

Spring 5-2015

Reflections in the Author's Eye: Optics, Involution, and Artifice in the Novels and Short Stories of Vladimir Nabokov

Amelia J. Oliver

Bates College, aoliver@bates.edu

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**Reflections in the Author's Eye: Optics, Involution, and Artifice in the
Novels and Short Stories of Vladimir Nabokov**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Departments of English and Russian Studies

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Amelia Josephine Oliver

Lewiston, Maine

March 30, 2015

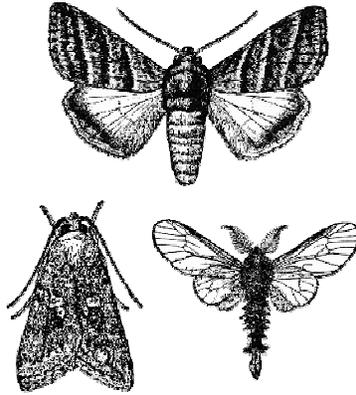
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my English advisor, Sanford Freedman, for his encouragement and invaluable critical insight throughout this process. I would also like to thank my Russian advisor, Marina Loginova, who has expanded my understanding of the Russian language and whose guidance in examining Nabokov's Russian works was crucial. Thank you to my grandmother and parents for always supporting and inspiring me, and to my brother who makes me smile at all the right moments. Mark and Jack, thank you for keeping me grounded and rolling. Finally, I must thank Professor Nabokov himself, for showing me the texture of the text.

Introduction



‘Natural selection,’ in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of ‘the struggle for life’ when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator’s power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.

—Vladimir Nabokov (*Speak, Memory* 125)

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) caught his first butterfly at age seven. Spotting the pale-yellow creature with black blemishes and “a cinnabar eyespot above each chrome-ribbed black tail,” Nabokov recalls his desire for this insect was, “one of the most intense I have ever experienced” (*Speak, Memory* 120). This seemingly ordinary moment shaped the course of Nabokov’s childhood in the “legendary Russia” of his earliest years and became one of his strongest passions through the course of his life: “Few things indeed have I known in the way of emotion or appetite, ambition or achievement, that could surpass in richness and strength the excitement of entomological

exploration. From the very first it had a great many interwinkling facets” (*Speak, Memory* 126).

One such facet was Nabokov’s growing obsession with the discovery of a new species of Lepidoptera, which began as a childhood fantasy and protracted into a chase, well into the author’s adulthood:

Nothing in the world would have seemed sweeter to me than to be able to add, by a stroke of luck, some remarkable new species to the long list of Pugs already named by others. And my pried imagination, ostensibly, and almost grotesquely, groveling to my desire (but all the time, in ghostly conspiracies behind the scenes, coolly planning the most distant events of my destiny), kept providing me with hallucinatory samples of small print: ‘. . . the only specimen so far known . . .’ And then, thirty years later, that blessed black night in Wasatch Range (*Speak, Memory* 136).

That “blessed black night,” in 1945, Nabokov collected two previously undiscovered “pugs”— speckled and camouflaged moths of the genus *Eupithecia* (*Butterflies* 755).

The 1940s were markedly Nabokov’s most productive period of entomological advance. In October 1941, Nabokov took a position as an unpaid curator at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, which furthered his expertise on a group of butterflies commonly known as “Blues.” Between 1943-1944, Nabokov wrote a significant scientific paper, which developed a technique for delineating wing markings of the genus *Lycaeides*, by counting scale rows through a microscope, demonstrating the level of scientific precision with which Nabokov examined wing patterns of his beloved Blues (Boyd, *Stalking* 75). Into the 1950s and 1960s, Nabokov continued to expand his

butterfly collections, taking butterfly-hunting trips with his wife Véra to the American West each summer. These tours spawned some of Nabokov's best literary creations, most notably *Lolita*, as well as the capture of several thousand specimens of Lepidopteron between 1940-1960. Nabokov, who never had a license, estimated that between 1949-1959 Véra drove him more than 150,000 miles over North America (*Blues* 9).

But what exactly was the root of such a strong entomological attraction, burgeoning during Nabokov's early childhood years and enchanting him until the very last days of his life? Mimicry is perhaps the first clue:

The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. Its phenomenon showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things. Consider the imitation of oozing poison by bubblelike macules on a wing (complete with pseudo-refraction) or by glossy yellow knobs on a chrysalis . . . Consider the tricks of an acrobatic caterpillar (of the Lobster Moth) which in infancy looks like a bird's dung, but after molting develops scrabby hymenopteroid appendages and baroque characteristics, allowing the extraordinary fellow to play two parts at once . . . When a certain moth resembles a certain wasp in shape and color it also walks and moves its antennae in a waspish, unmothlike manner. When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in (124).

Inlaid in these examples of intricate mimicry, Nabokov identifies a kind of natural, aesthetic perfection, founded in excess. The "macules on a wing completed with pseudo-refraction" is an embellishment, which mirrors the natural phenomenon of refraction found elsewhere in nature, as well as a reflection of the mirrored design on the partner

wing, creating a complex optical scheme. The process of metamorphosis also allows these specimens to acquire new masks—doubling their dual roles, as they transform and adopt different disguises.

Nabokov similarly describes the mimicked, enigmatic ornamentation of the Blues wing: “The pattern of the Blues (underside) may be considered as *cryptic* inasmuch as it resembles the flowerhead on which the butterfly sleeps, with the scintillae imitating dewdrops in the dangerous light of morning” (*Butterflies* 311). Again, the dewdrop on the underside of the Blue’s wing illustrates an example of natural artistic excess, as the pattern of the droplet goes much beyond the utilitarian function of camouflage and far surpasses any predatory perception. Noticing the marking of a liquid jewel on the butterfly’s wing, therefore, calls attention to our own consciousness, as it is this distinctively human faculty in observing and appreciating such an aesthetic detail that distinguishes us from other creatures.

Mimicry also implies the imitation of hundreds of years of ancestral prototypes, whose mimetic markings are passed on, and perhaps restyled, from one Lepidopteron to the next. The descendants of the most aptly designed butterflies and moths are of course the species that survive, whose patterns and reproductions of patterns become mimicked, refigured, and repeated—and no one ever calls a progeny a plagiarist.

The patterns of excess and artifice implicit in mimicry, harbor the potential for imaginative expanse. The aesthetic excess of a dewdrop, which escapes the notice of a predator, also points to the trick of the butterfly’s mirrored wings. Ocular distortions figure prominently in patterns of Lepidoptera, creating beautifully designed reflections, false doubles, even eyes, which point to their own artifice with the flicker of a wing.

Similarly, Nabokov creates effects of aesthetic artifice through his dizzying textual patterning, refracted images, involutions, textual encryptions and ocular illusions, which pattern his texts far beyond traditional frames of creation—masking and exposing his authorial imprints of artifice. For Nabokov, pure art mimics nature’s deceptive designs, pointing toward evidence of an architect who transcends the creative medium.

Peering at Nabokov the lepidopterist begins to inform us about Nabokov the novelist. Utilizing Nabokov’s passion for Lepidoptera as a sort of field guide, the thesis explores many of the aesthetic devices in Nabokov’s art that are drawn from his entomological enrapture. More specifically, I examine Nabokov’s development of devices of deception such as mirroring, doubling, mimicry, masking, ocular distortions, and textual encryptions in an effort to understand the way these mechanisms serve Nabokov’s reconfiguration of a higher authorial consciousness and how this affects the participation of readers:

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. . . A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal (*Speak, Memory* 139).

The first Chapter of the thesis examines Nabokov’s seminal work, *The Eye*, in relation to Dostoevsky’s *The Double* and *Notes from the Underground*. Through this context, I will explore Nabokov’s mimicry of some of Dostoevsky’s most distinctive

devices such as hyperconscious narration and doubling in an effort to uncover the ways Nabokov has refashioned these schemes to create a new locus among his narrators. The chapter will utilize a Bakhtinian interpretation of Dostoevsky's dialogic constructions as a means for understanding Nabokov's masking of his ubiquitous authorial hand throughout the text. Lastly, the chapter will investigate Nabokov's ocular patterning, largely through various forms of reflection, which provide traces of authorial deception and control as well as a mechanism for Nabokov's reconfiguration of the double.

Chapter Two traces Nabokov's aesthetic evolution through short stories, exploring the ways this concise form encapsulates his experimentation with optics, imagination, reversals, encryptions, and involution, which anticipate the coherence and presentation of form in Nabokov's later novels *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The short stories demonstrate increasing distortions of reliability, truths, and the primacy of particular realities conveyed by fallacious narrators, which shift traditional configurations between author, reader, and narrator. The progression of short stories tangibly displays Nabokov's growing participatory requirements of his readers, compelling them to parcel through devices of distortion and deception in order to locate the authorial texture beneath the overt text. Mapping some of Nabokov's most formative short stories seems a necessary prefiguration to unlocking the layered complexities of artistic excess in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Working historically also demonstrates the way many of the intricacies of the later novels stem from the genealogic roots and experiments in the short stories.

The final chapter will turn to an examination of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, beginning with an introduction of how Nabokov constitutes "Good Readers and Good Writers," outlined in one of his Cornell lectures. The chapter then shifts to a reading of Nabokov's

biography *Nicolai Gogol* and utilizes this unreliable and unconventional biographic style as an impetus for further understanding of Nabokov's conceptions of reality, reliability, reversals, masking, doubling, and mimicking. *Gogol* lends particular insight into Nabokov's conceptions of aesthetic artifice and deception framed through an investigation of Gogol's life and works, which exposes Nabokov's lineage to another Russian literary predecessor.

Through this discussion of *Gogol*, I will transition to an analysis of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, pursuing Nabokov's many encryptions, allusions, reversals, and myriads of doubles in uncovering the veiled display of artifice throughout these works. Returning to the theme of optics, I will explore the ocular entrapment of Nabokov's narrators in a sort of prison of mirrors reflecting doubles of their narrow and solipsistic perceptions of their designed worlds. Nabokov's intense optical and textual patterning asserts his control and undermines the pursuits of his narrators who attempt to occupy the position of an authorial double within the text. The reader's only escape from such dizzying and entangling effects is thus the discovery of Nabokov's artistic artifice, which challenges the perceptive reader to become a reader-creator, or more distinctly, the author's double.

Chapter I: 'A Bleak Knoll With a Relentless View'

The pale organisms of literary heroes feeding under the author's supervision swell gradually with the reader's lifeblood; so that the genius of a writer consists in giving them the faculty to adapt themselves to that—not very appetizing—food and thrive on it, sometimes for centuries.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair*

Ocular imagery suffuses Vladimir Nabokov's prose, lending him a very specific type of authorial control. Narrators with acute optical perception allow Nabokov to develop their solipsistic vantage point through which the text is conveyed, while concurrently inserting glimmering reflections of his larger authorial design, which escapes the view of such self-conscious characters. In creating his optical landscapes, Nabokov fills his texts with constructed devices of distortion, particularly through the careful implementation of mirrors, glasses, water, and other forms of reflection. These reflections yield unique patterns, reversals, and doubles, which both mask and expose their authorial scheme. This chapter will discuss Nabokov's seminal, and appositely named work, *The Eye*, in relation to Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and *The Double*. The chapter examines how Nabokov has borrowed and refigured Dostoevsky's hyperconscious heroes and their doppelgängers by drastically altering the authorial position in relation to such characters. It addresses Nabokov's positioning of optical displays and the effect this has on the relationship of author, reader, and narrator, and

briefly contextualizes *The Eye*, in order to trace Nabokov's mutable opinions of Dostoevsky through Nabokov's own criticism as well as through Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

Between 1927 and 1930 there was a decline in Nabokov's rapid production of short stories as he began to shift his attention to novels, publishing *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Defense* in 1928 and 1929, respectively. Continuing his experimentation with length and form, Nabokov published the extended short story *Soglyadatay* in 1930, which nearly borders on novella and that he himself characterized as "a little novel."¹ The literal translation of *soglyadatay* is "spy," "voyeur," "reconnoiterer," or "peeper," although Nabokov cleverly exchanged this title for *The Eye* when converting his novel into English in 1965. In the introduction, Nabokov provides his English readers with pronunciation assistance of the original Russian title, which expertly illustrates both proper accentuation as well as a faint genealogic stroke between translations:

The Russian title of this little novel is *Soglyadatay* (in traditional transliteration) pronounced phonetically 'Sugly-dart-eye' . . . I gave up trying to blend sound and sense, and contented myself with matching the 'eye' at the end of the long stalk (*The Eye* Foreword).

This implicit homophone within the English title also cues perceptive readers, and certainly "rereaders," to the forthcoming experimentation with narratory perspective between a first person "I" and a removed, observing third person, "eye."

¹ Within its criticism, *The Eye* has been categorized as both novel and novella. As stated above, Nabokov himself branded the work "a little novel." Part of this confusion may be attributed to the fact that it was originally published in Russian as a novel in 1930, then as a novella in a collection bearing the same Russian title in 1938. The ambiguity surrounding characterization of the work is significant, demonstrating Nabokov's experimentation with length, form, and textures of time within the very shape of the text. *The Eye* will be labeled as a novel for this thesis.

In Phyllis Roth's introduction to *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov* she claims that *The Eye* "has received less attention than any other of Nabokov's novels . . . and, in fact, remains Nabokov's most obscure novel" (12). D. Barton Johnson echoes this claim, stating: "In both its original Russian version and in its 1965 English reincarnation, it is Nabokov's least known work" ("Eying" 328). Nevertheless, *The Eye* is a pivotal work in the context of Nabokov's *œuvre*, as it establishes his characteristic distortion of point of view, which requires readers to sieve through the sleight of the deceptive narratory hand. Johnson asserts:

The importance of *The Eye* is in its seminal position in the development of Nabokov's *œuvre*, for it is crucially innovative in two respects: it is Nabokov's first novelistic use of the 'unreliable first person narrator,' and it introduces what will become one of the author's most successful fictional cosmologies—that of an elaborate fantasy world which the mad narrator imposes upon the real world. ("The Books Reflected" 394).

Placing *The Eye* in a historical context, Johnson accurately characterizes the novel's formative position as encompassing the emerging complexities of Nabokovian narration. Though Johnson establishes Nabokov's "fictional cosmology" as the narrator's imposition of a fantasy world on the real one, I would modify this claim to assert that Nabokov's fictional cosmology involves the infliction of the narrator's imagined reality imposed upon the frame of the authorial fictitious reality, neither of which can be fully characterized as the reader's reality, or "real world."

The overt storyline of *The Eye* is relatively straightforward; a Russian émigré house tutor opens the novella with an account of his lackluster affair with a rather

uninteresting woman, Matilda. When Matilda's husband learns of the relationship, the cuckolded man beats the narrator up in front of two glowering tutees. Following this humiliating encounter, the hyperconscious narrator resolves on suicide. The narrator's suicide occurs within the first quarter of the novel, although narration and plot continue on, supposedly as a result of a 'posthumous momentum of thought.'

This imaginative inertia is of course the draping of an authorial veil, intended to mask the narrator's identity until Nabokov begins administering a sequences of reflections that allude to the deceptive construction of the novel. Following his suicide, the narrator traces the lives of a fictitious group of Russian émigrés. Within this group, the narrator falls in love with a young woman Vanya and becomes compulsively fixated on an elusive figure, Smurov. As Nabokov himself states in the Foreword to the English translation: "The theme of *The Eye* is the pursuit of an investigation which leads the protagonist through a hell of mirrors and ends in the merging of twin images." Thus, the mysterious Smurov exists only insofar as his image is reflected in other characters, which creates a multitude of Smurovs and echoes Dostoevsky's *The Double*. By the conclusion of the novel it is revealed to the suspecting reader that Smurov and the narrator are one.

Julian Connolly argues that *The Defense*, Nabokov's precursor to *The Eye*, advances his experimental interest in the notion of a conceptual "other," as *The Defense* offers "a concentrated view of one man's fear of an abstract, invisible other" (*Early Fiction* 101). Connolly goes on to state:

With *The Eye* and *Despair* Nabokov depicts two related responses to this basic fear. In each work and autobiographic intrinsic narrator tries to defend himself

against the threat of others by wresting control of the levers of creation: he attempts to ‘author’ himself and others in his world (101-102).

This conception, which hinges on the transitive reflexive verb “himself,” defines the way Nabokov re-envisioned the dynamic between author and narrator. Connolly captures this creative moment as a development of a new type of narrator who attempts to fight against its author and muscle their way into the text, pursuing the transition from mouthpiece to maker. While this assertion is attractive, I would argue that Nabokov merely mimics a struggle between author and narrator, and in fact, maintains complete control over every aspect of the text to which his narrator falls prey.

The delusion of a combat for consciousness is produced through the narrator’s dissociative observations of his imagined posthumous reality, which paradoxically further perpetuates Nabokov’s creative calculus. In other words, even the fantasy of Smurov’s fictitious reality encompasses a superimposed authorial consciousness, which crafts Smurov’s delusions according to a larger aesthetic design. One such example figures shortly after Smurov’s attempted suicide, where he believes he has died and is now contriving semblances of an imagined hospital:

What a mighty thing was human thought, that it could hurtle on beyond death! . . .
How persistently, though, and how thoroughly—as if it had been missing its former activity—my thought went about contriving the semblance of a hospital, and the semblance of white-clad human forms moving among the beds from one of which issued the semblance of human moans. I good-naturedly yielded to these illusions, exciting them, goading them on, until I had managed to create a complete, natural picture . . . (31).

It is evident from this passage that Smurov has not died and is merely picturing, as opposed to imagining, his surroundings. Contrary to his statement, Smurov is not “yielding” to his own contrivances, but is instead “good-naturedly” complying to Nabokov’s “complete, natural picture,” which exposes Smurov’s delusion with increasing detail through Smurov’s own descriptions. Through masks of unreliable narration, Nabokov establishes a propensity to draw in, or even “author,” his readers into the text, as the very concept of a deceptive narrator requires readers to immerse themselves within a text in order to decipher the authorial reality wedged behind the miasma of deceptive narration.

Despite Nabokov’s expressed general contempt for Dostoyevsky late in his career,² his unreliable protagonist/narrator, Smurov, harbors a likeness to several Dostoevskian heroes, who share comparable styles of unreliable narration and exhibit similar anxieties regarding societal perception, which causes comparable disassociations of self. These parallels prompt a critical evaluation of the evolution of Nabokov’s seemingly convictive statements denouncing the artistic qualities of Dostoyevsky’s prose. Alexander Dolinin maps this critical transformation and notes Nabokov’s initially positive opinion of Dostoyevsky throughout his artistically formative years in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s:

Specifically, in Nabokov’s early, Russian period—the very period when, logic would dictate concern with ‘influence’ should be most acute—Nabokov shows

² As Alexander Dolinin points out in his article, “Nabokov, Dostoyevsky, and ‘Dostoyevskyness,’” Nabokov repeatedly expressed his contempt for Dostoyevsky throughout the 1960s and 1970s in numerous interviews, university lectures on Russian literature, letters to Edmund Wilson, and commentary on *Eugene Onegin*. Nevertheless, as Dolinin’s article details, these remarks were refashioned from Nabokov’s earlier expressions about Dostoyevsky dating from the 1920s and 1930s. This change of opinion is important to keep in mind, particularly while examining works from this earlier period and will be discussed further throughout this chapter.

little interest in Dostoevsky, assigning him to the rank of great writers . . . It is, rather, in Nabokov's American period—when the transition to English would seem to have freed him from the parental yoke—that he tries with all his might to downplay Dostoevsky's significance (44).

Dolinin expounds upon this theory, arguing that Nabokov's later disdain for Dostoevsky is a result of his predecessor's position as the "Father of Existentialism" and for his inflated celebration among American intellectual communities (44).

Contrary to Nabokov's later criticism, Dolinin points to Nabokov's early acknowledgment that Dostoevsky's prose possesses "the blessing of sensory cognition" (qtd. in Dolinin 50). Juxtaposed alongside "Dostoevsky without Dostoevskyness," the opinions expressed in Nabokov's *Lectures on Russian Literature* reflect such grave contradictions that one would assume they stemmed from a different critic entirely. Bearing in mind Nabokov's previous praise of Dostoevsky's sensory appeal, Nabokov makes the following claim in his *Lectures on Russian Literature*:

In the light of the historical development of artistic vision, Dostoevski is a very fascinating phenomenon. If you examine closely any of his works, say *The Brothers Karamazov*, you will note that the natural background and all things relevant to the perception of the senses hardly exist. What landscape there is a landscape of ideas, a moral landscape (104).

In this retrospective interpretation, Nabokov emphasizes the absence of perceptual and sensory intricacies in *The Brothers Karamazov* and criticizes Dostoevsky's moral foregrounding. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Nabokov's initial praise of Dostoevsky was much nearer to the composition of *The Eye*.

In his article, Dolinin details Nabokov's earlier, critical examination of Dostoevsky's ability to draw in and entrap his readers in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Nabokov's considerations of Dostoevsky's consciousness toward his readers, provides valuable insight into Nabokov's own authorial position regarding his readership, particularly when examining his earlier works such as *The Eye*. Dolinin's description below employs his own summary as well as direct quotations from Nabokov's, "Dostoevsky without Dostoevskyness":

The novel's clever game with the reader, whom Dostoevsky 'endlessly eggs on' and teases in an attempt to 'ignite his curiosity by all possible means; the wry device of withholding and then revealing information in order to maintain reader interest; the skillful unfolding of the plot in which the writer 'with cold and logical detachment ties his characters in knots'; every kind of deceit and trickery—all represent, according to Nabokov, Dostoevsky's 'hypertrophied authorial sensitivity toward his reader,' who is, after all, simultaneously both the prey enticed into the author's trap and the hunter chasing the author as he weaves his way forward. The sources for this attitude toward the reader are, according to Nabokov, to be found 'partly in the Russian literary tradition (both Pushkin in *Eugene Onegin* and Gogol in *Dead Souls* frequently address themselves to the reader with apologies, request, or jokes) and partly in the tradition of the Western mystery novel (51).

The vacillating relationship, between the author, reader, and narrator that Nabokov describes, applies directly to his prose, which I will return to in my discussion of *The Eye*.

Astonishingly, in Nabokov's later *Lectures on Russian Literature*, his theories of Dostoevsky's "hypertrophied authorial sensitivity" toward his readership directly echo his earlier criticism, although now these conceptions have been reworked into a negative critique. We find that the same critical observation appears but Nabokov's original fascination with ideas of entrapment are now reconfigured into a complaint about excessive preoccupation:

In this turning and teasing way the cunning author quite deliberately entices his reader. However, this is not the only way in which he does it. He is constantly preoccupied with various means for keeping and whetting the reader's attention throughout the book . . . This oversensitivity, over-concern of the writer in regard to the reader—when the reader is thought of simultaneously as the victim being drawn into a trap by the writer and as a hunter before whose path the writer keeps crossing and recrossing like a fleeing hare—this consciousness of the reader on the part of the writer derives partly from the Russian literary tradition. Pushkin in *Evgeniy Onegin*, Gogol in *Dead Souls* . . . But it also derives from the tradition of a Western detective story, or rather its predecessor, the criminal novel (*Lectures* 132).

Although Nabokov's latter opinions are directly derivative of his earlier conceptions of Dostoevsky's hypertrophied consciousness toward the reader, Nabokov's recurrent employment of the word "over" makes this second assessment ring more critically negative. The general discussion of the authorial-reader relationship as an oscillating dynamic between hunter and prey is consistent with Nabokov's previous considerations of authorial awareness, however, this time, Nabokov does not address Dostoevsky's

“logical detachment.” Nabokov’s own means of creation often seems quite callous, thus this omission in his later criticism can perhaps be understood as an effort to distance himself from Dostoevsky.

