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Nabokov: The artist against caprice

Parker, Mary Elizabeth, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1987

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NABOKOV: THE ARTIST AGAINST CAPRICE

by

Mary Elizabeth Parker

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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Approved by



Dissertation Advisor

APPROVAL PAGE

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This study examines the use of detachment in the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, a detachment that has earned Nabokov an undeserved reputation as an aesthete interested only in manipulating his characters within intriguing artistic patterns. I attempt to show that Nabokov's detachment is a device for provoking both his protagonists and his readers into shedding their complacency and assuming a perceptive, engaged stance toward the world. His detachment imitates, and thereby exposes, a power I call Caprice, a whimsically destructive force at large in the world, as inexorable as the Fates, yet never as predictable. Nabokov's weaker characters cannot decipher Caprice's patterns, and they become alienated ciphers, lost in madness or drifting on the periphery of life.

His artist heroes, though, are strong enough to insistently carve out their own moral niches within the chaos of an amoral world. The Nabokovian hero's artistic sense is grounded in a continual awareness of the beauties as well as the horrors of the phenomenal world; and he uses his imagination to highlight these beauties and transform the horrors. He controls the imaginative constructs with which he reshapes his world.

Much of my argument is an appreciation of, as well as a warning against, the seductions of Humbert Humbert, Nabokov's most compelling artist. I trace Nabokovian

artists through four early plays and several novels, showing how the artist's moral and aesthetic sense is shaped by political exile and its relationship to emotional exile; and by emotional exile and its relationship to the traditional Romantic response. Finally, I show how "strange-making" details nestled within the mundane allow horror and sadness to insinuate themselves into the reader's consciousness even as he laughs at another of Caprice's tricks. The power of Nabokov's detachment lies in its paradoxical insistence upon an emotional response.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE.	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.	iii
CHAPTER	
I. THE DETACHED ARTIST: DISARMING CAPRICE.	1
II. TRANSCENDING POLITICS: RECLAIMING THE PAST IN IMAGERY	42
III. THEATRICALITY AND IMPERMANENCE: THE EXILE'S LIFE.	73
IV. <u>POSHLOST</u> AND THE GROTESQUE: THE ART OF "MAKING STRANGE"	124
V. FRAGMENTATION: HUMBERT, THE FAILED ROMANTIC	176
CONCLUSION: THE EXISTENTIAL ARTIST: OBJECT AS ICON	217
BIBLIOGRAPHY	228

CHAPTER I

THE DETACHED ARTIST: DISARMING CAPRICE

Vladimir Nabokov's novels can make a reader uncomfortable, because his version of everyday reality has a habit of shading into illusion, which then becomes the new reality. Yet both the original and the new realities may be suspect, because both have been created by a narrator whose foundation is not necessarily the reader's terra firma. Nabokov wrenches the reader from the tethers of his own world and forces him to dangle over a narrative landscape in which there are crevices between the painstakingly plotted pieces. These crevices are frightening, since they may become crevasses in an instant.

Such manipulation of reality makes the reader wary, as he tries to define boundaries; and when he finds them difficult to delineate, he may respond defensively--but with a certain studied nonchalance, so as not to admit that the narrator has confused him. By striving to keep himself detached from the goings-on, the reader in effect adopts something like the narrator's intelligent, yet dispassionate, response. The reader responds to the artfulness of the situation, rather than to the effects of the situation upon the lives of the characters. The characters are reduced to mere pawns moved by a skillful

gamesman. When the reader sees the characters merely as intriguing shifts in the overall design, then the reader's response is aesthetic, rather than empathic. Nabokov has manipulated the reader just as effectively as he has manipulated his characters.

Of course, any author manipulates both his characters and his reader. Yet, unlike formal realists among fiction writers, Nabokov arrogantly refuses even to bother with the accepted fictional pretense that all his characters are as "real" as the reader. If the reader is a creation of God, Nabokov's characters are not. As Nabokov makes abundantly clear--through ubiquitous intrusions by narrators who rarely give the reader the truth in easy-to-read format--the narrator is the only god, and he's not reliable. The power that these narrators seem to emulate is neither that of a benevolent God, nor the inexorable vengeance of Yahweh. It is more properly the power of a harlequin god I choose to call Caprice, a court jester who lacks any recognizable ethos. Caprice manipulates human lives, applying a sure instinct for the vulnerable spots in the human psyche.

The manipulations of Caprice are amusing, and artistically satisfying, at the points where they diverge from the reader's reality; but these manipulations are frightening when they poke the reader's own soft spots with too rough a finger. Thus, it is not true that the reader

learns to read Nabokov with complete dispassion; rather, the reader sympathizes with a character when he feels that he himself is also the butt of Nabokov's cosmic bad joke. For the most part, though, the reader accepts the grotesqueries of the Nabokovian world, because they are tossed off so flippantly.

This flippancy causes some readers to complain. While they admire Nabokov's virtuosity, and are awed by his lyricism, particularly where his works celebrate his nostalgia for Russia and his love of sensual detail, they suffer his sangfroid badly. Some believe that his archness overrides any sense of fair play or morality that an author might be expected to have.¹

More charitable readers assert that Nabokov's work contains a humane message, although they concede that his insistence upon manipulative narrators does make the search for his humaneness exasperating. Julian Moynahan, for example, says that Nabokov

is simply floundering in a moral and metaphysical quagmire when he insists . . . upon the omnipotence of anyone else's creative thought. Nabokov's great theme . . . is that of married love. . . . The connection is

¹ For reviewers who emphasize Nabokov's flippancy and his lack of a recognizable ethos--perspectives based (except for Trilling's) largely upon their responses to Lolita--see Diana Trilling, The Nation 14 June 1957: 722; Orville Prescott, The New York Times 18 Aug. 1958: 17; Marcel Thiebaut, Review de Paris Aug. 1959: 143-152; and Kingsley Amis Spectator CIII, 6 Nov. 1959: 635-36.

between loving and making free in a bond of two against the loneliness of exile, the imprisoning world, the irredeemable nature of time, the voidness [sic] of eternity.²

James M. Rambeau agrees that Nabokov's literary games can bog down the reader and keep him from progressing to an appreciation of Nabokov's "human concerns." He cautions that the intelligent reader must avoid the "quagmire" of Nabokov's concern with creating his own too-precious reality, and must recognize "how small a part these games finally play in Nabokov's genuine appeal to his readers."³

The reader who is dismayed by the narrative sangfroid in the face of the absurdities and misfortunes of Nabokov's fictional world fails to realize that Nabokov takes care to insert a moral force into his chaotic fictional universe. While he shamelessly manipulates his protagonists as well as his bit players, many of his characters--whom I will call Nabokovian artists--are strong enough to insistently carve out their own moral niches within the chaos of an amoral world. Nabokov's style is not a web of obfuscation which the reader must wipe away to reveal the meaning, but a web of nuance which enmeshes the reader unawares and

² "Lolita and Related Memories," in TriQuarterly 17 (Winter 1970): 247-52. (This festschrift issue is devoted to critiques of Nabokov's work, for his 70th birthday.)

³ "Nabokov's Critical Strategy," in Nabokov's Fifth Arc, J. E. Rivers, and Charles Nicol, eds. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1982) 22-34.

tumbles him into a new way of understanding artistic responsibility. This lesson in legerdemain aims to disturb the complacency of the audience, and to introduce a particularly clever kind of hero. The Nabokovian artist is a sleight-of-hand man who, by imitating Caprice, paradoxically creates a moral order which withstands the world's capriciousness. I will trace the Nabokovian artist through four early, characteristically Nabokovian plays, as well as through several novels in which these artists create a moral order by devising their own idiosyncratic psychological realities. Nabokov's most complex, unnerving, persuasive and compelling artist remains Humbert Humbert. Much of my argument will be an appreciation of, as well as a warning against, the seductions of Humbert Humbert and Lolita.

Protagonists such as Humbert are often, like Nabokov, irreverent and idiosyncratic in their moral responses to Caprice. Though they are to be commended for their efforts against chaos, they are unusual heroes. Because of their idiosyncracies, the reader may fail to see that these heroes are engaged in the same search for beauty and permanence--even immortality--which marks the quest of all Romantic heroes. Beneath their arch exteriors, Nabokov's artists are Romantics, not nihilistic game-players. Nabokov, too, is an engaged, passionate man, though the flippancy of his art sometimes obscures his moral stance.

Both Andrew Field and Ellen Pifer understand Nabokov's strong sense of artistic responsibility, his belief that the artist must employ his aesthetic sense to create order for himself, despite the trumpery and disorder of the "real" world.⁴ Field, Nabokov's biographer, believes that circumstances of Nabokov's personal life shaped, consciously or unconsciously, his rather cold-blooded and perplexing artistic stance, one that seems, on the surface, to be devoted to the perfection of artifice rather than to the imperfect yearnings of man.

Field seems comfortable with that surface sangfroid when he can safely remove it to the realm of Nabokov's art, holding Nabokov's personal sense of compassion separate from his art. This separation is unnecessary. While Nabokov's sometimes cold-blooded art admittedly can be disturbing, I sense no rift between the man and his art, since his artistic dispassion is a ruse, a method by which he paradoxically distills and concentrates his sense of moral responsibility. The sterility Field rightfully notes in Nabokov's attitude toward his characters who are clumsy or false artists should be recognized as the necessary

⁴ The major works in which they explore Nabokov's concept of aesthetic order are Field's Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), 1967; Field's V. N.: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Viking Press), 1986; and Pifer's Nabokov and the Novel (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press), 1980.

control set against Nabokov's sense of compassion and admiration for his heroic characters. In his work, compassion grows stubbornly from a sterile soil. Nabokov creates tension in the reader--a tension which at last must be eased by the reader's empathic response to the struggle to uphold true art--by pairing the absurdities of Caprice with the pathos such absurdities evoke in the Nabokovian artist. The Nabokovian artist's morality shines more strongly for being backlit by the amorality of Caprice.

Pifer argues that Nabokov the artist vindicates himself against critics' charges of amorality by allowing his most admirable characters a moral awareness founded in a depth and delicacy of sensory and intellectual perception. In Pifer's opinion, though Nabokov's characters remain his "galley slaves," he redeems his admirable characters from flatness and inconsequentiality, allowing them to transcend a social reality which lacks humaneness by erecting a psychological reality which is loving and engaged. His less admirable characters concoct psychic realities which are solipsistic and destructive. All, however, mentally transcend "real" life, and thus escape its banality and horror. She sees ordinary reality as negligible to both his heroic and his non-heroic characters, as well as to Nabokov himself.

In contrast, I believe that Nabokov, by championing the world of the imagination, does not thereby ignore or

trivialize the socio-political reality in which his readers operate daily. Rather, his art celebrates the tensile strength of the psychological construct in the face of constant assault from social and political forces. Art becomes a viable political act. Rather than retreating, Nabokov's artist heroes confront Caprice on Caprice's own shifting, ambiguous terms. I will examine the entertaining, yet dangerous, feint between Caprice and the Nabokovian artist, in which morality, finally, holds ground. Nabokov succeeds against Caprice by not underestimating his opponent's ability. In fact, at some points, Caprice seems about to unhand Nabokov; Nabokov, and his protagonists, can be momentarily distracted by the precision and simplicity of an ethic devoid of compassion. When the joust between amoral Caprice and the moral artist is most heated, it is difficult to decide who leads and who follows. The use of art and aesthetics as a feint to keep his emotional footing is a precarious stance for Nabokov.

The struggle between morality and amorality is most subtle in Lolita, where the two are most inextricable. Lolita displays Nabokov's artistic balance at its most precarious, and it is both painful and exquisite to watch. Humbert Humbert, whose character traits are permutated and tested in various other of Nabokov's heroes, is his most perfect example of the attempt to fix a moral absolute within a shifting reality. Ultimately, Humbert is able

neither to save nor be saved by his personal aesthetic; yet his story beautifully illustrates the struggle to define morality through art. I will examine Humbert Humbert in depth in chapters 4 and 5, after I've delineated the necessary qualities of the true Nabokovian artist in chapters 1 through 3, so that Humbert may be judged in the context of a Nabokovian morality. In building to my appreciation of the paradox of cruelty and compassion in Humbert Humbert, I will discuss paradoxes of behavior that are played out repeatedly in Nabokov's characters, and that complicate and intensify the tension between artistic morality and Caprice's amorality. Nabokov's characters are simultaneously pragmatists and romantics, death-obsessed and vitally alive, lovers and murderers, artists and philistines, optimists and cynics, liars and poets.

In Nabokov's entire body of work, Humbert is the most intriguing, and maddening, amalgam of the sublime and the infernal. No other character is complex enough to display all facets of the Nabokovian attitude: the love of paradoxes, of opposites, of "accidents and possibilities" that whimsically weave an inexorable pattern; the willingness to let loneliness surface, if obliquely, from beneath a veneer of grandiosity and detachment; the sense of personal responsibility for reshaping the world with the tools of art, and the simultaneous thrall to, and ridicule of, the fallible construct thus created.

Although I will briefly discuss the artistic stances of other Nabokov protagonists, both admirable and execrable, I have chosen to concentrate on Humbert Humbert because he best illustrates that double message in Nabokov's novels which alternately disturbs and pleases critics: Art is an intriguing pattern, filled with titillation and delight but of no cosmic consequence; and art is a game in deadly earnest, a way of controlling the sleights-of-hand of a capricious world. Both views intertwine in Humbert, as he simultaneously evokes both our censure and our praise.

Humbert is Nabokov's least accessible character. He is the most complex and the most maddening because he has that shimmering quality of a truth that is almost articulated, but then falters. He is almost the perfect blend of perception and inspiration which would put him in the pantheon of love poets he hopes to join; yet his carnality keeps him from heaven. At the same time, though, his belief in the Beautiful keeps him from hell. No other Nabokovian protagonist offers such a challenge to the reader. I hope to articulate those elements that make Humbert such a disturbing and exasperating study, while he also inspires the reader. Nabokov manages this balancing act between morality and amorality with such finesse and trompe l'oeil with no other character. No label entirely fits him.

For example, Humbert is not as easy to censure as Hermann of Despair. Humbert diminishes Dolores Haze by shutting her away from a normal childhood; yet his goal was to apotheosize her. Hermann's objective from the start was to treat Felix as a cipher; Hermann's act is clearly evil. For him, art is simply a convenient label for murder. Nabokov also treats the amorality of the false artist unambiguously in Laughter in the Dark. The vicious pranks of Axel Rex make it clear to the least discerning reader that Rex uses his artistic skills to diminish others rather than to act responsibly in the face of human frailty. In another study of amorality, King, Queen, Knave, the characters lack even the saving edge of Rex's perceptual acuity to brighten their wickedness; they are dully and ponderously selfish. Even the murder plot the lovers devise is trite and ineffectual.

Conscripting the imagination into the service of cruelty creates obvious problems. Less obvious, but more instructive in their subtlety, are the problems faced by protagonists who retreat into the maze of their imaginations. By refusing to grapple with the "real" world and its caprices, they forfeit all pleasure and live constricted lives. The narrator of The Eye clearly fails in his attempt to deny the constraints of the physical world. So does the protagonist of The Defense, who sees the patterns of daily life as chess moves planned by a

malevolent force. Rather than rally against his increasing fear of a physical world out to check him, he commits suicide. Death is also the escape of the anonymous Hugh Person of Transparent Things, whose attempt to find meaning is reduced to an endless nonsense dialectic between himself and objects, and a despair over a sterile marriage from which he hopes to extract meaning. Kinbote of Pale Fire, a friendless man, concocts a fantasy in an attempt to give himself substance. The poem of a local academician--a fairly pedestrian summary of the poet's (and Nabokov's) own beliefs about reality/unreality and the limitations of mortality--becomes in Kinbote's mind a clever disguise of, and tribute to, Kinbote's life. Almost literally "between the lines" of his narrative, Kinbote is exposed as a wily, but pathetic, figure, with little grasp of the offices or methods of art.

The escape into the imagination is used more effectively by the protagonist of Invitation to a Beheading, and is bestowed as a gift upon the protagonist of Bend Sinister, an honorable and sensitive man, a philosopher by profession. His only fault is his failure to realize that the political regime that surrounds him does have the power to tumble him from his aerie. Nabokov clearly looks with favor upon Cincinnatus of Invitation and Adam Krug of Bend Sinister, who both display the moral sensitivity of the true artist. Cincinnatus and Krug are

offered an escape into the imagination as a last-ditch alternative to death, both physical and moral. It is clear that Nabokov admires their integrity as artists and as thinking men, or he would not have rescued them.

He is even brighter and more exuberant in the small triumphs he allows Fyodor Gudunov-Cherdyntsev of The Gift and the title character of Pnin. Rather than calling upon their imaginations only in extremis, they use memory and the imagination consistently in their daily lives as a way to withstand the vicissitudes of the "real" world, which has handed each considerable losses. The necessity of using art as a way to transcend ambiguity and loss is also articulated by the narrator of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. That allegiance to art reaches its highest point in Ada, where the canvas upon which Van and Ada draw out the pattern of their lives is a Boschean Eden, enervating in its extravagance and perversity, yet for a time irresistible. They make a spirited effort to deny their future expulsion, but at last come partially to terms with their mortality, becoming less demonic and more human in the process.

Nabokov has given the reader a gallery of characters who display various traits of either the true or the false artist; these characters are fairly easy for the discerning reader to place in one camp or the other. Only in Humbert is the reader given a highly polished surface which on

closer inspection is still uncut, with its imperfections and its beauties vying equally with one another.

Discretely defining each of these will be difficult, since each takes color and clarity from its juxtaposition with other facets, both dark and light.

Throughout my discussion, I will explore the attitudes which Nabokov's heroes effect in order to deal with Caprice. I will examine Nabokov's treatment of the theme of political exile, and its relationship to emotional exile, and will consider the theme of emotional exile in its relationship to the traditional Romantic response. Finally, I will examine Nabokov's idiosyncratic use of "strange-making" details nestled within the mundane, so that horror and sadness insinuate themselves into the reader's consciousness even as he laughs with Nabokov at another of Caprice's tricks.⁵ I will demonstrate that Nabokov weaves each of these themes throughout his complex, contradictory narratives, with an off-handedness that belies and shields his underlying empathy.

⁵ Page Stegner appreciates Nabokov's black sense of humor, his skill at divining the mundane beneath the horrific. See Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov (New York: The Dial Press, 1966):

To cross farce with anguish . . . and not vitiate the suffering by the farcical treatment is an extremely difficult accomplishment. It is a technique in which Nabokov is perhaps the most consistently successful master among contemporary writers, and it is the triumph of his art. (21)

The paradoxical elements of Nabokov's simultaneous cold-blooded/empathic style should not be considered separately; they are woven into one seamless cloth, and the material is weakened if the strands are not considered as one. Through his work, Nabokov reveals himself as part solipsist, part savior--in short, as one of his own artist heroes. His flippancy cunningly supports and strengthens his sense of emotional engagement. His flippancy is a powerful trick Nabokov uses ultimately to disarm all-powerful Caprice. The baffled, imperceptive protagonist and the dismayed reader are merely his stalking-horses. By affecting nonchalance, Nabokov and his artist heroes can unobtrusively enter the performance as Caprice acts out his whims, and can pull off a sleight-of-hand which subtly alters Caprice's effect. While Nabokov's right hand is sawing the protagonist in half, blandly helping Caprice, his left is quietly pulling a live dove from a hat, releasing this fragile symbol of hope into the audience. The dismemberment of the protagonist cannot be avoided (the victims don't survive unscathed in Caprice's magic act)--whether Nabokov helps or not--because Caprice cannot be stopped. But Nabokov chooses to create a sense of beauty to balance the horrors of Caprice.

Nabokov's detachment is not an inevitable strategy for establishing control over the chaos in the world. He might

have emulated his statesman father by crafting an ideological stance against Bolshevism. Or he might have embraced the sentimentality which led other emigres to refuse to be assimilated by their new cultures, instead pining romantically for their lost Russia. Or he might have despaired, using his writing to draw the tortured map of a man estranged from his old world and its conventions, angrily and hopelessly attempting to piece together a new world. Or, he could have become a mere aesthete, devoid of human impulses, deciding that if the world was so lacking in a metaphysical order--call it God--then he would take his pleasure where he could within the limits of the physical world. The body of his work attests that Nabokov was intimately acquainted with the possibilities, and the limitations, of all these responses to Caprice.

In order to engage Caprice in combat with morality, Nabokov and his heroes must call Caprice out, on terms seductive to the monster. Thus the reader will be disconcerted by situations in Nabokov's work that are larded with black humor--where the absurd detail seems more compelling to the narrator than the moment of tragedy. Yet it is a necessary strategy to disarm Caprice. More important, Nabokov's use of the horrific, strange-making detail is, ironically, the most hopeful proof that Nabokov has discovered meaning within the void; for only an artist who has discerned the line between beauty and horror can be

confident enough to intertwine them intimately within his work. Nabokov then seeks to tease out affirming, compassionate, discerning artists among both his protagonists and his readers. I hope to show that Nabokov is completely engaged with human concerns, and that his method is a complex, gutsy, and effective response to a world where it seems that only intelligent subterfuge can gain momentary control over Caprice.

Nabokov invokes Caprice, and simultaneously teases and tests the reader, in two novels which are among his most "black" and cold-blooded. Reading King, Queen, Knave, for example, is akin, emotionally, to skimming a newspaper. It is as if you read on the front page, in bold headlines, that six prominent local businessmen had died in the crash of a small plane. You are stunned at the six deaths and at the sorrow and disorder those deaths will cause. Then you read, buried on page 26, a filler story from Kabul, Afghanistan, telling how a bus plunged off a mountainside, killing 62 people. This happened because the driver was running without headlights, a common practice with Mohammedan bus drivers who have to pay to replace dead headlamps. They also believe that if a bus crashes, it is Allah's will; that a bus driver's actions, however absurd or dangerous, are immaterial. In your amusement at the absurdities of a world operating under such a hapless belief, you forget the deaths.

Similarly, the reader of King, Queen, Knave becomes distracted from the horror that befalls the characters because the reader becomes so caught up in the sangfroid of Nabokov's style. In King, Queen, Knave a young man and his lover plan to murder her husband, who is the young man's uncle; but then she dies of a chance illness. The tone of the entire novel, although it includes a lover's triangle, a murder plot, and death, is objective rather than passionate, and the mood is expressionistic but not tragic. The reader can flip page after page, with no sense of emotional engagement.

In Invitation to a Beheading, the narrative tone is equally detached, but Nabokov lets more than a tinge of horror seep through. The protagonist, Cincinnatus, whose mind the narrator selectively enters, has been imprisoned for the crime of "being opaque." The narrator gives neither the reader nor Cincinnatus clues to the motivation of the jailer, the executioner, Cincinnatus's wife, nor any other character who is crucial to his well-being. Cincinnatus takes heart when he hears digging outside his cell, thinking that he is being rescued. He learns, however, that the tunneler is his jailer, who has been systematically and perversely digging a route leading back into Cincinnatus's cell. Yet Nabokov does not allow the horror of this little perversity to break the detached narrative style. The reader's uneasiness at such a cruel

joke is mitigated, instead, by subtle clues that all the events of the novel are merely Cincinnatus's delusion. Cincinnatus subsequently seems to release himself from execution by the simple act of imagining the collapse of the entire structure--as if everything had been stage props.

At this point, the reader might determine that he had been either the butt of an elaborate joke (if he allowed himself to be caught up in Cincinnatus's fears), the saddened onlooker at an incident of oppression in which the victim's only escape was madness, or the privileged observer of a feat of mental triumph. Like any Nabokovian protagonist, the reader must also determine whether his own response to the stultification and dull perversity of Cincinnatus's prison world is to admit defeat or to take on such a world as an artistic challenge.

In his novels, Nabokov explores the artist's response, the escape into the imagination, showing that such art can be pernicious when used irresponsibly and can be profoundly nurturing when used responsibly. The responsible artist hero recognizes that though the employment of imaginative sleights-of-hand to reorder reality might make him feel powerful, the ugly, chaotic real world still persists, obstinately. The artist is never omnipotent, though art has power, within limits. Art can enforce order in a messy world--a world jumbled with petty fears, with ennui and

hopelessness, with the obduracy of fellow humans; one possible way to bliss is the mental control which attends artistic detachment.

On the other hand, art offers only false salvation to those who do not realize that art is married to reality. For example, the reader suspects that the scheme of Hermann Karlovich of Despair is too perfect to be real, for reality is never so neat as art. For Hermann, art is a psychological reordering in which--in his mind--another man's face takes on the contours of his own. He can then dispatch his own fears by dispatching this new persona. His artistic scheme seems to confer power upon Hermann, allowing him to purge himself of his weaknesses by killing his "double." However, his "double" looks nothing like him, and Hermann will be found out. The stick figure Hermann--and the artistic construct he uses to prop himself up--are crushed by the weight of a reality which operates like a juggernaut, moving silently yet powerfully against his fantasy world. Art can reorder reality, and thus afford the artist a degree of control in a messy world; but this control is tenuous, and easily toppled by Caprice.

Thus Nabokov builds worlds which revolve around aspiring artists (or, like Hermann, aspiring philistines hopeful that their lives will be enhanced by actions they deem artful). These characters, through acts of the imagination, do attain some measure of dignity. Yet

Nabokov also shows the limitations of their artifice, undermining their imaginary worlds by persistently interjecting the pettiness, the sadness, and the unforeseen disasters which are part of the real world in which all rounded characters must operate. If, like Hermann, the character cannot live on respectful terms with the real world, then his art masks a serious illness.

This debilitating use of the imagination is made even clearer in Lolita, as Humbert attempts to realize his desire for perfection in the person of a pubescent girl. His attempts not only disintegrate his own self-esteem, but also destroy the child, who is denied her childhood. Humbert the artist truly appreciates beauty; yet as he holds Lolita, his diamond, in the pressure of his grip, a kind of backwards chemistry occurs, turning that diamond to carbon and ash (Lolita dies at age 17, giving birth to a stillborn child).

Nabokov examines the theme of pernicious passion, divorced from time and change, again in Ada. In a fantasyland called Antiterra, protagonist Van attempts to preserve himself and his Ada in the perfection of their childhood love affair. (Although Antiterra is said by Nabokov to be modeled on America, it is also gloriously like Nabokov's boyhood Russia.) Van and Ada mean to defy time and change by capturing fleeting moments in art. They painstakingly gather insects and orchids, preserving

summer's largesse in detailed drawings of things they have collected. They defy the laws of space and gravity through elaborate feats of magic and acrobatics. And they are tirelessly sensual: Each sensory impression, from their lovemaking to the observation of the patina that thousands of hands leave upon a banister, is dissected and savored. Yet somehow, in their obsessive attention to the artistic detail, they lose touch with human emotion--their lush, cornucopia-like world of flora and fauna and endless lovemaking is paradoxically sterile. The world of Ada rivals Spenser's Bower of Bliss, and, like that bower, has something enervating, rather than vital, at its core.⁶

For example, Van recounts, as an old man, how Lucette, Ada's sister, had to be diverted from the sites of young Van's and Ada's love trysts. When Lucette continued to be a pest even when the lovers were young adults, at one point they brought her into their bed for a little teasing, to experiment with something new in their marriage of passion

⁶ Ellen Pifer says in Nabokov and the Novel:

If . . . the prodigious gifts of Van and Ada Veen tend to raise them to the level of the superhuman, there are also times when both characters appear abysmally inhuman. . . . Understandably impressed by Van's and Ada's talents, the poetry of Van's prose, and the enchantment of his love affair with Ada, critics have tended to overlook the darker elements of the Veens' experience. Their inhuman qualities are, however, deliberately set forth in the text, to be examined by the reader. Our recognition of these inhuman qualities is, I believe, as essential to an understanding of Ada as these subhuman elements are to King, Queen, Knave. (139)

and art. Van recounts this experience with detachment, as if it were a montage seen through a kaleidoscope: Ada's dark, dark hair, Lucette's red coloring, and himself as their foil. Not a trace of sympathy slips into this telling, notwithstanding the fact that Lucette, finally, commits suicide, possibly as a result of the turmoil stirred up in her by her unrequited love for Van and by the mockery of this menage a trois. In Lolita and Ada, art is a means to gain control, but that control seems to be gained at the expense of compassion.

As the reader follows the beautiful lines of another Nabokovian design, a clean design which masks a tangle of subtleties, he should ask: When does art celebrate our humanity; and when does art become mere artifice, sterile and inhuman? This is the question Nabokov poses. The Nabokovian character walks a fine line between art and artifice. At his weakest, he is simply a pawn moved around a chessboard. At his strongest, he is still a pawn subject to the whims of Caprice; but he attempts to transcend his state by memorializing moments of beauty in art. Still, the Nabokovian artist knows that ultimate control is in the hands of Caprice, and has no illusions that an artist's magic actually subdues reality. Even while, like the magician, he is using one hand to retrieve whole women from slashed boxes and to create live doves from crumpled paper, he keeps the other hand in the real world. The character

completely detached from reality is no true Nabokovian artist; the artist's response must be a studied detachment, used in defense of morality and compassion.

Nabokov has said that his works are not didactic, have "no moral in tow," and should not be doggedly searched for his "message." Still, when he told his students "Style is all," he didn't mean that a novel should be only an exercise in style. His works are not merely artistic constructs. The insistent ethical subtheme beneath his aesthetic constructs proclaims that art must be both the shrine and the crucible for the frail human condition. For Nabokov, art is a paradox: an engineering marvel built of beauty and banality, a frail edifice of enduring strength. His detached style functions as the vehicle for this message, as I will demonstrate. But his style is not his message. Using a circumspect, tongue-in-cheek delivery, Nabokov aims not for detachment but for emotional response. That style, as Field has noted, is part of Nabokov's idiosyncratic response to a personal world where the verities (an omnipotent intelligence that might be called God; a country to call one's one; political and social constructs) were in constant flux, so that any ideal of order or beauty could be preserved only by the imagination. If untenable social and political realities can be "changed" only by transubstantiating the real world through art, a work of art then becomes something akin to a

political action, a statement of the supremacy of the individual spirit over the state. Each work of art also affirms the enduring--even if beleaguered--power of beauty within the world.

Phyllis A. Roth's psychological approach to Nabokov supports my view that Nabokov's art constitutes his own form of political statement.⁷ However, I would not imply, as she does, that the death of Nabokov's father, and of a father-figure, his cousin Yuri, were the necessary and sufficient causes of what she terms his solipsistic retreat into art.

Page Stegner, in Escape into Aesthetics, gives Nabokov credit for continued emotional engagement with his world, despite his personal losses. Stegner examines this retreat as a expansive, rather than a defensive, response. Stegner understands that although the retreat of the artist to an idiosyncratic construct has also been the reaction of the nihilist, Nabokov is not one of their number. At no point in Nabokov's work, or in his commentaries upon his work and life, does he lose his sense of humor, retreat from reality, or court anarchy. Yes, Nabokov is an aesthete, but his method of using aesthetic puzzles to examine the human condition is the response of an engaged human being, not the retreat of a solipsist.

⁷ "Toward the Man Behind the Mystification," in Nabokov's Fifth Arc 43-59.

My interpretation of his work should not be construed as psychological criticism. Nabokov's fiction is not the inevitable response to his own personal history of exile and loss. I mean merely to point out that his political and familial background inform his artistic sensitivity, a sensitivity which is at once objective and Romantic, and which gives his work a moral richness beneath its aesthetic perfection. If Nabokov can be said to have a "message," it is: Pursue beauty; but temper that pursuit with a realization of the limits of art. The artist's faith in the fleeting moment of perfection--tempered by the knowledge that he lacks the power to perfectly recreate such moments--allows compassion for the human condition. The artist's responsibility is to attempt to bring order to chaos at the same time that he admits the impossibility of his task.

It is hardly obvious, however, that Nabokov is as much a moralist as he is an aesthete, because the detached way in which his narrators report the undoing of their protagonists nearly overwhelms the emotional underweave beneath the artifice. Nabokov reports from a world which often seems bereft of "kindness, tenderness, ecstasy," the elements which were part of his professed formula for "aesthetic bliss." But--and this distinction is important-- Nabokov's habit of reporting horrors should not be construed as his approving of the world he reports.

Readers who call Nabokov a heartless aesthete seem to revert to the practice of the ancient Greeks, and want to punish the bearer of the bad news rather than the cause of it. In Nabokov's world, Caprice is the bad news, and Nabokov simply the bearer.

Nabokov's arch style, in which he freely admits to keeping both his characters and his readers under his controlling thumb--is not an asseveration that the author is god so much as it is an artistic recreation of the stance of Caprice over human lives. Caprice has no passions, operates instead on whims. Caprice moves sometimes like a noiseless, invisible juggernaut, powerful and destructive, giving no hint of its approach--and sometimes moves more like a butterfly net, airy and serene, but quick to snap down and entrap its victims. Furthermore, human emotions do not affect Caprice. Similarly, Nabokov's narrators, who often stand in the stead of Caprice, respond fitfully, if at all, to the emotional needs of the characters, or fail even to discern in the characters what the reader might call "normal" human emotion.

Since events are endowed with so little emotional weight by the narrators, it is easy for the reader to follow unconcerned as twists of coincidence lead the character off the edge of a cliff, either literally to death or to a psychological undoing. For example, Hermann

Karlovich of Despair is undone as the reader watches. He has murdered a drifter named Felix whom he saw as his mirror image, thinking that the authorities would believe that Hermann was dead, and that he and his wife Lydia could retire comfortably with the insurance money. He recounts the perfection of his plan, which has inexplicably failed (a failure which is not inexplicable to the perceptive reader). Despair is filled with crevices (most of them involving incidents which should arouse anxiety in Hermann, though he seems disinterested)--but these crevices seem as harmless as the titillations of walking through a funhouse. Although he seems unaware of flagrant evidence of his wife's affair with her cousin, perhaps he is merely unaffected. And he acts as though he were merely bemused by incidents which show a splitting of his own personality; he sees such incidents as moments of perception not allowed the unartistic man. In a scene much commented on by critics, Hermann thinks how it pleases him when "imp Split" takes over while he is making love to Lydia: Split into two selves, Hermann can feel his face buried in the plump folds of her neck at the same time that he is watching himself perform, one hand placed casually on the back of the chair where she has arranged her underthings. He daydreams of becoming even more detached: of observing from so far away that his performing self is only a cartoon figure on a blue globe, spied through a high-powered telescope.

