Nabokov
Toker, Leona

Published by Cornell University Press

Toker, Leona.
Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47555

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1844674
The Gift:
Models of Infinity

Nature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between. Imagination, the supreme delight of the immortal and the immature, should be limited. In order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much.

I rebel against this state of affairs.

Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory

*The Gift*, serialized (with the significant omission of its fourth chapter) in 1937–38, is Nabokov’s portrait of an artist as a young man. By the end of the novel the protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cheryntsev, is on the threshold of a full-fledged literary career, ready to fulfill his girlfriend’s prophecy that he will be “such a writer as has never been before” (*G*, 376). Paradoxically, however, *The Gift* marks the end of its author’s career as a Russian writer; through this work Nabokov, who had for some time been polishing his English prose (in 1936 he had translated his *Despair* into English) acknowledged the gift that he had received from Russian literature before bidding it farewell.

The action of the novel is set in the twenties, yet Godunov-Cheryntsev’s disgust with the “native” population of Berlin and a fellow writer’s nostalgia for the better days of the émigré literary society (see *G*, 329) suggest an atmosphere more closely reminiscent of the eve of World War II: the sense of an ending has been smuggled

¹In the foreword Nabokov remarks that “Fyodor’s attitude toward Germany reflects too typically perhaps the crude and irrational contempt that Russian émigrés had for the ‘natives’ (in Berlin, Paris or Prague). My young man is moreover influenced by the rise of a nauseous dictatorship belonging to the period when the novel was written and not to the one it patchily reflects” (*G*, x).
into a novel that ostensibly celebrates a beginning. It may be said that the threat of an ending was impossible to keep out without reducing the art of *The Gift* to tenuous artifice. It was therefore incorporated into the novel's main structural idea: the tension between the infinite and the incomplete. The sense of a premature ending, one that leaves things incomplete, is constantly combatted by the models of infinity constructed, with varying success, throughout the novel.

I

Nabokov mentions the years 1935–37 as the period during which he wrote *The Gift*. The writing, however, must have been preceded by the mental composition described in *Strong Opinions* (see, e.g., *SO*, 69, 110–11). The protagonist of *The Gift* seems able to “remember” his future work; if this is also true of Nabokov himself, the “memories” of the yet unwritten novel must have been intense a year earlier, in 1934. That year, however, marks the composition of *Invitation to a Beheading*, the first draft of which was written in a fortnight of miraculous excitement. *Invitation* seems to have got rid of (see *M*, xi) a number of urgent matters whose stronger presence could have disrupted the tremulous design of the projected masterpiece.

First, the contemporary reality had to be got out of the way. The rise of fascism had no place among the motifs of *The Gift*, yet to ignore this uncouth reality would have amounted to following the example of old Luzhin, who attempts to write a wish-fulfilling, wax-figure *Künstlerroman* (see *D*, 77–78). Nabokov's novel, his castle-in-the-air, does not double as a waxworks gallery because, to continue the metaphor, the edifice is pierced by the winds of contemporary reality—alongside mysterious “drafts” (*SM*, 35) from the other direction. Vapors of the gloomy sociopolitical realities are present in the atmospheric environment of Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s emotional life, yet they do not obtrude on *The Gift* too strongly; the main energy of Nabokov’s response to them has been channeled into *Invitation*.

Second, hints of the projected shift into another language likewise had to be banned from *The Gift*. Nabokov seems to have been seriously considering that possibility: in 1936, for instance, in addition to translating *Despair* into English, he actually wrote “Mademoiselle O” in French. Yet *The Gift* was supposed to celebrate the resilience of a Russian emigrant writer and his obligation to what was most dear to
him in his heritage. It was supposed to be a novel about growth rather than about a drastic change. Therefore it is at the end of *Invitation* rather than in *The Gift* that a kind of breakthrough takes place as the protagonist boldly steps from one reality into another. Margaret Byrd Boegman is probably right in believing that the disproportionate nature of the punishment inflicted on Cincinnatus C. may reflect Nabokov’s fears about his survival as a writer in a new language. However, Nabokov had also lived through times when disproportionate punishments were meted out with the most nightmarish matter-of-factness. In 1934 such times were beginning again.

Most important, however, *Invitation* absorbs, like a scavenger, the worst of those tendencies in personal relationships that threaten one’s emotional balance, personal freedom, and artistic independence. “Everything has duped me—all this theatrical, pathetic stuff—the promises of a volatile maiden, a mother’s moist gaze, the knocking on the wall, a neighbor’s friendliness, and, finally, those hills which broke out in a deadly rash,” says Cincinnatus near the end of *Invitation* (*IB*, 204–5). Fyodor is not let down in this way; on the contrary, he is staunchly supported by his mother and by the courageous girl with whom he falls in love; he finds genuine friends (though always remaining remote from them), and the presence of sunbathing “natives” does not prevent him from enjoying the forest and lake of Grunewald.

Nevertheless, minor characters of *The Gift* could, upon some darkening of the colors, find caricatures of themselves in the world of *Invitation*: Boris Shchygolev, who interferes with Fyodor’s work by dropping in for a chat, would deteriorate into the intrusive M’sieur Pierre; Marianna Nikolayevna’s dinners would turn into the meal in the prison director’s apartment; Alexander Yakovlevich’s tactless practical joke would be debased to Rodrig and Pierre’s crude mystifications; Olga Sokratovna Chernyshevski would find her reflection in Marthe, and her student friends in Marthe’s incestuous brothers. It is as if the potential darker side of these characters has been dealt with in *Invitation*, so that in *The Gift* they might be treated with mildly humorous exasperation. The grimly comic “mass execution” (cf. *G*, 376) that takes place in the earlier novel has left the coast clear for a more complex and subtle character portrayal in the later work.

---

The thematic common denominator of *Invitation* and *The Gift* is the relationship of an artist with his environment; the relationship of his aesthetic or metaphysical pursuits with his private life, his commitments. In *The Gift* the treatment of the second term in this relationship is realistic and more tolerant. The novel has been much discussed as an aesthetic battlefield where the Romantic aesthetics of Fyodor is pitted against the utilitarian views of N. G. Chernyshevski. Yet Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s life is more than a frame for his own and other writers’ opinions. Though in the 1962 foreword Nabokov notes that the heroine is “not Zina, but Russian Literature” (*G*, x), one should not forget that the novel is not about the heroine but about the hero, about Fyodor. It is also about literature insofar as literature is the crucial part of his life, in a sense a rival of Zina Merz. Zina knows that at times she will be “wildly unhappy” with Fyodor yet is prepared “to face it” (*G*, 377) because his writing is as important to her as it is to him. The action of the novel is set in Berlin not only because Nabokov knew that city better than, say, Paris, but also because the cheapness of paper in Germany facilitated the publication of émigré books and periodicals. Symptomatically, in *Mary* the disillusioned poet Podtyagin wants to leave for Paris where his niece lives and “where the long crusty loaves and the red wine [are] so cheap” (*M*, 7). He no longer cares about paper.

Fyodor has two problems to solve: what sort of works he wants to write, and what sort of life he must lead. He solves the first by mobilizing the powers of his intellect and imagination and going through a strenuous apprenticeship. The second solves itself through his daily ethical choices.

Fyodor does not find himself in the dystopia of Cincinnatus. The people around Cincinnatus are so thoroughly unwilling to live authentically that they are presented as unselfconscious parodies on sundry genres of popular art. That they cannot create their own worlds is symbolically expressed through their functioning as images in the world of Cincinnatus: for example, the prison director vanishes like a removed slide a few seconds after his first appearance (see *IB*, 15). “To fiction be as to your country true,” writes Fyodor in his love poem to Zina (*G*, 168). The appeal is rhetorical, since the strong-willed Zina staunchly refuses to become part of her mother’s and stepfather’s world; she creates a world (“a fiction”) of her own, and only the man she loves is allowed to participate in that creation, just as he allows her
to collaborate in the polishing of his book. Like Fyodor’s father, the naturalist explorer who would never be influenced by anthropologists in planning his expeditions or by pseudo-patriots in defining his political stand, she is presented as a totally "genuine" personality. Yet Fyodor has learned the art of sympathy even for people whose genuineness is not so complete. His numerous little faults must be forgiven because of the pity he comes to feel for Zina’s unprepossessing mother and because of his increasing appreciation of Alexandra Yakovlevna Chernyshevski, whose image is a brilliant and rather underrated achievement of character portrayal.

This woman’s name and patronymic are the feminine forms of the name and patronymic of her husband, Alexander Yakovlevich. An identical combination of names for a married couple occurs also in Ilf and Petrov’s *Twelve Chairs* (1928), a work that Nabokov admired. Nabokov’s bestowing on the Chernyshevskis the names of the “shyly thieving” couple in charge of an old-age home in *The Twelve Chairs* must be considered in conjunction with his bestowing the name of an obnoxious Dostoevsky character (the Luzhin of *Crime and Punishment*) on the pathetic protagonist of *The Defense*. Nabokov reclaims, as it were, the names marred by precursor novels; he obliterates their old connotations and endows them with new ones. Indeed, the reader’s attitude towards the Chernyshevski couple changes in the course of the novel, moving away from first impressions. This element of reader’s response reenacts the protagonist’s emotional maturing, his growing tolerance of people’s superficial foibles and his appreciation of their genuine worth.