Despite the difference in tone, the surprising consistency between Nabokov’s analyses of Dostoevsky’s authorial relationship to readers is critically important as it substantiates these opinions as deeply founded aesthetic considerations. Applying these principals to *The Eye*, one can trace a direct relation to the aspects of Dostoevsky’s literature that occupied Nabokov’s greatest attention and the ways in which elements such as doubling and hyper-conscious narration were borrowed and refashioned in Nabokov’s short novel.

Once again, the Introduction to the English version of *The Eye* provides a valuable clue connecting Nabokov and Dostoevsky. Bearing in mind Nabokov’s emphasis on the influence of Western detective fiction in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he states the following about *The Eye*:

The texture of the tale mimics that of detective fiction but actually the author disclaims all intention to trick, puzzle, fool, or otherwise deceive the reader . . . It is unlikely that even the most credulous pursuer of this twinkling tale will take long to realize who Smurov is (*Foreword* 9).

Recognizing Nabokov’s propensity toward deception and a very particular, stylized, public image, it is important to examine such a critical declaration. Nabokov’s tight control of storyline, narrative perspective, reflections, and character consciousness implies that large structural elements of *The Eye* hinge on deception, or at the very least, distortion. Nabokov’s introductory statement is exemplary of a sort of positive negation,

where he denies and implants an idea in the same breath. Thus, Nabokov's specific disclamation of attempts to trick the reader should be read in the reverse, and the reader should prepare for a dizzying road of false reflections.

Nabokov's discussions of Dostoevsky's hyperconscious authorial position, which was an outgrowth of Russian literary tradition, also illuminates the ways in which Nabokov reworked the dynamic of author and audience in his fiction. In *The Eye*, Nabokov has transformed the vacillating predator prey dichotomy between author and reader to become a relationship primarily between author and narrator. This harkens back to Connolly's position of the narrator "wrestling to control the levers of creation." In a sense, Nabokov has enticed his unreliable narrator into believing he is in a position of a fluctuating predator prey relationship, where at times, he controls the artistic space through his imaginative reconstruction of reality. In doing so, Nabokov has shifted Dostoevsky's "hypertrophied authorial sensitivity toward his reader" into a hypertrophied narratory sensitivity toward the author. Of course, the perception that this relationship wavers between authorial and narratory control, is a façade, as Smurov is merely an artistic device, completely at the mercy of Nabokov. Nevertheless, Nabokov's interest in hypertrophied sensitivity, which perhaps derived from his examination of Dostoevsky, is evidently incorporated into *The Eye* and marks a salient, artistic innovation for Nabokov, and even the Russian literary tradition at large.

When we follow the artistic fingerprints of Nabokov in the late 1920s into the early 1930s, Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian contemporary of Nabokov, provides us a link between Dostoevsky's literature and the artistic structure of *The Eye*. In 1929, Bakhtin published *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, which offered a pioneering theoretical

understanding of Dostoevsky's works; in particular, Bakhtin's model of the Dostoevskian hero's stream of consciousness echoes Smurov's multifaceted distortion of reality in *The Eye*. Although it is unknown whether Nabokov read *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the proximity and relevancy of Bakhtin's publication to *The Eye* makes it an enticing association.

Early in his second chapter titled: "The Hero, and the Position of the Author with Regard to the Hero, in Dostoevsky's Art," Bakhtin establishes that the hero interests Dostoevsky primarily through their ability to embody a particular point of view, or perception, as opposed to an expression of a fixed reality:

The hero interests Dostoevsky not as some manifestation of reality that possesses fixed and specific socially typical or individually characteristic traits . . . which taken together answer the question 'Who is he?' No, the hero interests Dostoevsky as a *particular point of view on the world and on oneself*, as the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surroundings of reality. What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself (47).

This last line in particular can be directly appropriated to *The Eye*, which explores the effects of an unreliable narrator who conveys an intentionally distorted reality in conjunction with duplicitous perceptions of himself. It also establishes the critical desire for the fictional hero to delimit the world in the effort to see himself. Through such pursuits, Smurov experiences a very similar brand of hyperconsciousness to the narrator

of *Notes from the Underground*, as well as a disassociation with himself, aligning him with *The Double*.

According to Bakhtin, this projected reality and internal exploration of self is directly related to the protagonist's self-consciousness. Although the outspoken Nabokov of the 1950s and 1960s vehemently asserted the banality of Dostoevsky's artistic composition, Bakhtin interpreted this same style of configuration as utterly inventive, particularly in relation to the protagonist:

The hero as a point of view, as an opinion on the world and on himself, requires utterly special methods of discovery and artistic characterization. And this is so because what must be discovered and characterized here is not the specific existence of the hero, not his fixed image, but the sum total of his consciousness and self-consciousness, ultimately the hero's final word on himself and his world (48).

At first glance, the passage sounds like a thematic reverberation of *The Eye*, as Nabokov requires his readers to follow the course of artistic manipulation and trail Smurov's indeterminate existence through reflections of his "consciousness and self-consciousness." The area of Bakhtin's assertion that exposes one of the primary divergences between Nabokov and Dostoevsky, however, is his last remark. Nabokov repeatedly asserted his authorial dominance over his creations; his narrators functioned as instruments through which Nabokov fashioned new worlds and thus, a Nabokovian narrator would never be allowed to have the "final word on himself and his world."

Embodying many of Bakhtin's interpretations of the archetypal Dostoevskian hero is Dostoevsky's unnamed narrator in *Notes from the Underground*. In a discussion on *Notes from the Underground*, Nabokov describes the beginning half of the novella as:

. . . a soliloquy that presupposes the presence of a phantom audience . . . These ghostly gentleman are supposed to be jeering at him, while he is supposed to thwart their mockery and denunciations by the shifts, the doubling back, and various other tricks of his supposedly remarkable intellect" (*Lectures* 115-116).

Notwithstanding Nabokov's rhetorical disapproval of the work, his description of Dostoyevsky's narratory Underground Man resonates strongly with Smurov. The Underground Man's tricks of consciousness, which are directed at a phantasmal audience, in part encompass one of the skeletal frames of *The Eye*, whose narrator also presupposes the presence of a readership.

Dostoevsky's Underground Man, or 'Mouseman' as Nabokov translates, focuses all his attentions on thwarting the scrutiny of others. The Mouseman's attempts to divert his audience's judgments by predicting their opinions and stating them first, functions as part of his overall effort to have the final say about himself and his world, just as Bakhtin describes—a knowledge of self in the world and not a knowledge of the world. A perfect example of the Mouseman's deflections rests in one of the novella's earliest pages, where the Mouseman introduces himself to his phantasmal audience through a series of declarations and retractions:

Well, I lied about myself just now when I said I was a spiteful civil servant. I lied out of spite. I was simply having a little fun with these petitioners and the officer, as in fact I could never really be spiteful. I was always conscious of the

abundance of elements within me that were diametrically opposed to that. I felt that they were literally swarming inside me, those warring elements. I knew that they had been swarming there all my life, begging to be set free, but I wouldn't set them free, oh no, I wouldn't, I deliberately wouldn't set them free. They tormented me until I felt ashamed; they brought on convulsions and—in the end—they bored me, oh how they bored me! So don't you think, gentleman, that I'm repenting of something to you, asking you to forgive me for something? I'm certain that's what you think. But I assure you that it's all the same to me if that's what you're thinking . . . (4-5).

The passage exemplifies the Mouseman's circumventive language as well as his hypersensitivity toward his audience. The Underground Man winds and distorts his own words, echoing the diametrically opposed elements of his character through the stream of his contradictory speech. In a sense, the Mouseman compensates for his lack of action and internal ruptures through the creation of a hyperactive text that extends itself multidirectionally, in an effort to entrap, confuse, and anticipate his audience.

Smurov likewise engages in similar anticipatory deflections and characterizations of himself. Although his inflections are subtler than the Mouseman's, Smurov's speech still frequently spawns devices that attempt to prevaricate the scrutiny of others. For example, examine Smurov's description of his humiliating walks home after adulterous evenings with Matilda:

Often I trudged home, my cigarette case empty, my face burning in the auroral breeze as if I had just removed theatrical make-up, every step sending a throb of pain echoing through my head, I would inspect my puny little bliss from this side

and that, and marvel and pity myself, and feel despondent and afraid. The summit of my lovemaking was for me but a bleak knoll with a relentless view. After all, in order to live happily, a man must know now and then a few moments of perfect blankness. Yet I was always exposed, always wide-eyed; even in sleep I did not cease to watch over myself, understanding nothing of my existence, growing crazy at the thought of not being able to stop being aware of myself, and envying all those simple people—clerks, revolutionaries, shopkeepers—who, with confidence and concentration, go about their little jobs (17).

The very way in which Smurov recounts his story, his “after all” insistence on there being a normative life that escapes him, heightens his devastating self-scrutiny and evokes tangible parallels to the Mouseman. The diametrically opposed elements bubbling within the Mouseman are not unlike the summit of Smurov’s knoll, perpetually imposing its proximate view. The ubiquity of self-scrutiny becomes a nightmarish prowler that lingers behind all of Smurov’s humanly sensations. Additionally, the notion that Smurov could not stop being aware of himself, implies a subtle split of consciousness between the conscious self, and the cognizance of this self consciousness. Further mirroring Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* is the indication of Smurov’s superiority and longing for the simplicity of an ordinary person’s moments of “perfect blankness.”

Tingeing the narration of both Smurov and the *Underground Man* are confessional afflictions of humiliation that are precipitated by their perpetually heightened acuity of self-perception. The opening of *The Eye*, for example, deliberately notes Smurov’s constriction and embarrassment in the company of his two tutees:

There were two of them, both boys. In their presence I felt a humiliating constraint. They kept count of my smokes, and this bland curiosity made me hold my cigarette at an odd, awkward angle, as if I were smoking for the first time; I kept spilling ashes in my lap, and then their clear gaze would pass attentively from my hand to the pale-gray pollen gradually rubbed into the wool (14).

The brevity and specificity of this early description transports the reader into Smurov's painfully analytical and sentient world. The sketch follows and precipitates a sequence of perception, beginning with Smurov's awareness of the tutees' gaze. The reception of this gaze triggers Smurov to act unnaturally, which provides his pupils with further cause to continue their stare, as well as introducing a layer of personal scorn toward the narrator's involuntary subjection of himself as a spectacle. The passage also marks the first faint, but perceptible, distancing between the narrator's actions and self-observations.

A similar sketch appears in *The Double*, during the fourth chapter's critical birthday party scene, which ends in incredible humiliation for the hero, Golyadkin, and gives rise to his subsequent double. Attempting to inconspicuously assimilate to his surroundings, Golyadkin, the uninvited guest, awkwardly fumbles and recoils:

. . . he tried to slip away into some corner where he could simply stand, modestly, decently, on his own, without troubling anyone, without attracting particular attention to himself but at the same time winning the good graces of both host and guests. However, Mr. Golyadkin felt as if something were undermining him, as if he were tottering about to fall. Finally he managed to reach a corner and stood there, rather like an outsider, a fairly indifferent observer, leaning his hands on the backs of two chairs, thus having claimed full possession of them and trying his

utmost to look cheerfully at those guests . . . Nearest to him stood a certain officer, a tall, handsome youth before whom Mr. Golyadkin felt a mere insect (155).

Like Smurov, Golyadkin longs to be an indifferent observer of an exterior reality, but fails to blend into his surroundings because of his excruciating internal gaze at himself, which leads to his bifurcation. All three of these “heroes” also experience an intense waning of positive self-perception in the presence of other more normal or attractive figures.

Smurov’s narratory confessions mirror the Underground Man’s envy toward the ordinary person’s capacity to indulge in moments of pleasurable vacuity. As demonstrated through quotations, both Nabokov and Dostoyevsky imbue their narrators with an agonizing awareness of self, which precipitates an increased awareness of this awareness. This succession of perception creates a distancing, or perhaps even a doubling, of character. The narrators swarm their existence with parallel channels of consciousness, which involve a deep cognizance in the way daily actions and emotions are performed, alongside a more removed and analytical consciousness of consciousness, as illustrated by the Underground Man’s analysis:

So it’s precisely this kind of spontaneous man whom I consider the real, normal person, such as tender Mother Nature herself wished to see him as she lovingly brought him into being on this earth. This kind of man makes me green with envy. He is stupid—that I don’t dispute with you . . . And I’m all the more convinced of this suspicion, so to speak, because if one takes for example the antithesis of the normal man, that is, the man of heightened consciousness, who of course has not

sprung from the bosom of nature but from a test tube . . . then this test-tube man will sometimes capitulate when confronted with his antithesis, to such a degree that for all his heightened awareness he will in all good conscience consider himself a mouse and not a man. Granted an intensely aware mouse, but a mouse all the same (9-10).

The Underground Man's deprecating sequence of self-consciousness exacerbates in the presence of a spontaneous man, whose existence stirs the very fibers of his aberration. In effect the theories of his mouse-like condition outline Smurov's humiliation in the presence of the two "normal" pupils, whose glaring normality inculcates a haze of oppressive, double-edged scrutiny, which materializes in the form of doubling. Perhaps the pale grayness of Smurov's descending cigarette ash can be understood as a residual fleck of Dostoyevsky's Mouseman, although Nabokov almost certainly would dismiss any such claim.

Reflecting the duality between the consciousness of action and the consciousness of consciousness are frequent involuntary contradictions and negations. In Nabokov's discussion of *The Underground Man*, he summarizes the infamous dinner scene with the Mouseman and his old acquaintances from school, characterizing it as: ". . . one of the best scenes in Dostoevski"³ (*Lectures* 122). During this section, the Mouseman undergoes a series of humiliations, claiming:

. . . No one paid any attention to me, and I sat crushed and humiliated. 'Good Heavens, these are not the people for me!' I thought. 'And what a fool of myself I have made before them! . . . I must get up at once, this very minute, take my hat

³ "Dostoevski" is Nabokov's transliteration.

and simply go without a word—with contempt! . . . I'll go this minute!' Of course I remained (123).

After an earnest admission of his disgrace, the Mouseman assumes an indignant position, and resolves to make an almost hysterical exit. The drama and inflation of the Mouseman's proclamation of departure is then entirely undercut by his subsequent confession that he of course remained. Here, Dostoyevsky implores a severance between the Mouseman's rupture of impulse alongside the constraint of his consciousness, which seemingly creates two versions of the man: the irate Mouseman who explosively abandons his odious company, and the Mouseman who sits quietly at the table, gulping his gloom by the glass.

Plaguing Smurov and the Underground Man are similar fluctuations between boredom and humiliation, which stimulates them to implore the invention of alternative existences. Corresponding with the Mouseman's empty professions of quitting his party, are Smurov's pitiable cries between the bashings of Matilda's husband's cane: “. . . at last I fell limply to the floor, exposing my rounded back to his blows, and kept repeating hoarsely, 'Enough, enough, I have a weak heart . . . Enough, I have a weak . . .' My heart, let me remark pathetically, has always functioned quite well” (25-26). Nabokov engenders Smurov with a classically Dostoevskian voice that parallels his praise of this style of humor: “He [Dostoyevsky] had a wonderful flare for comedy mixed with tragedy; he may be termed a wonderful humorist, with the humor always on the verge of hysterics and people hurting each other . . .” (*Lectures* 122). Nabokov has clearly recreated this brand of humor through Smurov's appeals for mercy toward his falsely conditioned heart.

Fabrication becomes a central mechanism for all three protagonists in their attempts to deride humiliating exposure and reconcile their position as social pariahs. The sentiment is well articulated by Dostoyevsky's Mouseman, who explicates the ways in which self-observation and recreation can be amalgamated:

I find it degrading to recall all this now and it was degrading at the time . . . And if you ask why I tormented and mangled myself like that the answer is: because I was already terribly bored idly sitting around and so I indulged in a manner of capers. Really, that's how it was. If you observe yourselves a little more closely, gentleman, you'll understand that it's so. I used to imagine adventures for myself, I invented a life, so that I could at least exist somehow (15).

The idea that the Mouseman created a fictitious existence in order to "at least exist somehow," encapsulates in reverse the elemental focus of *The Eye*, where Smurov's alleged nonexistence provides an escape from his corporeal prison, allowing him to shift from "I," to observing, "eye."

Although Nabokov's narrator is wholeheartedly committed to his facade of nonexistence, the reader perceives tangible flashes where the smokescreen fades. Often such instances occur after moments of grave embarrassment for Smurov, causing the "real" elemental world to come into focus. Or, to phrase this differently, the more positive the narrator's perceptions of Smurov are, the more detached and seemingly observing he becomes. Let us examine the vacillating degrees of detachment that the narrator portrays in relation to Smurov in two scenarios. First, it is important to contextualize, that the narrator is fixated on two people: Smurov and Vanya. Vanya is the narrator's love interest and as such, the narrator's belief in Vanya's affections for Smurov

acts as a mode of transposition, as the narrator has fabricated a more appealing version of himself. When Vanya's somewhat mad Uncle Pasha confuses the name of her fiancée and tells the narrator that she will soon marry Smurov, the narrator becomes both elated and disassociated from Smurov:

Vanya shook her head and seemed about to frown but instead giggled and lowered her face . . . her soul was ringing and flowering with its own melody. At this moment one could have noted in Smurov's face a most violent desire that the elevator carrying Evgenia and Uncle Pasha get stuck forever . . . and most important, that I—the cold, insistent, tireless eye—disappear (76).

Here the narrator has wholly transformed into a voyeur; the narrator and Smurov both long for the severance of this brand of ocular observation so that Smurov can completely disassociate himself from the hyperconscious narrator and become the dashing figure the narrator wishes him, or rather himself, to be.

Nevertheless, after the narrator uncovers Uncle Pasha's mistake, and learns that Vanya is betrothed to Mukhin, the whole double fiction seems to crumble: "There follows a brief period where I stopped watching Smurov: I grew heavy, surrendered again to the gnawing of gravity, donned anew my former flesh, as if indeed all this life around me was not the play of my imagination, but was real, and I was part of it body and soul (79). Such moments illustrate the narrator's reluctant confrontation with his "real" self, or rather, his failure in creating an enhanced double, which reflects glimmers of the "merging of twin images" that figures later in the text.

A very similar scene can be found in Dostoevsky's *The Double*, where the hero's imagined, enhanced persona is shattered by the actions of his double, who permeates his dream:

Then Mr. Golyadkin would dream that he was in the company of distinguished people, renowned for the wit and refinement of every single member; that Mr. Golyadkin in turn was distinguished for charm and wit and that everyone came to like him . . . and finally Mr. Golyadkin had the pleasure of overhearing the host singing Mr. Golyadkin's praises while taking one of the guests aside . . . Then suddenly, for no earthly reason, there again appeared the person notorious for his perfidious ways and bestial impulses, in the shape of Mr. Golyadkin Junior and in a flash, in one fell swoop, Golyadkin Junior destroyed Mr. Golyadkin Senior's entire triumph and glory . . . and finally demonstrated that Mr. Golyadkin Senior, who was the real one, was not the real one at all, but a fake and that *he* was the genuine one and that Golyadkin Senior was not at all what he had seemed to be. . . (223).

Golyadkin Junior, who serves as a reflection of Golyadkin Senior's repellent behavior, has entered the realm of Golyadkin's subconscious, which marks a critical difference between *The Eye* and *The Double*. While both narratives convey a very tangible bifurcation of character, Smurov's doubling is a product of an imaginative recreation of self, whereas Golyadkin represents more of a moralistically inclined split between the good and the evil individual.

Smurov and Golyadkin experience similar obsessions with their double and the mystery that surrounds them. Following Golyadkin's extreme humiliation after the birthday party scene, the narrator remarks:

If any disinterested, outside observer had now casually glanced from the side at Mr. Golyadkin in his wretched flight he would have at once fathomed the whole awful horror of his tribulations and would doubtless have said that Mr. Golyadkin now looked like a man wanting to hide, wanting to run away from himself . . . Let us say more: now Mr. Golyadkin not only wanted to escape from himself but even hide from himself, to be utterly annihilated, to exist no more and turn to dust (160).

Smurov's resolution to suicide after the violent and humiliating encounter with Matilda's husband seems directly taken from this scene. Almost immediately after Smurov decides on suicide, he catches a disassociated glimpse of himself in a mirror: "A wretched, shivering, vulgar little man in a bowler hat stood in the center of the room, for some reason rubbing his hands. That is the glimpse of myself I caught in the mirror" (27). Smurov's unexpectedly detached reflection of himself almost directly mirrors the description of Golyadkin as a "wretched flight," apparent to the outside observer. Both scenes also initiate the onset of the double.

Following this depiction of Golyadkin's despair, he catches notice of "a small dark figure of a man" (163). After the strange figure passes Golyadkin several times, he follows the man through the streets of St. Petersburg, which leads him nearer and nearer to Golyadkin's apartment:

And then his heart missed a beat: the mysterious person stopped right outside the doors to Mr. Golyadkin's flat . . . His hair stood on end and he squatted where he was, insensible with horror . . . his nocturnal friend was none other than himself, Mr. Golyadkin in person—another Mr. Golyadkin, but identical to him in every way—in brief, in all respects what is called a double (166-7).

It is important to bear in mind that immediately after Golyadkin wishes not to exist anymore, he doubles.

Nabokov does not explicitly disclose that Smurov and the narrator are one in *The Eye*, until almost the very conclusion of the novel; he instead conveys their singular identity through a myriad of discrete clues to his readers, most of which are centered on reflections.

A central distinction between Nabokov and Dostoevsky can be understood through the lens of Bakhtin's examination of the dialogic nature of Dostoevsky's authorial design:

Thus the new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is a *fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position*, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero . . . Dostoevsky realizes a dialogic relationship toward his characters at every moment of the creative process and at the moment of its completion . . . In Dostoevsky's novels, the author's discourse about his characters is organized as a discourse about someone actually present, someone who hears him (the author) and is capable of answering him . . . In

Dostoevsky's larger design, the character is a carrier of a fully valid word and not the mute, voiceless object of the author's words (63).

Bakhtin attributes Dostoevsky's creative innovation to his polyphonic approach to the hero's discourse, which develops and preserves his independence.

This understanding of Dostoevsky's literary design stipulates an image of Dostoevsky scribing the words of his narrators and responding to them in a dialogic collaboration of narratory configuration. A dialogic discourse between author and character is wholly problematic to Nabokov's creative design, which almost always undercuts the cogency of his narrators in some form. For Nabokov, narrators function as a mechanism for delivering an overt plotline that simultaneously transmits and conceals a larger, "real," authorial scheme. The distinction between "real" and overt plotlines in Nabokov's texts is a conception I will return to in greater detail in my subsequent two chapters. As exemplified by *The Eye*, Nabokov is able to both maintain and undercut the facade of a dialogic style of narration through particular textual devices, such as the fluctuating space between the narrator and Smurov, depending on the way Smurov is positively or negatively reflected.

