

ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF ART IN NABOKOV'S RUSSIAN NOVELS

A FORMAL ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF ART IN
NABOKOV'S RUSSIAN NOVELS

A thesis
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Terry Patrick Anderson

Department of Russian and Slavic Studies

McGill University

1973

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A dissertation submitted for the degree
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An abstract

The present study constitutes a significant and original contribution to Nabokov criticism. It is the only work existing which distinguishes and formally analyzes throughout Nabokov's eight Russian novels his singularly most explicit and most important recurring theme -- the theme of art. This critical approach provides the essential key to a deeper understanding of Nabokov's literary intentions. Since this thematic line runs throughout Nabokov's prose, this dissertation will also serve as an informative approach to his English novels.

Prefacing the textual analyses, several facets of Nabokov's artifice have been dealt with generally. This chapter serves to explain Nabokov's choice of theme, as well as to form a basis for an understanding of his art and the presentation of his theme in the Russian novels. Immediately following the main text and Conclusion are an Appendix of doctoral dissertation abstracts on Nabokov and a Bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

Department of Russian and Slavic Studies
McGill University
1973

UNE ANALYSE FORMELLE DU THEME DE L'ART
DANS LES ROMANS RUSSES DE NABOKOV

par

Terry Patrick Anderson

Thèse présentée pour l'obtention du grade de
Docteur en Philosophie

Résumé

La présente étude est une contribution importante et originale à l'étude critique de Nabokov. C'est le seul ouvrage existant qui distingue et analyse formellement à travers huit romans russes de Nabokov le thème le plus remarquablement explicite et celui qui se répète le plus souvent dans l'oeuvre de l'auteur: le thème de l'art. Cette étude critique permet une compréhension plus profonde des desseins littéraires de Nabokov. Etant donné que cette ligne thématique se retrouve dans toute la prose de Nabokov, on peut noter que cette thèse est également utile pour l'étude des romans anglais de Nabokov.

Lorsque l'on fait une analyse des textes de Nabokov on a généralement affaire à plusieurs facettes de l'art de l'écrivain. Le présent travail permet d'expliquer le choix d'un thème par Nabokov et constitue une étude de base pour la compréhension de son art en général et de la manière dont il présente ce thème dans ses romans russes en particulier.

Après le corps de l'ouvrage et la Conclusion le lecteur

trouvera un Appendice comprenant les thèses écrites sur Nabokov
et une Bibliographie des sources primaires et secondaires.

Département d'Etudes Russes et Slaves
Université McGill
1973

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The writer was born on April 20, 1947 in Jersey City New Jersey, in the United States of America. He received his elementary and secondary education in the Ithaca Public School System, Ithaca, New York, where he began his studies of Russian language and literature. In June 1969 he received the Bachelor of Science in Languages (B.S.L.) degree from the Institute of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. The major concentration was Russian language and literature; the minor was German language.

In September 1969 he entered the graduate division of the Department of Russian and Slavic Studies at McGill University. In June 1971 he received a Master of Arts degree in Russian Literature. In June of 1973 he received his Doctor of Philosophy in Russian and Slavic Studies from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research of McGill University.

For the years 1969-1973 he was a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Russian and Slavic Studies at McGill. Aside from the financial assistance afforded by this position, the author was awarded a Summer Research Grant in 1971 to support the initial research for his doctoral dissertation. In addition,

the writer was awarded a McConnell Memorial Fellowship in Fall of 1971, also to support the research and the preparation of his doctoral dissertation. This award was held for two years, 1971-1973.

In addition to his teaching responsibilities at McGill, the writer was an instructor of Russian for the Internal Language Program at the International Civil Aviation Organization in Montreal during 1971-72, 1972-73.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to
my wife, Frankie Lee

PREFACE

The system of transliteration employed in this dissertation is the one recommended by the Slavic Review (formerly the American Slavic and East European Review). It must therefore be noted that the names of Russian literary publications, publishing-houses, and historical figures appear in their more accurate transliterated form, and not according to their conventional spelling. Hence "Dostoevsky" is rendered "Dostoevskij" and "Gogol" as "Gogol'." A slight deviation from this system was necessary in Chapter Nine, as is explained in footnote three (3) of that chapter.