The image of Alexander Yakovlevich Chernyshevski undergoes a number of transformations: from a man who plays a crude practical joke on Fyodor to one who contritely apologizes for having caused pain; from a deeply suffering bereaved father to a spokesman of tritely elevated conventional liberalism; from a man who seems to be in contact with the other world to a skeptic who denies the hereafter out of sheer self-discipline. The character of his wife is an even more subtle study of the relationship between conventionality of thought and authenticity of intuition combined with an unflinching personal loyalty and a “well-ordered life” (*G, 50*).

Alexandra Yakovlevna befriends Fyodor because he reminds her of her late son Yasha. At first Fyodor is embarrassed and repelled by the gushing frankness of her shows of grief and by her demands on him, yet these demands eventually slacken—whether because, as Fyodor
The Gift

thinks, she is tired of his unresponsiveness or because she respects his independence. How well Alexandra Yakovlevna comes to understand his character is evident from the vigor with which she addresses his housing problem in chapter 2.

Alexandra Yakovlevna is, to some extent, a cautionary example for Fyodor. Not everything in her soul is "alien" to him (G, 48), but her keen intuition and energy have for a long time been subdued by the conventions of her society. The death of her son has suddenly awakened that plain and indolent forty-five-year-old woman: "She was seized with the fever of activity, with the thirst for an abundant response; her child grew within her and struggled to issue forth; the literary circle newly founded by her husband jointly with Vasiliev, in order to give himself and her something to do, seemed to her the best possible posthumous honor to her poet son" (G, 49). Fyodor does not understand that, by way of compensation, the shattering grief gives Alexandra Yakovlevna a certain distinction, a sense of her own importance which she probably had not had since the days of her pregnancy. The confidence born of grief goes a long way toward releasing her from the conventionality of attitudes and roles. She still submits to middle-class forms, but she is now able to see through them and through her own conformity; she has, for instance, "confessed" to Fyodor that "when she goes shopping in familiar stores she is morally transplanted to a special world where she grows intoxicated from the wine of honesty, from the sweetness of mutual favors, and replies to the salesman's incandescence smile with a smile of radiant rapture" (G, 17).

Her newly acquired confidence also reveals Alexandra Yakovlevna's excellent literary taste. She is indignant at having to listen to Busch's reading of his play and is sensitive to the minor flaws in Fyodor's poems. If she is indulgently deaf to the flaws in the poems of her late son, it is because they serve her as a means of contact with Yasha himself. Most interesting, however, is her brief remark about her namesake, the famous nineteenth-century writer and critic N. G. Chernyshevski: "Frankly speaking, I myself wouldn't be very interested in resuscitating everything that I felt in this connection when I was a college student in Russia" (G, 209). It seems that, like Fyodor, Alexandra Yakovlevna was disgusted by Chernyshevski's What to Do? but did not allow herself to maintain this attitude, because he was a hero of the liberal movement, a long-suffering dissenter persecuted by the regime.
Nabokov

Fyodor, however, does not really need to learn from Alexandra Yakovlevna's negative example of well-meaning conformist self-repression. In matters of artistic judgment he accepts no compromise; he is even somewhat rude to fellow writers when they attempt to draw him into their politics. But this seems to be his only sin against human commitment: he is sufficiently strong not to grudge expenditure of energy on social contacts, friendship, and love. None of the meanings of “getting and spending” are, in fact, among Fyodor’s urgent concerns.

The “material indigence and intellectual luxury” (SM, 276) that Fyodor shares with many of his fellow emigrants affect the brand of eschatological alertness that allows him to cope with his displaced and disrupted life. Fyodor shares with Cincinnatus “the constant feeling that our days here are only pocket money . . . and that somewhere is stocked the real wealth, from which life should know how to get dividends in the shape of dreams, tears of happiness, distant mountains” (G, 176). The “pocket money,” to which the bulk of the novel’s text is devoted, pertains to the motif of insufficiency and incompleteness, whereas the “dividends,” which are interspersed throughout the novel and have to be patiently collected, are tokens of the presence—ever receding—of the infinite. This quaint bookkeeping, the tension between the incomplete and the infinite, is reflected both in the major themes of The Gift and in the three main constituents of the novel’s structure: the recurrent motifs, the features of perspective, and the self-referential games. The boundary between these techniques is often indistinguishable, as is the difference between structure and thematic content; and the terms in the two oppositions (infinite—incomplete, structure—theme) intertwine, so that the novel both describes and embodies the unfinished quest for the infinite, with the infinite threatening to collapse into the incomplete. As Fyodor notes in another connection, the end reveals a “fatal kinship” (G, 237) with the means.

II

The Gift contains numerous samples of Fyodor’s work in various states of incompleteness. His poems about childhood are supposed to be well-polished miniatures, yet he soon becomes aware of their incidental weak points. His later poems are much more successful, yet he tacitly agrees with Zina that even these are “never quite up to [his]
measure” (G, 206). His story about Yasha Chernyshevski remains unwritten, his monograph on his own father’s life unfinished. Even the most nearly complete of his writings, the controversial biography of Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevski that forms the fourth chapter of the novel, is referred to as “firing practice” (G, 208): the touch of maliciousness brings in associations with his toy gun that would shoot “a six-inch stick of colored wood, deprived of its rubber suction cup in order to increase the impact” on the target, “making in it a respectable little dent” (G, 26).

Fragments of several other people’s writings are incorporated into the text of the novel. Fyodor’s correspondence with his mother is presented in fragments that merge with the surrounding discourse. Excerpts from a boring philosophical play are amusingly interpolated in the first chapter. A fragment of a memoir with a reference to the “triple formula of human existence: irrevocability, unrealizability, inevitability” (G, 111) is included in the chapter about Fyodor’s father; the whole chapter, in fact, is supposed to consist of bits and pieces of notes, sketches, letters, memoirs, thoughts, and reveries. The biography of Chernyshevski (Yasha’s famous namesake) alludes to archival documents, diaries, memoirs, and both actual and spurious monographs. A fragment from Yasha Chernyshevski’s notes is likewise used as material for Fyodor’s comment.

The motif of fragments brings into relief the relationship between the actual absence and the virtual presence. In “the book of life” crevices, seared edges, and dog-eared corners suggest the presence of things that just happen to be illegible, intangible, unseen. The incomplete is a reminder of the absent, and the absent shades into the infinite.

Fyodor’s life is deliberately presented in a fragmentary fashion: long periods are elided; nested texts blend with the master text; and dream is at times allowed to eclipse reality. The texture of Fyodor’s humdrum “pocket money” days is punctured by love, memories, and writing, yet when resumed, it consists in the conventional motions through which he is expected to go, surrendering to the expectations and the rules of his environment. Fyodor swerves off mapped paths in order to subvert these rules: he leaves the meetings of the literary society and a funeral service before they end, aborts his first and only “real life” conversation with Koncheev, turns back home in the middle of his ride to a private lesson, neglects to follow up on job offers or to cultivate chance acquaintances. By giving his life an irresponsible fragmentary
quality, Fyodor attempts, as it were, to prevent the quotidian from “congeal[ing] into reality” (E, 108).

The element of the fragmentary may account for the mistaken impression that *The Gift* consists of “tenuously connected separate short stories.” All the fragments are, in fact, firmly held together by the recurrent motif of eschatological “dividends.” Different expressions of this motif comment on each other across intervening stretches of the pocket-money narrative. The fragments, the nested texts that end too soon, do not end completely; they either merge with the framing discourse or are echoed in remoter portions of the narrative; the unfinished thus aspires towards the infinite. People whose lives are made tragically incomplete by a premature short-circuiting—Pushkin, Fyodor’s father, Yasha Chernyshevski—likewise continue to haunt the pages of *The Gift* in the shape of recurrent images, allusions, traces of “influence,” hallucinations, and dreams.

The sense of incompleteness permeates both structure and subject matter. It is reflected in the ultimate disintegration of two cryptographic designs that the structure of the novel seems to have borrowed from its content: the pattern of five, and the figure of a triangle enclosed in a circle.

The novel contains several sets of five items of which the fifth is problematic, unfinished, unconsummated.

