Semitism in the final chapter of my dissertation.

consider a world in which one is denied to exercise one's freedom as being *real*. In his view, mundane life bears a resemblance to a dreamlike state of being, whereas entry to the realm of the transcendent is the only reality – the reality, when human consciousness is wide awake. Cincinnatus refers to dreams as “semi-reality, the promise of reality, a foreglimpse and a whiff of it” (92), which also calls to mind the works of Georgij Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky, who achieved massive popularity due to their views on dreaming and trance in the early the twentieth century.¹⁰⁸ Alexandrov concludes that Cincinnatus “would see the awakening that death brings in terms of a cosmic synchronization-like leap in consciousness” (94).

¹⁰⁸ Chapter Six provides a more detailed analysis of their possible influences on Nabokov's works.

CHAPTER 6

“Horrible Hybridization” in *Lolita*: Synthesizing Worlds and Worlds Apart

The relevance of Vladimir Nabokov’s prophetic statement that he is “probably responsible for the odd fact that people don’t seem to name their daughters Lolita any more” (SO 47) has been seldom if ever challenged since the novel’s publication in 1955, and its subsequent film adaptations have shocked the world with their contentious subject-matter. The debate around the theme of pedophilia in *Lolita* has eclipsed so many other salient aspects of the novel that readers, for a long time, regarded it as a piece of literature devoid of all moral, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions. Throughout the decades after *Lolita* was published, considerable emphasis has been laid on the novel’s metaliterary features, connecting it with all the other works that Nabokov had authored by a heavy reliance on so-called “secondary sources,” or rather, citations from the author’s own oeuvre as well as extra-textual sources. As opposed to the widely held belief that Nabokov mastered his narrative method from Joyce and other modernists, it must be borne in mind, claims József Goretity, that he was more deeply influenced by the techniques used by those “Russian Symbolists, who, during Nabokov’s pubescent and late teenage years, around the 1910s provided us with the Symbolist prose that was perhaps the most amazing thing of Russian literature at that time” (200).¹⁰⁹ The focus of this chapter of my dissertation will be, in place of yet another metaphysical reading of *Lolita*’s otherworlds, the examination of the theme of hybridization, of how the Old World and the New World of the novel are synthesized and how they are related with the role of doubling that figures large throughout the novel.

It seems that writing about *Lolita* is as though another bottle of ink were futilely spilled, as so much has been said, written, confirmed and revoked about the novel, which rejects all types of categorization. It thus seems pointless to attempt to create even an incomplete list of all the voices that ever stated anything memorable about *Lolita* in order to propose ways to resolve the tensions between worlds and worlds apart that the novel, perhaps more so than any other work by Nabokov, strikingly dramatizes (for example, Humbert’s idiosyncratic way of building his own America

¹⁰⁹ In the original: “De ne feledjük, hogy Nabokov ezt az elbeszélő-technikát nem Joyce-tól tanulta, hanem azoktól az orosz szimbolistáktól, akik Nabokov serdülő- és ifjúkorában, az 1910-es évek környékén az orosz irodalom talán legnagyobb szenzációjával, a szimbolista prózával szolgáltak” (Goretity 200).

as opposed to the America known by almost everyone else). Equally pointless would be to spell out the particularities of Nabokov's works as being more *metaphysical* (Boyd, Alexandrov, Davydov) than *metaliterary* (a view prevailing before World War II and having its second wave in the literary criticism after the 1980s), more of a modernist than a postmodernist work of art, more engrossed in the author's attempt to comprehend the secrets of existence than his basking in the admiration that his phenomenal linguistic personhood earned him. Despite this ultimate instance of apologetics on my part for failing to say something truly seminal about the complexities of Nabokov's *magnum opus*, it seems imperative to call attention to several distinct features of the novel, without which no discourse on the author's other works could ever strive to achieve any semblance of thematic completion. It is a commonplace statement, and justly so, that yet another reading of *Lolita* is hazardous as an academic, philological and exegetical enterprise. Any success to offer a novel treatment of the book is further complicated by a plethora of perilously restricted readings in conjunction with the novel's salacious, or rather (putatively) pornographic, subject-matter.¹¹⁰ I suppose that *Lolita* poses no questions as a novel (apart from the numerous conundrums alluding to other works or the revelation of an unanticipated ending) – instead, it proposes several answers to clarify whatever seems inexplicable in the author's later works, such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, both of which are veritably postmodern pieces, and submitting them to critical assessment in my dissertation might as well make them incongruent with the other works I have analyzed earlier, all of which seem to have their rightful place among Nabokov's predominantly modernist writings before the 1940s, though with striking attributes gravitating to apparently postmodern texts.

Amenable to further scholarly investigation, Nabokov's best known novel is often seen as a central web holding together, as it were, the rest of the author's works; to my mind, it embraces all those *topoi*, subject matter, narrative techniques,

¹¹⁰ It is highly unlikely that any scholar can compile a complete list of bibliography whose items investigate the different qualities of Nabokov's otherworld in *Lolita* as indicators of his personhood and full-fledged psychology of his techniques of world-fashioning. Some notable examples, also incorporated into several chapters of this dissertation, include: D. Barton Johnson's *Worlds in Regression*, D. Barton Johnson and Brian Boyd's "Prologue: The Otherworld," several articles in *Nabokov's World: The Shape of Nabokov's World* (volume one, edited by Jane Greyson, Arnold McMillin, and Priscilla Meyer), Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Pekka Tammi's *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Analysis*, Leona Toker's "Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures," Vladimir Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Ellen Pifer's *Nabokov and the Novel*, Alfred Appel's *Annotated Lolita*, and J. B. Sission's influential study on "cosmic synchronization."

and stylistic accomplishments, which called for the dexterity of a tenderly sinister author, who satirized America and its vulgar middle-class lifestyle (especially in Part Two of the novel with typical vestiges of a culturally inane post-World War II United States) in light of Europe with its high culture and imperishable values. Or this is what seems to be happening on the surface. Questions immediately begin to come to mind as regards the antithetical views between America and Europe. It should be added here that Nabokov was a staunch opponent of the interpretation of *Lolita* as a textual zone that sets against one another Europe and America. Setting up such a binary opposition, for Nabokov, was a mistaken reading of the novel, since the two locations are neither juxtaposed to one another nor stand in an antithetical relationship: both places have their pluses attractions and repulsions. Traces of *poshlost'* are also found in highly venerated Europe: Humbert's first wife, Valeria, who had an affair with a White Russian taxi driver in Paris, is an apt demonstration of vulgar philistinism. Humbert recalls the events as follows:

We [Valeria, Maximovich, and Humbert] sat down at a table; the Tsarist ordered wine, and Valeria, after applying a wet napkin to her knee, went on talking – *into* me rather than to me; she poured words into this dignified receptacle with a volubility I had never suspected she had in her. And every now and then she would volley a burst of Slavic at her stolid lover. The situation was preposterous and became even more so when the taxi-colonel, stopping Valeria with a possessive smile, began to unfold *his* views and plans. (AL 28; italics in the original)

Conversely, *Lolita* can also be seen as a storehouse of the positive features that America offers, though Humbert's Old World mannerisms and typical European intellectualism might suggest, at face value, that the New World ought to be denigrated and considered "second-rate" by readers. One recognizably favorable attribute of the United States is, for example, the scenery that Humbert is astonished to find unfold before his eyes:

By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of "going places," of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight. I have never seen such smooth amiable roads as those that now radiated before us, across the crazy quilt of forty-eight states. Voraciously we consumed those long highways, in rapt silence we glided over their glossy black dance floors. Not only had Lo no eye for scenery but she furiously resented my calling her attention to this or that enchanting detail of landscape; which I myself learned to discern only after

being exposed for quite a time to the delicate beauty ever present in the margin of our undeserving journey.

Humbert goes into raptures over the beauties of the natural scenery, checkered with images which resemble landscape paintings by El Greco and Claude Lorrain. However, it should not be forgotten that the novel's narrator is Humbert, who is, after all, narcissistic and judgmental; therefore, his interpretation of events is also a reflection of his negative mindset, callousness, indifference, and complete lack of empathy toward the weak and the intellectually challenged. He recounts the events in a fashion that brings forth his unreliability in the narrative process, and unless one is mindful enough not to identify with him, one will develop an attitude similar to his. Embracing a contrastive view of the Old World versus New World opposition will pose the risk of our becoming condemnatory like Humbert and formulate prejudiced and wholly subjective opinions.

What role does Humbert's partly abandoned and partly regained Europe – whose worth survives only in the literary works accessible to him and the most erudite readers – play in his construction (or rather, rewriting) of his own America and his "solipsized" prepubescent nymphet that – allegorically – embodies the New World with its many heinous and beauteous qualities at the same time? In what ways does Humbert occupy a pivotal role, in his capacity as a cultural exile, an émigré wanderer *par excellence*, in making America look as though it were a mere imitation of the Old Continent and thus became a hybridized space akin to the one typified in the famous passage describing the Haze household in the novel (later to be quoted at full length)? Also, questions spring to mind as to what extent we can claim that Humbert's private vision of the New World had been influenced (or rather, marred) by his unconsummated relationship with Annabel Leigh, the reincarnation of the eponymous heroine in Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee." In this side-glance at reexamining *Lolita* in brief, pointed attention will be paid to the extension of the novel's dichotomous nature, created through the apparent contrast between America and Europe, Lolita and Humbert, which helps to comprehend the hybridization of past and present, reality and imagination, one world and another being juxtaposed to and also overlapping one another, thus creating in-between spaces.

As an entomologist and a "lepper" – a hunter of butterflies, that is – Nabokov had an exceptional ability to catch and eventually collect his treasured Lepidoptera,

an act, which, I daresay, can be metaphorically taken to signify catching an insight or an immersion into a different dimension of existence and then collecting all the wondrous experiences that the otherworldly “glimpse” has offered. Apart from this oft-favored metaphysical reading of *Lolita* and other works, intermittently connected with the appearance of butterflies, *Lolita* is a world of hybrids. It stands at a crossroads of its protagonist’s Old World gusto and the corniness and cultural deprecation of the New World – a unique way of hybridizing two worlds, that is, emblemized by the numerous dichotomies that the novel accommodates, ranging from numeric doubling, double names and initials, doppelgangers, and narrative repetitions, only to mention of few examples. Nabokov, who traced his lineage all the way back to his Russian ancestors and then became a product of America’s mainstream culture – both nations attempting to monopolize his artistic genius –, portrayed Humbert as an émigré hero: “that of a wandering, ill-fated exile uneasily suspended between two conflicting sets of cultural values. ... Behind all the familiar oppositions of the book ... looms the greatest and most potent of American polarities: the legendary conflict between New World possibilities and Old World sensibilities” (Haegert 779).¹¹¹ Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to state that *Lolita* is solely centered round the dichotomy of Europe and America, the former representing lofty ideas, erudition, esthetic refinement, and encyclopedic attainments that Humbert possesses, whereas the latter being a repository of the most diverse forms of vulgarity: gooey fudge, motor courts, luxury cars, pop songs, motion pictures, the funnies, lollipops, and other items relished and consumed by Lolita and her contemporaries. Even the protagonist, who is introduced as a “salad of racial genes” (AL 9) at the outset of the novel, acknowledges the annihilating power that

¹¹¹ In “Jamesian Meanderings in Vladimir Nabokov’s Fiction” (in: *The Reality of Ruminations: Writings for Aladár Sarbu on his 70th birthday*, eds. Judit Borbély and Zsolt Czigányik, Budapest: ELTE BTK, School of English and American Studies, 2010) I briefly outline a handful of ideas according to which Nabokov’s fiction alludes to Henry James and his works and shares a number of common features with them. Of especial importance is the relationship between the Old World and the New World (see James’s “international theme” vs. Nabokov’s “two-world cosmology”), secrets and structural patterns which allow for communication with the dead (the role of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and Charlotte Haze’s tear drops from heaven in *Lolita*), artists and sculptors as protagonists, etc. Irena Auerbach Smith discusses the issue of James’s “international theme” and its reversal in Nabokov’s fiction to some extent, stating that the “confluence of exile and narrative” (81) is a common modernist aspect of their works. In *The Ambassadors*, Strether associates Europe with the gaining of knowledge and the learning of new experiences at a dear price. America for him represents insipidity and stagnation, whereas he can feel a sense of optimism and freedom in Europe. Humbert’s knowledge and sentiments are deeply rooted in European culture, where he feels at home, and the America he is plunged into brings him suffering and the feeling of being uprooted, belonging nowhere.

