Introduction

Another thing we are not supposed to do is to explain the inexplicable.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*

Vladimir Nabokov belongs among those writers who are continually exposed to distrust during their lives, whose first steps encounter inauspicious predictions, who must struggle against the prejudices of the audience yet have admirers as ardent as the general public is unjust. When such writers die, there often follows a reversal: their works almost instantly become part of the classical canon.

The recognition of V. Sirin (Nabokov’s prewar pseudonym) by the Russian émigré readers of the twenties and thirties was slow and frequently reluctant. In the forties, having moved to the United States and adopted English as the language of his prose (and partly of his poetry), he found himself in relative obscurity once again. With the publication of *Lolita* in 1955, Nabokov became one of the rich and famous and then had to spend a considerable amount of energy fighting such side effects of glory as irresponsible misrepresentations of both his art and his life. The sexual thematics of *Lolita*, combined with its best-seller/cover-story popularity, placed him in a sort of literary *demimonde*, among the beautiful and damned. To this day some readers are surprised to learn about the serenely old-fashioned happiness of his monogamous private life.

The need to vindicate Nabokov, however, no longer exists. The quantity of literature about him published in recent years testifies to
the growing recognition of his stature. An increasing number of scholars believe that he is our century's foremost writer of fiction, that his works demand and reward multiple readings, and that his art is an aesthetic puzzle requiring a great deal of solving. His novels, with their countless discoveries on the way toward constantly receding bottom lines, with their moments of mirth and those other moments—of what can only be called “aesthetic bliss” (L, 316)—give one the feeling of basking in an intelligence vastly superior to one's own. Yet the appeal of these novels is not purely cerebral: they also contain a deeply touching human reality—not a demonstrative human interest but a “personal truth” (ND, 14) protected from wear and tear by layers of exquisite wrapping made up of lexical and acoustic games (“contextual shades of color” and “nuances of noise”: LATH, 118), complex allusions, triplefold reticences and circumlocutions, defamiliarizing reversals, and subtly subversive wit.

Because at least part of this wrapping must be lifted before one can approach the real thing, some of the most valuable Nabokov criticism includes a strong element of extended annotation. The work of Donald Barton Johnson, for instance, reveals astonishing subtleties of the texture and structure of Nabokov's narrative and then cautiously (“handle with care”) relates them to themes; Dabney Stuart shows the connection between the texture and the generic features of the novels; and Brian Boyd demonstrates the links of narrative details to the central features of both the novel in which they appear and of Nabokov's work in general. Much of the earlier criticism annotated just for the fun of the game; it was often uneasy about this self-indulgence and presented Nabokov as a cold virtuoso aesthetician whose artistic feats would, or would not, allow a grudging forgiveness of what seemed to be his doubtful ethos. Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics* is destined to be considered a prime example of this trend, even though its bias is largely redeemed by its numerous insights.


Nabokov remained undaunted. “I believe that one day a reappraiser will come,” he remarked in a 1971 interview, “and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride” (SO, 193). That day dawned earlier than Nabokov had expected. It was already heralded by the work of Andrew Field⁴ and Alfred Appel,⁵ whose analysis of Nabokov’s themes and intricate texture proceeded from the assumption that the author’s heart was, so to say, always in the right place; however, their personal ties to Nabokov partly discredited their positions in the eyes of the their (somewhat envious) colleagues. Of greater persuasiveness, therefore, were the articles of, for instance, Robert Alter and Stanley Edgar Hyman,⁶ who revealed the seriousness of Nabokov’s moral and political concerns in Invitation to a Beheading and Bend Sinister; and the books of Donald Morton, Julian Moynahan, and Ellen Pifer,⁷ who emphasized the humanistic, ideological contents of Nabokov’s fiction. Pifer’s book, in particular, successfully accomplishes its avowed aim of redressing the injustice that Nabokov’s literary reputation suffered as a result of criticism’s earlier preoccupation with the form of his novels at the expense of their content.

The purpose of this book is not only to reinforce the camp of the readers who believe in the humanistic value of Nabokov’s work but also to reconcile the two camps by demonstrating the close connection between its moral attitudes and virtuoso techniques, the mutual adjustment of the major thematic concerns and the structure of his novels.

Nabokov characterized his college lectures on literature as, among other things, “a kind of detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures” (LL, epigraph). The word “mystery” here is polysemous. Each great work has a structure of its own, to be investigated

⁴Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston, 1967); unfortunately, the attitude apparent in Field’s subsequent books is rather disappointing.
Nabokov

by a minute Sherlock-Holmesian attention to detail until its mystery—that is, its specific relation to specific dreams, desires, and limitations of human life—begins to emerge. Yet the mystery of a literary structure can be approximated rather than solved. It lies in the quaint appropriateness of the structure to an attitude; the "aesthetic bliss" produced by this harmony retains mysteriousness even after the approaches to it have been mapped. An attempt to unravel the enigmas of Nabokov's structure ultimately confronts one with a Mystery: "a fictional technique," if Jean-Paul Sartre is to be believed, "always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics."