The way in which Bakhtin establishes the distancing between Dostoevsky and his heroes is also critically important in understanding Nabokov's orientation toward his narrators:

By the very construction of the novel, the author speaks not *about* a character, but *with* him. And it cannot be otherwise: only a dialogic and participatory orientation takes another person's discourse seriously, and is capable of approaching it both as a semantic position and as another point of view. Only through such an inner

dialogic orientation can my discourse find itself in intimate contact with someone else's discourse, and yet at the same time not fuse with it, not swallow it up, not dissolve in itself the other's power to mean; that is, only thus can it retain fully its independence as a discourse. To preserve distance in the presence of an intense semantic bond is no simple matter. But distance is an integral part of the author's design, for it alone guarantees genuine objectivity in the representation of a character (64).

While Bakhtin emphasizes the way Dostoevsky speaks *with* as opposed *about* his characters, I would argue that Nabokov speaks *through*, or even *despite* of his narrators. In this way, Nabokov has enhanced the participatory nature of Dostoevsky's discourse, by requiring his readers to locate the distortions conveyed through the narrator and uncover the real man behind the mask, Nabokov. The notion of distance between author and narrator also figures prominently in *The Eye*, as Nabokov utilizes a position of authorial detachment in order to callously implement the devices of his design. Thus, Nabokov has tangibly reworked this mode of composition by bending Smurov's discourse to fit the calculated configuration of his authorial design. In other words, Nabokov disguises his authorial autocracy as Smurov's discursive liberty, which establishes the illusion of Smurov "wrestling for the levers of control" throughout the work.

Nabokov's remarks in an interview conducted by Alfred Appel, Jr. in September of 1966, indirectly respond to Bakhtin's theories about Dostoevsky's relationship to his autonomous heroes. Appel asked Nabokov the following question about his characters: "One often hears from writers talk of how a character takes hold of them and in a sense

dictates the course of the action. Has this ever been your experience?” to which Nabokov responded:

I have never experienced this. What a preposterous experience! Writers who have had it must be very minor or insane. No, the design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth. Whether I reproduce it as fully and faithfully as I would wish, is another question. Some of my old works reveal dismal blurrings and blanks (*Strong Opinions* 69).

Herein lies a major difference between Nabokov and Dostoevsky: Nabokov believes that he is exclusively responsible for the constancy and truth of his characters who carry out deliberate actions within his carefully designed universes; whereas Bakhtin asserts that dialogic authors such as Dostoevsky preserve the verity of the material world through creating characters so truthful to their persona that they almost dictate their own discourse or, “achieve its [their] inner logic and independence as someone else’s discourse.”

Smurov’s attempted imaginative recreation of reality is the perfect example of Nabokov’s authorial dictatorship over the sequestered worlds of his characters. The sheer interiority of imagination and personal perspective provides the ideal landscape for Nabokov to take hold of the private fibers of his characters’ creative existences.

Smurov’s descriptions of his posthumous world provide the gateway through which he grapples for authorial control as explained by Connolly:

With this shift of focus from the diegetic to the extradiegetic world, Nabokov redirects his readers' attention from the dynamics of story to issues of literary creativity. He now encourages the reader to consider the narrator's creation of an alter ego in a fresh light—not only as a strategy for deflecting the attacks of others onto an external surrogate, but also as a way of gaining power and autonomy for himself by assuming a new role—that of author (*Early Fiction* 107).

This assessment is particularly pertinent in understanding the ways in which Nabokov has reworked this quintessentially Dostoevskian model of narratory deflections into a broader reconsideration of literary structure and form. Connolly's analysis also exemplifies the way Nabokov has incorporated Smurov's imaginative extension of himself into a larger artistic design, while still allowing Smurov to uphold the delusion of his own authorial autonomy, thereby creating a sort of false authorial double. Furthermore, Connolly's interpretation demonstrates Nabokov's calculated control over the directed focus of his readers—a control that Smurov himself lacks, as he is unable to occupy the aloof vantage point of a removed author.

Comparing Smurov's final proclamations at the conclusion of *The Eye* with the Mouseman's typifies Nabokov's recreation of Dostoevsky's dialogic discourse.

Smurov's concluding avowals bear a direct semblance to the Mouseman's discursive style, which is centered on hysterics and unreliable professions:

To sum up gentleman the best thing to do is nothing! Better conscious inertia! So, long live the underground! Although I may have said that I envy the normal man with all the rancor of which I'm capable, I wouldn't care to be him, in the situation which I see him (although I shan't stop envying him all the same. No,

no, in any event the underground is more advantageous!). There one can at least . . . Ah! You see, here again I'm lying! I'm lying because I myself know, as sure as twice two is four, that it's not the underground that's better in any way, but something else, something completely different, which I long for but which I just cannot find! To hell with the underground! Even this would be better: if I myself could believe just a little of all that I've written now! I solemnly assure you, gentleman, that I don't believe one word, not a single word of what I've just scribbled here. I mean to say, perhaps I really do believe it but at the same time, I don't know why, I feel and suspect I'm lying like a bootmaker (*Notes from the Underground* 34).

The Mouseman's incessant reversals and negations display the independence of his rampant discourse, which seems to run unchecked in the pages of the novella. It also captures the way the Underground Man as a character truly is the sum total of his shifting consciousness, making his particular point of view exhausting.

One of the concluding scenes in *The Eye* mimics the Mouseman's above false protestations of happiness. Once it is explicitly revealed that Smurov and the narrator are one, Smurov makes the following, final professions:

And yet I am happy. Yes, happy. I swear, I am happy. I have realized that the only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye. I swear that this is happiness. What does it matter that I am a bit cheap, a bit foul, and that no one appreciates all the remarkable things about me—my fantasy, my erudition, my literary gift . . . I am happy that I can gaze at myself, for any

man is absorbing—yes, really absorbing! The world, try as it may, cannot insult me. I am invulnerable . . . I am happy—yes, happy! What more can I do to prove it, how to proclaim that I am happy? Oh, to shout it so that all of you believe me at last, you cruel, smug people . . . (113-114).

This final, clamoring address to readers directly parallels the Mouseman's discursive style of incongruent syllogisms. Connolly describes this as "a Dostoevskian outburst" which characterizes "the first moment in the novel when the narrator evinces an awareness of an outside audience," which "represents a masterstroke on the part of Nabokov, the real author" (*Early Fiction* 107). Although there are arguably other glimmers of Smurov's awareness of a phantasmal readership, this concluding passage is significant in that it displays a striation of perception and observation, perpetuating an entanglement between Smurov's observations of himself and others, the readers' perceptions of Smurov and his reflected personas through seemingly delusive characters, and finally, Nabokov's omniscient surveillance of Smurov, and even his readership, through the rigid control of his literary design.

Perhaps the reason Smurov's protestations of happiness are so unconvincing, is a result of his permanent entrapment in a prison of mirrors. The happiness of being such a "big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye" is the implicit distance of the eye from its subject. Despite his attempts, Smurov cannot disassociate himself from himself and thus is incapable of the position of a detached observer—a position which only the author, or reader can occupy. Furthermore, *The Eye* establishes Nabokov's seminal exploration of perceptual and imaginative distortion through the frame of transcendent, or posthumous momentums of narratory thought. Juxtaposing Nabokov's

texts alongside Dostoevsky's we can see clear derivative markers in the way Nabokov has mimicked and refashioned some of the most fundamental elements of Dostoevsky's dialogic discourse. Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky also provides important insight into the way Nabokov has mimed the independence of a dialogic narrator and undercut it through reflections of his authorial control.

Chapter II: Tracing Reality, Imagination, and Ocular Function

Nabokov's Short Stories

All my stories are webs of style and none seems at first blush to contain much kinetic matter. For me style is matter.

—Vladimir Nabokov

Nabokov composed an extensive corpus of roughly 70 short stories between 1921-1951, which were later compiled into a comprehensive collection of 66 stories by his son Dmitri, 18 years after the author's death⁴ (*Cambridge Companion* 119). The first 56 short stories were written in Russian, until the publication of "The Assistant Producer" in 1943, which marked Nabokov's shift to English for his final ten stories. Interestingly, Nabokov completed his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, two years prior to applying the language to his shorter forms. By 1951, Nabokov abandoned short fiction altogether, forsaking this compressed literary design before the publication of his most famous novels, including, *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Pale Fire*.

Hence the majority of Nabokov's short fiction was written during the 1920s into the 1930s. Maxim Shraye organizes Nabokov's short stories into four periods, which I too will adopt: the Early period (1921-1929), the Middle period (1930-1935), the High period (1936-1939), and the American period (1940-1951), (*The World of Nabokov's Stories* 12). Within these periods, Nabokov produced 33 stories in the Early period, 19

⁴ This collection of stories is titled *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, originally published in 1995, then again in 1997 with an additional, previously undiscovered story, "Easter Rain."

stories in the Middle period, seven stories in the High period, and ten in the concluding American period.⁵ The year 1924 represents Nabokov's most productive period of writing, as he rapidly constructed 14 short stories in that year alone, marking the highest annual number.

When we attempt to contextualize *The Eye*, alongside the frame of Nabokov's short stories, we must pay particular attention to the later half of the Early period into the Middle period, which are also the years during which Nabokov generated the largest number of short stories. As such, I will focus my discussion around two stories from Nabokov's Early period, two from his Middle period, one from the High period, and one from the American period. Through these compacted illustrations, we can trace Nabokov's experimentation with narration and participatory inculcation of readers, the expansion of lexical as well as atmospheric detailing, the growth of authorial commandment alongside character cognizance, and the ways in which optics and perception further develop Nabokov's pervasive metaphysical creed. Sketching the evolution of Nabokov's shorter forms extends also to a greater interpretative understanding of Nabokov's longer novels as well as the formative positioning of *The Eye* in the landscape of Nabokov's oeuvre.

"Gods," a story written in October 1923, remained unpublished until the 1995 collection, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*.⁶ The narrative is internally atmospheric, primarily detailing the narrator's attempts to console his partner from an unspoken death, which is revealed by the conclusion of the story to be the death of their child. The story

⁵ Shroyer's chronological list of Nabokov's short stories include 69 stories in total as depicted in the total number of stories within each period above; however, only 66 of those stories are included in Dmitri Nabokov's compiling work, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*.

⁶ All further parenthetical references to short stories will come from this volume.

varyingly shifts between dual narrative planes, vacillating from the internal frame story of the narrator and his grieving spouse to the narrator's external observations and fables. Melancholic surveillances reflected in the narrator's wife's eyes in the opening lines of the story instigate the inaugural stream of narratory consciousness:

Here is what I see in your eyes right now: rainy night, narrow street, streetlamps gliding away into the distance . . . Thus I gain entry to your overcast eyes, to a narrow alley of black glimmer where the nocturnal rain gurgles and rustles. Give me a smile . . . It's morning. All night the stars shrieked with infant voices and, on the roof, someone lacerated and caressed a violin with a sharp bow . . . you emanate an enveloping smoky haze. Dust stars swirling in your eyes, millions of golden worlds (44).

Immediately this opening establishes a labyrinth of physical and emotive connection between the narrator's exterior surroundings and the internal response hidden within his wife's eyes. What furthers the construction between inner and outer is the narrator's language, which is laced with impressions of the cosmos and thereby draws together the interiority of the wife's eyes with the exteriority of the stars. Traditional Nabokovian interactions between the senses also occur here.

"Gods," captures many of the preliminary fragments that ground much of Nabokov's later works, marking an interesting point to begin tracing the growing narrative complexity of Nabokov's subsequent texts and introducing the nascent Nabokovian associations between imagination and ocular function. Arguably the central thematic tensions within *The Eye* are forces of visionary imagination juxtaposed against empirical optical observation as Smurov's imaginative recreation of reality is constantly

thwarted against pervasive glimpses and reflections of his “real” self, which finds an antithesis between optics and imagination. “Gods” also evokes a relationship between imagination and ocular function, although Nabokov makes the division between these sources of vision less distinct. The perceptual narrowing and enlargement of the opening passage, which takes place in the narrator’s companion’s eyes—and moves from external refractions of the world, to internal elucidations of wet sorrow, then to the outermost universes of the stars—blends both the optic and the imaginative.

For Nabokov, memory and imagination were strongly connected forces, as the process of recollection inherently encompasses elements of imaginative recreation. Often, he depicts moments of imaginative lucidity with corresponding descriptors of optical obscurity. This relationship is exhibited several times throughout “Gods,” through the narrator’s observations of his lover’s changing eyes: “Your eyes again grew murky. I realized of course, what you were remembering” (45). The narrator later makes a similar remark after relating a comforting fable to his partner: “But I cannot overcome your anguish. Why have your eyes again filled with darkness? No I don’t say anything. I know everything” (49). Implicit in both quotations is the notion that the narrator’s companion is lost deeply in memories of her child, causing the appearance of her eyes to grow murky or dark. Thus, the stronger the narrator’s partner recollects her child, the more she “emanate[s] an enveloping smoky haze” with “dust stars swirling in your [her] eyes, millions of golden worlds” (44).

In spite of its many precursory elements, Brian Boyd characterizes “Gods” as “wrong from the start”:

Unlike anything else Nabokov wrote, it is experimental fiction, irksomely so: a series of descriptions and mediations the narrator feigns to find by looking into his mistress's eyes . . . the attempt to see everything originally quickly becomes banal . . . 'Gods' succeeds in only one respect: it catches Nabokov in the act of searching for a means to render the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the superhuman bursting in on the human (*Russian Years* 219).

Boyd, despite such criticism, captures the germinal position of the work; its very experimental nature establishes it as an important early measure, marking some of Nabokov's most preliminary attempts to "render the extraordinary behind the ordinary" as Boyd states, but also to employ early connections between optics and imagination as well as his authorial position concerning narratory autonomy and consciousness.

Paul Morris makes the unique assertion that: "'Gods' occurs within the narrator's mind and the enclosed borders of his wife's eyes" (257). Morris' interpretation provides an insightful understanding of Nabokov's early interest in consciousness and its production of mental sensation, as well as the conflation between optics and imagination, which become more polarized in later works:

Each visual impression, every mental move, is redirected by consciousness to become an act of creativity and hence of triumph over existential pain. Mastery of the world, the narrator suggests, is achieved not so much through an act of will translated into physical action, as, more precisely, through the exercise of consciousness (258).

Here Morris' understanding of the text opens an important discussion on Nabokov's representations of fictitious realities alongside a transposing narratory force that seeks

imaginatively to recreate their fictitious surroundings. In a general sense, Morris' discussion of "Gods" encapsulates the thematic core of *The Eye*. But when we examine his analysis, it is imperative to note that in describing the capacity of consciousness to supersede existential pain, Morris states that "the *narrator* suggests" this ability as opposed to Nabokov (emphasis added). This distinction is critical, as for much of the story Nabokov seems to take an uncharacteristic back seat to the consciousness and musings of his narratory figure. Nevertheless, the story still harbors illustrations of a burgeoning dynamic between the controlling author and the guise of a narrator fighting for creative command.

Though perhaps lacking the refinement of Nabokov's more developed authorial hand, "Gods" testifies to Nabokov's interest in inserting his creative presence within a text and distorting traditional tiers of author, narrator, and reader. Near the middle of the story, the narrator relates a fable intended as a distraction to curtail the weight of grief. Briefly after the narrator introduces an elderly character within his fable, the narrator states: ". . . the old man gave a snort and lay back down on his mat. How business went that day and what happened to him afterwards is of no concern to us at all" (48). Here, Nabokov directly addresses readers and collapses the distinction between author and narrator. In this instance it becomes unclear as to who exhibits control over what information is conveyed to the reader, particularly because the narrator is relating a distanced, fictitious tale and placing himself in a removed, authorial position.

The narrative's conclusion also poses questions of authorial stance and demonstrates the ways this experimental piece encompasses many artistic nuances

employed in Nabokov's later works. Once again, Nabokov's narrator addresses an audience and discusses the creative capacity of imagination:

Around me, silence and a kind of spring emptiness. There is no death. The wind comes tumbling upon me from behind like a limp doll and tickles my neck with its downy paw. There can be no death . . . You and I shall have a new, golden son, a creation of your tears and my fables . . . My skin is covered with multicolored sparkles. And I want to rise up, throw my arms open for a vast embrace, address an ample, luminous discourse to the invisible crowds (50).

Lacking *The Eye's* authorial structure, these proclamations ascribe a genuine agency to the protagonist and his creative capacity, a concept that Nabokov's narratives increasingly undercut as he develops his authorial hand. Both early and experimental, "Gods" provides us with critical insight into some of the original ways Nabokov explores the dichotomy between imagination and ocular function as well as representing a budding attempt at unconventional narration and structure.

The second story for examination within Nabokov's Early period, "A Guide to Berlin," was composed in 1925, following "Gods" by two years. In his introductory foreword to the 1976 collection of short fiction, *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories*, Nabokov states:

Written in December 1925 in Berlin, *Putevoditel' po Berlinu* [A Guide to Berlin] was published in *Rul'*, December 24 1925 . . . Despite its simple appearance, this 'Guide' is one of my trickiest pieces. Its translation has caused my son and me a tremendous amount of healthy trouble. Two or three scattered phrases have been added for the sake of factual clarity (*Stories* 644).

Nabokov's retrospective assessment of his "Guide" signals the complexities beneath the, once again, rather plot-less text, which requires added scrutiny in parsing his reflective characterization of the work. Nabokov's introductory remarks also pose the need for a comparative examination between the English and Russian versions of the "Guide."

"A Guide to Berlin" is a composition of five vignettes, each narrowly detailing rather pedestrian scenes from around the city. Before entering the five sketches, the narrator begins three brief prefatory sentences about the guide: "We sit down and I start telling my friend about utility pipes, streetcars, and other important matters" (155). The pipes, streetcars, and "other important matters" are precisely the exact headings for the ensuing vignettes; thus, this seeming casually, descriptive sentence functions organizationally to subtitle the narrative. As such, the first fragment, "The Pipes," presents a single paragraph describing a heap of unloaded pipes along the sidewalk. The narrator notes the fleeting interest of local children in the pipes and continues to illustrate his personal observation of the tubes:

I go out in the flat gray light of early morning, an even stripe of fresh snow stretches along the upper side of each black pipe while up the interior slope at the very mouth of the pipe which is nearest to the turn of the tracks, the reflection of a still illumed tram sweeps up like bright-orange heat lightning. Today someone wrote 'Otto' with his finger on the strip of virgin snow and I thought how beautifully that name, with its two soft o's flanking the pair of gentle consonants, suited the silent layer of the pipe with its two orifices and its tacit tunnel (155-56). The opening of the passage mixes characteristically Nabokovian contrasts of light and dark, while incorporating elements of glinting, modernist reflection. The notion of

reflection is expanded further by the relationship between the aesthetic appearance of the palindromic word “Otto” and its metaphoric resemblance to the shape of the pipes.

Following “The Pipes,” is the second section, “The Streetcar.” The vignette adopts an air of forward retrospection, as the narrator discusses the “air of antiquity” he feels toward the streetcar and begins to imagine the ways a future Berlin writer will describe the romantic archaism of the narrator’s present:

Everything, every trifle, will be valuable and meaningful: the conductor’s purse, the advertisement over the window, that peculiar jolting motion which our great-grandchildren will perhaps imagine—everything will be ennobled and justified by its age (157).

The narrator then continues to describe the poetic encapsulation of time as the crux of literary creation:

I think that here in lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragment tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right . . . (157).

Again reflection plays an integral role in establishing the narrator’s artistic tenet. Here, the narrator establishes a construction between reflection and future projection, which ties the concept of reflection to the transportive capacity of memory and imagination.

Furthermore, this artistic understanding draws in an optical force, as it requires the artist to utilize an empirical cognition of a present image, or object, and imagine its prospective transposition.

The third vignette, “Work” describes “various kinds of work” that the narrator “observe[s] from the crammed tram” where “a compassionate woman can always be relied upon to cede me her window seat—while trying not to look too closely at me” (157). This opening of the third fragment captures a Nabokovian tactic of extracting a sort of governing generality from an instance of extreme specificity.

The fourth section, entitled, “Eden” outlines the city’s zoo, where the narrator observes the aquarium and notes its resemblance to Atlantis. The narrator continues to describe other marine flowers and fish, paying particular attention to “a live, crimson five-pointed star” and its connection to the Bolshevik Red Star: “This, then, is where the notorious emblem originated—at the very bottom of the ocean, in the murk of sunken Atlantica, which long ago lived through various upheavals while pottering about topical utopias and other inanities that cripple us today” (158).

The final vignette, “The Pub” brings the reader back to the opening prefatory paragraph, and begins with the narrator’s companion dismissing the “Guide:” “That’s a very poor guide” (159). Without acknowledging the comment, the narrator slips back into his descriptive position and relates the atmosphere of the pub, noting with particular attention “. . . a cramped little room with a green couch under a mirror” which is “part of the publican’s humble apartment” (159). Here, the “kindly mirror of future times” begins its transition from a figurative to a literal position. After another critical remark from his companion, the narrator again ignores his friend and observes: “From our place near the bar one can make out very distinctly the couch, the mirror, and the table in the background beyond the passage” (159).

The narrator then focuses his attention on the publican's son and starts to imagine his recollective perspective:

There, under the mirror, the child sits alone. But he is now looking our way. From there he can see inside of the tavern . . . he has long since grown used to this scene and is not dismayed by its proximity. Yet there is one thing I know. Whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember the picture he saw every day of his childhood from the little room where he was fed his soup (159-160).

Once more the narrator's friend interrupts his dreamy musings, saying, "I can't understand what you see down there," to which the narrator reflects: "What indeed! How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody's future recollection?" (160).

Here, memory, imagination, and reflected optical information are woven together to establish an artistic and metaphysical moment, one whose very subtle transience protests against the act of communicating—of making public. By watching the young boy watch the scene of the pub, a sort of indirect reflection in it of itself, the narrator transposes the foresight of present imagination onto a future, unformulated recollection. In this final scene, Nabokov conflates the threads of the past, present, and future while simultaneously melding the duality between imagination and ocular function.

D. Barton Johnson makes the convincing argument in his article, "A Guide to Nabokov's 'A Guide to Berlin,'" that the depiction of the child's observations of the pub are detected by the narrator through the mirror, as opposed to a direct course of sight:

A close reading reveals that the description of the boy's view is actually the view seen by the narrator in the mirror above and behind the boy. By virtue of the mirror the narrator is seeing himself, his friend, and the interior of the barroom as

it appears to the boy whose future memories the narrator is thus observing. This is the mirror of future recollections . . . The lines of sight are clearly drawn and the crucial position of the mirror is emphasized and re-emphasized (356).

Johnson's analysis adds increased complexity to the interconnections between reflection and recollection, amplifying the term "vision" as a notion that extends itself to both perceptual and conceptual realms. Furthermore, his observation regarding the position of the mirror as above and behind figuratively suggests the past (behind) and the future (above), converging in the present, which is marked by the child's direct, as opposed to reflected, gaze at the narrator.

These relations between time, ocular reflection, and imagination are also pervasive throughout *The Eye*. For instance, returning to the conclusion of the novel, Smurov proclaims:

For I do not exist: there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me. With every acquaintance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. Somewhere they live, somewhere they multiply. I alone do not exist. Smurov, however, will live on for a long time (113).

This analysis of Smurov's multiplying phantasmal existence encapsulates the transposing action of the narrator of "A Guide to Berlin," as only a phantasmal resemblance of the boy is perpetuated through a reflected description of the boy's "future recollection." In this regard, "A Guide to Berlin" functions aesthetically somewhat as a predecessor to the reflected undercurrents of *The Eye*.