Lolita possesses, but the passage itself is more revealing for its cultural and esthetic commentary on *poshlost*’ middleclass America in the 1950s with its “eerie vulgarity” (AL 44) as contrasted with higher-standard European culture:

What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet – of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels; and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death, oh God, oh God. And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is – Lolita. (AL 45)

It is interesting to note that in *America’s Coming-of-Age* (1915) critic and historian Van Wyck Brooks called attention to the prevalence of a national schizophrenia that he believed to have had characterized the socio-cultural landscape of America since the previous century, establishing, as it were, a stark opposition between highbrow and lowbrow culture, which finally resulted in a split in national identity. Akin to Nabokov, Brooks disdained the catchpenny realities of the lowbrow and looked instead to the artist and intellectual for national renewal. However, to make the artist emerge as a hero, for Nabokov, was more of an energizing force than his intention to revitalize American values, with which, as a writer having his ancestry in Russia, his formative years in Europe, and his own existence in America, he was less *au fait* and understandably less preoccupied than thinkers born and raised in the United States. Similarly to the postulations made by Brooks – who was known to be indebted to George Santayana and his views on the destructive and superficial sentimentality of the “genteel tradition” – Nabokov also displays an image of America’s dual mentality, divided between the debasing effects of vapid commercialism and the perceived superiority of European culture.¹¹²

If one reads and rereads *Lolita* (and, perhaps more importantly, *Pnin*), it becomes evident that Nabokov was not only a writer of fiction abounding in puns and postmodern narrative ruses, but that one must also acknowledge his place in literary history as a keen social observer. David Castronovo rightly makes the claim

¹¹² See George Santayana’s view in “Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” on Young Sammy (“hot young blood”) representing the burgeoning spirit of America vs. Uncle Sam (“that prim proper honest man”) representing the “imported” European intellectual tradition.

that “Nabokov ... is a pioneering observer of the effects of pop culture, middlebrowism, and the culture industry. *Lolita* is a brilliantly illustrated guide to cultural inanity – and builds up a vision of disdain in such a way as to make Nabokov one of the major observers of post-World War II culture” (“Humbert’s America” 39). Gaining insight into several cultures, civilizations and languages of the world, in his native Russia, Germany, England, and France, Nabokov was an erudite spectator of the petty-bourgeois qualities of which America was a vehicle, and his fictional characters, such as Charlotte Haze stood as leading representatives of the *poshlost*’ that constitutes the author’s abhorrence for a certain type of substandard American culture, with which he was loath to associate. America’s deficiencies are seen through her pretentious mannerisms, often bordering on the ludicrous and the kitschy. Castronovo catalogs the very traits that make Charlotte Haze an embodiment of America at its most repulsive and antipodal to the Old World whose grandeur and intellectual height Humbert represents even with his perversions and secret penchant for nymphets:

[Charlotte Haze’s] mangled French (“Dolores Haze, ne montrez pas vos zhambes”), the attempt at Old World amenities (coffee on the piazza), the artiness (the Van Gogh print), the international flavor of her décor (the Mexican knickknacks), the aura of the good person (struggling with the truth of sexual need and social ambition), the kittenish manner (in conflict with the middle-aged reality), the parental integrity (masking her envy of her daughter): Nabokov unpacks the whole bag of bourgeois tricks and makes them central to the novel’s meaning. (“Humbert’s America” 37)

Several critiques of *Lolita* were initially founded on the assumption that the novel dichotomizes the nature of art and life, fantasy and reality, moral debasement and the exaltation of high-standard cultural values – but the clash between America and Europe, as represented by the two protagonists, stand out more significantly than all the other qualities that the novel has in store in the way of highlighting dualities, such as the monumental instances double roles (for example, the comic brawl between Humbert and Quilty at the novel’s closure), numbers and names. However, it must be stated that *Lolita* is more of a novel of displacement, which dramatizes the question of liminality, indicating the crossings of thresholds between the life-enhancing cultural values of the Old World and “the margins and byways of

American society, *sans* roots, *sans* family, *sans* anything save his [Humbert's] glorious memories of an older European world" (Haegert 780).

Contrary to the view that *Lolita* comprises a "two-world" frame founded on dualities, theories of postcolonialism imply that Nabokov – a migrant and a polyglot himself – created a novel that merges rather than further splits clashing cultures through the act of hybridizing both spatial and temporal elements. Rachel Trousdale, who considers Nabokov and Rushdie as the most important practitioners of transnational world-fashioning, believes that these two writers often "create a community of migrants whose shared culture is one of displacement and self-invention" (2). Hybridization appears in the novel at the most superficial textual level, when Humbert, in describing the Haze household, notices the "horrible hybridization" at the very sight of the place's odd décor and is only seconds away from turning down the offer to rent the room, with which he, as Charlotte Haze euphemistically puts it, "not too favorably impressed" (AL 38). The patchwork of high and low art is aptly exemplified in two passages:

The front hall was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh's "Arlésienne." A door ajar to the right afforded a glimpse of a living room, with some more Mexican trash in a corner cabinet and a striped sofa along the wall. There was a staircase at the end of the hallway, and as I stood mopping my brow (only now did I realize how hot it had been out-of-doors) and staring, to stare at something, at an old gray tennis ball that lay on an oak chest, there came from the upper landing the contralto voice of Mrs. Haze, who leaning over the banisters inquired melodiously, "Is that Monsieur Humbert?" A bit of cigarette ash dropped from there in addition. Presently, the lady herself – sandals, maroon slacks, yellow silk blouse, squarish face, in that order – came down the steps, her index finger still tapping upon her cigarette. (AL 37)

I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called "functional modern furniture" and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps. I was led upstairs, and to the left – into "my" room. I inspected it through the mist of my utter rejection of it; but I did discern above "my" bed René Prinet's "Kreutzer Sonata." And she called that servant maid's room a "semi-studio"! Let's get out of here at once, I firmly said to myself as I pretended to deliberate over the absurdly, and ominously, low price that my wistful hostess was asking for board and bed. (AL 38)

The description of the scene – similar to the fragmentariness and consisting of seemingly disparate objects like the middle-class apartment of “Terra Incognita” – is in some ways indicative of the novel at large, typifying America with its mishmash culture and jumbled lineages. As noted above, Humbert is a “salad of racial genes” (AL 9), who portrays his father as a “Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of the Danube in his veins” (AL 9), making worlds not simply clash but also overlap with one another. Such palimpsest-like overlapping or superimposition is highly characteristic of modernist and postmodernist works, but is most lucidly explained through postcolonialist theories. In her discussion of transnational fiction, Trousdale submits *Lolita* to further analysis and puts into practical implementation the theories of Homi Bhabha. Instead of relying on binary oppositions, Bhabha, in “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” proposes the emergence of a so-called Third Space and thus construes the term hybridity to refer to the margin where cultural differences get into contact and clash and unsettle all the stable identities that are constructed around oppositions. I personally believe that *Lolita* – more than just setting against each other Europe and America as a time-honored binary opposition – celebrates the creation of these in-between spaces (also known as “the zone” in Brian McHale’s terminology). It is all the more interesting to acknowledge the applicability of Bhabha’s theory because he understands the condition of being “a migrant,” as Humbert is – best seen as a case study of the effects of hybridity upon identity and culture. Trousdale correctly argues that

[t]ransnational fiction instigates dialogue between a series of real and possible worlds: the home country and the adopted country, both of which exist in the real world but are understood through competing epistemologies; the world of the book, which *juxtaposes and synthesizes* the home and adopted countries; and an implied fourth world brought into being by that synthesis. (19; italics added)

Ostensibly irreconcilable worlds converge in *Lolita*, creating the impression that the juxtaposition of two distinctly different elements can constitute a hybrid, such as Humbert himself, to start with, whose job, upon his arrival to the New World, constitutes the “thinking up and editing [of] perfume ads” while he is also in the process of compiling a “comparative history of French literature for English-speaking students” (AL 16). Moreover, hybridization surfaces at several crucial

junctures of the text. Humbert's mixed ethnic background is pointed out early on in the novel, albeit his extraction is clearly specified, he remains, for the entire length of the novel, a migrant, a fusion of different worlds, whose national identity is not revealed. Akin to Nabokov, who always claimed that the nationality of a worthwhile author is of secondary importance, Humbert is also stranded at the liminality of hybridization with attempts to make use of his European erudition on a vulgar and morally corrupt American soil. Of all instances of hybridization, Humbert's powerful use of his old-style English, blended with innovative slang expressions and coinages from the America of the 1950s, a modicum of French affectation and the sporadically inserted Latinate terms throughout the novel is the most revealing example of hybridization. Slangy terminology appears on the same page with "français moyen" (AL 25), "son argent" (AL 24), "plumbaceous umbae" (AL 111) and a barrage of foreign-sounding words. He refers to his own imaginative way of using English as speaking and writing in "Humbertish" (AL 35), accentuating, as it were, the malleability and the ambiguous nature of language used in *Lolita*. Hybridity is best expressed through a ludic mixture of words in the protagonist's narcissistic "umber and black Humberland" (AL 166), which emerges as much of a patchwork as Charlotte Haze's house, maladroitly synthesizing the cultural legacies of Europe and America within a single space. One additional example of linguistic hybridity is reflected in a passage – resembling Joyce's stream-of-consciousness – where a deftly inserted spoonerism ("What's the katter with misses?" [AL 120]) is followed by a "curious mishmash of Latin, English, French, German and Italian" (Appel 379):

Seva ascendes, pulsata, brulans, kitzelans, dementissima. Elevator clatterans, pausa, clatterans, populus in corridor. Hanc nisi mors mihi adimet nemo! Juncea puellula, jo pensavo fondissime, nobserva nihil quidquam ... (AL 120; emphasis in the original)

In his annotation to this famous passage, Alfred Appel remarks that "[a]t moments of extreme crisis, H.H. croaks incomprehensibly, losing more than his expropriated English; for his attempts to "fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets ... almost resist language altogether, carrying him close to the edge of non-language and figurative silence" (Appel 379). However, hybridization is not only a manifest feature of blending words of foreign languages beyond recognition (certainly appropriate to a postmodern piece), but it might safely be ventured that the "lifting"

of the generic boundaries of a novel in the famous Chapter 35 of Part Two also aptly exemplifies the process of hybridization through Nabokov's heavy reliance on and incorporation of other texts (for example, T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" and other pieces of lyrical poetry) into the chapter.

The disconcerting nature of sexual abuse and the theme of pedophilia are successfully downplayed in *Lolita* by the inventiveness of Humbert's pastiche of languages. While his eloquence is, to some extent, used to tone down the level of brutality and lewdness, which can be, for the most part, imagined by the reader (the only exception being the davenport scene, in which Humbert is "immersed in a euphoria of release" [AL 61]), one will become acclimated to Humbert's coinages, insertion of words and passages in foreign languages, and linguistic hybrids by the end of the novel. It is the blending of the male protagonist's highly immoral behavior and his nurturance of high arts at the same time that makes all forms of hybridity more or less digestible by the time the novel comes to its closure. Indeed, the language of *Lolita* easily becomes naturalized despite Humbert's unnatural (or rather, overly stylized) choice of words regardless of how many of the countless foreign lexical items are condensed on a single page. Similarly to Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, which stands as the most glaring example of linguistic hybrids – also meant to mask the sheer violence of the action among other things –, and alongside Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* – where the thick veil of multilingual wordplay may also have a similar function of camouflage –, the reader will consider *Lolita*'s compelling, yet not the least intricate plot easy to follow. Hybridity in *Lolita* is more about crossing the boundaries and making the differences indistinct than requiring herculean efforts on the reader's part to shift from one world to another. Akin to Burgess's novella, whose idiosyncrasies might seem baffling or even incomprehensible at first sight, Humbert's memoir also presents difficulties owing to the text's linguistic diversity it encompasses as well as the polyglot portmanteaux and double entendres which abound in it. Nevertheless, *Lolita* can be read as a fictional construct whose apparent linguistic and narratological intricacies do not prevent the reader from perusing the novel relatively effortlessly (only as much as the reading of a Nabokovian might be so designated) as though its unsteady quality were a natural attribute of the text. Unsteady, because the worlds, as well as the words, of *Lolita* seem to flow into each other through the use of linguistic code-switching (used excessively in what might be termed as the multilingual *Ada*), and

denominational as well as generic hybrids. In this world of Nabokov, the boundaries between worlds open up in a way that the previously drawn, clearly visible borderlines become distorted (or “hazy,” only to refer to Charlotte’s evocative surname and also to Humbert’s “umber and black” land of a shadowy, shady nature, both of which represent a typical “in-between” space, to use Bhabha’s terminology), and all the binary oppositions are made to coalesce in discourses constantly in dispute with one another (cf. Bókay 282-3).

Just as in the Haze household, where “not merely artifacts but times and ages meet” (Trousdale 41), Humbert’s language is also a pastiche of styles, indicative of the drabness of American English in the fifties as opposed to the extravagance that the protagonist’s speech represents. Nabokov was keen to transpose Europe and the United States through the hybridization of language; nevertheless, Humbert’s memoir – outwardly interested in its own inception only – aims at reinventing his new country in a way that also “legitimize[s] his émigré desires” (Heagert 786). It seems that Humbert’s juxtaposition of two worlds and two varieties, dialects and idiolects of the English language is not only ascribable to his intention to engage in the act of hybridization, but it is also there to validate his sexual perversion through the disparagement of American values. Haegert aptly points out that

his [Humbert’s] denigration of America is designed, at least in part, to rationalize his relationship with Lolita and endow his criminal conduct with a sense of high heroic purpose. So committed is he to the monumental task of self-exoneration that he comes to see himself – and so to portray himself – as a kind of émigré quester in an alien wasteland, seeking the coveted Grail of his European past amid the resplendent ruins of America. (786)

Intimately connected to the question of hybridization, *Lolita*’s dearth of dialectical passages clearly reflect the process of how America and Europe stand in sharp contrast with one another, but at the same time the convergence of the two worlds is also a remarkable phenomenon through the protagonist’s way of speaking. Humbert’s memoir, written in the first person and labeled as a highly subjective confession of past events, allows very limited space and “talking time” for the remainder of the characters – especially for the titular heroine – to give utterance to their sentiments, thoughts, and ideas. Humbert speaks and sees the world through his own lenses, and he successfully creates all his bystanders to view the world from his perspective. Seldom does Lolita express her opinion on any subject, and whenever

she is given such liberties, most of her formulations are as hollow and self-indulgent as the personality that Humbert bequeaths upon her. In Chapter 5 of this dissertation, during my ruminations on the question of *poshlost'*, I noted that, at one unexpected moment, Lolita is made to appear as a flesh-and-blood character, who has developed her truly idiosyncratic mindset as she pronounces a “heartfelt and private truth” to a friend, Eva: “You know, what so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own” (AL 284).¹¹³ Lolita’s putative insensateness and inability to understand Humbert’s prosaic style, expressed with a verbal eloquence that only seeks to conceal the very monstrosity of the protagonist’s (sub)human nature, prefigures her as the embodiment of an America that Humbert had created. In his account, Lolita’s thoughts are subdued almost to nil, and the adolescent colloquialisms, indicative of the American fifties, are – with a very few exceptions, limited to small talk between Lolita and her friends – channeled through Humbert’s strangely stilted style, referred to as “Humbertish” in the novel. One might then say that Humbert’s articulate use of English is not necessarily juxtaposed to Lolita’s slanginess, but the two are closely intertwined in the former’s speech, where the heroine’s apparent mistaking, for example, “abdominal” for “abominable” (AL 239) as well as the basic French expressions she utters cause one world and another to converge and finally overlap one another. One can only allude to Lolita’s own existence to the extent Humbert desires to keep her alive and within the consciousness of his implied readers. On a marginal note, it might be worthy of mention that Italian scholar Pia Pera undertook