But what was Nabokov's metaphysics? "Total rejection of all religions ever dreamt up by man and total composure in the face of total death," writes a dying fictional writer in Transparent Things. "If I could explain this triple totality in one big book, that book would become no doubt a new bible and its author the founder of a new creed. Fortunately for my self-esteem that book will not be written . . . because [it] would never express in one flash what can only be understood immediately" (TT, 84). The uncertainty of the latter idea is, of course, matched by the uncertainty with which the character's position can be ascribed to the author. Nabokov's own voice is more mild and modest: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more" (SO, 45). Elusive as this statement may be, it leaves no doubt of the tinge of mysticism in Nabokov's view of the world. His mysticism was a matter of feeling, of relationship with the world, rather than of definable hypostasis: Nabokov "knew" what he could not express the way one "knows" love, or hope, or suffering. Only a few aspects of his world view can be formulated as beliefs.

II

Nabokov seems to have "liked" these beliefs rather than to have really "held" them: in his life he would have had the courage to face their crumbling, yet in his fiction he was free to create a universe controlled by the cosmogony of his choice. His favorite brand of mysticism seems to have been the gnostical belief in a transcendent reality that can occasionally be glimpsed through the chinks in our material

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existence and which is fully attained at death. Among the precious times when one feels contact with what he would call the “Beyond” are not only mystical moments (the peak experience of the protagonists of Invitation to a Beheading and The Gift) but also moments of genuine emotion, of madness, and of a disinterested aesthetic contemplation that silences suffering and desire. The value attached to these moments of “aesthetic bliss” is an overlap between Nabokov’s views and the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who is respectfully mentioned in chapter 4 of The Gift: under Schopenhauer’s “critical fingernail” the pragmatic Chernyshevski’s “saltatory thinking would not have survived for a second” (G, 258).

I single out Schopenhauer from all the philosophers referred to in The Gift because he is somewhat erroneously considered to have preached that “escape into aesthetics” of which Nabokov was often accused. The egoistic connotation of the slogan is largely a misreading of both Schopenhauer’s and Nabokov’s hostility to the pragmatic view of art. Schopenhauer did not really advocate an artist’s selfish retreat to an ivory tower; in his system, it is for the audience rather than for the artist that the beautiful provides a temporary haven. Aesthetic experience is not sensuous gratification; it does not satisfy desires but silences them and thereby suspends the ominous will that they manifest. The pleasure derived from the beautiful is “the momentary silencing of all willing, which comes about whenever as pure will-less subject of knowing, the correlative of the Idea, we are devoted to aesthetic contemplation.” These are the moments when the individual gains freedom from the bondage of will; they are steps toward the self-suppression through which he or she breaks away from the grim chain of apparent causality and gains knowledge at the expense of the fulfillment of desires (another way to the same goal is the via negativa of ascetic self-discipline). The ultimate goal that Schopenhauer sets for mankind is the achievement of a state in which the cosmic will comes to know itself and is completely abolished—the state that man imagines as complete nothingness, the opposite of Being. Yet according to Schopenhauer, the negation of the world is not what we imagine as void or darkness. It is a vantage point for an opposite vision: “To those

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in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is—nothing."  

This coda of *The World as Will and Representation* can be read as a commentary on the ending of Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, in which the world of the “converted” protagonist is destroyed in the brief course of what looks like a filming-site disaster (all the world is a filming site). However, though *unichtozhenie* (the Russian for “destruction”) is dramatized in the last paragraph of *Invitation*, the word itself is avoided; Nabokov would not have failed to hear in it the ominous ghost word *nichto*, the Russian for Schopenhauer’s “nothing.” The Russian title of Nabokov’s story “Tyrants Destroyed” is “Istrebleniye tiranov,” or “tyrants exterminated”—*nichto* is eschewed again (though the choice of *istrebleniye* may have been determined by the roughly trochaic pattern that it creates in combination with *tiranov*).  