Much of the criticism relating to "A Guide to Berlin" focuses primarily on its fragmented, plotless, design as well as the emergence of the early stages of Nabokov's

distortive relation to time.⁷ Similarly, in his discussion of “A Guide to Berlin” Brian Boyd describes the work’s seminal position in propelling Nabokov’s fiction toward more mature workings of time and structure:

He also began to subvert and complicate the classical norms of structure—economy, clarity, harmony—he always adhered to. ‘A Guide to Berlin’ appears to contain half-a-dozen discrete vignettes, whimsically personal observations of Berlin life that signal their own impracticability as a guide to the city’s streets. But behind the patchy frame of space, Nabokov allows us to glimpse another structure where the spatial world serves only as the pretext for different possible relations to time, and it was this above all that marked the new course he found for his fiction in the autumn of 1925 (*Russian Years* 252).

Although Boyd captures the texture of Nabokovian conceptions of time, this relatively imprecise analysis fails to account for Nabokov’s characterization of the work as one of his “trickiest pieces,” nor can it explain the troubles of translating this text. Such a direct clue from Nabokov ought not to be ignored; there must be less overtly detectable elements developing the difficulty of the work.

Johnson echoes my argument in his “Guide” to “A Guide to Berlin,” asserting that Nabokov’s experimentation with time can only account for one layer of the story’s complexity:

This embodiment of theme in structural device is characteristic of much of Nabokov’s best later work and may in some measure account for his particular

⁷ See for example Paul D. Morris’s, *Vladimir Nabokov Poetry and the Lyric Voice*, Pekka Tammi’s *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics*, or Maxim D. Shrayner’s *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*.

affection for the story. It would, however, scarcely qualify the story as one of his ‘trickiest’ (357).

The concluding pages of Johnson’s essay perceptively disclose some of the hidden, textual clues, which adjoin the seemingly unconnected vignettes as well as enhance the optical and imaginative glimpses of memory permeating the work. Furthermore, Johnson’s analysis exposes the difficulties in translating this particular work.

What foregrounds Johnson’s textual analysis is the hidden recurrence of the mirrored palindrome “ОТТО,” which the narrator initially notes inscribed in snow on top of the pipes. The narrator himself points to the resemblance between the form of the word and the shape of the utility pipes, indicating a connection between the two that goes beyond mere coincidence. Johnson points out that the Russian original of the work contains an encrypted anagram of the word in the last sentence of the first vignette: “Отверстиями и ТаинственноОй глубиной.” The English version almost upholds the anagram in the last sentence of the first section as well: “Orifices and iTs Tacit tunnel” (156). Johnson enhances the physical and linguistic connection between the appearance of word and the pipes through his observation that, “the open pipe permits reciprocal vision and . . . the older Russian expression for ‘telescope’ is *optčieskaja truba* [optical telescope]” (358).

ОТТО also appears in some of the opening words of “The Streetcar,” the second section of the story: “что-то ОТжившее, какую-ТО,” although the palindrome is lost in the English translation. Johnson also notes that the anagram is skillfully prefigured by the repetitive “O-TO” of “что-то” in the Russian text. In addition to Johnson’s observations, I note that the anagrammatic appearance of “ОТТО” in the last line of the first vignette

into the first line of the second vignette functions loosely as another layer of reflection at opposite ends of the two scenes.

Again, the palindrome occurs in the first line of the third snapshot, “Work.” In the Russian original, the line reads: “Вот образы разных работ, коТОрые я наблюдаю из трамвайного окна.” Although the complete anagrammatic palindrome only occurs once in the sentence, the first two words “Вот образы” once again create the repetitive “ОТ О” pattern. The English opening of the third vignette upholds the pattern with: “. . . while trying nOT TO look too closely at me” and also possesses the recurrence of outstanding “O’s” and “T’s” (157). It is precisely Nabokov’s transfiguration of the anagram into the English text, which signals the intentionality of such textual features: “It would be possible to attribute such matters to chance were it not for the fact that the corresponding English passage in the translation has been markedly expanded in order to incorporate equivalent anagrammatic elements” (Johnson 359).

Johnson claims that the fourth vignette, “Eden” contains the most complex textual inversions, uncovering the repeated palindrome “ОТТО” as well as experimentation with the word “utopia.” The narrator’s observation regarding the crimson starfish’s resemblance to the Bolshevik Red Star is originally written in Russian as: “из темнОты (ПО)ТОпленных Атлантид, давным-давно переживших всякие смуты,--опыты глуповатых уТОПий,-- и все то, что тревожит нас.” Here, Nabokov establishes the first of several experiments with the root of utopia where “top” becomes “pot” (пот) the Russian word for “sweat.” Johnson once more points toward the way in which Nabokov has carried this anagrammatic pun into the English translation, again solidifying its intentionality:

This, then, is where that notorious emblem originated—at the very bOTTOM of the ocean, in the murk of the sunken Atlantica, which long ago lived through various upheavals while pOTTering abOut the TOPical uTOPias and OTher inanities that cripple us TOday (158).

In the last vignette, Johnson illuminates a final insertion of the word “OTTO” at a particularly pointed moment relating to the narrator glimpsing the boy’s future memory:

The final vignette also contains its own encoded anagrammatic “OTTO” and, moreover, at a particularly appropriate point. In the passage containing the narrator’s description of the scene which he, the narrator, sees indirectly in the mirror and which the boy sees directly, the introductory expression is “ОТТуда видно” (101). The boy and the narrator are looking through the telescope, the *optičeskaja truba*, of time. It is also of note that the physical layout of the pub building with its two openings connected by the passageway through which the characters regard the scene resembles the pipe-telescope with its inscription (359).

Here Johnson’s astute analysis unlocks many of the technical designs employed in “A Guide to Berlin,” which emboldens Nabokov’s thematic explorations of a transcendence of time through imaginative future recollection. The very optical task required of the reader to uncover these trans-linguistic anagrammatic devices further underscores the connection between imagination and ocular function on narratory, authorial, and readerly planes. Such textual encryptions also bring forth the notion of artistic artifice and craftsmanship, reflexively pointing to Nabokov’s manipulative design through encryptions within his narrator’s discourse. Thus, despite the seemingly inert plotlessness of this manual, “A Guide to Berlin” is a seminal work that marks Nabokov’s assimilation

of both linguistic scheme and metaphysical theme and weighs on *The Eye* as well as the complex structures of Nabokov's later novels and short stories.

Six years after the publication of "A Guide to Berlin," Nabokov published the short story "Terra Incognita" in November 1931. "Terra Incognita" is the first story of my examination that stems from the Middle period. Unlike "Gods" and "A Guide to Berlin," "Terra Incognita" contains a more active plot, bordering on escapist fiction. The first person narrator, Vallière, a botanist of some sort, opens the story with a sentence that encapsulates much of the content to come: "The sound of the waterfall grew more and more muffled, until it finally dissolved altogether, and we moved on through the wildwood of a hitherto unexplored region" (293).

As the title suggests, the story details the narrator's descent into an unexplored jungle, primarily in the presence of two companions, Gregson and Cook. In the opening of the story, Vallière begins establishing the landscape of the narrative, noting that many things were becoming ambiguous to him: "It remained unclear, however—or else I was already beginning to forget many things, as we walked on and on—exactly who this cook was (a runaway sailor, perhaps)" (293). Immediately the statement draws attention to an implicit quality of unreliability, as the narrator puts forth his difficulty in recollection at the outset of his narrative. Two paragraphs later, the narrator admits to, and reveals, his own illness: "I kept telling myself that my head was heavy from the long march, the heat, the medley of colors, and the forest din, but secretly I knew that I was ill. I surmised it to be the local fever" (294). Once again this admission, points toward a narrative conveyed through a lens of distorted, feverish, perception.

Shortly after Vallière discloses his illness to readers, Cook and eight “natives” abandon Gregson and the narrator, who vaguely outlines the course of events: “I think we tried to catch up with the fugitives—I do not recall clearly, but, in any case, we failed” (294). Once again, Nabokov calls direct attention to Vallière’s inhibited memory, thereby experimenting with narrative position and subjecting readers to a program of extreme individual distortion. The narrative then begins its truly hallucinatory trajectory as Vallière’s condition worsens:

I was tormented by strange hallucinations. I gazed at the weird tree trunks, around some of which were coiled thick, flesh-colored snakes; suddenly I thought I saw, between the trunks, as though through my fingers, the mirror of a half-open wardrobe with dim reflections, but then I took hold of myself, looked more carefully, and found that it was only the deceptive glimmer of an acreana bush . . . (295).

The passage marks the first flicker of an increasingly established alternative reality taking place in a “civilized” domestic realm. Here, Nabokov draws out the interplay between ocular function and hallucinatory imagination. As the narrator gazes at the tree, he begins to believe he sees an obscured reflection of a wardrobe, until he takes hold of his perceptual capacity and focuses more clearly on the tree, realizing his own delusion. Thus, optical emphasis and refocus creates and subsequently dismisses the illusion of an ulterior reality, although the legitimacy of the narrator’s optical intake remains dubious as his perceptual capacity seems hindered by his feverish condition—calling into question the reality of both the jungle and the wardrobe. Furthermore, it is significant that the alleged mirage took the form of a mirror, the most traditional source of reflection, which

creates a complicated stream depicting, perhaps, an illusory vision that reveals yet another hallucinatory reality, with no concrete source of direct authenticity.

Cook, deserted by the natives, returns to Gregson and Vallière, begging them to abandon their journey and return home; simultaneously, the narrator's hallucinations take increasing hold over his state of being, particularly clouding his optical capacity:

The noonday sky, now freed of its leafy veils, hung oppressively over us with its blinding darkness—yes, its blinding darkness, for there is no other way to describe it. I tried not to look up; but in the sky, at the very verge of my field of vision, there floated, always keeping up with me, whitish phantoms of plaster, stucco curlicues and rosettes, like those of modern European ceilings; however, I had only to look directly at them and they would vanish, and again the tropical sky would boom . . . (295).

Once more glimmers of a European reality permeate the narrator's field of vision and advance an alternate reality. Again, Nabokov establishes a polarity between imagination and ocular function: as the oppressive sky causes its "blinding darkness" and inhibits Vallière's sensory vision, he becomes released from the seeming materiality of ocular perception and lapses into an alternative realm, until he directly confronts the hallucination by refocusing his vision.

Vallière's hallucinations become increasingly pervasive, which begins to break down the sense of reality attributed to the narrator's initial optical descriptions of his tropical surroundings:

I foresaw that in a moment I would collapse altogether, that the contours and convexities of delirium, showing through the sky and through the golden reeds,

would gain complete control of my consciousness. At times Gregson and Cook seemed to grow transparent, and I thought I saw, through them, wallpaper with an endlessly repeated design of reeds. I took hold of myself and strained to keep my eyes open, and moved on (296).

At this point, the sense of delirium “gaining control” of the narrator’s consciousness is no longer discernable, as it now seems that the European surrounding could just as easily be the narrator’s authentic “reality.” This confusion between the two realities is enhanced by Vallière’s comment that at times he thought he could see wallpaper with a design of reeds through the translucent figures of Gregson and Cook. The observation steers the reader into consideration that the European setting is perhaps Vallière’s genuine reality, and that the jungle is conceivably the imagined locale permeating the European setting instead. Still, Nabokov, by in part playing on translucency, has taken pains to maintain both realities as equally probable and ambiguous. The passage once again demonstrates Vallière’s attempt to maintain control over his hallucinations—a more involuntary form of imagination—by refocusing his optical attention.

Vallière’s hallucinations continue, “Once again everything around me assumed an ambiguous transparency” (296), as does an increasingly dreamy translucence of his perception: “. . . I did not hear the exact words, but I could guess the general sense of their talk, which would grow absurd and somehow spherical when I tried to listen more closely” (297). The quotation enhances the indistinguishable quality of the story’s (fictional) reality, as it is unclear whether the narrator has difficulty in distinguishing the sense of Cook and Gregson’s dialogue because he is more firmly grounded in an

authentic European reality, or because he is gripped further into a hallucinatory mirage of a European environment.

On the penultimate page of the narrative, the persistent European setting makes another convincing appearance in Vallière's abstruse consciousness:

Meanwhile delirious visions, taking advantage of the general confusion, were quietly and firmly finding their places. The lines of a dim ceiling stretched and crossed in the sky. A large armchair rose, as if supported from below, out of the swamp. Glossy birds flew through the haze of the marsh and, as they settled, one turned into the wooden knob of a bedpost, another into a decanter. Gathering all my willpower, I focused my gaze and drove off this dangerous trash (297-98).

In this moment, it is completely unclear which reality is the illusory, although convention would point to the jungle environment as the more plausible hallucinatory realm, which was fabricated as a result of a feverish condition taking hold of Vallière's cognition somewhere in Europe. Despite this, Vallière once again attempts to drive out visions of the room in an effort to restore what he believes he perceives optically, seemingly reinstating a degree of authenticity to the jungle environment.

By presenting correspondingly convincing realms of existence, Nabokov fabricates a relation of simultaneity between time and space. Vallière himself indirectly acknowledges this simultaneity during a particular moment of optical delirium: "His [Gregson's] motions underwent curious changes, as if someone kept reshuffling them. I saw him in different poses simultaneously; he was divesting himself of himself, as if he were made of many glass Gregson's whose outlines did not coincide" (298). Vallière's

illusory illustration of Gregson captures the liminal position of his own multiplicity spanned across two realms of being.

After a fight between Gregson and Cook that results in both of their deaths, Vallière slips into his final stream of feverish consciousness, illuminating the position of the dual realities in reference to his existence:

But suddenly, at this last stage of my mortal illness—for I knew that in a few minutes I would die—in these final minutes everything grew completely lucid: I realized that all that was taking place around me was not the trick of an inflamed imagination, not the veil of delirium, through which unwelcome glimpses of my supposedly real existence in a distant European city (the wallpaper, the armchair, the glass of lemonade) were trying to show. I realized that the obtrusive room was fictitious, since everything beyond death is, at best, fictitious: an imitation of life hastily knocked together, the furnished rooms of nonexistence (299).

Vallière's allusion to his European presence as providing "glimpses of my supposedly real existence" rhetorically undercuts the notion that the room is the concrete atmosphere of his existence. Through the passage, Nabokov creates a new frame for establishing notions of reality, as the narrator's descent into death marks a departure from traditional conceptions of gauging authenticity. Vallière, or rather Nabokov, purports that these glimpses of a European life were merely gleaned from previous existence, clouding Vallière's hallucinatory venture into death. The story concludes with the narrator's last attempt to scribble something in his notebook, which slips from his hand and "was no longer there" (299). These final four words seem to imply Vallière's death and parting into nonexistence along with the notebook and surroundings which were also "no longer

there.” The assumption that Vallière’s last breath coincides with the final words of the story also draws attention to the inherent literary death of characters and their surroundings that comes with the conclusion of every story.

Jonathan Sisson argues that “Neither the narrator nor the reader can determine which of the two realities functions as the single underlying primary reality and which is the dreamed or fantasized secondary reality” which establishes “a higher level of cosmic synchronization” (95). Sisson asserts that Nabokov’s careful maintenance of both realities as plausibly primary results in a sort of transcendent brand of perception, requiring new means for organizing reality. This view echoes my assertion of the narrator’s illuminating quotation defining the hallucinatory simulacra of being after nonexistence.

According to Sisson, the possibility of either reality as the sole, mutually exclusive primary frame for the narrator’s existence requires the reader to:

. . . mentally balance the two alternative realities without according to either of them the priority required by the classical axiom of a single underlying reality . . . it is only in the superimposition of the two settings that the reader is deprived of an axiom of routine perception and thereby is stimulated to a transcendent perception of the world (98).

Sisson’s poignant analysis characterizes Nabokov’s scheme of calibrating new conceptions of reality through the narrator’s hallucinatory visions while simultaneously implicating the reader into an ulterior “transcendent perception of the world,” which balances two axioms of existence simultaneously.

Speaking to Vallière's statement regarding the "furnished rooms of nonexistence," Sisson argues:

The narrator may suspect that the urban environment is the single underlying reality, but as he approaches death, he perhaps rejects bodily life as insignificant in preference for what he may consider his invented life. His use of the word 'realized' ambiguously implies either the 'recognition of reality' or 'the establishment of a reality' by means of imagination (115).

This understanding of some of the narrator's final musings before death aligns with the conclusion of *The Eye*, composed one year prior to "Terra Incognita." By the close of *The Eye*, Smurov prefaces observation and imagination over the restriction of embodied reality, particularly with regards to his fixation and adoration for Vanya:

And what do I care if she marries another? Every other night I dream of her dresses and things on an endless clothesline of bliss, in a ceaseless wind of possession, and her husband shall never learn what I do to the silks and fleece of the dancing witch. This is love's supreme accomplishment (114).

Although expressing a vastly different realm of imaginative recreation, Smurov's conclusion once again reinforces the establishment of an imagined, escapist, even hallucinatory, reality over a particular confining corporeal frame. Furthermore, *The Eye* thematically coincides with "Terra Incognita" by simultaneously upholding dual-frames of existence and forms of transcendent, imaginative perception and experience.

Sisson accurately claims that the equilibrium between the two realities in "Terra Incognita" ". . . deliberately challenges the dream-framework convention" as no single reality emerges as entirely primary, or underlying (120). Reworking this traditional

framework is one way in which Nabokov requires his readers to reconsider traditional axioms of reality and distinctions between “real” and “imagined.” Sisson applies this understanding to *The Eye*: “In *The Eye* Nabokov challenges the same convention, although without use of the dream device but with a similar manipulation of death” (122). Sisson draws the parallel between Smurov’s falsely posthumous momentum of thought and the narrator’s hallucinatory perceptions as sources of imaginative recreation that are held as equally authentic alongside penetrating glimmers of the conventionally “real.”

In establishing this argument, Sisson traces a comparison between “Terra Incognita” and H.G. Well’s “The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes.” He writes: “Wells’ ‘The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes’ provides the structural model for ‘Terra Incognita,’” as both stories share the theme of “bilocation” (143). “The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes” is a story documenting a lab accident that causes Sidney Davidson to go blind. Despite blindness to his immediate surroundings, Davidson maintains a sense of vision of a distant island scene. After the accident, Davidson exists in a liminal position between the realm of his corporeal being and the remote area of his seaside vision. The narrator of the story notes: “For three weeks Davidson remained in this singular state, seeing what at the time we imagined was an altogether phantasmal world, and stone cold to the world around him” (6). Eventually, Davidson is able to make out his own thumb, from which a hole in his “infernal phantom world” developed, until “as it were and through these translucent gaps he began to see dimly the real world about him. The patches grew in size and number, ran together and spread until only here and there were blind spots left upon his eyes” (7).

After Davidson recovers his immediate sense of vision, he and the narrator attend a dinner with a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, where a strange revelation is made. At the dinner, Atkins, the lieutenant, shows Davidson a picture of a ship, which Davidson claims to have seen before in his visions of the island:

Atkins . . . corroborated, word for word, the description Davidson had given of the island and the boat. There is not the slightest doubt in any of our minds that Davidson has really seen the place. In some unaccountable way, while he has moved hither and thither in London, his sight moved hither and thither in a manner that corresponded, about this distant island (8).

This “completes the remarkable story of Davidson’s eyes” as the narrator himself concludes (8). The final two paragraphs of the story entertain several speculations as to how this phenomenon could have occurred. The narrator rejects the theory put forth by the fictional Professor Wade, who purports a kink in space, drawing from the analogy that:

. . . two points might be a yard away on a sheet of paper and yet be brought together by bending the paper round . . . His idea seems to be that Davidson, stooping between the poles of the big electro-magnet, had some extraordinary twist given to his retinal elements through the sudden change in the field of force due to the lightening (8).

Professor Wade’s explanation mirrors a statement made by Nabokov in his autobiographic work *Invitation of a Memory*: “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (139). The superimposition of one part of a pattern upon another captures the

simultaneity, or “bilocation” presented in both “Terra Incognita” and “The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes.”

Sisson attributes the primary difference between the two works to be the scientific explanation at the close of Wells’ story. According to Sisson, the lack of scientific explanation at the conclusion of “Terra Incognita” is precisely what allows each of Vallière’s realities to maintain their primacy and cause the reader to consider new parameters for calibrating reality. I would argue that in addition to Sisson’s claim, the collaboration between imagination and ocular function between the two stories further enhances their subtle differences in theme.

“The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes” establishes a similar pull between imagination and ocular capacity; as soon as Davidson’s optical vision is damaged, his imaginative vision becomes utterly enhanced, causing him to remark “I never saw anything so real” in describing the island (4). Once Davidson regains ocular ability, the vision of the island dissipates until his original perceptual faculty is restored. In “Terra Incognita,” Vallière also establishes a similar relation, focusing his eyes harder whenever glints of the European world seep through. Nevertheless, the ambiguity, or lack of primacy between the jungle and the European realm, illustrate the indeterminacy of Vallière’s optical actions; in other words, when Vallière concentrates on seeing the jungle, the reader cannot fully verify if he is focusing on fighting illusory European visions, or straining harder to keep alive sights of the hallucinatory jungle.

The opening lines of “The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes,” capture the essence of both *The Eye* and “Terra Incognita”:

The transitory mental aberration of Sidney Davidson, remarkable enough in itself, is still more remarkable if Wade's explanation is to be credited. It sets one dreaming of the oddest possibilities of intercommunication in the future, of spending and intercalary five minutes on the other side of the world, or being watched in our most secret operations by unsuspected eyes (1).

The notion of a "transitory mental aberration" encapsulates the dual positioning of Vallière's existence, which flashes between the furnishings of a European environment and a tropical jungle. Similarly, Smurov's identity flickers between a removed, inventive observer, to an implicated protagonist, grappling to control the conscious trajectory of his existence. The "intercalary minutes on the other side of the world" can also be understood as Smurov and Vallière's proximity to death, causing them to experience this sort of transcendental semblances to ulterior spaces or existences. Lastly, this concept of being watched by "unsuspected eyes" clearly captures the focus of *The Eye*, which explores conceptions of hyperconscious observation, and is also applicable to "Terra Incognita." Because the reader cannot extrapolate a principal reality between the given two frames in "Terra Incognita," Vallière's attempts to focus his gaze and "drive off" the "trash" of a European existence, can be interpreted as an escapist attempt to expel an immediate reality in order to peer into "the most secret operations" on "the other side of the world."

"Terra Incognita" marks explicitly the development of an artistic and metaphysical creed that parallels many of the innovations of *The Eye* and can be traced to later, more complex works, such as *Pale Fire*. We can understand the simultaneity of time and atmosphere in "Terra Incognita," as an experimental expansion of the narrator's

glimpse of a future recollection as seen in the conclusion of “A Guide to Berlin.” These narratives’ proximity in composition to *The Eye*, highlight Nabokov’s focus on experimentation with narratory style and metaphysical theme, as well as a reworking of traditional constructions such the assembly of a traditional dream-framed story, which requires the primacy of a particular reality.

In 1935 Nabokov published the nine-paragraph short story “Recruiting,” which first appeared in *Poslednie Novosti*, Paris. The story opens with third person narration drawing readers into the life of Vasiliy Ivanovich (V.I.), an old, ill, and virtually unneeded man who “[I]n the manner of poverty . . . had reached the point where a man no longer asks himself on what he will live tomorrow, but merely wonders what he had lived on the day before” (397). The first paragraph continues by tracing V.I.’s life, describing his sentiments toward his dead sister whose absence he had grown used to, as well as his attendance at Professor D.’s funeral earlier that day.