Because Hermann is cold-blooded, the reader has difficulty developing empathy for him. Yet, Felix the victim engenders just as little empathy, since the murder is performed in a milieu which is emotionally gray, or at best, ambiguous. In fact, Nabokov renders Hermann's crime even more colorless, through Hermann's admission that his underlying motive is to have his escapade published in the USSR. Hermann is an avowed Communist eager to prove his belief that all men are indistinguishable, interchangeable cogs perfect in their utility to the state:

It even seems to me sometimes that my basic theme, the resemblance between two persons, has a profound allegorical meaning. . . . In fancy, I visualize a new world, where all men will resemble one another as Hermann and Felix; a world of Helixes and Fermanns; a world where the worker fallen dead at the feet of his machine will be at once replaced by his perfect double wearing the serene smile of perfect socialism.
(Despair [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966] 168-69.)

It is difficult for the reader to feel sympathy for a character with so little understanding of the individual--Hermann becomes a pawn, not a person, through his own choice. Subtly, throughout the novel, Nabokov reveals that Hermann has been "murdered" as well as Felix, that Hermann's act was not simply a useful effacement of himself and others, but a tragic failure of vision, both literally and psychologically. Having killed Felix, Hermann reads in the newspaper that a man has been found

wearing Hermann Karlovich's clothes, which has immediately alerted police to foul play, since the dead man in no way resembles Hermann Karlovich. This revelation finally causes the visceral twist in Hermann as well as in the reader, and explains the title Despair. The astute reader is finally assured that he has been privy to not the clever twists of the perfect crime, but the twists of a disintegrating mind; the lazy or gullible reader, who has accepted Hermann's flawed perceptions until the end, is brought up short.

The gamesman who moved the characters has also been manipulating the reader; the game, which has worked perfectly, was Nabokov's, not Hermann's. Though Hermann had hoped that his murder scam would be the perfect work of art, he has failed as both criminal and artist. He has hoped to achieve the "pride, deliverance, bliss" of artistic triumph. But he ends as a deluded pawn in a large game played by a perhaps malevolent, certainly laissez-faire, gamesman. This act of bringing both the protagonist and the reader up short at the end shows Nabokov's genius, because it warns the reader that he leaves himself open to mad delusions if he continues to approach the world as a detached observer.

Perversely, though, Nabokov ensures that his reader will continue to observe detachedly and will continually be brought up short at the end. He deliberately sets up

intriguing extraneous details and patterns that direct the reader away from the crux of the situation, and dissipate his emotional response. Only through repeated exposure does the reader learn that even in Nabokov's most detached works, human emotion continues far below, like a worm at its own pace, inevitably chewing through even the most elaborate artistic construct.

Some critics fail to fully appreciate the endless psychological puzzles and the overwhelming displays of sensory detail--piled image upon image, and memory upon memory--with which Nabokov confounds his readers. Barbara Goodwin argues that modern philosopher/writers (specifically Sartre, Borges, and Nabokov) in their fiction needlessly stir up an existential vertigo, in a kind of reductio ad absurdum of objective reality.⁸ These writers, Goodwin says, fall victim to a kind of referential mania. Frustrated by the limitations of memory, and overwhelmed by the proliferation of objective data provided by the empirical sciences, they despair of coherently "naming" reality. Nabokov, she notes, pairs incidents and objects helter-skelter; or, in an attempt to force meaning, to expose the kernel, reduces objects to atoms. Her analogy--taken from a suggestion in the narrator's

⁸ "The Vertigo of Facts: Literary Accounts of a Philosophical Dilemma," British Journal of Aesthetics 18 (1978): 261-276.

introduction to Transparent Things--is the core of the nursery rhyme "The House That Jack Built," in which the connection between Jack and the cheese is linear and tangential, but not specifically causal or necessary. Nabokov, Goodwin says, becomes enmeshed in an intellectual regression, archly reducing some chance memory until it seems as if essence should have been plumbed; yet no meaning is revealed. For example, in Transparent Things, he reduces a pencil on a desk to its "worm" of lead, and traces a meal inside the protagonist's entrails.

Goodwin suggests, though, that this complaint of object-vertigo is too precious, since a writer is always in control, via the selective, order-making processes of memory and language. Furthermore, he can avail himself of the order and meaning granted to experience once it is placed within linguistic and social constructs. While she appreciates the vertigo that the objective world can induce in the modern man searching for meaning, she believes that the artist has the skills to cure himself of his own sickness. Although I agree with her analysis of Nabokov's strategy, I do not agree that he uses this strategy in order to abdicate responsibility for assigning meaning to experience. Nabokov himself is not overwhelmed by experience. Rather, he uses object-vertigo as an illustration of the havoc Caprice wreaks in the minds of those characters who are too weak to withstand the

banalities of the "real" world, and seek meaning willy-nilly. I will examine Goodwin's argument at greater length later.

Like Goodwin, William Carroll sees Nabokov's universe as essentially contrived, although he reacts with amusement rather than impatience.⁹ Carroll first explores the tyranny that the world of random objects and accidents holds over Nabokov's characters. In the face of this situation, though, he notes the paradoxical freedom afforded the reader who comes to realize that Nabokov's characters are his galley slaves, "authored" bits who lack autonomy. This knowledge has the perverse power to liberate, Carroll says, because it teaches the reader that he, too, can create a reality over and above the circumscribed world, where pain is the norm. In his understanding of the all-powerful authorial position, Carroll faintly apprehends the position of the artist hero; but he fails to apprehend Nabokov fully because he focuses on the mechanistic, rather than the humanistic, aspects of authoring a new reality.

Alfred Appel Jr., who has examined the dark humor in Nabokov's pictures of daily life within a culture, is even more pleased than Carroll to examine Nabokov's

⁹ "Nabokov's Signs and Symbols," in A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov, ed. Carl Proffer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974) 203-17.

journalism-style sangfroid, although his criticism may err on the side of too much fascination with Nabokov the scientist, nearly to the exclusion of Nabokov the humanist.¹⁰ He notes Nabokov's love of the painstaking depiction of detail, and argues that Nabokov's brilliance is in making objects the only reality. Nabokov's apparent belief in the self-sufficiency of the objective world is the reason, Appel argues, that Nabokov does not care about argumentation, advice, social relevance, or the artist's responsibility. Thus, Appel says, Nabokov allows his young author/protagonist in The Gift to satirize Chernyshevsky, a real historical figure, a socialist and activist venerated even in pre-Bolshevik Russia.

However, I would argue that if a scientist's objectivity were Nabokov's raison d'etre, his lovingly reconstructed details would not be embellished with nuance, illusion, allusion, double-entendre, and exquisite touches of irony. The objective detail, set starkly against these embellishments, gives his work its peculiar tension, its insistent undercurrent of pathos beneath the dispassionate game-playing. Examples of this tension abound, for example, in Humbert's recounting of his affair with Dolores Haze, in which only the random detail (a so-called "rabbit cold, that tinged her nostrils pink") reminds the reader

¹⁰ "Nabokov: A Portrait," in Nabokov's Fifth Arc 3-21.

of the horror inherent in Humbert's story: Lolita is not an ethereal temptress, but a 12-year-old child being coerced by an adult.

Nabokov controls emotion so that it is insinuated rather than laid on with a trowel. He criticized what he considered the bathos of Dostoevsky, mocking the oppressive verbiage and histrionic epithets; instead, Nabokov takes what might be termed a gentlemanly, even a sporting, approach to those social and personal concerns which evoke the deepest emotions--an approach well in keeping with his family background. The Nabokov line boasted gentlemen of intelligence, wit, and style, who coupled these attributes with a strong concern for their country's political and social welfare. Nabokov varies from them only in method, choosing to make his statement obliquely, rather than straightforwardly at the podium or in polemical broadsides.¹¹

¹¹ Page Stegner notes in the Introduction to A Portable Nabokov (New York: Viking Press, 1968) that Nabokov does not use his work to examine exile from Russia on a political level, because such discussion

. . . smacks of social problems, and he tends to become abusive when anyone accuses him of trading in them--rightly so, for his books do not have "social significance," and those who mistake parody for social satire are confusing intention. The former, he points out, is a game, the latter a lesson. Even when he does invent a totalitarian state, as in Invitation to a Beheading and Bend Sinister, his interest is not in the ideology of despotism but in the stifling of the creative consciousness that inevitably ensues.

Nabokov eschews writing polemics that address economic and social concerns; he instead reserves his pen for celebrating fictional men who use art as a construct for meaning in the face of the void. It is not ars gratia artis, but ars gratia moralis: We are at the height of our humanity when we create a work of art, the only transcendent power granted us. Thus, for Nabokov, the artistic act is an act of heroism.

However, as Nabokov makes clear, art is also an inherently dangerous method of engendering a more perfect reality, because the imagination looms as an area where the artist's psyche can disappear. Andrew Field, in his 1986 biography, V. N.: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov, traces in Nabokov's life and art the pervasive theme of the double, which grew, Field says, out of Nabokov's fascination with the dangers of narcissism. Field also examines, in both Nabokov and his characters, the use of

Andrew Field seems to uphold Stegner's assessment. In the introduction to Chapter 7 of Nabokov: His Life in Art, Field quotes Nabokov directly, to show that Nabokov supports democratic, certainly non-Bolshevik tenets, but that he is primarily concerned with how politics affects freedom of thought and expression:

"Since my youth, and I was nineteen when I left Russia--my political outlook has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me. Portraits of the head of government should be limited to the size of a postage stamp." (Nabokov, Strong Opinions [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973] 34-35; rpt. in Field 181)

art as both a chary protection of the ego against death, and a kind of liberation of the ego into a state outside of objective reality. Field argues that although the boundaries between Narcissus on the bank and the face in the pool sometimes nearly merge, as Nabokov experiments with his reflection, on some level of the psyche these boundaries are preserved; otherwise, the artist would be drowned in his imagination. In my argument, the Nabokovian hero is the character who is strong enough to recognize the boundary between the psyche and the world, even as he flirts with falling into the depths of his own imagination. Thus Nabokov's least sympathetic characters are philistines who cannot discern art from artifice. These characters are most easily disposed of by a flick of the finger of Caprice. More sympathetic, but still inadequate, are those characters who are so sensitive that they disintegrate mentally when daily life impinges on their imaginary worlds. Finally, we have his most sympathetic, his heroic, characters; they are the true artists, who move with equal facility between their art and ordinary reality, never disappearing in either.

Understandably, however, since Nabokov's narrators usually report the undoing of both inferior and superior characters quite dispassionately, it is easy to infer that, for Nabokov, emotional engagement is a secondary concern, far less important than the game-playing. Various critics

point out, with considerable glee, what they consider evidence of Nabokov's chosen role as manipulator of pawns.

Carl Proffer notes that a respected Russian emigre critic, Petr Bitsilli, early on discerned and appreciated that the Nabokovian universe operates under no common rules of pattern or causality.¹² Bitsilli retraces the clues in Despair that would lead the astute traditional reader to expect a resolution for Hermann, something like the Dostoevskian treatment of alienation. Bitsilli notes, however, that all clues are false, and that such a "Freudist" interpretation is never borne out in the novel.

William W. Rowe, on the other hand, appreciates Nabokov's love of oblique clues that lead not to cul-de-sacs but to crucial themes.¹³ Nabokov never actually "misrepresents" important incidents, Rowe says; he just seems to. In another essay, on Pnin, Rowe analyzes the pattern of sevens (Pnin's seven heart seizures) and threes (three magical squirrels who help Pnin) which intersects the horizontal grid of control placed over Pnin's life by the narrator.¹⁴ Pnin becomes that narrator's "galley slave," and must try to discern the

¹² A Book of Things 63-69.

¹³ "The Honesty of Nabokovian Deception," in A Book of Things 171-181.

¹⁴ "Pnin's Uncanny Looking Glass," in A Book of Things 182-92.

narrator's pattern, just as he tried, unsuccessfully, to discern the recurring patterns in his wallpaper when he was a child. Frustratingly, Pnin realizes that patterns have a key; but the key seems unattainable, and meanwhile the universe continues in its high-handed way.

These interpretations fail to adequately appreciate that Nabokov's characters are not powerless; for in Nabokov's view, the ability to imagine makes one powerful. They also fail to emphasize that the private worlds of Nabokov's characters are not simply aesthetic constructs, but are similar, on a psychological level, to the quotidian world in which all his readers reside. A more careful assessment would show that not Nabokov, but Caprice--whimsical destruction, inevitable loss--rules the private worlds of Nabokov's characters; and that Caprice, not Nabokov, lacks compassion. Nabokov's detachment is only a ploy to disarm Caprice, and to give himself breathing room. He needs time to conceive and erect an artistic construct that will create a salutary, if fleeting, beauty in the midst of chaos. Nabokov, in referring to his characters as his pawns and "galley slaves," accepts, on the face of it, the role of the heartless manipulator who calls the shots; but it is more accurate to say that Nabokov's function is not to fire the shots but rather to announce each bullet as it strikes, randomly, from the void. Nabokov conceives his function to

be that of reporter rather than commentator; he expects the intelligent reader to puzzle out the salient facts and to draw the appropriate conclusion. That conclusion would seem to be the old saw, "truth is stranger than fiction."

Nabokov's worlds are frequently coalesced out of a cosmic ether of the horrific and the absurd, which envelops the quotidian until the ordinary seems negligible. Thus his works, seemingly almost facetious if judged by a common reality, are always true to a psychological reality: man's fear of time's changes, particularly of death, the final change. Nabokov's heroes know that their appreciation of physical beauty--and their attempts to render beauty changeless through art--help them hold chaos at bay; but they also know that Caprice can topple them and their attempts in an instant. So Nabokov believes that art must be performed defiantly, in full knowledge that, ultimately, chaos will prevail. The true artist realizes that art cannot defeat Caprice with all its machinations. But he also recognizes that art is his best defense, because it encompasses the finest human emotions--the desire for beauty's permanence, and sorrow in the knowledge that the desire cannot be granted.

Nabokov's work embodies a particular tension. Balanced against an, at times, almost insufferable chutzpah, in the artist's attempt to construct his own more perfect reality, is the artist's sorrow in knowing that his

attempt will fail. The sorrow always lurks even though the Nabokovian artist often conceals it beneath a self-protective shell of irony and game-playing. Nabokov's examination of Humbert Humbert in Lolita, his 1955 masterpiece, plumbs the relationship between the artist and his art most deeply and fully, uncovering both the bliss and the torment that attend the act of creation. (Ada, Nabokov's later novel, is more sensual, but not so poignant.) Lolita is also the work which most subtly interweaves an argument for the necessity of keeping one hand in the real world and retaining a sense of humility and compassion to temper one's art. But these issues underly not only Lolita; they are at the heart of all of Nabokov's achievement.

CHAPTER II

TRANSCENDING POLITICS: RECLAIMING
THE PAST IN IMAGERY

Lolita, the novel which ensured Nabokov's popular success, was not an isolated creation but rather the culmination of Nabokov's belief, developed out of his early disenchantment with politics, that art provides the only course of action for the honorable man. But for notable exceptions such as the exuberant young protagonist of The Gift, Nabokov's characters live in a universe where a sense of purpose and efficacy is hard to come by. Those characters who are not political exiles somehow have little sense of human community, and they lead self-absorbed and obsessive lives. Those who are contending with political exile respond passionately to the past, but they must make heroic efforts in order to be engaged in the present. For them, loss of wealth and status, forced emigration to alien cultures, and even loss of family and friends because of political ideologies, often combine to create emotional estrangement. Their reduced lives require them to draw on reserves of memory and imagination in order to live fully despite their present fortunes.

Those who lack Nabokovian mettle fabricate delusions of control that only briefly counteract the reality that eventually overwhelms them. But the heroes among Nabokov's

characters reclaim some power through art. All, though, must adjust to casual diminishment, like children who are the frequent butts of pranks from an inventive bully. Each adapts to this diminishment in his own way. Nabokov's heroes face Caprice squarely, but his ciphers succumb to the hapless delusions or hopeless passivity which prompt critics to call Nabokov's characters his "galley slaves." Nabokov's own response to the Bolshevik revolution which claimed his family's fortune and, obliquely, his father's life, is echoed faintly by those characters who use their bafflement, sorrow, and distaste for their present conditions to fuel a unique combative energy.

They learn to face Caprice and the new reality with faith in the stinging, yet healing, power of memory as celebrated in the lyric image. They also renew their quest for the sensual and emotional perfection they remember. Their quixotic quest will pit them not against windmills but against Caprice, a malevolent giant with a skewed sense of humor and a marked disrespect for the individual, the imagination, and art. Since romance has been leached from their present circumstances, they must protect their persistent Romantic passions under a hard shell of cynicism and gallows humor, in order to play Caprice's game. And they must not lose their footing on their new reality, however circumscribed that reality may be, or Caprice will undo them.

I am indebted to Andrew Field's exhaustive early study, Nabokov: His Life in Art, which encompasses Nabokov's adolescent poetry through his preparations for Ada. (Ada and his last novels, Transparent Things and Look at the Harlequins!, had not yet been written.) Field examines Nabokov's poetry, short stories, novellas, novels, and a limited number of works of political and literary criticism, all published in Russian before 1939; Field's study also contains comparisons between the originals and versions that were reworked or translated into English after 1940. Finally, it includes works written after 1940, when Nabokov and his wife emigrated to the United States. These works after 1940 were written in English, like The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the trial novel in which he left his vow to be a Russian-language writer. He had tried, with some success (he was a popular lecturer, but had difficulty finding suitable publishers for his work), to break into the literary world in Paris, after the effects of growing anti-Semitism forced him and his wife to leave Berlin (she is Jewish).¹ All subsequent references to Field, unless otherwise indicated, will be to Nabokov: His Life in Art.

¹ Nabokov was not a neophyte to the language when he began writing works in English; his first governess had been from Great Britain, and English was the language of choice in the upper-class milieu in which the Nabokov family circulated prior to the Revolution. Furthermore, he took his degree at Cambridge after his family left Russia.

Referring to Field's studies, I will focus on the themes of quotidian reality and the tension between it and artistic reality; on the use of narrative detachment for the purpose of artistic control; and on the comments of both Nabokov and critics concerning the influence of his personal history on his work. Nabokov in his art transcended his personal history, saving the spirit of the Russia he loved, its lyric impulse, not by a political act but by continued acts of the imagination which secured and strengthened that lyricism. Many of his most engaging and sympathetic characters also draw sustenance from memory. However, as I will show, his artist heroes are pragmatic enough to temper nostalgia with reality.

In an early novel, The Gift, which some call his best, Nabokov traces the development of the poetic sensibility of a young Russian writer named Fyodor Gudunov-Cherdyntsev (fictional), living in exile in Berlin, who is beginning to establish a reputation for himself. Fyodor begins his career with a book of simple, lyrical poems constructed of remembered images from his childhood, and then writes an irreverent biography of an actual socialist hero who fell out of favor, Chernyshevsky. The biography has little to do with the socialist's contributions to the state, and much to do with brilliantly poking fun at the man's pretensions to being an heroic figure in the worlds of politics and letters.

Among Nabokov's novels, The Gift is his most lyrical and affirmative, and can be read with pleasure as an account true in spirit, if not in fact (because transmuted through art, of course) to the development of the young poet Vladimir Nabokov. Although Nabokov began as a poet, he seemed to segue naturally into elegant, poeticized prose.² For example, in Lolita, the extended prose metaphor is the girl as butterfly, a thing of beauty and airiness that emerges from a drab cocoon. The metaphor also balances this beauty against the attendant threat of the collector's net and mounting pins.³

² After noting that the principle of poetic prose is central to Nabokov's fiction, not only in The Gift and Speak, Memory, but also in Nabokov's novels, Field cites Nabokov's own definition of poetry, which encompasses prose:

"Poetry 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 praising, the beat of thought rendered by recurring 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." (Qtd. in Field 43-44.)

³ This metaphor is explicated almost to the point of tedium in Diana Butler's "Lolita Lepidoptera." Butler explains, for example, that Humbert, noticing the fine downy hairs on Lolita's arm as she reaches to return a tennis ball, thinks of the fine dusting of pollen carried by butterflies. (New World Writing 16 [Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1960] 58-84.)

While The Gift is conditionally autobiographical, in his autobiographical Speak, Memory, Nabokov recreates those sensations and images which gave color and meaning to his childhood, and which continue to inform his experiences as an adult. In Speak, Memory, Nabokov, to use Page Stegner's term, recoups his losses, recreating Russia from memory. (Although he performs a similar feat in Ada, the world of Antiterra is a fantastical reincarnation of Russia, with the beauties of Nabokov's America interspersed, rather than an attempt to lovingly reconstruct meaning from memory.) Speak, Memory is so richly evocative thanks to Nabokov's prodigious memory and his synaesthesia. This was an uncommon physiological condition he shared with his mother, which enabled them to "see" the "colors" of aural sensations, so that each sense overlapped and strengthened the others. In addition to recounting moments synaesthetically so that they become almost four-dimensional, dream-like, Nabokov collapses and condenses moments whenever one image seems to naturally follow another, regardless of how far those moments may have been separated in time.⁴

⁴ Field notes that "Nabokov will frequently suspend his narrative for a brief instant during which he focuses upon a single striking image which becomes a tiny work of art or 'prose poem' in itself." Field cites this passage from Despair:

". . . [She was] in the kitchen engaged in beating an egg in a glass--'goggle-moggle,' we called it. The evening sun

And when memory fails him, he employs sleights of the imagination to embellish his narrative. Such easy movement between memory and imagination is part of the richness of Nabokov's entire body of work. "Facts" are never as important to him as creating a narrative true to the intellectual and emotional spirit of a captured moment.

Nabokov insistently maintains his commitment to aesthetics by means of the lyric image. In his imagery, he arrests and examines a single moment so lovingly that it becomes more vibrant, more resonant, than the historical "reality" of the moment being celebrated. The echoes spread out from that moment like ripples from a stone cast into a pond, their shapes altered before reaching the bank by intervening flora or fauna. Similarly, Nabokov's memories have been altered by the influence of time, and by the impress of his quotidian world, so that his lyric passages are true to the emotional impulse which produced them, but not necessarily true historically. Thus, even in his most closely autobiographical works, he creates a new reality, rather than simply recreating the old.

checkered the kitchen. Again she started to turn the spoon in the thick yellow stuff, grains of sugar crunched slightly, it was still clammy. The spoon did not move smoothly with the velvety ovality that was required. . ."
(Qtd. in Field 44; Despair 40-41.)

The memory of making goggle-moggle then segues naturally into another moment when the cook was grinding coffee in the coffee-mill, as if time occurs seamlessly.

His artist heroes create their own realities by condensing, enmeshing, and transforming memory and coincidence. For example, in The Prismatic Bezel, the fictitious novel written by the subject of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Sebastian employs the jeweler's bezel as a metaphor for his parodic use of the novelistic form as a tool for breaking out of the expected planes of story-telling.⁵ Sebastian transforms his life into a many-faceted gem, each facet blinding and consuming the narrator, while the core of his life remains lambent, a mystery.

Similarly, Fyodor of The Gift transforms Berlin into one long scintillant image, fraught with rhythm. The act of poetry begins with "thinking in images," and these images become the core of his existence. He fixates on the act of inducing rhyme, and of following rhythms, including those rhythms in the physical act of writing down the words.⁶

However, the paradox of Nabokov's universe--a paradox which offers his characters salvation and ruin simultaneously--is this: For all his passion for precise imagery and exact detail, Nabokov's reality does not lie in

⁵ Julia Bader, Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

⁶ Anna Maria Salehar, "Nabokov's Gift: An Apprenticeship in Creativity," in A Book of Things 70-83.

the objective world. In Nabokov's worlds, space and time are fluid--which makes sense, since such fluidity is true of both human memory and human imagination, neither of which honors space/time boundaries. Nabokov may chronicle the physical and temporal details of an incident cleanly and dispassionately, and then transcend those details by abandoning them without notice, and moving on to explore the psychological reality. As Nancy Anne Zeller notes, in Nabokov, time takes shape as a spiral, through the action of "voluntary memory aligning regularly recurring events which possess common features."⁷ His characters continually engage in spirited attempts to confound linear time through acts of the imagination, thereby hoping to evade, or at least mitigate the horrors of, loss and death.

In Ada, the narrator Van uses art in an attempt not only to transcend the ordinary world for Antiterra, his world of the imagination, but to escape bodily as well, by positing Antiterra as an actual spot on the map where love reigns and lovers never flag. He seeks to break the bonds of mortality by proclaiming a parallel world where time is disdained. In Antiterra, the extremes of horror and bliss (often coinciding in sexual perversion) are ardently pursued, and art and ardor are wedded. In Nabokov and the Novel, Ellen Pifer defends Ada in a qualified way for the

⁷ "The Spiral of Time in ADA," in A Book of Things 280-90.

skill with which Nabokov, via the clarity of Antiterra's extremes, backlights the murkier world of Terra where most mortals live, chary of their frailties and craving moral constructs to protect them. Antiterra is a pressurized, dazzling, diamond-hard nation of the demonic (the father of Van and Ada is called "Demon" Veen), and the Zemski family from which the Veens come perceives itself as deriving from superhuman gods as well as from the lusty but flawed gods of the Romantics. Yet even in Antiterra, time intrudes on Van's and Ada's love affair. Van finally escapes time only through the writing of the novel itself, a wedding of memory and imagination.

Although Nabokov easily abandons "reality" for worlds in which truth is defined by the imagination, and by the vagaries of memory, this does not necessarily prove that Nabokov thinks an artist should live wholly in his memory and his imagination. As Field notes, the most successful Nabokovian characters are those who are well-grounded in the daily world, but who can move with ease between that world and the worlds of their imaginations. These are the true artists.

Nabokov's insistence upon grounding the imagination in the real world is illustrated by a moment in the The Gift when Fyodor surfaces from a reverie in which he has imagined in detail the sensory delights of accompanying his father on a lepidoptery expedition into Siberia. Nabokov

has sewn this reverie so seamlessly into the narrative that it is as real to the reader as it is to Fyodor. Yet the father is now dead, and Fyodor never accompanied him in fact. The passage in The Gift when reality intrudes reads as follows:

[The Siberian scene] shifted and dispersed--and Fyodor saw again the dead and impossible tulips of his wallpaper, the crumbling mound of cigarette butts in the ashtray, and the lamp's reflection in the black windowpane. (The Gift, trans. Michael Scammell with the collaboration of the author [New York: Paragon Books, 1979] 137.)

Field explains that

This abrupt return from . . . a reality attained by means of Fyodor's powerful imagination and his readings of gifted naturalists . . . establishes the great distance between Fyodor's aesthetic demands upon himself and the factual requirements of biography that will finally make the [Chernyshevsky] project attainable. (Field 17)

Fyodor cannot remain in the world of his imagination; art must be yoked to life. Still, the connection between art and life is necessarily flexible and tenuous. As Fyodor learns, even history and biography are subsumed by artifice, however realistic the artist strives to be. He cannot accurately reproduce any single moment in history, however he might wish to, because memory dances at several removes from the actual event. While there is honor in the attempt to reproduce reality through narrative, the product must properly be called fiction--art.

Fyodor attempts to describe the impossibility of capturing truth in history, beginning his biography of Chernyshevsky with a sonnet:

Alas! In vain historians pry and probe.
 The same wind blows, and in the same live robe
 Truth bends her head to fingers curved cupwise
 And with a woman's smile and a child's care
 Examines something she is holding there
 Concealed by her own shoulder from our eyes.
 (The Gift 224; qtd. in Field 22.)

If history is itself a chimera, a tantalizing and often frustrating amalgam of "fact" and interpretation (albeit a chimera which caused real and substantive changes in Nabokov's own life), then the intelligent man cannot rely upon history. He becomes, de facto, a kind of reluctant existentialist.⁸ But, like Nabokov and his artists, the intelligent man may retain a spark of his former Romantic passion to warm and inspire him in a cold new world. Or, not so happily, he may become an embittered Romantic, or even a nihilist, as are Nabokov's least attractive characters. Nabokov's lyric impulse--leavening even his coolest, most controlled novels--is the legacy of his

⁸ Nabokov respected Sartre neither as philosopher or writer, offhandedly panning La Nausee in a review noting some blunders in a 1949 English translation ("Sartre's First Try," New York Times Book Review 24 Apr. 1949; rpt. Strong Opinions [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973] 228-30). He also heaped contempt on Sartre's analysis of Hermann as a victim of social and economic forces. Yet "existential despair" names the quandary from which many of Nabokov's most artful protagonists must extricate themselves.

personal history of exile. He sorrows for the Russia which can now exist for him only as a region of the imagination; though Russia as a political entity still exists, Nabokov recognizes only the Russia of his boyhood, a region of emotional security and richness.

Page Stegner notes how Nabokov uses the theme of exile to illustrate the crucial role of imagination in expanding an otherwise circumscribed life:

[In 1919] what the family left behind--a country, a heritage that extended back for generations, wealth, influence, reputation--all are revisited and recalled in Speak, Memory . . . a memoir of extraordinary perception and execution, as remarkable for its lack of bitterness and sentimentality as for the lyricism of its nostalgic recollections. One thing it makes quite clear is that Nabokov's investment in the past is in its "unreal estate" and not its once-upon-a-time riches. "The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years," he says, "is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood, not sorrow for lost banknotes." (The Portable Nabokov [New York: Viking Press, 1968] Introduction x.)

Stegner continues:

Almost without exception, Nabokov's heroes are, like himself, homeless wanderers forced by real or self-imposed exile to replace their terrestrial roots with various forms of distracting obsessions--chess, Russian literature, serial selves, the art of fiction, nymphets (only the last [obsession] may be omitted from [Nabokov's] dossier)--obsessions that enable them, through an absorption with the aesthetics of their various infatuations, to escape the difficulties and suffering in part produced by a vagrant existence. In part, one has to say, because homelessness is by no means the single source of his characters' suffering, and rarely can be blamed for their neurotic behavior. (Introduction xi.)

The function of such obsessions, as Stegner terms them, in compensating for past losses is illustrated most clearly in Humbert's desire to recreate with Dolores Haze a moment of perfection with one "Annabel Leigh" when he was 13. Such obsession is also apparent in Van Veen's richly sensual reminiscence about his lifelong affair with Ada, which was at perfect pitch when he was 14 and Ada 12.

Stegner seems to say that the imaginative lives of all of Nabokov's characters fall into the category of "neurotic obsession." Yet Humbert's passion for Dolores Haze--as even he makes quite clear--goes far beyond a simple niggling neurosis; a darker label is needed here. For the opposite reason, that the term "neurotic" ignores the emotional health of many of Nabokov's other protagonists, a more flattering label is needed for them. For example, Fyodor Gudunov-Cherdyntsev of The Gift, Kuznetsoff of The Man from the USSR, Pnin, and the mother in the short story "Signs and Symbols" all act bravely--and with a continuing determination to persevere in the present--in the face of anxiety-producing circumstances from the past. The circumstances which trigger their sorrow are real, not imagined or self-induced difficulties. These protagonists are not neurotics.

Stegner is deeply perceptive, though, in recognizing that Nabokov's theme of geographical exile is simply a vehicle for his true theme: emotional exile, living

estranged from one's present reality. Such estrangement creates a vacuum into which memory and the imagination flow, sometimes bringing welcome respite, sometimes unwelcome pain, into his characters' present lives.

Although his protagonists are not always exiles from Russia, they almost always live most fully in their imaginations, and are strangers, because of political circumstance or by choice, in the environments in which they now reside. Thus Nabokov always presents the faculty of memory as a painful gift: A protagonist may be able to recreate in achingly immediate sensory detail the country of his boyhood, or to recall moments in alien cities when he felt a piercing joy as he noticed a slant of light reflected in a puddle. His memory casts him back into moments of previous perfection and allows him to keep those moments inviolate. Yet the impress of memory painfully revivifies many moments of alienation.

The keenest examples of the effect of memory upon the exile are in Pnin, whose protagonist struggles gamely against the weight of present caprices bearing down on him, and against recurrent memories too heavy to be borne. Significantly, Nabokov treats Pnin--a sensitive Russian emigre who has endured tremendous sorrows--gently, occasionally sheathing the rapier point of the narrator, who jibes at Pnin's predicaments in typical Nabokovian fashion.

But Nabokov does not lament the sorrows of exile by constructing thinly-disguised allegories against the Soviet state or other political oppressors. Even when his novels seem overtly political, Nabokov does not aim to delineate the horrors of the political tyranny under which a protagonist lives, but rather to show the protagonist's struggle against the destructive power of his own imagination, which is leading him into the void--or to portray the protagonist's attempt to strengthen the constructive power of his imagination, which will lead him toward art.

In the two novels most often categorized as political, the philosopher Adam Krug of Bend Sinister and the dissident Cincinnatus of Invitation to a Beheading escape into their imaginations. Krug becomes mercifully lost in madness, via the deus ex machina of a sympathetic narrator who will not let Krug suffer remembering that his small son has been killed by the state. (The boy was a victim in a psychology "experiment" in which adult mental patients were allowed to exercise their hostilities by attacking children let loose into an arena.) Allowing Krug to become insane is a less than perfect conclusion, but it is clearly a compassionate act by the author. Nabokov has also explained that he did not intend Bend Sinister to be perceived as political raillery; instead, he merely attempted to set up a situation which required a

compassionate response.⁸ Cincinnatus of Invitation to a Beheading retains his integrity by mentally resisting the pressure to conform. He explodes the paper cut-out figures of authority who have jailed him, simply by setting his mind free from his hidden yearning for the security offered by a life in service to the state.

⁸ Nabokov was concerned that readers not mistake Bend Sinister for social or political commentary, veiled or explicit: As Stegner notes, Nabokov wrote an introduction to the novel in which he said:

"I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment. . . . I am not 'sincere,' I am not 'provocative,' I am not 'satirical.' I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer. Politics and economics, atomic bombs . . . the entire Orient, symptoms of 'thaw' in Soviet Russia, the future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent."