Despite Schopenhauer’s paradoxical optimism about the positive nature of ultimate nothingness, Nabokov was reluctant to imagine his “Beyond” as “nothing.” The execution of a young man in his early poem “Rasstrel’” (1928) is followed by “merciless darkness” (*neumolymaya t’ma*: S, 209), but this poem is kept out (as unsafe?) from the later collection *Poems and Problems*. The protagonist of his last novel wonders whether “the brook and the boughs and the beauty of the Beyond all [begin] with the initial of Being” (*LATH*, 16). The Mystery is sometimes imagined in the metaphorical shape of a “formula” that connects the Being and the Beyond. In Nabokov’s story “Ultima Thule,” the mad mathematician Falter, whose name is German for “butterfly,” an emblem of the soul (Psyche, the “myth behind the moth”: *A*, 437), claims to have discovered that eschatological formula but will not impart it to others because the knowledge would lead to madness or death.  

In Nabokov’s other works the characters’ quest for the “solution of the Universe” is likewise safely sabotaged by the intrusions of “reality.” The transcendent reality is a sort of a coexisting “parallel world” (*LATH*, 74) to which the obsolete rule that parallel lines never meet does not apply. Let us note also that metaphor, madness, and mathematics all begin with the initial of Mystery.  

Nabokov seems to imagine the contact with the Beyond not as negation but as incipient merger, a carnivalistic removal of partitions.

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11Ibid., 1:412.  
12See the discussion of Nabokov’s “Ultima Thule” theme in Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, pp. 206–19.
The individual world loses its hermetic separateness, and the individual identity moves not toward nothingness but toward a dissolution in something infinitely greater than itself. Such moments of divestment are the essence of mystical experience, yet the loss of identity is also associated with death. It is with an elaborate defense mechanism, the stylistic equivalent of "a grain of salt," that the menace is presented in Pnin: "I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is the space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego" (P, 20).

The facetious tone of this paragraph is the armor for its very serious anxiety. The last sentence suggests that Nabokov was well aware of the danger involved in the Romantic quests for the infinite and yearnings for a merger of subject and object. The passage deals not only with physical death, the "walt whitmanesque" (BS, 95) semisocial "mixing" with the grasses of the landscape ("the dead are good mixers, that's quite certain, at least": TT, 93), but also with the loss of spiritual identity through divestment and communion. Even if death is not a total negation of consciousness but, according to the hypothesis of Bend Sinister, the attainment of "infinite consciousness" (BS, 192), of "perfect knowledge" in which a point in space and time can "identify itself with every other point" (BS, 175), it still involves the dissolution of "the tender ego," the loss of the individual identity no matter how "painstakingly" it has been "-fashioned" (IB, 21).

Not all of Schopenhauer's ideas, then, were acceptable to Nabokov. Although a detailed line of demarcation is beyond the scope of this discussion, it has to be noted that Nabokov would not have sympathized, for instance, with the element of dismissiveness in Schopenhauer's attitude to the individual. I cannot, moreover, determine at what point in his life Nabokov first read The World as Will and Representation; therefore, I refer to Schopenhauer's major work not as Nabokov's "source" but as a text that can improve our understanding of his fiction. Nor has this text been chosen arbitrarily. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were widely read by Russian writers of the turn of the century, and the disillusionments caused by the political events of the early twentieth century led to a Schopenhauer revival between the two world wars. Nabokov, of course, would never follow fashions; in his works one does not find such Schopenhauerian catchwords as "subject
of knowing” or “will-to-live” (especially since the latter eventually came to be associated with Freud’s life drive), yet he seems to have been impressed by the poetic element in Schopenhauer’s writings, by his psychological insights and his extended metaphors. It is noteworthy that in Strong Opinions, Henri Bergson—a philosopher whose attitudes were very close to Nabokov’s way of thinking—is mentioned not separately but among the poets and novelists whom Nabokov read during his stay in Germany (see SO, 43). A philosopher is thus denied privilege; his authority does not exceed that of an artist.

Bergson did suggest something of a formula for connecting the physical and the spiritual. His bridge between the two was memory. Nabokov seems to have enjoyed Bergson’s discussion of memory as highly poetic but not necessarily as definitive. In addition, Nabokov must have appreciated the insights into the nature of the comic presented in Bergson’s Le rire—insights put to the test by some of the techniques used in King, Queen, Knave and Laughter in the Dark.

III

Laughter. . . The mixture of humor and earnestness in Nabokov’s work suggests that his cautious metaphysics was characterized by a sort of a tongue-in-cheek eschatological alertness. He loved cryptographic patterns, quaint coincidences, life’s combinatorial quirks; they encouraged a half-serious, half-playful half-expectation that things might suddenly fall together into a solution of the Mystery. The more earnest aspect of this attitude accounts for the structure of his autobiographical Speak, Memory, which traces the development of thematic lines rather than a sequence of events.