First, before going to the Chernyshevski’s home in chapter 1, Fyodor buys some small Russian pies (*piroshki*), “one with meat, another with cabbage, a third with tapioca, a fourth with rice, a fifth... could

---

Footnotes:


2 Guidelines for the study of the presence of Pushkin in the text and subtext of *The Gift* may be found in Simon Karlinsky, “Vladimir Nabokov’s Novel *Dar* as a Work of Literary Criticism: A Structural Analysis,” *Slavic and East European Journal*, 7 (1963), 284–90; Hyde, *Vladimir Nabokov*, pp. 21–23; and Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, pp. 100–101. Some motifs related to the character of Fyodor’s father are surveyed in Rowe, *Nabokov’s Spectral Dimension*, pp. 33–39. The story of Yasha Chernyshevski is discussed in Douglas Fowler, *Reading Nabokov* (Ithaca, 1974), pp. 80–90. Fowler notes that part of the information presented in that story cannot be firsthand: “The narrator’s voice has become that of an omniscient, creative deity” (p. 88), which is strongly reminiscent of the technique of *Pnin*. As in the latter novel, the first-person narrator uses the “sources” technique, augmenting the density of the story’s setting by projecting into it elements of his own experience: e.g., the architect Stockschmeisser who promenades in Grunewald with his dog on the day of Yasha’s suicide in chapter 1 (see G, 59–60) as well as after the crash of a small airplane in chapter 5 (see G, 343). However, the recurrence of motifs related to Yasha’s character in the other parts of the novel still awaits investigation.
not afford a fifth” (G, 42). It seems that Fyodor’s hunger will not be satisfied.

Second, trying to guess who wrote the favorable review of his poems, Fyodor thinks of several critics: “This one was scrupulous but untalented; that one, dishonest but gifted; a third wrote only about prose; a fourth only about his friends; a fifth... and Fyodor’s imagination conjured up this fifth one”—the ever inaccessible Koncheev (G, 42). Upon arriving at the Chernyshevskis’, Fyodor learns that the supposed review is the host’s April-Fool joke.

Third, in the first of his two imaginary conversations with Koncheev, Fyodor mentions five Russian poets whose names begin with B, “the five senses of the new Russian poetry”—and Koncheev wonders “which of the five represents taste” (G, 86). Who might the five be? Blok, Briusov, Bunin, Balmont, and... Andrey Belyi? or perhaps Baltrushaitis? The problem of taste remains unsettled.

Fourth, The Gift consists of five chapters, the last of which effects the novel’s “return-upon-itself.” Indeed, the last paragraph of the novel is a poem that “mimics an Onegin Stanza” (G, xi).5 Eugene Onegin is mentioned within the text of the poem: “Onegin from his knees will rise—but his creator strolls away” (G, 378). This is an allusion to the

5Eugene Onegin is written in stanzas of fourteen iambic tetrameter lines with an abab ccdd effe gg rhyme scheme. The last paragraph of The Gift (in both Russian and English) can be easily rearranged to suit this pattern:

Good-by, my book! Like mortal eyes,  
Imagined ones must close some day.  
Onegin from his knees will rise—  
But his creator strolls away.  
And yet the ear cannot right now  
Part with the music and allow 
The tale to fade; the chords of fate 
Itself continue to vibrate;  
And no obstruction for the sage  
Exists where I have put The End:  
The shadows of my world extend 
Beyond the skyline of the page,  
Blue as tomorrow’s morning haze—  
Nor does this terminate the phrase.

The End

Chapter 3 of The Gift also contains hidden poems. Anna Maria Salehar was, to my knowledge, the first to detect them and to quote them in lineated form. Her valuable study “Nabokov’s Gift: An Apprenticeship in Creativity,” in Proffer, Book of Things, pp. 70–83, presents a detailed discussion of their imagery and the manner of their composition. One may, however, argue with Salehar concerning the exact
in medias res ending of Pushkin's novel in verse: the curtain falls when Onegin is rejected by Tatiana; a "clink of spurs" is heard (EO 1.307), and her husband appears. A metaphorical reading of this "clink of spurs" is given in Nabokov's Commentary to Eugene Onegin: the sound "might have heralded the appearance of the Chief of Police, Count Benkendorf (Benckendorff), whose shadow caused Pushkin to interrupt his novel" (EO 3.243). The Gift likewise reinterprets the "clink of spurs": the author is strolling away in his riding boots (Pegasus is saddled for a new venture), leaving his hero "at an unkind minute for him" (EO 1.307). "Nor does this terminate the phrase," asserts the last sentence of the novel (G, 378) even though, ironically, it is followed by the required full stop. An "unkind minute" is in store for Fyodor, and the movielike final words "The End," which Nabokov "revised into" the English version, will not hinder the reader from picturing it to himself. Fyodor's keys have been stolen; Zina's keys seem to have been left inside the apartment. Will the lovers, finally alone together, find themselves locked out?

We are not to know, since the author is strolling away—and not without a chuckle: "I wonder how far the imagination of the reader will follow the young lovers after they have been dismissed" (G, x). Fyodor has not witnessed the dialogue between Zina and her mother, so he does not know that her keys are locked inside. But has that dialogue really taken place? Fyodor is the focal character of the novel; the scene at which he has not been present may be understood as his fearful imagination—one way in which fate could revenge itself for his flippant remarks about it (see G, 375). On the other hand the dialogue may be a postdated projection of information obtained after the finale. In any case, Fyodor and Zina never get to the apartment, because the novel ends while they are still in the street. Here the reader has a choice of recollections: of the unattainable goals depicted on Keats's Grecian Urn or, closer to home, of a statement made à propos de rien by a character in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight: "I'll be disappointed in your book if it all ends in bed" (RLSK, 170). The Gift certainly does not end in bed. It does not, in fact, end at all; rather, it "winds up": a

limits of the poem: what she considers its fourth part ("She always unexpectedly appeared . . . ": G, 189) seems to me a case of the flesh of prose and the specter of translucent poetry (cf. G, 21); this likewise seems to apply to the penultimate paragraph of the novel, which Salehar regards as a tonic poem.

The theme of the keys in The Gift is extensively discussed in Johnson, Worlds in Regression, pp. 93–106.
mislaid key, the wrong key, a forgotten key form one of the most significant recurring motifs of chapter 1.

Finally, the number five is disrupted by addition and subtraction. Chapter 5 acquaints us with six rather than five reviews of Fyodor's monograph—actual reviews that replace the wish-fulfilling supposed one of chapter 1. Koncheev's favorable review is the fourth; slot number five is reserved for an angry article in a monarchistic newspaper. Curiously, its author is not mistaken in remarking that Fyodor “goes wholly over to the side of his sorry, but pernicious hero as soon as the long-suffering Russian Tsar finally has him safely tucked away” (G, 320). Further, in chapter 5 the five-member Committee of the society of Russian Writers in Germany is shown disintegrating. Its venerable chairman Vasiliev announces his resignation, and there seem to be no suitable replacements for the dishonest three of the remaining four committee members—who, incidentally, are not even writers. The pattern of five breaks down.

So does the pattern of the triangle enclosed in a circle. This figure is first introduced in chapter 1, where it describes the relationship of three young people: Yasha Chernyshevski has conceived a passion for Rudolf Baumann, who is in love with Olya G., who in turn falls in love with Yasha; the circle of their common friendship gradually erodes. In chapter 4 the same figure applies to the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad (Nabokov seems to have preferred Schopenhauer to Hegel) on which the fictional historian Strannolyubskii (“Mr. Strangelove,” whose remarks in the spurious quotation marks serve to bring into relief Fyodor's own strikingly formulated thoughts) makes the following comment: “There lies concealed in the triad . . . a vague image of the circumference controlling all life of the mind, and the mind is confined inescapably within it. This is truth's merry-go-round, for truth is always round; consequently, in the development of life's forms a certain pardonable curvature is possible: the hump of truth; but no more” (G, 256).

The “development of life's forms” accepts patterns only on sufferance, as hints at a possibility. Circles imposed on life by the mind erode, leaving here and there only a “hump of truth.” Imagination seeks to complete the circle that is suggested by its humplike fragment but succeeds only on the borderline between the transience of insight in one's mind and its immortality “in the flesh” of an aesthetic object.?

7 A sensitive discussion of the significance that patterns and the incompleteness
In chapter 3 the encircled triangle is suggested but fails to take shape in the Fyodor-Zina-Koncheev triangle. The description of Zina’s mysterious fiancé, whom she leaves for Fyodor, fits Koncheev in every detail except age: Koncheev is younger than Fyodor, whereas the ex-fiancé is supposed to have been about twelve years older than Zina, which would make him Fyodor’s senior by about four years. The fact that Zina has for a long time been collecting clippings with Fyodor’s and Koncheev’s poems is evidence of her literary taste rather than an element of the pattern.

The same figure seems to emerge in the contrasts between three young writers in the novel: Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev (whose monograph on Chernyshevski foreshadows Nabokov’s monograph on Gogol, written several years after The Gift); the novelist Vladimirov, who briefly appears in chapter 5; and the poet Koncheev. Different elements of Nabokov’s personality and views are distributed among these three characters.

The most significant triangle enclosed in a circle emerges in chapter 2. It is the “triple formula of human existence: irrevocability, unrealizability, inevitability,” which, according to the memoirist Suhoshchokov, was known to Pushkin (G, 111). Death signifies the ultimate erosion of the circle. Throughout the novel, however, the protagonist and the author keep trying to disrupt not the circumference but the triangle. The spurious memoirs are a text within an unwritten text (the biography of Fyodor’s father) within a text: the formula loses some of its authoritativeness by being placed in such a complicated perspective. The novel offers a whole catalogue of models of infinity that are meant to refute the finality of the irrecoverable, the unrealizable, and the unavoidable. These models range from failures farcical through failures noble to failures barely distinguishable from success. The first are based on the crude workings of conscious reason and produce gross, slapdash models of infinity; the last are miraculously spontaneous gifts of life and “inspiration.” They are still failures insofar as they are qualified by the doubt that their nature may be psychological rather than spiritual. Yasha Chernyshevski attempts to sublimate his homosexual passion by persuading himself that he is in

---

of patterns hold for Nabokov’s characters can be found in Morton, Vladimir Nabokov, pp. 10–12.