¹¹³ In a recent article on the question of *poshlost'*, entitled “Kommunáci bunyós bohócok: a nabokovi pásloszty” (“Buffoons and Bullies of a Communazi State: the Nabokovian *poshlost'*”), Zsuzsa Hetényi explains the concept of *poshlost'* through the most representative figure, M’sieur Pierre of *Invitation to a Beheading*, who connects (in line with the Gogolian definition of the word) the devilish and the petty, supplemented by the atrocities of a totalitarian dictatorship (411). Hetényi provides a list of those Nabokovian characters (from *Mary*, *Laughter in the Dark*, *King, Queen, Knave*, and “Cloud, Castle, Lake”), who fit into the category of *poshlost'* based on the above attributes (with some minor discrepancies amongst them). She writes that “the most essential formula refers to the timeless qualities of every dictatorship: the decaying, putrid and false figures; *poshlost'* might presage the imminence of the shadows of violence ... It is in the character of Pierre where the *poshlost'*, satatnic features and authorial power converge for the very first time” (140) [in the Hungarian original: “A leglényegesebb képlet azonban a diktatúra időtlen jellegzetességeire vonatkozik: a rothadó, posványos, kiürült, és hamis formák, a póslaszty előre is jelezheti az erőszak árnyainak közeledését.” – my translation]. On a side-note, it must added that Nabokov’s choice of blending Communism and Nazism in one word and associating with this portmanteau (“Communazi,” that is) the essential qualities of *poshlost'* is another apt example to call attention to the hybrid nature of languages and régimes, and I believe that *poshlost'* in itself also acts as a hybridized space, in which attributes of a conflicting nature converge: “the obviously trashing ... the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the false clever, the falsely attractive” (LL 314). I think that M’sier Pierre’s very name and his scattered remarks in French throughout the novel also signal his own construction as a hybrid, representing an intersection between intellectuality and tawdriness.

the precarious task of recontextualizing the novel by publishing *Lo's Diary* (1995), which attempts to rewrite *Lolita* through a feminist lens, by giving the lewd bobbysoxer the opportunity to rise from her subjugated state to male power and unveil her real identity silenced in Humbert's narrative. In "Two Copyright Cases from a Literary Perspective," the claim is made explicitly that

[i]f anything, she [Pia Pera] criticizes Nabokov's readers for being so easily fooled by Humbert, for craving the sweetness of his words even as the quiet facts of the case belie him. She excoriates Humbert Humbert as a rather sad figure, but more importantly, strips Lolita of any romanticism and unveils her spoiled nature. In brutal fashion, she problematizes readings of gender power dynamics with Lo's unsettling truculence, refusing to reduce Lo to subjugation. (Roh 123)

The importance of "Humbertish" as a unique blend of languages – incorporating the rarest lexical items of the English language – and the two worlds converging in the novel gravitate beyond the dynamics of language itself and call for the reader's extra-textual knowledge of one of the novel's most decisive characters. Concealed early on in the text is Annabel Lee, Edgar Allan Poe's all-too-famous girl-child (revoked only by the mention of Annabel Leigh, as Humbert's early flame, in Part One), whose tragic fate is recounted in a poem of the same title and can be mentioned in relation to *Lolita* as the single most important allusion governing the plot and somewhat justifying the protagonist's penchant for Dolores Haze decades later. It is in this respect that one must acknowledge the fact: not only does America in the fifties appear as a mere parody of Europe, as demonstrated earlier, but Lolita, who is to be taken as a reincarnation of Humbert's once beloved girl – Annabel Leigh, that is – stands comically antithetical to the literary values that Poe's output and his historical era represented for Nabokov (in fact, the author was known to be an avid reader of Poe as a child, which he confessed in one of his strong opinions). He continued to cherish a lifelong passion for Poe's literary output, whose "kingdom by the sea" is not merely, as Ellen Pifer suggests, a place for Humbert's romantic desires, where "love transcends mortal and moral law" ("The *Lolita* Phenomenon" 193), but also a transitional place where worlds, times, people, fates, literatures meet and peacefully coexist. In this way, Annabel synthesizes past and present, one world and another, two fictional spaces and times; and this synthesis illustrates best the process of hybridization looming large in the novel.

Humbert himself is also cognizant of the fact that his adolescent love with an “initial girl-child” (AL 9), whom he loved one summer on the French Riviera, but who died of typhus soon after their “unsuccessful first tryst” (AL 14) triggered his infatuation with Lolita in his more mature years. He confesses that “I am convinced ...that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel” (AL 13-14), and adds that “the ache [caused by Annabel’s death] remained with me, and that little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue haunted him ever since – until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (AL 15). Humbert’s own description of their burgeoning, yet eventually unconsummated, affair is rife with passion and nostalgia, but above all, naturalness and normalcy in the broadest sense of the word, because “[w]hen I was a child and she was a child, Annabel was no nymphet to me” (AL 17). It is indeed the tenderness and requited nature of the love affair of two sensitive young souls that stands in marked contrast with the often violent and unreciprocated relationship between a middle-aged pedophile and a soulless prepubescent girl – a relationship based on parasitism as opposed to of a healthy symbiosis. It appears more than plausible that Annabel Lee is evoked in the text only to validate the monstrosity and deviant sexual conduct of Humbert toward Lolita, eventually exonerating the protagonist from being publicly denounced for his pedophilia, or statutory rape, as it was termed in the fifties. In this sense, as Daniel Thomieres claims, Annabel is but a rhetorical device used by the narrator to exculpate himself (“Cherchez” 165). Humbert endeavors to retrieve, recreate, and relive his fondly cherished past on the French Riviera with the beloved girl, who has since become a perilous obsession of his mind. “Humbert’s love for Lolita herself also reflects the theme of the irretrievable past. ... What he does not know, of course, what he finds out too late, is that the attempt to repeat the past only shows how impossible it is to retrieve it” (Boyd, AY 238), as several examples – Chorb’s case in particular – have been used to bolster this argument.

In light of the commonly held interpretation that the relationship between Lolita and Annabel is merely an effort to recapture the beauties of the past, one can boldly claim that Lolita acts as the repetition, or rather, a double of Humbert’s childhood love. In spite of Nabokov’s “consistent emphasis on the individual nature of reality” (Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* 97) and avowed aversion to the notion of duality, the Double Theme appears to be a key organizing principle in his *oeuvre*, and *Lolita* is an impressive example of monumental doublings, which has been subjected to the

most thorough treatment in one long chapter of my MA thesis.¹¹⁴ As one observes the kinship between Lolita and Annabel, it is important to note that Nabokov's choice of names was not left to chance either. First, Nabokov, the despot-like author, was inclined to recreate Annabel Lee out of Poe's poem and, through the homophonic transformation of names, Annabel Leigh was qualified to continue her earthly existence at another time and in another body. Her untimely and tragic death that Humbert bemoans in the first few chapters of the novel no longer seems irreversible as Lolita makes her debut in Chapter Ten, Part One. What he does not realize is that Humbert can never consummate his love with Lolita just as he was unable to possess Annabel. If one agrees with Thomieres and insists that Annabel is more the "result of a series of hypallages than a real human being with a life of her own" ("Cherchez" 169), one should also concur with Alfred Appel's ingenious idea that the middle syllable of Lolita (*Lo-lee-ta*) alludes to Poe's Annabel Lee (328-329). She was also a poet's private creation, and according to Nabokov, was forbidden to die as much as death is forbidden for Annabel Leigh. Humbert emphasizes in the novel that "[p]oets never kill" (*AL* 88), so the novel's omnipotent author immortalizes Poe's heroine through reincarnation (she continues her existence in Annabel Leigh, while the latter lives on in Lolita). Secondly, one should mark the words of Karl Proffer, who offers an even more stimulating interpretation of the names. In his opinion, Lolita is Annabel's exact double or mirror image if we juxtapose the two names and find that the word-initial and the word-final letters in both names reflect each other. Hence **A**[nnabe]**L** is mirrored as **L**[olit]**A** (*Keys* 34), providing something of a textual evidence for the quaint case of doubling of roles and names at the same time. Even Humbert struggles to come to terms with Lolita's genuine identity: he dreams of "Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta" (*AL* 167) near the end of the novel. Thomieres believes that "Lolita is [...] the object of desire, and young women called Dolores and Leigh (if she ever existed) have to provide their bodies and deny their minds so as to incarnate that fantasy for Humbert Humbert" ("Cherchez" 167).

Commentators have tendentiously interpreted the Annabel-Lolita relationship in terms of the Romantic theme of the double, but often failed to notice what Thomieres brings to the foreground of his analysis. He attacks Humbert on moral and ethical

¹¹⁴ Sárdi, Rudolf, "The Questions of Identity in Vladimir Nabokov's Works", ELTE University, MA thesis, 2006.

grounds, emphasizing that his childhood with Annabel Leigh cannot stand as a justification for her future kinship with Lolita. Humbert's most essential psychological features include lust, authority, and narcissism, all of which reside deep inside him even after his unconsummated love affair with Annabel ends and spreads over to Lolita. All the qualities that Humbert exhibits at a tender age are thus *transported into his world as an adult*, exposing that nothing has made Humbert to mend his ways: "if we want to speak of repetition, we have to say that Humbert repeats Humbert" ("Cherchez" 166), and this is what lies behind Nabokov's nasty "double rumble" (SO 26). Whilst Humbert's recollections of Annabel are vague in terms of her bodily traits, he highlights many of those common features which came to unite their souls:

Long after her death I felt her thoughts floating through mine. Long before we met we had had the same dreams. We compared notes. We found strange affinities. The same June of the same year (1919) a stray canary had fluttered into her house and mine, in two widely separated countries.

It is at this point that I would like to pick up the central thread of this chapter from the point of view of uniting two worlds and creating a hybrid zone in *Lolita*. Critics, examining the metaphysical, moral, and ethical depths of the novel, usually take little notice of the fact that in one sense Humbert perceives America as the repetition of Europe, the two worlds merging into one as he rediscovers his Riviera love (Annabel Leigh) in Lolita, whom he also encounters in June, as the above passage lucidly demonstrates. However, despite the many apparent similarities between Annabel and Lolita, the protagonist seems to function as a more glaring example of a double to Annabel than to his lewd nymphet. Lolita simply cannot repeat Annabel. First, Lolita is a nymphet, while Annabel could never correspond to this definition (they were the same age, Humbert mentions, just as Dante and Beatrice, and their relationship was absolutely normal under these circumstances). Second, Humbert fell "madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love" with Annabel, but he only expresses the same feelings for Lolita when she is no longer a "Lolita" and has already been lost to him. Third, he could never engage in a sexual intercourse with Annabel, while Lolita was used only to gratify his carnal pleasures. Annabel and Lolita are only related as far as Humbert's self-absorption is concerned. Humbert's narcissism prevails

throughout the novel. He takes pride in his mental powers, grandiosity, and manliness by often referring to himself in the third person as “Humbert the Terrible” (AL 29), “Humbert le Bel”¹¹⁵ (AL 41), “Herr Humbert” (AL 56), “Well-read Humbert” (AL 70), “handsome Humbert Humbert” (AL 72), and “crafty Humbert” (AL 100). “I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling” (AL 13), says Humbert in cool indifference as if Annabel’s own desires should be completely ignored – it is his well-worded apathy that is also preserved in the case of Lolita, though time (*now* and *then*) and distance (*here* and *there*) could have changed him, yet all of this was in vain. It is the protagonist’s narcissistic attitude that makes Thomieres regard *Lolita* as a novel of Humbert’s love of power. He concludes his essay by explaining that Humbert “needs to control images in order to satisfy his narcissism and in this respect he makes of Annabel ... a reflection of himself” (“Cherchez” 171).

Edgar A. Poe’s omnipresence in the text of *Lolita* – in addition to the oft-cited Annabel Lee/Lolita parallel – is more often than not restricted to allusions and word plays, all of which have been expertly catalogued in the novel’s annotated version, yet there is much more to *Lolita* than a barrage of decodable references. Dale E. Peterson also notes that Nabokov’s “conception of genuine artistry’s appreciation of its own literariness derives in large measure from Poe’s own theoretical understanding of the poetic process” (463). The fact that Humbert, in the opening passage, where Poe’s stature is clearly visible, considers Lolita to be his spectral love, “the phantasmic facsimile of a lost Riviera figure of desire” (464). It is the associations with the girl’s spectral figure and the many components of the novel bordering on the numinous that remind those who are versed in Poe’s works that “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” (1839) might have left an eerie trace on *Lolita*. Nabokov’s novel contains many verbal shades and visible shadows; however, the most striking example of the supernatural is the nymphet whose origins are found in Greek mythology. Entrusted with the guarding of springs, the mythological nymphs possess fearsome supernatural powers, and are either dreaded or respected due to the abilities to bring up heroes and also to steal children at the same time. It is this dual nature of the nymphets – angelic and demonic – that also justifies the claim that *Lolita* can be read, to some measure, as a story of the supernatural (though “The

¹¹⁵ Humbert the Beautiful (French).

Vane Sisters” and *Transparent Things* are textbook examples of this important thematic principle). Poe’s posthumous dialogue presents a female and a male protagonist, who are now celestial beings and have experienced the dissolution of earthly existences. Eiros recounts the apocalyptic scene to Charmion of how the Earth was consumed in a fiery ball. However, at the very heart of the story lies a conversation that reveals that “the survival of the soul is not dependent upon moral, pious, or good behavior, while alive on Earth. Instead, the survival of the soul means the survival of the mind capable of pure thought” (Sova 51). The conversation already takes place in the otherworld, and Eiros is sharing minute details about the apocalypse that occurred as the result of a comet colliding with Earth. His description of the last moment of the planet is expatiated in the exhaustive closing response of the male protagonist through conjectures related to astronomy, human sciences, philosophy, and chemistry. Sova also writes that it is the combination of all these studies that led the inhabitants of the Earth “into a false security” (51).