A concession is made to conventional spelling, however, in the rendering of Nabokov's own name as well as the names of people and characters appearing in his memoirs and novels. It has been decided to retain the spelling which Nabokov used in his writings and translations. In addition, the Russian word-concept for "philistinism" is rendered as "poshlust'" and not "pošlòst'." Also, the Chekhov Publishing House of New York is rendered as such in the text, and not as Čekhov Publishing House. In the references it appears as "Izd. im. Čekhova."

Since some readers of this dissertation might not

read Russian, it was thought necessary to include translations of any Russian passages occurring in the text of this study. Short passages are followed immediately by a translation in parentheses. Longer segments have the translations in the appropriate footnote.

Finally, different versions of Chapters Four and Eight of the present study appeared earlier as Chapters V and VI, respectively, of the author's Master's Thesis, "The Image of the Artist in Two of Nabokov's Russian Novels" (unpublished, Montreal: McGill University, 1971). The present study constitutes a significant and original contribution to the knowledge of Nabokov's literary art in that it is the only work existing which distinguishes and formally analyzes the theme of art throughout Nabokov's eight Russian novels. As will be shown, this thematic concern is a near obsession with Nabokov. The analyses of the eight novels provide the essential key to a deeper understanding of Nabokov's literary intentions. Hopefully this study will also serve as an informative approach to Nabokov's English novels since this thematic line runs throughout his prose.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Professor John Greer Nicholson of McGill University for his aid and counsel during the writing of this dissertation. As Thesis Supervisor he provided not only invaluable professional advice

and guidance, but also warm interest and encouragement. I must thank Professor Nicholson also for my appointment as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in his department from 1969 - 1973, as well as for his endorsement in my successful application for a Summer Research Grant and a McConnell Memorial Fellowship.

I must also extend grateful thanks to Professors Paul M. Austin and Alexander V. Fodor, both of McGill, for their friendly interest in all things Nabokovian, as well as their support in my application for a McConnell Memorial Fellowship. I would also like to express my thanks to Miss Pat M. Fortin. As the typist of this dissertation she did a very conscientious job. Throughout the preparation of this work she gave devoted hours to its final form.

In conclusion, I must thank the Department of Russian and Slavic Studies of McGill University for providing financial assistance during my doctoral studies in the form of a Graduate Teaching Assistantship for the years 1969-1973. I would also like to thank the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for supporting me with a Summer Research Grant and a McConnell Memorial Fellowship. These awards were held for the years 1971-1973.

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"... in the perspective of the past and the future,
Nabokov is the answer to all the doubts of the
exiled, the persecuted, the insulted and the in-
jured, the 'unnoticed' and the 'lost'!"

(Nina Berberova)

INTRODUCTION

In April of 1973, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov will be seventy-four years old. Throughout the impressive span of his years, this man has experienced many cultural, social, and political milieus while living in Russia, England, Germany, France, The United States, and Switzerland. As a child in tzarist Russia he knew wealth and experienced culture, education, and the other joys of life afforded by his aristocratic lineage. He received his education at Cambridge, England, and years later was a professor of literature at Wellesley, Stanford, and Cornell. With the birth of the Soviet state, however, he suffered self-imposed exile from his native Russia and the rootless existence so common to many who chose that alternative. As a young émigré in Europe during the Twenties and Thirties he knew fear, loneliness, poverty, and at many times, frustration. Today he is a recognized authority on lepidopterology, as well as a vituperative literary polemicist. He is an obstinate, eccentric man who prides himself on the range and depth of his intellectual interests, but who ironically prefers the isolation of

Montreux, Switzerland, to the intellectual centers of North America and Europe. He takes great delight in defaming contemporary society and its literature, as well as foiling the endeavors of would-be interviewers and taunting respected men of letters with his idiosyncratic approach to translation, literary criticism, and research. In addition to, and overshadowing all of this, Vladimir Nabokov is a distinguished writer of twentieth century poetry and prose.

During his fifty-eight years as a writer, beginning with the composition of his first poem in St. Petersburg in 1914, Nabokov has proved himself to be most prolific in many genres in Russian, English, and even in French. His complete bibliography shows: eight novels, a novelette, and a half-finished novel, all in Russian; seven novels in English; four volumes of collected poetry (Russian and English); five volumes of collected stories (Russian and English); numerous uncollected stories and poems (Russian, English, and French); six verse plays; three dramas; one movie scenario; many translations from English and French into Russian, as well as from Russian into English; a volume of memoirs, twice revised; numerous articles on various subjects; book reviews and scholarly articles on literary topics; twenty scholarly articles on lepidopterology; and a book on Gogol'. At present

he is editing and preparing for publication his lectures on Russian and European literature which he gave at Cornell, while concurrently working on a critical study of James Joyce's writings. In addition, he is writing a history of the butterfly in Western art, a screenplay and a Broadway production of Lolita. His most recent publications are a selection of his poems and a collection of his own chess problems with their solutions,¹ and his latest English novel, Transparent Things.