He admits that while he uses bits of Lenin's speeches to

". . . interlard [Bend Sinister], the story . . . is not really about life and death in a grotesque police state. My characters are not 'types,' not carriers of this or that 'idea'. . . all of them are only absurd images, illusions oppressive to Krug during his brief spell of being, but harmlessly fading away when I dismiss the cast. . . . The main theme . . . is the beating of Krug's loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subject to--and it is for the sake of the pages about David and his father that the book was written and should be read." (Rpt. in Stegner 240.)

Field notes, however, that

. . . when the political situation was still rather fluid and it was by no means certain that the Bolsheviks would persevere, the Soviet Union (as differentiated from Russia, which, as we have seen, is the theme of memory) does figure frequently in Nabokov's writing, either as a central theme or in the political convictions of different characters. It could hardly be otherwise, except where Nabokov goes beyond the emigration--which he first did in 1928--to find subjects for his art. (Field 116)

Perhaps some critics stress the political underpinnings of much of Nabokov's work before 1940 because of their understandable assumption that the son is following in his father's footsteps: The senior Vladimir Nabokov was a leader in the Kadet moderate socialist party, which developed as a response to the excesses of the czarist state, then later hoped to loosen the strictures of the Bolshevik state. However, Field notes that the Rudder, the party's mouthpiece, included a generous amount of poetry and prose in addition to political soundings. The literary tone of that magazine perhaps influenced the young Nabokov to develop an artist's detached stance, rather than a polemicist's passion, toward matters of politics.

Field notes that in 1927, in a youthful statement of faith, the only instance of Nabokov's use of rhetorical discourse, he rises above polemics to extol the freedom of imagination. The strength of imagination, he argues, makes emigre life not only bearable, but exalted:

"We are the mark of Russia which has left her shores--we are spread over the entire world, but our wanderings are not always in depression, and our courageous longing for our fatherland does not always prevent us from enjoying a strange country, refined solitude in a foreign electric night, on a train, in a square, at a railway station. . . . We have, for one thing, ten years of freedom to celebrate. . . . In that particular Russia which invisibly surrounds, quickens, and supports us, nourishes our souls, adorns our dreams, there is not a single law except the law of love for her, and there is no power except that of our own conscience. . . . we are free citizens of our dreams" (from "An Anniversary"; qtd. in Field 220-21.)

Nabokov's statement nevertheless displays harsh contempt for Leninism, which "makes ants out of people," and for "the sham aura smacking of middle-class Philistinism that is in everything Bolshevik." Nabokov never came closer to direct politicizing.

If the young Nabokov were ever to be galvanized into direct political action, it would probably have occurred as the result of the death of his father, the victim of a political assassination when the son was only 22. Ironically--and heroically--Nabokov senior deliberately stepped into the path of bullets meant for the leader of another socialist faction. The son did not respond to his father's death with a bitter polemic, however, nor even with a panegyric. Nabokov remembered the death instead with an affirmative poem called "Easter," published in the Rudder the following spring. It asserted the possibility that his father yet lived in the "arise and bloom" of the season of miracles. This seems to have set the tenor for Nabokov's essentially aesthetic response to the political upheavals that repeatedly upended his life.

However, Field notes in V. N.: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov, that the young Nabokov's Romanticism was irreparably damaged by the loss of his father, and that, tellingly, no later poem ever again celebrated the presence in Nature of a benevolent deity. Poems published after his father's death that attest to the happy influence of

Nabokov's upbringing in the Russian Orthodox Church, had been written earlier. Perhaps the death was, as Phyllis Roth has said, the linchpin for his artistic development. At any rate, it offered the perfect moment for Caprice to become uppermost in the young artist's mind, and for the conventional heavenly Father to be displaced.

As his response to the loss of both father and homeland, Nabokov removed his home from the map and secured it in his imagination. For Nabokov, home exists in that region of the artist's mind where "beauty, compassion, and joy" exist perpetually, free from the influences of time and change. And in that sense, any of Nabokov's works which treat the theme of memory, of homeland, of the unease of the wanderer's life, are at some level the poems of a Romantic. He has learned the advantages of living simultaneously in both present and past, so that past and present enrich each other in a helix-style spiral of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. By allowing the imagination to ignore the dichotomies of present and past, Nabokov is able to negate time. Nabokov's boyhood Russia is as much a metaphor of timeless, seamless perfection for him as Dolores Haze is for Humbert Humbert.

In an often-quoted passage in Speak, Memory, Nabokov writes: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to refold my magic carpet after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another." Field

explains that, considering this statement, Nabokov's emigre poems on Russia

are not so much actual treatment of Russia or of a return to Russia in attainable time and space as they are metaphors of the geography of a poet's soul. Russia is the "other shore" of that soul, and the only mode of access is the imagination. This is the reason why these poems demand that either the land or the poet himself be either invisible or transparent. He speaks in one poem of his "passportless soul," but the boundaries it crosses are more temporal than political. . . . Those poems that describe or look forward to an actual return to Russia have about them a fairy-tale air of unreality. [In a 1926 poem] the journey is presented as a whimsical possibility achieved, as it were, by "stepping over there" in seven-league boots. (Field 97)

Even in this early poetry, with its persistent theme of the artist's flight from time's control, comes the knowledge that, high-flying as the imagination is, reality weights its wings. The poems contain an undercurrent of humor--the poet laughing at himself, armed with an ironic skepticism about the chances of return in anything other than an imaginary capacity. The same limitations are realized in Nabokov's novels. Nabokov's forced exile from the life of his boyhood is fact, as is character Humbert's exile from the Annabel Leigh of his boyhood. Each knows, at some level, that he cannot go home again, no matter how artfully he conjures his past within his present. Yet art is all that he has. Nabokov, working in the guise of a Romantic poet, uses the metaphor of exile as the "bridge" between fact (prose) and the imagination (poetry), as the

way to a new political reality responsive to the artist's needs. Thus, creation of a new reality becomes, metaphorically, a political action.⁹

Since art is the province of the individual, not the mass, Nabokov always champions the individual. In *Cincinnatus*, he presents a man who has been imprisoned for the crime of "being opaque," that is, having sensibilities not shared by the mass, although he is not ostensibly an artist. By contrast, in *Hermann Karlovich*, Nabokov presents a man who calls himself an artist, but who considers men interchangeable cogs. Thus, Nabokov concludes Invitation to a Beheading by illustrating that *Cincinnatus* has the imaginative power to escape his

⁹ Field notes Nabokov's 1936 short story "The Annihilation of Tyrants," in which a man who considers assassinating a dictator decides that imagination is more powerful than politics; that he can assassinate the ogre--and still influence history--more effectively in his mind, and with his pen, than he might have with his sword. Field explains how art obviates the need for politics in "Annihilation":

The narrator's simple formation is that "first, a real man is a poet; and second, that he, our ruler, is the incarnate negation of a poet." . . . The decision to kill the tyrant on moral and aesthetic grounds falters with the narrator's realization that his means will be as vulgar as his goal is noble. This leads him to consider suicide . . . annihilating by his own death the tyrant . . . He is saved from his intention by his discovery, in rereading his notes, that he has effectively slain the tyrant with ridicule, and he imagines that his little tract will serve mankind at some future time "on the eve of new unpleasantnesses, no less amusing than those we have now," for with it every man has the power to destroy tyranny. (Field 122)

predicament; and he concludes Despair by showing that Hermann will be sought for murder. By Nabokovian standards, Cincinnatus is a true artist, and Hermann Karlovich a false one.

Hermann's plan fails, Field explains, because he lacks the sensibility with which to value each man's individuality, and thus is unable to maintain his own integrity. His lack of integrity is shown metaphorically, as he splits into two selves. For example, the murder victim, Felix, seems to appropriate some responses that should be Hermann's. Hermann seems blind to his wife's infidelity; Felix, however, at one point notes that all women are unfaithful. The Nabokovian artist must remain integrated, must remain rooted in reality even as he holds himself aloof from its strictures. Imagination debilitates those characters who, like Hermann, use it to defend themselves in a reactionary way. Characters who retreat entirely into their own "fine madness" lack the strength to combat an untenable reality.

Cincinnatus, however, achieves that heroic balance between reality and imagination. As Field notes, there are moments when Cincinnatus "knows perfectly well that the entire masquerade is staged in his own brain." He knows, at some level of consciousness, that his oppressors are paper dolls, and he sometimes addresses them as fantasy figures: " Yes, that's fine. I thank you, ragdoll, coachman,

painted swine." Quite possibly, Invitation has nothing to do with political imprisonment, but is simply a metaphor for each man's imprisonment within his own mind: the imprisoned Cincinnatus as a metaphor for the conservative, safety-seeking part of Cincinnatus to whom his free, gnostic self is necessarily but inconveniently shackled. The key which unshackles him at story's end is his ability to dismiss his constricting fears. Then quotidian reality no longer controls him.

Of course, for Cincinnatus or any artist, the new "reality" where he is strong and capable may also be simply a region of his mind; he may in fact be physically imprisoned. But, for Nabokov, Cincinnatus' new reality, whether fact or fiction, deserves the reader's admiration. Cincinnatus can now incorporate and transmute common reality and rise above it, rather than simply panicking.

Field at first describes the Nabokovian artist as one who can move freely between the spheres of reality and fantasy; but then Field continues, with Nabokovian archness, to force the reader into an uncomfortable position: that of judging the point where fantasy ends and "real" life takes up. Field seems to suggest that the reader is capable of immediately recognizing the delusions under which Nabokov's protagonists labor. Actually, it is more often the case that the characters are not the only puppets Nabokov has manipulated: Unless a reader is well acquainted

with Nabokov's narrative stance, and his habit of toying with his reader's intellectual acumen, the reader is likely to trust as truth the same delusion that has ensnared the protagonist.

In The Eye and The Defense, the protagonists suffer dissociations from reality which are so severe that their response, even more despairing than Hermann's splitting into two selves, is suicide. Smurov, of The Eye, tries to shoot himself early in the narrative, and though he fails, his thoughts continue to be narrated as if Smurov actually had killed his corporeal self and now existed only in his imagination. Luzhin, of The Defense, is a chess master unsurpassed in skill at chess defenses; but through a failure of will, and an ineptness at every act of survival in the daily world, he succumbs to his fears, and even his art cannot save him: he leaps from a window. Both of these ostensibly "artistic" responses are inadequate. Neither protagonist has developed the fortitude which will allow him to transcend reality through his imagination; instead, each succumbs to despair over his inability to succeed in the mundane world.

Field says that the unfortunate Nabokovian character types "can believe only in life, which we, as the readers of the novels in which they appear, know is only an illusion" created by the author. Although Smurov and Luzhin embrace death as an escape from failed lives, their

deaths result, ironically, from their fear of dis-integration; and death is the ultimate disintegration, psychological as well as physical. This fear drives all artists, both failed and successful. But this despair particularly attends all of Nabokov's characters who rely totally upon the world laid before their eyes, who are able to "believe only in life." They perceive the transitoriness of life's moments of joy and aesthetic perfection, and are made anxious and despairing by their knowledge that life ends in death, which is beyond artistic intervention.¹⁰

But these characters are caught in a double bind, since the life they protect so assiduously is only the whimsical creation of another artist, Nabokov, just as all life is the creation of a whimsical god, known familiarly in this argument as Caprice. When his characters cannot shift artfully between imagination and reality, then they are merely Nabokov's pawns; and they feel oppressed by

¹⁰ Almost all of Nabokov's protagonists are dogged by death, Field notes:

The natural complex duality of all things (object and shadow, idea and image, reality and art) is expressed most forcefully in the presentation of abnormal characters--all of Nabokov's major heroes, in one sense or the other of the term, are abnormal--and extraordinary situations and states. Stories of death provide perhaps the most perfect refinement and interpenetration of the two realities of any given proposition. There are, in fact, only three Nabokov novels in which death is not a paramount force, and there is none in which death is absent entirely. (Field 238-39.)

their subservient position. Hermann Karlovich knows that something is overshadowing him, and he chafes at the thought that he is under someone's baleful eye. The omniscient eye is not that of God, however, or the devil, because Hermann believes in neither: to believe in these controlling powers which might thwart him would cause him to doubt his ability to effect the quintessentially socialist society. Hermann's concept of the omniscient overseer is similar to my concept of Caprice.

Hermann protests:

If I am not master of my life, not sultan of my own being, then no man's logic and no man's ecstatic fits may force me to find less silly my impossibly silly position: that of God's slave; no, not a slave even, but just a match which is aimlessly struck and then blown out by some inquisitive child, the terror of his toys. There are, however, no grounds for anxiety. God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter, that second bogey being as easily disposed of as the first. Indeed, imagine yourself just dead--and suddenly wide awake in Paradise where, wreathed in smiles, your dear dead welcome you. Now tell me, please, what guarantee do you possess that those beloved ghosts are genuine; that it is really your dear dead mother and not some pretty demon mystifying you, masked as your mother and impersonating her with consummate art and naturalness . . . forever shall your soul remain in doubt, expecting every moment some awful change, some diabolical sneer to disfigure that dear face bending over you. . . . (Despair 112-13).

Field notes that "This argument is over authorship, and Hermann is striving to establish himself as the primary author of everyone and everything around him, while at the same time freeing himself from any possible similar

control." Hermann occupies the artist's position: He has, first, an awareness of the whimsical control of a God (whom my argument subsumes under Caprice) who in his whimsy seems to be more a bedeviler than a protector of his "toys." This is coupled with an awareness that only through his own art can the toy gain any measure of control.

Unfortunately, while Hermann possesses a sound understanding of the artistic dilemma, he cannot solve this dilemma satisfactorily since he lacks two crucial characteristics: an awareness of the limitations of art as the artist goes up against reality (indeed, Hermann never has a grasp of reality, since he chooses as his double a man who looks nothing like him); and compassion.

Field notes that Nabokov essentially develops two lines of work--a minor line of conventional, compassionate stories, and a major line of novels in which he experiments with either 1) the detached narrator, moving the characters whimsically and dispassionately, or 2) the unreliable narrator, who makes it possible for Nabokov to manipulate not only the characters but the reader as well. This major line of novels has earned Nabokov his reputation as an artist interested primarily in executing elaborate cosmic jokes, with scant regard for the perplexed reader--or the protagonists who fall through the cracks in his designs.

The novels in which, Field says, Nabokov's infamous detachment is the controlling element begin with King,

Queen, Knave (1928), where the omniscient narrator takes great pains to present the characters as mannequins who use one another with impunity. They in turn are dispassionately manipulated by the narrator. In this love triangle, the surprise ending (the woman's sudden death from pneumonia) is the sole incident which does not happen inexorably, like a cog turning in a huge machine.

In Laughter in the Dark, Nabokov examines three bloodlessly detached characters--whom Field openly recognizes as false artists, although not in the special sense of my argument. The novel, originally written in Russian, was first published in translation in England in 1936; then altered and published under its present title in the United States in 1938. In the new version, the characters, all Germans, are Albinus Kretschmar, a critic; Axel Rex, a former professional forger and now a cartoonist; and Margot, a 16-year-old movie usherette who wants to be a star, and gets a bit part with Rex's help. All three lack spirituality, as Field notes:

If the three central characters are judged by one Nabokovian title, [this] is a novel about three failed artists. Only one of them, Axel Rex, has any talent at all, though it has been completely perverted and corrupted. Margot is the most innocuous. She is merely a very bad actress, but when she is not acting, she has a charm and natural beauty that is not without an art of its own (the way, for example that she tosses her undergarments on a chair as she undresses for a bath). Kretschmar is a bad artist . . . and worse yet, he is a bad critic Kretschmar is predisposed toward the "beautiful" and the "happy ending" and as a critic he equates beauty and

simplicity. . . . How bad a critic Kretschmar really is, is demonstrated by the fact that he has had a forged painting (done by Rex eight years previously when he had worked as a professional forger of pictures) hanging in his own home and doesn't realize it. Kretschmar can claim only one discovery, Margot, and he never understands her even though her nature is monochromatic and constantly before his eyes. (Field 163-64.)

Although Kretschmar is an art critic, he is blind to true art; and Margot equates art with the silver screen. Both are obvious failures as artists. However, Axel Rex is a more complex character. He knows true from false art, or he would not have been such an excellent forger. And he is clearly imaginative and intelligent. Given a heart, he might qualify as a true Nabokovian artist. But his lack of compassion and his willingness to employ his talents to prey upon others' weaknesses mark him as a false artist in Nabokov's eyes. Rex takes control of his world by observing people with a cool eye, with a kind of spare aesthetic sense, reducing the whole of humanity to a quick line drawing--as if a few strokes of his pen could capture what little soul anyone might possess.

Yet Nabokov makes no comment upon Rex's detachment--little moral perturbation leaks into the narrative. It might seem that Nabokov approves Rex's stance. If taken at face value, Nabokov seems to emulate Rex's sangfroid. Nabokov has repeatedly claimed that the aesthetic component of his novels is their whole, that he

intends no commentary upon the psychological or social needs of the bits of protoplasm he moves about his pages: "I have no social purpose, no moral message," Nabokov writes, "I've no general ideas to exploit, but I like composing riddles and I like finding elegant solutions to those riddles that I have composed myself."

If this is his only purpose, then Nabokov is a dilettante. Then Adam Krug's merciful insanity in Bend Sinister, Cincinnatus' escape from beheading in Invitation and Hermann's awful comeuppance in Despair may be meant simply to engage the reader intellectually, as possible "elegant solutions" to each character's situation. Perhaps the reader is expected neither to believe in the efficacy of these solutions nor to feel a sense of emotional engagement. Yet these novels do create not only intellectual titillation but emotional unrest in the perceptive reader, because the spirit of compassion--healing when present, subtly missed when absent--informs even those works which seem most detached. This subtle battle against Caprice is waged with the complementary weapons of irony and compassion. Caprice is matched in the first instance, and bested in the second. Throughout his work, Nabokov's sympathy is visible in the small triumphs allowed those characters who have a finely honed artistic perception that they use in a valiant struggle against Caprice.

CHAPTER III
THEATRICALITY AND IMPERMANENCE:
THE EXILE'S LIFE

Recently, four early Nabokov plays (The Grand-dad (1923), The Pole (1924), The Man from the USSR (1926), and The Event (1938)), have appeared in English, translated by Dmitri Nabokov.¹

These translations offer evidence that, in these early works, Vladimir Nabokov was puzzling out the theatricality and impermanence inherent in a life of exile--whether that exile was physical or psychological--and was defining the Nabokovian artist's responsibility in the face of such impermanence and estrangement. Dmitri Nabokov, in his foreword to the plays, notes within them

the deliberate glimpse through the fabric of the fictional world, into its wings, under its surface . . . [which is] comforting, if it allows us respite from some unsettling nightmare being played out onstage; or eerie, when we think that the world may be a stage, but that here the stage becomes a world whose workings are not limited to the progression of the play or novel on its more obvious levels, and where even the reality of unreality comes into doubt. (3-4. Emphasis added.)

I take this to mean "and where even the integrity of the dramatic moment--the willing suspension of disbelief--is

¹ The Man from the USSR and Other Plays (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984). All page references will be to this volume, unless otherwise indicated.

undercut." Nabokov is certainly guilty of such undercutting throughout his work, usually through the use of sly comedy or irony which deflates the dramatic tension and collapses his character's imaginary worlds. The theme of impermanence is interwoven through most of Nabokov's work, early and late, and is also inherent in Lolita. Even in these early plays, he delights in bringing his audience up short with a reminder that the fantasy which has carried them away is, indeed, artifice.

The three plays of the 1920s lack the fluidity and the savoir-faire of his mature writing style; they are self-conscious. The dialogue is often overwrought and stilted, characters' actions are predictable, and the plots are too obviously contrived. None has received critics' attention outside emigre circles. Field mentions them only briefly in his 1986 biography. He notes the preoccupation with death and with heroic action in The Pole, and the emphasis upon treachery and sudden, violent death in The Grand-dad. These concerns are not surprising in works written by the young Nabokov just a few years after the violent death of his father.

The Event, which dates from the late 1930s, is much more complex and accomplished in its execution. Dmitri Nabokov remarks, in his notes within the collection, that The Event's emphasis upon the insubstantiality of the phenomenological world provoked "many echoes and much

discussion in the emigre press." It was staged in Paris, Prague, Warsaw, Belgrade, and then New York, over a three-year period.

Field gives more attention to The Event, saying that although it is unevenly balanced between its underlying comic style and the gloominess of its plot, which involves "a failed marriage and an artist who has to work in a puppet-show world," nevertheless "it still remains one of the most intriguing of Nabokov's middle-year works, perhaps indeed his fullest expression of the problems of the artist in middle age." The protagonist's predicament as artist and husband, Field says, "corresponds precisely to what we know of [Nabokov's] own situation and outlook at this time." My own interpretation of The Event focuses upon the solipsism of the protagonist rather than upon his victimization by circumstances, and does not presume him to be an understudy for Nabokov.

Although they stand up weakly against Nabokov's later work, I've chosen to devote attention to these plays not only because they've received limited critical attention, but more importantly because they include, insistently, the same theme of Caprice, and the responsibility of the artist to militate against Caprice, that Nabokov treats throughout his better-known work.

Yet his insistence upon highlighting his own capriciousness and artifice sometimes irritated critics,

who complained that all that concerns him is style. Critics note his punning in several languages, playing each language off the other; his random nuggets of parody, cunningly planted for the sheer pleasure of exposing the fool's gold of Russian Romanticism or of Freudianism. They particularly note his delight in authorial intrusion, in manipulating his reader with as much impunity as he does his characters. Field notes, for instance, that Nabokov's "linguistic playfulness" irritated Nabokov's friend Edmund Wilson, particularly in works of such somber themes as that of Bend Sinister.²

Nabokov himself proclaimed that "Style is all!" when teaching his Wellesley students. The evidence of his work suggests, however, that he did not mean that style is the sufficient cause of art, merely that style is the necessary vehicle for conveying those subtleties with which an artist builds his themes. In his Lectures on Literature, Nabokov leads the reader, just as he led his students, through the niceties of plot and character development in such diverse works as Ulysses, Madame Bovary, Swann's Way, and Bleak House, noting that such development often depends upon the exquisite detail, originally downplayed, or the tiny coincidence, obliquely inserted.³

² See V.N.: Vladimir Nabokov: His Life and Art 250-51.

³ Fredson Bowers, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

Nabokov is not allowing the oblique detail to take the limelight simply because he wants the reader to admire his ability to capture it, but because it is the offhand detail which ultimately controls his precarious worlds. In his Lectures, he stresses that the author's purpose, in each work cited, is not simply to display his wares, but to develop a style to most effectively convey the themes motivating each work. Thus, just as Joyce employs stream-of-consciousness to simulate recurrence and memory, Nabokov employs a detached tone as he presents horror and absurdity, to simulate the actions of *Caprice*.

In the title play of The Man from the USSR, examination of a seemingly tangential point--the intricate detail with which Nabokov describes the props for each of the five acts--reveals a major theme of this early work: the artificiality of "reality." Nabokov's elaborate, subjective set descriptions illuminate the illusory quality of the world in which the caprices of history have isolated the emigres, setting them down as bit players on a foreign stage.

The set for Act One is a basement tavern in Berlin. Its proprietor, Oshivenski, is an elderly Russian emigre; his waiters are deposed Russians, and his clientele is also Russian. The obscurity of the tavern's underground location and of the people inside is heightened by what seems an extraneous detail in the set description. Outside

the tavern, sets of legs pass randomly across the street-level window, giving the only hint of the city and the people who exist beyond the lives of the emigres:

From time to time legs pass from left to right and from right to left in the strip of window. They stand out against the yellowish background of evening with a two-dimensional clarity, as if cut out of black cardboard. If one compared the action onstage to music, these silhouettes would serve as black quavers and semi-quavers. (36. Emphasis added.)

The similes I've underscored are paradoxical, and typically Nabokovian: they render these legs at first artificial, and then lyrical. The addition of passersby--a hackneyed movie bit, but an intriguing addition for the theatre--here becomes surreal. This artistic touch is negligible but important. Artificiality is part of the daily experience of the Russian exile who has drifted to Berlin. He lives with the sense that his existence is as unreal and as insubstantial as those legs which look like cardboard cut-outs. In the five-day course of the play's events, Oshivenski loses his tavern, he and his wife are evicted from their apartment because they cannot pay rent, and Fyodorovich, one of the tavern's waiters, is offered a job as a taxi driver in Paris. Impermanence is the pervasive theme of The Man from the USSR. The insubstantial nature of emigre life is also underscored by a mock-lyrical violin, badly played, which is occasionally heard as a chorus.

The set for Act Two is the rented room of Marianna Sergeyevna, and the set description underscores her artificial personality. She is a Russian actress, and the second lead in a poorly conceived emigre film about the Russian Revolution. Marianna is a woman for whom the excessive gesture and histrionics are the norm. She considers herself an artist, yet her sense of art is limited to a fascination with objects and tangible possessions: Her loudest complaint against the Bolsheviks is "They ruined all those lovely country houses!" She claims to feel the stirrings of an artistic soul, but her passion is evoked by movie cliches: dreams of white dresses, a lover, and the Riviera. Nabokov's set description for Marianna's room reveals her as a philistine, not an artist:

In all of this [furniture] there is a kind of unpleasant puffy rotundity--in the armchairs, the green lampshade, the outline of the folding screen, as if the room had developed in concentric circles, frozen motionless over there in the form of a pouf, over there in that of an enormous plate stuck to the peony design of the wallpaper and giving birth to several smaller ones all over the back wall. (58)

More importantly, this stuffy, static description reveals not only her lack of aesthetic sensibility, but also her lack of the vitality and drive required of the true artist. Her room, "developed in concentric circles, frozen motionless," is an echo of the condition in which emigre

tenants of rented rooms find themselves: Forced from their original center, they move in ever-widening circles, from adopted country to adopted country, yet are never really moving to any destination since they cannot go home again.

Yet, typically, Nabokov deliberately undercuts even the subtle hint of pathos in this set description. Juxtaposed against the room's uncomfortable feeling of stasis-in-flux is the vulgar, funny, and messy metaphor of the decorative wall plate giving birth to smaller plates. This is a parodic correlative to the kind of "artistic" moments (read "histrionic") Marianna creates in order to force her Berlin existence to approximate her movie roles.

Another tragi-comic prop, the ersatz lyrical violin mentioned earlier, opens Act Two. The violin introduces Olya, a true romantic who believes in violins but whose daily life gives the lie to such lyric music. Olya is the patient wife of Kuznetsoff, the man honored in the play's title and its protagonist. He is another exiled Russian; but as a covert activist against Bolshevism, he often travels to the USSR. A seeming anti-Bolshevik, he is willing to be thought a double agent or a Bolshevik sympathizer when expedient. He is a pragmatist. Throughout the play, it is implied that he would be most comfortable living life straightforwardly; yet because he is a disenfranchised and thus essentially powerless emigre, his actions must be circumspect, their influence limited.

The play's fretful skirmishes between characters who waver between nostalgia and the reality of Berlin existence are left unresolved. These subtle tugs-of-war are of two sorts: 1) between sordid reality and transcendent romance, and 2) between the philistine vulgarity of the unimaginative characters and the dignity of the true artists. These battles remain unresolved because, in the tenuous emigre world, no decisive action seems to be possible.

The tenor of emigre experience is set in Act One by the tavern passers-by reduced to cardboard cut-out legs, and in Act Two by the mock-romantic violin, so that even the play's few moments of transcendence seem undercut and unreal. As Dmitri Nabokov has noted, it is as if

the real action is taking place elsewhere. . . . One has the feeling that the interpersonal relationships around which the play itself revolves are overshadowed by much larger events occurring outside the stage, outside the theatre, outside the country.
(7)

Because these displaced characters are constantly overshadowed by the political reality which has displaced them--and because they make only occasional, ineffectual attempts at what Olya calls "rebellion" against their helplessness, the play never resolves. Caprice is too oppressive a force in these characters' lives to allow them the traditional movement toward climax and catharsis.

Not only is Caprice too constricting to allow resolution, Caprice is also too powerful to allow any one character to emerge as fit protagonist. In this play, we have no undisputed hero forging ahead (Kuznetsoff is at best an ambiguous candidate for hero, too shadowy to gain the reader's trust); we have, instead, several pawns scooped up inside a controlling fist which at any moment might crush them--the plot moves according to the vagaries of chance, not in response to characters' actions. Even the two relatively powerful and pragmatic characters, Kuznetsoff, and the future Paris taxi driver Fyodorovich, are not their own masters, their bravado notwithstanding.

The sense that all of the characters' lives are controlled by an outside influence is reinforced by strained dialogues: In one, Olya pretends for Kuznetsoff's sake not to love him, since responsibility for her will hamper his activist work--while Kuznetsoff abjures any intimate discussion at all. In another, Kuznetsoff's mistress (only briefly) Marianna prattles desperately to him of her undying love, as he impatiently takes his leave of her and heads for a mission in the USSR. As a third example, there is an uncomfortable confrontation when Kuznetsoff meets the deposed White Russians Oshivenski and his wife, who revile him as a Bolshevik.

Scattered throughout are appearances by Fyodorovich, and by Taubendorf, a romantic who is hopelessly in love

with Olya. These two present intermediate stances between Marianna's lack of awareness, which gives her a false sense of well-being, and the Oshivenskis' hypersensitivity to their situation, which paralyzes them with bitterness. Fyodorovich is the New Emigre, willing to be assimilated into his adopted cultures. He speaks jauntily (although possibly ironically) about his prospects as a Paris taxi driver: "I like variety. I'm grateful to communism. It made us discover the whole wide world. Now I'm going to see Paris--new city, new impressions, the Eiffel Tower. It's a great feeling." (113) He had also been jovial about waiting tables at the tavern, joking that, like Napoleon, he had once been an artillery officer. Fyodorovich knows that his fortune can swing up as well as down, and he takes both conditions lightly. He is more self-aware than Marianna, and also more aware of reality, as shown by his sense of irony. He is also more at ease in his adopted world than she, since he does not need to resort to fantasy to enliven his existence.

Taubendorf, however, has neither Marianna's addled joie de vivre nor Fyodorovich's joviality. He leans more toward the Oshivenskis' despair. He is heartsick, yearning for something other than life as an emigre intellectual. As he takes tickets at yet another lecture, he despairs:

Lectures, idiot reports . . . anniversaries--how many of them! . . . Now, for instance, someone is lecturing on something--but who it is and what, I really

couldn't care less. Then again, maybe it's not a lecture at all but a concert, or else some long-haired moron reading poetry. (80)

Yet although his new life frustrates him, he does not want to turn to the old life for solace; he is less nostalgic and more pragmatic than the Oshivenskis. He is tired of all the sentimental memorializing of a lost Russia, tired of the ineffectual attempts to recreate what is lost. He works as a sometime operative for Kuznetsoff's activist group, which is trying to free Mother Russia, yet Taubendorf has no heartfelt sense for Russia to match that voiced by Oshivenski. Oshivenski declaims:

I'm fed up with the accursed existence I've been living here. I'm fed up with perpetual indigence, Berlin back alleys, the repulsive rasp of a foreign tongue, this furniture, these newspapers, all these trashy trappings of emigre life. I am a former landowner. I was ruined right at the start. But I want you to understand: I don't need my land back. I need the Russian land. And if I were given the chance to set foot on it for no other reason than to dig my own grave, I would accept. (115-16)

Oshivenski is intelligent and aware, but too despairing and bitter to adjust to his new reality on any level.

Taubendorf has managed to transfer his passion from Russia to a new love object, Olya. Taubendorf and Olya, both professing the same attachment to Russia which Oshivenski feels, really are more attached to the idea of enduring romance than to enduring patriotism. The crux of their rather resigned romanticism is shown in this exchange:

Taubendorf: I know that for you I am nothing more than Nikolay Karlovich, and that's the end of it. But then, you don't notice anybody. For you, the only thing in your life is your longing for Russia. And I can't live like that. For you I would give up everything. . . . God knows I'd like to get back over there too, but for you I'd stay, for you I'd do anything (85)

Olya: I'll tell you something I've never told anyone before. You see, you . . . you are mistaken. I'll tell you the truth. I'm not interested in Russia now--I mean, I'm interested, but not all that passionately. The point is I've never stopped loving my husband. No one knows this. Even he doesn't know. (85)

Even in this early play, Nabokov is developing differing degrees of awareness and capacity for action in his characters, working toward a prototype of the artist who can go up against Caprice. It would seem that the necessary mix of artistic sensitivity and pragmatic objectivity has not been exhibited in any of these characters thus far, but the characters must be considered more closely.

Oshivenski is powerless under Caprice, since his grief and bitterness will not allow him to accommodate his new reality. Fyodorovich, although he could have been equally paralyzed by the blow dealt by Caprice, instead uses humor to accommodate the shifts in his life. And Taubendorf and Olya--although they, like Oshivenski and Fyodorovich, are powerless to change the world picture or their displaced position in it--are sustained by the strength of their romantic imaginations, imaginations which allow them to

create modest internal vistas to replace the lost vista of Russia.

Taubendorf, Olya, and Fyodorovich exhibit some of the necessary resilience needed by the Nabokovian artist. Yet their effectiveness is limited. A far more incisive approach than any of theirs--although it at first seems insensitive--is the approach of Kuznetsoff, the political activist; he most closely approaches the definition of the Nabokovian artist. Yet his artistic sense is difficult to discern. Of all the characters, he is, on the surface, the least sensitive, the least romantic.

He is also the most enigmatic, to the point of seeming an antagonist. At the close of the play, in a moment of seeming vulnerability, he reveals to Olya that his work has included the sacrifice of lives, and has cut him off from normal emotions. There are hints here that he is, in fact, a Bolshevik double agent. And if he is a double agent, then he is an opportunist, and the basest of false artists.