Poe’s short story also presents an imaginable scenario of the world vs. otherworld dichotomy, but the transfer to a new locus of post-mortal existence is justified through scientific means, lengthily described by Eiros. The “false security” into which humankind is drifted can be easily compared with the elusiveness and the unknowability of Nabokov’s otherworld, whose very nature is just as intricate to explain as it is for Eiros to describe the prophetic vision that “ended it all.” Alternatively, the story can also be read in relation to *Lolita*: the metaphysical otherworld of one’s post-mortem existence is the only place where the souls can re-encounter one another, as the capturing of Lolita appears to be a mission impossible for Humbert. Something numinous, gravitating toward the otherworld, is happening in the novel. Humbert is anticipating in a prophetic fashion that something would come about which facilitates the encounter with his beloved girl-child. He curtly states: “I long for some terrific disaster. Earthquake. Spectacular explosion” (AL 53). The calamity he so zealously looks forward to experiencing is similar to the total destruction of Earth happening in Poe’s short story, because only the otherworld is able to provide us with the knowledge and the intuitions that ordinary existence cannot embrace. In relation to the short story, presenting the colloquy between Eiros and Charmion, Peterson writes that “Poe’s cosmological fantasy of the “angelic imagination” reconceiving an exterminated earthly garden is not far removed from the fantastic perceptions of Nabokov’s poetic sleep-walkers who insist upon

superimposing one world on another” (“Nabokov and Poe” 470) as is the case of Hugh Person in *Transparent Things*.

Other works of Poe also shed light on his faith in the supernatural and the spiritual, with which Nabokov may have been familiar, as he was an avid reader of Poe at a tender age. “Marginalia” (1846) and “Eureka: Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe” (1848) are writings which present Poe’s most arcane views of the universe, the physical, the metaphysical, and the mathematical. While “Eureka” is seldom considered as an important work of art in Poe’s *oeuvre* – mainly because of its allegedly pseudo-scientific nature – it happens to be the conception of ideas about how truth can eventually be discovered by conscious deliberate inference (termed as “ratiocination,” which refers to Poe’s widely used method of reasoning in his fictional works).¹¹⁶ In “Eureka”, he implies that the soul continues to exist even after death (excellently illustrated in his short story “Ligeia”), which delicately parallels his views with those of Nabokov, though was known to have disparaged transcendentalism as a movement. However, what remains an important connecting link between Nabokov and Poe – other than assumptions about the world beyond our own – is the masterful techniques of which both authors make copious use in their detective stories (*Lolita* being a prime example in Nabokov, following the “sleuth” traditions found in Poe as well as Arthur Conan Doyle). Added to these attributes, Poe is often seen as a forebear for the Russian author in seeing “the literary possibilities in mesmeric trance” so as to investigate the “mysteries lying within the unconscious soul to reveal irrational states of mind, madness, love, cruelty, and to search for clues about the possibilities of the afterlife” (Pellérdi 134).

In spite of the metaphysical dimensions that the novel encapsulates and is more often than not dealt with in important critical essays, one should not ignore the various forms of dichotomies presenting themselves throughout *Lolita*.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ In his tales of “ratiocination” (that is, suspense and mystery stories), Poe always arrives at a conclusion first and only then he begins to construct events and circumstances in order to buttress the conclusion already determined.

¹¹⁷ It is worthy of mention that – in addition to a coterie of largely “metaphysical” scholars mentioned at the outset of this chapter – the question of transcendent communication in *Lolita* has been profoundly treated. Alexandrov (1991) is among the first to mention that “Nabokovian characters tend not to disappear after death” (quoted in Rutledge 94) but either assume a different shape (see Annabel as a medium to breathe life into *Lolita*) or exert their influence in an occult manner on the living, as Charlotte does. David S. Rutledge claims that water (in the form of raindrops, poodles, lakes, etc.) plays an otherworldly role in several Nabokovian novels, giving birth to ghosts and spectral figures watching over the rest of the “worldly” characters (see “The Otherworldly Role of Water,” Chapter 7, 90-97).

Contrastive as the collision of the two worlds – that of Europe and America, of Humbert’s refinements and Lolita’s teenage mindset – might appear, the geographical settings of *Lolita* are by no means accidental: the Old World of Humbert’s past is confronted with the New World of the novel’s “textual presence” (something of a misnomer as the so-called “present events” are also narrated retrospectively), and at the very same time, the story begins in a *New England* town, namely, the repetition and consequently the continuation and extension of (Old) England, which metonymically emblemizes the whole of Europe. It is for this reason that Humbert and Lolita can be said to create a hybrid zone that incorporates elements of a heterogeneous nature, while the “horrible hybridization” of the novel should also be seen as a repetition, a reverberation – a continuum of space and time, that is – of two distinctly dissimilar *loci*, which converge and despite their dissimilarities engender one single space.

It is this very fluidity of the novel that produces a hybrid space for the quintessential migrant, as Humbert, who begins to feel shamelessly at ease in what he considers to be a rapidly changing America with its putative worthlessness and dearth of traditions. Nevertheless, he discovers, as they tour around the States, covered with endless highways, rundown motels, pink bubble gums, flashy posters, billboards and a barrage of other elements of *poshlost*’, that the independent worlds of Lolita and Humbert can be synthesized through the power of imagination and the literature that their imaginations beget. Trousdale implies that “[t]he European romantic version of America in his self-described ‘Flaubertian intonation’ proves no more accurate than the advertisements of the Tour Book” (43). In acknowledgement of the idea concerning the power of imagination, Humbert pronounces:

And do not pity C.Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. *And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.* (AL 309; emphasis added)

Literary immortality is indeed one commanding force that glues together the two worlds the novel so skillfully synthesizes – immortality that also synthesizes Humbert and Lolita despite their unbridgeable intellectual gap and varying scopes and levels of interest. Only after Lolita elopes with Quilty does the protagonist begin

to explore a more placid, more idyllic, almost paradisiacal feature of America, which is based on its own value systems instead of being dependent on the Europeanized America picture that is doomed to fiasco on account of the impracticability of European ideals on a fertile soil awaiting discovery. In the beginning, America constituted a fundamental challenge for Humbert, because he was internally compelled to reinvent a country that had already been in existence. He attempted to make these two worlds coalesce, which would then, in accordance with Humbert's corrupted vision of America and mostly its most freakish creature, Lolita, allow the protagonist to call into being spaces, such as "nymphetland" (AL 92) and "umber and black Humberland" (AL 166), whose settings and elements spring from the his imagination. Europe's conquest of America – and with them, all the other imaginary lands in the previous sentence – is simply inversed when it emerges that experienced Humbert is absurdly seduced by inexperienced Lolita. This very idea was interpreted by József Goretity, who thought of this series of events as the paraphrasing of the Original Sin, which also allows for the inversion of the tempter and the tempted. However, Quilty's well-deserved death is preceded by an even more important episode of the novel, which many non-ideal Nabokovian readers might fatuously skip: when Humbert receives a letter from Lolita, in which she entreats her father-surrogate to provide her financial backing, he immediately calls on married Lolita, and discourses with her in a manner that is far from being as solipsistic as earlier. "Lolita is no longer," as Trousdale says, "for Humbert, a creature of the island of the nymphets but an inhabitant of a larger, more complex natural world" (43). Humbert's sin of having been a pedophile, at this juncture, is also greatly mitigated, as the scene shows that the protagonist, corrupt and lewd as he seems throughout the novel, has developed mature adult love toward a bespectacled, parturient Lolita, beseeching him for money. Trousdale is right in claiming that "Lo's body itself has become the landscape of a wild America, subject both to uncontrolled growth and to the decay to which such growth leads" (44). Yet America at its most worthless, seemingly presaging the downfall of the hero, turns out to be a country that establishes a liminal space, where negatives can be turned into positives, and vice versa: "Humbert slowly recalls her moments of unguarded inwardness and grace, her untutored sensitivity and depth – as well as his own tyrannical authority and possessiveness" (Haegert 791).

To conclude my work by discussing *Lolita* was also a conscious choice to select a novel that transcends classification of modern or postmodern, real or imaginary, objective truths and subjective theories, constructed realities and pre-existing ones, and many other themes converging in Nabokov's mature novel. *Lolita*'s accessibility to a larger audience – as opposed to *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, as stated at the outset of this chapter – makes it an apt and always topical choice to make arguments not only to reiterate points that have been said in the foregoing chapters, but more so to provide a remarkable insight into a novel that is built around the central concept of fashioning one world and another through the fluid identities which have shaped it.

CHAPTER 7

Morality, Philo-Semitism, and the Otherworld in

Vladimir Nabokov's Life and Art

It has been clearly demonstrated in the foregoing chapters that Nabokov's reputation as a novelist rests on his unique ability to create fictional worlds, whose narrative innovations and stylistic eccentricities serve to challenge the deep-seated beliefs of "old-fashioned readers" bent on "follow[ing] the destinies of the 'real' people beyond a 'true' story" (AL 4). On account of his verbal pyrotechnics and convolutions of narrative, Nabokov was regarded preeminently as a novelist whose works had been dominated more by their fictional shape than their content or ideas, or an underlying message of, for example, his lack of sympathy with the suffering of human beings or the oppression of people. Early critics of Nabokov long upheld the idea, now appearing somewhat erroneous, that the author's stylistic accomplishments, his mastery of language and techniques, in English and Russian alike, are but easily discernible components of *a solipsistic fictional universe devoid of moral dimensions*. Odd as it may appear for the proponents of Nabokov's non-*engagé* stance in terms of moral issues, a good deal of his works embrace a worldview that belies this fallacy. The reason for this is that one of the moral commitments Nabokov would repeatedly enunciate in full candor was his attitude (or rather, empathy) toward those living under "the grotesque shadow of a police state" (SO 10) and an acute awareness of the plight of all the persecuted minority groups (ethnic, religious, and otherwise). Of especial importance of these were the Jews, many of whom – but certainly not all – shared a common lot throughout the twentieth century, and Nabokov felt an urge to intermittently slip in Jewish characters into his short stories and novels as well as inserted opinions formulated in the *récit* related to anti-Semitism.¹¹⁸ As Nabokov's work has, over the past three

¹¹⁸ Nabokov's oft-mentioned opinions on anti-Semitism have called attention to a main conceptual problem, whose discussion is left to narratologists. The question is whether opinions formulated in the *récit* are directly attributable to the implied author in general and or to Nabokov's in particular. This has been a very complex issue, even in the case of less "complicated" writers than Nabokov. With this I am of course not suggesting that he was *not* against anti-Semitism or any other form of religious or ethnic bigotry, but I am well aware that his personal opinions, on *any* subject whatsoever, are not easily deducible from his novels and often have to be taken with a pinch of salt (for example, Nabokov stated "I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions" [SO 16], which is defined by his highly moral art, as expatiated at length, only recently, in Leland De La Durantaye's book, entitled *Style is Matter: the Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*.

decades, invited a bounty of plausible interpretation, one is likely to find only an exiguous number of questions which have not been subjected to critical assessment so far. In line with my argumentation of the Jewish theme in the foregoing subchapter (a propos of *Pnin*), I continue to study the presence of Jews both in the author's private life and its possible bearing on his fiction. My analysis of the Jewish theme will be preceded by a slightly drawn out, yet (hopefully) all the more utile, subchapter on the realm of esthetics, morality, and metaphysics, which are intimately linked with Nabokov's employment of Jewish characters, their relationship with art, and, most importantly, their ability to enter a transcendental state of heightened consciousness. By considering the recent and extensive biography-based research on the subject by Shalom Goldman, I will also devote a section to the possible impact of Jews in Nabokov's own life, which, in more ways than one, must have inspired him to focus on Jewish-related questions in his fiction. Nevertheless, I will argue that Nabokov's inclusion of the theme is not contingent on the author's life course as it were, but the Jewish characters of his fiction enjoy a privileged position by their (being perceived as) having access to another dimension, where they can take refuge during moments of spiritual revelation.

Nabokov's continued protestations that he is not to be identified as a moralist run counter to the view that he was in fact intensely preoccupied with questions of moral dimensions, particularly, as mentioned earlier, with the fate of the Jews. It is today unanimously acknowledged that one of the constants prevailing in Nabokov's fiction is in connection with his very faith in the metaphysical, or more specifically, "the mystery of the relationship of matter and spirit and of life before birth and after death" (Toker 238). I believe, as stated earlier, that Nabokov's preoccupation with the Jewish question in his works is only *in part* attributable to biographical circumstances, because, more significantly, it is rather the author's conviction in the otherworld that impelled him to express his concern toward the fates of Jews. Also, fundamental to my investigation of the subject will the biblical figure of the wandering Jew, who, very much like people living in exile – foremost of them is Nabokov and the Russian émigrés in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe –, represents the dire experience of hovering between cultures, dominated by ideas of dislocation, language, and identity.