Some followers of Nabokov have declared him to be the most prolific writer of this century, or the last, for that matter. One of the better known, and perhaps most thorough critics of all things Nabokov, Andrew Field, has written:

The complete works of Vladimir Nabokov (with the exception of letters) would, if collected, comprise something between thirty and thirty-five ample volumes. And, if such a Complete Works were to be published with facing English or Russian texts where necessary, the project would grow to well over fifty volumes.²

It has been generally noted that not since Henry James has an American writer created such a formidable corpus of work. And yet, frequent comparisons between Nabokov and other less prolific writers have been made which in fact deny Nabokov his

momentous achievement. One example is the frequently-drawn parallel with the Polish-born writer, Joseph Conrad. Whereas Conrad was only thirty when he began to write in English, Nabokov was nearing middle-age when he wrote The Real Life of Sebastian Knight³ and Bend Sinister.⁴ Also, Conrad had written nothing in his native language, let alone eight full-length novels, a novelette, and poetry. In view of this circumstance, one can readily understand R.H.W. Dillard's assertion that Nabokov holds a unique place in the history of literature:

[Nabokov] has no double in recorded literary history. Along with Boris Pasternak he is one of the two great Russian novelists of his time, and he is, along with William Faulkner, one of the two greatest American novelists of that same time. And his novels are genuinely Russian and as genuinely American.⁵

Despite this great body of work, the fact that Nabokov has been considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and the great number of reviews which his books have always elicited, it is surprising how little known and misunderstood Nabokov remains among readers and critics of contemporary literature. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that so few scholarly articles and books have been written which give serious and detailed analyses of the many aspects of Nabokov's highly sophisticated and intricate art. When one considers the length

of the bibliography which follows this dissertation and the number of leading critics whose names appear therein, one cannot help but conclude that most of the literally hundreds of reviewers and scholars who have come into contact with Nabokov's writings have either failed to understand him or have refused to accept the critical burden and challenge the thematic and structural complexities which form his work. One must add that although this bibliography contains secondary material primarily relevant only to Nabokov's Russian novels, as well as essays pertaining to his art in general, it is sufficiently representative to conclude that for the most part Nabokov has only begun to receive the true scholarly attention which he deserves.

While in fact criticism of Nabokov has existed since he began to write, the greatest number of these writings have been limited in their scope and depth of analysis. Prior to 1967, most criticism tended to focus its attention on individual works, while only an insignificant number of investigations were devoted to analysis of Nabokov's writings as a whole. One peculiar feature of the existing criticism was that although Nabokov had already produced a body of work sufficiently large on which to comment, nearly two-thirds of all criticism before 1967 was devoted to Lolita, Nabokov's most

controversial novel. This phenomenon is certainly understandable given the novel's apparent subject matter and the puritanical era in which it was published. As regards his other works and their reception, however, very few serious and incisive reviews resulted. Unquestionably the largest number of items in Nabokov criticism at that time (and to this date as well) were review-essays of his novels. Despite the generally unscholarly approach to fiction one finds in reviews, these review-essays constitute some of the most serious analyses available of individual Nabokov novels. Certainly anyone planning a study of Nabokov should critically examine these materials.

Relatively few articles appeared in scholarly periodicals before 1967. Those few which did appear, as with the review-essays, tended to deal specifically with separate novels and not with Nabokov's writings as a whole. Notable exceptions⁶ to this trend did exist, however, and as such they represented unique attempts to establish some connection between the protagonists of several of Nabokov's major fictional works and to trace some pattern of development in Nabokov's fiction.