Nevertheless, Kuznetsoff comes close to the Nabokovian idea of the artist hero. He cannot be tersely written off as a mere pragmatist, because he displays the Nabokovian artist's sense of values. He can discern art from artifice, can use irony to distance himself from a debilitating emotionalism, and knows that the only vindication of the beleaguered human spirit lies in wrestling Caprice. It is Kuznetsoff the pragmatist (and he

is a shrewd, cynical commentator on emigre life, as "cold" in his approach to suffering as Nabokov has been accused of being) who exposes and articulates the weaknesses of the romantic's response to Caprice. He exposes the Romantic response as either misty or despairing, and knows that neither Romanticism nor despair can afford any kind of control over a difficult reality.

Kuznetsoff exposes the brittle illusions that some might call "art" in Act Four. Act Four is a play within the play itself, as Kuznetsoff visits a movie set in order to say goodbye to Marianna, the film's second leading lady, and to pass information to Taubendorf, who is a movie extra. Idly noting scenery, props, and snatches of cliched dialogue, Kuznetsoff attacks this false world with subtle verbal darts. The tone of his response to Marianna's theatrical lament at his leaving her, prefigures his later response to the silly movie which purports to present the Russian Revolution:

Marianna (pressing her hands to her temples as she walks): It's absolutely outrageous, absolutely outrageous of you . . .

Kuznetsoff: Only one thing can be interesting in life--that which can be prevented. Why waste energy worrying about the inevitable? (90)

After this exchange, which ends without Marianna getting in her full share of anguish, Kuznetsoff wanders idly around the movie set, remarking to the assistant director:

You people pour on the folklore pretty thick. What are those, cupolas? (92)

Kuznetsoff then picks up and unfurls the enormous map depicting Russia, smiles and examines it (saying to Taubendorf, who has just entered):

The Crimea came out as a perfect rhomboid here. (92)

Then, after discussing the sparse details of the next anti-Bolshevik plan with Taubendorf, Kuznetsoff needles him: "Aha! You're in jackboots!" Earlier, Kuznetsoff had badgered Marianna about her acceptance of stereotypes about Bolshevism: "And that astrakhan hat with the star on it. Who are you supposed to be?" He has a keen awareness of the absurdity of a Russia extant now only on a Berlin movie set; and he also has a keen awareness of the limited effect of his own efforts to hold that absurdity at bay. Yet awareness of his own limited power does not paralyze him--he retains a psychic freedom which to some degree releases him from the net of historical circumstance in which the other characters are enmeshed. Because he is not only aware of the absurdity of his situation but strong enough to take action, Kuznetsoff fills the role of the artist working against Caprice.

Using the subtle detail as underscoring, Nabokov lets us glimpse those attributes in Kuznetsoff which mark him as an artist. In his embracing of the social and emotional

isolation which undercover activism demands, and in his sense of his own superiority, Kuznetsoff is clearly something of a Byronic figure, a maverick. When the assistant director informs him that he must leave the set if he is not an extra, since there are "rules," Kuznetsoff replies, "Fiddlesticks!" and leans contentedly against a no-smoking sign while he draws on a cigarette.⁴

Unlike the actors, who seem compromised by a rather facile movie, Kuznetsoff, though also limited by his emigre situation, is not made a clown by it. And there is a hint--a small one, of course--that Kuznetsoff may have some power toward reclaiming Russia. As he says a casual

⁴ In Act Four, the movie within the play (so that the reader/playgoer is placed at two removes from reality), Nabokov uses seemingly throwaway bits of dialogue, and casual references to costuming, to emphasize several ironies: 1) that a strong Russia is now reduced to a silly movie, and 2) that a Bolshevik story line is being played out by deposed White Russians dressed in romanticized peasant costumes or incongruous meshes of peasant and patrician clothing. Also highlighting these ironies is the set description, as Nabokov describes the backstage area of a second-rate movie production:

. . . a wide passageway crowded with movie props, creating an effect reminiscent simultaneously of a photographer's waiting room, the jumble of an amusement park booth, and the motley corner of a futurist's canvas (Among these angular shapes are conspicuous three cupolas--a large one and two smaller ones--the ochre, onion-shaped domes of some crudely reproduced Russian church. There is also a balalaika lying there haphazardly, and a half-unfurled map of Russia.) . . . All of it reminds the viewer of a many-colored jigsaw puzzle, carelessly and only partially assembled. As the curtain rises, the front of the stage is swarming with Russian emigres who have just arrived for the shooting. (89)

goodbye to Marianna and leaves the set, "Stagehands walk toward him carrying banners, and a bundle of rifles [to be used in filming the 'revolution' scene]. He slows, glances at them with a fleeting smile, then leaves." (100)

However, Nabokov does not unequivocally paint Kuznetsoff as savior and hero, since roles in Nabokov's works are never so clear. The implication in Kuznetsoff's smile is ambiguous. Does that smile hint at a counter-revolution? Or is Kuznetsoff only grinning in the face of cinematic absurdity? Is the smile simply an instance of what Dmitri Nabokov calls "the reality of unreality coming into doubt"--where the "reality" being created onstage is undercut by a hint that a character knows that the "real" world is happening offstage?

Nabokov also casts an ambiguous shadow upon Kuznetsoff--seeming to prefigure that other highly ambiguous hero, Humbert--in two instances of wry comedy. In the first instance, Kuznetsoff's credibility is weakened in a moment in which he seems to take himself both too seriously and not seriously enough, an attitude similar to Humbert's sardonic approach to himself. After Kuznetsoff and Taubendorf have tersely stated the codes for their next anti-Bolshevik plan, Taubendorf turns to join the other extras, and Kuznetsoff pulls out his Browning automatic and points it at Taubendorf. Taubendorf, well-trained, does not even flinch. In the murder scene in Lolita, Quilty

similarly refuses to take seriously Humbert's threat at gunpoint. And, prefiguring Humbert, Kuznetsoff employs the same tone and language in addressing his gun as Humbert does with his gun. Kuznetsoff says of Taubendorf, "Good for him.... Didn't even flinch.... And you, my friend, don't you let me down." (Aims the pistol at the audience.) "Don't you flinch in the clinch." (Puts gun back in his pocket.) (97-98) Humbert prepares to murder Quilty by becoming intimate with his little snub-nosed gun, which he jocularly calls "Chum," and he adjures Chum to help him by "shooting straight." The gunplay with Taubendorf, which seems superfluous in the context of the moment, is significant in terms of character development, since such clowning seems to cast doubt upon the soberness of Kuznetsoff's activism.

A second instance which undercuts the picture of Kuznetsoff as hero comes when he leaves Marianna:

Kuznetsoff: I had a good time with you. But now I'm leaving.

Marianna: Alec, what is the meaning of this?

Kuznetsoff: I don't think I ever gave you reason to believe that our relationship would last. I am a very busy man. To tell you the truth, I don't even have the time to say I am a busy man. (99)

Kuznetsoff's retort is almost a vaudeville line, yet it may also be read as Byronic posturing in the face of Caprice. Or, it may be interpreted at face value as an accurate

assessment of the urgency of the resistance efforts in which Kuznetsoff is involved.

These instances illustrate why it is difficult, in general, for the reader/playgoer, as well as for the other characters, to interpret Kuznetsoff. The Oshivenskis believe him to be a Bolshevik; his wife believes him to be a Russian loyalist; and he himself is always cryptic about his allegiances. With no dramatic chorus to underscore the truth, we must accept on faith that the Kuznetsoff who, at least momentarily, drops his sardonic attitude, is the "real" Kuznetsoff. In Act Five, he presents himself briefly as an intellectual, a man aware of himself and the complexities of his situation; aware that he and everyone else are controlled by Caprice--a man sobered by these realizations, but still willing to follow ideals in an attempt to create meaning in the face of meaninglessness.

But Nabokov does not allow Kuznetsoff to let down his guard, step away from his pragmatism, and reveal his sensitivity and his capacity for compassion, until the last moment. In Act Five, Kuznetsoff first visits the Oshivenskis, and agrees to take back to Russia with him some halva and a length of cloth. Kuznetsoff is not hard-hearted, but he knows the limits of romanticism. While he understands that Oshivenski is too nostalgic to think realistically, he nevertheless tries to instruct him in reality:

First of all, get out of the habit of saying "Russia." The country has a different name now. You reek of the old regime from over a thousand miles away. It may not be your fault, but it's so. (116)

Kuznetsoff is stronger than Oshivenski because he can be dispassionate and aloof on the surface, in the face of situations over which he has no ultimate power; he has the ability to serve a higher passion than bitterness and thus to gain some measure of control. Oshivenski has dreams of returning to Russia, but lacks the ability to make them reality. Kuznetsoff is taking action which might someday make Oshivenski's dream tangible. He is able to be realistic and idealistic simultaneously.⁵

In Act Five, he tells his wife the details of his "business affairs," ugly truths he has never admitted before:

Last year, when I was in Russia, the following incident occurred. The Soviets got wind of something. I sensed that if I did not take resolute action they would eventually get to the bottom of it. And you know what I did? I deliberately let three people, minor pawns in my organization, go before the firing squad. Don't start thinking I regret it one bit. I don't. That gambit saved the whole project. (120)

However, later confessions within Act Five show that he has trained himself to be dispassionate because he does

⁵ Dmitri Nabokov interprets Kuznetsoff more lyrically, reading a reassurance to Oshivenski as a wistful reference to a reunion in Heaven, not on earth. (Foreword 20.)

not want Olya or anyone else "being afraid for me, thinking about me, agonizing if, because of some stupid quirk of fate . . ." His response to Caprice is an ostensible stoicism offset by action. Kuznetsoff's final words, which end the play, seem to prove that at heart he is compassionate:

Olya, I'm going to the USSR so that you will be able to come to Russia. And everybody will be there . . . old Oshivenski living out his days, and Kolya Taubendorf, and that funny Fyodor Fyodorovich. Everybody.

Olya: And you, Alyosha, where will you be?

Kuznetsoff (picks up his suitcase, puts the other arm around his wife, and both walk slowly toward the door; as they do so Kuznetsoff speaks gently and almost mysteriously): Listen--once upon a time there lived in Toulon an artillery officer, and that very same artillery officer-- (They leave. CURTAIN, and the play ends.) (122)

This ending implies that, like Fyodorovich, the future Paris taxi driver, Kuznetsoff also will make a new life for himself in France. But even this romantic implication might be a false clue. Possibly this ending is simply Kuznetsoff's parody of a fairy tale, told to his wife in order to reassure her. Like later Nabokov works, this play from his youth has an ambiguous ending, or rather, no real conclusion. In a world where outcomes are beyond human control, the artist alone has the chutzpah to assume possibilities, and even to work assiduously to make them probabilities. But any "conclusion" which is true to

reality must be inconclusive, because reality is constantly in flux, being manipulated by Caprice.

The Man from the USSR is not a mature work. All but Kuznetsoff are stereotypes of romantics. And even in this protagonist, Nabokov offers little character development beyond Kuznetsoff's brief softening at the end; the reader is still left largely to imagine the complexities of Kuznetsoff's psyche. Furthermore, almost all the dialogue is stilted: The characters, particularly Oshivenski, deliver near set-pieces to delineate their positions on the totem pole of emigre idealism. However, the play is worth reading simply for the pleasure of being introduced to the activist, a character type who later, in Nabokov's novels, will become more complex--an artist/activist: more sensually aware, more compassionate, and more exquisitely and defensively ironic; more aware of both the strengths and the limitations of the thinking man, and more aware of the impositions of time and Caprice. In short, Kuznetsoff's political activism will transmute, in later characters, to a more subtle activism: that of the artist/writer who considers the use of language a political act, a way of reordering reality. Language becomes a tool used to define and to fixate experience within time, thus to gain control of flux, which is synonymous with Caprice.

For the characters in The Man from the USSR, the cruelest action of Caprice--the Bolshevik revolution which

forced them to emigrate--has happened before the curtain rises. The play contains only their reactions to the blow that has already fallen. In much of Nabokov's work, however, the reader is allowed to watch as Caprice makes her moves, as the little man is made ever more helpless. Sometimes artist heroes emerge in these scenarios, sometimes not. However, since in the process of rendering a reality free of sentimentality or moralizing, Nabokov records dispassionately even the moments when Caprice unseats his heroes, it is easy to conclude that he doesn't care for the "little man" at all, "heroes" included.

Dmitri Nabokov counters that accusation of cold-bloodedness. He does allow that his father loves the chess-player's, and the artist's, "accidents and possibilities . . . combinational delights [and] the possible nastiness of art." But the son says in his father's defense that Nabokov is not capricious simply for the sense of power to be gained in victimizing his characters, is not a "heartless puppeteer." In the foreword to The Man from the USSR and Other Plays, he emphasizes his father's sense of compassion: "He identified beauty with pity, with the poetry and patterns of life itself. He detested brutality and injustice, whether toward a group or an individual." (18-24)

To counter critics' puzzlement about the lack of political or social statement in Nabokov's work, Dmitri

Nabokov cites Alfred Kazin's argument that Nabokov's art is more socio-political than it seems on the surface. Nabokov realized, said Kazin, that literature could be akin to political action. Consider, Kazin said, that Lenin attempted to engineer a new reality through creating a totalitarian state, just as an artist/writer creates a new mental and emotional reality through his work.

Nabokov, as his work matured, created characters whose imaginations enmeshed them in emotional states akin to political nightmares. In Bend Sinister, Adam Krug's consciousness was oppressed by the obsessiveness of a despotic regime, and in Invitation to a Beheading, Cincinnatus barely escaped being overwhelmed by the chilling capriciousness of an invisible regime. But Nabokov had confronted the obsessive atmosphere of totalitarianism even earlier, in the one-act play The Grand-dad.

Although The Grand-dad does not deal with the emigre situation, it is like The Man from the USSR because it is also overtly political. However, because the plot of The Grand-dad hangs entirely upon whimsical horror, this play is more typically what his readers have come to call Nabokovian.

A middle-aged wanderer named de Merival puts up at a French farmhouse, and tells the farm family the reason behind his wandering: While young, during the purges of

the French Revolution, he was sentenced to be guillotined because his name possessed a "noble particle." Through a fluke, the gallows caught fire and he escaped; he has been fleeing since. The family has another boarder, an old man they affectionately call "Grand-dad." And it is swiftly apparent to the reader, watching Caprice's turns of the thumbscrews, that Grand-dad is the executioner from whom de Merival escaped 24 years earlier. The old man--perhaps unconvincingly in terms of good plotting, but necessarily in terms of dramatic resolution--recognizes his former victim and grabs an axe to perform the long-delayed deathstroke. (The farm family is out of the room.) Grand-dad and de Merival grapple, and the old man falls, bangs his head, and dies.

So, two twists of Caprice, the first fortuitous and the second macabre, neatly resolve the major conflict of 24 years of de Merival's life. The play lacks the insidious capriciousness of such later works as Laughter in the Dark, where the aesthetically blind Kretschmar is eventually physically blinded. Nor does the play measure up to the horror experienced by Hermann in Despair, when he realizes that the rest of the world sees no resemblance between him and the "double" he has murdered, in what he deems a perfect work of art. Character development in The Grand-dad is nil, and the revival of the early conflict--via an unlikely crossing of paths and the

surprise return of a senile man's memory--is contrived and forced.

However, even though the exposition within The Grand-dad does not match the skill exhibited by the more experienced Nabokov, the play does contain the primary themes that Nabokov reweaves throughout his entire body of work. First, it delineates the control that Caprice holds over human lives. More importantly, it does a serviceable, and often an admirably subtle job of examining the executioner as a type of false artist. The executioner's "art" is in the service of a totalitarian ideology, so that even though his "art" does create a new reality (a society minus anyone who possesses a "noble particle" before his name), it is a stagnant reality based on fixed perceptions. By showing the fanatical obsession of the old man, and his automatic hatred of de Merival, The Grand-dad illustrates the poverty of being an unthinking ideologue. Yet the character of the executioner is not delineated simplistically. The line between true, vital art and false, sterile art, which is always purposely fuzzy in later Nabokov works, is also fuzzy in this early play. For Nabokov, false art, though pernicious, does serve a useful function--to sharpen the awareness of the true artist. It should be emphasized that the ranks of true artists must include the reader as well as the protagonist, since only a reader of acute sensitivity can apprehend all the nuances

of a Nabokovian work of art. Whether the pawn being tested is the reader or the protagonist, Nabokov makes it clear that it takes a finely-honed perception to transcend that paralysis of the imagination which leaves the false artist frozen within a concept of perfection. Often as not, the false concept of perfection lacks compassion and an awareness of human frailty.

In The Grand-dad, Nabokov deliberately plays devil's advocate, almost seducing the reader with Grand-dad, the false artist, challenging the reader to discern Grand-dad's flaws--just as de Merival must if he wants to survive. The executioner is first presented as a beguiling elderly gentleman, gathering flowers in the farmwife's garden. He is wrapped in imagery of beauty and sensitivity, and it is this which makes his sudden plunge into savagery even more frightening than it would have been had he been introduced as sinister.

The old man is not spoken of by the family, nor does he appear, pottering in the garden among lilies and cherry blossoms, until well into the play; yet even before this bucolic introduction, Nabokov sets up a deliberate ambience of vitality: a rural home, a kind and indulgent family, a life lived close to the land. De Merival remarks on the recent rain, exulting to the farmer, "What life it will breathe into your land!" He is equally pleased by the mist rising from the wet fields: "Look at that lovely golden

smoke!" De Merival's appreciation launches the farmer, in turn, into florid blank verse, extemporaneously delivered. The farmer's poem extols "the swelling of the seed within the furrow" and recalls with dread the "ricocheting clatter" of hail. This paean devolves, in its final lines, into a diatribe against a pear tree parasite, "a monstrous, warty worm, a green-hued devil," but de Merival replies undaunted, "Yet what a sense of pride for you, what joy it must be to receive the ruddy, aromatic thank-yous that your trees give to you." And the farmwife muses, offering a hint of Grand-dad's true origins (a hint remembered by the reader only in retrospect):

Grand-dad, too, awaits assiduously some kind of revelation, pressing his ear first to the bark, then to a petal. . . . He believes, it seems to me, that dead men's souls live on in lilies, or in cherry trees. (293-94)⁶

These poetic ruminations lead into a discussion of de Merival's escape from execution 24 years earlier. De Merival's evocation of the gallows scene is rendered in blank verse, as is his almost admiring recollection of the executioner:

The executioner was nimble, by the way, and diligent, an artist, not an axman. He was

⁶ The characters' ruminations, though poetic, are prosaic poetry. It is difficult to discern whether this poetry is intended to be false or true art. The role of this blank verse will be discussed shortly.

emulating his Paris cousin, the renowned Sanson: He had procured the same kind of small tumbril, and when he'd lopped a head off, he would hold it by the hair and swing it the same way. I sat inside the shaky cart . . . and I was thinking . . . of trivial details mostly: that I had left without a handkerchief, or that my executioner companion looked like a dignified physician . . . (and) with a kind of guilty courtesy, the executioner helped me descend . . . (295-96)

When the farmer asks if de Merival would even thank God for the soul of the executioner, "that flashy craftsman whom you encountered that day on the scaffold," de Merival responds grandly that "through him the world revealed itself to me. He was, unwittingly, the key." Suffused with his love for all humanity, de Merival highlights the artistry and gentillesse of the executioner, indulgently forgetting that his freedom was a fluke, and not a gift from that artist at head-chopping. In fact, de Merival fails to recognize his old enemy when he first sees Grand-dad in the garden; but he does immediately recognize something artistic in the old man:

Splendid old man. The sun gives him a silvery sheen. Splendid. And there's a certain dreamy air about his movements, as his fingers slide along a lily stem, and he is bent over the flower bed, not picking, just caressing, all aglow with such a tender and timid smile. (299-301)

Missing the import of the farmwife's reply that Grand-dad "has conversations with" the lilies, and calls

them by "names of duchesses, of marquessas," de Merival says with unconscious irony that the old man, being of such noble mien, must have "lived his life in peace...away from civil and from other tumults." Only when the farmer's daughter bounds into the house laughing, to report that Grand-dad has seized her cherry-stained basket and flung it away from him into the stream; does de Merival feel "strange associations," which he promptly dismisses as "nonsense." He will regret this dismissal, since such associations between present and past are the building blocks of the new reality for the Nabokovian artist; they are the thesis-antithesis-synthesis spiral which enriches life. So, de Merival's "strange associations" denote his artistic temperament, as does his compassion for humanity, a compassion which has developed as a coping response to Caprice and has sustained him through adversity.

The old man's sudden personality shift is not well-integrated; it wraps up the plot too neatly, so that, overall, The Grand-dad is too contrived to seem like an illustration of the random workings of Caprice. Playgoers or readers might accept, for example, that de Merival and his intended executioner could meet again through a twist of circumstance. But it is more true to the vagaries of life that a) they would fail to recognize one another; b) that the old man would be unable to summon the pitch of hatred held years earlier against a total stranger, a

hatred which was merely a tool for a now-defunct ideology; or c) that any meeting would provoke a more complex solution than a wrestling match with an axe--a match in which an old man, precipitously unmasked as a villain, is dispatched within five minutes. Melodrama is atypical in Nabokov, unless it is meant ironically; yet this drama is so heavy-handed that the melodramatic conclusion seems meant to be taken seriously. Thus, the reader is laughing at Nabokov, rather than with him.

Furthermore, de Merival is not a full-fledged Nabokovian artist, for his perceptions are too heavily freighted with Romanticism. His Byronic memories of his years of exile following his freak escape, not voiced to the farm family, are also rendered in blank verse:

Amid the whistle of sea winds I fled
 from France, and kept avoiding France so long
 as over her the icy Robespierre
 loomed like a greenish incubus, so long
 as lusty armies marched into the gunfire
 spurred by the Corsican's gray gaze and forelock.
 But life was hard for me in foreign countries.
 In dank and melancholy London I
 gave lessons in the science of duelling. I
 sojourned in Russia, playing the fiddle at
 an opulent barbarian's abode. . . .
 In Turkey and in Greece I wandered then,
 and in enchanting Italy I starved.
 The sights I saw were many; I became
 a deckhand, then a chef; a barber, a tailor,
 then just a simple tramp. Yet, to this day
 I thank the Lord with every passing hour
 for all the hardships that I came to know--
 and for the rustle of the roadside corn,
 the rustle and the warming breath of all
 the human souls that have passed close to me.
 (298-99)

With this humanist manifesto, de Merival pins his heart securely on his sleeve.

And his poetry is bathetic, often trite and prosaic. Without close reading, it is hard to notice that the play is written in loose blank verse, because such a mock-formal vehicle fits naturally within the context of the melodramatic plot. This stock, expository blank verse works adequately because the play itself neither promises, nor delivers, developed characters. Interestingly, by limiting the play to one act precipitously and fantastically concluded, and by presenting quickly sketched characters, who reveal themselves in unoriginal poetry, Nabokov, even in this early work, creates ambiguity. Even here the reader confronts the dilemma which continually stumps Nabokov's critics. Is Nabokov creating a moral drama for the catharsis and instruction of his audience? Or is he playing games; that is, should his elevation of this mundane set of people to the status of poets be interpreted as tongue-in-cheek?

Although both reactions are possible, the former can be more strongly supported. The serviceable blank verse of de Merival and the farm family celebrates an unprepossessing, admirable life; and it is shocking when this life is brutally shattered by an old man in the blind service of an ugly ideology. The Grand-dad clearly favors the farm family and de Merival over the obsessive

executioner. Nabokov abruptly dispenses with compassion for the executioner when he transforms him from an enigma caressing his lilies to an unquestioning henchman for a defunct authority. As de Merival struggles to avoid the axe, Grand-dad becomes self-righteous: "No. . . . Wait. . . . You must not interfere. . . . It is decreed. . . . My duty . . . " It is clear that, however artistic Grand-dad's former head-chopping, however sensitive his present caressing of the lilies, Nabokov intends us to see that the executioner's "art" is in service to a stagnant ideology. For Nabokov, the executioner is a member of the most dangerous class of false artists, since his art is, literally, death-dealing, and therefore a denial of the human spirit.

If the reader keeps in mind that, in Nabokov's work, to be in thrall to a political ideology is, de facto, to be a failure as an artist, the reader should also keep in mind that, in Nabokov's work, hereditary nobility (and the aesthetic awareness that, ideally, money and position afford) is a basic good. The bearer of the "noble particle" before his name is assumed by virtue of heredity to possess the potential to enter the ranks of the artist. That de Merival is from a good family of Lyon, that he shows at least a glancing knowledge of Shakespeare (he makes an allusion to Romeo), and that he expresses himself in blank verse (the literary vehicle of the nobility), are

perhaps indications of his favor in Nabokov's eye. The fact that the farm family responds to de Merival with similarly lofty attempts at verse is perhaps an indication that they too have Nabokov's favor. (The executioner, by contrast, in the heat of his obsession speaks in choppy sentences.)

Of course, I have already noted the important distinction to be made between the blank verse of Shakespeare and that of The Grand-dad. If the reader can have faith that Dmitri Nabokov's translation is true to his father's original Russian, the blank verse in Nabokov's play is neither revelatory, nor emancipating, nor stunning. Indeed, it is simply expository, and often trite at that. This deficiency, however, should not tempt the reader to dismiss The Grand-dad as a tongue-in-cheek mockery. I think, rather, that Nabokov does here heavy-handedly what he learns to do more subtly in later works such as Lolita. He is evoking the sometimes pathetic poetry of mundane life. These little people operate against what Nabokov considers to be the inescapable ingredient of reality--the capricious, fantastic, intricate snafu. The incident from the past recurs in the present because time is a spiral. It would be predictable in its future loopings only if humans were presentient, and if Caprice were predictable. Since these salutary conditions do not exist, man must create a reality in which each

spiral; each repetition; is used to deepen his perception of life.⁷

The true Nabokovian artist attempts a quiet gesture; his is an unassuming act of self-assertion; not a grand heroic statement. Nabokov's work never champions any ideology; be it despotic; anarchic, or benevolent. For Nabokov, such proselytizing is a sign of beoming enslaved by an obsession; then seeking to enslave others by it. Nabokov's heroes are instead masters of the small, private gesture, the bright act of optimism in the midst of despair: This kind of instinctual act separates the true artist from the false artist who is an unquestioning slave to an obsession.⁸

⁷ The importance of such patterns is explored in Pnin, as each successive heart seizure brings Pnin closer to an understanding of the "key" to his life. In concrete terms, he is seeing a key in the pattern in the wallpaper of his childhood bedroom. During his heart seizures as an adult, understanding occurs almost atavistically as he becomes, once again, that child. In metaphysical terms, he is discerning the gridwork of his life; the large pattern which has both sheltered and imprisoned him; and this understanding at last frees him: With fresh optimism; he and the small stray dog he has befriended ride off into the sunset; literally; away from Waindell College and toward Pnin's new job.

⁸ The death of Nabokov's father is an intriguing model for the quiet gesture; independent of any ideology. The elder Nabokov, a former White Russian and then a conservative socialist, stepped in front of assassins' bullets meant for the leader of a more radical faction, who was sharing a speaker's podium with him. His death was not that of a martyr to socialism, but that of a man whose instincts were unflinchingly protective of life.

Nabokov also celebrates quiet acts of heroism in another early one-act drama, The Pole, which imaginatively reenacts the last moments of the explorer Captain Robert Scott and a few of his men, who, on an expedition to reach the South Pole, succumbed within twelve miles of a supply outpost. Their gestures are small, even pathetic; but they briefly illuminate the cold tent in which these men die of starvation. Nabokov changed the characters' names, except for Scott's, and he either invented the incidents or extrapolated them from Scott's diaries. The renamed characters are Fleming, Kingsley, and Johnson. They and Scott speak in blank verse; but, unlike the blank verse of The Grand-dad, it is simple rather than florid. Although they express themselves in blank verse, the content of their musings suggests that they are scientists first, poets second. Just as Nabokov allowed the farmer to undercut his paean to his growing corn with his diatribe against worms, so Nabokov ensures that the scientists' moments of poetry are underscored, made more human, by small, sometimes silly, concerns. Yet by choosing to present these men as poets of a sort, Nabokov forces an awareness of their sensitivity upon the reader. He even allows one character, Fleming, to soliloquize in a highly artful manner. Ironically, though, the power of Fleming's spirit is lost to his comrades, who are asleep as he speaks:

All three asleep. . . . Lucky for them . . .
 to whom, then,
 can I explain that I am strong and avid,
 that I could gobble up not twelve but hundreds
 of miles, so stubborn is the life within me.
 My hunger and the icy wind have forced
 all of my strength into one burning, bursting
 mote. . . . And there is nothing in the world
 a mote like that cannot achieve. . . (272)

Fleming interrupts his own defiant thoughts with concern for Johnson, who has awakened and who says he is going outside "to have a look if there is anything in sight." Johnson is actually leaving the tent to die, to spare the others the burden of his death. Then Kingsley, delirious, begins to talk in his sleep:

Oh, Jessie,
 my darling--it's so beautiful. . . .
 We've seen
 the pole, and I have brought you a penguin.
 Here, Jessie--you just take a look how smoo-
 smoo-smooth he is . . . and how he
 waddles . . . Jessie,
 you're honeysuckle. . . (273)

Kingsley laughs in his sleep, and this small burst of joy makes the plight of the men even more poignant.

Continuing to muse, Fleming reviews his life in faintly Byronic fashion, much as de Merival does in The Grand-dad. Fleming envies the others, even Kingsley, who in his delirium at least has a loved one to address. Fleming says:

Lucky man . . . I have
 no one to be delirious about . . .
 The captain has a wife and little son

in London, Kingsley has a fiance,
 almost, a widow . . . Johnson, I don't know--
 I think his mother. What a notion to
 go walking. Funny chap, that Johnson, really.
 To him life is a mixture of exploit
 and prank. . . . He knows no doubts, his soul is
 straight as the shadow of a post on level snow.
 A lucky man. . . . While I must be a coward. . . .
 Danger enticed me; but aren't women enticed
 like that by an abyss? My life's not been
 much good. . . . I've been a ship's boy
 and a diver,
 hurled my harpoon upon uncharted seas. Oh,
 those years of seafaring, of wandering,
 of longing. . . . Few have been
 the peaceful nights,
 the happy days I've had from life . . . and yet. . .
 And yet I've an unbearable
 desire to live. . . . Yes, to pursue a ball,
 a woman, or the sun or--still more simply--
 to eat, to eat a lot, to tear the plump
 sardines in golden oil out of their tin. . . .
 I want to live so much it maddens me,
 it hurts--to live somehow. . . (274)

Then, considering Johnson again, Fleming notes
 Johnson's freedom from doubt; his unwavering soul, his
 simple courage. For Fleming, these traits bespeak an
 equable, accommodating personality that he himself cannot
 emulate. Fleming is fascinated with ambiguities. His
 attitude toward life is a mixture of fear and passion, of
 estrangement coupled with an affection for that very world
 in which he finds himself a stranger. Fleming is the
 typical Nabokovian character who feels cut off from normal
 human experience. He can't seem to share in Johnson's
 self-assurance, or Scott's and Kingsley's ability to form
 personal relationships; and he has been attempting, like an
 artist, to articulate his estrangment in the hope of

understanding and controlling it. The only alternative left to Fleming at this point is to embrace the world on an artist's terms--as he has been doing--making some sort of peace with the difficult position of feeling simultaneously connected and estranged, simultaneously omnipotent and powerless in the face of life's ambiguities.

Captain Scott, like Fleming, has hopes that articulation can control and, to some small extent, transcend, an untenable situation. Scott reveals himself as a meticulous scientist; and science requires observing and collating seemingly unrelated phenomena--much as does artistic creation. Scott has a diary in which he has been recording the group's days. His matter-of-fact entries, however, are interspersed with observations of poetic intensity. At the point after Kingsley finally has died in his sleep, and Johnson has gone off, never to return, Scott reads his previous diary entries:

Fifteenth November: moon is blazing
 like a bonfire;
 and Venus seems a little Japanese lantern
 (turns page)
 Bravo for Kingsley. Always looks like
 he's playing--sturdy and light-footed. Problems
 with our poor dogs: Gypsy's gone blind,
 and Grouse
 has vanished: fell into a seal hole, I imagine . . .
 (280)

Scott's observations on Venus and the moon are those of a poet, not a scientist.

The characters of The Pole, the most admirable to be found in the four early Nabokov dramas, possess the rudiments of the artistic sensibility. Self-aware, they retain a sense of beauty, compassion, and wry humor throughout their most difficult moments.

In contrast, in The Event, Nabokov's early five-act play, the protagonist, Troshcheykin, lacks both passion and compassion. Ironically, although he is a portrait-painter, an "artist" by profession, he is no artist in the Nabokovian sense. His sensuality and self-awareness are limiting rather than liberating; because he is solipsistic, lacking an appreciation for anything beyond himself. The intelligent Troshcheykin does own something of the artistic sensibility, for he understands well the power of Caprice. But his purpose in observing Caprice is not the artist's purpose of countering it. Rather, he delights, perversely, in Caprice's workings because the world's vagaries, which he always takes as a personal affront, allow him to mourn the injustice of mundane intrusions into his artist's aerie.

He and his wife, Lyubov, are held in psychological thrall throughout the play's five acts by the rumor that one Barbashin (Lyubov's hot-blooded former lover, who has been imprisoned for attempting to shoot the Troshcheykins) has been released from prison 18 months early and is headed their way to complete his early attempt. When Troshcheykin

hears that Barbashin has been spotted in the vicinity, he muses petulantly:

It's monstrously funny, though. Poor idiot that I am, a moment ago I still had a year and a half in reserve. By that time we would have long since been in a different city, in a different country, on a different planet. I don't understand: What is this, a trap? Why didn't anybody warn us beforehand? Where did these tender-hearted judges come from? The bastards! Just think--they let him out early! No, it's . . . it's . . . I'll lodge a complaint! I'll-- (145)

Troshcheykin implies that they were prepared to deal with Barbashin's release, but later, 18 months in the future. Their reactions to Barbashin's imminent arrival are curious. They make no attempt either to flee, or to prepare to meet him, acting as if their lives are no longer under their control. The ostensible reason for their inaction is Troshcheykin's lack of funds for escaping--he has lately been reduced to hack portraiture--but the real reason seems to be psychological rather than financial. Their response to the imminent arrival of Barbashin is the response almost of somnambulists being moved by an outside force. The final irony--the cosmic mockery of their condition--is that Barbashin never shows up, and they at last receive word that he was simply passing through town. Thus, as "the event" unfolds, it doesn't. Or rather, Caprice, true to its usual ambiguity, chooses not to deliver what we might expect if the universe were governed simply, by inexorable fate. In a fateful universe, the

reader would expect a second meeting, and a resolution, between Barbashin, Troshcheykin, and Lyubov.