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Impulses and Biographical Circumstances

In her memoir and bestselling novel, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nasifi (2004) recounts the story of seven of her most dedicated female students, who gather, under the supervision of their professor, to read forbidden Western classics in the Islamic State of Iran over a period of two years. One of these novels is *Lolita*. In Chapter 10 Nasifi writes:

I want to emphasize once more that *we* were *not* Lolita, the Ayatollah was *not* Humbert and this republic was *not* what Humbert called his principedom by the sea. *Lolita* was *not* a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives. (35; emphases in the original)

So do Nabokov's works condemn anti-Semitism "as a persistent aspect of totalitarianism" (Goldman 15). His motivation to incorporate Jewish characters in his fiction was not a religious one. He believed that tyranny and the subsequent suffering of any group of people violate basic human rights, and he recurrently expressed his "indifference to organized mysticism, to religion, to the church – any church" (*SO* 39). To make a stand against the oppression of the weak was for him the strongest moral obligation that no religious philosophy could validate entirely. What can safely be taken for authorial views (those of the implied author and the real author as well) on totalitarianism, racial prejudice, and anti-Semitism abound in Nabokov's works from his short stories to his later American fiction.¹¹⁹ Nabokov's detestation of the

¹¹⁹ Scholars coping with the problems of the Jewish theme in Nabokov's works seemed somewhat hesitant to make their voices heard about the narratological uncertainties that the question of the

Stalinist and the Hitlerite régimes is traceable everywhere, although none of his dystopian novels can be read as straightforward political or social manifestos (*Bend Sinister*, being the most political of all, might come close to being an exception). The novel that gives the most pellucid account of Nabokov's abhorrence of racial discrimination and the maltreatment of the oppressed is *Pale Fire*.¹²⁰ In the annotation to *Line 470* "Pale Fire" the poem, Shade imparts to Kinbote his attitude toward prejudice:

Shade said that more than anything on earth he loathed Vulgarly and Brutality, and that one found these two ideally united in racial prejudice. He said that, as a man of letters, he could not help preferring 'is a Jew' to 'is Jewish' and 'is a Negro' to 'is colored'; but immediately added that this way of alluding to two kinds of bias in one breath was a good example of careless, or demagogic, or lumping ... since it erased the distinction between two historical hells: diabolical persecution and the barbarous traditions of slavery. (155)

Similarly to his creator, the eponymous hero of *Pnin* contemplates on giving "some splendid new courses which [he has] planned long ago. On Tyranny. On the Boot. On Nicholas the First. On all the precursors of modern atrocity" (*Pnin* 141). In point of fact, Nabokov delivered a series of lectures on European literature when he was teaching at Cornell University between 1948 and 1958; a scanty list of works for which the author had high regard included the ones where the theme of intimidation, fear, and oppression figure dominantly. Although Nabokov's catalogue note to the

implied author evokes. From the perspective of the implied author – the imagined Nabokov, standing at a remove from the narrative voice – all forms of oppression and prejudices (racial and otherwise) are condemnable, but one should be mindful not to mistake not to ascribe a fictional character's opinions to those of the flesh-and-blood author. Also, the question of pedophilia and the penchant Humbert – who is often taken as the author's alter ego based on a set of qualities – expresses for underage girls does not necessarily imply that the real Nabokov was ever engaged in deviant sexual behaviors. Nabokov, the implied author, thus must be distinguished from the real Nabokov, who, as a writer, also created other works implying different kinds of persona behind them.

¹²⁰ In a narratological context, authorial reflection is a seriously contested issue. Even though the topic of this dissertation is by no means a narratological one, the "implied author," a term coined by Wayne C. Booth (1961), in relation to Nabokov cannot go unexamined here. *Pale Fire*, possibly Nabokov's most complicated novel when it comes to the question of "who speaks now," cannot be regarded as straightforward evidence of what Nabokov *really* thought of anything. Even if Shade is perhaps the most likeable character in it, and even if a public utterance can be found here made by Nabokov in his own name that most clearly echo Shade's (or any other character's or the narrator's) pronouncement made here or elsewhere in the novel. I am well aware that the passage quoted above suggests at least three types of abhorrence: (1) that of racism in any of its forms, (2) that of indiscriminate and imprecise analogies and (3) that of linguistic hypocrisy. The novel itself seems to present a very complex issue, because one cannot be quite sure of (1) who is speaking and (2) what he is exactly saying. While probably all these problems cannot be resolved in this short chapter, I wish to imply in this footnote that I am aware of the difficulties it raises.

lecture-course material read that “special attention will be paid to individual genius and questions of structure” (*LL* vii), other criteria might also have been taken into consideration as he selected the works for analysis. It cannot be coincidental that, for instance, Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way* was compulsory on his syllabus, because questions of “Jewishness, anti-Semitism and aristocratic snobbery” (*Ada Online* web) are an overriding theme in the novel. In like manner, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, also incorporated into the lectures, can also be read as a case study of Leopold Bloom’s alienation, displacement, longing, and an experience of loss – sentiments generally associated with being Jewish, hence being an outcast. It should marginally be mentioned that these two novels are also widely used as prime examples of modernist experimentation, something that should not be dissociated from Nabokov. I believe that both considerations – the ethical and the esthetic, that is – must have played some part in Nabokov’s choice of these specific works for classroom discussion. Instead of expanding a catalogue of random indications to racial discrimination, I will provide further elucidation on the theme by proceeding to the possible historical and personal reasons in Nabokov’s life. His ruminations on Jewish questions spring from the author’s family history and are related to a coterie of friends and associates whose impact on Nabokov – however vehemently he would protest against *any* influence on his work – cannot be called into doubt.

Nabokov was first exposed to anti-Semitism as a child. In Chapter 9 of *Speak, Memory*, he writes exhaustively about his father’s involvement in the liberal politics of pre-revolutionary Russia. V. D. Nabokov, jurist, publicist, and liberal politician, son of Dmitri Nabokov (1826-1904), Minister of Justice under Tsar Alexander II, was a prominent member of the Constitutional-Democratic Party and an editor of *Rul’* (The Rudder), the Russian émigré newspaper, which, among other things, promoted the establishment of a pro-Western democratic government in Russia. In 1881 Tsar Alexander II died, and anti-Semitic legislation was introduced in Russia (Goldman 10). V.D. Nabokov “plunged into antidespotic politics” after he had been deprived of his court title of Junior Gentleman of the Chamber (*SM* 136) as a result of his publication of a provocative article on the Pogrom of Kishinev, an anti-Jewish riot, which took place in 1903 and left forty-five Jews dead and hundreds injured. “This unrhetorical, coolly analytical article [“The Bloodbath of Kishinev”], considered one of the most dazzling productions of Russian public debate under censorship, set the whole capital buzzing” (Boyd, *RY* 55). Nabokov later remembers

with pronounced lucidity how “[t]he reactionary press never ceased to attack my father’s party, and I had got quite used to the more or less vulgar cartoons which appeared from time to time – my father and Milyukov handing over Saint Russia on a plate to World Jewry and that sort of thing” (*SM* 147). In 1913, V.D. Nabokov reported on the trial of Mendel Beilis, a Ukrainian Jew, who had been accused of kidnapping and murdering a child. Beilis was placed on trial “only because the notorious minister of justice Shcheglovitov was determined to inflame anti-Semitic feeling by reviving the old bogey of Jewish ritual murder” (Boyd, *RY* 104). Nabokov Senior’s denunciation of the pogrom, his powerful responses to anti-Semitism, and his championing of liberal causes in the country’s politics exerted a lasting influence on Nabokov Junior throughout his life and literary career. It is important to note at this point that V. D. Nabokov’s opposition to anti-Semitism was not without precedent as regards his lineage: Dmitri Nabokov, the writer’s grandfather, was an opponent of the anti-Semitic Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Alexander III’s “influential and ultraconservative adviser” (Boyd, *RY* 21), who sought to restrict the rights of Jews and persecute religious nonconformists.

In addition to the liberal traits and philo-Semitic attitude young Vladimir came to inherit from his father, the presence of Jews in his proximity was an almost daily phenomenon. The most prominent of them was Filipp Zelensky (the “Lensky” of *Speak, Memory*), one of Nabokov’s tutors, who was of Jewish extraction and whom the boys defended (Vladimir and his brother, Sergei) from the “anti-Semitic scorn of reactionary aunts” (Boyd, *RY* 80). Shroyer notes that Zelensky was “a convert to Lutheranism like many Russian Jews trying to surpass anti-Semitic quotas” (Shroyer 74). Zelensky was not the only one of Jewish descent in young Vladimir’s life. In his seminal essay on the philo-Semitic aspects of Nabokov’s life, Goldman enumerates a group of Jewish intimates, whom he calls “Nabokov’s minyan,”¹²¹ by borrowing the title of the writer’s first English-language collection of short stories, *Nabokov’s Dozen*, published in 1958, which, incidentally, is a play on the term “a baker’s dozen” denoting number thirteen. The “minyan” included the writer’s closest friends and schoolmates, Samuil Rosov and Savely Grinberg, at Tenishev School, which, at that time, was widely recognized as “[e]mpathically liberal, democratic, and

¹²¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines “minyan” as “[a] minimum of ten Jews or, among the Orthodox, Jewish men required for a communal religious service.”

nondiscriminatory in terms of rank, race, and creed” (Boyd, *RY* 86). Nabokov and Rosov often had discussions on “Chekhov and poetry and Sionism [*sic*]” (Boyd, *RY* 101). Nabokov’s later interest in the State of Israel was not merely a consequence of his philo-Semitic attitude: he had planned to pay a visit to the Holy Land to be reunited with Rosov, who had previously chosen Haifa as his home, and, as a keen lepidopterist, wished to expand his collection of butterflies (Goldman 19). Israeli ambassador Arie Levavi extended his invitation to the author in 1970, but an elderly Nabokov, afflicted by illness, working on a novella (*Transparent Things*) at the time, and witnessing the gargantuan fiasco of the Broadway adaptation of *Lolita* felt disinclined to set out. The long-awaited trip thus only remained a wish never to be fulfilled: Nabokov died in 1977 without ever visiting the Holy Land (Boyd, *AY* 583). It seems as though Nabokov had (involuntarily) presaged with the gift of a clairvoyant the impracticability of this sojourn in his short story, “The Aurelian” (1930), whose protagonist, Pilgram, the owner of a small butterfly shop, dies just the night before he could undertake the trip he had been planning all his life to collect Lepidoptera in a far-away land. Quaintly named Pilgram – a transparent name indeed to refer to a character who dreams of traveling to exotic places, or rather, undertaking a pilgrimage – never succeeds in visiting these places, similarly to Nabokov, whose “lepping” trip to Israel, as the author would refer to it, remained only a pipedream regrettably. For the purposes of this discussion, I will cite an excerpt that calls attention to certain analogies between Nabokov-the-author and his writing.¹²²

During the years of his European exile Nabokov could avail himself of the opportunity to meet and collaborate with Russian-Jewish expatriates, who played an active role in the culturally flourishing milieu of Western Europe in the early 1920s. Most of them were writing for Russian-language newspapers and journals, and “by 1923 Berlin outshone Petrograd and Moscow as the center of Russian book publishing” (Schiff 19). Iosif Gessen, Sasha Cherny, and Yuly Aikhenval’d stood out of a cohort of Russian-Jewish intellectuals who enthusiastically supported Nabokov in his literary aspirations. Working under the auspices of his Jewish patrons – many of whom had converted to Christianity at an earlier stage – is recognized as a

¹²² The importance of butterflies, their manifestations and possible meanings in varying contexts, in Nabokov’s works is discussed in almost every chapter of this dissertation. I must remark here, just to be emphatic on the point, that for Nabokov, as Bethea claims in his discussion on the author’s style, “to catch butterflies ... is to ‘catch’ a momentary glimpse into existence. ... Unlike the ants, which are not distinguishable as to their roles in their society, the *singular* butterfly is, in the father’s words, ‘calm and invulnerable’ (699).

prominent landmark in the author's treatment of the Jewish theme, but it was, much more so than his fellow-littérateurs, a Jewish muse who gave the finishing touches to Nabokov's portrait of a young man becoming an artist. His marriage to Véra Slonim in 1925 is often seen as an event that began to generate an outpouring of philo-Semitic sentiments in the writer. Nonetheless, one must also remember that their encounter, central to the Jewish theme as it is, only "*completed* the cycle of his separation from organized Christianity" (Shrayer 75) but never served as a springboard to his "opposition to anti-Semitism" (Shrayer 76). Goldman was right in modifying the latter view because Nabokov had been, by the time they met, already preoccupied with fate of the Jews and courted a number of Jewish girls. Although opinions are often at odds when it comes to discussing the presence of a Jewish wife in Nabokov's life and its possible bearing on his writing, it cannot be rejected out of hand that the impact of Véra's origin was beneficial for the development of the writer's creative faculty. Some of his contemporaries claimed that, as a result of his marriage, he became an "un-Russian" author and was "completely *Jewified*" (Shrayer 75; emphasis in the original). Nabokov was mindful of social and racial prejudice since his childhood, and his increased awareness of anti-Semitism was further heightened following the marriage both in his works and his private life. In the annotations to *Lolita*, for example, Alfred Appel, Jr. chronicles a famous incident when Nabokov, accompanied by Dmitri and a friend of his, entered a New England inn and became enraged when opening the menu, whose proviso read "Gentiles Only," denoting that Jewish patrons are not welcome.

He called over the waitress and asked her what the management would do if there appeared at the door that very moment a bearded and berobed man, leading a mule bearing his pregnant wife, all of them dusty and tired from a long journey. "What ... what are you talking about?" the waitress stammered. "I am talking about Jesus Christ!" exclaimed Nabokov, as he pointed to the phrase in question, rose from the table, and led his party from the restaurant. (AL 436)

The Otherworld and the Wandering Jew

Exasperated by the atrocities imposed on the oppressed, Nabokov went out of his way, much more so than Véra did, to combat racial discrimination and commiserate over the fate of those whose image evokes sentiments generally associated with

displacement and alienation. “[Flashman] Irving, for whom I am sorry,” says Humbert (who is repeatedly mistaken for a Jew in *Lolita*), because Irving is the only Jewish pupil – hence ostracized and pitiable – in the nymphet’s class, which is otherwise predominantly composed of Gentiles (*AL* 53, 363). In addition to the biographical circumstances discussed above, one should not fail to take into account Nabokov’s faith in a metaphysical otherworld and its interrelatedness with Jewish questions. When Véra Nabokova first indicated the existence of other worlds in Nabokov’s writing, she referred to a poem that had appeared in the novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974). Here, as has been pointed out earlier, Nabokov calls the work a “philosophical love poem” (“Fame,” 1942) and suggests “the hereafter” as a near-translation of the Russian term, *potustoronnost’*. It was for him a secret (“something else,” as one of the lines in the poem reads) that he refused to share with his readers; nevertheless, the oft-recurring scholarly view, that Nabokov’s “secretiveness” is but a ingenious ruse to call attention, in a lightheartedly serious way, to the unique nature of his *oeuvre*, should *not at all* be straightforwardly rebuffed. Nabokov’s strongly formulated public utterances convey an air of mystification and ambiguity that one might consider hard to accept at face value, especially if one recalls that the author had “prefabricated” most of his answers for television interviews, read them out (stealthily or conspicuously) and later, prior to the publication of *Strong Opinions*, even did a reworking on them as regards their style and content. It is this lack of naturalness and the pre-written fashion of even the most straightforward answers, which he could have given on the spur of the moment during a television interview broadcasted live, that should raise more than a healthy amount of skepticism in otherwise fine scholarly undertakings with a pure focus on the metaphysical otherworld.