After 1967, with the appearance of the first two book-length critical studies of Nabokov by Andrew Field⁷ and Page Stegner⁸, Nabokov criticism seemed to reach a transition

point both in the nature of the criticism and the number of worthwhile scholarly inquiries. Since that time six books, eleven unpublished doctoral dissertations, and at least three master's essays⁹ have appeared which deal with some aspect of Nabokov's art. In addition, numerous articles in books and periodicals, as well as hundreds of review-essays, have appeared in all languages. Scholars began to deal more critically with a wider range of Nabokov fiction than in the past. This phenomenon was no doubt due both to the appearance of Field's and Stegner's books, thus giving others a "critical foothold," and the publication of new English novels and Englished versions of his Russian novels. Despite the great awakening, however, the great majority of new materials reflects continued uncertainty about Nabokov's predominating theme(s), the nature of his artifice, and his raison d'être. Many studies give attention to multiple facets of Nabokov's art with respect to a cross-section of his English and Russian novels. Andrew Field's work stands as the most thorough study of all genres in which Nabokov has written.¹⁰ Stegner's book and Leonard Feldmann's¹¹ dissertation examine only the English fiction (through 1966) as an oeuvre, while Stephen J. Parker's study¹² is unique in its analysis of a recurring theme in all of the Russian novels. Finally, William W. Rowe's work,

Nabokov's Deceptive World,¹³ is a testimony to the ever-increasing awareness and concern scholars exhibit for the symbols, literary allusions and lexical features of Nabokov's conjured art.

Since all of Nabokov's Russian novels are now available in English, and since the body of his English prose is still growing, one feels that the quantity and quality of future criticism will be significant. The corpus of Nabokov's work is available to those who wish to deal seriously with its complexity. One can foresee the publication of more book-length studies in addition to the usual articles and review-essays. In particular, however, one hopes for the appearance of more detailed studies of the relationships between Nabokov's works and their major characters, more attempts to analyze recurring themes as well as lexical and structural features of his work, and finally more attention to all aspects of the Russian novels as distinct from the English prose.

The subject of this dissertation is a formal analysis of the theme of art in Nabokov's Russian novels. The choice of the Russian novels is significant. After the success of Lolita,¹⁴ Nabokov began to render into English his hitherto unknown Russian

novels. As they gradually began to appear on bookstands, American readers and scholars slowly began to realize that Nabokov had been a prominent, although poorly-acknowledged writer for thirty-two years prior to the appearance of Lolita. At this time, critics began to devote more time to Nabokov's writings as an oeuvre--attempting to discover some recurring theme which would lend understanding to his artistic aim. Despite this enthusiasm, more attention was given to the English novels; the Russian novels were regarded as unimportant and even inferior to the English works--especially Lolita and Invitation to a Beheading.¹⁵ This is certainly not to imply that these two novels did not deserve the attention they received, on the contrary. The point is that the Russian novels too are important. Nabokov has acknowledged this fact by suggesting that they serve as the basis for his literary art. Consequently, any reader or critic who disregards the Russian works, cannot hope to understand fully the remaining segments of his oeuvre. Nabokov further complicates this matter by suggesting that even to understand thoroughly all of his Russian novels, readers should have access to everything that he has written, as well as an understanding of the full cultural tradition in which he has lived.¹⁶ Although Nabokov is justified to some extent here, it seems that he should be as understandable to the discerning reader

as are both Joseph Conrad and Henry James, also émigré writers.

To date, with the exception of the previously mentioned doctoral dissertation of Stephen J. Parker, no other work exists which attempts to deal exclusively with a recurring theme in Nabokov's Russian novels. Parker's study is of limited scope and interest since the theme of Nabokov as teacher is seemingly of minor importance and does not necessarily lend itself to a fuller understanding of Nabokov's English fiction. The dissertation presented here represents an innovation in Nabokov criticism. It distinguishes and formally analyzes in all of Nabokov's Russian novels his singularly most explicit and most important recurring theme - the theme of art.

Prefacing the textual analyses, an attempt has been made to deal at least generally with several facets of Nabokov's artifice to show that the allusions and illusions, games and deceptions, parodies and distortions, all form an integral part of his complex art and, in fact, suggest a whole vision of life and reality in art. As will be shown, Nabokov condones a retreat into aesthetics to escape the trivialities of this consciousness; he has effected such an escape by the creation of his literary art. His works therefore exhibit an intricate and involuted character since the artists he depicts all are involving themselves in some form of artistic act and

striving to achieve what Nabokov has already accomplished by their creation. Nabokov's concern is with the inherent problems of the creative process in what often is an artistically insensitive society coveting only banality and meretricious art. Complete escape is necessary; but as Nabokov warns, this retreat from reality must be only temporary; the artistic person must not lose control of his ability to return to that reality from which art originated. Art can be man's saviour, but if one reaches that paraphasia where one can no longer clearly discern life's reality, one is destined to failure both as an artist and a human being.