Field notes that the poet and critic Khodasevich, Nabokov's good friend, whose opinion he respected, in a critique of a 1938 production of The Event describes a sense of imminent disaster permeating the play. This fear dissipates at the end, when it is learned that the feared visitor will never arrive, Khodasevich says. He contrasts The Event with Gogol's The Inspector-General. In Gogol's play, the town's nervous mayor (who, unlike the reader, is not aware that he is placating an impostor of the inspector) learns, at the conclusion, that the real inspector must still arrive, and his fear and consternation increase. Khodasevich says:

Sirin's Troshcheykin . . . [Sirin was Nabokov's pen-name for his works written originally in Russian] calms down before the final curtain, when he has learned that Barbashin will not appear; but in the course of the entire play he is in that state of terror which overwhelms Gogol's mayor only at the end. And it would seem that the fear that possesses both of them has a common effect: under its influence, reality grows both more obscure and more apparent for Troshcheykin and his wife, just as it does for the mayor: more obscure because in their eyes people lose their real aspect, and more apparent because that very reality turns out to be transitory, from behind which another still more real, more authentic reality begins to flash (Contemporary Annals, 1938; qtd. in Nabokov: His Life in Art 212-215. Emphasis added.)

Troshcheykin and his wife do live in a state in which reality "grows both more obscure and more apparent," but it

seems overall to be a state of bemused self-absorption, not fear. Troshcheykin seems to me a man who is too busy building himself up with braggadocio to fully admit the real world, much less to feel terror. The uneasiness that might be felt by the true artist as he discovered layer upon layer of "reality" is an emotion foreign to Troshcheykin.⁹ Unless Dmitri Nabokov's translation of The Event fails to convey an all-pervasive terror in Troshcheykin which is clear in the Russian-language version, then I will stand on my interpretation of Troshcheykin as an inferior artist, too self-absorbed to be truly engaged by shifts in outer reality. Thus, Troshcheykin is alarmed by news that Barbashin is in town, but he simply ruminates over the facts, like a sleepwalker repeating a litany.

Field, like Khodasevich, is intrigued by the two levels of reality created by the threat of Barbashin's reappearance, a threat which reveals the shallowness of the Troshcheykins:

One suspects that Barbashin, who never comes onstage, is the author of the play. Its course of development and the state of mind of the Troshcheykins depend

⁹ Their situation is revealed as pathetic only in one brief scene, commented on by emigre critics, when a scrim comes down, separating husband and wife from the other characters on stage, who have suddenly become a tableau. Then the couple voice their fears nakedly rather than petulantly. (The Man from the USSR and Other Plays 212-215.)

entirely upon his wife. His revenge is not to appear so that, with no more reason to be afraid, the Troshcheykins will, we assume, continue to live their "real lives" but will also have an awareness of the flat stageboard reality their lives really are. . . . It is a case of dramatic murder, and the weapon is the absence of fear. . . . (Field 212-215.)¹⁰

The differing emphases in their memories of Barbashin's first attack years earlier reveal Troshcheykin and Lyubov as two variations on the false artist. Troshcheykin is a self-conscious aesthete, and Lyubov is a simple sensualist:

Troshcheykin: Look, this is how it was. I was sitting here. No, wait--the table was in a different spot, too. Here, I believe. You see--memory does not immediately adjust to a repeat performance. Yesterday it all seemed so long ago. (150)

As the craftsman, he needs to reassure himself that he can recall where each stick of furniture was positioned.

¹⁰ Field makes an analogy between Barbashin's threat and the kind of fear that can be instilled by peoples' reliance upon a political regime. The reassuring orderliness of the regime is meant to keep them safe from fear, but it instead instills in them a desperate need to retain that order and rigidity at all costs:

Fear, when one thinks of it, is the basic emotion of all politics: fear that property or ideology will be threatened, fear that reform will not be made in time, fear that traditions are not being properly preserved, and so on. (Field 218.)

Field then poses the possibility, which I have already noted, that any apparent "politicizing" in Nabokov's novels is actually oblique philosophizing, that Nabokov is exploring the psychological nature of fear and confrontation of that fear, rather than the nature of any particular political ideology.

If he can use his artist's powers to exactly recreate the scene, he can gain some measure of control over the fear and horror that occurred there, since art, however mimetic, is always safely at one remove from the actual experience.

Lyubov's recollection, in contrast, focuses on only one detail, which is heavily sensual and emotional:

Lyubov: It was October eighth, and raining, because I remember the ambulance attendants' cloaks were wet, and my face felt wet as they were carrying me. You might find that detail useful for your reconstruction.
(150-51)

Her last comment is sarcastic, since she is irked by her husband's seeming lack of attention to the emotional substance beneath the surface details of the shooting.

An excellent example of the difference in the ways that husband and wife perceive reality is shown in their reminiscences on the death of their small son (in an unrelated incident). She accuses him of insensitivity in asking her to locate three toy balls being used in his portrait of a local child, because the toys remind her of her dead child. Troshcheykin defends himself:

Maybe my heart is breaking, too, but I know how to control myself. Look at it sensibly--he died at two, he folded his little wings and fell like a stone into the depths of our souls, and if he hadn't he would have grown and grown, and developed into a nincompoop.
(131)

Lyubov finds his sardonic humor vulgar, and refuses to relinquish the past:

You keep living under the illusion that time heals all wounds, as they say, while I know it is only a palliative, if not outright mockery. I can forget nothing, while you do not want to remember anything. If I see a toy, and it brings back the memory of my baby, you get bored and vexed, because you have reached an agreement with yourself that after three years it's time to forget. And perhaps even--Heaven only knows--perhaps you have nothing to forget.

Troshcheykin counters:

Nonsense. . . . what on earth has gotten into you? First of all, I never said anything of the sort, but simply that we cannot expect to exist forever by collecting life's old debts. There's nothing either vulgar or insulting about that. (135)

Troshcheykin has an aesthetic sensibility, but is not a true Nabokovian artist. First, he refuses memory, rather than using it as a way to enrich the present. And second, although he is aware of reality, he can only control that reality by undercutting it with satire. He does not know how to transmute reality by using memory in a positive way.

A brief squabble between husband and wife illustrates Troshcheykin's lack of natural sensuality. Lyubov, complaining about the portrait with the three toy balls, had earlier observed:

I don't see why you can't paint the balls in first, and then finish the figure.

Troshcheykin replies:

You see, the balls have to glow, to cast their reflection on him, but I want that reflection firmly

in place before tackling its source. You must remember that art moves against the sun. (129)

Troshcheykin means that the artist is challenged to transcend the natural order, with its attendant change and decay; but he seems unable to appreciate natural beauty. Respect for the power of the natural order, and compassion for the frailty of humans who will inevitably be destroyed within that order, are necessary for the true artist who wants to transfigure reality. Yet Troshcheykin lacks both qualities. He not only works glibly against the sun, against nature in his portraiture; he is also too self-absorbed to see the lives behind the faces he paints.

He is not a true artist, but a solipsist revolving against the sun in an orbit outside ordinary humanity. His self-absorption is well illustrated in his complaint that his "artistic temperament" makes it hard for him to sleep, and in the vision of his ultimate artistic triumph that sweetens his insomnia. He explains:

I always get palpitations when there is a full moon. And then I've been getting these shooting pains here every now and then--I don't know what's happening to me. . . . And all kinds of thoughts, too--my eyes are closed, but there is such a merry-go-round of colors spinning in my head I could go insane. . . . Here's what I'd like to paint--try to imagine that this wall is missing, and instead there is a black abyss and what looks like an audience in a dim theatre, rows and rows of faces, sitting and watching me. And all the faces belong to people whom I know or once knew, and are now watching my life. There they sit before me, so pale and wondrous in the semi-darkness
(132)

Unwittingly, Troshcheykin here articulates the staginess of human existence, a realization necessary for the artist. That theatricality was also obvious to Kuznetsoff in The Man from the USSR. Yet there is an important difference in their perceptions. Troshcheykin the portrait-painter is a false artist, his occupation notwithstanding; and Kuznetsoff the political activist is a true artist, although his occupation is non-artistic. Kuznetsoff knows that self-absorption breeds stagnation, that self-awareness must be complemented by an awareness of the world. Kuznetsoff's disdain of self-absorption makes it difficult for him to commiserate with the Oshivenskis as they rail against the indignity of being penniless emigres in an uncaring Berlin. Their own situation has become the scope of their world. Troshcheykin exhibits a similarly unlovely preoccupation with self, as he nurses his vivid perception that his life's performance is a work which all who knew him would be eager to review. Troshcheykin believes, egotistically, that he has an interested audience. Kuznetsoff, in contrast, is sardonically amused by the stage set of life on which he finds himself, knowing that his actions attract little attention, and that other humans in the drama are as powerless as he is, under the thumb of the overall director, Caprice.

Troshcheykin fails to grasp his true position in life's drama, and his complacency leads to a debilitating

stasis, illustrated by his fond hope that a reflective symbol, a painting of an admiring audience, can give meaning to his life. He believes that self-reflection is the only element needed for artistic awareness.

Just as he nurses prejudices about his own importance, he holds contrasting prejudices about the unimportance of others. He considers the small-town bourgeoisie whose portraits he paints to be beneath his contempt. He complains to Lyubov:

For five years now we've been languishing in this super-provincial town, where I think I have daubed every paterfamilias, every round-heeled little housewife, every dentist, every gynecologist. Things are going from ludicrous to plain lewd. By the way, you know, I used my double-portrait method again the other day. It's pretty damned amusing. Unbeknownst to Baumgarten I painted two versions of him simultaneously on the sly: on one canvas as the dignified elder he wanted, and on another the way I wanted him--purple mug, bronze belly, surrounded by thunderclouds. Of course I didn't show him the second, but gave it to Kuprikov. When I accumulate twenty or so of these by-products, I'll exhibit them. (134)

In Troshcheykin is the germ of Nabokov's later false artist Axel Rex of Laughter in the Dark--an aesthete whose perceptions are utterly knifelike, an opportunist who considers his subjects as material for jokes. Troshcheykin and Rex are fairly easy for the reader to peg as poseurs. But when Nabokov's depiction of the false artist reaches its height of subtlety and ambiguity, we have Humbert Humbert, Nabokov's master creation. In Lolita, the target

of Humbert's contempt is also the center of his passion. The mixture of comeliness and vulgarity Humbert sees in Lolita's mother, Charlotte Haze (Humbert calls the mother "a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich") is transcended by the gleam of perfection he glimpses in the gum-popping brat, Dolores. Still, although his sense of the child Dolores Haze is, for the most part, more aesthetic than compassionate, Humbert is closer to being the responsible artist than Rex, certainly, and even closer than Troshcheykin. For Humbert is emotionally involved with his subject. In Humbert, the artist's contempt for his subject is at times indiscernible, since it is almost inextricably mixed with love. This ambiguity makes the situation much more complex and frightening--for both Humbert and the reader--than the blatant contempt of an Axel Rex or the aloofness of a Troshcheykin. Humbert is not merely working as a technician, deploying his craft for the sake of amusement, like Troshcheykin or Rex.

CHAPTER IV

POSHLOST AND THE GROTESQUE:
THE ART OF "MAKING STRANGE"

When he moved from plays to novels--and I will be examining Lolita in particular--Nabokov's sense of the theatre did not leave him. The lives of characters in these novels mirror the attempts of actors to repeat the correct lines, recall the proper gestures in a tricked-up, temporary setting. They seem charged with the responsibility for weaving whole cloth on a bare loom. Consider the unreal nature of the theatre. During any lull in the action onstage, the spectator can become all too aware of the wheezy breathing of the theatre-goer in the next seat, of the shoddiness of costuming or sets, of the discrepancy between the small stage and the sumptuous ballroom it has been tricked out to represent. In the theatre, the actors have almost complete responsibility for creating a coherent world; and the audience enters the world created for them. Because of the artificiality of their environment, the lives of the characters in Nabokov's novels seem somehow tenuous, as insubstantial as theatre. But Nabokov's characters are doubly disadvantaged, first by the artificiality of their daily lives, and then by Nabokov's refusal to allow them the actor's prerogative of interpreting the material and thus determining what world

will be offered to the audience. They seem to the reader to be the author's puppets. Just as puppets are dispensable to the child who forgets them as he turns back to the real world, so are Nabokov's characters dispensable to the reader. In a "theatrical" novel such as Nabokov writes, the actor/protagonists are pawns moved by Caprice. Thus his works offer both the protagonist and the reader less psychic freedom than a more traditional novel, in which the protagonist operates in a world of free will, choice, and consequence. The plays that Nabokov wrote early in his career had few performances, so that most knowledge of them is of their printed form--and perhaps a printed play is the best objective correlative to Nabokov's novels. Those bare bones of conversation, with only a few stage directions and set descriptions to provide context, are like his novels, in which the material, contextual world shifts and dissolves, and only human imagination endures. Dissolution is as endemic to Nabokov's novels as it is to his plays.

Beside impermanence, another important element makes the theatre an objective correlative for Nabokov's novels: the precipitous climax. In any theatrical production which observes the unities, the audience enters in media res, on the cusp of a situation. Within a stunningly short time, within the limits of one or two days, marriages are dissolved, lives ended, loves established, ideals

overthrown, and sustaining perceptions revealed as false. Dissolution in Nabokov's novels--although he may take the length of a novel to do it--seems equally precipitous. However, since he is not working within the time constraints of the theatre, he creates that precipitousness not by theatrically condensing and squeezing time, but by dissociating cause and effect. In the traditional novel the author trails his characters through hundreds of pages as they spin the web of action and reaction; fate gathers its forces visibly and delivers its blow precisely as expected. Traditional heroes triumph or perish on the basis of moral choices. Nabokov's protagonists, in contrast, seem to be free-floaters. Although they live within the web of emotion, imagination, and idea which entangles the traditional protagonist, they seem to have abdicated from the realm of moral/immoral action. They simply act. If they succeed, their success seems attributable only to the whim of the controlling narrator; if they fail, their destruction seems equally whimsical. Thus, even though Nabokov's novels are as lengthy as traditional works, they seem to climax precipitously, because their climactic moments seem to appear out of nowhere.

Interestingly, the surprise climax--however disagreeable--engenders little sympathy for the protagonist. Because it seems unconnected with anything

the protagonist does, it effectively relegates him to the status of the shaggy dog in a shaggy dog joke. Since the preamble has been incohesive, the punch line, however extraordinary, doesn't fit. The dog--here the Nabokovian protagonist--seems set up as simply an irritant in the plot, not the key to understanding. The reader not only receives no catharsis, but turns away feeling that he has been duped by artifice.

Nabokov's refusal to follow the moralist's outline of cause-effect--instead constructing his truths upon chance and circumstance--has brought down upon him the accusation that he does not value his characters. Many readers first respond irritably at being fed such a sumptuous feast of sensual detail, plot, action and reaction, all for the sake of an absurd climax and a fizzled denouement. The second, often subconscious, response is to adopt the same archness and aloofness that Nabokov and his narrators affect. But after the irritation and the ennui, the realization may come that there is much more than game-playing here, but that the substance is camouflaged. Nabokov's refusal to admit a moral is almost the refusal of a lover who doth protest too much against love for fear that he will lose his love object. The most profitable stance for the wary hero, who has seen Caprice destroy the good, is to dupe Caprice at Caprice's own game. This is why Nabokov pretends to a position of amorality. Nabokov's purpose

lies between the lines. His works of art are detached exercises, but in the service of the old Romantic question: How can man survive the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and transcend time? Nabokov's is the old answer: through art.

Nabokov's seeming carelessness toward his characters is, paradoxically, the way in which he camouflages his great care for the human spirit. Ellen Pifer in Nabokov and the Novel argues that the more artificial the world created in a Nabokov novel, the more insistent is the underweave of moral responsibility which contrasts with the solipsism and cruelty of the overlying plot. Pifer believes that Nabokov meant to make it very clear that the sterile and circumscribed fantasies of his false artists, as well as the embellished, gleaming, scintillating worlds of the imagination that his artist heroes use to usurp the mundane, are limited in their power--that human vulnerability is a more powerful reality than art. Pifer notes:

Nabokov's expressed tenderness for his "poor little girl" [expressed in an interview about Lolita] makes obvious what should be apparent to his readers in any case. Despite the author's subjugation of his "galley slaves" within the work of artifice, Nabokov was far from indifferent to his characters or hostile to the real human beings they so convincingly resemble. And despite the many differences between Nabokov's early Russian and later English novels, a synoptic view of these works reveals how unswerving was his commitment to certain moral as well as aesthetic principles. Keenly aware of the transgressions all human beings commit against each other as they pursue, and try to

realize, their solipsistic dreams and desires, Nabokov himself was no solipsist. The very form of his fiction illustrates that the artist's private world is not coterminous with ours; he does not seek to extend his personal dominion beyond the printed page. (170-71)

She further cites an interview in which Nabokov challenged his detractors by saying

. . . I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist, kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel--and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride. (Qtd. in Pifer 170-71.)

With the firebird metaphor, Nabokov defines himself and defines the true Nabokovian artist: self-sufficient, subsuming and recreating himself within his own universe; through his art metaphysically removing himself from the mundane laws of mortality, though still physically vulnerable to death.

While Pifer asserts that Nabokov is adamantly clear that tenderness is as necessary for the artist as talent and pride, my argument is that the firebird, consuming itself solipsistically, is far more seductive in Nabokov's work than Pifer admits. The boundaries Nabokov allows the domain of art are more fluid than Pifer believes them to be. Nabokov's underlying position as "rigid moralist" blurs around the edges, given the seductiveness of the power of art. She emphasizes that Nabokov considers it

necessary for humans to be allowed freedom (through their imaginations if not in fact), and that for this reason Nabokov basically disapproves of artists such as Rex and Humbert, who seek with impunity to control others. Pifer and I vary, however, when assessing the degree of comfort with which Nabokov embraces artifice. Pifer says that Nabokov always makes clear that the "natural condition of human freedom" may be abused by "the inhuman privileges of art." I believe instead that, for Nabokov, although art unfortunately may be abused by solipsists, it is the only possible simulacrum of freedom; and the artistic impulse is the most fully human--rather than inhuman--response to the natural condition of human impotence. For Nabokov, although freedom is a condition ardently desired by humans as they move through the mundane world, such freedom is not possible because of the ubiquitous control of Caprice; the only true freedom lies in the imagination. His allegiance to art often makes him seem cavalier about "real" life, so that it is not always easy to discern that Nabokov favors vitality over artifice.

Yet if Nabokov seems cavalier, it is only a mark of his care to reproduce a reality in which Caprice is more cavalier than any author could aspire to be. As much as he admired the great black webs of cause-effect spun by Dickens--or the subtle threads of human strengths and vanities drawn out by Jane Austen--he cannot afford to be

so direct in his approach to immorality.¹ The immorality he is battling is not a matter of social evils perpetrated by men, nor of human vanities. Instead, he is battling a world divested of a sense of individual responsibility, so that human actions seem to have no power for either good or evil. The world he reports on mirrors the capriciousness of Nabokov's own life. Existential despair might have been his first intelligent response; instead, to his credit, he makes a subtle plea for reinstating the heroic response. Nabokov himself had watched Caprice perform its most devastating whimsies overnight, with no fanfare, and no sound of dragons' wingbeats fading in the distance. The frequent upheaval was quotidian, almost silly in its absurdity, and inescapable even for the hero. Simple absurdities also upend his fictional protagonists.

Nabokov records reality, not fantasy, when he allows his protagonists to be snatched up in the scattered leaves of coincidence, which then form a tiny whirlwind around them. He paints a world of absurdities not simply because he loves absurdity but because he is so familiar with it. For Nabokov to write a novel in which right action prevailed would be as unlikely as for Jane Austen to abandon her more stable, morally coherent world. Nabokov fights life's caprices with humor and with art. This arch

¹ See his Lectures on Literature.

response does not necessarily imply, however, that he is amoral. The reader should conclude only that Nabokov perceives a world in which awareness, sensitivity, compassion--the underpinnings of conventional moral behavior--seem ineffectual.²

In the most radical sense of "real" art--art which imitates life--the indifferent, brittle, fantastically shifting world of Nabokov is realistic. The characters, who respond with helplessness, aloofness, bravado, or--at best--artistic sensitivity, in their attempts to survive, are realistic. And the absurd twists of plot, rather than being the self-conscious moves of an effete "gamesman," are realistic. His is a conscientious attempt to evoke, and then subdue through art, the capricious world.

Barbara Goodwin complains that modern writers such as Nabokov become too precious because of their obsession with

² Nabokov, asserting that his work is never moralistic, still makes it clear that a sense of responsibility and compassion for humanity is an essential ingredient of what he considers art. Defending Lolita against those disturbed because it did not moralize against Humbert's pedophilia, Nabokov said:

"There 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 John Ray's assertion, Lolita has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss; that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with the state of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm." ("On a Book Entitled Lolita," in Stegner, The Portable Nabokov 235.)

objective reporting, with cataloguing and naming, with establishing clear connections between themselves and the outer world--a condition she refers to as "referential mania." She contends that it fragments their work. For Nabokov at least, her criticism seems misdirected, because Nabokov himself sees referential mania as debilitating; however, it is not debilitating for Nabokov, but rather for some of his most aware, but most powerless, characters. His grasp of the condition often allows him to be at his most engaged, most compassionate, with these characters.

In few of his works is his compassion clearer than in his short story "Signs and Symbols," in which the parents suffer helplessly through the illness of their child, who is a victim of referential mania:

"Referential mania," Herman Brink had called it. In these very rare cases the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy--because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages which he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. . . . He must always be on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding and undulation of things. ("Signs and Symbols," in The Portable Nabokov 174.)

Nabokov has such compassion for the parents' sorrow that he allows his narrator a pathetic fallacy--not used

tongue-in-cheek--to articulate their situation. The parents are on their way to the asylum to visit their son, and it is raining: "They reached the bus-stop shelter on the other side of the street and he closed his umbrella. A few feet away under a swaying and dripping tree, a tiny half-dead unfledged bird was helplessly twitching in a puddle." (173)

The omniscient narrator, indistinguishable from Nabokov, is privy to the mother's anguish as she recalls the progression of her child's illness. He recognizes her estrangement, which is inescapably yet pathetically part of the human condition:

She thought of the endless waves of pain that for some reason she and her husband had to endure; of the invisible giants hurting her boy in some unimaginable fashion; of the incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world; of the fate of this tenderness, which is either crushed, or wasted, or transformed into madness. . . . (176)

As she leafs through a photograph album:

From a fold in the album, a German maid they had had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiance fell out. Minsk, the Revolution. Leipzig, Berlin, Leipzig, a slanting house front badly out of focus. Four years old, in a park: moodily, shyly, with puckered forehead, looking away from an eager squirrel as he would from any other stranger. Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths--until Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about. . . . He again, aged about eight . . . afraid of the wallpaper in the passage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and an old cart wheel hanging from a branch

of a leafless tree. Aged ten: the year they left Europe . . . (175-76)

The reader discerns faint outlines of Pnin--whose childhood, like the son's, was mixed up with arcane "messages" from wallpaper, paintings, and encounters with squirrels--and whose adulthood, like the parents', includes the pain of political exile and of losing loved ones to the Nazi concentration camps.

Yet against these startling revelations which evoke compassion, Nabokov, like Gogol (the two authors' affinity will be discussed later), juxtaposes absurd details in a bantering tone: a black-trousered man lying supine on a bed in a window across the alleyway; the photograph of the maid and her "fat-faced fiance"; Aunt Rosa, whose fussiness was ended neatly when she was killed "along with all the people she had fussed about." This fusion of the horrific and the mundane is Nabokov's strength. The absurd does more than disconcert; it terrifies, because Nabokov gives no reassurance to counter the absurdity. However, while Nabokov at first glance seems an absurdist, he does not embrace the absurd. Instead, he observes it, making sure that he catches the moments when absurdity takes control and then chronicles these moments carefully. This vigilance, which allows him some measure of control, is his strongest defense against Caprice and attendant chaos. Finally, he wears his sense of humor as armor against

absurdity. His ability to seem in control although he is actually enmeshed in the struggles of his "puppets" is Nabokov's strongest weapon against despair.

Critics, including Field, point to the parallels between Nabokov's life and the lives of his physically and emotionally uprooted characters, implying that in some way each of his novels is subconsciously autobiographical. This assessment has limited relevance, however, because Nabokov controls his characters far more tightly than the vicissitudes of politics were able to control him. All of his characters are more circumscribed by their physical and psychic environments (due to lack of money, influence, talent, or perception) than Nabokov ever was. But many of his protagonists do clearly share their creator's artistic sensibility. If the novels present their protagonists sympathetically, those protagonists are bound to be thinkers and artists; and while they may not always be political exiles, strangers to the cultures in which they are forced to live, they often operate under conditions of emotional and intellectual estrangement. Thus they must, in a sense, invent themselves; since their environment is either oblivious to their existence or is interested only in fitting them into the common mold. Since the outside world is unable or unwilling to accurately define them, their art is an act of self-definition. And since they are operating outside common experience, they are not

constricted to using common modes of expression. For example, a writer who feels estranged will employ plotting and imagery which reflects that estrangement. And if, like Humbert, he is bereft of the one object which gave his life meaning--if, like Humbert, he has "only words to play with"--then his entire self depends upon his articulation of that object. Thus, in Lolita Nabokov weaves his theme of estrangement, of uneasiness with time and its changes, on the frame of an unusual plot involving a middle-aged lecher and a 12-year-old girl.

Lolita, unusual and even perverse, is also poignant, for it shows both the failings and the triumphs inherent in Humbert's estranged sensibility. Yet because Humbert's story falls outside the commonly accepted molds, its triumphs do not always seem pure, or free of its failings. True to the Nabokovian tenet that truth is elusive--not apprehensible in a clean-cut fable--Lolita is ambiguous. For instance, if the reader accepts the possibility that Clare Quilty's function is to underscore facets of Humbert's own psyche, then Humbert's murder of Quilty--though Humbert treats it tragi-comically in the telling--is perhaps a loss of part of Humbert himself, and thus more poignant than Humbert's loss of Dolores Haze. For by shooting fellow lecher Quilty, Humbert not only destroys the "rotting monsters" of his sexual obsession for a child, he also destroys that spark in himself which

illuminated perfection. When Humbert professes love for the girl who is no longer a nymphet but simply pale, pregnant Dolly Schiller, he becomes more touchingly human; but he also deserts his dream of possessing beauty infinitely. Notwithstanding that the dream had pernicious effects upon Dolores, as he is now aware (assuming the reader can take his confession at face value), still the dream was impressive in its devotion to Idea. When Humbert confesses wrongdoing in seducing Dolores, he douses the quirkish, brilliant spark in him that was able to illuminate the child as if she were pure Idea. This loss--of an artist's confidence in his ability to control beauty--is poignant.

Yet there is also gain to be measured. By relinquishing pure Idea, Humbert can now step hesitantly into the common world--flawed though it is--and find a niche for himself, since he has learned compassion. He is no longer estranged from humanity. The compassionate Humbert is able to recognize the limitations of art, to realize that his attempts to freeze Lolita--to imprison her in order to protect her against time--were acts which ignored her vitality. He recognizes finally that his art has violated nature; and the result is a 17-year-old woman whom he never allowed to be a child. As the story of an artist's estrangement from, and reconciliation with, the world to which his mortality restricts him, Lolita

encompasses the crystalline perfection of the artistic Idea, in its beauty as well as its bloodlessness. It encompasses also the more human construct that the artist must ultimately create as he bows to the limitations of art.

The artist's unease with the accepted cliches for perceiving his environment, and his capacity for perceiving it in fresh, often startling ways, contributes to the condition in modern novels referred to in Russian as ostranenie, or "making strange."³ From the artist's unusual sensibilities comes unusual work. The artist does not recreate the mundane; even if he seems to, it always wears what Dabney Stuart refers to as the "shimmer of an imaginary nature." Stuart says further that Nabokov, for example

. . . uses the novel-as-game as a springboard to higher regions of emotion. He knows how to combine serious concerns with utter delight . . . always for a purpose, at least partly to jar his reader out of habitual modes of response to the world and lead him

³ For discussion and illustration of ostranenie, see the work of Viktor Shklovsky, exponent and practitioner of the New Formalism in Russia. He explains that "Art is fundamentally ironic and destructive. It revitalizes the world. Its function is to create inequalities, which it does by means of contrasts." Ostranenie, which is only one among many techniques within the New Formalism, involves taking unusual or strange points-of-view, or employing uncommon images. (Shklovsky, A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922, trans. Richard Sheldon [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970] 232-233.)

back into it with a fresh vision. (Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody [Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1978] 50-51.)⁴

This is particularly true in Lolita, which beneath its surface of archness and titillation, is as lyrical as Keats's observation on the two pastoral lovers. In this tragi-comedy about nympholepsy, Nabokov jars the reader into emotion--but subtly, under cover of a deceptively entertaining style. In fact, the careless reader may remain simply amused; but the careful reader will be

⁴ Robert Alter, discussing Nabokov's style not in Lolita but in Ada, cites a passage which concretely illustrates Nabokov's concept of the function of metaphor: to "make strange." The passage, Alter explains, is

. . . a vivid commentary on what [Nabokov] aspires to achieve through style. [Nabokov] likens the youthful Van's astonishing agility in walking on his hands to the function of metaphor in Van's later work as a writer:

"It was the standing of a metaphor on its head, not for the sake of the trick's difficulty, but in order to perceive an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis [arrow] of time. . . . Van on the stage was performing organically what his figures of speech were to perform later in life--acrobatic wonders that had never been expected from them and which frightened children." (106, "Ada, or the Perils of Paradise," in Vladimir Nabokov: His Life, His Work, His World: A Tribute, Peter Quennell, ed. [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979] 103-18.)

I would note that the reverse sunrise, the ascending waterfall, and the inverted boy are all inversions of the natural--images used to imply the inversion, the "strange-making," of the sexuality in Ada. The image of upside-down Van and his strange perceptions could apply equally well to Lolita. Yet in Lolita, the perversion of the father/daughter relationship is a condition used by Nabokov not only for its "strange-making," its stunning artistic effect, but also for illustrating the underlying theme of psychological estrangement from quotidian society.

brought up short, as if startled out of sleep, when he feels the pinpricks beneath the comedy.

Critics are alternately titillated and horrified by Nabokov's particular brand of comedy. For F. W. Dupee, the novel is a diabolically clever study of the European in America. He calls it an example of "fresh virulence breathed into the roman noir"; he admires the "inverted Freudianism" of Humbert's obsession, and warns against the seductive "falsity" of Humbert's confession.⁵

Alfred Appel takes an opposite tack and dissects the social malaise Nabokov exposes beneath the comedy. In "Tristram in Movielove: Lolita at the Movies," Appel examines the danger behind America's child-centered mentality, the early sexualizing of children (a la Shirley Temple and other child stars), and the manner in which America's fantasy of Hollywood-style perfection fails to accommodate real life; to the injury of both Humbert and Lolita.⁶ In his concern over America's moral vacuum, he seems not to fully appreciate the black comedy which is seamlessly interwoven with the tragedy, and which must be recognized for the way in which it leavens the pathos in Lolita.

⁵ The King of the Cats, and Other Remarks on Writers and Writing (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1965) 117-130.

⁶ in Proffer, A Book of Things about Lolita 122-70.

Dupee considers Lolita perniciously good fun; Appel considers it subtly dangerous. I agree with Dupee that it is a game, and with Appel that it is a dangerous one if taken too lightly, because the edge of its humor is so finely-honed that it can cut without pain. Nabokov is a dangerous comedian. Here is just one example of Nabokov's subtlety. Lolita and Humbert have spent their first night together at a motel, have gotten into the car the next morning, and he has just told her casually, brutally, that her mother is dead. Humbert's narrative continues matter-of-factly:

In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics; a box of candy; a box of sanitary pads, two cokes [sic], a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments--swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks. At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go. (Lolita, rpt. [New York: Fawcett World Library, Fawcett Crest Book edition, 1962] 130.)

The haphazard nonchalance of the catalog of gifts is in keeping with the satiric sobriquet "gay Lepingville." That nonchalance is so lulling that it dulls the reader's reaction to the final sentence, in which the comedy turns to horror: Humbert the fiend reflecting dispassionately upon Lolita's helplessness. Another small detail in the

catalog easily goes unnoticed. He buys a box of sanitary pads, indicating that Lolita is now post-pubertal, and that a simulacrum of an adult relationship can begin. Equally subtle, but as carefully engineered to stir emotion in the perceptive reader, is the juxtaposition of that box of pads with the girlish accoutrements of high-topped white roller skates, swooners, and summer frocks. Nabokov's talent for insinuating the "strange-making" detail into the weave of a mundane pattern--his talent for using the flaw in the mirror to render a plain face startling--provides the tension which makes Lolita much more than the comedy of "Lepingville, America."⁷

Humbert's deadpan delivery is not only the mark of a comedian; examining a phenomenon objectively and

⁷ Donald Malcolm was one of the first critics to appreciate the art of "strange-making," the perfect marriage of comedy and horror, in Lolita:

A gift for comedy seldom comes to a writer unaccompanied. Usually it attaches to some less endearing quality, such as a tendency to preach and moralize. Sometimes, as in parody, it is coupled with the gouty disposition of the critic. Sometimes, as in satire, it is joined to a spirit of ferocious indignation. But of all such pairings the oddest by far is the connection of a sense of humor with a sense of horror. The result of this union is satire of a very special kind, in which vice or folly is regarded not so much with scorn as with profound dismay and a measure of tragic sympathy. Literature is not rich in examples of such work, but certain of Mark Twain's writings come to mind, as does Nikolai Gogol's "Dead Souls." And to this abbreviated list we may now add Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. ("Lo, the Poor Nymphet," The New Yorker, 8 Nov. 1958: 195+.)

dispassionately because he is, paradoxically, passionately interested in discovering its essence; it is also the mark of a scientist. The account of Humbert's time with Lolita is managed with a lepidopterist's attention to detail. Humbert passionately examines the markings of his capture, but with a sure, hard eye, sealing his discovery with a Latinate nomenclature which defines, and then re-objectifies, the object of his passion. Nabokov omits no detail as Humbert builds his grand lyric scheme, no matter how throwaway that detail may at first seem. For the scientist, each detail is a building block in an attempt to reconstruct the grand pattern.