Incidentally, Nabokov’s essay “Inspiration” quotes an extract from the fourth canto of John Shade’s “Pale Fire” but, like chapters 3 and 5 of The Gift, prints it as a prose passage (see SO, 311).
love with Rudolf's soul. Conversely, the modern reader tends to reduce creativity to the workings of the libidinous subconscious. Neither extreme is endorsed in a Nabokovian context where skepticism is a dialectical counterpart of mystical insight. Since Fyodor prefers the latter, his skepticism is deflected to himself, reduced to an attitude of self-irony and thus made innocuous. This complex position is conveyed in a wavelike prose, subtly modified in its tone and its branching hues.

III

The Irrecoverable: To recover the irrecoverable—the past, the childhood, the exile's birthplace, the dead father—would amount to canceling time. A return to Russia is as impossible for Fyodor as a return to childhood or as his father's return from the dead. Only in the mental activities that make up his inner world can the bans be broken.

One of these activities is the result of an accurate visual memory. Fyodor and his mother can simultaneously imagine that they are walking in the same direction on their Leshino estate: "And suddenly, in the middle of this silent walk being performed by two minds, using according to the rules of the game the rate of a human footstep . . . both stopped and said where they had got to, and when it turned out, as it often did, that neither had outpaced the other, having halted in the same coppice, the same smile flashed upon mother and son and shone through their common tear" (G, 101).

Yet deliberate recollection is only a "habit interpreted by memory."9 A habit fades when discontinued; and Fyodor has to admit to himself that "it is already difficult . . . to gather all the parts of the past; already [he is] beginning to forget relationships and connections between objects that still thrive in [his] memory, objects [he] thereby condemn[s] to extinction" (G, 30).10

10Cf. SM, 135–36: "The struggle that had gone on since my grandfather's time to keep the park from reverting to the wild state always fell short of complete success . . . The disintegrating process continues still, in a different sense, for when, nowadays, I attempt to follow in memory the winding paths from one given point to another, I notice with alarm that there are many gaps, due to oblivion or ignorance, akin to the
Triumph over oblivion is not granted when solicited. Memory becomes a successful model of infinity only when it is joined to something independent of conscious will. This happens in the case of spontaneous recollection, which, as Bergson has observed, imagines rather than repeats and is "as capricious in reproducing as it is faithful in preserving." In Nabokov's novels, as well as in his autobiography, spontaneous recollection is combined with the artistic transformation of an image into a work of art that exists in a sort of limbo until captured in a medium.

"To call up the past in the form of an image," wrote Bergson in *Matter and Memory*, "we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream." Never does Fyodor recapture moments of the past with greater vividness than when he slips into doing precisely what he considers useless and inappropriate (see G, 151): namely, into diluting with his own life the biography of his father that he attempts to write. It is then that a commonplace object turns into a focus of infinite symbolic significance. This happens, for instance, when Fyodor recollects ("with incredible vividness": G, 137) the day of his father's last return from an expedition. The recollection becomes a reliving of the past, a return from a rented room in Berlin to "that world which was as natural to him as snow to the white hare or water to Ophelia" (G, 137).

In preparation for the scene the narrative pace slows down, conveying the sense of "inflated, exaggerated time" (G, 137). Fyodor's mother has gone to the railway station to meet his father, and Fyodor is "loaf[ing] about the manor, feeling the weight and pain of his agitation, and envying the way the others [get] through these big, empty minutes." Meanwhile, his sister Tanya is "swinging enthusiastically and powerfully on the swing in the garden, standing on the seat" (G, 138). A little later Fyodor runs to meet his father's carriage but somehow takes the wrong road. The first thing he sees when he retraces his steps is "the abandoned swing... still quivering in the garden": Tanya is already hanging on their father's neck, and the father has "taken a watch from his pocket with his free hand... for he always liked to know how fast he had got home from the station" (G, 139).

terra-incognita blanks map makers of old used to call 'sleeping beauties.' "

12Ibid., p. 94.
The glance at the watch arrests the moment but not the movement of the still quivering abandoned swing. This residual yet unending oscillation is Fyodor’s—and Nabokov’s—model of perpetuum mobile; it foreshadows the theme of the perpetual motion machine that Fyodor will trace in his biography of Chernyshevski (who, of course, justified his search for a model of infinity by utilitarian considerations, hoping that it would be a source of cheap energy). The vision ends abruptly, as with the click of a chronometer, and the whole of the ensuing year is condensed into one paragraph.

Notably, the episode is presented in the third person, which means that it is not Fyodor’s written narrative. Fyodor does not wish to tell the story of his own emotions in the scholarly monograph about his father. The memory overwhelms him unsolicited and is captured by the author in the kind of prose that Fyodor’s own pen is not yet ready to produce.

Later, confessing his inability to complete the monograph, Fyodor tells his mother that the period of research and recollections has given him intense happiness: “All these months while I was making my research, taking notes, recollecting and thinking, I was blissfully happy: I was certain that something unprecedentedly beautiful was being created, that my notes were merely small props for the work, trail-marks, pegs, and that the most important thing was developing and being created of itself, but now I see, like waking up on the floor, that besides these pitiful notes there is nothing” (G, 150-51).

Fyodor cannot give material substance to the images that have arisen in his mind, but he fails as a craftsman rather than as an artist. “Something unprecedentedly beautiful” has indeed been created “of itself”: not only the story of a brave naturalist (written by Nabokov instead of Fyodor) but also, and in tune with the tentative metaphysics of the novel, a model of contact with irrecoverable time.

Fyodor’s notes on works by and about his father are confused and almost unintelligible: like “the irritating sham of a caryatid, a hanger-on and not a support” (G, 16), they cling to his work but do not promote it. (The experience gives him a technical lesson in note-taking that he later puts to use during his work on Chernyshevski). The notes are the crudest model of resistance to oblivion; more “fanciful and rare” (G, 168) are the solicited recollections, as in the game Fyodor plays with his mother. At the top of the scale are feats of spontaneous recollection that seem to cancel time and, when transformed into a work of art, save the images from (no longer unavoidable) effacement.
Even so, the images, are on the near side of the newly erected “verbal fence” (G, 24); the past is on the far side. It remains irrecoverable because aesthetic distance replaces rather than reduces distance in time and space.

**The Unavoidable:** Notes and diaries also belong to the coarser models of the contest against the unavoidable, the end, the full stop, death. Diaries, however, interfere with the winnowing action of memory; meant to salvage one’s life from oblivion, they devalue genuine experience by blending grain with chaff. The diary of Chernyshevski, for instance, preserves for the prying historian much of what probably ought to have been forgotten. Chernyshevski also supplies another crude model of infinity, the projected perpetual motion machine meant to avoid the inevitable exhaustion of energy in a closed system. That such a machine is impossible makes the very idea as counterproductive as the idea of a diary: both divert creative energy into blind alleys.

Another approach to the idea of endlessness is made, with due reference to Pascal, in the fragment of a philosophical novel of Herman Ivanovich Busch, an aimiable graphomaniac who eventually helps Fyodor to publish his biography of Chernyshevski. Busch’s model, rather than dabbling at infinite mechanical extension, aims to probe depth through an interplay of the microcosm and the macrocosm: “The universe is but the final fraction of one, I think, central atom, of those it consists of. It’s not easy to understand, but if you understand this you will understand everything. Out of the prison of mathematics! The whole is equal to the smallest part of the whole, the sum of the parts is equal to one part of the sum” (G, 222).

The philosopher who says these words in Busch’s novel is addressing “a cutie, his lady friend” (G, 222): this narrative situation is an *en abîme* parody on Fyodor’s discussions of his work with Zina. Moreover, the “game of worlds” described in the fragment is an *en abîme* parody on two other models of infinity found in the novel: the Möbius strip, and the infinitely receding spiral.

13Forgetting is often no less important than remembering. *The Gift* makes an elaborate allusion to Pushkin’s poem “The Three Springs” (“Tri klyucha”—the Russian for “a key” also means “a spring,” and the pun is fruitfully exploited in the novel; see Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, pp. 100−101): the spring of youth, the Castalian spring of inspiration, and the spring of oblivion. The last seems to be as sweet as the fountain of the muses.
The motif of the Möbius strip is related to that of the "miracle of the lemniscate" mentioned in *Pale Fire*. The lemniscate, a figure eight gone to sleep, the mathematical symbol of infinity, could serve as a two-dimensional graphical symbol of the Möbius strip. In *The Gift*, as in *Pale Fire*, it is traced by the tire of a bicycle. Fyodor's early poem about learning to ride a bicycle mentions the "weavers and wavers in an alley": that is, lemniscates drawn on the sand by a still unsteady rider. "Drozhan'ye i vily v alleye" in the Russian text of the novel (Dar, 33, 41-42) makes use of the sounds "vil" which the noun vily ("pitchforks") shares with the verb viliat', indicating a wavery, unsteady movement. The result is an inept pun—Fyodor has to agree with his friends that the expression is "doubtful" (G, 46)—as are, in fact, most models of infinity in the novel.