The second paragraph describes V.I.’s tram ride back from the funeral and continues in a relatively similar trajectory except for two parenthetical intrusions. Beginning the first sentence of the second paragraph, the narrator details the scene of the tram, drawing the reader’s attention to his narratory observation: “In the impersonal Berlin crush of the tram, there was another old refugee staying around to the very last, a non-practicing lawyer, who was also returning from the cemetery and was also of little use to anyone except me” (398). Several lines later, the narrator once again wedges his perspective into the text parenthetically: “Finally (and that was the very moment I caught, after which I never let the recruit out of my sight), V.I. got off, and, since he was heavy and clumsy, the conductor helped him clamber down onto the oblong island of the stop”

(398). The narrator explicates the story's title, seemingly recruiting characters for his narrative. Constantine Muravnik characterizes these narratory insertions as "a familiar device in Nabokov" which "signals another reality still fictional, to be sure, but associated with the narrator rather than his narrative" (64). Thus, once again Nabokov has produced the framework for narrative interposition.

In the fourth paragraph, the narrator fully inserts himself textually by beginning the passage with the first person pronoun: "I would like to understand, though, whence comes this happiness, this swell of happiness, that immediately transforms one's soul into something immense, transparent, and precious" (398). Several paragraphs later the narrator elaborates on these curious flashes of happiness:

. . . (the charitable conductor had to stoop with downstretched hands—and one of the passengers helped too, I think); tired, lonely, fat, ashamed, with all the nuances of old fashioned modesty, of his mended linen, his decaying trousers, his whole unkempt, unloved, shabbily furnished corpulence, V.I. nevertheless found himself filled with an almost indecent kind of joy of unknown origin, which, more than once in the course of his long and rather arduous life, had surprised him by its sudden onset (399).

The passage seemingly departs from Dostoevskian exhibitions of unhappiness and embarrassment. Although thematically the quotation draws parallels to the conclusion of *The Eye* and Smurov's professions of a constructed and unlikely contentment, "Recruiting" appears to capture a sort of visceral and inexplicable swelling of happiness that is both more subtle and complex than Dostoevsky's fluctuating character schemes.

In the seventh paragraph of the story, the narrator, who has already inserted himself through first person observation, describes a street garden, drawing attention once more to moments of V.I.'s unsuspected happiness and aligning himself with such flashes: "This little secret garden . . . sparkled through and through with vitality, novelty, participation in one's destiny, whenever he and I experienced such fits of happiness" (400). The narrator then begins to sketch unexpectedly another character, who appears to be the narrator's first physical entrance into the text:

A man with the local Russian newspaper sat down on the same dark-blue, sun-warmed, hospitable, indifferent bench. It is difficult for me to describe this man; then again, it would be useless, since a self-portrait is seldom successful, because of a certain tension that always remains in the expression of the eyes—the hypnotic spell of the indispensable mirror. Why did I decide that the man next to whom I had sat down was named Vasiliy Ivanovich? Well because that blend of name and patronymic is like an armchair, and he was broad and soft, with a large cozy face, and sat, with his hands resting on his cane, comfortably and motionlessly; only the pupils of his eyes shifted to and fro . . . Professor D.'s obituary occupied a prominent place in the paper, and that is how, in my hurry to give V.I.'s morning some sort of setting as gloomy and typical as possible, I happened to arrange for him that trip to the funeral, even though the paper said there would be a special announcement of the date; but I repeat I was in a hurry, and I did wish he had really been to the cemetery . . . (400).

This narratory intrusion into the text debunks the previous information that the reader had been provided about V.I. and completely shifts the narrative from a course of intimate

development of V.I. into personal disclosures of the narrator, who has now taken the position of central character.

As the narrator continues, he slips into a Dostoevskian state of attestations, this time echoing Smurov's concluding professions:

What did I care if this fat old gentleman, whom I first saw being lowered from the tram, and who was now sitting beside me, was perhaps not Russian at all? I was so pleased with him! He was so capacious! By an odd combination of emotions I felt I was infecting that stranger with the blazing creative happiness that sends a chill over an artist's skin. I wished that, despite his age, his indigence, the tumor in his stomach, V.I. might share the terrible power of my bliss, redeeming its unlawfulness with its complicity, so that it would cease being a unique sensation, a most rare variety of madness, a monstrous sunbow spanning my whole inner being, and be accessible to two people at least, becoming their topic of conversation and thus acquiring rights to routine existence, of which my wild, savage, stifling happiness is otherwise deprived (401).

Through such an address, the narrator reveals the previously depicted pulsations of indecent happiness were in fact glimpses of his own artistic fulfillment, transposed onto the fictitious V.I. This sort of unsolicited, perhaps even involuntary, emergence of sensation in many way mirrors the pervasive hallucinations in "Terra Incognita." Furthermore, the subtle happiness formerly attributed to V.I. now takes the form of exaggerated Dostoevsky-like expression.

The narrator makes his thirst for artistic creation most explicit in the concluding two paragraphs of the story. Once again indirectly referencing the story's title, the

narrator remarks: “But he was already mine . . . he carried off with him, like the plague, and extraordinary disease, for he was sacramentally bound to me, being doomed to appear for a moment in the far end of a certain chapter, at the turning of a certain sentence” (401). This admission points toward the source of the narrator’s almost lewd happiness, which stems from a clamoring for artistic control as discussed in relation to Dostoevsky and *The Eye* in the previous chapter.

Finally, the narrator makes his most profound attempt to grapple with the “levers of creation” with the concluding paragraph of the story:

My representative, the man with the Russian newspaper, was now alone on the bench and, as he had moved over into the shade where V.I. had just been sitting, the same cool linden patten that had anointed his predecessor now rippled across his forehead (401).

Here, the narrator introduces a third level of negation, where he now undercuts his physical entrance into the text as the man reading the Russian newspaper, as only a fictive representation of himself. “Recruiting” therefore marks a series of regressions, by which the narrator introduces readers to the fictitious V.I. then admits to this fallacy, describes his proximity to the stranger, then revokes the statement, and finally concludes the story by disclosing a presence entirely removed from the physical embodiment he had previously attributed to himself.

In his article titled “Choosing the Hero: Nabokov’s Short Story ‘Recruiting’ as an Introduction to his Aesthetics,” Muravnik argues, “Nabokov deliberately poses the question of art’s authenticity in such a way that leads the reader to realization that the question itself is posed incorrectly for as long as it is posed within the dichotomy of

fiction and truth” (66). In many respects, Muravnik’s analysis is related to the way in which Nabokov reframes traditional distinctions between reality and imagination in “Terra Incognita.”

Muravnik observes the narrator’s relation of V.I. to an armchair, “that blend of name and patronymic is like an armchair,” is emblematic of the dichotomy between the inward invention of a story, and the outward embodiment of those ideas through text:

. . . they set the scene for the unfolding story and thus order the relationship between the real and the fictional, between the so called extra-literary reality and the body of the narrative proper. In other words, they furnish the author’s thought with a physical frame just like an armchair would hold a person’s body (68).

The armchair, also a pervasive image throughout “Terra Incognita,” bears particular importance in reference to the narrator’s conclusion “that the obtrusive room was fictitious, since everything beyond death is, at best, fictitious: an imitation of life hastily knocked together, the furnished rooms of nonexistence” (299). Here too, the physicality of the armchair seems to equip the imagination with a frame from which an author can sketch the body of his choosing.

In a related idea concerning the notion of “subjective truth,” which clearly captures the focus of “Recruiting,” “Terra Incognita,” and *The Eye*, Muravnik argues:

In ‘Recruiting,’ his [Nabokov’s] position . . . is closer to Kant who, in order to save art from frivolity of imagination, merely demands that the products of imagination be *universally subjective* rather than directly connecting them with any ontologically certain source (73).

Continuing to draw out this philosophical interpretation, Muravnik defines the Kantian imagination as

. . . the power of imposing an image on the manifold before this image becomes a concept and thus objectifies . . . The aesthetic judgment consists of a free and harmonious interplay between imagination and understanding, a play that is *subjectively purposive but universally communicable* (73).

Through such a Kantian lens, we can understand the way in which the three phases of narratory negation in “Recruiting” function to push the bounds of the aesthetic imagination. Nabokov’s experimentation with traditional frame stories, in “Recruiting” challenges conventional conceptions of narrative truths within fiction. In other words, Nabokov creates an extreme cause for aesthetic judgment as a result of the narrator’s perpetual destabilization of previously established information throughout the narrative, thereby instigating the reader to ask if, within the greater context of the fiction, the information revoked by the *narrator* makes the holistic *narrative* any less true.

Nabokov’s construction of a creator-narrator in “Recruiting” also seems to be an outgrowth of *The Eye*, paralleling in many regards Smurov’s imaginative recreation of reality. Though seemingly in control of the waves of information provided to and revoked from the reader, the narrator’s desperation in having his “most rare variety of madness. . . accessible to two people at least, becoming their topic of conversation and thus acquiring rights to routine existence,” without which this “stifling happiness is otherwise deprived,” exposes his detention to the text. Specifically, the narrator in “Recruiting” becomes only a “concept” with an ability to “objectify” so long as his text has a reader; without such a reader, the narrator ceases to exist and remains perpetually encased inside the text.

Furthermore, the narrator's concluding confession exposing his abstruse position, separate from the representation of himself he created through the man reading the Russian newspaper, likens this narrator to Smurov who wishes to exist as an observing abstraction: "to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye" (113).

To transition to the High period, the 1939 short story, "Vasiliy Shishkov," written less than a year before Nabokov's departure for America is the last of Nabokov's short stories to be originally crafted in Russian, definitively marking his abandonment of the language and transition into English. Here the plot is relatively simplistic, detailing the narrator's recollections of the poet Vasiliy Shishkov. The poet approaches the narrator and asks him to review his booklet of poems; after thumbing through the poems, the narrator muses that the poetry was "dreadful—flat, flashy, ominously pretentious. Its utter mediocrity was stressed by the fraudulent chic of alliterations and the meretricious richness of illiterate rhymes" (491). When the narrator earnestly tells the poet that the work is "hopelessly bad," Shishkov reveals that the poetry is a hoax to determine the narrator's honesty: "those credentials are not mine . . . I have learned that you are merciless—which means that you can be trusted" (491).

Following the revelation, Shishkov supplies the narrator with the "real" poems, which are "very good" (492). After thanking the narrator for his opinion, Shishkov invites him to participate in the launching of a new literary magazine. A week or so later, the narrator attends a dismal meeting for the magazine which exhibits the failure of Shishkov's attempted journal. Two weeks later, the narrator encounters Shishkov one final time and recounts the poet's strange declaration:

Here's what I wanted to tell you . . . I have been trying to come to a decision and now I think I have hit upon something, more or less. . . . Why I am in this terrible state would hardly interest you . . . I have been trying to decide what to do—how to stop things, how to get out . . . Retire to a monastery? But religion is boring and alien to me and relates no more than a chimera to what is to me the reality of the spirit. Commit suicide? But capital punishment is something I find too repulsive to be able to act as my own executioner, and furthermore, I dread certain consequences undreamt of in Hamlet's philosophy. Thus there remains but one issue: to disappear, to dissolve (495).

After the narrator departs for France, he learns that Shishkov had in fact vanished, abandoning everything he owned—his location untraceable. Concluding the short story, the narrator states:

With the kind of incident that opens a mystery story my narrative closes . . . But where the deuce did he go? . . . What did he have in mind when he intended to 'disappear, to dissolve'? Cannot it actually be that in a widely literal sense, unacceptable to one's reason, he meant disappearing in his art, dissolving in his verse, thus leaving of himself, of his nebulous person, nothing but verse? One wonders if he did not overestimate

The transparency and soundness

Of such an unusual coffin (495).

“Vasilii Shishkov” is of critical importance in tracing the progression of Nabokov's opus of short stories, primarily from a biographical standpoint. Maxim D. Shroyer, points to the relationship between “biographical/contextual information” and

“analytical/structural” data encoded within “Vasiliy Shishkov.” To help lay out this association, I will begin by providing a historical framework for the biographical significance of the work.

In the English version of the text,⁸ Shishkov directly addresses the narrator, thereby exposing him as “Gospodin [Mr.] Nabokov” (491). The authorial encoding of the text goes a step further with the fact that Nabokov himself adopted the pen-name “Vasiliy Shishkov” in an experiment designed to curtail the biased criticism of his harshest critic. In the introduction to the story, Nabokov details the émigré context inspiring this biographical hoax:

To relieve the dreariness of life in Paris at the end of 1939 (about six months later I was to migrate to America) I decided one day to play an innocent joke on the most famous of émigré critics, George Adamovich (who used to condemn my stuff as regularly as I did the verse of his disciples) by publishing in one of the two leading magazines a poem signed with a new pen name, so as to see what he would say about that freshly emerged author . . . The Russian original appeared in October or November 1939 . . . and was acclaimed by Adamovich . . . with quite exceptional enthusiasm. (‘At last a great poet has been born in our midst,’ etc.—I quote from memory . . .). I could not resist elaborating the fun and, shortly after the eulogy appeared, I published in the same *Poslednie Novosti* . . . my prose piece ‘Vasiliy Shishkov’ . . . which could be regarded according to the émigré reader’s degree of acumen, either as an actual occurrence involving a real person called Shishkov, or as a tongue-in-cheek story about the strange case of one poet

⁸ Shryer points to the fact that in the original, Russian version of the story, the narrator remains nameless and unidentified.

dissolving into another. Adamovich refused at first to believe eager friends and foes who drew his attention to my having invented Shishkov . . . (653).

Thus, Nabokov has fashioned a web of biographic-intertextuality where the narrator of “Vasilii Shishkov” links himself to Nabokov as a widespread authorial identity and the poet, Shishkov, embodies the brief literal and figurative artistic extension of Nabokov.

An added stratum of encoded biographical information is the fact that “Vasilii Shishkov” is Nabokov’s final Russian short story. Thus, the “transparence and soundness of such an unusual coffin” encapsulates not only a farewell to the fictitious Shishkov who quite literally “dissolves in his verse” but also marks a permanent departure from Nabokov’s émigré existence as a Russian author, who also in a widely literal sense “disappeared into his art.” Through this artistic distinction, which Nabokov himself formulates with the creation of “Vasilii Shishkov, Nabokov’s adoption of a new linguistic medium signals a sort of literary rebirth, giving rise to a transformed outgrowth of himself.

Lastly, moving to the American period and one final specimen of Nabokov’s short fiction, “The Vane Sisters” is Nabokov’s penultimate short story, composed seven years prior to his abandonment of the form in 1958; written in Ithaca, New York in 1951, the story remained unpublished until 1959. Here it is perhaps significant to note that “The Vane Sisters” was produced four years prior to the publication of *Lolita* but was not published until after Nabokov received acclamation from his most iconic work. Nabokov characterized “The Vane Sisters” as the best story he ever wrote,⁹ narrated by “a somewhat obtuse scholar and rather callous observer of the superficial planes of life” (Boyd, *American Years* 195).

⁹ Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya, 293.

In an introduction to the short story, Nabokov cues readers to the following devices:

In this story the narrator is supposed to be unaware that his last paragraph has been used acrostically by two dead girls to assert their mysterious participation in the story. This particular trick can be tried only once in a thousand years of fiction (655).

As superciliously indicated by Nabokov, the short story is conveyed once again by a negligent narrator who rejects the possibility of an intangible transcendent essence of the dead sisters Cynthia and Sybil Vane. At the start of the story the narrator is enraptured by the dripping of a collection of icicles, which produce a sensation of acute perceptual attentiveness:

This twinned twinkle was delightful but not completely satisfying; or rather it only sharpened my appetite for other tidbits of light and shade, and I walked on in a state of raw awareness that seemed to transform the whole of my being into one big eyeball rolling in the world's socket (615).

The narrator's "appetite" for light and shade establishes an early emphasis on ocular perception, with a particular focus on the contours of light and dark. The passage also mirrors Smurov's profession at the conclusion of *The Eye*, where he claims that utmost happiness is attributed to being "nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye" (113). It is perhaps noteworthy to point out that Smurov's optical protestations occur at the conclusion of the novella, whereas the narrator of the "The Vane Sisters" makes this claim at the very outset of the story, pointing toward, *perhaps*, a narrator with a heightened sense of perceptual awareness.

After becoming lost in the lucid perceptions of his surroundings, the narrator finds himself in a street distant from his “usual eating place” and runs into “D.” who informs the narrator of the death of Cynthia Vane (616). This information inspires the narrator to reminisce about the two deceased sisters Sybil and Cynthia Vane. The narrator begins with recollections of the younger sister Sybil who had an affair with D. and left a suicide note encrypted in pun in an exam booklet for the narrator. Following Sybil’s suicide, the narrator becomes closer with Cynthia and dismissively describes what he considers to be Cynthia’s simplistic metaphysical creed, which functions as a representation of foreshadow and slips through the text unnoticed by the narrator:

. . . she never could describe in full the theory of intervenient auras that she had somehow evolved. Fundamentally there was nothing particularly new about her private creed . . . The interesting point was a curious practical twist that Cynthia gave to her tame metaphysics. She was sure that her existence was influenced by all sorts of dead friends each of whom took turns in directing her fate much as if she were a stray kitten which a school girl in passing gathers up, and presses to her cheek, and carefully puts down again, near some suburban hedge—to be stroked presently by another transient hand or carried off to a world of doors by some hospitable lady (620).

The narrator continues to dismiss this sort of occult, leading to a falling out between him and Cynthia. The night the narrator learns of Cynthia’s death from D., he returns home and becomes anxious that Cynthia’s aura is somehow surrounding him. The narrator then plunges “into Shakespeare’s sonnets” and finds himself “idiotically checking the first

letters of the lines to see what sacramental words they might form” the way Cynthia had often searched for acrostic meaning within texts (625).

The final pages of the story most strongly display Nabokov’s association between light and shadow as well as material and immaterial connotations of vision. After several pages of musings about Cynthia’s life, the narrator experiences unrest regarding the possibility of her spirit:

I was appealing to flesh, and the corruption of flesh, to refute and defeat the possible persistence of discarnate life. Alas, these conjurations only enhanced my fear of Cynthia’s phantom. Atavistic peace came with dawn, and when I slipped into sleep the sun through the tawny window shades penetrated a dream that somehow was full of Cynthia (626-627).

Among the shadows of a sleepy dawn the narrator is able to grasp wisps of Cynthia’s luminous essence. But once dawn overturns completely to the day’s light hours, the narrator’s “sensibilities” again take hold: “This was disappointing. Secure in the fortress of daylight, I said to myself that I had expected more. She, a painter of glass-bright minutiae—and now so vague!” (627). The narrator’s vacillating ability to perceive Cynthia’s aura at the dawn of a new day prepares readers for the final revelation of Cynthia and Sybil Vane, and perhaps Nabokov himself, in the shadows of the upcoming acrostic, marking the narrator’s final disassociation from the text.

In an ultimate attempt to decode dusk’s dreamy pulsation of Cynthia, the narrator makes a last decrypting effort: “I set myself to reread my dream—backward, diagonally, up, down—trying hard to unravel something Cynthia-like in it, something strange and suggestive that must be there” (627). But instead of discovering Cynthia’s clandestine

phantom, the narrator draws a murky conclusion, which bears Cynthia and her sister visibly at the tip of his tongue, peeping through the text of his final, indistinct vision:

I could isolate, consciously, little. Everything seemed blurred, yellow-clouded, yielding nothing tangible. Her inept acrostics, maudlin evasions, theopathies—every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning. Everything seemed yellowly blurred, illusive, lost (627).

Signaling the acrostic is the drastic change in the narrator's tone, which enhances the sensation of his discursive unconsciousness. The first letter of each of the above words forms the message: "Icicles by Cynthia. Meter from me Sybil." Cynthia's icicles had captivated the narrator, inspiring him to stop "to watch a family of brilliant icicles dripping from the eaves of a frame house" and rousing him to the state of heightened perception, causing him to liken his excitement to an "eyeball rolling in the world's socket" (615). Concurrently, the slender, shadowy silhouette of the parking meter earlier in the text was a product of Sybil's creation that led the narrator to D.:

The lean ghost, the elongated umbra cast by a parking meter upon some damp snow, had a strange ruddy tinge . . . it was then that a car crunched to a standstill near me and D. got out of it with an exclamation of feigned pleasure (616).

Despite the narrator's acuity toward such details, he remains blind to the intangible significance of these apparitions, imperceptive to the imaginative pulses of the world which common sense tells him to ignore. In this Nabokov establishes a pattern between optical lucidity and imaginative transparency whereby the sharpness of the eye can hinder the dexterity of transcending imaginative capacity. As exhibited by Nabokov's narrator,

heightened ocular focus and sensitivity have the potential to establish a disregard for the incorporeal, creating a sort of metaphysical blindness.

Misty Reynolds postulates that Nabokov's implementation of light and shade surrounding these descriptions establish distinct color associations which signify the existence of the two sisters and the way in which they artistically tinge the narrative:

Furthermore, the grey of the 'pointed shadows' and the 'blue silhouettes' of the icicles form specific color associations with the sisters. Both Cynthia and Sybil are connected to shadows and shade, especially Sybil whose grey shadow seems to haunt the narrative. Cynthia is also linked to or represented by the color blue (23).

Reynolds further enhances this claim with the apt observation that the names of the two sisters echo the Russian word for "blue-grey iridescent": *sizyi* (24). The saturation of color gradients of light and shade in connection with the sisters enhances the relationship between author and perceptive reader as it artistically designs a world that lies beyond the narrator's perceptive capacity.

Reynolds also points to the pun embedded in the word "icicle," which Nabokov later utilizes again in *Pale Fire*:

. . . the word icicle here is also a pun, used in a similar manner in *Pale Fire* with Kinbote's 'Institute for the Criminal Insane,' *ici*, telling the narrator and the reader that the icicles are the 'key' to solving one of the puzzles within 'The Vane Sisters' as the word 'icicles' can be bifurcated into *ici* (here) and *cles* (keys) (27).

Reynolds continues to explain, ". . . the word play here prepares the reader for Sybil's punning in her suicide note" (27). I would add, that the punning in the word icicles and in

the suicide note are further connected by a third, indicative pun implanted in the word “suicide” itself. Implicit in “suicide” is of course the notion of death, although wedged in the middle of its characters, just as at the start of “icicle,” is the French *ici*. Thus, interpreted bilingually, the word suicide evokes death as well as the present “here,” which captures Sybil’s immediate, yet posthumous presence.

Another of Nabokov’s ploys in “The Vane Sisters” is his manipulation of foreshadow on the level of both textual and imaginative planes. The short story is littered with hints of narratory foreshadow which prepares the perceptive reader for the final acrostic: “I [the narrator] wish I could recollect that novel or short story (by some contemporary writer, I believe) in which, unknown to the author, the first letters of the words in its last paragraph formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message from his dead mother” (623). Foreshadow appears so strongly in this instance, the narrator practically points the reader directly to the final acrostic. One can imagine Nabokov sneering at his uninformed narrator’s description of a text with a message unbeknownst to its author. Concurrently, Cynthia and Sybil’s pervasive presence over the course of the story through artistic glimmers of light and shade, establishes a connective arch between metaphorical and metaphysical devices of shadow.