Nabokov recollects, for instance, how in 1904 General Kuropatkin showed him tricks with matches just before being ordered to assume supreme command of the Russian army in the Far East (Russia eventually suffered a defeat in that war with Japan). During his flight from St. Petersburg after the Bolshevik coup, Nabokov’s father was accosted “by an old man who looked like a gray-bearded peasant in his sheepskin coat.” That was Kuropatkin in disguise; he wanted a light, a match. “I hope old Kuropatkin . . . managed to evade Soviet imprisonment,” adds Nabokov, “but that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also van-
ished, and everything had fallen through, like my toy trains that . . .
I had tried to run over the frozen puddles in the grounds of the Hotel
Oranien. The following of such thematic designs through one's life
should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography" (SM, 27).
Revolutionary Russia likewise "trifled with and mislaid" great num­
bers of its liberal intellectuals—did she later miss them as badly as
Kuropatkin missed the matches? Did émigré intellectuals likewise
come to miss what they had once taken for granted? Similar designs
are followed through the life of Chernyshevski in chapter 4 of The
Gift, not without a touch of admiration for the witty vengefulness of
fate. Yet the train of symbolic associations never becomes explicit or
ponderous in Nabokov's texts because as soon as it stops being a mere
ghost of a thought, it may "fall through" like the toy trains.
Incidentally, Nabokov probably never found out that General Kuro­
patkin did escape imprisonment. After the revolution he stayed on his
estate of Sheshurino, in the province of Pskov, where he taught sec­
ondary school and eventually established an agricultural school. Un­
known to Nabokov, Kuropatkin's peasant disguise thus belongs to a
"thematic design" of its own.
On the more playful side, Nabokov is sympathetic to his characters'
private creeds. The charm of Cynthia Vane in his story "The Vane
Sisters" (written in 1951) is associated with her belief that "recur­
rently, in an irregular series," anything that happened to her "after a
given person had died, would be . . . in the manner and mood of that
person. The event might be extraordinary, changing the course of
one's life; or it might be a string of minute incidents just sufficiently
clear to stand out in relief against one's usual day and then shading off
into still vaguer trivia as the aura gradually faded" (TD, 228).
Cynthia—according to the morose narrator, who is not Nabokov's
spokesman—is also

on friendly terms with an eccentric librarian called Porlock who in the last
years of his dusty life had been engaged in examining old books for
miraculous misprints such as the substitution of "I" for the second "h"
in the word "hither." Contrary to Cynthia, he cared nothing for the thrill
of obscure predictions; all he sought was the freak itself, the chance that
mimics choice, the flaw that looks like a flower; and Cynthia, a much
more perverse amateur of misshapen or illicitly connected words, puns,
logogriphs, and so on, had helped the poor crank to pursue a quest that
in the light of the example she cited struck me as statistically insane.
[TD, 230]
It is known that the frequency of queer phenomena that can be ascribed to chance tends to surpass the statistical probability of coincidence, but this, again, is not the point. The histrionic tune that often accompanies Nabokov’s eschatological alertness is, or should be, contagious. That is why I frequently attempt to reduce my inevitable overstatement on the side of high seriousness by somewhat illicit surmises, by fictionalizing hypotheses based on incipient or residual patterns of motifs, and by a preference for explaining each pattern as a signal of meaning rather than as “a chance crease in the texture of time” (A, 34).

The thin ice through which Nabokov’s toy trains fell into the puddles near the Hotel Oranien will, of course, be taken as a warning. Cynthia Vane of icicle fame went too far when it dawned on her, upon reading a quotation from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” that “‘Alph’ was a prophetic sequence of the initial letters of Anna Livia Plurabelle (another sacred river running through, or rather around, yet another fake dream), while the additional ‘h’ modestly stood, as a private signpost, for the word that had so hypnotized Mr. Porlock” (TD, 230). The patterns that Nabokov observes sometimes lead to dead ends symbolized by ends of sections; the patterns that he creates are usually imperfect: geometrical completeness is not allowed to conflict with verisimilitude. His restraint in the handling of patterns is probably also motivated by the same proud humility that keeps the narrator of Jorge Luis Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” from succumbing to the attraction of the artificial world of Tlön, the involute design that has gained dominion over the other intellects in his private dystopia: “Ten years ago any symmetry with a semblance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws—I translate: inhuman laws—which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men”.1

The suspicion that certain patterns are traps and fakes rather than cryptic signals from the transcendent realm is a recurrent motif of Nabokov’s novels. His texts, as is well known, set many traps for the

reader, who is thus made to reenact the experience of those characters who confuse ideals with idols, the aesthetic with the sensual, the metaphysical with the carnal. This, in general terms, is one of the ways in which Nabokov's rhetoric relates back to his metaphysics.