One hopes that the present study of the Russian novels will serve to complete the particular line of investigation which was begun by Page Stegner's work. Taken together these two studies represent an essential and basic line of interpretation for all of Nabokov's prose fiction from Mašen'ka¹⁷ to Ada¹⁸. The noteworthy value of this study apart from Stegner's work is that it offers a concise introduction to Nabokov's art as well as bringing appreciable understanding to Nabokov's otherwise misunderstood, neglected, and forgotten Russian prose. The bibliography presented at the conclusion will serve as a critical stepping-stone for all those who might be interested in pursuing Nabokov criticism in the future. It

contains all available review-essays of Nabokov's Russian novels to January, 1973 as well as all other secondary material concerning these novels and Nabokov's art. The appendix includes abstracts of those dissertations which are listed in the bibliography.

Since most readers of this thesis and of Nabokov's novels will be English-speaking, it will be more fruitful to use as the basis for textual analysis the available English language versions of the eight Russian novels. This choice is prompted by the general unavailability of the original Russian versions even to those who do read Russian. Also non-Russian readers will have access to translations thereby enabling them to compare the analyses with the texts.

Those readers and critics who might claim that consideration of a translated text for a scholarly analysis could lead to misinterpretation or to an erroneous assessment of the artist's original intentions will be unnecessarily concerned. With Nabokov's Englished novels one is not removed so significantly from the original as to be left to the mercy of a translator's comprehension of his model because Nabokov himself, or someone working with him or under his closest supervision, has effected

the translations. The crucial and difficult tasks of selecting the proper verbal counterparts, of adjusting the phrasing of his English to fit the original Russian, and of transferring intact the entirety of the artistic vision which informs the original, have all been done by the creator himself. His English is comparable to his command of Russian. The translations thus match in almost all respects the tone and intent of the originals.

Another problem dealt with in deciding to work with the translated versions was the fact that three of the eight novels, Kamera obskura, Korol', dama, valet", and Otčajanie, sustained some sort of revision while undergoing translation. A decisive factor in choosing to use the revised versions was Nabokov's belief that he only succumbs to this urge "to abridge, expand, or otherwise alter or cause to be altered [his writings in translation] for the sake of belated improvement."¹⁹ Where extensive revisions have been made, as in the case of Laughter in the Dark, and to a lesser extent in Despair, the English editions become fuller, later versions of the original and thus may be considered the perfected, final form of the writer's original artistic vision.

Kamera obskura, as the bibliography shows, was first published in Paris in 1931-32. The original English translation

was published by John Long of London in 1936 under the title Camera Obscura. Apparently dissatisfied with Camera Obscura and with the Russian original, Nabokov revised his translation in 1938 and reissued it under the title Laughter in the Dark. Because it is unlikely that contemporary readers will have access to either the 1936 translation or the original Russian version, the basis for analysis is the 1938 revised edition of the novel. In the analysis of this book, however, the nature of the changes will be discussed so that one may fully appreciate any development of characterization or theme essential to the book as a whole. As concerns revisions of a lesser nature, as Andrew Field has suggested: "textual comparison of the differences between the two versions should properly be reserved for a scholarly monograph."²⁰

In the Foreword to the 1968 English translation of Korol', dama, valet ("King, Queen, Knave"), Nabokov writes that after considering the publication of a 1966 literal translation of this novel, he decided that a number of revisions affecting the text had to be made; "Very soon I asserted that the original sagged considerably more than I had expected."²¹ Nabokov claims that in making the changes his main purpose was "to permit a still breathing body to enjoy certain innate capacities which inexperience and eagerness, the haste of thought

and the sloth of word had denied it formerly."²² In general the nature of the changes concerned only the striking out and rewriting of "lame odds and ends."²³

Originally in Speak, Memory, recalling his first two novels, Mašen'ka and Korol', dama, valet", Nabokov says that they were "mediocre." Later he changed this opinion with the publication of the unrevised English edition of Mašen'ka ("Mary") and the revised English version of Korol', dama, valet" ("King, Queen, Knave"). Apparently more pleased with the revised version of King, Queen, Knave, Nabokov refers to it in the novel's Foreword thus: "Of all my novels, this bright brute is the gayest."²⁴