The figure-eight shape of the lemniscate recurs at the end of the evening at the Chernyshevskis'. The departure of the tired guests is depicted as the waning of their faces in one's memory: "And now they all began gradually to grow less distinct, to ripple with the random agitation of a fog, and then to vanish altogether; their outlines, weaving in figure-eight patterns, were evaporating" (G, 64). The use of the verb "weave" in the English version echoes the bicycle theme, thus compensating for the lost association with a bicycle wheel in disrepair that is evoked by the Russian word vos'morka (Dar, 62), translated as "figure-eight pattern." The image self-referentially describes the gradual cancellation of the hypotyposis: the faces and the bodies of the people wane into two circles connected by a narrow neck, just as in Maurits Escher's drawings birds or fish gradually turn into triangles. At the same time, the pattern of the lemniscate suggests that through that very text the characters have attained their own eternity.

The number eight soon recurs in a seemingly unrelated context: Fyodor buys himself a pair of shoes after the salesgirl brings him an eighth pair to try on (G, 76). The X-ray view of his foot in the shoe store gives him an impulse to start composing a poem about stepping ashore ("with this": that is, with his skeleton foot) from Charon's ferry (G, 76). The river, he notes, "is not the Lethe but rather the Styx" (G, 87): eternity can be free from oblivion. One recollects the shoes (they

---

4The significance of the image of the lemniscate in *Pale Fire* has been observed by Robert Alter, "Nabokov's Game of Worlds," in *Partial Magic* (Berkeley, Calif., 1975), pp. 189-90.
are supposed to fit but are too tight) when Zina tells Fyodor that he should write in a different genre because his poems are "a size too small" for him. The shoes seem to stretch together with the growth of Fyodor's creative experience.15

The lemniscate is referred to again as "the Dunlop stripe left by Tanya's bicycle, dividing into two waves at the turn" (G, 97), and once more, indirectly, at the end of chapter 2, as "the rounded shape of eternity" with which Fyodor tends to endow a stretch of granted time (G, 152). This wish to arrest the infinite within the finite is also obvious in one of the main structural peculiarities of the novel: namely, the subversion of the ending.

The structure of the novel has been compared to the Möbius strip16 (of which, as already noted, the lemniscate is a simplified twodimensional projection) mainly because at the end Fyodor decides to write a novel that would be "built up, curtained, surrounded by dense life—[his] life, [his] professional passions and cares" (G, 376). In a letter to his mother he mentions his wish to write "a classical novel, with 'types,' love, fate, conversations . . . and with descriptions of nature" (G, 361)—which rather aptly describes The Gift. Moreover, in chapter 1 Fyodor passes by a square to which the narrative refers as the one "where we dined" (G, 65), yet the dinner in question takes place at the end of chapter 5.17 The narrative future has already taken place, so that by the time Fyodor plans to write his novel, it seems to have been written for him already.

And yet the text does not quite support the analogy between the Möbius strip and the structure of The Gift. Fyodor overrules Zina's objection that his novel may "result in an autobiography with mass executions of good acquaintances"; he says: "Well, let's suppose that I so shuffle, twist, mix, rechew and relench everything, add such spices of my own and impregnate things so much with myself that nothing remains of the autobiography but dust—the kind of dust, of course, which makes the most orange of skies" (G, 376).


16See Davydov, Teksty-Matreshki, pp. 183–99. A Möbius strip may be obtained by cutting a narrow length of paper, twisting one of its ends, and attaching it to the other end. The resulting ringlike structure will turn out to have only one edge and only one surface in which the outside merges with the inside.

17For this observation I am indebted to Johnson, Worlds in Regression, p. 97.
The Gift

Given this transformation, the novel that Fyodor is going to write will not contain an exact account of his experience as recounted in the master text. And if what we have just read is in fact Fyodor's novel, then the experience it describes has already been “shuffled, twisted, and mixed.” In other words, not only does the story of The Gift differ from the supposed “real” experience of the narrator, but the novel that the narrator is planning to write must also differ from his experience. And if in the end the hero of that projected novel likewise decides to write a novel, it will likewise have shuffled, twisted, and mixed the loop that preceded it. The figure that emerges from this relationship is that of a receding spiral: its narrowing gyres are not closed circles—according to Nabokov, circles are always vicious (see NG, 149). Such a spiral may continue ad infinitum; it may be imagined as a wedge that is stuck through the familiar material universe into the world of “infinite consciousness” (BS, 192).

In his biography of Chernyshevski, Fyodor has to content himself with a finite spiral: “There must be a single uninterrupted progression of thought. I must peel my apple in a single strip, without removing the knife” (G, 212). The tip of the peeling contains the first part (the octet) of the sonnet whose end (the sestet) appears at the very beginning. Therefore, the end of the peeling easily joins its starting point, forming a Möbius strip; the necessary twist consists in the change in the narrator’s attitude to Chernyshevski after his arrest (ironically, as noted above, it is a hostile reactionary reviewer who notices this twist). Upon passing the twist of a Möbius strip, one repeats one’s previous trajectory yet has, in fact, a new experience because the path is a continuation rather than a repetition of the surface covered before. Thus, whereas on first reading the biography one is mainly conscious of Fyodor’s mercilessly iconoclastic mocking criticism of Chernyshevski, with repeated reading one senses that Fyodor is treating his ideological adversary with suppressed admiration and that under his surface maliciousness there is a fascination with the ways in which destiny imitates poetic justice. Such a reinterpretation of the biography is facilitated by the scholarly review noting that the biographer Strannolyubski (“Strangelove”) is spurious. In a repeated reading, moving along the inner surface of the Möbius strip, we are much better aware of Fyodor’s strange love for the problematic revolutionary whose utilitarian views on art may have misled generations of critics and writers yet, by the same token, helped Fyodor to resist their influence. Thus it is chapter 4 that has the form of the Möbius strip; the
narrative as a whole imitates a never-ending spiral.

Fyodor's purpose in writing his projected novel is to sabotage the unavoidable and thus preserve and immortalize that which is passing away. This can be done, he feels, not by diary records or by willed exertions of the memory but by the most successful model of infinity—the mysterious "royal experiment" of transforming gifts of life into art:

[Fyodor] recalled how he had met [Alexandra Yakovlevna] this spring— for the last time—after her husband's death, and the strange sensation that overwhelmed him when looking at her lowered face with its unworldly frown, as if he had never really seen her before and was now making out on her face the resemblance to her deceased husband. . . . A day later she went away to some relatives in Riga, and already her face, the stories about her son, the literary evenings at her house, and Alexander Yakovlevich's mental illness—all this that had served its time—now rolled up of its own accord and came to an end, like a bundle of life tied up crosswise, which will long be kept but which will never again be untied by our lazy, procrastinating, ungrateful hands. He was seized by a panicky desire not to allow it to close and get lost in a corner of his soul's lumber room, a desire to apply all this to himself, to his eternity, to his truth, so as to enable it to sprout up in a new way. There is a way—the only way. [G, 349]

A finished work, "a thing of beauty" is not "a pretty bauble" that "always gladdens us" (LA TH, 77); nor is it a record of definite experience, a "bundle of life tied up crosswise." Rather, it is an evocation of what the bundle has "sprouted" into in "the other dimension." When composing literary works or chess problems, Fyodor (see G, 182-84) and Nabokov himself have the feeling that the result sought already exists in some "now transparent, now dimming, dimension" (SO, 69). When at the beginning of the first chapter Fyodor observes a moving van in front of his new lodgings, he thinks that one day he must "use such a scene to start a good, thick old-fashioned novel. The fleeting thought was touched with a careless irony; an irony, however, that was quite unnecessary, because somebody within him, on his behalf, independently from him, had absorbed all this, recorded it, and filed it away" (G, 16).

The image of the "bundle tied crosswise" likewise has the connotations of a gift, especially since it forms a contrast to the boxed gifts that frustrated Fyodor and his sister in their childhood (see G, 25).
The Gift

This passage is most often read in its self-referential meaning: at the moment Fyodor does not know that a thick (though not quite old-fashioned) novel, The Gift, which opens with the scene he is witnessing, has already been written. But the remark also has a meaning within the provisionally self-contained fictional world: the "somebody within" Fyodor is precisely that which makes Cincinnatus (in Invitation to a Beheading) opaque. It is his contact with that "other dimension" where a latent work of art sprouts from the seed of possibility, waiting for Fyodor or Nabokov or some other artist to "take it down."