IV

An ethical consequence of Nabokov's tentative metaphysics is a reservation about the Romantic quest for the infinite. This quest is beautiful and ennobling so long as it does not lead to the neglect of the finite. Nabokov favors self-discipline but not the Schopenhauerian virtue of an ascetic retreat from the world. Nor does he preach the gnostic rejection of the material world; his claim to be "an indivisible monist" (SO, 85) denies the very belief in the existence of the purely material. The outside world demands appreciation: when a railway passenger turns the page of an absorbing book, the world darts up to him with the "bright bound" of a "playful dog" that has been "waiting for that moment" (KQK, 10). The least one owes it is an authentic, deliberate, actively reciprocal relationship.

In the absence of such a relationship the world is doomed. This is not a paraphrase of the dependence of an object on a subject. In Borges's Tlön, things "become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten," yet at times "some birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheatre." For Nabokov, however, birds and horses would not suffice, because the act of perception retains its efficacy only if it is deliberate and creative. "Average reality," he says to an interviewer, "begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture" (SO, 118). An authentic creative act—V. Sirin's writing of a novel, Rainer Maria Rilke's dreamy waxing of chairs, or Thoreau's hoeing of a bean field—is


15See Gaston Bachelard's comment on the letter in which Rilke describes himself waxing furniture: "When a poet rubs a piece of furniture—even vicariously—when he puts a little fragrant wax on his table with the woolen cloth that lends warmth to everything it touches, he creates a new object; he increases the object's human dignity; he registers this object as a member of the human household. . . . Objects that are cherished in this way really are born of an intimate light, and they attain to a higher degree of reality than indifferent objects, or those that are defined by geometric reality. For they produce a new reality of being, and they take their place not only in an order
spiritualized and redemptive. Genuine love, creative perception, authentic culture—all the things that make up what in a secular context is called spiritual life—are equivalent to such an act.

The bracing spirit of this position is reminiscent of the crisp optimism of Emerson and Thoreau, the major philosophical self-expression of the country whose citizen Nabokov became after having for long years carried the Nansen passport through dusky Germany and France. In biographical terms, a direct influence of Emerson or other American writers on Nabokov is unlikely; what he seems to have been eventually affected by is a recognition of the affinities between his own work and the writings of a few quaint persons who had at different times haunted the environs of Concord, Massachusetts. Taken out of the biographical context, Nabokov's ethical principles may be considered a swerve from Emerson and Thoreau, just as his metaphysics is a swerve from Schopenhauer.

With Thoreau, Nabokov shared a love of nature over and above the transcendentalist glorification of the natural world as the language of the spirit. He also shared Thoreau's sense of the importance of any individual's creative relationship to the world. If, as some believe, Nabokov devotes his novels to different aspects of artistic creativity, this is because a professional artist is but the most obvious exponent of human creativity; any individual's activities and attention are, or should be, creative. Thoreau's view of the writer's vocation, as explained by Stanley Cavell, is also Nabokov's:

Each calling—what the writer means (and what anyone means, more or less) by a "field" of action or labor—is isomorphic with every other. This is why building a house and hoeing and writing and reading... are allegories and measures of one another. All and only true building is


The word "swerve" is here used in more or less the same sense as in Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence (New York, 1973), p. 14: "A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a clinamen in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves."

See, e. g., the treatment of the theme of art in Julia Bader, Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels (Berkeley, Calif., 1972).
edifying. All and only edifying actions are fit for human habitation. Otherwise they do not earn life. If your action, in its field, cannot stand such measurement, it is a sign that the field is not yours. This is the writer’s assurance that his writing is not a substitute for his life, but his way of prosecuting it. He writes because he is a writer. This is why we can have the sense, at once, that he is attaching absolute value to his words, and that they do not matter. What matters is that he show in the way he writes his faithfulness to the specific conditions and acts of writing as such.  

Nabokov was frequently accused of not responding to the problems of the age; Thoreau was notorious for his indifference to politics and to the daily deluge of media information. From “the angle of a leaden wall, into whose composition was poured a little alloy of bell metal” (his version of the ivory tower), Thoreau would hear the “confused tintinnabulum” of his contemporaries. He was as bored with it as with “The Daily Times”; what one should read and write are things that reveal essences and not garments: “A goose is a goose still, dress it as you will.” What we call the issues of the day are but “transient and fleeting phenomena.”

This is not, however, a Romantic dressing of another ornithological metaphor, that of the proverbial ostrich. Nabokov’s constantly changing dwellings (angles rather than nooks) had considerably more bell metal in their composition than Thoreau’s leaden wall. Contrary to widespread opinion, his fiction did resonate with the times; it did explore contemporary issues. These were issues not of the outer but of the inner agenda of the culture: not the surge of Nazism but its psychological grounds; not the dawn of the sexual revolution but the vulnerability of norms; not religious revivals but impatience with rationalism; not the patching of socioeconomic wounds but the survival of conscience in the postcataclysmic world.