“The Vane Sisters” encompasses many of the intricacies depicting the binary of Nabokovian imagination and ocular function. The narrator’s early image of himself as a rolling eye reflects both that of the reader, absorbing and looking onto the text as well as the narrator who embodies a state of hyper-sensory perception. Reflection itself is another element that incorporates optical and imaginative significance. The text therefore, yields reflections of authorial craftsmanship and imagination through the duality between

the narrator's overtly reflective recollections of the sisters and the phantasmal reflections of the sisters embedded within the text. The duality of shadow and foreshadow inserts a sort of textual consciousness between letters and characters that when encoded breathes the same sort of imaginative transcendence as his characters and sentences themselves. As characterized by Nabokov himself, "The Vane Sisters" is his "finest story," signaling the conclusion of his composition of short fiction and providing a conduit into the complex world of Nabokov's later American novels.

Nabokov's short fiction opens an entry into the evolution of his artistic style, which frames manifestations of his evolving conceptions of consciousness and perceived reality. Utilizing the six stories laid out in this chapter, we may also trace the development of Nabokov's growing associations between imaginative vision and ocular function. "Gods" establishes the early emergence of such a connection through recollective reflections captured in the narrator's wife's eyes. The concept of reflection then begins to take on a transposing position in "A Guide to Berlin" where the narrator is able to absorb a mirror image of the publican's son in the present and imaginatively reconfigure the vision into a reflected memory in the future. "A Guide to Berlin" is exemplary of a pilot story that lays the foundation for more complex constructions depicting simultaneity of time and space sequences through ocular and imaginative lenses, as depicted in "Terra Incognita." The indistinguishable primacy of both realities conveyed in "Terra Incognita" blurs the lines between ocular and imaginative, establishing a Wellsian environment of "transitory mental aberrations" that challenge traditional structures of the primacy of a particular reality.

“Recruiting” further distorts constructions of reliability and truths within fiction through the narrator’s perpetual negation of previously established information. The narrator’s direct insertions of himself within the text draw out the interactive dynamic between author, narrator, and reader, which becomes even more exacerbated in later texts such as “The Vane Sisters.” The troika between author, reader, and narrator is advanced further in “Vasiliy Shishkov” with Nabokov’s biographical encoding of his Russian literary personas that establish an almost “Smurov-esque” disassociation of identity. Lastly, “The Vane Sisters” demonstrate a strong connection between optically perceivable phenomenon such as light, shadow, reflection, even the text itself, and the ways in which these visual impressions can harbor posthumously transcendent sensations.

Chapter III: The Double's Reflection

Configurations of Artifice in *Gogol*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*

You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects.

—Vladimir Nabokov¹⁰

The poet's plan is to display in the very texture of his text the intricacies of the 'game' in which he seeks the key to life and death.

—*Pale Fire* 194

During September of 1966 in Montreux Switzerland, Alfred Appel Jr. conducted an interview with Nabokov, asking the author: "In which of your early works do you think you first begin to face the possibilities that are fully developed in *Invitation to a Beheading* and reach an apotheosis in the 'involute abode' of *Pale Fire*?" Nabokov unsurprisingly replied: "Possibly in *The Eye*. . ." (*Strong Opinions* 74). Once more, *The Eye* will serve as our guide throughout this chapter in researching passages of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's two best known American novels¹¹ in conjunction with the short stories discussed in the previous chapter, particularly with respect to optics and doubling.

¹⁰ *Strong Opinions* 11.

¹¹ Nabokov himself characterized *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* as his two best American novels, see *Strong Opinions*, 52.

Before discussing *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, it seems pertinent to take a lesson from Professor Nabokov himself as this chapter outlines Nabokov's opening discussion to students on "Good Readers and Good Writers" from his *Lectures on Literature*¹² and applies Nabokov's particular methodology of reading to an investigation of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Then, utilizing Nabokov's analysis of Gogol from both his *Lectures on Russian Literature* as well as his short biography *Nikolai Gogol* (1944), I apply these studies of Gogol toward Nabokov's own fiction. The chapter finally returns to themes of doubling, briefly in Dostoevsky and *The Eye*, then at length in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Again the chapter engages with the theme of optical perception and imaginative creation/recreation by exploring Nabokov's artistic creed and his fictional formations of "reality."¹³

Early in Nabokov's short essay on "Good Readers and Good Writers," he emphasizes that a work of fiction marks the creation of another world and must be approached as something entirely new, without necessary connections to the world of the reader:

We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been

¹² Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* and *Lectures on Russian Literature* serve as two compilations of his lectures on Russian and European fiction during his academic career at Wellesley College and Cornell University during the 1940s and 1950s.

¹³ Several times Nabokov has stated the necessity to regard "reality" with quotation marks. Take for example in *Strong Opinions*, his response to a question about the precedence of the imagination over the mind: "I tend to regard more and more the objective existence of *all* events as a form of impure imagination—hence my inverted commas around "reality." Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy" (*Strong Opinions* 154).

closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge (*Lectures on Literature* 1).

The statement cautions against conceived generalizations when approaching a work of fiction and harbors particular importance when we examine Nabokov's works that present dual frames of existence or unreliable narration; here, Nabokov emphasizes that all frames of "reality" presented in a fiction are fictive, even if some seem more "real," or plausible than others. Sieving through *The Eye*, for example, we may distinguish between Smurov's imaginative recreation of his reality and the larger fictional reality framing the work, but we cannot characterize either realm as "real." It is perhaps this conception that gives rise to Nabokov's attacks of genres such as detective fiction or dream framework narratives, as implicit in these designs is the claim of a discovery of the "real."¹⁴

Expanding on his conceptions of created fictitious worlds, Nabokov develops the distinctions between writers of genius and minor authors, which exposes the way the material world functions as a source of imaginative reinvention for Nabokov:

Time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and of minds, all these are for writers of genius (as far as we can guess and I trust we guess right) not traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way. . . minor authors . . . do not bother about any reinventing of the world; they merely try to squeeze the best they can out of a given order of things, out of traditional patterns of fiction . . . But the real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and

¹⁴ The Vintage International (1990) version of *Strong Opinions* includes descriptions of each of Nabokov's novels and characterizes *The Eye* as follows: "*The Eye* is as much farcical detective story as it is a profoundly refractive tale about the vicissitudes of identities and appearances."

eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib, that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself. The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos and to this chaos the author says 'go!' allowing the world to flicker and fuse (2).

Assuming Nabokov considered himself an author of genius, and to borrow his words, "as far as we can guess . . . I trust we guess right," his discussion on the imaginative power of fiction offers insight into the ways he approaches a work of fiction and intends it to be explored. Through such a passage, we can envision Nabokov tinkering and tampering with every word, inflection, flinch, or musing experienced by his unreliable narrators and the worlds that surround them. The passage points to the fact that none of Nabokov's characters ever truly "wrestle for the levers of control"—any perception of such a struggle is merely another guise or device instilled by the creator, Nabokov.

Reverting back to the topic of reading, Nabokov establishes a critical relation between the optical process of reading and imagination, describing the ways in which the optical absorption of a text restricts the work to sequences of space and time, which can be transcended by the mind through rereading:

Incidentally, I use the word reader very loosely. Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader, and I shall tell you why. When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right,

line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting . . . We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave toward the book as we do towards a painting. However, let us not confuse the physical eye, that monstrous masterpiece of evolution, with the mind an even more monstrous achievement. A book, no matter what it is . . . appeals first of all to the mind. The mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine, is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book (3-4).

This association between the optical groundwork involved in a preliminary encounter with a text and the holistic absorption of the text after rereading is essential to Nabokov's methods of creation as well as his expectations from readers. Nabokov's fiction, particularly his later short stories and novels, are so layered with puns, allusions, anagrams, acrostics, masks, and minute, yet central, details, that he requires his perceptive readers to revisit his texts again and again to experience the spasm of artistic stimulus that inspired the work, in an effort to open up his imagined realms.

At Wellesley College in 1941, Nabokov delivered a lecture entitled "The Art of Literature and Common Sense," which expounds upon his understanding of the transcendent qualities of artistic inspiration: "the most natural form of creative thrill—a

sudden live image constructed in a flash out of dissimilar units which are apprehended all at once in a stellar explosion of the mind” (*Lectures on Literature* 379). This “flash” of inspiration is precisely the reason why a book requires rereading—so readers can come closer to the authorial imagination by interpreting the text without the confines of chronology:

Time and sequence cannot exist in the author’s mind because no time elements and no space elements had ruled the initial vision . . . without the bother of working from left to right and without the absurdity of beginnings and ends, this would be the ideal way of appreciating a novel, for thus the author saw it as the moment of its conception (379-380).

Thus, for Nabokov, artistic creation, and perhaps even rereading to some degree, has the potential to ascend the ladder of consciousness, which Nabokov characterizes in the following three categories: “Time without consciousness—lower animal world; time with consciousness—man; consciousness without time—some still higher state” (*Strong Opinions* 30).

To achieve any sort of higher consciousness, the reader, according to Nabokov, must also employ their imaginative capacity while reading fiction: “Since the master artist used his imagination in creating his book, it is only natural and fair that the consumer of a book should use his imagination too” (*Lectures on Literature* 4). As the reader follows the author’s text, they must simultaneously conjure live versions of the author’s descriptions, creating personal reflections of the world laid out by the author; Nabokov characterizes this as a “harmonious balance between the reader’s mind and the

author's mind" where . . . The reader must know when and where to curb his imagination . . . by trying to get clear the specific world the author places at his disposal" (4).

Nearing the conclusion of his lecture "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov defines the necessity of deception within fiction:

Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth. Every great writer is a great deceiver, but so is that arch-cheat Nature . . . there is in nature a marvelous system of spells and wiles. The writer of fiction only follows Nature's lead. (5)

Implicit in nature's "marvelous system of spells and wiles" is the notion of intricacy and specificity. As an avid lepidopterist, Nabokov studied at great length nature's deception on levels as minute as the pattern on the underside of a butterfly's wing that mimics "the flowerhead on which the butterfly sleeps . . . imitating dewdrops in the dangerous light of the morning" (*Nabokov's Butterflies* 311). This level of deceptive detail captures the degree to which Nabokov tries to mimic nature's game through fiction and explicates the root of Nabokov's scorn for generality, which negligently obscures the wonders of the world. Motifs and categories such as detective fiction or doubling are once again too tired and simplistic, as they gloss over the specificity of the illusory detail, which the artist as a creator must not ignore.

In concluding this introductory lecture, Nabokov discloses the three necessary ingredients of a "major" author who must embody a combination of "storyteller, teacher, enchanter" (5). The author as a storyteller functions primarily for entertainment and simple excitement throughout the text. The teacher occupies "A slightly different though not necessarily higher mind . . . Propagandist, moralist, prophet—this is the rising

sequence” (5). Indirectly this statement functions as another criticism of Dostoevsky whose moral foregrounding and “teaching” lower the level of his prose, according to Nabokov. “Finally, and above all, a great writer is always a great enchanter, and it is here that we come to the really exciting part when we try to grasp the individual magic of his genius and to study the style, the imagery, the pattern of his novels or poems” (5-6). Thus, let us examine Nabokov as an enchanter, first through Gogol, which will open pathways into *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*.

Nabokov’s treatment of Gogol in the “innocent, and rather superficial, little sketch of his life,”¹⁵ provides vital insight into the elements of experimental forms that most interested Nabokov in the 1930s and 1940s and were implemented in his later novels, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The very unconventional way in which Nabokov composed *Nikolai Gogol* lends itself to the structure of his novels, specifically because of the deception and imaginative recreation involved in the composition of this biography. Nabokov’s detailing of Gogol’s mimicry, masking, and sculpting of his readers, are all ingredients that are directly applicable to Nabokov’s prose. Lastly, Nabokov’s discussion of the limitation of human perception as demonstrated through Gogol’s art is reflective of the way Nabokov distorts and disrupts traditional notions of perception in his fiction.

The first, and perhaps most critical, point to bear in mind when examining *Gogol*, is that above all this biography is about Nabokov. As Robert Bowie accurately points out in his essay “Nabokov’s Influence on Gogol,” “. . . the most brilliant achievement of the book lies in the ability of the conjuror-contortionist Nabokov to present sometimes valid and always sparkling insights into Gogol’s art and, simultaneously, to place an emphasis

¹⁵ This is how Nabokov characterized his biography *Nikolai Gogol* in an interview in 1969 (*Strong Opinions* 156).

on himself” (252). Pushing this claim further, Bowie states: “Nabokov wrote a book about himself while ostensibly writing a book about Gogol” (252). This solipsistic approach to biography is critical in several respects. First, throughout the text Nabokov describes his admiration for Gogol’s ability to conjure, mimic, distort, and mask traditional conceptions of “reality,” which indirectly calls attention to Nabokov’s own ability to employ such devices and deceive his readers in the context of this biography as well as other works of fiction. In effect, it is difficult at times to discern whether Nabokov is praising his predecessor or pointing to his own artistic brilliance.

The second area for consideration is the way Nabokov’s reworking of the biographic form aligns with his conceptions of “reality.” It is precisely because a biographer can never truly capture the “reality” of their subject that Nabokov makes a meager attempt to even try. Paradoxically, Nabokov has refashioned biographic convention into a more accurate practice by refocusing attention to himself—the only subject he can truly know. When asked about the possibilities of literary biography in an interview in 1966, Nabokov brought in the notion of the double, stating: “They are great fun to write, generally less fun to read. Sometimes the thing becomes a kind of double paper chase: first the biographer pursues his quarry through letters and diaries, and across the bogs of conjecture, and then a rival authority pursues the muddy biographer” (*Strong Opinions* 67). This “double paper chase” is principally important; by evading the “bogs of conjecture” almost entirely, Nabokov has rejected traditional, factual biography, and streamlined the “double paper chase” toward a singular subject—himself.

At the end of the biography, in a seemingly fictitious dialogue with the publisher of *Gogol*, Nabokov defends his lack of traditional plot summary in relation to Gogol's works, stating:

'I have tried to explain,' –I said, –'that in Gogol's books the real plots are behind the obvious ones. Those real plots I do give. His stories only mimic stories with plots. It is like a rare moth that departs from a moth-like appearance to mimic the superficial pattern of a structurally quite different thing—some poplar butterfly, say' (152).

This is a central feature to much of Nabokov's fiction, as demonstrated through short stories such as "A Guide to Berlin," "Vasilii Shishkov" and "The Vane Sisters" to name a few. Often Nabokov's texts harbor a relatively simplistic, explicit plotline, with a "real" or transcendent plotline behind the obvious one. For Nabokov, the covert meaning of his texts take form through a fusion of wordplay, biographical encoding, highly sensory descriptions, and perceptual distortions such as reflections, mirrors, and shadows, conveyed through unreliable narration. Moreover, this description encapsulates the very form of *Gogol*, which mimics the superficial pattern of biography but is "structurally quite a different thing."

Further adding to the illusory qualities of Gogol's texts is the deliberate masking of meaning. In the chapter entitled "Apotheosis of a Mask," Nabokov describes the function of disguising a text in order to get closer to the underlying depth of the hidden reality within the text:

The torrent of 'irrelevant' details . . . produces such a hypnotic effect that one almost fails to realize one simple thing (and that is the beauty of the final stroke).

A piece of most important information, the main structural idea of the story is here deliberately masked by Gogol (because all reality is a mask) (148). By masking the “real” meaning or invented reality beneath the text, Gogol, and of course Nabokov, have created in the same manner as “that other V.N. Visible Nature” (*Strong Opinions* 153). It seems therefore, that Nabokov indirectly asserts that the artist must mimic nature’s method of creation by adopting her magical guises and imbuing imagined, fictional realities with as much detail and deception as nature herself.

One such Gogolian example of a gush of irrelevant details, formulating a layered mask, can be found at the opening of “Diary of a Madman.” The narrator at the onset of the story, begins to tell his readers that he “wouldn’t have gone to the office at all” if he had known “the sour look” he was going to receive from the head of his department. The aside, however, takes on a dizzyingly different course than the one initially outlined by the narrator:

For some time now he’s been saying ‘Why are you always in such a muddle? Sometimes you rush around like a madman and make such a mess of your work, the devil himself couldn’t sort it out. You start paragraphs with small letters and leave out the date and reference number altogether.’ Dammed old lazy buzzard! Seeing me in the Director’s office sharpening His Excellency’s quills must have made him jealous. To cut a long story short, I’d never have gone to the office in the first place if there hadn’t been a good chance of seeing the cashier and making the old Jew cough up a small advance somehow or other (17).

Through so many tangential details, the reader becomes completely disoriented, losing sight of the original statement prompting the entire passage. At the same time, Gogol

brilliantly points to his own masking ploys by mirroring the textual muddling that the madman is accused of. Madness permeates the passage more acutely with each random turn of the sentence, culminating in the narrator's claim that he will "cut a long story short" after having just presented readers with so many details that they have difficulty even remembering the original story. Here, Gogol has taken madness and applied it as an aesthetic, portraying a highly specified and distorted point of view, that reflexively reveals itself to be completely out of touch with the reality being described by the describing figure. This is directly resonant to the kind of perceptual specificity and obsession prevalent throughout the masked discourses of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.

As the perceptive reader parcels through devices of masking and mimicry, they experience a distancing from the central narratory figure, which simultaneously produces an enhanced nearness to the authorial imagination. Nabokov describes this phenomenon as Gogol's ability to construct readers in his own form:

Gogol of course never drew portraits—he used looking glasses and as a writer lived in his own looking glass world. Whether the reader's face was a fright or a beauty did not matter a jot, for not only was the mirror of Gogol's own making and with special refraction of its own, but also the reader to whom the proverb was addressed belonged to the same Gogolian world of goose-like, pig-like, nothing-on-earth-like facial phenomenon. Even in his worst writings Gogol was always good at creating his reader, which is the privilege of great writers. Thus we have a circle, a closed family circle, one might say. It does not open into the world (*Nicolai Gogol* 41).

Demonstrating this “family circle” reflecting Gogol’s image in his readers, is the conclusion of “The Nose,” which is just as bizarre as the entire tale, creating an almost uncomfortable departing confrontation with the reader:

And all this took place in the northern capital of our vast empire! Only now, after much reflection, can we see that there is a great deal that is very far-fetched in this story. Apart from the fact that it is *highly* unlikely for a nose to disappear in such a fantastic way and then reappear in various parts of the town dressed as a state councilor, it is hard to believe that Kovalyov was so ignorant as to think newspapers would accept advertisements about noses. I’m not saying I consider such an advertisement too expensive and a waste of money: that’s nonsense, and what’s more I don’t think I’m a mercenary person. But it’s all very nasty . . . makes me feel very awkward! . . . No I don’t understand it one bit! But the strangest, most incredible thing of all is that authors should write about such things. That, I confess is beyond my comprehension . . . I simply don’t know *what* one can make of it . . . However, when it is all said and done, one can concede this point or the other and perhaps you can even find . . . well then you won’t find much that isn’t on the absurd side . . . And yet if you stop to think for a moment, there’s a grain of truth in it . . . (70).

In this unconventional conclusion, Gogol anticipates the reactions of his readers and prescribes for them a very specific and intended response, while upholding the same atmosphere of absurdity as the story itself. Dissecting this passage, we see Gogol’s ironic and superficial inflections of the irrational, beginning with the assertion that only now in a moment of careful reflection can we see the absurdity in a story centered on a man’s

escaped nose. The narrator's discussion of the logistical irrationality of the newspaper advertisement characterizes the absurdity of this type of extreme particularity, which goes back to the notion of madness rooted in obsession. The sudden self-consciousness and awareness of his discomfiture that follows, forces the reader to entertain the questions put forth by the narrator and locate the *real* absurdity of existence that the story captures. In this way, Gogol has strangely, and effectively, configured the response of his readership.

Nabokov's description of Gogol's ability to transform his creative readership reflects his later responses about the same topic:

I don't think an artist should bother about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning. I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask (*Strong Opinions* 18).

Like Gogol, Nabokov's penchant mode of communication through solipsistic narrators with individually distorted perceptions, requires the reader to reject the, often convincing, reality projected by such narrators and unearth the deeper, authorial nucleus embedded beneath the superficial narratory crust, as particularly well illustrated through "The Vane Sisters." William Rowe draws parallels between Nabokov and Gogol's employment of "reversal effects" which cause "a fresh view of "reality" and, somewhat paradoxically, a simultaneous and unsettling awareness of human perceptual limitations" ("Gogolesque Perception-Expanding Reversals in Nabokov" 110). These perceptual reversals are in line with techniques of mimicking and masking as well Nabokov and Gogol's ability to transform their audience into reflections of themselves, ultimately disclosing to the persistent and astute reader the hidden view of their invented authorial reality.

Rowe points toward Gogol and Nabokov's fondness for "innocent little trap doors opening into other, eerie realities" (111), which is an aspect of Gogol's fiction that Nabokov particularly focuses on in his discussion of *The Overcoat*. Nabokov's commentary on Gogol's literary posterns, provides valuable insight into Nabokov's own methods of creation as well as Gogol's:

The essence of mankind is irrationally derived from the chaos of fakes which form Gogol's world . . . The allusions to something else behind the crudely painted screens, are so artistically combined with the superficial texture of the narration that civic-minded Russians have missed them completely. But a creative reading of Gogol's story reveals that here and there in the most innocent descriptive passage, this or that word, sometimes a mere adverb or preposition, for instance the word "even" or "almost," is inserted in such a way as to make the harmless sentence explode in a wild display of nightmare fireworks; or else the passage . . . all of a sudden leaves the tracks and swerves into the irrational where it really belongs; or again, quite as suddenly, a door bursts open and a mighty wave of foaming poetry rushes in only to dissolve in bathos, or to turn into its own parody, or to be checked by the sentence breaking and reverting to a conjuror's patter, that patter which is such a feature of Gogol's style. It gives one the sensation of something ludicrous and at the same time stellar, lurking constantly around the corner—and one likes to recall that the difference between the comic side of things, and their cosmic side, depends upon one sibilant (*Gogol* 142).

The artistry of superficially fashioned textures of narration, under which lies the eruption of the author's cosmic reality, directly captures Nabokov's model for creation, while shedding light on Gogol's puzzling passages such as the conclusion of "The Nose." Here, mimicry and masking come into full force, as the artist hides his footprints under thinly laid perceptual certainties. Only the perceptive reader can grab hold of the "conjurer's patter," and catch the cosmic in the comic—a lexical relation that is particularly Nabokovian in nature.

The shifting tides of expression in Nabokov and Gogol's writing causes the reversal that Rowe characterizes as: ". . . a haunting return to the point of departure even while narrational focus seems to keep moving away" ("Gogolesque Reversals" 113). This is particularly true through *The Eye*, where the reader suspects the narrator and Smurov are one, although the narratory course of the novel continues to track Smurov as a separate entity; this causes perpetual fluctuations and reversals of point of view, which the reader has to scrutinize in order to recognize Smurov's perceptual fragility and opens an expanded perception of the author's calculated imaginative design. This scheme is particularly well performed in the short story "Recruiting," which frequently reverses and negates information purported by the deceptive narrator and self-consciously calls attention to the artifice of art, which "takes the reader back to where he started only to emphasize that he is somewhere else" ("Gogolesque Reversals" 118).

Indirectly, Rowe also touches upon the role of optics in revealing and distorting such reversals: "Both Nabokov and Gogol often depict sudden, perspective-wrenching reflections (in puddles, mirrors, lakes, and so on) which all seem part of a larger and stranger preoccupation with reversing the real and the unreal" (118). The refractive

qualities of such substances perpetuate the almost indistinguishable camouflages between the “real” and the illusory textures of the texts, which will be examined further in my discussion of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.