In addition to striking out material, Nabokov added to the text making it a longer and much more substantial version of the original version. The changes in the text range from simple rephrasing, the deletion of whole passages, the addition of parenthetical remarks, to the addition of whole sentences, paragraphs, and pages. Considering the extent of the revisions, King, Queen, Knave could be considered a whole new novel. Nevertheless, in most respects the later edition is undoubtedly preferred by Nabokov since the loose edges and lack of coordination in Korol', dama, valet", have been removed in King, Queen, Knave. For those interested in

the exact textual revisions, one may consult Carl R. Proffer's essay, "A new deck for Nabokov's Knaves."²⁵

Nabokov translated Otčajanie as Despair at the end of 1936 while he was still in Berlin. He considered the result stylistically clumsy but allowed its publication by John Long of London in 1937. This translation exists in very few copies since most were destroyed by a bomb during World War Two. As a basis for the available translation, Nabokov used the original Russian version, but made some revisions. Apparently much more pleased with the fuller, revised edition, Nabokov remarks in the novel's Foreword:

...but I also know how pleased and excited I would have been in 1935 had I been able to foreread this 1965 version. The ecstatic love of a young writer for the old writer he will be someday is ambition in its most laudable form. This love is not appreciated by the older man in his larger library, for even if he does recall with regret a naked palate and a rheumless eye, he has nothing but an impatient shrug for the bungling apprentice of his youth.²⁶

Although Nabokov says that he has "done more than revamp [his] thirty-year-old translation: [that he has] revised Otchayane itself,"²⁷ the changes are mostly of the word, phrase, and sentence variety. Names are not changed, as in Laughter in the Dark, character roles are neither

extended nor abbreviated, and the chronology of events remains identical in both versions. Other alterations are of a lesser nature. There are typographical changes which put some phrases in parentheses, and others in italics to give them more stress. In all, modifications are on a much smaller scale than found in Laughter in the Dark.²⁸

Before turning to analyses of the texts, it is necessary first to make a few statements concerning the nature of Nabokov's art so as later to avoid unwanted repetition. Chapter One concerns itself with Nabokov's artistic aim and the essential traits of his artifice. The recurrent elements of illusion, parody of literary forms and themes, satire on the Freudian approach to literature and psychoanalysis, nostalgia for the past, the unreality of time and space, and the intertwining of fantasy and reality all will be briefly discussed. Immediately following these observations, one will present in separate chapters a formal reading of each of the eight novels as they reflect the theme of art.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Poems and Problems. New York: McGraw-Hill & Co., 1970. The volume contains thirty-nine Russian poems with facing English translations, fourteen English poems, and eighteen chess problems with their solutions. Also: Transparent Things. New York: McGraw-Hill & Co., 1972.

² Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 352.

³ See Primary Sources, "Works in English."

⁴ Idem.

⁵ R.H.W. Dillard, "Not Text But Texture: The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov," Hollins Critic [Richmond, Virginia], Vol. III (June, 1966), 2.

⁶ Dillard, R.H.W. "Not Text But Texture: The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov." Hollins Critic, Vol. III (June, 1966), 1-12. Also: Grosshans, Henry. "Vladimir Nabokov and The Dream of Old Russia." Texas Studies in Literature and Language, VII (Winter, 1966), 401-409.

⁷ For the complete citation, see Secondary Sources, "Books and Theses."

⁸ Idem.

⁹ See Secondary Sources, "Books and Theses," under Anderson, Miller, and Ripp.

¹⁰ The year 1967 saw an exciting innovation in scholarly Nabokov criticism: when Andrew Field published Nabokov: His Life in Art. Whereas in the past criticism was centered primarily around the English works, Field's book was the first of its kind to call attention to all of the genres in which Nabokov has written, and to consider for the first time all of his writings as an oeuvre so that the reader could trace and place the various Nabokovian motifs which figure throughout his art. Unfortunately, although Field pointed out several secondary themes, one of which was the theme of art, he seemed reluctant to call particular attention to any one specific motif which he considered to be the important theme in Nabokov's writings.

11 See Secondary Sources, "Books and Theses," for the complete citation. See Appendix III for further data.

12 Idem.

13 Idem. [In reviewing Rowe's book Nabokov sums up his opinion thus:

"The jacket of Mr. Rowe's book depicts a butterfly incongruously flying around a candle. Moths, not butterflies, are attracted to light, but the designer's blunder neatly illustrates the quality of Mr. Rowe's preposterous and nasty interpretations. And he will be read, he will be quoted, he will be filed in great libraries next to my arbors and mists!"
(The New York Review, Oct. 7, 1971, p. 8.)]