Lest all this sound too much like the “general ideas” that Nabokov recommended abandoning for the sake of detail, let us examine another metaphor related to the Romantic cliché about art presenting essences rather than garments. Schopenhauer emphasizes this idea by

\[^{19}\text{Stanley Cavell, } The Senses of “Walden” (San Francisco, 1981), pp. 61–62.\]
\[^{20}\text{Henry David Thoreau, } Walden, or Life in the Woods (New York, 1950), pp. 274–75.\]
\[^{21}\text{For the distinction between the inner and the outer agenda of culture I am indebted to Stanley Cavell, } Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 16–17.\]
alluding to an early photographic device already in use by the time a late edition of his book came out: “If the whole world as representation is only the visibility of the will, then art is the elucidation of this visibility, the *camera obscura* which shows the objects more purely, and enables us to survey and comprehend them better.”22 Indeed, Daguerre’s *camera obscura* recorded only objects that did not move, since in the absence of lenses it required a very long exposure to light; hence, it ignored all incidental—that is, “transient and fleeting”—phenomena and presented objects “more purely” than they appeared to the eye. Within a few years this metaphor was realized in the image of the daguerreotypist Holgrave in Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables*.

It also underlies the title of Nabokov’s 1933 Russian novel *Kamera obscura*. In a subsequent revision this book was renamed *Laughter in the Dark*, perhaps because its pervasive modern film imagery was felt to conflict with the reference to a gadget from a museum shelf. Moreover, in his description of nature and individual emotion, Nabokov, unlike Thoreau, would attempt to arrest the fleeting moments that Daguerre’s camera was powerless to capture. It was as if for him these fleeting moments, the halftones of mirages and the ghosts of motion, were in fact the “real” essence of experience.23 “The pleasure of a drink of cold water on a hot day, the pain of a hard blow on the head, the irritation from a tight-fitting shoe, and many other human sensations . . . are similarly peculiar to every mortal,” Nabokov wrote in an early article in *Rul’,* a daily paper.24 The sensations rendered in his narratives possess such a common denominator but also, superimposed on it, a touch that makes them individual and unique. Their artistic reality lies in their difference. The combination of the typical with the unique is also a feature of Nabokov’s character portrayal. While pointing to the bond between the characters and the readers, Nabokov also reminds us that his characters are more than mirror images in which we recognize ourselves. In Schopenhauer’s terms, we are made to see in them the same will of which we too are phenomena,

23 Cf. Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 12n: “Today, one of the churches of Tlön Platonically maintains that a certain pain, a certain greenish tint of yellow, a certain temperature, a certain sound, are the only reality. All men, in the vertiginous moment of coitus, are the same man. All men who repeat a line from Shakespeare are William Shakespeare.”
but at the same time we are made to recognize and accept their “otherness” and uniqueness.

The problem of the balance between the universal and the unique, the general and the individual, characterizes both the form and the content of Nabokov’s work. Needless to say, it is a problem of great social and cultural relevance. Things have to be worked out between the “chips fly when trees are cut” spirit of the Bolshevik Revolution and the bourgeois definition of individual happiness as the gratification of all fundamental needs. More specifically, in everyday life we wonder not just how much money can be spared from the rehabilitation of disadvantaged neighborhoods for, say, space projects (or vice versa) but, mainly, how well we have divided our time between our jobs and our families, between keeping up with current books and visiting that boring lonely aunt, between the proportion of lead and bell metal in the walls of our homes. A Nabokovian text reflects these and other modern dilemmas by staging a tug-of-war between self-immolating metaphysical or aesthetic pursuits and the daily meticulous reclamation of “average reality.”

Nabokov once noted that he liked Emerson’s poetry (SO, 64); the ideas of Emerson’s essays he left without comment. Emerson goes so far as to reject the claims of human commitment during moments of vision: “The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.” It is from this element of Romantic individualism that Nabokov swerves. A human commitment does interfere with one’s work or vision; it is a disturbance—but not a trifle. “What if those tears / cost more than our redemption?” thinks the apostle John, on hearing Mary’s sobs after Golgotha, in Nabokov’s 1925 poem “The Mother” (PP, 33).