The moments when this "taking it down" is carried into effect are the most tormenting and yet the happiest in Fyodor's life; it is then that he seems to be in touch with real immortality. And this immortality is not synonymous with either posthumous fame or the appreciation of his work by the contemporary world "in the person of a few hundred lovers of literature who had left St. Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev" (G, 21). The story of Fyodor's composition of the poem "Thank You, My Land" in chapter 1 is a pertinent example: a sudden impulse, the emergence of a prosodic matrix in which words and rhyming endings alternate with gaps, the tortuous filling-in of the gaps, the rejection of sound clusters that draw inappropriate associations (again, this is more obvious in the Russian than in the English text), the discovery of the meaning in the words that have just been found, and the approval of this meaning. Miraculously, a meaning exactly appropriate to Fyodor's concerns at the time of composition seems to be generated spontaneously, without being planned. Fyodor eventually falls out of love with most of his old poems; his belief in his gift is based not on the volume of his completed production but on those moments when he seems to become a medium between quotidian reality and the "involute abode," the aesthetic realm.

This seems to be an answer to Salehar's question of why the poet creates—"because he desires to express 'something' or because he is driven to write by the power of the word, i.e., rhythm and rhyme" ("Nabokov's Gift," p. 71). The poet's conscious efforts are directed toward fitting appropriate words into the rhythmic matrix that springs out of unexpected rhymes between morphologically different items that would hardly be paired in any conventional dictionary of rhyme. The secret, irrational workings of the imagination behind the filling of the mold result in unpremeditated "expression." A painstaking filling of the mold is recorded (partly) only in chapter 1. In chapter 3 it takes place behind the curtain of the text, while the curtain itself contains a flashback account of Fyodor's apprenticeship in the writing of poetry (see G, 160–68). When the curtain rises, the reader is presented with a finished poem.
Significantly, Fyodor hardly ever courts inspiration. It overtakes him spontaneously and often at the wrong moments, as when he is dressing for a ball that Zina has been eagerly anticipating. By analogy, the clockwork Malayan nightingale of his childhood (another model) does not sing when wound up but starts its trills unexpectedly, awakened by a "mysterious tremor" of a floorboard when someone accidentally walks past the toy bird's "lofty wardrobe-top perch" (G, 24). The mystery of inspiration may, if one so wishes, be reduced from a spiritual to a psychological phenomenon, however imperfectly investigated: for a movie director in *Ada*, infinity is reduced to "the farthest point from the camera which is still in fair focus" (A, 333). Throughout *The Gift* the infinite persistently threatens to collapse into the unfinished. A doubt lurks, for instance, even behind the exhilaration of the poem "Thank You, My Land."

Ostensibly, the poem deals with Fyodor's belief in his gift, with the gift of his land to him, and with his persistence as a poet despite the lack of public recognition. His only audience is himself:

Thank you, my land; for your remotest
Most cruel mist my thanks are due.
By you possessed, by you unnoticed,
Unto myself I speak of you.

The word "mist," which at first glance seems to be a *pis aller* translation of the Russian *dal'* ("distance"), is in fact an appropriate reference (though veiled, or "curtained," to use the vocabulary of the novel) to the "noises" in the channel of communication with that aesthetic realm where his poem has already "sprouted." Yet in the second quatrain he cannot help wondering whether his poem is a token of that realm's autonomous existence or whether it is the product of a psychological idiosyncrasy:

And in these talks between somnambules
My inmost being hardly knows
If it's my demency that rambles
Or your own melody that grows.

[G, 68]

The doubt, in its turn, is balanced by the suggestion (pervasive in Nabokov's work) that "demency" may be a glimpse of the Mystery.
This suggestion is most explicit in the “Ultima Thule” fragment20 (written within a year or two after The Gift, during the abortive return to Russian-language prose that followed Nabokov’s completion of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight). The fragment explores the impossibility of determining whether Mr. Falter’s “solution of the mystery of the universe” (which he obstinately withholds from the protagonist, pretending to protect him from a heart attack) is the cause or a symptom of his insanity.

Fyodor’s poem, however, is a “writing exercise,” just as his biography of Chernyshevski is “shooting practice.” Both seem to be rehearsals for a work whose composition would really bring him in touch with his own immortality. Like all more or less successful model approximations of infinity, this writing apprenticeship finds a parody on itself in the “writing exercises” of young N. G. Chernyshevski: for example, copying into his notebook Feuerbach’s maxim “Man is what he eats” (G, 226). In the Russian text this copying is ironically referred to as propis’ (Dar, 241), which means exercises to improve one’s handwriting (the “art of writing well”?), usually performed by an endless copying of adages, miniature models of eternal truths.

Fyodor’s ironic reference to handwriting exercises may evoke Gogol’s image of the pathetically inarticulate master calligrapher in “The Overcoat”; Chernyshevski’s examination of pictures in shop windows and the economies of his ascetic student days as described in Fyodor’s monograph are likewise reminiscent, however vaguely, of Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich. Between the unfinished biography of his father and the conception of Chernyshevski’s biography, Fyodor moves to new lodgings: “the distance from the old residence to the new [is] about the same as, somewhere in Russia, that from Pushkin Avenue to Gogol Street” (G, 157).

The Unrealizable: The motif of the unrealizable is closely connected with the theme of Fyodor’s father; it involves the inaccessibility of information about the father’s death, the impossibility of establishing contact with him, and the unattainability of the mystical knowledge that Fyodor believes his father to have possessed.

The impasse that Fyodor shares with historians is metaphorically described in the sestet of the sonnet that frames Fyodor’s biography of Chernyshevski:

---

20The central theme of this fragment is examined in Johnson, Worlds in Regression, pp. 206–19.
Alas! In vain historians pry and probe:  
The same wind blows, and in the same live robe  
Truth bends her head to fingers curved cupwise;

And with a woman's smile and a child's care  
Examines something she is holding there  
Concealed by her own shoulder from our eyes.

[G, 224]

The image of truth as a half-woman, half-child holding something in "fingers curved cupwise" foreshadows Krug's memories of a young girl carefully carrying a large hawk moth in her hands in *Bend Sinister*. *Psyche*, the Greek for "butterfly," also means "soul": for all the probings of a historian, the soul of a person and the essence of a past event remain hidden behind the shoulder of truth. Standard history, like the volumes that N. G. Chernyshevski is translating (not quite closely) in his last years, is a coarser model of the quest for the inaccessible. Another coarse model is likewise mentioned in chapter 4: the "table-turning," an attempt, made by the credulous rather than by the imaginative, to achieve contact with the souls of the dead. Chernyshevski writes to his father about this "new fad," and both agree that it is "all gullibility and fraud" (G, 231).

The reference to the theme of spiritualism in the father-son correspondence is less important for the portrait of Chernyshevski than it is for the spectrum of motifs around another father-son relationship. The table-turning belongs to the same cluster of motifs as the diary, the perpetual motion machine, and other attempts to build models of the infinite out of materials close at hand. Somewhat higher on the scale of success are the purely mental efforts to probe the darkness, such as Fyodor's strenuous and painful surmises about the way his father may have met his death:

Oh, how did he die? From illness? From exposure? From thirst? By the hand of man? . . . Did he return their fire for a long time? Did he save a last bullet for himself? Was he taken alive? Did they bring him to the parlor car at the railway headquarters of some punitive detachment (I can see its hideous locomotive stoked with dried fish), having suspected him of being a White spy? . . . Did they shoot him in the ladies' room of some godforsaken station (broken looking glass, tattered plush), or did they lead him out into some kitchen garden one dark night and wait for
the moon to peep out? How did he wait with them in the dark? With a smile of disdain? And if a whitish moth had hovered among the shadowy burdocks he would, even at that moment, I know have followed it with that same glance of encouragement with which . . . he used to greet the pink hawks sampling our lilacs. [G, 149]

Having thus worked through the literary variants of the death of a hero, Fyodor hits upon the image of a hawk moth, which renders the imagined scene of his father's death morally, if not historically, correct.

The reader, and Fyodor himself, may doubt whether any of his guesses reflect what may really have happened. One can also doubt whether Fyodor succeeds in recapturing the father's experience when he describes one of his journeys in the first person. Yet it may be that at some other moments he does unknowingly reenact the experience of his father, whether in his dream about their reunion ("His heart was bursting like that of a man before execution, but at the same time this execution was such a joy that life faded before it": G, 366), or in the flow of unsolicited memories that bring back the pain he felt after seeing his father off on the last journey:

Fyodor walked across the park, opened the tuneful wicket gate and cut across the road where the thick tires had just imprinted their tracks. A familiar black-and-white beauty rose smoothly off the ground and described a wide circle, also taking part in the seeing-off. He turned into the trees and came by way of a shady path, where golden flies hung aquiver in transversal sunbeams, to his favorite clearing, boggy, blooming, moistly glistening in the hot sun. The divine meaning of this wood meadow was expressed in its butterflies. Everyone might have found something here. The holidaymaker might have rested on a stump. The artist might have screwed up his eyes. But its truth would have been probed somewhat deeper by knowledge-amplified love: by its "wide-open orbs"—to paraphrase Pushkin. [G, 144; my italics]

It is not without significance that in the sestet quoted above the motif of probing the truth likewise precedes an indirect reference to a butterfly. A glimpse of the truth—the most successful rebellion against the finality of the inaccessible—is granted when not consciously sought. Fyodor surrenders to the flow of his memories and, as in the episode of his father's last return, blends a moment of the present with a moment of the past. Now, however, the crumbling of time has an additional suggestion: it is also a blend of the experience of the father
and the son. A communion between them is embodied in the ensuing description of butterflies in the meadow. Here is the end of the page-long paragraph:

A small hummingbird moth with a bumblebee's body and glasslike wings, beating invisibly, tried from the air a flower with its long proboscis, darted to another and then to a third. All this fascinating life, by whose present blend one could infallibly tell both the age of the summer (with an accuracy almost to within one day), the geographical location of the area, and the vegetal composition of the clearing—all this that was living, genuine and eternally dear to him, Fyodor perceived in a flash, with one penetrating and experienced glance. Suddenly he placed a fist against the trunk of a birch tree and leaning on it, burst into tears. [G, 145]

It is hard to say what narrative convention Nabokov is using in the episode. Does the scene arise spontaneously, “in a flash” in Fyodor’s memory? Or is it a direct account of a past event ostensibly shaped as a recollection? Or a requiem for Fyodor’s lepidopterist father?