Such scientific attention to detail would seem to be the mark of a realist; and, in a qualified sense, Nabokov belongs to that group of modern novelists whose attention to detail is part of their attempt to capture "reality." A mounted butterfly is nature made changeless through art--because if the butterfly can be mounted and fixed on a pin, its beauty is preserved and remains real forever. The lepidopterist cheats Time. However, it is a manipulation of reality to collect specimens and preserve them formally, whether the collection is brains bottled in formaldehyde, photographs taped in an album, flowers pressed in books, insects pinned in glass cases--or memories and images arranged according to an author's calculated ends. Literature, too, is a manipulation of the real--a truth

about literature that Nabokov admitted early, through the young biographer Fyodor in The Gift.

Laurence Sterne in Tristram Shandy was one of the first novelists to illustrate, tongue-in-cheek yet painstakingly, the inability of the novel to capture reality. Tristram's reality cannot be duplicated because the moments of his life tumble out of memory in such disorder--clamoring to be depicted in such precious detail--that they become clotted and cannot flow smoothly from his bottle of ink: Reality overwhelms the hapless narrator of Sterne's novel.⁸

Although Tristram's story was a parody of the new emphasis on the artist's responsibility to reproduce reality, it was also, beneath the silliness, a somber illustration of the impossibility of objective "realism." By Nabokov's time, the impossibility of such objectivism

⁸ Nabokov's knowledge of, and delight in, Sterne, is noted by Field, who cites a passage from Bend Sinister in which the narrator manipulates the protagonist in a way which is distinctly Shandian:

The reader may sense the author as a real participant throughout the novel, aping Laurence Sterne's manipulation [in the playful service of verisimilitude] of Uncle Toby, [Nabokov] also making [Krug] go up and down stairs:

"I think I want to have the whole scene repeated. Yes, from the beginning. As you came up the stone steps of the porch, your eyes never left your cupped hands. Oh, what were you carrying? Come on now...I think I shall have you go through your act a third time, but in reverse--carrying that hawk moth back into the orchard where you found it." (Bend Sinister [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960] 120-21; qtd. in Nabokov: His Life in Art 202.)

was a given. Knowing that realism did not equal truth, novelists concentrated not so much on the scientific reporting of detail, but on the impression behind the detail. Objective details could be apprehended, selected, and then controlled by style, to evoke an emotional and psychological reality residing beneath surface experience.

Nabokov, like Sterne, is concerned with painstakingly rendering moments in time. And Nabokov's personal gifts permit him to remember exquisitely. His synaesthesia--the overlapping of his senses--allows him to overlay visual, auditory, and olfactory sensations in a way that enhances each. (See especially the autobiographical Speak, Memory, which often contains re-creations of moments from his youth.) Yet as skilled as he is at recall, Nabokov, unlike Tristram Shandy, is comfortable knowing that, in his work, time is often telescoped and details rearranged. He explains, first, that his memory, like all our faculties, is not faithful to experience. Humans perceive selectively, and it is our subjective impressions--not necessarily the "real" situations--that make up our memories. He admits, second, that he then exercises artistic control over those memories which may already be at several removes from reality.

Since he deliberately selects and rearranges sensory impressions to produce a particular effect upon the reader, even his autobiographical writing is not "true" in the

objective sense. Still, it is crucial that all his work is deeply true to the hopes and fears of mortal beings: Throughout his writings, and especially in Lolita, the protagonists feel compelled to control or to transcend the terrifyingly destructive power of Time, and they use their wit and their art in a valiant attempt. Humbert Humbert's efforts to freeze Dolores Haze at 12, in all her sensual perfection, can be linked to Tristram's efforts in two important respects. Both Tristram and Humbert are standing arms akimbo, feet planted against the headlong rush of Time, trying desperately to stop it; both are artists attempting to control reality.

Tristram produces a poignant but silly self-portrait which reminds the reader of a cat feverishly chasing its tail. If Humbert's attempt seems more heroic, it is equally doomed. However, critics are not as quick to chuckle at Humbert's failure as they are at Tristram's. Gladys Clifton, who calls Humbert an "artiste manqué", downplays Humbert's assertions that he is an artist moving toward a creative goal. She argues that he can approach perfection only in his imagination, and that his actual triumphs are limited to masturbatory fantasies. This segueing between life and art seems to her sad rather than illuminating.⁹

⁹ "Humbert Humbert and Artistic License," in Nabokov's Fifth Arc 153-70.

Brenda Megerle is more sympathetic to the artistic impulse in Humbert, but nevertheless agrees that Humbert's obsession is a trap from which neither he nor Lolita can be freed. For Megerle, Lolita tells a story of tantalization, of the artist's drive to reach an unattainable perfection. Megerle asserts that, despite Humbert's intentions, the attempt is primarily sensual rather than metaphysical. She considers Humbert's art static, the effort of a lepidopterist to capture his butterfly at a single moment of its development. Her view is useful for its examination of the static, rather than the vital, component of the artistic process.¹⁰

Humbert the artist/scientist, the painstaking collector, keeps his Lolita young through the sheer psychological strength of his obsession. Yet his butterfly escapes her pin, flits for three years outside his physical and artistic control--and then dies in childbirth, at age 17. Humbert's brief period of artistic control has been only a poor approximation of his goal of holding her forever, of giving her immortality.

It may be that Humbert's pernicious effect upon a young girl is even more profound than he admits in his "confession." It may be that his control of Dolores Haze in fact was never mitigated by even a brief sojourn outside

¹⁰ "The Tantalization of Lolita," Studies in the Novel (Denton, Texas) 11 (1979): 338-48.

the cocoon in which he imprisoned her, that she never escaped his artistic construct for her life. It may be that even her "freedom"--brief as it is, and ending in her death--is just another construct of Humbert's imagination, invented to mitigate his manipulation of her, and to render him more attractive to the reader. Christina Tekiner offers an intriguing--if ultimately unsound--argument that "Dolly Schiller" is simply Humbert's invention.¹¹ This flawed thesis does point up the difficulty for the reader, faced with a Nabokovian narrator, in distinguishing truth from con artistry. Since Nabokov's reality resides within the imagination, any incident imparted to the reader may be true to the narrator's reality, yet not necessarily true objectively. So the reader must cross the gap between the narrator's reality and his own with a leap of faith and accept the narrator's reality when it seems plausible; if not, the reader will be paralyzed, unable to find ground anywhere in the narrative. Tekiner fails to make that leap of faith. Her argument posits that Humbert loses contact with Lolita forever after she escapes from him to go to his rival, playwright/pederast Clare Quilty, that Humbert goes mad, and that "Dolly's" pregnancy with young Dick Schiller, and Humbert's murder of Quilty, are the wishful thinking of a madman writing from a padded cell, not a jail cell.

¹¹ "Time in Lolita," Modern Fiction Studies 25.3 (1979): 463-69.

Her argument collapses in the face of 1) Humbert's arrest for Quilty's murder, 2) Humbert's death from a heart attack in jail (November 17, 1952), and 3) Dolly Schiller's death in childbirth (Christmas Eve, 1952), all of which are affirmed in a foreword to Humbert's memoirs written by a Dr. John Ray. However, Tekiner submits that even the foreword is a Nabokovian trap, set up to make sure that the reader believes Humbert's confession--in which he realizes the evil of his obsession, tells the reader that he has searched out and admitted love for pale, pregnant Dolly Schiller, and killed Quilty as an act of contrition for both men's sins rather than out of jealousy. Naturally, Tekiner says, the reader would consider this active, reformed Humbert much more heroic than if he were an incarcerated lunatic simply weaving fantasies of idle remorse. And Tekiner further suggests that the dream-like, cartoon-like quality of the murder scene, coupled with hints that Humbert has had mental breakdowns before, should make the careful reader aware that the murder never happened.

However, any reader must agree to a willing suspension of disbelief at some point. If the reader believes that Ray exists--and that Ray is a reliable commentator--then it is difficult to believe that Humbert is incarcerated in an asylum rather than a jail cell. More to the point, if the reader agrees with Tekiner that Ray is a smokescreen thrown

up by Nabokov to give credence to Humbert's claims of remorse and murder-as-absolution, then the whole fabric of the novel disintegrates. If Ray doesn't exist, does Humbert, does Lolita? And the existence of Quilty (who may be only Humbert's alter ego) has been doubtful throughout. Tekiner's ultimately reductionist assessment of Lolita shows the quandary into which Nabokov throws the reader who hopes for clearly-defined truths. In Nabokov, all possibilities may be "true," since truth does not rest in objective reality.

The paradoxical--and the truly slippery--element of Lolita is its preponderance of objective detail. Nabokov seems to present Humbert, and, through Humbert, Lolita, as painstakingly as an entomologist might describe rare moths. And of course, as Alfred Appel notes, Nabokov's first love was science, rather than symbols:

"Had there been no Russian Revolution, I probably would have devoted myself solely to lepidopterology," says Nabokov, whose aesthetic of objectivity and precision is clearly that of a naturalist: "The use of symbols [is] hateful because it substitutes a dead general idea for a live specific impression. To high art and pure science detail is everything." (Qtd. in "Nabokov: A Portrait," in Nabokov's Fifth Arc 18.)

In Lolita, the reader is treated to a minutely detailed portrait of both Lolita and Humbert--graphic and objective right down to the grubbiness of Lolita's fingernails. But, stepping back, the reader realizes that

the portraits are actually silhouettes. Or, mesmerized by the markings on its skin, the reader does not realize that the creature inside has slipped away; under cover of detail, Nabokov hides his characters from his reader. The glimpses the reader is allowed into their motivations are suspect. Humbert is an unreliable narrator, and Lolita is never allowed to speak to the reader for herself. We are shown ostensibly intimate portraits of characters who, at novel's end, somehow remain shadowy and contradictory, with many shades missing.

Though the details of their lives are unraveled from a quotidian fabric, these details, rewoven, don't make homey, ordinary characters; Lolita and Humbert must be understood at some level beneath the ordinary. Yet the signposts pointing to this subterranean reality are almost whitewashed over by unprepossessing details. For example, Humbert Humbert is in one sense an ogre, who has kidnapped the princess and would deny her the world of princes and happily-ever-after; yet, in the details of Humbert's and Lolita's life together, there are no echoes from the Black Forest. This horror tale is not festooned with trappings from the subconscious. Instead it is presented bald-faced in the bland world of traveler's alarm clocks, car repairs, movies, and postcards. This is even a world where the heroine catches, in Humbert's words, "what the young people called a 'rabbit cold,' which tinges the nostrils pink."

Notwithstanding Lolita's febrile condition, Humbert cannot resist her "exquisite calorificity." His erotic reaction to a feverish child adds something "strange-making" to the mundane detail of her reddened nose.

In Lolita, Nabokov uses the familiar philistine world, edged with comedy, to set up a peculiar tension. There's an itchy feeling that, somewhere beneath the subtle fun, this world is grimly uncomfortable. Nabokov challenges the reader to perceive complex patterns within a humdrum design. The reader, caught up short by a disturbing detail, is startled into a new way of perceiving.

Nabokov himself alludes to the "strangeness" which must complement the mundane, in order to draw a true portrait of the world. In Speak, Memory he articulates the strangeness of the writer's experience, using an oblique reference to chess-playing:

I do not seem to convey sufficiently the ecstatic core of the process and its points of connection with various other more overt and fruitful operations of the creative mind, from the charting of dangerous seas to the writing of one of those incredible novels where the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients--rocks, and carbon and blind throbbings. (Qtd. in Dabney Stuart, Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody 180-81.)

Nabokov's strength is his belief in the power of art: that only art can strengthen sensory experience--by making

it stranger than, and thus more durable than, the decaying sensory world. Thus, art makes sensory experience both arresting, and arrested.

Phyllis A. Roth, examining Nabokovian technique, calls Nabokov's use of the startling detail "grotesque" when that detail is disturbing enough to shock the reader from his somnolence. Drawing upon Wolfgang Kayser's discussion of the term, Roth says that the grotesque

contradicts the very laws which rule our familiar world. . . . The basic feeling is . . . one of surprising horror, an agonizing fear in the presence of a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible. The grotesque is the estranged world, . . . it is our world which ceases to be reliable.¹²

Roth argues that Nabokov invokes the grotesque in order to subdue it. To put her argument in Nabokovian terms, when faced with a welter of detail, Nabokov analyzes it, wearing his scientist's hat. Then, finding that the analyzed phenomena yield dark, unidentifiable particles (grotesque elements), he puts on his conjuror's hat. If he is unable to subdue the strangeness of experience by classifying it, then he will invoke the power of its untameable elements and use this power to increase his own. As shaman, he can touch the intangible within

¹² "The Man Behind the Mystification," in Nabokov's Fifth Arc 47-48. Definition extrapolated from Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) 31, 184-85.

objective reality--the object, still strange, is now within his artistic control. He is not only a scientist documenting experience in his spiral-bound notebook, but also a mystic. He must not only note the pollen on the moth's anthers, but also divine the "blind throbbings" which propel the moth from flower to flower. In other words, he records the tangible in an effort to articulate the intangible. The effort never affords complete success, but it is exhilarating and eye-opening for the author, and, he hopes, for his reader.¹³

Roth's inclusion of Nabokov among the writers of the grotesque simply because he can divine the "strange-making" detail within the welter of phenomena that spur human action and emotion, seems to assume a less stringent definition of "the grotesque" than Kayser's. Kayser asserts that the grotesque is a region not only of caricature and parody, but also one where the characters wear, beneath their grinning masks, not human faces but skulls. That world yawns open to reveal demons and a hellish abyss. Nabokov's glimmering, dazzling

¹³ Nabokov pretends to have no respect for his reader. Indeed, he allows Humbert to launch apostrophes at the reader that are seemingly gratuitous parodies of Baudelaire, Eliot, and others. Nabokov's ideal reader is willing to become engaged in the writing and to work hard to discern the substance beneath the games; this challenge to work hard is a compliment to the good reader. Actually, Nabokov's disrespect is reserved for shallow readers, a point he made clear to his Wellesley undergraduates.

grotesqueries include the farcical, the absurd, the exaggerated, the physically repulsive; but he does not go so far as to include the demonic, at least not in Kayser's classic sense.

Yet many of Nabokov's characters seem to stare into the pit without being properly terrified, a lack of perception that can cause discomfort in the reader. They are amoral, destructive, adept at relegating others to a zombie-like status--a status that is rightly their own, but they can't see the skull in the mirror. Consider Hermann in Despair, Martha and her lover Franz in King, Queen, Knave, Axel Rex and young Margot in Laughter in the Dark, Clare Quilty in Lolita, the goons and agents who support the police states in Bend Sinister and Invitation to a Beheading, and Van and Ada in Ada. All view other human beings as tiresome impediments to their pleasure or, at best, as amusing robots or diverting pets. Nabokov's ability to plumb the "blind throbbings" that propel these characters who seem fiendishly detached from human compassion and aspiration clearly involves his ability to invoke the grotesque, and finally to subdue it with detachment and sardonic humor.

Humbert Humbert, for all his poetry, at some level is also grotesque. Superficially, Lolita can be dismissed as a self-indulgent Nabokovian exercise in parody, caricature, and sensationalism. Yet Lolita touches the emotions in

ways not merely sensational or spurious. The modern reader, raised on television nightmares and National Enquirer-style absurdities, easily assimilates the bizarre story of the child Lolita. But most readers cannot equate it with a sensationalized news story. And they cannot simply dismiss it as pornography. As Dr. John Ray notes in the foreword, there are no four-letter words in Humbert's memoir. Humbert's pederasty is something more than lust; it touches something deeper. Megerle in "The Tantalization of Lolita" notes that the novel teases rather than being graphic--just as all good art is but an inflection and a promise, with the connoisseur's imagination fleshing out the outlines. Ellen Pifer is not so equable. While she admires the "poignancy and depth" that Humbert's "confession" gives to his narrative, she is too disturbed by the dark side of Humbert's nature to subsume it in his art. She moralizes, noting that while Humbert admits his culpability in usurping Lolita's childhood, still he

confuses his creative gifts of perception, his artistic sensibility, with moral virtue. He even declares himself more poet than pervert when describing the tender love of "unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen" for their nymphets. . . . By elevating himself to the status of "pure" poet, Humbert understandably desires to remove his actions from the ethical sphere and consider them only as art. But these attempts prove futile; guilty Humbert must ultimately confront the violence he has wrought upon Lolita. . . . By the novel's end, poet or no poet, Humbert perceives his hands to be those of a mangler and "sex fiend." (Nabokov and the Novel 165-66.)

Why, finally, does Nabokov allow Humbert to tell his tale of sensitivity and perversion, obsession and sanguinity, lyricism and cynicism, fear and comedy? I believe that Lolita delineates an artist who almost succeeds as a Nabokovian hero, but is undone by the deceptively simple daily world. Humbert the European exile wrong-headedly attempts to assimilate a new culture and a new reality, even as he insists that it recreate for him his mellifluous past. Humbert "makes strange" with the inhabitants and habits of his new world, and in so doing articulates his own estrangement and sense of alienation from mainstream America. Although America's ingenuousness attracts him, he is ultimately confused by its ubiquitous optimism, detached somehow from history and lacking any sense of the need for a national imagination that would marry present and past. America is present and future only. Because America is one-dimensional in time, Humbert fails when he tries both to embrace America and to reshape it, tries to control the future by forcing the present to fit the mold of his past on the Riviera. He cannot recreate a European thing of beauty from American clay.

The tragi-comedy of Lolita is, very subtly, a fable for the instruction of the artist. Humbert's attempt fails not only because the medium in which he is working is incompatible with his artistic vision, but also because reality always escapes the strictures of art. Nabokov

means to show the dangers as well as the beauties of exercising the artistic sensibility. The Nabokovian ethic, which warns against being seduced by the power of art, and against confusing art with artifice, is implied, I think, in Nabokov's comments on the work of Gogol. Nabokov analyzed the work of his fellow Russian absurdist in detail, and with evident delight, in his book Nikolai Gogol.

In appreciating Gogol, as well as in presenting Lolita, Nabokov warns against the seductiveness of artifice by seeming almost to be seduced himself--again invoking the enemy in order to subdue it. First, he seems to dismiss, with an almost parental indulgence, the comic mistakes of false artists and philistines. For Nabokov, the mesh of beauty and perversity--that very world in which art grapples with Caprice--is perfectly illustrated by the hopes and dreams of characters who possess what might be called "middle-class" sensibility, with its emphasis upon objects rather than ideas. In discussing the vulgar little people of Gogol's Dead Souls, and those of Gogol's "The Overcoat," Nabokov employs the term poshlost, which involves a philistine aggrandization of trivial values. Poshlost is a term, Nabokov says, which is not readily translatable into English; so he defines it by example as he discusses the tawdry strivings of Chichikov of Dead Souls and Akaky Akakyevich of "The Overcoat." Chichikov's

goal is upper-class status, which he hopes to achieve through buying up dead serfs still on their owners' tax rolls. With the money, he plans to buy an estate and instant respectability. Akakyevich's goal is simpler: a new overcoat; yet he is as deluded as Chichikov in thinking that objects ennoble their possessor. Both have succumbed, one cheerfully and the other desperately, to the idea that joy can be had through amassing the correct, the popular, the desirable, objects.

Nabokov feels an affinity for Gogol's work because Gogol also is quick to seek out and ridicule poshlost; yet the faint seductiveness of poshlost evokes an ersatz lyricism from Nabokov. Nabokov praises one of the mock-lyrical passages in Dead Souls, a scene in which the beauty of midnight is undercut by the vulgarity of the characters. Nabokov gives this passage the tongue-in-cheek sobriquet "The Rhapsody of the Boots":

[Chichikov's servants were] emitting snores of incredible density of sound; echoed from the neighboring room by their master's thin and nasal wheeze. Soon after this everything quieted down and deep slumber enveloped the hostelry; one light alone remained burning and that was in the small window of a certain lieutenant who had arrived from Ryazan and who was apparently a keen amateur of boots inasmuch as he had already acquired four pairs and was persistently trying on a fifth one. Every now and again he would go up to his bed as though he intended to take them off and lie down; but he simply could not; in truth those boots were well made; and for a long while still he kept on revolving his foot and inspecting the dashing cut of an admirably finished heel. (For a more pedestrian translation into English; without Nabokovian dash, see Tchitchikoff's Journeys; or, Dead

Souls, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1886] 219-20.)

This passage illustrates the subtle turn of the wrist, inextricable from the comedy, with which Gogol opens a peephole into the abyss of the grotesque, where the horror of mindlessness dwells. The one potential hero of the scene, still awake and ruminating, is not reviewing his life by his lone candle, but admiring his fifth pair of boots. Like poor Akaky, who comes to no good end, the lieutenant believes that clothes make the man. Gogol's world becomes suddenly peopled with paper dolls; but the reader is grinning too broadly to notice.

In the world that Gogol creates, even the most mundane character is subtly made strange, set outside the mass of humanity he must brush past in the streets. A perfect case in point is Akaky Akakievich. As Nabokov explains, Akaky is not merely an underdog, but is completely divorced from the society in which he moves. And everyone else is equally divorced, in an entire city of people who are aliens from one another:

The gaps and black holes in the texture of Gogol's style imply flaws in the texture of life itself. Something is very wrong and all men are mild lunatics engaged in pursuits that seem to them very important while an absurdly logical force keeps them in their futile jobs--this is the real "message" of the story. In this world of utter futility, of futile humility and futile domination, the highest degree that passion, desire, creative urge can attain is a new cloak which both tailors and customers adore on their knees. I am not speaking of the moral point or the

moral lesson. There can be no moral lesson in such a world because there are no pupils and no teachers: this world is and it excludes everything that might destroy it, so that any improvement, any struggle, any moral purpose or endeavor, are as utterly impossible as changing the course of a star. (Nikolai Gogol 143-44.)

Poshlost has plunged to its perigee in "The Overcoat," in a society so barren that honor, virtue, pride, and identity are posited in a piece of cloth. When there is no self-awareness, when a society's values become obsessively, and humorlessly, materialistic--when there is no recognition of the banality of materialism--then this dedication to poshlost becomes not simply an amusing foible of the human race, but something alien and disturbing.

Like the tone of Nabokov's writing, the tone of Gogol's work is complex. On the one hand, Gogol assures that the reader will smirk and feel superior to his characters; yet at the same time he assures that the reader will feel discomfort from an intuitive, almost visceral, realization that the two men aren't meant simply to be clowns. In a sense, they are intended as ghouls, because they cease to exist in any dimension outside their obsessions. (Akakyevich in fact becomes a ghost, fruitlessly seeking the man who stole his overcoat and caused his death.) These men don't merely lack self-awareness; they lack souls. Their poshlost has undone them. Poshlost concerns Nabokov because it is the

antithesis of true artistic sensibility. Nabokov champions any society--or any individual--that can discern the truly beautiful from the pietistic, the vulgar, the trivial, and the sentimental. For Nabokov, this ability to discern bespeaks an inherent knowledge of the good, and of what is most essentially human. When Nabokov creates a character who has this ability, he gives that character his respect--albeit obliquely.

Obliquely, because it is hard to see Nabokov's ethical stance, hidden as it is behind a posture of mockery. Nabokov does not moralize, using didacticism to crush what he deems wrong; he instead parodies, using satire as a paintbrush to heighten and fully illuminate absurdities. Nabokov attacks in ironic feints, rather than lunging thrusts. Even his sharp attacks are in an odd sense humane. A degree of tenderness is there, if the reader looks carefully. Nabokov understands human weaknesses and, while he does not pardon them, he at least admits a modicum of sympathy. For example, in Pnin he clearly sympathizes with the underdog, subtly turning the reader against the heartless narrator and to the rescue of the ineffectual, but loving and idealistic, Professor Timofey Pnin. Nabokov's modicum of compassion is also articulated--but very incidentally, and much more subtly--by Humbert Humbert, who, when offered the perfect opportunity to drown and be rid of Lolita's mother, Charlotte Haze, says simply,

"Dear reader, I could not do it." Somewhere in the dully middle-class woman--with her affectations, her ersatz French, her tritely fashionable Mexican artifacts--he discerns the outline of the artistic perfection she imparts to her daughter.

Like Gogol, Nabokov uses ironic humor to reveal the disturbing underside of the quotidian world. In America, the land of freshness in packaging, instant gratification, and eternal youth, the reader meets Humbert Humbert, an aging man whose obsession is a 12-year-old girl. Unlike Akaky or Chichikov, though, Humbert becomes more self-aware as he pursues his object, and his irony becomes double-edged. Humbert turns it not only upon poshlost America, for its foolishness in believing that all desires can be instantly gratified, but upon himself for believing that physical possession empowers the possessor. As Humbert peels back the layers of American poshlost, he is able to work closer and closer to a revelation of that which must fill the moral void created by poshlost.

Yet Humbert's (and Nabokov's) attitude toward vulgarity is complex, because the tone of his ironic feints is, up to a point, admiring. Humbert is at first fascinated with the idea that his fantasies will be realized in this brash, wide-open, ingenuous culture. Nabokov said that he loved America, and this affection is evidenced in Humbert's attitude toward his adopted

country. Humbert's attitude toward the American milieu and his place in it ranges from affection, to bemusement, to playful satire. Answering critics' charges that Lolita is "anti-American," Nabokov said:

This is something that pains me considerably more than the idiot accusation of immorality. Considerations of depth and perspective . . . led me to build a number of North American sets. I needed a certain exhilarating milieu. Nothing is more exhilarating than a Philistine vulgarity. But in regard to Philistine vulgarity, there is no intrinsic difference between Palearctic manners and Nearctic manners. Any proletarian from Chicago can be as bourgeois (in the Flaubertian sense) as a duke. I chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only because I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights as other American writers enjoy ("On a Book Entitled Lolita," in Stegner, The Portable Nabokov 236.)

Nabokov's attitude toward some aspects of American poshlost--which he incorporates into his comments upon poshlost in Nikolai Gogol--is simple bemusement. Nabokov enjoys American advertising, where an entire family pretends, for example, to be transported by the bliss of owning a new toaster oven, because the game is played tongue-in-cheek; no one is actually deluded:

The amusing part is not that it is a world where nothing spiritual remains except the ecstatic smiles of people serving or eating celestial cereals or a world where the game of the senses is played according to bourgeois rules (bourgeois in the Flaubertian, not in the Marxist sense), but that it is a kind of satellite shadow world in the actual existence of which neither sellers nor buyers really believe in their heart of hearts--especially in this wise quiet country. (Nikolai Gogol 67. Emphasis added.)

His reference to America as a wise, quiet country, at heart more enduring and soulful than its highly visible consumer ethic, raises the possibility that Lolita, Humbert's exhaustive chronicle of motel America, may be meant to be at least as affectionate as it is parodistic.¹⁴ The beauty--and hence the danger--of poshlost, is that the process of becoming enveloped in it is pleasurable, as sumptuous as it is to Akaky Akakyevich to wrap himself at last in his own custom-made overcoat. As Nabokov explains, speaking again of poshlost in Dead Souls:

There is something sleek and plump about poshlost, and this gloss, these smooth curves, attracted the artist in Gogol. The immense spherical poshylak Paul Chichikov eating the fig at the bottom of the milk which he drinks to mellow his throat, or dancing in his nightgown in the middle of the room while things on shelves rock in response to his Lacedaemonian jig (ending in his hitting his behind--his real face--with the pink heel of his bare foot, thus propelling himself into the true paradise of dead souls). (Nikolai Gogol 71.)

This fascination with vulgarity and excess which Nabokov shares with Gogol (although Nabokov admits it more cheerfully, since he doesn't so obviously have a moral bone to pick) is not inconsistent with Nabokov's love of true aesthetic sensibility. He considers an appreciation of poshlost necessary to, rather than antithetical to, true

¹⁴ Alfred Appel also notes Nabokov's love for America in "Tristram in Movielove."

artistic sensibility. An artist appreciates quality more for being able to discern it from trash. After all, Nabokov mines poshlost as his richest source of affectionate humor. He does not consider poshlost values either dangerous or particularly immoral so long as they are not applied to art. Not simple vulgarity, but vulgarity masquerading as artistic sensibility, disturbs Nabokov:

Obvious trash, curiously enough, contains sometimes a wholesome ingredient readily appreciated by children and simple souls. Superman is undoubtable poshlost, but it is poshlost in such a mild, unpretentious form that it is not worthwhile talking about; and the fairy tales of yore contained, for that matter, as much trivial sentiment and naive vulgarity as these yarns about modern Giant Killers. Poshlost, it should be repeated, is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is not obvious, and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought, or emotion. (Nikolai Gogol 68.)

The lifestyle of Charlotte Haze is a clear example of the kind of poshlost Nabokov hates. Her spurious sense of aesthetics drives her and other educated middle-class ladies to collect best sellers which are banal compendiums of insights supposed to penetrate, as Humbert says, "the inner recesses of the soul." The joke, in Nabokov's and Humbert's view, is that such ladies are possessors of dead souls.

Only an artist can distinguish between poshlost and art; and even an artist can be momentarily seduced by false

art. At first, as seen through the eyes of Humbert, the sophisticated European, America seems substantial, spacious, ever-expanding and ever-titillating in its cheerful manifestations of vulgarity. At first, on his maiden cross-country automobile voyage with Lolita, he is more intrigued by than alienated from this low-brow culture. However, on his second cross-country trip, pursuing Lolita and Quilty, he becomes controlled by this alien environment. The America which on his first voyage seemed merely big and ingenuous, on his second seems interminable and monstrous.

Reading the clues left by Quilty at every motel, but failing to discern the signature of his rival, Humbert is both frustrated and tantalized. Quilty, the slick, amoral Hollywood-style playwright, becomes in Humbert's mind the synthesis of all that is vulgar, powerful, and obscene about poshlost America. Quilty leaves a trail of literary allusions in the names he signs at the motels, a game Humbert appreciates as one educated man speaking to another. However, if the reader can trust Humbert's assessment of Quilty, Quilty is a total pragmatist, and his allusions are only a game; they lack the passion of Humbert's obsessive need to articulate Lolita.

As Humbert, the desperate lover, pursues Lolita and Quilty, he is able (if we believe that Humbert's confession is reliable) to transmute his physical obsession into an

appreciation of Dolores as Lolita, as Idea, that realm of the imagination which transcends time. The conclusions that Humbert draws, finally, develop from a self-awareness not given to characters such as Chichikov and Akaky Akakievich. When he realizes the barrenness behind poshlost's charms, he is finally able to step free of the snare in which he has been trapped. Humbert is then able to see that the poshlost values of America have their place, as fuel for self-indulgent humor--and have a kind of simple largesse and beauty. But he realizes that these values are not sustaining to the thinking man, and cannot be used as a replacement for reality.

However, poshlost easily traps Humbert because it is alien to his experience. He is not born into poshlost; he must be introduced to it and seduced by it. As an emigre in America who believes that he has cleverly assimilated himself, he finds instead that the culture--in the guise of a pre-bobby-soxer, that culture's symbol--has undone him. F. W. Dupee explored the role of Humbert as the European lost in America, who at first is detached from, and protects himself by adopting a stance of superiority toward, the culture he has entered:

Humbert is an ironic portrait of the visiting European, and the Hazes help to complete the likeness. He is to them the prince of a lost realm--actually a luxury hotel kept by his father on the Riviera. He seems to have the superior sexual acumen and appeal so often assumed by Europeans and envied by Americans--but his sexuality is peculiar as

we know. The Haze women and their appurtenances are familiar enough; they have been portrayed in many satirical novels and problem plays. There is the arty, career-bent, unloving mother; the defiant unloved daughter with her eternal blue jeans, her deplorable manners and secrets, her loud cries of "You dope!" and "I think you stink"; and there is the litter of lamps, sofas, coffee tables, magazines, Van Gogh prints, and pink toilet-seat tidies amid which they irritably and insubstantially live. But the observations and machinations of Humbert, the sinister outsider, project a fierce glare on this trite house and its trite occupants, recreating them and investing them with a sour pathos Charlotte Haze . . . her principles which bulk large but weigh little, her vacuous animation, her habit of asserting herself although she has next to nothing in her to assert . . . is the immoral moralist, the loveless romantic, the laughless comic--whatever it is that spoils the party and dampens the honeymoon all across America. (King of the Cats 124-25.)

Soon, though, insidiously, Humbert is seduced by this very vacuousness. In Dolores Haze, the product of a trite household, Humbert seeks both perfect sensuality and perfect Idea; and he is encouraged and frustrated simultaneously as he tries to realize Old World ideals by operating within the New World's poshlost ethic. As Dupee notes, Humbert "becomes subject to the preposterous chances and changes of a wide-open society, a culture madly on the move. His fate hangs on the godlike motions of the motorcar and the wayward oracle of the telephone."

Dupee must be referring specifically to Lolita's balancing act between Humbert and Quilty while she is still with Humbert: Quilty pursues Lolita across America in his phallic automobile; and Lolita is constantly in telephone

booths receiving mysterious calls--a situation which mystifies Humbert and steadily estranges him from her, until the day when Quilty finally abducts her bodily.

Beyond the obvious tension created in Humbert by Quilty's cat-and-mouse games, is a more ambiguous tension inherent in America itself, as if it were in collusion with Quilty. There is something too easy, too ingenuous, in the friendliness of small towns, in the convenience of omnipresent hotels and motels, in the defiant come-ons of little girls in blue jeans (whom Humbert glimpses from the corner of his eye, so to speak, even while he concentrates on Dolores).