The imperative need for reconciling human commitment with aesthetic or metaphysical pursuit is a major theme that binds Nabokov’s work into a unified oeuvre: each novel presents this theme from a different angle, thus complementing the others. His first novel, Mary (1926), demonstrates the need for a balance between sympathy and detachment; the conflict between the two tendencies is reflected in the clash of the different levels of interpretation (for example, the moral versus the symbolic) that the book invites. King, Queen, Knave (1928)

examines the consequences of rejecting authentic spiritual life; its comic approach to the theme controls the potentially horrifying effect of the “average reality” of conformism and convention. *The Defense* (1930), on the contrary, shows the tragedy of a chess genius whom recondite art too thoroughly diverts from the “average reality.”

*Glory* (1932) is the first of a series in which the protagonist devotes himself to the pursuit of the transcendent reality but misjudges the nature of his quest. Martin Edelweiss mistakes a prophetic awareness of mystery for nostalgia; having conquered fear, he embarks on an illegal and (as he subconsciously knows) suicidal trip to Russia. The line between his version of heroic knight-errantry and egotistic self-emulation is obliterated by his placing his duty to himself above his duty to the people who love him. *Laughter in the Dark* (1933/1938) forms a sequel to the motif of mistake: here it is the pursuit of a sexual eidolon that takes the place of the transcendental quest, stifles the protagonists’ sympathy, and makes him betray his commitments. The worst possible mistake, however, is committed by the protagonist of *Despair* (1934), who confuses artistic creativity with its polar opposite, murder.

The protagonist of Nabokov’s first dystopia, *Invitation to a Beheading* (written in 1934–35, first published in 1938), makes no metaphysical mistake. Cincinnatus C. is aware of being different from the others and of knowing more: this is the crime for which his environment condemns him to death. What he fails to understand for a long time is that his tormentors exist only so long as his imagination evokes them and his thoughts grant them life. On finding himself betrayed by all he cared for in his world, Cincinnatus becomes free from any commitment and can make his way, undeterred, to the mysterious “other dimension.”

In *The Gift*, Nabokov’s last novel written in Russian (serialized, with an important omission, in 1937–38), the young writer Fyodor Godunov-Cherdynstev shares Cincinnatus’s wish to live authentically, to love genuinely, to create his own “fiction” and remain true to it; but he also draws support from his awareness of the transcendent dimension lying somewhere beyond his vibrant life. Fyodor is the only Nabokovian character who manages to find a balance between his somewhat mystical art and his relationships with the people around him.

The protagonist of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (published in 1941, written two years previously) seems to have the makings of
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Fyodor and Cincinnatus but commits the mistake of Albinus of Laughter in the Dark; he too allows an obsessive passion for an undeserving woman to usurp that place in his life which should have been devoted to a tentative eschatological quest. This, in my opinion, is a flaw in the plot formula. For all its dazzling brilliance, Sebastian Knight—the first of Nabokov's novels written directly in English—seems to have been something of a false start.

Adam Krug in Bend Sinister (1947), Nabokov's first "American" novel and second major dystopia, is caught between his wish to retain intellectual independence and his love for his child, who is threatened by a bloodthirsty regime. His plight is more realistic than the ecstasy with which Cincinnatus's freedom is asserted at the end of Invitation.

In Lolita (1955) Nabokov returns to the theme of a metaphysical mistake. Like Albinus of Laughter, Humbert Humbert pursues his perverted sexual passion with all the energy of a misdirected metaphysical quest and ruins the life of the object of this passion, a very young girl who does not identify with the role of sexual eidolon. One of the central dramas of the novel is the conflict over what the two central characters regard as normal; the reader's own values are likewise questioned by the rhetoric of the narrative.

Pnin (1957) portrays a complex character whose scholarly research keeps diverting him from the "average reality" but who comes back to this reality and makes pathetic efforts to cope with it, who is constantly left in the lurch by his loved ones but returns kindness for callousness, who combines a survivor's guilt with resilience and love of life, who suffers pain but tries not to share it with others—in at least two meanings of the word "share." It is as though Nabokov needed his mild Pnin—no believer in an individual's constitutional right to fulfillment—as a counterbalance for the predatory, hedonistic Humbert.

In Pale Fire (1962) John Shade, like the protagonist of The Gift, has found a happy balance between his work and his love for his wife Sybil (and grief for their daughter), but he has no more psychic energy left for humoring Charles Kinbote (Botkin), whom he sincerely respects and pities, despite Sybil's energetic dislike of this intrusive neighbor. Shade's kindness to Kinbote, combined with his wish to keep his privacy, and Kinbote's pain at not being granted a closer friendship are among the most touching motifs of the novel.

In Ada, or Ardor (1969)—which is set on the planet "Antiterra"—the memoirist Van Veen attempts to deemphasize the callousness and cru-
elty that he has displayed throughout his life, but he cannot conceal
that the force of his love for his sister Ada has increased his insensi-
tivity to the other people around him. As they grow up, the Wunder-
kinder retain both their striking, if sterile, intellectual prowess and
their attitude of superiority to almost everyone else; they exclude the
rest of humanity from their intensely passionate conversation, and
inflict fatal wounds on people who come too close—unless their
strength and egotism match the lovers’ own.