This structural indeterminacy reflects the tentativeness of the meaning behind the scene. Fyodor’s father had taught him entomology, and therefore the father’s perception of the meadow (perhaps on a previous day—which would make the parenthetic remark about the accuracy in determining the season particularly important) could have been the same as his own. In fact, Fyodor’s landscape may be an exact reproduction of his father’s experience, just as Darwin’s walk along a winding path in a Swiss forest may be a reenactment of Martin Edelweiss’s last walk in a forest near the Soviet border. The possible clairvoyance is suggested by a childhood episode in which the sick Fyodor, in a kind of waking dream, perceived what later turned out to be the exact

---

21Minute sense perception—whether actual, as in the case of Proust’s madeleine, or re-created—seems to cancel the intervening years. “I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way,” writes Nabokov (SM, 139), “as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another”—time disappears in the fold. When “fancy’s rear-vision mirror” takes Nabokov from the New England winter to a cold winter of his childhood Russia, “the snow is real,” and as he scoops up a handful, “sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between [his] fingers” (SM, 100). When this experience is related to the haunts of butterflies, its mystical coloration is enhanced: “This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal” (SM, 139).
motions of his mother buying him a once-coveted gift. Fyodor thinks that this “clairvoyant spell” is the only one he has ever experienced (G, 34–36), in fact, it is the only one whose correctness has been explicitly confirmed.

Likewise tentative is Fyodor’s suggestion that his father was capable of mystical insight:

In and around my father, around this clear and direct strength, there was something difficult to convey in words, a haze, a mystery, an enigmatic reserve which made itself felt sometimes more, sometimes less. It was as if this genuine, very genuine man possessed an aura of something still unknown but which was perhaps the most genuine of all. . . . I cannot track down a name for his secret, but I only know that that was the source of that special—neither glad nor morose, having indeed no connection with the outward appearance of human emotions—solitude to which neither my mother nor all the entomologists of the world had any admittance. And strange: perhaps the estate watchman, a crooked old man who had twice been singed by night lightning, . . . who frankly and with no fear or surprise considered that my father knew a thing or two that nobody else knew, was in his own way right. [G, 126–27]

Images and circumlocutions “something difficult to convey in words, a haze, a mystery, an enigmatic reserve”; “an aura of something still unknown”; “I cannot track down a name for his secret”—echo the tentative approaches to the “other dimension” in Invitation to a Beheading. This, according to Fyodor, is a genuine, no matter how elusive, realization of the unrealizable. Only a little less genuine, and therefore more transient, is the revolutionary ardor, the mysterious charisma of N. G. Chernyshevski: “That mysterious ‘something’ which Steklov talks about in spite of his Marxism, and which was extinguished in Siberia (although ‘learning’ and ‘logic’ and even ‘implacability’ remained), undoubtedly existed in Chernyshevski and manifested itself with unusual strength just before his banishment to Siberia. Magnetic and dangerous, it was this that frightened the government far more than any proclamations” (G, 276). It is therefore not surprising that some of the motifs in Invitation to a Beheading—an idealistic prisoner, a fortress, a treacherous fellow prisoner, an unfaithful wife—seem to be nightmare transformations of motifs from Chernyshevski’s biography.

Like all the approximations of Mystery in The Gift, contact with transcendent reality finds a caricature of itself in the crude model of an
optical illusion. The flat blue letters on the side of the yellow van are “shaded laterally with black paint: a dishonest attempt to climb into the next dimension” (G, 15). Significantly, the combination of blue and yellow recurs in the first chapter. The dress of Fyodor’s landlady is pale yellow with bluish tulips; the wallpaper of his room has the same design, and Fyodor’s imagination will have trouble transforming it into “a distant steppe” (G, 20). When he recollects the images that flowed before his eyes during his childhood illnesses, he includes among them what may be a telepathic glimpse (in similar colors) of his father, who was at that time away on one of his journeys: “[Mother] unhurriedly shakes the thermometer and slips it back into its case, looking at me as if not quite recognizing me, while my father rides his horse at a walk across a vernal plain all blue with irises” (G, 33).

It is in this rented room, some time after the publication of Fyodor’s monograph, that his reunion with his father takes place in his dream (chapter 5). One of the most touching things about the dream is the sense of the father’s approval. Since Fyodor refers to dreams as dividends from a mysterious transcendent capital of infinite happiness (see G, 176), one may wonder whether the dream could signify a moment of contact with the other dimension. In his waking life Fyodor fails to imagine this reunion, partly because of his horror at the thought of the possible changes in his father if, despite the rumors of his death, he has miraculously survived. His troubled remark in the monograph that it might have been better for Chernyshevski if instead of suffering a symbolic civil execution he had been really executed rather than compelled to go through long years of decline in exile, may thus bear a personal relevance. At the same time, part of his fear may be attributed to memories of his father’s anger at Fyodor’s childhood failings and to the anxiety that his father might disapprove of his idleness (cf. G, 126). The fear could be a muted expression of the vague doubts that sometimes threaten to undermine Fyodor’s belief in his gift.

This surmise, suggested but not sanctioned by the text, brings into relief the psychological subtext that threatens to demystify what to Fyodor is most sacred. The passage that deals with the halo of mystery surrounding his father is written in the first person, explicitly denoting Fyodor’s, rather than the author’s, attempt to idealize the father, to turn him into a hero capable of walking with the gods. Yet Fyodor’s is an unreliable point of view. At the beginning of chapter 2 he says that once his father, “climbing a hill after a storm, inadvertently entered the base of a rainbow—the rarest occurrence!”—and found himself in col-
ored air, in a play of light as if in paradise. He took one more step—and left paradise” (G, 89). Only in fairytales is it possible to enter the base of a rainbow: a rainbow recedes as one approaches it. What the passage contains is yet another model for realizing the unrealizable, and its striking inadequacy is a subversive comment on the other models constructed in the text.

Even without the evidence of this broader context, there are traces of repressed doubt in Fyodor’s account of his father’s mysteriousness: “I have no means of explaining the impression his face made on me when I looked through his study window from outside and saw how, having suddenly forgotten his work, . . . he sat for a minute without moving. It sometimes seems to me nowadays that—who knows—he might go off on his journeys not so much to seek something as to flee something, and that on returning, he would realize that it was still with him, inside him, unriddable, inexhaustible” (G, 126–27).

The “something” that Konstantin Kirillovich would try to flee might be either the gnostical “itch of being” (GI, xiii) or memories of some past experience. Here, the impossibility of Fyodor’s consciously understanding (“probing”) his father’s contact with the “infinite consciousness” combines with the impossibility of retrieving information (“prying”) about his early life. Thus, once again, the infinite threatens to collapse into the unfinished. Even the portrait of the estate watchman who believes in his master’s mystical knowledge is shot through with irony: he has all by himself learned to catch and kill a butterfly without mangling it, yet he persists in his mistaken belief that butterflies grow in size from spring to summer (see G, 127).

IV

The tug-of-war between the motifs of the finite and the infinite, death and immortality, agnostic skepticism and mystical insight, continues throughout the novel. Neither religion nor atheism are of any help. “Religion,” in Fyodor’s rendering of the thoughts of the dying Alexander Yakovlevich, “has the same relation to man’s heavenly condition that mathematics has to his earthly one: both the one and the other are merely the rules of the game. Belief in God and belief in numbers: local truth and the truth of location” (G, 321). Both mathematics and religion contain promises of the infinite, yet both are felt to be insufficient. The “mathematical universe expanding end-
“lessly” appears in the delirium of Fyodor’s childhood fevers and therefore “sheds an odd light on the macrocosmic theories of today’s physicists” (G, 34), whereas the overpopulated “hereafter” of “popular faiths” (G, 322) repels Alexander Yakovlevich in his last illness. The very quest for the infinite is subjected to irony in the thoughts that Fyodor projects upon Chernyshevski’s agony: “Somehow simpler. Somehow at once! One effort—and I’ll understand all. The search for God: the longing of any hound for a master; give me a boss and I shall kneel at his enormous feet. All this is earthly. Father, headmaster, rector, president of the board, tsar, God. Numbers, numbers—and one wants so much to find the biggest number, so that all the rest may mean something and climb somewhere. No, that way you end up in padded dead ends—and everything ceases to be interesting” (G, 322–23).