It has been already said that Nabokov remained indifferent to institutionalized religion throughout his life. “What are Jews?” asks an inquisitive Lucette in *Ada*. “‘Dissident Christians,’ answer[s] Marina” (*Ada* 75), implying (in the wrong order) that Judaism and Christianity are best conceived as an uninterrupted succession of religious beliefs. The assumption that Nabokov was strongly inclined to adopt Judaic notions of post-mortem survival in his fiction and considering them as an essential *raison d’être* of his otherworldly views seems to be overstated at times. Of course, as regards the Judaic belief in the hereafter Shroyer is right in a sense, because in modern times “the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead has ... been largely

replaced in both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism by the belief in the *immortality of the soul*" (Cohn-Sherbok 458; emphasis added). In the broadest sense, traditional Judaism rejects the view that death is the end of human existence (as opposed to the Christian belief in heaven and hell). Judaism is, as most sources mention, more concerned about earthly existence (that is, the "here" and "now") instead of the afterlife (that is, the "there" and "then"). Since Judaism is said to have no doctrines related to the afterlife, Nabokov's otherworldly views also seem to leave room for speculation of what exactly lies beyond the great divide.¹²³ In light of this, characters partaking of otherworldly experiences in Nabokov's fiction never submerge into the realm of the "beyond" through death. Dying provides no clearly defined avenue to the land of the deceased, but "[i]t has them shift to some other plane or mode of existence, from which they are able to observe and gently bear on the fates of the living" (Proffer 59). It would thus be more fruitful to speculate that Nabokov's notion of the otherworld was the consequence of reasons *partly* biographical and *partly* philosophical, and, perhaps in some measure, was induced by his fascination with Judaic thought. In a recent article, published in *NOJ (Nabokov Online Journal)*, Shrayder examines some textual evidence for "Nabokov's Jewish concerns and Judaic explorations," suggesting that "some indications of Nabokov's Jewish linguo-ethno-historical interests and of his metaphysical Judaic awareness may already be located in the stories of the early 1920s" (web). He makes the claim that "Nabokov's Judaic interests had either predated his marriage to a Jewish woman or were ignited by their meeting [in 1923] and rapprochement" (web). However, I believe that the Judaic conviction in the immortality of the soul merely supplements the much larger framework of the otherworldly in that only certain Nabokovian "favorites" – including Jewish and non-Jewish ones – are permitted to communicate with the "hereafter." In Nabokov's writings the characters often imagine that the dead may be "hovering over them, trying to communicate with them through the things of space and time" (Boyd 94). In *Glory*, for example, Martin, the protagonist

¹²³ In spite of the view that Judaism focuses on human existence on earth, Orthodox Jews tend to believe that "the souls of the righteous dead go to a place similar to the Christian heaven, or that they are reincarnated through many lifetimes, or that they simply wait until the coming of the messiah, when they will be [sic!] resurrected. Likewise, Orthodox Jews can believe that the souls of the wicked are tormented by demons of their own creation, or that wicked souls are simply destroyed at death, ceasing to exist" (Rich web).

tried to comprehend his father's death and to catch a wisp of posthumous tenderness in the dark of the room. He ... even made certain experiments: if, right now, a board in the floor creaks or there is a knock of some kind, that means he hears me and responds. (*Glory* 21)

Considering the overall importance of the above passage – the protagonist's communication with the spirit world – with respect to the Nabokovian *oeuvre*, I would like to make a brief digression at this point. Worthy of further investigation is the more than plausible echo of Occultism popular with the international intelligentsia in the early 20th century in Europe and Russia. Initiated as a movement in 1875 in New York City by the Russian expatriate Helena Blavatsky, theology (originally formed as the Theological Society and drawing on the beliefs of Brahmanism and Buddhism) was the religious-philosophical driving force behind the French "Occult Revival," counterbalancing the then dominant scientific positivism. Alexandrov was the first to call attention to a possible connection between the Russian occultist P. D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), who also influenced "a surprisingly wide range of major figures in Russia and Europe ... In simplest terms, Uspensky's ideas can be seen as part of the broad stream of syncretic mysticism that appeared in Europe" in the last quarter of the 19th century ("Nabokov and Uspensky" 549). Although Ouspensky's formulation of the occult does not comprise a particularized definition of the otherworld, he discusses the "relationship between the material world and 'higher dimensions' of being [that] gives insight into the 'fourth dimension'" (549). Ouspensky's ideas might have sounded alluring to Nabokov and are more than likely to have played an important role in contributing to the deepening of his own intuitions of the otherworld. In his book, entitled *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949), Ouspensky heavily relies on the "system" devised by Georgij Gurdjieff, whose teachings were widely popular in the mid-twentieth-century. Pellérdi claims that "Gurdjieff had an almost demonic influence over Ouspensky, but taught him to see the difference between dreaming and reality. To Gurdjieff all men, unbeknownst to themselves, were in a trance, dreaming constantly. But through the process of 'self-remembrance' a new discovery of reality can be achieved" (147). The ideas developed by Gurdjieff and his disciple, Ouspensky, who studied the "system" for nearly a decade, might have appeared somewhat speculative to Nabokov and his contemporaries (as opposed to the theosophical movement, which was also much in vogue in their time). Nevertheless, Nabokov is often thought to

have profited from the notion of the “fourth dimension” as well as the gist of the two Russian thinkers’ works, which, according to Pellérdi, argue that “man lives in a trance throughout his life and must learn to break out of it through the process of ‘self-remembrance’ in order to find reality” (147).

Even though Alexandrov considers the works of the Russian occultist, alongside other prominent figures of the Silver Age of Russian literature¹²⁴, no reference whatsoever is made to the important influence W. B. Yeats may have exerted on Nabokov (or, at least, displaying some plausible affinities between their unique philosophies).¹²⁵ John Burt Foster, Jr. draws a parallel between Nabokov and Yeats, highlighting that the former, during his formative years in Cambridge, primarily evinced an interest in Russian poetry other than anything else, especially the practitioners of high modernist poetry (his denigration of Eliot and Pound is well-known among Nabokov scholar, while he took pleasure – not unconditionally though – in some fictional works from the same period). While Yeats never makes his appearance by name in *Strong Opinions*, Foster discovers “a typically ingenious oblique tribute to the poet” in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, expressing a “misdirected communion with a dead parent” (“Nabokov and Modernism” 88). It is this spiritual union with the dead – aptly illustrated in the above passage in *Glory* – that somehow seems to create a silent link between the two masters.

Nabokovian characters who are in easy reach of the transcendent are privileged ones, highly intelligent or sensitive artists, psychologically unhinged individuals, who live in their intricately patterned, solipsistic worlds, imperceptible to the uninitiated, mediocre, *poshlyaki* ones.¹²⁶ Similar figures are the Jews, who only

¹²⁴ In the concluding chapter of *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, Vladimir E. Alexandrov calls attention to a highly provocative pronouncement by Nabokov, which, to some extent, has come to defy the author’s systematic rejection of literary influences. In a letter written to his friend and well-known critic Edmund Wilson, Nabokov traces his own artistic roots back to the Silver Age of Russian culture, acknowledging that “Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff in those days. And never was poetry so popular, not even in Pushkin’s days. I am the product of that period, I was bred in that atmosphere” (213). The claim that Nabokov’s artistic development might have been influenced by the Russian literary movements between 1905 and 1917 (especially Symbolism and Acmeism) is not only relevant because critics have long been determined to find a suitable way to relate the author’s name to some major philosophical or literary current but also because the revival of Russian literature around the turn of the century has emerged as one plausible inspiration behind the workings of the Nabokovian otherworld. Vladislav Khodasevich and Nikolai Evreinov are also mentioned among the pre-eminent figures of the age.

¹²⁵ John Burt Foster, Jr. wrote an important essay about the position of eccentricity connecting Yeats and Nabokov. See “Eccentric Modernism: Nabokov and Yeats” in *Nabokov’s World*, Grayson, Jane, Priscilla Meyer, and Arnold McMillin, Eds. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 141- 155.

¹²⁶ In relation to *The Gift*, Bethea says that “the father, from his position in the other world, helps the son find the ‘keys’ to love (Zina) and to calling (Russian literature)”. This particular move is at the

seldom figure overtly in Nabokov's novels and short stories. Humbert's erroneously assumed Jewish traits in *Lolita*, Klara in *Mary*, Greg's Jewish ancestry in *Ada*, an elderly Russian-Jewish couple in "Signs and Symbols" (1946), the short story "Conversation Piece, 1945," and Mira Belochkin in *Pnin* who was exterminated during the Holocaust are but a few notable examples of the theme which, for a long time, had passed unnoticed in the author's critical assessment. Nabokov's indulgence in "shameless favoritism" (Fowler 26) for certain characters is apparently present everywhere, and I think that, at this point, one should attach less significance to the possible effects of Judaic philosophy on Nabokov's writing than certain critics commit themselves to doing.

One might then pose the question whether it is really the Jewishness of these characters that makes their presence so conspicuously relevant or they are simply elements of a much broader notion, by representing the archetypal Biblical migrant, known as the wandering Jew. Of course, neither of these views is wholly incorrect, but approaching Nabokov's characters through the manifestation of the wandering Jew can provide a deeper insight *not only* into the plight of the Jews but also into the destiny of exiles and emigrants who, as the author's "favorites," are granted certain benefits. Legend has it that Ahasuerus (one of the many names used for the wandering Jew) derided Christ on his way to Golgotha and then was deprived of his own eternal rest: he was doomed to perambulate aimlessly the earth until the Second Coming. Akin to the wandering Jew, who must tarry until Christ returns, Nabokov's major characters – Jewish and non-Jewish alike – must also linger on a "threshold" of two existential planes, that is, dwell in a liminal state, characterized by duality, ambiguity, and indeterminacy – words which bring into mind *not* exclusively the wandering Jew, and, by extension, the stories of Jews and peoples expelled from their homelands, but also underscore that being an exile is "marked by an unstable sense of belonging, constant and sometimes futile attempts at reconciling different worlds and redefining one's identity" (Luburić).

Something similar is happening in the case of Nabokov. Through his employment of Jewish characters, he found a perfect medium to depict the insupportable fate of exiles in general, the pain that so many of his contemporaries had to endure during a modern era of mass migrations. Olga Skonechnaia writes that

center of Nabokov's style and all his art: the dead are resurrected through the secret knowledge that they guide the living to the patterns of transcendence" (702).

“Nabokov applies [the] theme of wandering to the problematics of émigré condition. He repeatedly speaks of the state of being cut off from his native land and beloved past, as a state conducive to artistic creation” (187). If exiles are ubiquitous as they are in his fictional world, it is not because Nabokov himself had been twice uprooted (first from Russia and then from Europe), but because the acute state of displacement creates opportune conditions for contemplation on the individual, who is forced to confront past, present, and future, self and setting (Parker). However, their predicament is by no means limited to the fictional heroes in Nabokov’s works or to Jews in general. Dávidházi’s *Menj vándor: Swift sírfelirata és a hagyományrétegződés* [Go traveler: Swift’s epitaph and the layering of tradition, my translation], offers, at one point, a striking analogy with the role of the wandering Jew in literary texts. He reflects on the work of Tivadar [Theodore] Thienemann, a former Professor of German Studies at the University of Pécs, Hungary, who, in addition to a number of other countries, also resided in America and experienced at first hand the loss of his homeland. Contrary to the famous poem, *Az örök zsidó* [The eternal Jew] by the Hungarian poet János Arany, where damnation, anguish, and curse are associated with the incessant traversing of the Jew (reinforced by the refrain “Onward! Onward!”), Thienemann describes the delight only a migrant can savor:

We have become much like an airplane without landing gears – we must keep flying on and on, there is no stopping – until we run out of fuel – there is no landing, only the end. What strikes me as strange is that one gets accustomed to and begins to like this traversing lifestyle, whose every minute is accounted for. (134; my translation)

Dávidházi writes that in an audio recording from 1981 Thienemann cogitates over Adalbert von Chamisso’s famous short story, *Peter Schlemil, der Mann ohne Schatten*, in which the eponymous hero makes a pact with the Devil by selling his own shadow to him only to realize that being bereft of one’s shadow entails banishment from society. The idea Thienemann had in mind was not to give an account of the Jewish fate by writing about the lost shadow, but rather to create the existential emblem of being an exile. “We all are *schlemils* in one way or another. I mean that we have lost something intangible, which belongs to us. Something that

used to belong to our very essence. What we used to have at home is no longer here” (163-4; my translation).¹²⁷