Transparent Things (1972) approaches the conflict from a totally new
angle: it shows the tragedy of a man who wastes a great talent on
humdrum tasks and whose psychic energy, not expended on any cou-
rageously painstaking creative endeavor, erupts all too violently when
his consciousness is at rest: he strangles his beloved wife in his sleep,
confusing nightmare with reality.

Finally, Look at the Harlequins! (1974) is the story of a writer so
completely absorbed by his work and by his attempts to satisfy his
desires that he becomes blatantly insensitive to his daughter’s needs and
fails to prevent “average reality” from wrecking the lives of the weaker
ones among the women he loves.

The structure of each novel is based on a specific manner of com-
bining the perspective (the “point of view,” variations of the camera
eye’s trajectory, the presence or absence of an illusion of spatial depth)
with recurrent imagery and self-referential games. No combination is
repeated unchanged from one narrative to another, because each is
appropriate to the specific thematic features of the work. The central
object of my analysis is the unique relationship between the theme and
the structure in ten of Nabokov’s seventeen novels. “All hangs
together—shape and sound, / heather and honey, vessel and content,”
says Nabokov in his 1945 poem “An Evening of Russian Poetry” (PP,
158). I place particular emphasis on the handling of recurrent images
and motifs because this is a sphere in which the distinction between
“vessel and content” is practically annihilated.

V

The discussion of the ten works begins and ends with Nabo-
kov’s novels of the fifties. Pnin, published in 1957, is a convenient

26Boyd, Nabokov’s “Ada,” expresses a similar view. A valuable earlier extended study
introduction to some of his major methods. Following the reading of a number of his earlier novels in the order of their composition, the circle closes with the chapter on *Lolita*, which was written at approximately the same time as *Pnin*. The ten texts chosen provide the best examples of the mutual adjustment of Nabokov's virtuoso techniques and humanistic concerns. The model that I use to demonstrate this adjustment is less central (though not inapplicable) to *The Eye* (a very short work), *Despair*, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; therefore, these three novels are not discussed in detail, even though they belong to the relevant period.  

The treatment of Nabokov's novels as parts of an *oeuvre* involves regarding his various texts—novels, poems, short stories, interviews, lectures—as indirect commentary on one another. I frequently use Nabokov's own expressions, from other works or from different parts of the novel under discussion, in lieu of blander critical language. This method of out-of-context quotation is a partial compensation for not dwelling at greater length on Nabokov's brilliant, witty, synaesthetic style. It also implies a monolithic character of Nabokov's views. His philosophy, however, should not be imagined as preexisting his writing: it evolved in the process of continuous discovery, revealing new aspects and realizing new potentialities with every work.

The dates of composition, rather than of publication, are the landmarks of this process; and though I frequently juxtapose Nabokov's works for the sake of a synchronic comment, I also take into account the biographical links between, say, a novel and some poems and short stories written at the same period. The shorter works may be preparatory sketches for the novel, or channels for material that would disrupt it, or repositories for matters left over from the novel, or a development of its latent technical feats. In any case, the complex of the production of a certain period testifies to that period's dominant concerns.

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It is now common knowledge that Nabokov made a considerable number of revisions in most of his Russian novels when he was preparing them for publication in America because, in retrospect, he had a clearer view of his artistic goals. These revisions, to which I frequently refer, are a boon to the literary scholar because they present clear evidence of the writer's development. In Nabokov's terms, the true shape of the book was more clearly perceptible for him in the mature years when the revisions were made. "I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato, whom I do not care for," he observed in an interview with Alfred Appel, "but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to" (SO, 69).

The statement is metaphorical rather than metaphysical. The Gift contains a similar observation about the composition of chess problems (G, 183) and expresses the need for the artist to believe in his power. The "other dimension" is, here, a metaphor for an aesthetic potentiality. As records of a clearer vision of the right book (in what Borges calls "the Library of Babel"), the changes made in the translated novels are more reliable indications of Nabokov's positions than some of his on-record programmatic remarks. Indeed, his habitual disparagement of meat-and-potatoes human appeal or social relevance in fiction is a rhetorical overstatement in response to the journalistic high-handedness of standard misreadings.

Nabokov no longer needs to be defended, but we are still a long way from solving the aesthetical problem that his work represents, and there are still many discoveries to be made on the journey. One day, farther down this road, philosophical inquiry may find that his work truthfully reflects the slow processes of a vertiginously dynamic age.

28Borges, Labyrinths, p. 51.