The “padding” of the dead end (an asylum cell?) is a veiled reference to the mental illness that Alexander Yakovlevich developed after his son’s suicide. Until the onset of his agony he seemed to be in touch with his son’s spirit, saw his son entering the room or leaving it, disappearing through the door that led not to the adjoining bedroom but to a world which, in the literal translation of the Russian potustoronyi, is “on the other side.” The image of the door, which in King, Queen, Knave and Look at the Harlequins! is associated with the motif of “the Beyond,” is also prominent in Fyodor’s dream of the reunion with his father. Yet the door is always a part of “this” world: “I know that death in itself is in no way connected with the topography of the hereafter, for a door is merely the exit from the house and not a part of its surroundings, like a tree or a hill. One has to get out somehow, ‘but I refuse to see in a door more than a hole, and a carpenter’s job’ (Delalande, Discours sur les ombres, p. 45)” (G, 321–22).

Until “a given time” the door is closed, but, as the passage goes on to say, “air comes in through the cracks” (G, 322). These gusts of air from “the other side” are spontaneous gifts of memory, creative transformation, and quaint parapsychological phenomena. In Speak, Memory, continuing to use the imagery of gaps and doors, Nabokov refers to the phenomenon of synaesthesia, or audtion coloree, as “leakings and drafts” (SM, 35).

---

22Delalande (literally, “of the faraway land”) is the fictional philosopher responsible for the somewhat ambiguous epigraph to Invitation to a Beheading: “Comme un foux se croit Dieux, nous nous croyons mortels.”
It is not clear whether the apparitions of Yasha's ghost are a reward or merely a symptom of his father's insanity. Moreover, it is not clear whether Yasha's ghost does indeed haunt anything but the narrative itself: "perhaps," thinks Fyodor, "perhaps, this is all wrong, perhaps he . . . is not imagining his dead son at all right now as I imagine him doing" (G, 47). Indeed, just before dying, Alexander Yakovlevich denies the very existence of anything on "the other side":

The following day he died, but before that he had a moment of lucidity, complaining of pains and then saying (it was darkish in the room because of the lowered blinds): "What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards." He sighed, listened to the trickling and drumming outside the window and repeated with extreme distinctness: "There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining."

And meanwhile outside the spring sun was playing on the roof tiles, the sky was dreamy and cloudless, the tenant upstairs was watering the flowers on the edge of her balcony, and the water trickled down with a drummy sound. [G, 324]

The fact that the sound of the rain turns out to be the sound of something else undermines the validity of the dying man's insight, even though his being wrong about the weather does not automatically mean that he is wrong about life after death. The ambivalence of the passage is further supported by an unexpected development: coming from a Jewish family that had converted to the Russian Orthodox church, Alexander Yakovlevich ultimately turns out to be a Lutheran—his beliefs do not seem to be stable. Besides, whereas almost the whole of the novel's material is filtered through the consciousness of Fyodor, the deathbed scene takes place on a day "following" the one on which Fyodor has been admitted to the then unconscious and silent Alexander Yakovlevich. The narrator deliberately neglects to inform us how the account of the scene reached Fyodor: here, as in *Pnin*, Nabokov endows the very structure of the narrative with cognitive unreliability in order to suggest that Fyodor may be projecting his own persistent but not unqualified skepticism on his dying friend.

With its tentative promise of reunions, the idea of life after death or of the infinity of consciousness is a great comfort to the bereaved—which is precisely why it is never allowed to turn into a sentimentally wish-fulfilling, bottom-line conclusion. Both Alexander Yakovlevich and Fyodor accept the grim possibility of annihilation along with the powerlessness of rational thought. This acceptance is akin to Yasha
Chernyshevski’s attitude toward his own suicide: “that honesty of spirit that imparts to the most reckless act an almost everyday simplicity” (G, 59). In Fyodor’s monograph the same quality is exhibited by N. G. Chernyshevski when he hastily yet undemonstratively swallows the papers that could incriminate his friends and behaves with unobtrusive matter-of-factness during his absurd civil execution.

The simplicity and the matter-of-factness might, however, be a curtain drawn over a “multifaceted thought” (G, 176). Fyodor’s thought process balances between earnestness and self-refutation. Man is not what he eats; he is what he thinks—that is, the content of his consciousness. His worth depends not on birth and not on past achievement but on his sense of the present gift. Reminders of his own unique gift are summoned just in time to stifle Fyodor’s incipient depression, yet having served their purpose, they are ironically refuted; like Rabelais’s Pantagruel, Fyodor repeatedly changes his size:

It would have been pleasant to look down from above on the gliding street ennobled by perspective, if it were not for the everlasting, chilly thought: there he is, a special, rare and as yet undescribed and unnamed variant of man, and he is occupied with God knows what, rushing from lesson to lesson, wasting his youth on a boring and empty task, on the mediocre teaching of foreign languages—when he has his own language, out of which he can make anything he likes—a midge, a mammoth, a thousand different clouds. What he should be really teaching was that mysterious and refined thing which he alone . . . knew how to teach: for example—multilevel thinking: you look at a person and you see him as clearly as if he were fashioned of glass and you were the glass blower, while at the same time without in the least impinging upon that clarity you notice some trifle on the side. . . . Or: a piercing pity—for the tin box in a waste patch, for the cigarette card from the series National Costumes trampled in the mud, for the poor, stray word repeated by the kind-hearted, weak, loving creature who has just been scolded for nothing—for all the trash of life which by means of a momentary alchemic distillation—the “royal experiment”—is turned into something valuable and eternal. Or else: the constant feeling that our days here are only pocket money . . . and that somewhere is stocked the real wealth. . . . And at the same time he found it amusing to refute himself: all this was nonsense, the shadows of nonsense, presumptuous dreams. I am simply a poor young Russian selling the surplus from a gentleman’s upbringing, while scribbling verses in my spare time, that’s the total of my little immortality. But even this shade of multifaceted thought, this play of the mind with its own self, had no prospective pupils. [G, 175–76]
This wholesome control of one's flow of thoughts would later produce the miraculous resilience of Pnin. The habit of self-refutation finds its reflection in Fyodor's aesthetics. "The spirit of parody always goes along with genuine poetry," as he comments on his poem about a toy clown (G, 24). The target of the parody is not only the work of precursors but also, and mainly, one's own endeavor. At the outset of his work on Chernyshevski's biography, Fyodor formulates his approach: "I want to keep everything as it were on the very brink of parody. You know those idiotic 'biographies romancées' where Byron is coolly slipped a dream extracted from one of his own poems? And there must be on the other hand an abyss of seriousness, and I must make my way along this narrow ridge between my own truth and a caricature of it" (G, 212).

The "abyss of seriousness" finds a parody on itself in the strident tones of the novel The Hoary Abyss by Shirin. The element of parody, on the other hand, is kept from lapsing into tastelessness: upon reading about the tsar's police firing into people at the station of Bezdna, Fyodor resists the temptation "to regard the further fate of Russia's rulers as the run between the stations Bezdna (Bottomless) and Dno (Bottom)" (G, 215).

The technique of balancing between truth and parody, between the infinite and the incomplete, reflects the tentativeness of the novel's metaphysics. The excursus into the subject of doors and drafts is supposed to reflect the thoughts of the dying Alexander Yakovlevich and therefore ends on a note of tired resignation: "But all this is only symbols—symbols which become a burden to the mind as soon as it takes a close look at them" (G, 322). The novel itself seems to be likewise unsure about the metaphysical position suggested by its imagery. However, it deflects its skepticism from the existence of the hereafter toward human ability to solve the Mystery. In the words that Fyodor attributes to Koncheev, "the attempt to comprehend the world is reduced to an attempt to comprehend that which we ourselves have deliberately made incomprehensible. The absurdity at which searching thought arrives is only a natural, generic sign of its belonging to man, and striving to obtain an answer is the same as demanding of chicken broth that it begin to cluck" (G, 354). Thus within but a few lines even the seriousness of skepticism yields to a parody on itself. "'You will understand when you are big,' those are really the wisest words that I know" (G, 354). Second best are, perhaps, the grammarbook sentences used as the epigraph to The Gift: "An oak is a tree. A
rose is a flower. A deer is an animal. A sparrow is a bird. Russia is our fatherland. Death is inevitable.” The rhythmical repetition of the grammatical pattern distracts our notice from the fact that the last sentence is somewhat out of line: its complement is an adjective rather than a noun. When we recognize this anomaly, it calls our attention to the fact that within the pattern of the novel’s motifs, this statement is also less obvious than the preceding ones. Each of the sentences of the epigraph, then, seems to be a fragment of a shadow syllogism whose conclusion may vary from an adage suitable for “writing exercises” to the “absolute formula” (G, 221), which, as a paramathematical phenomenon, can only be a rule of the game.