A perfect example of Gogolian scheme of reversal occurs near the conclusion of “Diary of a Madman,” where the narrator, now confined to a mental institution, steadfastly continues to believe he is the King of Spain:

Up to this time Spain had been somewhat of a mystery to me. Their native customs and court etiquette are really most peculiar . . . Today they shaved my head even though I shrieked as loud as I could that I didn’t want to be a monk. And I have only a faint memory of what happened when they poured water over my head. Never before had I gone through such hell. I was in such a frenzy they had difficulty in holding me down. What these strange customs mean is beyond me. So foolish, Idiotic! (39).

The narrator’s text almost completely bifurcates as he tries to describe strange “Spanish customs,” which the reader knows to be his experiences in an asylum. As the narrator illustrates these events with increasing detail, the text departs more and more markedly from his strange vantage. Nabokov has almost directly borrowed from this idea in *Pale Fire*, whose delusional narrator, Kinbote, believes he is the King of Zembla.

Structure plays an essential role in forming the illusion of “reality” through the premise of authentic convention. Approaching the conclusion of *Gogol*, Nabokov dislocates the biographic form with the following attestation:

While trying to convey my attitude towards his art I have not produced any tangible proofs of its particular existence. I can only place my hand on my heart and affirm that I have not imagined Gogol. He really wrote, he really lived (150). This peculiar and indirect acknowledgement of the blurring between a fictional and a real Gogol faintly echoes Smurov's claims towards an imagined Vanya. After this unconventional conclusion, Nabokov reinserts a semblance of authentic biographic form through his false commentaries with his publisher, chronology, and index. Nabokov's dialogue with his publisher seems plausible, though more overtly fictitious, than the index. The index wears an overcoat of "truth" but turns out to be more fiction than function.

Nabokov characterized the biography as "a rather frivolous little book with a nightmare index (for which I am not responsible) and an unscholarly, though well-meant, hodgepodge of transliteration systems (for which I am)" (Bowie 263). Bowie makes the convincing claim that although Nabokov denied responsibility for the index, there are footprints of the deceptive artist in entries such as the listing of James Laughlin, Nabokov's publisher, "with reference to p. 151ff. There is no footnote on this page, and the name James Laughlin never appears in the text, but it is on p.151 that Nabokov's fictional dialogue with the publisher begins" (Bowie 264). Other footnoted entries seem equally as suspect, particularly because Nabokov frequently indexes his own stylistic descriptions, which have virtually nothing to do with Gogol. Nabokov, for example, places "Moscow, Ohio" in the index when it was used merely to illustrate "the dotted line of a vicious circle with no geographical meaning" as well as "Graces," which points readers to a page describing Gogol's possessions, including three crooked candlesticks,

which Nabokov compares to “Grecian Graces” (*Gogol* 117, 104). Such a strange index creates an even larger discrepancy between biographer and subject, as it self-consciously redirects the reader to Nabokov’s prose as opposed to providing an informative key of information on Gogol.

This masking and parody of form, is directly related to the structure of *The Eye*, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* and mimics the opening of “Diary of a Madman,” where “. . . the devil himself couldn’t” sort out the “paragraphs with small letters” whose “dates[s] and reference number[s]” are left out altogether. *Pale Fire* adopts the form of a false critical edition of a poem with a foreword, index, and commentary that is completely disjointed from the poem in question. Similarly, *Lolita*, is written in the form of a false memoir, which Alfred Appel Jr. describes as “a very special kind of detective story” (*Annotated Lolita* 454). In this sense, Gogol the author and *Gogol* the somewhat fictional biography, have anticipated the themes of Nabokov’s major novels, which parody the search for veracity in forms such as biography, memoirs, detective fiction, and dream framework narratives. Michael Wood captures these structural impersonations, saying:

Lolita, like countless detective and horror stories, presents itself as a textual game, insists not only on its verbal but also on its written quality. It is a novel pretending to be a memoir with a foreword; as *Pale Fire* is a novel pretending to be a critical edition of a poem; as many novels pretend to be biographies (*The Magician’s Doubts* 103).

Examining the way Nabokov has created a biography that self consciously calls attention to its imprints of artifice, is critical in understanding his calculated craftsmanship of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. More than just the subject of Nabokov’s strange biography, Gogol’s

mastery of mimicking and exaggerating the absurd patterns of the universe as well as fashioning readers in his own looking glass form are areas from which Nabokov has heavily drawn from, or mimicked, in the creation of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Furthermore, Nabokov has adopted Gogol's implementation of madness and obsession as a specified aesthetic from which the author can create a highly distorted plane of perception. Thus, looking at Nabokov's critical analyses of Gogol alongside marked passages of textual influence, prefigures valuable stylistic and structural elements that will become focal in my analysis of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.

The Forewords of both *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* call attention to their own invention. The comically named Dr. John Ray, Jr. states in the Foreword of *Lolita*: “. . . this remarkable memoir is presented in tact. It's author's bizarre cognomen is his own invention; and, of course, this mask—through which two hypnotic eyes seem to grow—had to remain unlifted in accordance with its wearer's wish” (3). The discussion of a mask, and even J.R. Jr.'s humorous name, function to betray the realism created through the frames of foreword and memoir. As Appel identifies, Kinbote also uses a “mask” in his description of the poet Shade, during the Foreword of *Pale Fire*: “This friendship was the more precious for its tenderness being intentionally concealed, especially when we were not alone . . . [h]is whole being constituted a mask” (19). Shade's concealed fondness towards Kinbote signals the upcoming discrepancy between Kinbote's perceptions and Shade's affections. The references of masking in both Forewords reflexively points toward each novel's disguised structure.

Masking, as Nabokov positions in *Gogol*, is significant in uncovering the hidden plots of Nabokov's texts, which feature “the characters in the book, and the

consciousness of the creator above it—the ‘real’ plot” (*Annotated Lolita* xxvi).

Discovering the distinction between character and authorial consciousness has been a central pursuit since *The Eye* and becomes even more essential in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Both works are conveyed through highly individual vantage points, which the reader must filter through in order to uncover the authorial “reality” beneath the mask.

Lolita’s pedophilic stepfather, Humbert Humbert, and John Shade’s fanatical neighbor, Professor Charles Kinbote, both share the characteristic of obsession, signaling a highly distorted frame of narration in each novel. Nabokov provides his readers with tangible signals pointing toward this unreliability and perceptual specificity, although, many such clues are themselves obscured by masks and reversals. The conclusion of Kinbote’s Foreword, to John Shade’s poem “Pale Fire” is an early example of Nabokov’s subtle caution to readers:

Let me state that without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his . . . with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments, and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better for worse, it is the commentator who has the last word (21).

Here, Kinbote admittedly acknowledges Shade’s probable contestation regarding the necessity of Kinbote’s contextual commentary, which functions as an early notice signaling his departure from the original poem itself. Kinbote, nevertheless, dismisses this hypothetical, much in the same way Nabokov disregards factual accuracy in *Gogol*. An added complexity is the degree to which Kinbote’s statements are in some respects

true, since as readers we are dependent on the reality he presents in his foreword, commentary, and index in reviewing *Pale Fire* the novel; without Kinbote, we are left exclusively with “Pale Fire,” the poem.

The famous opening lines of *Lolita* provide another subtle cautioning towards readers:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul . . . She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock . . . She was Dolly at school . . . But in my arms she was always Lolita. Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child . . . About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style (9).

Like Kinbote, Humbert Humbert admits to the fiction of this particular version of Lolita, as her existence is contingent on Humbert’s own experiences. The illusion of detective fiction is also drawn into the opening with Humbert’s mention of a murder, which can be interpreted as the beginning of Nabokov’s masking of an authorial text. Alfred Appel also makes the poignant observation that Lolita’s

. . . name is the first word in the Foreword, as well as the first and last words of the novel. Such symmetries and carefully effected alliterations and rhymes undermine the credibility of H.H.’s ‘point of view,’ since the narrative is presented as an unrevised first draft, mistakes in tact, started in a psychiatric ward and completed in a prison cell, the product of the fifty-six frenzied final days of H.H.’s life (*Annotated Lolita* 328).

Nabokov's masked structural control formulates the budding divergences between his authorial design and the distorted perspective of his focal characters.

Central to chasing Nabokov's authorial scheme is observing and decoding many of his textual encryptions, which point to both the artifice of the work as well as areas of departure between author and character. Appel attributes Nabokov's extensive textual patterning to his passions for language, chess, and Lepidoptera: "Like the games implemented by parody the puns, anagrams, and spoonerisms all reveal the controlling hand of the logomachist; thematically, they are appropriate to a prison of mirrors" (*Annotated Lolita* xxviii). This "prison of mirrors" recalls Smurov's attestation that he does not exist: "there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me" (113). I would argue that although many of Nabokov's lexical games are maddeningly self-reflexive and referential, they pose a crack in the prison of mirrors that reflect the illusory realities of his protagonists. One must remember the temporally significant recurrence of the word "OTTO" in "A Guide to Berlin," or the posthumous acrostic illuminating the transcendent existence of Cynthia and Sybil Vane in "The Vane Sisters."

There is an extensive amount of literature on the textual patterning of both *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, which I will hardly scratch the surface of with my next several examples.¹⁶ Further complicating Nabokov's propensity for patterning and wordplay is the presence of characters who themselves have an inclination towards such verbal amusements. In *Pale Fire*, John Shade describes his dead daughter's proclivity toward wordplay: "She twisted words: pot, top, / Spider, redlips. And 'powder' was 'red wop.' / She called you a

¹⁶ See critics such as Alfred Appel, Carl Eichelberger, and Michael Wood.

didactic katydid (35). Kinbote's commentary on these lines further expands Hazel's palindromic partiality, although from an entirely "Kinbotean" point of view:

One of the examples her father gives is odd. I am quite sure it was I who one day, when we were discussing 'mirror words,' observed (and I recall the poet's expression of stupefaction) that 'spider' in reverse is 'redips,' and 'T.S. Eliot,' 'toilest.' But then it is also true that Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects (*Pale Fire* 149).

Kinbote's commentary conceitedly reroutes Shade's musings about his daughter into recollections about his influence on the poet. The increasing number of such dissonances point toward Kinbote's disillusionment surrounding his relationship to Shade.

The example demonstrates the way in which Kinbote perpetually attempts to mirror the poem through commentary. Shade's poem is autobiographical and centrally focused on Hazel's suicide; by reworking many of the poem's autobiographic elements through the foreword, commentary, and index, Shade is on some levels attempting to mirror, and simultaneously mask, Hazel's role as the poem's inspiration. At this point, Appel's characterization of such lexical gaming as a prison of mirrors seems accurate. When searching for the rupture in the code, it is essential to bear in mind the degree to which Nabokov's characters are cognizant of such verbal ploys. In this case, it seems safe to assume that Shade and Kinbote, are merely mimicking the complicated lexical strategies that frequently escape the notice of Nabokov's narrators. Such overt lexical gaming isn't the imprint of the "master thumb," but is instead an exercise for readers to observe the imitative qualities of Nabokov's narrators, or to use a Nabokovian example,

it is a practice in distinguishing between the “real” butterfly and the moth adorned as the butterfly.

The butterfly motif figures prominently throughout *Lolita*, signaling Nabokov’s authorial presence, which frequently undermines the overt textual narration of Humbert Humbert. Humbert is plagued by his pedophilic obsession for “nymphets,” which he describes as “girl-children,” “Between the ages of nine and fourteen . . . maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac)” (16). Appel points to one of Nabokov’s discoveries of Lepidoptera, “Nabokov’s Wood-Nymph,” that belongs to the family *Nymphalidae* (*Annotated Lolita* 339). Elaborating on this point, Appel states, Nabokov was

. . . not unaware that a ‘nymph’ is also defined as ‘a pupa’ or ‘the young of an insect undergoing incomplete metamorphosis.’ Crucial to an understanding of *Lolita* is some sense of the various but simultaneous metamorphoses undergone by *Lolita*, H.H., the book, the author, and the reader, who is manipulated by the novel’s game element and illusionistic devices . . . (*Annotated Lolita* 339).

Lepidoptera is also used as an encrypted marker that visibly distinguishes between Nabokov and Humbert: “H.H. knows nothing about Lepidoptera. In fact, I [Nabokov] went out of my way to indicate that he confuses the hawk moths visiting flowers at dusk with ‘gray hummingbirds’” (*Annotated Lolita* 327). Accordingly, entomological allusions frequently function as an authorial inscription within the texture of the text.

On the second page of John Ray Jr.’s fictitious foreword, he alludes to a “Vivian Darkbloom,” who has written a biography entitled “My Cue” about her past romance

with the playwright, Clare Quilty. The title “My Cue” cleverly combines the initial letter of Quilty’s first name with the affectionate nickname of a lover “Q.” Throughout the text, Quilty appears as Humbert’s shadow, pursuing him during the course of his cross-country escapades with Lolita, and eventually kidnapping her from the narrator. Because Quilty’s identity is not fully revealed until almost the conclusion of the novel, he occupies an ubiquitous, phantasmal, presence, which asserts itself through a succession of encrypted initials, place names, titles, puns, and allusions that finally coalesce with the revelation that Quilty has been Lolita’s lover, near the close of the work.

Quilty is thus highly connected to textual patterning—even his name enhances his association with lexical patchwork—signaling Nabokov’s manipulative, authorial presence, which crafts a fictitious reality and undermines the authenticity of Humbert’s memoirs. Further solidifying Quilty’s position among verbal figurations is the fact that his previous writing partner and lover, Vivian Darkbloom, anagrammatically spells Vladimir Nabokov, thereby directly indicating the author’s calculating hand (*Annotated Lolita* 323). Vivian Darkbloom’s biography serves as a literal signal, or nod, from Nabokov himself, once again reflexively pointing to the strings of invention within his imaginatively constructed “reality.” This artistic ploy is not unlike the many encrypted autobiographic allusions within the short story “Vasiliy Shishkov.”

Returning to *Pale Fire*, it is perhaps pertinent to provide a bit more plot summary before continuing with textual analysis. There are several streams of plot integrated into the text; Shade’s poem is autobiographical and discusses his daughter’s suicide as well as his musings about the universe, afterlife, and poetic process. Kinbote’s editorial influences provide several layers of plot, which eventually, disjointedly merge together.

Through the foreword, commentary, and index, the reader uncovers Kinbote's obsessive fixation with Shade's poem, which stems from Kinbote's mistaken presumption that he encouraged the creation of the work through stories of his distant homeland Zembla. More specifically, Kinbote believes recollections of the escape of his deposed sovereign, King Charles II, centrally inspired "Pale Fire." Despite Kinbote's frequent attestations, the poem bears no tangible connections to the distant land or its expelled monarch.

Another sub-plot begins to unravel over the course of Kinbote's commentary and index, which suggests that he believes he is the fugitive King, Charles II. Increasingly, the reader uncovers Kinbote's insanity, which becomes particularly clear with his descriptions recounting the scene of John Shade's murder. According to Kinbote, Shade is killed, the same day he completes "Pale Fire," by Jack Grey, an escapee from an Institute for the Criminally Insane, who seeks revenge on the judge who placed him there. The judge in question, Goldsworth, is Shade's neighbor, whose house Kinbote had been renting for the summer. Apparently, Shade harbors an unfortunate resemblance to Judge Goldsworth, and thus, while on a walk with Kinbote, he is mistakenly shot and killed by Grey. Nevertheless, Kinbote has an entirely different take on the murder, as he believes the murderer Jack Grey is actually an assassin, Jakob Gradus, who was hired by the "anti-Karlist" movement in Zembla in an attempt to assassinate Kinbote/King Charles II.

Much of this information is revealed through intricate textual patterning, particularly embedded within Kinbote's bizarre commentary and index. Nabokov sends his readers on dizzying searches as they flip back and forth through the layers of poetry, commentary, and index—although not all of the reader's pursuits are fruitful. Michael Wood points to a futile chase that mirrors Nabokov's earlier experimentation with

biographic index in *Gogol*: “If we look up *Crown Jewels*, for example, in the eccentric index, we are directed consecutively to *Hiding Place*, *potaynik*, *taynik* and back to *Crown Jewels*: a false trail of concealment” (177). This illustration is perfectly representative of the way Nabokov deeply entrenches his “crown jewels,” beneath a web of false leads, each wearing the author’s mask.

Wood also exposes a critical example that unlocks one of the most central (imagined) authorial truths within the novel, once it has been untangled from a series of snares. The clue comes in the form of the name “Botkin,” which Wood describes as the “. . . name which is not supposed to appear and yet keeps appearing...” (177). In the index, Kinbote first mentions the name in the context of a conversation between several faculty members at, the aptly named, Wordsmith College:

Professor Pardon: ‘I was under the impression that you were born in Russia, and that your name was a kind of anagram of Botkin or Botkine?’

Kinbote: ‘You are confusing me with some refugee from Nova Zembla’

[Sarcastically stressing the ‘Nova’].

‘Didn’t you tell me, Charles, that *kinbote* means regicide in your language?’ asked my dear Shade.

‘Yes, a king’s destroyer,’ I said (longing to explain that a king who sinks his identity in the mirror of exile is in a sense just that) (*Pale Fire* 204).

The index also points to two mentions of Botkin. The first listing has several descriptions under the indexed term:

Botkin, V., American Scholar of Russian descent, 894; king-bot, mag-got of extinct fly that once bred in mammoths and is thought to have hastened their

phylogenetic end, 247; bottekin-maker, 71; *bot*, plop, and *boteliy*, big-bellied (Russ.); botkin or bodkin, a Danish stiletto (231).

Wood characterizes these “seemingly irrelevant echoes” as evading their “sensor,” Kinbote (177). The second indexed term is essential, listed as “Sudarg of Bokay,” who is described as: “a mirror maker of genius, the patron saint of Bokay in the mountains of Zembla, 80; life span not known” (*Pale Fire* 238). In line with this description, the very name of this “mirror maker of genius” is in fact a palindromic reflection of “Jakob Gradus,” Shade’s murderer.

Wood, as well as others,¹⁷ conclude that “Kinbote is Botkin; Russian not Zemblan” (177). Retrospectively examining the ways in which “Botkin” figures itself throughout the novel makes this a deceptively obvious conclusion, similarly to Vivian Darkbloom’s “My Cue” in *Lolita*. This deduction provides a new frame for interpreting this seemingly random textual information, as Kinbote seems to be both an anagram for Botkin, his real identity as an “American scholar of Russian descent.” This understanding of Botkin also sheds an ironic light on Kinbote’s haphazard discussion on surnames, when he notes: “. . . one of the many instances when the amorphous-looking but live and personal hereditary patronymic grows, sometimes in fantastic shapes, around the common pebble of a Christian name . . . Botkin (one who makes bottekings, fancy footwear) and thousands of others (78). The growth of a “personal hereditary patronymic” is comical when considering the way Kinbote royally refashions his identity, a joke Nabokov would likely have expected his readers to pick up on.

¹⁷ See for example, Bryan Boyd’s *Nabokov’s Pale Fire* and “Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*” <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/boydpf5.htm>

The Jacob Gradus- Sudarg of Bokay palindrome is the most important of the Botkin allusions. Kinbote's belief in Jacob Gradus as his hired assassin is the highest form of external affirmation in his identity as King Charles II. The lexical reversal of Jacob Gradus as Sudarg of Bokay, negates the possibility for the outward reality of Kinbote/Botkin's royal persona, by mirroring, and reflecting back, a textual image of Kinbote's own fiction. This conclusion is further echoed by the fact that Kinbote himself describes "Sudarg of Bokay" as "a mirror maker of genius, the patron saint of Bokay in the mountains of Zembla, 80; life span not known," which acknowledges his reflexive reality as well as signals to the fact that his life span is not "known" as it is still running its course in the creation of the novel.

Wood captures the way in which uncovering the Botkin behind Kinbote disturbs conceptions of 'fact' and 'reality' in the novel:

But if Kinbote is Botkin we can't place the narrative at all. The material will have been radically redrafted, but still seems to rely on, to allude to, a substratum of 'fact.' As with *Lolita* and Nabokov's other works, we cannot retreat into a safe zone where all is fiction; but the 'reality' here is much harder to establish.

Kinbote/Botkin makes Humbert look like a mine of easy information (178).

Wood continues his caution, stating: ". . . we don't know enough about Botkin to treat him as the 'real,' founding person, the man behind the mask" (178). This, however, is the beauty of the novel, which points us to a trail that leads to a seemingly more "truthful" (fictional) reality, but does not allow this uncovered reality to become primary, as we are not given enough information to make it more real than the acknowledged delusion. This distortion of reality and truths is characteristic of much of Nabokov's writing, as

particularly well demonstrated in *The Eye* and “Terra Incognita.” Wood concludes his discussion of Botkin with: “Botkin’s role in the novel is not to tell the hidden truth, deliver the crown jewels, but to remind us, eerily, that Kinbote’s self *is* invented, precarious; that it has a past or has a double” (178).

Nabokov’s intricate patterning of the double motif throughout his fiction is crucial in uncovering the authorial reality that rests beneath a landscape of masking, mimicry, and optically constructed mischief. I will begin my discussion of Nabokov’s doubles with a brief exhibition of Nabokov’s characteristically dismissive responses when asked about the subject and then delve into the significance of doubling with regard to *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and Nabokov’s readers.

In his 1966 Switzerland interviews with Nabokov Alfred Appel asked the author several explicit questions concerning the doppelgänger motif. When invited to comment about the ways in which the “Doppelgänger motif has been used and abused from Poe, Hoffman, Anderson, Dostoevski, Gogol, Stevenson, and Melville, down to Conrad and Mann?” Nabokov curtly responded: “The Doppelgänger subject is a frightful bore” (*Strong Opinions* 83). Fishing for a more substantial response, Appel’s next question was about *The Double*: “What are your feelings about Dostoevski’s celebrated *The Double*; after all, Hermann in *Despair* considers it a possible title for his manuscript,” to which Nabokov responded: “Dostoevski’s *The Double* is his best work though an obvious and shameless imitation of Gogol’s ‘Nose.’” Felix in *Despair* is really a *false* double” (84). This answer is fundamentally important as it affirms that there are at the very least false doubles at play within Nabokov’s fiction.

In the most obvious and literal sense, certain physical doubles can be located with relative ease in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Humbert and his double, Quilty, are said to look alike, as denoted through several allusions scattered throughout the text. One such example is Humbert's own description of his masculine appeal for pubescent girls: "I have all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl . . . Moreover, I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush" (*Annotated Lolita* 43). Quilty, is of course this "actor chap." Similarly, in *Pale Fire*, the physical resemblance between Shade and Goldsworth is the cause of Shade's accidental assassination.

Another suggestion of duality in both novels can be located through names. The double name Humbert Humbert is derivative from *ombre*, meaning shadow, as established by Appel: "Although Humbert calls Quilty his 'shadow,' the pun on Humbert's name (ombre=shadow) suggests that he is as much a shadow as Quilty . . ." (*Annotated Lolita* lxi). Quilty is also quite a debauched individual, who seems to have a liking for the juvenile Lolita—a personal fact which perhaps accounts for his acuity in guessing Humbert's relationship to Lolita. The double-shadow motif is exaggerated further by the fact that throughout *Lolita*, Quilty is in hot pursuit of Humbert and figures as a shadow both because he is not explicitly named until almost the close of the novel, and because Humbert has already killed Quilty by the time he is writing this memoir.