If taken as a metaphor for memory, the figure of the wandering Jew facilitates our understanding of the predicament that all the Nabokovian “favorites” undergo regardless of their race, religion, or creed. Just like the wandering Jew, these so-called “author-equivalents” (Fowler) – who are often seen to share essential traits with their creator – also “exist at the point of intersection of the creative memory of an artist and the cultural memory of descendents” (Skonechnaia 186). This is not to suggest that Nabokov was predisposed to write about his own quandary as an exile by creating his characters after his own image, but regarded them merely as a catalyst to talk about the anguish of alienation as well as memories of a happier past. The role of the wandering Jew in his fiction is thus twofold: on the one hand, he is the *free creator*, the lyrical hero, the itinerant whose immortality belongs to the realm of idealized memories (such as the idea of the lost homeland or the lost beloved), while on the other hand, he is the *eternal captive*, whose peripatetic state “becomes a metaphor for limited and confined consciousness and his immortality becomes a vicious circle of trite ideas, clichés, and dead-end theories” (Skonechnaia 186-7). Humbert, Kinbote, Pnin, and many others who are either forced to leave their homes or do so voluntarily, are exiles in an America which is alien to them; it is only through their creative faculty as well as a memory operating *with* consciousness that the idyllic image of a world past can be recaptured with utmost lucidity. The tragicomic hero of *Pnin*, for example, suffers from a heart disease, which enables him to temporarily enter the realm of the “beyond” during special moments of spiritual revelations, which are akin to James Joyce’s epiphany:

He felt porous and pregnable. He was sweating. He was terrified. A stone bench among the laurels saved him from collapsing on the sidewalk. Was his seizure a heart attack? I doubt it. ... And suddenly Pnin (was he dying?) found himself sliding back into his own childhood. (*Pnin* 17-8)

It is this sense of being “porous and pregnable” that allows the protagonist to become part of his vividly described own past, which can be regained through the painful act

¹²⁷ Of especial importance are Nabokov’s characters whose names have something of a connection with shades and shadows, including John Shade in *Pale Fire* and Humbert in *Lolita*. The state of being only a shadow, a reflection that is, or having no shadow at all might metaphorically imply the loss of something essential or pre-given, such as one’s parent culture or the much-coveted homeland, without which one’s existence and fixed origins are incomplete.

of remembering, because memory evokes not only the idylls of an idealized and timeless place, but also the image of a Jewish girl, Mira Belochkin, Pnin's beloved, who perished in the Holocaust. Such special moments of the narrative are broken by the characters' epiphanies (always expressed through Nabokov's prodigiously opulent style), which eventually remove them from the daily events. Bethea writes that "[t]he point is that Nabokov, in a manner reminiscent of the early Russian Formalists' emphasis on 'making strange' ('ostranenie'), constantly interrupts the flow of his narratives in order to stimulate his reader *to see better*, with increase alertness and cognitive engagement" (698).¹²⁸ Despite all of Pnin's attempts to withstand remembering, memory triumphs, dejected Pnin contemplates that "if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible" (*Pnin* 112).¹²⁹ This notwithstanding, consciousness has the most crucial role in Nabokov's worlds, because "an unconscious memory [for the author] would be no memory at all" (Wood 165). Only a retrospective faculty is capable of providing communication between a world lost and a world gained. However, the world of one's past is never lost in totality, as it continues to persist in memory, resulting in a liminal state of the mind that endows Nabokov's characters with a strange duality: their loss is *bliss* because it allows them to communicate with a world inaccessible for the others, but, at the same time, it is also a *curse* which makes them perpetual wanderers. This may also imply that the Jewish characters in Nabokov's fiction bask in the sympathy of their creator not simply on account of their Jewish origins, but also because Jews usually stand out as the archetypal pariahs, intent on establishing their own identities in their adopted cultures, into which they never manage to assimilate fully.

"beyondsense" of formalist poetry. Gerald Janeczek defines *zaum* as "experimental poetic language characterized by indeterminacy in meaning" (*The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism*, 1996).

¹²⁹ A full account of *Pnin* in relation to the Jewish question is given in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

EPILOGUE: Congealing Fragments

Nabokov's unequalled fascination with butterflies spanned sixty long years of his artistic career as a writer of novels, short stories, poems, and plays. It all commenced in his early childhood when his butterfly-hunting excursions (or "lepping" as he endearingly liked to allude to his passion of lepidoptery) played an essential part of his daily activities and lasted until he bade farewell to his wife and son in 1977. It would be a seriously demanding mission to find any other writer among the literary luminaries of the twentieth century who has been a more ardent admirer of nature and science and in fact a more gifted expert on butterflies than Nabokov. He was enchanted by them as a child, and later enchanted the world with them as a mature *homo scribens* both in his fictional and scientific writings. It was his never-dying, lifelong passion – deeply embedded in his novels and short stories as an ever-recurring motif – that he wove into the rich texture of his works; works which blended art with science in a most unorthodox and evocative way. Are these two utterly divergent fields reconcilable in a meaningful and harmonious way, or will the intersection of art and science remain Nabokov's mystery that scholars can only try to fathom?

It is recorded in all entomological studies on butterflies that the *Phengaris arion*, commonly known as the large blue butterfly, Nabokov's most widely examined species, that has, of all the orders, the shortest lifespan; and this is something – on account of the nature of their ephemeral metamorphosis – that kept Nabokov mesmerized until his death. *Art should imitate nature* is the idea that he maintained, because only in nature is it possible to find the design and the intentionality which are the principal indicators. One commentator concludes that Nabokov left his authorial signs and signatures on his works not so much in the way of creating a "postmodern gesture aimed at foregrounding the fictionality of the work ... [but to invite] his readers to understand the deceptive devices of his works of art as mirroring deceptive devices in nature" (Durayante 55). In Chapter Six of *Speak, Memory* Nabokov writes

The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things. Such was the imitation of oozing poison by bubble-like macules on a wing (complete with pseudo-refraction) or by glossy yellow knobs on a chrysalis ("Don't eat

me – I have already been squashed, sampled, and rejected”). When a certain moth resembled a certain wasp in shape and color, it also walked and moved its antennae in a waspish, unmothlike manner. When a butterfly had to look like a leaf, not only were all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes were generously thrown in. “Natural selection,” in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of “the struggle for life” when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator’s power of appreciation. *I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.* (SM 125; emphasis in the original)

Design and deception in Nabokov are intricately intertwined, yet the frequent instances of recurring butterflies, moths and other insects are just inadvertently placed posts in his *oeuvre* in order to call attention to the constructed nature of his literary universes. In addition to helping the reader understand the energizing force behind the involutions and crafted nature of Nabokov’s tales, as De La Durantaye observes (“Artistic Selection”), the metamorphosis of the butterfly represents an entry to a transcendental realm, underscoring as it were the infiniteness of human existence, where worlds and worlds apart, our reality and the beauty of the world beyond our understanding encounter and harmoniously coexist. In Nabokov, each butterfly species becomes distinguishable from the other one based on its patterns, behavior, special coloration or habitat. Similarly to their unique beauty, elegance, symmetry, the mysterious nature and the mediating function of his butterflies, the sham world of average reality can also be told apart from the exquisiteness that the otherworld emblemizes.

Worlds, seemingly incommensurable and substantially diverging from one another are reconciled at special revelatory moments with the help of the butterfly motif (or occasionally other animals, such as the squirrels in *Pnin*), whose presence always raises the reader’s awareness of the existence of another dimension, an alternative reality. The motif of butterflies appears both as a semi-autobiographical device, which points to Nabokov’s imposing stature in his works, but the expressively detailed description of his Lepidoptera also comes close to offering the “aesthetic bliss” to the reader, who – besides mulling over their beauteous portrayal – is urged to look for a hidden meaning in the text whenever a butterfly makes its appearance. This will help the reader to capture the revelatory moment and pay attention to the minutest details in the text. One of the most salient and attractive

qualities of Nabokov's butterflies is that they generate the interest of the reader to discover something new, something pleasurable, akin to the sensation that the author might have felt upon the discovery of a new species of butterfly. While one's attempt to search for a hidden clue or a pattern attached to the butterfly as a recurring motif might serve as a stumbling block to one's comprehension of the complexity of Nabokov's fictional world (since all the minutiae to be disclosed further complicate the process of reading), *butterflies can also be viewed – and this is the idea that I am more inclined to embrace – as facilitators to communicate among different layers of reality and to stitch together the author's works as one single continuum, mediating between worlds and worlds apart.*

Even though no independent chapter of this dissertation has been devoted to the author's favored and extensively used butterfly motif, one section heading makes reference to his "smaller butterflies" (to borrow Shrayner's term), signifying the short stories (two of which have been examined in my dissertation) as opposed to the novels under analysis. Nature has created butterflies of various sizes, which is not to mean that the smaller the species is, the less relevance should be attached to it. Their behavior, habitats, and interaction with the rest of nature's fauna might even prove smaller, less ostentatious species are extremely unique in terms of the aforementioned qualities. Along with this observation, it can be said of Nabokov's short stories that despite their diminutive size, just as much attention ought to be accorded to them as to his longer, craftily constructed pieces of prose. It is for this simple reason that approximately equal attention has been paid to the novels and short stories analyzed at some length in the foregoing chapters. One common feature all these pieces share is that the reader's perception of reality is obfuscated to varying degrees, as several narrative planes are superimposed on one another, circular structures and convoluted plots are devised, and revelatory, epiphanic moments are created during cosmically synchronized scenes that only the most favored, most privileged characters are allowed to enter. Smaller and larger butterflies all constitute a most intriguing part of the Nabokovian oeuvre, and while I am confident that all the previously mentioned narrative ploys and techniques can also be spotted (perhaps with even more clarity) in the author's acclaimed fictional pieces, it has proved appropriate to scrutinize some lesser-known works from the same angle.

It is stating the obvious that several impressive theories have been proposed over the last four decades to explain what factors could be held accountable for the

emergence of the otherworldly as a theme throughout Nabokov's fictional writings. Although the literature about the author's works covers a wide variety of such theories, the objective of my dissertation has by no means been to indicate a particular preference for one or another specific interpretation of Nabokov's otherworldly views, which has otherwise proved to be an inexhaustible topic among Nabokov scholars. In stating that the problem of communication between this world and other worlds has remained a central one for a coterie of serious scholars, the primary aim of my work has been to probe into – in some depth – the metaphysical, esthetic, social and moral questions which have kept generations of scholars busy.

Underscoring the impact of loss and displacement in Nabokov's personal life – partly contingent on historical factors, such as the author's involuntary exile from one place to another – one should not discard the fact that the oft-cited biographical circumstances were, at least to some extent, responsible for the frequently recurring theme of the otherworldly. Connected to this is the fact that Nabokov, a polyglot writer *par excellence*, was also exposed to a number of foreign languages, civilizations, and cultures, all of which come to life in the gaudiest fashion in his novels, such as *Invitation to a Beheading* or *Pale Fire*. It is his trilingualism (Russian, English, and French) which can also be seen as a factor contributing to his otherworldly views – he traveled widely as a child and spent long periods of time in a number of countries, in world and other worlds, in the physical sense of the word. However, one can risk searching for another, seemingly more plausible *raison d'être* behind the inception and continuous development of the otherworld in his work. Punctuated by a series of losses, Nabokov's life turned out to be one of success and glory: the world of one's past, he believes, is never lost in its entirety, as it continues to linger on in one's memory, leading to a liminal state of the mind that endows the Nabokovian character with a strange duality (or even multiple identities and personalities). It has been concluded that its loss is *bliss* because the loss permits the writers "favorite" characters to engage into communication with a world inaccessible for the average characters, but, at the same time, it is also a *curse* which makes them perpetual wanderers, unable to settle down in a place they could call their home.

Aside from viewing exile as a state of the mind, it has also been claimed – most suggestively, I believe – that Nabokov's conviction in a metaphysical otherworld as promulgated by Alexandrov, Pifer, Davydov, et al. can be presented convincingly, and might be related to some not wholly substantiated religious intuitions he might

have possessed (due to the liberal and philo-Semitic traits germinating from his family upbringing and his subsequent marriage to a Jewish woman). Independently from the religious and metaphysical views, one must also take into consideration the narratological justification of his otherworld, as indicated by Pekka Tammi in his early pioneering manuscript, which discusses the metaleptical nature of Nabokov's fictional worlds, the layering of his diegetical planes, all of which can be viewed as a world separated from other worlds, but certainly not from a metaphysical, but rather from a metafictional viewpoint. Considering Nabokov as a metafictionalist of sorts, who likes to create fiction that self-consciously exposes its constructed quality and fictional illusions is no longer seen as the sole answer to why the otherworldly figures so prominently in his works, yet the idea stands to logic and is readily applicable in a non-metaphysical reading of his novels. In my opinion, the fact that Nabokov's works contain an immense degree of playfulness (in terms of language, structure, and plot), the author's perpetual attempts at finding an answer to a question which he deems inexplicable – so much so that he mostly refers to it as a neutral “something” – might as well be finely crafted ruses to gently mislead the reader and fiddle with their expectations. The great truth on the “other side” might only be something illusory, unfathomable, and even less significant than what Nabokov mysteriously claims.

My dissertation has given evidence that all of these readings – the biographical, the metaphysical and the metafictional – are *not only* satisfactory taken separately, but one interpretation does not seem to exclude or invalidate the other one. I argued earlier (see “Introduction”) that the otherworld – and this might as well be taken as my personal belief and assumption in light of the bounty of interpretation entertained and culled so far – is the amalgamation of postmodern stratagems and games as well as a metaphysical otherworld (mainly concerned with questions of existence and reality and as to what entities or can be thought to exist). If blended with the mischievous and quizzical nature of Nabokov's language and scintillating wit, the alternative of these two views provide the reader and the inquisitive scholar with a convincing, yet still not uncontroversial answer to what the otherworld signifies in the Nabokovian context. In spite of the frankly confessed open-ended nature of this dissertation, it is an absolute necessity and the duty of the author of the present lines to make some partial observations, which might, in the end, contribute to our examination of the Nabokovian world from a more or less holistic point of view.