Similarly, Alfred Appel understands that America is not simply a wide-open fantasy that a jaded European such as Humbert can enjoy but also a pernicious nightmare. The most pernicious effect of America, for Humbert, is Dolores Haze's belief that she can, and should, realize her all-American dream of becoming a movie starlet (she leaves Humbert because Quilty can get her into acting). Significantly, her dream of becoming the female apotheosis of popular American culture is in direct apposition to Humbert's dream of placing her within the sphere of the most beloved women in European literature. Appel explains:

The movie motif functions as an elaborate, extended metaphor, a negative image, or what used to be called an ironic correlative, held in apposition to a veritable avalanche of allusions to the love poets of ancient and modern Europe. . . . Tristram's lovestruck

"sons" are everywhere in Lolita: Dante, Petrarch, Ronsard, Belleau, Shakespeare, Goethe, Byron, Keats, Beaudelaire, Browning, Verlaine, and Belloc, to name but a few. . . . In the process of writing his American memoirs and confessions, Humbert the self-styled manque talent has become an artist, and joined their company. His allusions are, in T. S. Eliot's famous phrase, "fragments shored against the ruins" of a love ethic having nothing to do with pedophilia, Humbert's clinical malady. ("Tristram in Movielove" 124-25.)

However, Humbert's "shored fragments" can't keep his construct from crumbling in the wash of Lolita's dreams. Since Lolita does not envision herself as Isolde, the lover in her dreams is not Humbert/Tristram. As Appel explains, Lolita's world is built not upon the idea of imperishable love, battened by pain and sacrifice, but upon the poshlost world of 1950s Cinemascope, where titillation is the high point of sensuality, where tragedy is fleeting, and where romance is equally insubstantial.

Yet what is equally damaging is that Humbert, unknown to himself, also succumbs to this distinctly American promise. As Lolita spins her movie daydreams, Humbert also spins fantasies of a moviedom happy ending: a silver-screen freeze-frame where Lolita will be frozen forever at her most perfect moment, when her apricot-golden arm was raised with its tennis racket to complete the "O" of a perfect serve. As Humbert lists the ingredients of what he calls the "cloying fudge" of the movies he and Lolita see together, it is apparent that his dream is as fatuous as

hers. He subconsciously measures himself--and not always to his advantage--against the "marvelous hunks of movie manhood" Lolita idolizes.

Appel discusses the precedent for the character Lolita in the child stars of Hollywood--Shirley Temple a chief example--who were often costumed as little adults (Mickey Rooney and Shirley Jean Rickert as Gable and Garbo, for example), and then made to simulate adult sexiness. The precocious Lolita is patterned after these real children. This eagerness to have children ape the sexual prowess of adults is possibly a tacit recognition of adults' fear of the power inherent in youth. Particularly in America, land of the easily disposable, what is new will always usurp the old--unless the old can somehow freeze youth in its tracks. If the child's inherent power is acknowledged--but somehow perverted and thus dissipated by forcing him into adult behavior before he actually is granted adult rights and powers--then the adult effectively controls the threat of the child's youthfulness. The child remains cute, neither child nor adult, frozen midway between infant helplessness and adult freedom. Which is exactly what Humbert does to Dolores in forcing her into the role of Lolita.

However, the carefully controlled world that Humbert has constructed collapses, and his effort to salvage what dignity he can falls far short of the triumphs of movie

heroes. Humbert fantasized in vain that his own avenging of his heroine, in his confrontation with Quilty, would be Wild West heroic--more befitting two gentlemen, of course, but equally heroic. In Humbert's own gun-slinging scene, his pistol seems to shoot blanks, allowing Quilty to continue to be shot, yet to continue conversation, as if impending death were no more real than in a movie shootout. Furthermore, the tussle between Humbert and Quilty leaves both panting and confused, unlike the definitive dispatch of the villain in movies.

Finally, Humbert's and Quilty's carnal sins and intellectual virtues overlap until it is difficult to say who should be considered the hero and who the villain in this confrontation. As Appel points out, Quilty, even though a pederast and pornographer, is witty and clever and a talented playwright, far more complex than the movie bad guy who speaks in monosyllables. Humbert is a conundrum, too. He is aloof, and often cruel and manipulative--yet he is also well-educated, aware, and sensitive to beauty. The aesthetic awareness and passion of Humbert the European, marred by his manipulateness, balance uneasily against the urbanity, marred by his pragmatism and sensual excess, of Quilty the American. I would conclude, finally, that the lack of clear-cut virtues--and the fact that both Humbert and Quilty are pederasts--make both unfit as American heroes. Their rivalry cannot be adequately

encompassed within the American ethic, which assumes that American youth and ingenuity will triumph over the mustiness and murkiness of the European psyche. Yet in Lolita, something is clearly as wrong in the New World as it is in the Old.

CHAPTER V

FRAGMENTATION: HUMBERT, THE FAILED ROMANTIC

The problem in both the Old and New World is not, per se, the immorality or the illegality of pedophilia. For both Humbert and Quilty, the problem is, rather, an immorality on aesthetic grounds, because pedophilia is a coercion of natural order which treats a child as a static object, not a vital being. They pervert beauty in their attempts to wrest it from its natural state and control it; they lack the appreciation of vitality required of the true Nabokovian artist. As false artists they wish to freeze, and thus immortalize, the subject--art as a photographic freeze-frame. However, such art, as Keats articulated so well, is at best deceptive beauty, seemingly vital, yet cold in its arrested motion--time stalled in a gesture, while the artist himself ages inexorably in every corpuscle. Until all is lost, Humbert does not realize that nature and its concomitants, time and change, will always be more powerful than art. Not admitting this truth to himself, Humbert is desperate to stop the aging process in his Lolita and, by extension, in himself. He believes he can halt her evolution into womanhood by arresting her in his art, thus retaining her at her loveliest moment, age 12 years, 7 1/2 months, when he first possessed her.

Robert Alter, noting Van Veen's similar preoccupation with time, describes Van's narrative style in Ada as

the necessary instrument of a serious ontological enterprise: to rescue reality from the bland non-entity of stereotypicality, and from the terrifying rush of mortality, by reshaping objects, relations, existential states, through the power of metaphor and wit, so that they become endowed with an arresting life of their own. ("Ada, or the Perils of Paradise" 106.)

This is also Humbert's enterprise. He elevates the sordid fact of a stepfather's obsession with his 12-year-old girl to the metaphoric plane of an artist's obsession with perfection. In this apotheosis, the child becomes an icon, an embodiment of Poe's love of Annabel Lee. Humbert's urge to arrest Lolita at her loveliest moment is poignant, but it is also egotistical and lacking in compassion. Humbert acts as a god, reshuffling art and reality according to his own needs, so that the other characters in his drama have only what freedom he bestows.

For all its aesthetic perfection, Lolita has only a qualified kind of beauty, since the ultimate consequence of Humbert Humbert's obsession is sterility and death. Although Lolita is sensual, it lacks Nature's sensuality, where the reader might watch the child moving freely from birth, to womanhood, to death. And although the battle of wills between Humbert the European pedophile and his American pre-bobby-soxer is often funny, the reader should

remember that a sexual relationship between a 12-year-old girl and her stepfather goes beyond the bounds of traditional comedy. The reader has left the simple world where mixed-up relationships and thwarted love affairs move in the end toward fruitful marriages, for a problematic world whose morality is questionable. Dr. Ray's foreword to Humbert's confessions, in which he explains that 17-year-old Dolly Schiller gave birth to a stillborn daughter, then herself died, is possibly Nabokov's subtle commentary, not upon pedophilia, but upon the wrong-headedness of attempts to manhandle and coerce life through art.

William Anderson believes that, Lolita's death and Humbert's ruin notwithstanding, Nabokov intends not to subtly censure Humbert but to save him.¹ Anderson sees a clearly traceable progression in Humbert's moral development: from love for "Annabel Leigh," a childhood icon--to Lolita, an insistent, differentiated person--to Rita, a mature woman--to acceptance of and love for pregnant Dolly Schiller, also a mature woman. Brent Harold agrees that although Humbert misses the mark in his attempt to control Lolita forever, he is no artiste manque, and that the writing of his memoirs is a growth process for

1 "Time and Memory in Nabokov's Lolita," The Centennial Review (East Lansing, Michigan) 24.3 (1980): 360-83.

him.² In the course of the novel, Harold argues, Humbert achieves a synthesis of artistic aloofness and passion, allowing him a control of style and expression which is comfortable, comforting, and real. Harold argues that, as Humbert's solipsism, tawdry satirical sense, and mawkish sentimentality slip away from him, he learns to appreciate Dolores Haze in totality.

In tracing Humbert's moral growth, Anderson, like Harold, conflates it with Humbert's aesthetic growth. The deepening of his capacity to love is based upon Humbert's finally understanding that perfection can exist only in the imagination, as a construct of art. Anderson posits a synthesis of art with the Nabokovian spiral of time, in which past memory and present experience are linked in an infinite recursion, each heightening and enriching the other. This heightened realization of time includes an attendant realization of mortal frailty, a fearful understanding which deepens the artist's appreciation for natural beauty and for the transcendent power of love. Anderson considers Lolita a perfect example of the great modern tradition of novels of time and memory beginning with Proust's A La Recherche du Temps Perdu.

In what I think is a misguided attempt to build a serious theme on a throwaway bit of Nabokovian satire,

² "Lolita: Nabokov's Critique of Aloofness," Papers on Language and Literature 11 (1975): 71-82.

Anderson sees an oblique Freudian conflict in the fact that Humbert as a child was under the control not of his mother but of his aunt, a woman with the loaded name Sybil Trapp, who foresees his future as that of the frozen "perfect widower" for Annabel Leigh, his first nymphet. Through the power of his imagination, Humbert moves out of that flat plane of existence--in which a straight line has linked all points of his present to his obsession with Annabel Leigh--into the spiral of art, which is greater than the sum of either past or present.

While I agree that Humbert attempts with all the power of his art to fly out of the flat plane of his existence, I do not agree that the beauty of his confessions proves that he has succeeded in lifting both himself and Lolita above reality. Although a deepening of Humbert's aesthetic sense might have finally allowed him to appreciate the true beauty of Dolores Haze rather than of the invented "Lolita," too much damage has been done to deem Humbert a success. Life pulls him down with a thud that sickens him, body and soul. Humbert's art ruins both its object and its creator, precisely because Humbert has refused to keep one foot in the ordinary world. I do not mean to ignore the beauty inherent in Humbert's artistic sensibility, or the possibility--if his confession can be believed--that he has learned to love the real Dolores Haze. But I cannot ignore the definite dark element which dims Humbert's worship of

Lolita. Nabokov paints the perniciousness of Humbert's obsession with aesthetic control just as insistently as he depicts Humbert's joy in a life guided only by aesthetic concerns. This ambiguity provides the tension within Lolita, and therein lies a caution for the artist.

Although Nabokov, of course, couches it subtly, between the poetry and between the laughs, this "moral" should be apparent to the reader who is attentive to nuance.

As Robert T. Levine explains, Humbert, in attempting to apotheosize Lolita by placing her outside time and death, places her beyond reality in a pernicious way.³ She now resides outside the "concordia" of the normal spectrum of children in their colored frocks, and outside the concord of other children's voices. Levine builds his argument around the scene in Lolita when Humbert hears children's voices coming up from the valley and realizes with a pang that the whole problem is that Lolita's voice has never been among them. Humbert's attempted apotheosis is pernicious, Levine says, because Humbert himself is not apotheosized but hulkingly real. The weight of his adulthood spoils the innocence he attempts to preserve.

Martin Green sidesteps the issue of Humbert's morality by arguing that Lolita must be judged by modern, referential criticism, because it is posited on aesthetic

³ " 'My Ultraviolet Darling': The Loss of Lolita's Childhood," Modern Fiction Studies 25: 471-79.

and moral rules peculiar to Humbert Humbert.⁴ Green says that, on conventional terms, the reader should not trust Lolita, but that on its own terms, it is a celebration of realism, of the horror (mitigated by affection for America's ingenuous elements) of large, alienating America as encountered by the European. For Green, Lolita becomes in a sense a moral work of art, exploring how a man can uplift himself and live in a manner that Tolstoy might have wanted--or in a manner striven for by Joyce or Lawrence, or other romantic realists of the Western World. For Green, the pornography of Humbert's obsession taints the exuberant celebration; but the pornography is leavened by love.

While Green excuses Humbert's excesses on the grounds that Humbert, as a European, means to act lovingly by America but is simply out of his element, Thomas R. Frosch argues that Nabokov never intended Lolita to be a romantic quest gone awry, but intended something different.⁵ Frosch believes that in Lolita Nabokov attempts to create a "metaparody" that transcends the convention of the romantic quest to pose a new quest for the hero: the pursuit of beauty in the abstract, with Humbert as the ultimate aesthete rather than the ultimate lover. Frosch believes

⁴ "The Morality of Lolita," Kenyon Review June 1966: 352-377.

⁵ "Parody and Authenticity in Lolita," in Nabokov's Fifth Arc 171-87.

that Humbert's attempt to create an allegory of the pursuit of beauty is ultimately unsuccessful, and that his failure to realize a new, individual form for the quest devitalizes the convention. Frosch says, though, that Humbert's very failure is a triumph, to the extent that he recognizes his failure.

Although I concur with Green that, in its aesthetic perfection, Lolita seems a paean to ideal love, in its underlying argument it is rather, as Frosch explains, a manipulation of the conventional love quest. It is a sensual, desperately poignant, Byronic refusal of conventional loving. Despite its worshipful appreciation of Dolores' sensual charms, and the comedic wit with which Humbert the effete European recounts the wiles of a seemingly ingenuous America, Lolita in its basic premise is neither love story nor comedy. Humbert's attention to young Dolores Haze's every atom and pore grotesquely parodies the intimacy of lovers, because his two years with her are lacking in any recognition of the Dolores Haze beneath the idealized Lolita. Humbert realizes only in hindsight that he has ruined a child. In the two years before she escapes him, he exerts as much power as he can over her, both physically and emotionally. His attempt to recreate her in words, as an act of loving worship, has a mitigating beauty. However, even the act of recreating her in his memoirs disallows her a life outside that moment at

which he would freeze her in a "perfect" attitude, as if she were an icon, not a child. In the months when Lolita is under his physical control, Humbert tries to play god, to recreate Dolores according to the blueprint, etched on his memory, of his "Annabel-by-the-sea."

His attempts to force Dolly Haze into Annabel's mold have uncomfortable results for Dolly. Humbert admits that his Lolita cried every night after he feigned sleep; but in recounting their time together in the first half of his memoirs, he never allows the reader this glimpse of her pathetic side. If the reader is allowed to glimpse Dolly Haze at all, he is simply amused by her addiction to comic books, movies, Coca-Colas, and slang. By comically delineating these surface traits, Humbert bars the reader from seeing a vulnerable child beneath the vulgarity. By making Dolly Haze a stereotype, he tries to make the reader feel sanguine about his attempts to elevate such a vulgar little girl into the realm of Feminine Idea. If the reader acquiesces, then Humbert becomes not simply a pedophile, but an artist who can pare away the imperfections of an awkward package, exposing such delicacies as "her comely twin kidneys, the nacreous sea-grapes of her lungs"--as he does in one fantasy of literally turning her inside out, in order to more fully possess her.

Humbert believes, on the level where he denies reality, that control of Lolita's body will ensure him the

perpetual acquiescence he craves from her. He is even desperate enough to consider one way in which he might always have his Lolita, even when Dolores Haze herself is curvaceous, fleshy, and undesirable. In their first, pre-Quilty, automobile trip, as he escapes across America with his Lolita, Mexico is always the goal in the back of his mind. There, without dodging legal sanctions, he can perpetuate his sensual world outside time, enjoying, after Lolita, Lolita's daughter, on down through his own granddaughters, as long as his lust sustains him. Mexico, in his fantasy, becomes a haven of absolute sensuality, and he is its god.

Keats lamented that perpetual youth was the province only of cold art. Time, with its persistent wearing away of the flesh and the material world, wears away the hope of heaven on earth. Yet there is a crucial difference between the early Romantics and Humbert. They were aware of time's power, but ultimately calmed their fears and made peace with it. With the mysteries of emergent science inspiring their art, they were hopeful that man would learn to understand and make peace with the objective world, apprehending and articulating the physical essences with the same fine intelligence with which he apprehended the spiritual realm. Humbert, for all his fantasies of ultimate control, is self-conscious and defensive about his enterprise. And he pretends to no such lofty goals as did

the early Romantics. The product of his creative intelligence, Lolita, is to be his private delight, not a revelation to the world.

Still, although Humbert is less idealistic than the early Romantics, there are parallels, for example, between him and Dr. Frankenstein. Each man, using his superior talents, attempts to mold a more perfect human. Like Frankenstein, Humbert convinces himself that his desire to "improve" brazen, vacuous Dolly is the natural urge of an artist presented with raw clay. However, the child-woman he crafts is monstrous, deformed by the strictures in which he binds her physically and psychically. She is always bound to him, whether in their car traveling; at their home in Beardsley, where she must account to him for every moment outside the house; or during coerced sex. Because Humbert refuses to allow her a reality outside the role he devises for her, she is as fatally flawed as Frankenstein's monster. Because Humbert is obsessed with playing god, she is divorced from, and held away from, the normal experiences of loving. And, like Frankenstein's monster, she dies soon after making a normal human connection: her life with her young husband, and her pregnancy.

However, Humbert's aspirations are not nearly as lofty as Frankenstein's. Humbert wants to keep Lolita as a toy for himself, not as an emissary to the world. And Humbert is simply sorry that he has hurt the child Dolly Haze; his

is not the grand remorse of Frankenstein, who rails at himself for defying the limits of science and art in seeking to emulate God. The strongest link between the two artists is their passion for molding an artificial perfection, and their attempts to usurp, rather than to appreciate, natural perfection. The Frankenstein question, as explored in both Mary Shelley's and Nabokov's works, is a question of power versus humility, of creative license versus aesthetics exercised within moral limits. In other words, can these excellent scientists, who dare attempt the heights of creativity, be held responsible for the ultimate failure of their creations? The answer is "yes," qualified by the realization that the artistic impulse which moved them was itself heroic, and therefore must be given its due. Yet the artist may still be held responsible for those failures which occurred because he would not temper his art with a sense of ethical and moral responsibility.

Frankenstein and Humbert are both artists whose creations escape them. They learn humility too late, when the ultimate controller steps in to halt their climbs toward power. For Mary Shelley, the ultimate controller is God, who pulls the artist's ego into line by devastating his painstakingly constructed world. For Vladimir Nabokov, Caprice--time and change--is the spoiler. Caprice enters Humbert's carefully constructed world in the harlequin

guise of Clare Quilty, but Quilty is only the capricious correlative of Time. If Quilty had not stolen Lolita from Humbert at age 14, young womanhood would have.

At heart, Humbert knows that time cannot be stopped and that his attempt to arrest Lolita in time is futile. He is sorry, though, that he failed to use every possible art to freeze her. In a revelatory moment, Humbert regrets his failure to take movies of her playing tennis, an activity which particularly moved him:

She who was so cruel and crafty in everyday life, revealed an innocence, a frankness, a kindness of ball-placing. . . . She was hitting hard and flat, with her usual effortless sweep, feeding me deep, skimming balls--all so rhythmically coordinated and overt. . . . Did I ever mention that her bare arm bore the 8 of vaccination? That I loved her hopelessly? That she was only 14? (Lolita 211-13.)

Time and change were inherent even in these timeless moments. As he regrets his failure to photograph her, almost as an afterthought he remembers the presence of a butterfly on that tennis court: "An inquisitive butterfly [had] passed, dipping, between us." In much of Nabokov's work, butterflies are inserted as a reminder to the reader of the author's omnipresence--Nabokov the lepidopterist carefully capturing a moment in his net of Mnemosyne, then preserving his capture in perfectly-arranged language. More importantly, Nabokov employs butterflies to stitch patterns in air between past moments and present. Their

flitting motions, in which they are gone, then reappear, perfectly symbolize memory.⁶ The butterfly on the tennis court, in its guise as memory, reassures Humbert that memory can effectively link moments of past and present.⁷

Yet, as Diana Butler has shown in "Lolita Lepidoptera," the butterfly is also a symbol of young Dolores Haze. Unfortunately, Humbert is not content that

⁶ Dabney Stuart notes butterflies' "almost timeless association with the soul," with all that is incorruptible by time and death. Stuart cites a particular instance in which a butterfly both articulates a protagonist's fixation on the past and transubstantiates his grief over its loss:

As is the case in his novels, many Nabokov short stories are devoted to a character's fixation upon his past, often prompted by a recent death, and the protagonist, when it is not the narrator himself, is almost always a plausible understudy for the artist. . . . One of the early stories dealing with the past moves toward a single striking pointe which is not the character's attainment of the sought past, but a beautifully poetic transubstantiation of the past into another present. The 1925 story "Christmas" concerns a man whose young son has recently died, and in his grief he has gone to the summer house in the midst of winter, where he rummages in his son's things and papers and tries to understand the fact of his death. When his grief has become such that, on the eve of Christmas, the father is sure he will now die, too, there is suddenly a slight sound in the room. The son had been a lepidopterist, and the sudden presence of heat in the summer house has caused an Indian cocoon to hatch. "Christmas" ends with a lyrical description of the emergence of the damp insect and the gradual unfolding of its wings. (Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody 144-45.)

⁷ Consider this nature/art paradox: Humbert remembers the butterfly, and for him it stitches that perfect moment on the tennis court into the weave of memory. However, being natural, and therefore ephemeral, the butterfly is as insubstantial as memory, which may eventually lose the moment. Yet a camera--an adjunct of art--might have preserved the moment almost indelibly.

his butterfly flit freely; he wants to collect her. By an act of artistic chloroforming, he fixes Dolores in an attitude of his choice, as Lolita, preserving his idealized picture of her simply by the fixity of his obsession with it.

In a comment upon Ada which also fits Lolita, Robert Alter observes that, in the eroticized world of Ada, beauty lies in the artist's ability to force the object into a "sensuous center," preserving that single moment of "reality" from metamorphosis and decay:

Time the eroder has been alchemized in this artful recreation of paradise, into a golden translucence, delighting palette and eye. Nabokov means to create just such an inter-involvement of art and pleasure transcending time, or rather capturing its elusive, living "texture" This is . . . a novel about memory, a faculty that in Nabokov's view can serve us vitally only if we exercise the finest, fullest attentiveness to the life of each moment, and ideally, the control of language required to focus the moment recalled . . . to "possess the reality of a fact by forcing it into the sensuous center" (as Van Veen says). ("Ada, or the Perils of Paradise," in Vladimir Nabokov: His Life, His Work, His World: A Tribute 111-113.)

Stuart notes how well the concept of the instar (a stage in the life of an insect between two successive molts) fits Nabokov's concept of how memory unfolds. Nabokov's characters are forced, successively, to cast off their earlier lives; yet memory, unbidden, retrieves those discarded lives and brings them back at odd moments. Thus, the character's present instar is burdened--but at the same

time augmented and transformed--whenever memory throws the mantle of the past over the present.

Unfortunately in Lolita, Humbert's memory of his Annabel, whom he tries to recapture in Dolores Haze, finally becomes a burden only, both to Dolores and to Humbert himself. Dolores--to use the butterfly/instar analogy--has been in a sense chloroformed by Humbert at a specific instar. In his mind, she remains post-child, pre-adolescent, at 12 years, 7 1/2 months, as something he calls "Lolita." And he does everything in his power to prevent her from emerging from that instar into the next stage, that of young womanhood. In his obsession, he in effect removes her from nature, where she would freely grow and change; he sees her not as a child, but as a beautiful scientific curiosity which he can preserve.

Of course, because this scientist is also an artist, he would preserve her complete with nuances and subtleties. Nevertheless, something goes awry in his artistry; something in Humbert's need to preserve Dolores as "Lolita" is as scientific and bloodless as the precise, bloodless artistry of Ada Veen, the heroine of Ada. Although Ada at age 12 is already an artist by avocation, she is a scientist by temperament. She paints plants and insects perfectly, rendering the genitalia of orchids and butterflies along with their less hidden beauties; yet her art only seems to celebrate nature. On a deeper level, it

freezes nature, because her preoccupation with sexuality is paradoxically asexual. Her sensuality is a scientific experiment, or at best an artistic construct. Her 14-year-old lover, Van, is similarly lacking in warmth, and insistent that the physical world be under his aesthetic control. Only in middle age can Van love Ada despite her dyed hair and her thickening waist. Until he gains, late in life, the powers of perception of the true Nabokovian artist, he holds to his fantasy that Ada must always be 12, a nymphet (like her literary predecessor Lolita). If he can continually force his image of Ada at 12 to the sensuous center--intensifying it, forcing it to the forefront of the imagination, somewhat in the same way he forces waterfalls to flow uphill by standing on his head--if he can exercise that kind of artistic control, Van hopes, then neither Ada nor he will age.

Humbert's obsession seems based on a similar fantasy. He thinks he can remain "the huge hunk of movie manhood" Lolita first believed him to be--someone larger and more powerful than life--if Lolita herself never ages. The gradual failure of Humbert's heart (he dies of a heart attack) is intertwined with the failure of his attempts to keep Lolita from aging. As she becomes more and more young woman than nymphet, his heart problems increase. By a kind of sympathetic voodoo, her emergence from her pre-adolescent instar bursts open the cocoon in which

Humbert has sheltered his hope of his own indestructibility. Humbert's heart both literally and figuratively breaks. In a scene shortly before Lolita escapes from him to Quilty, he suffers chest pains. Lolita disappears from his sight for just a moment, to speak to Quilty on the telephone, and as Humbert calls her name, helpless in the grip of the pain in his chest, he senses "the acoustics of time, domed time, endowing my call and its tell-tale hoarseness with such a wealth of anxiety, passion, and pain that it really would have been instrumental in ripping open the zipper of her nylon shroud had she been dead."

Ironically, although Lolita will soon burst the cocoon in which Humbert wraps her and flee to Quilty, the escape is futile. While her life with Humbert deadened her childhood, virtual enslavement at Quilty's sex camp/dude ranch will deaden her further. The shroud image which visits Humbert during his angina attack ironically prefigures Lolita's death: the ripping open of her womb to deliver a dead child. Her womb becomes a shroud, and the dead child is like Lolita herself: Her life was a cocoon from which the pupa was released too late: Dolores Haze was already dead, frozen at the Lolita instar.

Humbert's obsession destroys not only Dolores Haze, but himself. Throughout the novel, he is fragmented: on the one hand a master of savoir faire; on the other hand

himself controlled by a terror that he cannot keep Lolita in his grasp. He bandages with wit--and with apostrophes to the reader which cull sympathy--a painfully emerging third fragment of his personality: his own recognition of the evil inherent in his obsession. He recognizes not the legally punishable evil of incest, but rather the psychological evil of denying Lolita both her childhood and her adulthood. Humbert's mea culpa centers around his growing knowledge--if the reader can believe his confession--that he erred grievously in coercing her to remain in a perpetual, thin-shanked, downy post-pubescence--in a limbo where the physical and emotional accoutrements of childhood were pressed into the service of the physical and emotional demands of his adult sexuality. That error fragments her personality and exposes the darkest fragments of his own.

However, most often, the reader's attention is wooed away from the darker side of Humbert by his dazzling display of literary allusions, gags, puns, and ironies.⁸

⁸ Carl Proffer dissects Nabokov's allusions to a plethora of works in the Romantic literary tradition, including his playful use of Browning, Rimbaud, and others. But, Proffer shows, Nabokov has more fun yet with false clues, including constant allusions to Merimee's Carmen and glancing references to Pushkin's "Aleko," both of which would tip off the scholar that Humbert will murder Lolita. Proffer iterates that while the reader must be alert to all clues in order to understand the enigma which is Humbert Humbert, still the clues may not be reliable. (Keys to Lolita [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968].)

Humbert allows a view of his dark side only as reflected in his largely conjectural portrait of Clare Quilty (they meet only once, during the murder scene). Humbert's concern over the seamy side of his own sexuality is highlighted by his preoccupation with Quilty's greasy libido, which repulses Humbert because it is devoid of fatherly concern for Lolita. The obscene, seedy Quilty of Humbert's portrait functions as Humbert's double.⁹ As Humbert's dark side, Quilty becomes Humbert's fatal stumbling block, operating outside Humbert's control and independent of his finer impulses. Controlled by the "Quilty" within himself, Humbert loses his bid to be called a Nabokovian artist. The true artist must control himself before he can hope to use art to control the objective world.

Quilty insinuates himself into Humbert's consciousness and turns Humbert eventually into a man with a new obsession as strong as his former need to keep Lolita

⁹ This disturbing intertwining of Humbert and Quilty makes it clear that in Lolita, as in other novels, Nabokov is exploiting the idea of the doppelganger. In both The Defense and Laughter in the Dark, the protagonists frequently stand outside themselves and watch themselves perform, or are startled to see themselves manifested in the actions of other characters. He uses the concept most obviously with Kinbote and John Shade in Pale Fire, and with Sebastian and his half-brother/biographer in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. And the concept of the double is developed with as many twists as possible in Ada, as Nabokov explores the androgynous psychic atmosphere in which Van and Ada practice their sexuality and their artistry. In fact, the narrator, Van, sometimes refers to them as one entity, Vaniada.

captive: the need to kill Quilty. The insinuation is subtle and gradual. After Humbert removes Lolita from a girls' school where she has been having a liaison (later revealed to have been with Quilty), a man whom the reader can assume to be Quilty trails Humbert and Lolita across America in a red convertible. Humbert glimpses the convertible once at a motel where he and Lolita are staying, and likens the long hood of the car, poking insolently from the garage, to a codpiece. Quilty, who like Humbert enjoys games at others' expense, may have parked the car that way in order to tease Humbert. In a later incident at another hotel, a hairy stranger (probably Quilty) watches Lolita approvingly as she performs hijinks on the lawn near the tennis court; and Humbert catches sight of her performance for the stranger. As Humbert's memoir unfolds, it becomes more and more difficult to discern whether Quilty actually exists, or whether Quilty is Humbert's projection of his own guilt.

Is Lolita's benefactor, solicitous "Daddy Hum," as Humbert sometimes calls himself tongue-in-cheek, only a smokescreen for the seedy side of Humbert; does Humbert find it psychologically convenient to foist off his own unconscionable behavior on one "Quilty"? If Quilty the individual exists, he is at a distinct disadvantage: portrayed for the reader only through Humbert's eyes, and being ascribed whatever demons Humbert hates in himself.

For example, Humbert implies, when he tracks down and visits the married and pregnant Lolita in her home-- before killing Quilty--that Lolita tells him how Quilty cast her out into the street. But this confidence is only implied; Humbert reports almost no dialogue as he recounts that visit. Does Quilty's heinousness, then, exist only in the mind of a jealous Humbert? Or, more intriguing, does Humbert's nasty portrait of Quilty reflect not jealousy and self-righteousness, but Humbert's own guilt?

As Humbert attempts to define the line between his behavior and Quilty's, the line, perversely, seems to blur instead. Humbert deplores Quilty's selfishness in treating Lolita as a sexual toy, and emphasizes that he himself has tried to allow her a simulacrum of a normal childhood. In a poignantly ironic vignette, Humbert emphasizes that he has read, as a conscientious father might, a pamphlet entitled "Know Your Own Daughter" (double entendre well-noted by Humbert). He also allows her to have a boy/girl party, despite his fear that some kid will steal her "affections" from him (that fear is more abstract in most fathers). Humbert continues to broaden the line of solicitous concern that separates Daddy Hum from the beast Quilty by inviting the reader to imagine Quilty's lack of compunction in throwing Lolita into the midst of a sexual menagerie at his "Duk Duk" ranch, then throwing her out when she refuses to comply. Humbert is quick to explain

that he, in contrast, has spoiled her, plying her with bicycles, sodas, sundresses, and tennis lessons, supplying all her childish needs, being the best father he knows how to be. He wants the reader to trust and admire the Humbert whose solicitousness toward Lolita makes him almost honorable, despite his pedophilia.

The reader cannot determine with certainty whether Humbert and Quilty are separate pederasts, or the bright and the dark side of a single man. The possibility that Humbert invents Quilty out of himself sets up a neat pun which encapsulates the whole dynamic of Humbert's love for Lolita. Humbert considers himself exiled from society, which he imagines has a sixth sense about his nymphomania; and he feels a certain amount of fear about being caught. However, his own imagination pursues him more avidly than do the law or morality of an ignorant society. The pun works this way: He is first "trailed" across America by the basest fragments of his own personality, by his own obsession (Quilty in the phallic red convertible); and then he sees his obsession literally "drive away" Lolita, the object of that obsession. He then plans to kill Quilty, by projection also killing his own solipsism and nymphomania (his own "cesspoolful of rotting monsters"). Quilty's murder will simultaneously purge himself and avenge Lolita against his own perversity. If the reader follows this "trailing and

driving away" pun as the clue to the whole psychological puzzle, he can believe Humbert when he claims that, with the murder of Quilty, his love for Dolly Haze has been transmuted from obsession to platonism.

Fortunately, the reader need not decide conclusively whether Quilty is fact or figment, harmless or heinous. Humbert can shake off the dark, base, Quilty no better than Conrad's protagonist could escape his "secret sharer." Quilty, whether seen as a separate character or a fragment of Humbert's personality, still functions in a double-edged way. Quilty makes Humbert attractive by comparison, since Humbert indulges and cares for Lolita; yet he also focuses the reader's attention upon Humbert's guilt, by reflecting and thus highlighting Humbert's sexual deviance.

Quilty's lust, as Humbert imagines it, lacks the "tendresse" for Lolita which informs his own memoirs ("tendresse" is Dr. John Ray's characterization of Humbert's attitude). Quilty lacks the exquisite self-effacement which puts such a patina on the roughness of Humbert's sexuality. Clearly, Humbert has the more loving heart and the finer appreciation of Lolita, and the reader might forgive a lust which carries such a rarefied, poignant appreciation of evanescent beauty. It is easy to sympathize with Humbert, easy to forget that he must hide his creation, Lolita, because his art serves a lust as base as that of Quilty, his secret sharer.