Nabokov both parodies and takes seriously the doppelgänger relationship between Quilty and Humbert Humbert. In his introduction to the *Annotated Lolita*, Appel argues, ". . . Quilty embodies both the 'truth and a caricature of it,' for he is at once a projection

of Humbert's guilt and a parody of the psychological Double" (lx). Along these lines, Michael Wood asserts that Quilty:

. . . is not, alas, a mere projection of Humbert's oppressed mind, a figment like Banquo's ghost or Macbeth's dagger. He is that mind's nasty analogue, a material *semblable* and *frère*. He is an aspect of Humbert's self-image which has got loose, seceded, and taken over a part of the plot. Or he is Nabokov's answer to Humbert, the case that Humbert can't make against himself (127).

In a sense, even Quilty's position as a double, is doubled by the fact that it is both parody and veracity.

The parody of the double is directly related to Nabokov's disputes with Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's oversimplified fixation with the moral and psychological double figures prominently in the center of Nabokov's mockery of the theme. Appel marks the important connection between *Notes from the Underground* and *Lolita*:

There is thus an important paradox implicit in Nabokov's most audacious parodies: *Lolita* makes fun of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), but Humbert's pages are indeed notes from underground in their own right, and Clare Quilty is both a parody of the Double as a convention of modern fiction and a Double who formulates the horror of Humbert's life (*Annotated Lolita* li).

In *Lolita*, Nabokov has parodied the manic, hyperconscious, paranoid memoir style of *Notes from the Underground*, while simultaneously making light of the doppelgänger motif by implementing a double who seems almost equally depraved. This reflection of two evils, exaggerates Humbert's debauchery without reducing it to a duality between the 'good and evil self.' Wood echoes this point, postulating: "Lolita is not only a book with

a manically material double in it, it is a joke about books which allow such creatures any sort of run. Nabokov would expect us to remember Dostoyevsky, who wrote a novel called *The Double* . . . (128).

Turning to *Pale Fire*, Kinbote's second identification as the Zemblan King Charles II is an obvious double, which is enhanced further by the fact that his obsession with Shade, whose name also connotes shadow, rests in his belief that Shade's poem will exalt his royal character. This assumption also functions as a sort of textually immortalizing double of character. Other doubles in *Pale Fire* include: Kinbote and Botkin, Zembla and Russia, Jack Grey and Jakob Gradus, even Hazel and Kinbote, and many, many others. In effect, *Pale Fire* is bottomless entrapment of reflected doubles.

In the article entitled "Infinite Reflections in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," Priscilla Meyer and Jeff Hoffman state: "In his fiction, Nabokov plays with the many possible varieties of doubling—simple duplication, false duplication, mirror image left-right reversal, and real (this world) vs. ideal (an other world)" (198). This is certainly the effect of the examples laid out in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Nabokov's frequent doubling of doubling, or mirroring/mimicking of doubles is itself a contest to the motif's reductive binary nature. As Meyer and Hoffman point out:

Double tales illustrating German Romantic philosophy depict the dilemma of the impossibility of embodying the ideal in the real world . . . The popularized double tales, however, interpret the problem not philosophically, but morally and psychologically, as the conflict between super-ego (*Doctor Jekyll*) and suppressed id (the Frankenstein *monster*), leaving out altogether the problem of an otherworld, or reducing it to mere spookdom (198).

Thus, in the same way that Nabokov utilizes scaffolds of detection fiction and dream framework narratives, to highlight the simplistic and exclusionary nature of categories prefacing one reality over another, Nabokov completely refigures the doppelgänger motif.

Appel echoes these claims and draws in the influence of Gogol in Nabokov's complex reformation of the double:

. . . the ambiguities of human experience and identity are not to be reduced to mere dualities . . . The reader who has expected the solemn moral-ethical absolutes of a Poe, Dostoevsky, Mann, or Conrad Doppelgänger fiction instead discovers himself adrift in a fantastic, comic cosmos more akin to Gogol's (*Annotated Lolita* lxii).

Along these Gogolian lines, madness and distortion of perception are central in the creation of Nabokov's textual strata of doubles. With reference to Nabokov's early novel *Despair*, Ellen Pifer remarks: "In *Despair*, however, the Doppelgänger motif becomes a deceptive shadow-theme, tracing the delusions of Hermann's mad mind" (104). Viewing the double motif as an illusory shadow that outlines the misconceptions of Nabokov's narrators, lends an understanding of Nabokov's pervasive implementation of doubles, which aligns with his aesthetic creed as established through interviews, lectures, and *Gogol*.

Further solidifying the connection between madness and doubling are Meyer and Hoffman's remarks about the aesthetic of madness:

The question of literary doubles was crucial to Nabokov's Romantic idealist aesthetic philosophy because it located madness as an aesthetic rather than a

psychological phenomenon. Nabokov's failed artists (e.g. Herman, Luzhin, Humbert, Van Veen) are often given mock psychological motivations, but their true problem is the unattainability of an ideal (usually misconstrued) in reality (198).

This analysis can certainly be extended to Smurov and Kinbote, who are loosely failed artists themselves through their attempts to imaginatively reinvent their existence. Aesthetic madness functions as the perfect platform from which Nabokov is able to construct a fantastical realm—coating his works with shadows of the madman and burying the artist's crown jewels underneath. Madness provides a means for incredible distortion of perception and delusion in the overt text, through which Nabokov can distinguish his authorial imagination by intricate textual encryptions, allusions, illusions, and of course—a paranoid's nightmare—mines of doubles.

Central to Nabokov's recreation of the doppelgänger motif is the notion of optical perception and deception, a textual *trompe l'oeil*. As established in the previous two chapters, extensive optical passages often function as a sort of antithesis to the authorial imagination; more specifically, works such as *The Eye* and "The Vane Sisters" create a relationship where a narrator's heightened sensory sensitivity breeds a sort of singular, solipsistic, and paranoid visual plane that detaches such narrators from the wonders of the world as instituted by their master-creator, Nabokov.

This sort of narratory, optical specificity further perpetuates doubles and reflected duos within Nabokov's texts. Smurov, we recall, becomes so centrally focused that he literally loses sight of himself and creates an identity double, which is exacerbated by constant scenes of mirroring and twin images: "As I pushed the door, I noticed the

reflection in the side mirror: a young man in a derby carrying a bouquet, hurried toward me. That reflection and I merged into one” (107).

Similarly, Humbert Humbert is quite optically oriented with regard to his visions of Lolita, which fashion the creation of a double “Lo.” Early in *Lolita*, for example, Humbert distinguishes between two types of visual memory through his hazy recollections of his first nymphet love, Annabel:

There are two kinds of visual memory: one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: ‘honey-colored skin,’ ‘thin arms,’ ‘brown bobbed hair,’ ‘long lashes,’ ‘big bright mouth’); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita) (*Annotated Lolita 11*).

This “optical replica,” or “little ghost in natural colors” not only describes a Nabokovian juxtaposition of optical and imaginative vision, but it also perfectly captures the way Humbert’s obsession with Lolita has created a phantasmal double of Dolores.

Although *Lolita* is narrated through Humbert’s perspective, Nabokov leaves traces of the “real” Lolita, that he expects his readers to pick up on. Humbert does not see the broken ordinary little girl who cries at night; he cannot see beyond his constructed phantasmal double dream, which he himself admits:

I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady’s new white purse; and lo, the

purse was in tact. Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, by my own creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed no life of her own (62).

Here, Humbert admittedly accepts the fallacy of his creation, but cannot see the damage this has caused to the “real” girl. In many respects this mirrors the way Kinbote attempts to possess Shade’s poem through his unconnected fabrication of the foreword, commentary, and index, which has in fact altered impressions of the poem. Humbert’s *Lolita* is completely figured by the shadow of obsession. Wood describes *Lolita* as a book “. . . not about Lolita, or only about Lolita in a peculiarly displaced or refracted way. It is about ‘Lolita,’ about the obsessive dream of Lolita which captured the actual child and took her away” (115).

The reader sees this entrapment reflected optically through Humbert’s pedophilic visions, which leak their own discrepancies from the subject. Optical perception is a high source of stimulation for Humbert, and thus through such descriptively evocative images the reader can distinguish this perceptual distortion. One such example can be found in Humbert’s description of Lolita and her friend jumping rope:

How charming it was to see her, a child herself, showing another child some of her few accomplishments, such as for example a special way of jumping rope. With her right hand holding her left arm behind her untanned back, the lesser nymphet, a diaphanous darling, would be all eyes, as the pavonine sun was all eyes on the gravel under the flowering trees, while in the midst of that oculte

paradise, my freckled and raffish lass skipped, repeating the movements of so many others I had gloated over . . . (*Annotated Lolita* 163).

Such illustrations make clear that Humbert only has eyes for nymphets, and the “real,” elemental world which Nabokov designs, almost completely escapes from Humbert’s view.

Much like Humbert Humbert, Kinbote’s obsession with Shade is heavily fueled through ocular sensation, which also recalls a Smurov brand of excessive voyeurism. Echoing Smurov, Kinbote confesses:

. . . the urge to find out what he was doing with all the live, glamorous, palpitating, shimmering material I had lavished upon him, the itching desire to see him at work (even if the fruit of his work was denied me), proved to be utterly agonizing and uncontrollable and led me to indulge in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop (68).

In this instance, all of Kinbote’s delusions about his own identity are transfixed into the act of spying. More than anything, Kinbote wants to catch a glimmer of his Zemblan existence transcribed into a draft of Shade’s poem. It seems that there is something particularly important for Kinbote about actually *seeing*, as opposed to simply imagining, the poem being crafted. Observing Shade transcribe his poem is a way for Kinbote to watch his alternate identity, his self-created double, become immortalized into a text. The scene also strongly echoes Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man*, and his personal reflections mixed with self-observation, pride and shame.

Within *Pale Fire*, there are several passages centered on optics and illusion, which reflexively reveal Nabokov’s controlling power behind the text. In one of

Kinbote's lengthy discussions about the Zemblan revolution, Kinbote becomes preoccupied with tangential recollections about Eystein the famous palace portrait artist:

Eystein showed himself to be a prodigious master of the trompe l'oeil in the depiction of various objects surrounding his dignified dead models and making them look even deader by contrast to the fallen petal or the polished panel . . . But in some of those portraits Eystein had also resorted to a weird form of trickery: among his decorations of wood or wool, gold or velvet, he would insert one which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint. This device which was apparently meant to enhance the effect of his tactile and tonal values had, however, something ignoble about it and disclosed not only an essential flaw in Eystein's talent, but the basic fact that 'reality' is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye (101).

The passage is intricate and telling on a number of levels, primarily because of the ways in which it subtly distinguishes Nabokov from Kinbote. The notion that "art creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye" sounds initially to be an accurate articulation of Nabokov's own conceptions of artistic "reality."

Nevertheless, while Nabokov never made collectively perceived reality the subject of his art, he openly took great pains to inject his works with elements of authentic representation: "I had to invent America and Lolita . . . The obtaining of such local ingredients...would allow me to inject 'average reality' into the brew of individual fancy . . ." (*Strong Opinions* 26). Elaborating on this idea, Nabokov states:

To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms . . .

Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual. When my fancies will have been sufficiently imitated, they, too, will enter the common domain of average reality, which will be false, too, but within a new context which we cannot yet guess. Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture (118).

The statement is critical, as it captures the way Nabokov infuses his imagined text with imagined modicums of general “realities,” thereby contrasting Kinbote’s claim that art’s “special reality” has “nothing to do with the average ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye.” It is not so much that Kinbote’s statement is wrong, it actually aligns itself closely with Nabokov’s beliefs, but rather, it is the fact that Kinbote—a reflection of a reflection of a madman’s false reality—is the one making the statement. Kinbote, like Humbert, and Smurov, cannot perceive the imitations of average reality, which Nabokov has carefully configured into the text, nor can he perceive the work’s encrypted artifice, which points to the fallacy of Kinbote’s imagination. Nabokov after all was a proud “indivisible monist,” while Kinbote can be infinitely bisected: “Monism, which implies a oneness of basic reality, is seen to be divisible when, say, ‘mind’ sneakily splits away from ‘matter’ . . . (*Strong Opinions* 124).

The way in which Nabokov covertly calls attention to the artifice of his own fiction through false doubling, mimicry, masking, allusions, textual encryptions, and oblique mirrors, permanently entraps Nabokov’s narrators in the fabrication of their

making. Appel describes this phenomenon as a product of Nabokov's ubiquitous control, which he characterizes as a "puppet show:"

The 'two plots' of Nabokov's puppet show are thus made plainly visible as a description of the total design of his work, which reveals that in novel after novel his characters try to escape from Nabokov's prison of mirrors, struggling toward a self-awareness that only their creator has achieved by creating them—an involuted process which connects Nabokov's art with his life, and clearly indicates that the author himself is not in this prison. He is its creator, and is *above* it, in control of a book . . . (*Annotated Lolita* xxxii).

I would add, in addition to Appel's accurate claim, that the rereader is also largely in control of Nabokov's fiction. Once the reader becomes in tune with the total design of the work, they begin to uncover new footprints of the artist's authorial imagination that escapes and entraps his narrators—the very mouths of textual information—which confirms that the perceptive reader also escapes this "prison of mirrors."

The crack in the cage of reflection is always artifice, which inculcates a spatial distancing from the text. Parody, which Nabokov characterized as "a game"¹⁸ is strongly connected to artifice and structural separation from a text. In defying stale and constricting convention, Nabokov reconfigures particular expectations between author, reader, and narrator. Appel describes one such rupture between the reader's self-association with a character: "In parodying the reader's complete, self-indulgent identification with a character, which in its mindlessness limits consciousness, Nabokov is able to create the detachment necessary for a multiform, spatial view of his novels"

¹⁸ Nabokov distinguishes between parody and satire as follows: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game" (*Strong Opinions* 75).

(xxxii *Annotated Lolita*). Appel's characterization is correct, not only because a reader's association with the narrator is mindless and limits consciousness but also because it perpetuates another false double. Since Nabokov envisions an audience "filled with people wearing his own mask," he does not want his readers to identify with his characters; rather, Nabokov seeks an audience who identifies with him, the authorial imagination, thereby heightening, instead of limiting, spans of consciousness.

Wood captures the necessity of the reader alongside the authorial imagination in his discussion of the dissonance between the "real" Lolita and Humbert's version of Lolita:

No, Lolita is Humbert's obsession and what escapes it, she is its name and its boundary. The 'actual' Lolita is the person we see Humbert can't see, or can see only spasmodically. In this sense she is a product of reading, not because the reader makes her up or because she is just 'there' in the words, but because she is what a reading finds, and I would say, needs to find, in order to see the range of what the book can do. She needs to be 'there', that is, and she needs to be found. This surely is what reading is: a modest mode of creation, a collaboration with other minds and pictured worlds (117).

So much of Nabokov's fiction is contingent upon what we, as perceptive readers, can see that the narrators cannot, which makes Nabokov's fiction come alive through the practice of reading and rereading. This is why Nabokov requires his readers to have imagination, in order to recreate what he has hidden from them in the text.

Through controlled and complex patterns, Nabokov has completely refigured the concept of the double and the relationship between author, reader, and narrator.

Nabokov's narrators, the bearers of the initial, overt plotline, can be understood as mechanisms of ocular function, setting the "laborious process of moving our eyes left to right, page after page" into motion and jumpstarting the reader's "physical work upon the book." After visiting the book, the perceptive reader can begin to pick up on the second, "real," authorial plot as outlined by the author's intricate imagination and imprints of artifice. Through the reader's apprehension of the authorial imagination, Nabokov has created a *real* double of himself that has transcended the false double of a narrator who unknowingly conveys what only the reader and author can comprehend. This is the texture of the text—the author's ability to transcend the voice of his narrator through imagination and for this transcendence to be collected by another conscious reader, the creative double of the author. "Let us not confuse the physical eye . . . with the mind."

Conclusion

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, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of ‘thaw’ in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent.

—Vladimir Nabokov (*Bend Sinister* xii)

Nabokov the scientist, inspired Nabokov the artist, and in so doing created a textual relation where the author mirrors the controlled and deceptive work of “that other V.N., Visible Nature” (*Strong Opinions* 153). Nabokov’s stylized creative design centers on deterministic patterns, involutions, optical illusions, mirrors, doubles, and other imaginative tricks, all of which point to the texts’ artistically artificial configuration. This distinctively Nabokovian brand of craftsmanship is derivative of Nabokov’s aesthetically inclined observations of nature’s most mimetic and minute details, which signal the imprint of a higher maker’s thumb. Thus, the pattern of life outside literature is mimicked by Nabokov’s representations of life within fiction, which equate displays of excess and artifice to an authorial consciousness beyond the textual medium. This literary scheme is both rewarding and restrictive. The strata of specificity encoded in the text, the programmed necessity of rereading inducing designed discovery shape the reader’s perceptions almost absolutely to the Nabokovian imagination.

This thesis presents a particular interpretation of Nabokov, utilizing the deceptive strategies outlined by his observations of mimetic nature to configure an understanding of his linguistic composition and the way this stimulates an altered dynamic between author

and reader, which seemingly transcends its written medium. With specific focus on *The Eye*, as a seminal work, the thesis explores elements of this “little novel,” which open an understanding of other Nabokovian texts, particularly in the way Nabokov refashions the interaction between author, reader, and narrator. More specifically, *The Eye* captures Nabokov’s mimicry of Russian literary predecessors such as Dostoevsky, parodies the primacy of a particular distorted reality as often found in memoir or detective narrative forms, heavily spatters the text with optical illusions, presents an expanse of the imagination, and demonstrates the reflected entrapment of a Nabokovian narrator in a prison of mirrors.

In an interview, Nabokov captures his relation between consciousness and evolution in the following hierarchy: “time without consciousness—lower animal world; time with consciousness—man; consciousness without time—some still higher state” (*Strong Opinions* 30). This sequence aligns itself with the transcendence Nabokov perceives in the flash of artistic inspiration as explained in “The Art of Literature and Commonsense”:

In my example memory played an essential though unconscious part and everything depended upon the perfect fusion of the past and the present. The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present and the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego

suddenly crumbling away with the non-ego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open (*Lectures on Literature* 378).

The passage posits the belief that very particular individuals—that is to say artists of genius, can experience flashes of what Nabokov characterizes as “cosmic synchronization,” an ephemeral coalescence of past, present, and future.

Varying representations of transcendent forms of consciousness and cosmic synchronization figure prominently in many of Nabokov’s texts, tracing back to some of the author’s earliest short stories. “A Guide to Berlin” for instance, illustrates Nabokov’s fixation on the transportive capacities of the human imagination and the ways in which an author can capture and envisage shifting configurations of time. According to the narrator, encapsulating a present moment through a sort of predictive retrospection serves as the essence of artistic creation:

I think that here in lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragment tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right . . . (157).

The artist’s aesthetic eye catches glimmers of future nostalgia in the commonplace items of the present period; in so doing, they not only adorn the ordinary with a texture of the extraordinary, but they also have a hand in the way a particular moment in time will be assessed, or reflected upon. Nabokov’s fixation on transcendence makes this narrator’s musings likely to align with his own considerations of the determinative elements of

creation, which fuse together strings of the past, present, and future in the formation of an inscribed, artistic memory.

Transcribing, or reproducing, ordinary objects in literature functions as a means of “furnishing” a text with material markers that upholster the guise of fictional reality. Returning to the notion of the metaphoric armchair, as illustrated in Chapter Two, we can interpret this image as a figuration of nostalgia that ornaments the text with its phantasmal material outline. There are several layers through which we can interpret the armchair, which gives rise to important questions about temporality in Nabokov’s art. The first is the way we interact with the armchair and how moments of consciousness are shaped by this special type of seating. In an armchair, one’s corporeal form relaxes, giving way to heightened reflection and thinking. An armchair is often also a space of comfortable isolation and stagnation, and thus, very loosely positions a person in a moment of consciousness without time, or at least, provides an escape from the immediate cognizance of time. An armchair may very well be the place where a reader picks up a Nabokovian text and experiences a joining of the authorial consciousness as they work through the meticulously designed work. Or, an armchair can be the embracing space, where the artist experiences a moment of inspiration, “wholly dissolving in the universe” in the frame of their chair.

Nevertheless, the armchair is also a distinguishing structure of modernism, a symbol of the old fashioned Europe of Nabokov’s years. This has an interesting effect when placing the armchair in a Nabokovian narrative, particularly one that embodies a sense of cosmic synchronization such as “Terra Incognita.” In “Terra Incognita” the position of two equally primary realities seems to create a sense of temporal simultaneity.

The image of the recurring armchair immediately transports the reader outside the exotic jungle frame and into the domain of a European existence each time it appears. In this sense, the impression of the armchair is somewhat transcending, as it stimulates the movement from one artistic realm, or “reality” to another. Despite this, the armchair also encases the text in a particular period, bringing the reader to a moment of European modernism as opposed to a contemporary or futuristic space. This seems to restrict the capacity of the text to some degree, as it places the emphasis on a transposition of space over a true transcendence of time.

As established in Chapter Two, the armchair outlines important connections between the physical world and the text, which allow the author to sketch in his imprints of artifice and imagination through the frame of a lived reality. More broadly, this sort of “furnishing” of thought, this mimicry of the material, enhances the overall effect of the work through artistic imitation. Yet time is implicit in the design of every object, and thus these textual modicums of average reality fix the work in a very particular period of the past. In this way, Nabokov has fashioned a scheme that functions much like memory, as the contemporary reader visualizes Nabokov’s designed worlds reflecting “fragment tenderness” of the past, perhaps as the contemporary reader now sits and reads Nabokov’s texts on a “Kindle” in a “La-Z-Boy” chair. Vacillating from past to present and vice versa encompasses temporal transcendence to a degree, but does not create the perception of an “entire circle of time” as the future is not simultaneously interpreted in this design.

If the objects of Nabokov’s texts are fixed in time, and the transcription of the work loses its sense of the future through creation, can the artist ever reproduce the

transcendent consciousness of their initial inspiration? This points to Nabokov's dependence on his double-reader, established in Chapter Three. If the perceptive rereader functions as Nabokov's double, then Nabokov has in a sense transcended time by forming a manifestation of his imagination in the actual consciousness of another human being, shaped to the form of the author's very specified artistic instruction. Thus, in accordance with Nabokov's personal creed, it seems that artistic inspiration and creation do in fact propel him to "some still higher state" of consciousness without time so long as his texts continue to be read by future readers.

What is critical here, however, is the concept of Nabokov's instruction, which has carefully led us to the position of a double creator. Critics such as Alexandrov, Appel, Wood, Connolly, and myself have *chosen* to follow the author's meticulous directions—we have elected to listen to the maestro speaking in our ear. It is worth emphasizing once more, the obvious fact that Nabokov embodies a specific kind of writer in a particular period of time, as located by physical objects and style of his texts. The very participatory nature of Nabokov's writing represents the modernist moment from which he derives. Following Nabokov's direction, we have chosen to interpret Nabokov the way he told us to interpret him—primarily through language; we have followed his trail and uncovered in his texts, in ourselves, the transcendent and mystical author.

Yet no author, no matter how scrupulous and instructive their design, can control his or her reception of ideas in the future. Nabokov's direction has become fixated in a historical moment—the act of transcription and physical markers binding him to the chains of time. Characterizations of creativity and the frames of literary interpretation will change in the future, likely locating entirely new means for understanding Nabokov,

emphasizing different springboards of his aesthetic capacity despite his best direction. And so to return to the most underlying question, has Nabokov transcended time through artistic consciousness and creation and achieved “some still higher state”? It seems, that only time will tell.

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