In my analysis of “The Return of Chorb” I have highlighted that Chorb should be viewed as something of a Janus-faced character based on his associations with a dark, sphinx-like figure, who is able to see the past and the present simultaneously, while his boldness to enter the otherworld and his innocuous, downright touching way of attempting to bring back his wife make him appear as a bearer of angelic rather than demonic powers. I have shown that hovering between two realities is the main thematic current of “The Return of Chorb” Cataclysmic as his confrontation may appear with the world of reality, in which he is cast against his will, the story, by virtue of its oddly and literally soundless conclusion, withholds from the reader the knowledge of the calamity, its possible repercussions, but most importantly, the reader is not made privy to the secrets of the otherworld. On closer scrutiny, it can be safely said that the ensuing silence at the closure conveys an air of bitter irony: in a world where everything is encircled and dominated by music (Chorb-as-Orpheus, Wagner’s *Parsifal*, the euphony of words and the lyricism of the phrases), it strikes the reader that all the characters, gently hushed by the lackey, remain wordless. The preternatural voices, the shadowy and spectral figures, the haunting memories and all the uncertainties (or rather, the suspension of certainties) implies an ending that most readers would anticipate. An irrational finale would be to utter anything definitively in an aura where nobody is allowed to possess the epistemic advantage of knowing the secrets of life and death.

In the short story, only the in-laws and Chorb are allowed to know what happens next. While it might seem tempting to get closer to a larger, metaphysical truth of the hereafter, the conclusion provides the reader with an unambiguous indication that “the chords of fate itself continue to vibrate” (*The Gift* 333) even after the tale has come to an end.

While Nabokov may have meant to attach special significance to “Terra Incognita” as an anticipatory short story to *Invitation to a Beheading* and a series of his later fictional works, Julian Connolly’s interpretation that the two works are intimately connected to one another seems convincing only to the extent that the entire Nabokovian *oeuvre* is an attempt to demonstrate how human imagination can be cut loose from its limitations. One must thus conclude that “Terra Incognita” occupies a special position among all the short stories, because not only does it herald in the emergence of the otherworldly as a theme and its reversal in his later works, but because its suggestive title is also an indication that Nabokov’s works

often require the active participation of the reader, an intrepid explorer, as it were, to enter what might be termed as textual otherspaces. Equally important is the fact that Nabokov's obsessive preoccupation with alternative realities tempted him to introduce some characteristic properties of the science fiction genre that he himself had callously disparaged (*SO* 117). On a side note, I should like to remark that while he debunked several of his contemporaries, his admiration for H.G. Wells is well-documented, calling attention to some major thematic correspondences between the works of the two authors as demonstrated, for example, in "Nabokov's aesthetic search for a numinous pattern, revealed in mundane details, reflects the mystical sensibility of Wells's George Ponderevo, [in *Tono-Bungay* (1909)]" (Sisson 533)." Sisson ("Nabokov and Some") also points out well-discernible analogies between Wells's hallucinatory "The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes" (1895) and the short story under discussion in the relevant chapter of this dissertation. One such parallel can be drawn between one hypothesis championed in Wells's story. In it, a professor claims that there is "a kink in space," according to which "two main points might be a yards away on a sheet of paper, and yet be brought together by bending the paper round" (283). Sisson's observation that this untested conjecturing strongly resembles Nabokov's image in his autobiographical novel, *Speak Memory*: "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" (139). Sisson correctly argues that "Nabokov's fiction often offers alternative realities, mutually exclusive and yet somehow coexistent, overlapping in suprarational transcendence of space and time" (535). Nabokov's enthusiasm for Wells's works may be somewhat difficult to reconcile with the Russian master's disapproving remarks of science fiction, the feeling of unease that this question might have raised can be easily be dispelled, because "[w]hat Nabokov disparages is not work that *happens to be* SF, but work that is merely SF – merely genre fiction, merely formula fiction. Good fiction transcends any genre; "it is the individual artist that counts"" (Nicol 10). In his discussion of *Ada*, Alfred Appel claims that time travel, automata, invisibility, immortality, identity transfer, space and time travel significantly broaden the list of the general attributes of the science fiction and, in a broader sense, speculative fiction genre found throughout Nabokov's novels (*Ada Described*). The evanescence of truth is one of the prevailing qualities that Nabokov's fiction foregrounds through the indeterminable nature of the otherworld that can be read both as a *terra incognita* of

idealised memories or a hellish vision as captured by the punishments of Hieronymus Bosch's fantastic imageries.

Invitation to a Beheading has always been read as Nabokov's most philosophical vision of totalitarianism, especially when compared to his more factual portrayal of tyranny in *Bend Sinister* and "Tyrants Destroyed" (1938). In the latter short story, Nabokov examines at length the mediocrity and moral degeneracy of tyrants, and although the narrator of the story is originally resolved to annihilate the tyrant, he cannot bring himself to do it. Instead, he decides to erase the tyrant's image in his own mind. The protagonist states that "[t]his is an incantation, an exorcism, so that henceforth any man can exorcize bondage. I believe in miracles" (*Stories* 459). Nabokov condemns tyrants, dictators and assassins to "a particular brand of non-existence" (Dragunoiu 67) by denying them all the spiritual complexities which he bequeaths to his privileged characters. Similarly to the narrator of "Tyrants Destroyed," Cincinnatus C. also succeeds in exorcising the worldview imposed on him by his tormentors: he turns down the titular "invitation to a beheading" and thus refuses to accept the view that denies the opacity of his soul.

The information culled so far about the multiplicity of readings to which the novel exposes itself may help one arrive at a predictable but safe observation if anything indeed can be taken for granted in Nabokov's literary output. It seems that the diversity of the possible approaches to *Invitation* – be they based on a metaphysical otherworld, the novel's historical and political background, the various religious overtones it might carry, or the Nabokovian notion of "cosmic synchronization" – are indeed helpful in shedding light on numerous important aspects of the book; but, as usually the case is with any reading, reliance on any single orientation exclusively should be regarded with a touch of skepticism. If approached from the vantage point of "cosmic synchronization," as the closing paragraph of this chapter implies, one is urged to believe that the sense of pointless and tragic loss, alleviated by the vision of life beyond death, is what this work captures, which turns *Invitation* into a novel of more acute despair than *Laughter in the Dark* and it is shrouded in deeper darkness than *Despair* itself. While the world of Cincinnatus may somewhat appear to be a totalitarian state, focusing rigidly unbendingly on these aspects of *Invitation* would entail a faulty and prejudiced reading, reducing Cincinnatus's exalted status to the status of the many thousands who had to endure the needless mental and physical suffering that the last century

brought to humankind. Nabokov had an insatiable desire to keep expressing originality and freedom as the two supporting pillars of good art. In Cincinnatus's world both of these qualities are kept in check, yet the hero clearly succeeds in overcoming the autocracy of his keepers by resorting to his gift of being *imaginative* and developing his faculty to *remember* in a way that betrays "a special pattern or unique coloration" that makes "[h]is identity ... immediately recognized" (SO 63). "Memory always allows a partial release from ruthless enslavement to the moment, but it is only when memory satisfies his passion for pattern that Nabokov feels he is near to savoring the full freedom of timelessness, consciousness without the degradation of loss" (Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada* 84).

In spite of its brevity and the putative simplicity of the plot, *Pnin* stands out as one of Nabokov's most intricately woven achievements, whose narrative and thematic design as well as the fusion of moral, ethical and metaphysical issues have become the focal point of a large number of analytical works. *Pnin* boldly sets out to answer a plethora of questions which center round human pain and suffering, nostalgia, the tragedy of solitude and, most important of all, the incommensurability of the mundane world that one often refers to as "reality" with an idealized otherworldly locus, a place where the faces of the deceased friends and relatives vividly appear and haunt the living. While Nabokov makes a strenuous effort to provide the reader with some answers to the overall understanding of the hereafter by way of a resolution to the novel, one must realize that the best thing to do is to abandon one's quest of an immutable, ultimate truth and concur with Barabtarlo in what follows:

Erroneous beliefs are relatively harmless; knowledge of the axiomatic ultimate truth ought to be prodigiously shattering ... One can safely believe in the hereafter; however knowing anything of it is a self-destructive condition because such an experience must annihilate the concept of knowledge, indeed the very concept of a concept. ("A Resolved Discord" [*Pnin*], web)

It has become a fundamental tenet of the Nabokovian worldview that the finitude of human life is unavoidable, yet the otherworld becomes a different state of existence. The narrator of *Pnin* claims resonantly that conventional denouements do not tend to satisfy him in the least: "We feel cheated. Harm is the norm" (22). In his endeavor to "jam doom" and evade the inevitable, Pnin must look for ways to defend

himself from the intensity with which memory starts on him time and again. Instead of sentencing pitiable and befuddled Timofey to death, Nabokov dispatches him from the novel by employing a well-positioned narrative twist at the closure of the novel. Nicol has compared the novel's linear composition to a pet snake which bites its own tail: "[t]he length of the novel's body describes a full thematic circle, and the book ends in a different version of the very episode that opens it" (197). Circularity thus becomes a device in *Pnin* to round up the novel's beginning and closure, helping to establish the claim that death, in one sense, is avoidable, and akin to the non-ending of the novel, life as well as history are recursive. Nabokov attains metaphysical immortality for his hero by allowing him to maintain a perfect eidetic memory, accounting for the precise visualization of images and the recreation of sounds and smells. It is this gift as well as the precariousness of his status between one world and another that empowers him to perceive the existence of a metaphysical beyond, because Pnin, similarly to his creator, knew well that "our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (*SM* 19).

The penultimate chapter of my dissertation has thus focused on *Lolita* from a partially postcolonial point of view, according to which the Old World and the New World of the novel can be synthesized and therefore used in the process of world-fashioning. It has been demonstrated that while Humbert is meant to symbolize European culture and erudition that America lacks, Lolita stands for the quintessential bobbysoxer, who also defines – through her very presence – the concept of petty-mindedness and bourgeois values and the complete absence of tradition. Tasteless and cheap as America in the fifties might appear, Humbert manages to identify with the girl-child who is most representative of it, owing to the fact that she is – by the closure of the novel – not only a creation standing for an idea or an ideology, but more so, a freely thinking individual, whose ultimate appearance "on stage" (pregnant, wearing glasses, and no longer a nymphet) redraws the landscape of America in a fraction of a second. *Lolita* is a novel that produces a liminal space, an in-between zone, where migrant like Humbert and orphans like Lolita can feel at ease, and the collision of their two manifestly different worlds does not draw attention to the anomalies, the discrepancies, and the many forms of misunderstanding and misreading, but helps fuse the two worlds together and the ideas and thoughts begin to melt into one another only to show that, somewhat belatedly though, there was in her "a garden a twilight, a palace gate – dim and

adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions” (*AL* 284).

The ultimate chapter of the dissertation dealt with the question of philo-Semitism and the Jewish theme in the author’s works at large. Alfred Kazin’s statement that Nabokov is “the only refugee who could have turned statelessness into absolute strength” (quoted in Goldman 20) invites the reader to discover afresh the various dimensions of the Nabokovian texts which point toward an enigmatic world where the Jewish theme emerges visibly large. In this dissertation, I have offered a reading of the theme by bringing together several key elements – morality, philo-Semitism, and the otherworld – which, if treated independently, would have provided us with an immensely curtailed approach to the author’s incorporation of Jewish questions in his work. The title of this chapter boldly anticipated the assessment of three major fields in Nabokov studies at the same time, and promised to act as an entry-point into the Jewish world in the case of Nabokov by relying on moral, aesthetic, biblical, and metaphysical considerations. In addition to a plethora of biographical data and the possible impact of religious Judaic thought on Nabokov’s life and art, which may partially verify the author’s choice to populate his works with Jewish characters or reflections on the fate of the Jewry, it is, above everything else, the indisputable significance of the otherworld that functions as a catch-all for the thematic dominants discovered in Nabokov’s fictional world so far. Intimately related to the Jewish concerns within his fiction was the applicability of the wandering Jew as a figure standing for the emblematical migrant that aptly encapsulates Nabokov’s archetypal status as the artist-in-exile and accounts for his intention to employ characters (or even author-equivalents), who are faced with similar vicissitudes as their creator. The intricate interplay among all these crucial fields in Nabokov studies has helped me arrive at the conclusion that the author’s penchant for Jewish characters primarily originates from his desire to illustrate the fate of exiles, whose dual existence enables them to remember and establish a perceptible link between our world of darkness and another, timeless, non-material world, where, as Nabokov stated “art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (*AL* 305).

Clearly, just as the above quotation implies, there are many things in Nabokov which will continue to baffle and delight his admirers, and any summation of the

multifaceted nature of his art would make one eager to leap to a conclusion in the way of closing down an analysis based on cast-iron proofs and incontestable argumentations. I shall thus willingly, yet somewhat repentantly, acquiesce to any judgment on my having left this dissertation on an indeterminate note in terms of providing a holistic understanding of the Nabokovian otherworld, which has served not only as one of the relevant subject-matters of my discussion but has also set a solid framework for the works that I have thoroughly examined. The concept of the otherworld can be appositely deemed both as a point of departure and an agglutinative device for all the discussions and arguments given in the course of consecutive chapters. In spite of the fact that the otherworld has been highlighted as the most important theme by several like-minded scholars, whose works are copiously quoted in my dissertation, it still appears to be an important Nabokovian *constant* open for further discourse, and the application of multiple viewpoints juxtaposed to one another seemed to be the only satisfactory solution to formulate a proper theoretical framework.

It goes without saying that there are innumerable other aspects on the basis of which Nabokov's works are investigated and read, contributing to an even more comprehensive view than offered in my discussion. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that we should realize the limitations intrinsic to all quests. Any completion is but a dream; and however hackneyed this statement might appear, Nabokov was well aware of the apparent deficiencies of the writer's creative genius stemming from the finiteness of one's earthly existence. He left to posterity an unfinished *oeuvre* with the heatedly debated publication of his last, fragmented novel, *The Original of Laura* (1977), which was, against his authorial will, put into print in 2009. Nevertheless, the reader is inclined to follow in Nabokov's footsteps, who in lieu of searching for the real, saturated with a sense of completeness, eventually turns to the fragmented matter so as to construct, de-construct and re-construct the fictional worlds presented to humanity by far the most controversial artist of the past century. The subtitle of *The Original of Laura* – "Dying is Fun" – somewhat morbidly validates the existence of a *more real* reality, from where the dead communicate with the living, the place where all the fragments congeal and life seems to come full circle.

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