Humbert is a qualified hero, and the reader should sense, coexisting uneasily with Humbert's poetry, a banality and vulgarity about the relationship between Humbert and his love object. Nabokov leaves open the possibility that Lolita's perfection lives only in Humbert's eyes. He never intrudes in order to agree with Humbert that Dolores Haze is graced with ethereal beauty. Nabokov, who never hesitates to step in if he thinks that a point needs to be clarified, affirmed--or obfuscated--gives no stage whisper to assure the reader that Dolores Haze equals Dante's Beatrice. Possibly, she is no more than the precocious, infuriating child Humbert decries in the moments of exasperation which interrupt his rhapsodies about her nymphet charms. And possibly even during his rhapsodies he tries to mold a goddess from very common clay. His perception may be clouded then, not rarefied. Dolores Haze may not rank with Beatrice.

And if Humbert's intermittent disgust and disdain hints at deeper cruelties, then the cavalier attitude toward Lolita which Humbert ascribes to Quilty may actually comprise Humbert's own overweening attitude--even though Humbert the artist would not want to admit such cruelty. Actually, other offhand comments in his memoirs suggest that what Humbert presents as Quilty's disdain toward Lolita may actually mirror Humbert's own attitude. Humbert pinched his first wife's legs to torture her; he disdained

his second wife, Charlotte Haze, and nearly carried out his plan to drown her; he notes only fleeting, casual liaisons with previous women. An ideal Nabokovian artist, with attitudes informed by a compassion for other people, would not behave this way. Humbert's subtle hints throughout his memoir of his cruelty and pettiness, coupled with the broad slapdash picture of his impotence in the scene with Quilty, make Humbert much less heroic than he would have the reader believe, and much closer to Quilty.¹⁰

The concept of the double allows Nabokov to examine the artist's need to control his own psyche. The protagonists' doubles both hinder and help them as the protagonists struggle to attain artistic control. Ultimately though, the artist meets the limits of his control; beyond that, Caprice operates. Nabokov's protagonists are faced, finally, with the loss of something held dear, whether a loved person or object, or some part of their own carefully-constructed inner world. Whether or not they can recognize this loss yet keep their psyches intact measures their worth as Nabokovian artists. The "doubled" images that Nabokov creates, doubles thrown off from the refracting psyches of his protagonists, reveal disturbing facets of the protagonists' personalities.

¹⁰ Humbert's pistol "dribbles" bullets, and it takes many shots before Quilty actually dies. Nabokov's contempt for Freudian interpretation is well-known, but he enjoyed interpolating transparently Freudian scenes as parodies.

These fragments seem dark and disturbing because, although presented sardonically or even comically, the protagonists often cannot assimilate them. The fragments seem to operate independent of their owners--outside the protagonists' control either because not consciously accessible, because the protagonists misperceive them when they are accessible, or because they have become more powerful than the protagonist's normal persona, and render him helpless in his daily world.

Taking his usual approach when reporting the machinations of Caprice, Nabokov coolly reports the hammer taps which fragment his protagonists' personalities. He always recounts detachedly, as if contemptuous that the protagonist cannot keep from revealing a palpitating heart as he faces the vicissitudes of his daily struggle. Nabokov seems always ready to tell a joke at a character's expense. Yet what looks like archness is borrowed from the old stratagem of whistling past the graveyard--or laughter in the dark. Nabokov tempers fear with bravado, in the tragi-comic tradition. Consider that we allow only one priest, the comic, to publicly exorcise our deepest fears, and Nabokov is a superb comic entertainer. In his macabre twists and flips and sleights of hand, Nabokov inspires as much awe and fear as the young acrobat Van Veen, who strikes terror in children by walking on his hands, literally upending their perceptions of the world, and

reassuring himself of his own power to defy the law of gravity.

The characters in Nabokov's works, like children amazed by an acrobat, watch Caprice upend their worlds; often the experience disintegrates their personalities. But the analogy shifts slightly here, for instead of routing Caprice, Nabokov the hero imitates it. Nabokov also slips into the position of the acrobat, himself defying the law of gravity--or in this case, the inexorable power of Caprice--by disarming Caprice with the tools of the comic: First, he employs his keen yet dispassionate powers of observation, and then he uses humor to upend and in some measure subdue the absurdities that sadden or frighten his characters. Thus, Nabokov never shows himself as hero. In disguise, he performs comic tricks to minimize the shock Caprice has given the audience; but to the stunned watcher he seems merely an extension of Caprice. Nabokov's skillful, purposeful game-playing allows him to recognize his characters' pain without being overwhelmed by it.¹¹

¹¹ Field notes that

The speaker as conjuror is the public personality of the poet, and it is his trick to provide protective covering for the private self by means of distraction, indirection, and extravagant irony. . . . Nabokov, who practiced conjuring as a child, has a deep fascination with the figure of the magician. . . . He is concerned not so much with the trick itself as with the involvement of the performer in his private life with his craft.

Similarly, by fragmenting his protagonists' personalities, he helps them compartmentalize and thereby attempt to control the capricious shifts of their lives. The fragmented personalities of his artist characters reflect the problem faced by the modern artist. Because the world refuses to conform to his vision, he must use his

For Nabokov, sleight-of-hand is an effective method of controlling reality. As one example, Field cites the character Shock, the conjuror, in Nabokov's short story "The Potato Elf." On learning that his wife has deceived him by sleeping with Fred, the dwarf who helps him in his magic act, Shock feigns death throes, and his wife rushes out to a telephone to call for help; but when she returns, Shock is standing calmly in front of a mirror, adjusting his necktie. Field points out that the trick "is important chiefly for the tension it sets up between the performer and the performance." Conjuring is the ultimate act of artistic control, for the artist must first concentrate so completely that his own powers become calmly focused; and he can then manipulate reality, exercising momentary control.

"The conjuror is not a direct symbol but a fine and deep metaphor," Field continues: "The 1939 story which Nabokov never published and which became the novel Lolita was entitled 'The Magician.' . . ." (For discussion of the conjuror, see Nabokov: His Life in Art 104-5.)

Note: "The Magician," translated by Dmitri Nabokov, has recently been published, under the title The Enchanter (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1986). In The Enchanter, Nabokov limits contact between a jeweler, the prototype of Humbert, and a schoolgirl he meets in the park, the prototype of Lolita, to one furtive encounter in a hotel, where the jeweler, her new stepfather, has taken her after the natural death of her ailing mother. The sleeping child wakes as he molests her, and screams; he runs out into the traffic and is killed. The story lacks the ambiguities of Nabokov's characterizations of Humbert and Lolita, and of course does not explore in such detail the shadings of Humbert's agonies of bliss and remorse, or his wrestling with his own sense of responsibility. Finally, it is narrated in the third person, which further removes the reader from an involvement with the Humbert-figure.

craft to create a new world. Meanwhile, he is split mentally and emotionally; the facets of his psyche are illuminated now in the everyday world, now in any of several worlds of his imagination--which is why, as Nabokov has often noted, the reader cannot literally trust the artist. Yet neither can the artist trust himself. For instance, Humbert is smugly aware that, in his rarefied sexuality and idiosyncratic sense of beauty, he dares to "balance on his hands" while the common herd can only stand right-side-up and gawk. But Humbert, like acrobat Van, also knows that, exciting as it is to live upside-down, it is also precarious. Poesis, naming a new reality, becomes an almost impossible balancing act when the artist must perform it against the norm.

Humbert has always balanced outside the norm, existing through subterfuge in the society in which he must live. Humbert is estranged not only because of his pedophilia but because of his superior intellect. Like the modern artist, he feels set above, or outside, common humanity, without peer or communicant. And having no peer, the modern artist may try, like Frankenstein, to craft a character that is either like himself, or that cannot estrange itself from him. So Humbert tries without success to mold a perfect, responsive companion from the common elements of Dolly Haze. Humbert, for all his savoir faire, is a furtive and lonely man, not the man in control he claims to be.

Although Humbert presents himself to the reader as a sophisticate who easily makes his way in the world, he mentions no close friendships in Europe; and no emotional attachments (despite his brief marriage to one Valeria) with any females except his Annabel-by-the-sea. In America, he purposely remains a stranger to his second wife, Charlotte Haze; and reserves his real love--which he must keep hidden--for her daughter. His forging of these slight human ties does not ease the foreignness of his new environment, because his obsession with Lolita forces him to eschew almost all companionship but hers. Feeling compelled to keep his life with her a secret, he and Lo spend their two cross-country automobile journeys alone; confined in their automobile, in small motel cabins, in dark tourist-attraction caves, or--to appease Lo's need for vicarious adventure--in dark movie houses.¹² Most

¹² Ironically, Humbert's experience of America--that endless expanse of movie-mentality optimism he paints for the reader--becomes a more constricting prison for him than was the centuries-old confinement of the European culture he has left. Humbert only obliquely admits that he feels most comfortable in the same European state of entropy which was so beautifully portrayed by Henry James in Gilbert Osmond of Portrait of a Lady. Osmond demonstrates the enervation which can attend Americans who have exiled themselves in a culture which has become moribund. In characters like Osmond, the souls have dissipated after centuries of beauty that have passed without the characters' comprehension of that beauty. For them, Europe's beauty has trickled away unnoticed, leaving it and its citizens bloodless. The fine edifice still stands (like the postcard Humbert keeps of the facade of his father's hotel); and the European stands proudly before that edifice; but the edifice lacks a heart.

important, he fails to win her love. She sees him at first abstractly as "a marvelous hunk of movie manhood," and then with a mixture of disdain and disgust after their sexual relationship begins. She never loves him, either in a passionate or a daughterly sense. So Humbert remains the outsider, a European out of his element in brash, vulgar America, an America in which he never feels relaxed or welcomed.

He limits even his superficial contacts with Americans to only a few: Lolita's mother; Gaston Godin, another pedophile with whom he plays chess; the hard-luck, scatter-brained woman named Rita with whom he cohabits after Lolita leaves him; Clare Quilty, and a thousand nameless motel clerks and grease monkeys who ease his automobile flights across America. Although most of his portraits of Americans are detailed and amusing, they lack depth. His most nearly rounded portraits are of Lolita and her mother; and these are almost flat, since he dismisses the possibility of emotional depth in either female. He even admits that Lolita the nymphet is in large part a creature sprung from his own forehead; he admits that he has made little effort to understand the psyche of the child Dolores. By limiting himself to detached observation

aware of this bloodlessness--and of its opposite in the vulgar, juicy America--nevertheless feels more comfortable with orderly structure, and with keeping the roiling mess of emotion discrete.

of all Americans but Lolita--and by limiting his involvement with her to an appreciation only of her nymphet self--Humbert ensures that he will never be assimilated into this new culture. Humbert experiences no psychic freedom in America because his nympholepsy controls his daily existence so overwhelmingly. He lives mentally not within the slow moments of New England suburbia, nor in the passing scenic beauty of Appalachian coal country, but in some fantasy future in Mexico, where he can carnally enjoy his own granddaughters without fear of sanction.

The sadness that his obsession visits upon him is illustrated in two separate incidents when he tries to re-enact with Lolita his moment with Annabel-by-the sea. Both re-enactments fail. On the day he takes Lolita to the seashore, sea and sand are clammy, and he feels "as much desire for her as for a manatee." In another incident, just before Lolita flees with Quilty, Humbert does manage to possess Lolita on a beautiful mountain pass; but his bliss is interrupted by two wide-eyed children and their mother, who hustles her innocents away from the scene. Humbert's reaction is much like that mother's. At that moment, he sees the futility and sordidness of his attempts to recapture, in his coercive relationship with Dolly Haze, that long-ago moment of childish spontaneity with Annabel.

His moment with Annabel was comic but lovely; his moment on the mountainside with Lolita is sad. While he

and his Annabel were applauded by two bearded old men who urged them on with ribald pleasure ("Allons-y, allons-y!"), he and Lolita are shamed by two puzzled children.

Humbert's shame is knowing that he has forced Lolita to bypass her own childhood in order to serve his obsession. In that epiphanic moment, he learns that perfection exists in memory only; that the world, with its inevitable tricks of time, cannot embody artistic fantasies.

Humbert's life has narrowed into an obsessive attempt to recreate a single moment of ingenuousness, possibility, and hope. Deprived of past bliss, he is forever urging and herding a reluctant present toward a future moment which will recapture that past. Yet however hard Humbert tries, the charm of that childhood moment never resurfaces during his machinations as an older man. If the reader avoids Freud, whom Nabokov detested, and instead flirts with Jung, it is fairly safe to submit that Humbert is locked in a state of childishness. Obviously, during his futile exercise of art against reality, something has broken in Humbert as well as in Dolly. Despite his wit, charm, education, and worldliness, Humbert is crippled--by his inability to allow Lolita, or anyone else, an existence beyond their contribution to his obsession. No one seems really to exist for him who is not an extension of his first love object. Humbert is a prisoner of his first passion.

In much of Nabokov's work, both novels and stories, his protagonists are most alive when they are living in their pasts. The foster countries in which they reside are shells only, lacking definition, and markedly lacking in sympathetic response. To fill this blankness in their present lives, the characters' memories work, unbidden, to recreate the past through objects in the present, as if these objects held an imprisoned vitality.

Nabokov's most sympathetic protagonists are plausible understudies for the artist (although never autobiographical doubles). They are often emigres from Russia or other nations; besides their propensities toward literature, chess, and lepidoptery, they have keenly developed senses of nostalgia. Their present situations serve merely as stages upon which sit certain props that cue the protagonists to indulge in reverie. Their ability to derive from reverie not only sadness and nostalgia, but also creative strength, allows them to continue to protest against Caprice in the best, most affirming, most compassionate sense of the Nabokovian artist; to persevere honorably. Nabokov in even his most detached works affirms his characters' impulse toward reverie.

Pnin, a more unabashedly emotional character than Humbert, is the clearest example of the Nabokovian protagonist in thrall to the sensory experiences which marked his past. In the midst of his duties as a professor

of languages at Waindell College, Pnin daydreams of life before his forced emigration from Russia. Pnin is literally suffering a broken heart. The mild physical seizures which precipitate his daydreams are heart attacks. His loneliness, estrangement, and physical ailment seem regrettable for such an earnest and generous man as Pnin. Lest the reader's sympathy for the little man become mawkish, however, Nabokov allows the narrator's primary voice in Pnin to poke fun at the professor, making the reader also laugh at Pnin's absent-minded goof-ups. Yet readers unconsciously rebel against a narrator who keeps plunking a good-hearted man in the spotlight of ridicule. In Pnin, the narrator's cruelty ensures that the reader's sympathies are even more strongly with Pnin than had Nabokov let Pnin tell his own story.

Nabokov has created the unsympathetic narrator specifically as a rhetorical foil. Although that narrator is omniscient, and seems to choreograph events, a second narrative voice--the voice of Nabokov himself--actually controls all. This secondary voice shines through at odd moments to protect his character when Pnin, especially vulnerable then, relives his past.¹³ Passages in which the

¹³ Field says:

The artistic function of the narrator who cannot be believed is obviously not the most essential part and purpose of Pnin, since the untrustworthy narrator is only a diabolus ex machina in regard to Timofey Pnin, and his

distress of Pnin's physical heart underscore his emotional heartbreak are recounted gently, in a voice unlike the primary one.

William Rowe notes in "Pnin's Uncanny Looking Glass" that Pnin suffers seven seizures: The narrator lists the first five for the reader early in the novel, and the sixth occurs in the park with the squirrel with the peach stone. The seventh happens at The Pines in New England, a kind of New World dacha where Russian emigres gather for summer vacations. The athletic Pnin takes a businesslike swim, after removing both his wristwatch and his Orthodox cross--two mementoes of his earlier life. In this environment which reminds him of the Russia now lost to him, his heart clutches. (See Pnin [New York: Doubleday and Company, 1957] 19-24, 131.)

actual relations with Pnin are never more than tangential. The narrator (and a reference to an Anglo-Russian novelist whose name and patronymic are Vladimir Vladimirovich strongly suggest that he is Nabokov) uses the technique of the questionable account not merely for the sake of its own aesthetic charm and fictional veracity, but, even more, to separate Pnin as a serious character from Pnin the campus "character." The narrator has two distinct voices, and only one of them is serious. The first, and frivolous, voice, is the one from which Pnin flees and the one that relates all the hilarious misadventures of the little "assistant professor emeritus"; the second narrative voice, under cover of the other's jocosity and meticulous source-accounting, creates and describes a real and finely-drawn character, calmly utilizing the novelist's license to the utmost. . . . The narrator's second voice respects Pnin's human sorrow and human integrity by ignoring all that is surface and extrinsic . . . [addressing the Pnin] who has suffered heart attacks . . . (Field 135-37.)

In "Nabokov's Signs and Symbols," William Carroll explains that, by puzzling over repeated patterns in his life both in Russia and America, Pnin tries, with limited success, to "embrace disorder" and pain, to wrestle a coherent pattern from chaos.¹⁴ The oak-and-rhododendron pattern in the wallpaper, the details of disturbing drawings, and random objects from his childhood bedroom, are repeated in objects which seem to pop up deliberately in his present environment, as if taunting him. He is as little able to subdue them now as he was at age 11, when a childhood fever distorted his perceptions. He is being dallied with by a capricious overseer.

Yet Nabokov ensures that Pnin is not simply the dupe of the narrator. The underlying voice of the author illustrates that Nabokov is particularly sensitive toward those characters who struggle in dignity, rather than in self-pity, to construct a tenable life in an alien land. The sympathetic narrator ensures, Field says, that

In the community of sufferers to which Pnin belongs, the causes of his suffering matter. Pnin is the victim of a real exile, a complete loss of home and cultural ties; a total absence of love; and the monsters that must inhabit his dreams are not projections of self; but very real Bolshevik and Nazi torturers. Pnin's hell, the one he strains to avoid, is not private. Being a perpetual wanderer, always ridiculed for his peculiarities, always depending for his very existence upon the benevolence of other and generally lesser men, he has something substantial to

¹⁴ In Proffer, A Book of Things 203-17.

suffer about. His response is not a destructive howl at past horrors, but a legitimate and admirable refuge in the antithesis of nightmare--the beauty of Russian lore and literature, the aesthetics of art. It is, one might simply add, Nabokov's response as well. (Field, Introduction xviii-xix.)

Dabney Stuart explores The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, another Nabokovian novel in which the themes of exile and estrangement, of the homeless psyche, are particularly poignant. The narrator, the half-brother of the (fictional) novelist Sebastian Knight, is writing Sebastian's biography. Like any biographer, he attempts to gather, besides Sebastian's books and his own memories, fragments of letters, testimony from old lovers, and revered objects from which to reconstruct Sebastian's life. Another biographer, whom the narrator despises, does not bother to "assemble as many reflections as possible," but dismisses Sebastian simplistically as the typical twentieth-century artist trapped in the maze of his supersensitive soul. Yet, the narrator senses, Sebastian suffered not from twentieth-century malaise, but from his condition of exile. Writing formed a refuge for the homeless Sebastian, a Russian exile who wandered from city to city (in an itinerary, including Cambridge University, intriguingly like the real-life moves of Vladimir Nabokov and his brother as young men). Sebastian's novels (all truth filtered through art) are all that remains of him, and the narrator despairs of rebuilding his brother's life

truly and accurately when he himself has, using Humbert's lament, "only words to play with!". Stuart notes:

Thus Sebastian's work is a mask behind which he [Sebastian] hides himself; yet it is the chief source of his identity. . . . the novel the narrator is composing is itself a mirror of Sebastian's work, and, of course, the narrator is really seeking himself when he seeks the identity of Sebastian. The self is therefore an imaginative construct; an artistic composition; and the light of personal truth is hard to perceive in the shimmer of an imaginary nature. . . . (Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody 48-49.)

Yet because Nabokov treats Humbert more ambiguously than he does Pnin or Sebastian, the reader's sympathy for Humbert's estrangement is leavened by realizing that he created it himself. The unusual impetus behind Humbert's art--his urge to control Lolita--makes him a self-conscious exile, estranged by choice rather than political circumstance.

I have examined Humbert the unlovely solipsist who has misapplied his artistic sensibilities, attempting to cage "Lolita" in art rather than celebrate Dolores Haze. I have also examined Humbert the unloved exile, who, like many of Nabokov's protagonists, must persevere in an alien environment. In many ways he is execrable, in many ways admirable. While he at first lacks compassion for the subject of his art--ranking him with the most villainous of Nabokov's false artists--he finally appreciates Dolly Haze in all her imperfections (if the reader can accept Humbert's confession), writing his celebration of Lolita as a kind of atonement, and a great paean to love. When he

begins to approach that necessary balance of chutzpah and humility, Humbert approaches the ranks of the ideal Nabokovian artist. However, contrite or not, he cannot undo the damage he has caused. His remorse, if real, is too late. Humbert is a subtle object lesson in how the artist fails when he drifts away from humaneness and humility to float in a pure aesthetic ether.

Neither my "before" nor "after" snapshot of Humbert, however, seems to explain why he is such a puzzling mixture of tenderness and coercion, of expansiveness and paranoia. Nor does either explain why Dolores Haze becomes the motivating force in his life. The answers, I think, lie in realizing that Humbert, tilting at time and Caprice as tenaciously as Quixote tilted at windmills, is neither a dilettante nor a fool. He is an existentialist, in the affirmative, rather than the nihilistic, sense of that term, constantly constructing and reconstructing meaning.¹⁵ His attempt fails, ultimately, because he never quite manages the leap of faith which can take him beyond obsession with the physical world.

¹⁵ Though, as I've noted before, Nabokov had no patience with Sartre or his ilk, he nevertheless was very concerned with the search for meaning and coherence via individual, idiosyncratic consciousness, and approved those who would not blindly accept traditional concepts of truth or reality. To that extent, I believe Nabokov would not mind an existentialist label for artist Humbert. Humbert of course posits meaning, and the spiritual core of his existence, in a very non-metaphysical Idea with bobby sox.

CONCLUSION:

THE EXISTENTIAL ARTIST: OBJECT AS ICON

In its own particular brand of despair, Lolita articulates the doubt of the modern artist that language is an adequate tool for poesis. Humbert moans after Lolita leaves him, "Ah, my Lolita, I have only words to play with." Left with nothing but words, the modern writer pays obsessive attention to the world of things--positing the object as a locked cache of pure Idea. This suggests, according to Barbara Goodwin, two underlying problems.¹

First, modern man is overwhelmed by the proliferation of data from the empirical sciences, since that data has spilled from the confines of science and is now being plumbed by philosophers. The writer, himself a kind of philosopher, also attempts to find Idea in objects, and his confusion is mirrored in his characters. For example, she says, Sartre's Roquentin feels nausea when he is unable to make the mental "selections" in order to name the connections between objects; connections which will reveal the meaning behind the objects. His naming reveals nothing only because he fails to understand that simple naming is not the same as poesis; he fails to apprehend that sensory

¹ "The Vertigo of Facts: Literary Accounts of a Philosophical Dilemma." British Journal of Aesthetics 18 (1978): 261-76.

experience has no meaning until woven against a background of social and historical patterns. Looked at superficially, naming may seem an arbitrary act, but it is actually an act of connecting which cannot be successfully performed in a vacuum.

Humbert fits Goodwin's definition of the artist operating brazenly outside a supportive context. First, the reader should force himself to be aware--even as he enjoys Humbert's easy, flippant style--of the shaky foundation upon which Humbert builds his world. Of course, it is true that Lolita is a lavish game, and game-playing requires a certain detachment. It is true that the reader should, for his own protection, maintain a slightly bemused stance as Humbert palpates his heart, mind, and aesthetic pituitary; otherwise, Humbert's control of both Lolita and the reader would be total, bordering on the fiendish. However, the reader should not allow his detachment to let him lose sight of the fact that Humbert's teasing approach masks an obsession, and that Lolita manipulates the reader's emotions in disquieting ways.

The reader dares not take comfort in any emotion Humbert evokes from him--be it lust, disgust, pity, or admiration--because these are constantly undermined by the nagging feeling that Humbert has "put one over" on him. Between his rhapsodizing, Humbert himself reveals Lolita as a languorous brat, compelling, but far less ethereal than

Dante's Beatrice or Poe's pale Annabel. The conventions of the love story have been perverted in Lolita, to produce portraits of Dolores Haze as an aggravating bobby-soxer-to-be and her Daddums as a helpless lecher. Because Humbert's love is grotesque and self-serving, and his romantic outpourings--even he admits--manipulate the reader's emotions, perhaps the reader should ignore Humbert's pleas to be placed in the pantheon of love poets.

Humbert, at base, is not a Romantic. The Romantics, for all their awareness of the relentless cogs of science and industry churning them toward death, still wrung solace from Nature and from God. Although strongly aware of the rub of Time, the Romantic could still gather his rosebuds, and even Autumn's overripe offerings; could still tremble in the terrific shadow of Mont Blanc; could still merge with his Ocean; and could still address apostrophes, sometimes despairing and impertinent, but often exuberant, to his God. But the modern existentialist harbors no such sustaining optimism in a higher reality; and without a metaphysics, the art he creates lacks vitality. Like the watchmaker in Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful," a modern artist can design a butterfly more stunning than the specimen Nabokov himself netted at Telluride, Colorado. But a false butterfly's mechanism can be easily crushed by a child, can be dismissed by anyone whose natural sense of wonder operates as a ward against artifice. Like Hans

Christian Andersen's artist in "The Nightingale," or Yeats's artisans in "Sailing to Byzantium," the modern artist can concoct a jeweled bird; but its song is never as precious as that of the mortal bird.

Goodwin argues that Nabokov's work overall displays a kind of "referential mania," caused by a lack of faith in metaphysics that in turn deprives the modern writer of hope in the future. Nabokov's protagonists who come closest to being artist heroes share this mania. Overinsisting upon the power of the past, they practice an intellectual regression in which any object may function as an "endless window into the past" imbued with huge meaning. Their mania lies in attaching meaning to all objects, all sensory experience, so that the movement of a leaf, or the angle of a pencil on a desk top, precipitates an automatic spiraling into the past. Objects, and the memories they precipitate, cause sensory overload. The present is filled, like the field in a scavenger hunt, with objects willy-nilly, swollen with the memories infused into them. These artists force the sensory world to function beyond the physical. Mere objects are deemed metaphysical, outside the boundaries of time. For example, Humbert posits all meaning in one indelible sensory experience, his moment with his first Annabel. He spends the rest of his life pursuing that first perfect object--in childlike prostitutes, and finally in Dolores Haze.

His worship of past perfection is disconcerting, because the ethos of youthful, spontaneous appreciation, part of the context of his moment in the past, has been perverted in the subsequent re-creations of that moment. At first glance, Humbert in his pursuit of Lolita seems to worship the Idea of first, perfect, love. But closer examination reveals a hollowness underlying his Platonic appreciation. Humbert and Dolores's is no metaphysical love, at no time a meeting of souls. He intermittently perceives his object as Idea, but she remains for him stolidly physical, and is pursued vigorously on that level.

Although Humbert claims repeatedly that he reveres the poets whose Platonic vows have shaped the Western concept of love, Humbert's love and his defense of it step outside limits the Western reader has been conditioned to accept. Humbert has forfeited his place in the pantheon by refusing to contain his art within the conventions of history. In this way, Humbert fits Goodwin's definition of the modern artist who calls despair down on his own head. While that artist should understand that experience can be made sensible according to the slots in which we pigeonhole it, he instead eschews all conventional pigeonholes and creates his own defiant construct (e.g., Humbert's idiosyncratic definition of love). For an artist who lacks faith in history, historical conventions hold no truth. He estranges himself because, while he looks to the past for

sustenance, he puts no real faith in continuity. He considers the past a kind of quicksilver which he must rigorously contain and confine in the present; and he has no faith in any future. Thus he considers it equally valid to either despair of the possibility of order (e.g., Sartre's *Roquentin*) or to insist upon the rightness of an unrecognizable new order (cf. *Humbert*). The resulting dizziness that *Humbert* and other aesthetes suffer is not simply from being out of kilter with the mass of humanity. It is caused by lack of faith, by lack of a haven in which to seek meaning.

His lack of faith forces him to invent new meanings, to rearrange experience in unconventional ways. This rearranging requires him to construct an endless dialectic between memory and object, to enter a spiral coiling tighter and tighter toward the essence, toward meaning, but never reaching it. The modern artist's vertigo, then, is endemic to modern man, especially the modern man who strives to articulate his condition. Ideally, his balancing act completes the connection between an object or event and another seemingly unrelated object or event. But when he loses his balance--becomes too painstakingly attentive to detail, too precious, like *Tristram Shandy*--then he suffers vertigo, falls victim to the dizzying rush of experience. He becomes a casualty of referential mania.

This vertigo is self-inflicted, though, Goodwin believes, because any author ultimately controls his objects, they do not control him. Since he determines which details, which memories, to present to the reader, the stuff of reality is whatever stuff he chooses. She explains further that the feeling of vertigo is only a symptom of a more serious existential problem. The slavishness to objective detail is, she believes, a symptom that the modern writer is tied to the sensual world--and the umbilical cord restricts rather than nurtures. The attention to sensory detail precludes attention to context; and without a context, art loses its meaning.

Goodwin charges that Nabokov (in Transparent Things, for example) becomes enmeshed in an intellectual regression as he attempts to use language to net the essence of reality. Goodwin in effect accuses Nabokov of Tristram Shandy's shortcoming, arguing that Nabokov's fascination with objects and with cataloging them takes over his subject, so that his style becomes a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*; that is, that he catalogs with a freedom so broad that he assigns significance willy-nilly. A pencil on a desk top is dialectically reduced to its shavings (the burning question being "Are shavings essence-tial?"); a sausage is followed in its path through a character's entrails. And each simple object, through intricate cat's-cradle loopings, is linked with the character's

past. In fact, the objects in the room outshout the soul of the occupant himself, as Nabokov attempts a more and more perfect naming--not poesis, but a control over objective reality through scientifically identifying and cataloging each minute detail of perception. According to Goodwin, Nabokov is caught in the modern artist's self-styled dilemma of trying to rearrange certain objects in a meaningful way within a sensory reality bristling with objects. The effort becomes tangled not simply because the world is bristling with objects in the present, but because each present object has its myriad connections with the past. The artist cannot apprehend the whole of sensory experience along with all its associations--especially when he insists upon framing new constructs for experience, rather than relying upon conventional meanings.

Any modern novel does seem effete when permeated by a "poor me" attitude from an author who has lost faith in conventional meaning yet won't take responsibility for filling the void with new meaning--even as he desperately dumps new objectivist data into it. Yet responsible existentialism does not stop at despair. Nabokov, as I have tried to show, rather than despairing, champions responsible acts in the face of Caprice. Nabokov's attitude is not Roquentin's nausea in the face of chaos. Humbert, for example, although he suffers some despair, attacks with a will the problem of creating meaning for

himself. His attempt fails not because he throws up his hands in defeat but because he brazenly challenges Time.

Humbert has stepped outside that protective, nurturing environment of social and historical precepts--from which he might have chosen the proper precept to assign meaning to each of his own experiences. He falls back on his own devices, exhaustedly spinning his own web of meanings. And since he has deemed metaphysics dangerous, he falls back on sensory experience only, becoming a consummate sensualist. He must rely upon objective reality, creating his religion and his icons there. And without a metaphysic, the object becomes its own religion. Thus, sensory experience becomes the essence of his existence, and the objects of his perception are imbued with startling metaphysical attributes. In this way, a 12-year-old girl becomes a skeptic's icon for him. She must fill a double role, first as symbol, and then, more importantly, as the meaning behind the symbol. It is little wonder that Humbert despairs of Time, the destroyer of the physical world. For the skeptic, destruction of the object becomes destruction of meaning; thus the object must be guarded at all cost against dissolution. For this reason, Humbert cannot abide Lolita's sharp angles becoming womanly curves--as icon, she must be unchanging.

This resistance to Time is Humbert's downfall. He lacks the true Nabokovian artist's ability to divine a

bittersweet beauty in change, and to release his vise-like grip upon the physical world. Because Humbert had loved not Dolores Haze but rather one instaric moment of her development--when her shoulder blades were still sharp, before she developed wings to burst the cocoon in which he bound her--his was not a vital love. His passion debilitated them both, as he forced the present into the mold of the past. The child Annabel-by-the-sea, the object upon which the child Humbert first fixed his passion, becomes the controlling object which cripples his adult life even as it gives him a reason to live.

I believe that Nabokov allows his characters to become subsumed by and entangled in the physical as a subtle warning that the successful artist must balance skillfully between the physical and the metaphysical, tiptoeing a delicate wire between the quotidian and the empyrean. He effectively articulates the terror of the less than triumphant artist, who has lost faith in whatever we might call God and so gerry-rigs his own higher reality, like Humbert settling upon the physical as the only possible absolute. In so doing, however, artists like Humbert are duped by, rather than uplifted by, their own powers of imagination, as they forsake their own humanity in a desperate bid for control.

Goodwin claims that Nabokov himself is a victim of this failure to apprehend the need for a balanced context.

Yet it is only Nabokov's characters, not their author, who suffer from referential mania. Several of Nabokov's characters are overwhelmed by the sensory world, so that pencil shavings, for example, fiendishly become an unreadable key to the meaning of life. Nabokov presents the condition tongue-in-cheek, however, as the absurd terror of men who don't place their own lives within a socio-historical context, and fail to understand that perception is a synthetic, rather than an analytic, exercise. Obviously he understands the condition and illustrates it often in his weaker characters. But he does not himself embrace it.

As Goodwin defines it, the first material cause underlying the despair of the modern writer is his insistence upon the sufficiency of objective materialism. Nabokov, however, does not suffer this particular type of despair. He has never claimed that science is sufficient, has always melded it seamlessly into the context of poetry. And Nabokov's poetic sense, as I've argued earlier, was formed from his childhood and the socio-political context which both wrenched him from that childhood and entrenched him more deeply within it. Nabokov has never worked within a void.

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