14 See Primary Sources, "Works in English," for the complete citation.

15 Idem.

16 Malcolm David, "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov," The New Yorker, November 8, 1959, p. 197.

17 See Primary Sources, "Works in Russian."

18 See Primary Sources, "Works in English."

19 Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1955), pp. vi-vii.

20 Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 160.

21 Vladimir Nabokov, King, Queen, Knave (New York: McGraw-Hill & Co., 1968), p. ix.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. vii.

²⁵ Proffer, Carl R. "A new deck for Nabokov's Knaves." Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes. Edited by Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

²⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, Despair (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 8.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ For those interested in the textual differences between Otčajanie and Despair, see Carl R. Proffer's essay "From Otchaianie to Despair." Slavic Review: The American Quarterly of Soviet and East European Studies, June, 1968, 258-266.

CHAPTER ONE

NABOKOV'S ARTIFICE

Many critics, both past and contemporary, of Nabokov's art have pointed out the existence of lexical and thematic similarities between Nabokov's writings and those of the nineteenth-century Russian writer, N.V. Gogol'. This scholarly conclusion was voiced by Georgij Adamovič when he declared: "Granted, Russian Literature came out of The Overcoat, but Sirin [Nabokov's pseudonym until 1937, T.P.A.] came out of Gogol''s The Nose."¹ Indeed, several valid points of comparison between these two writers do seem to exist: the depiction of philistinism, the presentation of absurd action with what is apparently a perfectly realistic setting, the common use of specific narrative techniques such as the split narrative voice, the idiosyncratic use of language to create special effects in narration and character-drawing, the presentation of the protagonists' ideas through what seems to be a primitive consciousness, and the ironic, anti-Romantic employment of the Doppelgänger motif.

There seems, in fact, to be substantial evidence justifying Nabokov's inclusion among writers belonging to what literary historians call "the Gogolian tradition." Certainly

there would appear to be sufficient scholarly basis for a comparison between selected texts of these two writers, especially considering the fact that Chapter Five of Nabokov's study of Gogol'² serves not only as a useful introduction to Gogol''s work, but as well to Nabokov's personalized approach to fiction. Such a comparative approach might well be of significant interest and edification to readers of Nabokov. But to evaluate accurately Nabokov's art, one must deal with his works in isolation, not on a comparative basis with other writers. Although admitting to his own admiration for Gogol' and the possibility of influence on his writings, Nabokov warns critics:

Desperate Russian critics, trying to find an Influence and to pidgeonhole [sic] my novels, have once or twice linked me up with Gogol, but when they looked again I had untied the knots and the box was open.³

Hence, attempts to establish a literary bond between Gogol' and Nabokov seem unprofitable if one is to respect the author's own statements concerning his solitary place in literature.

In consideration of other approaches to Nabokov, Julian Moynahan perhaps more accurately evaluated Nabokov's

place in modern literature when he wrote that "Nabokov may be seen as the last figure in an imperial, yet supranatural line of succession defining a central tradition of the modern novel. This line runs from Flaubert through Henry James and Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust and James Joyce...."⁴ Moynahan feels that it was from the tradition established by these writers that Nabokov has inherited his austere and meticulous devotion to matters of style and technique. In discussing the thematic line developed by these writers and continued by Nabokov, Moynahan writes:

The writers of this line, more than any other during the past century, have altered and enlarged our understanding of human reality and human time, have changed radically our sense of self and our feeling for the texture of experience. As a group they tend toward an acute self-awareness, constructing some of their most important works by reshaping recalled experience under extreme imaginative pressure; or else their lives tend to be allegories of their works, the image of the artist coming finally to inhabit the masterpiece he has created.⁵

Nabokov would of course object to having his writings so neatly classified. Understandably he prefers to think of himself as a singularly independent and idiosyncratic writer who has acknowledged the outstanding writers of the past, but

who has by no means fallen under their stylistic or thematic influence. Page Stegner feels that Nabokov has assaulted literary convention and tradition by his experimentation with form and language; that Nabokov is not a practitioner of the literary art as established by Joyce, Proust, Kafka and Gogol'. Instead, Nabokov "has extended the boundaries of fiction by recombining forms and techniques into something incomparably his own."⁶

While respecting Nabokov's claim that he writes under no one's influence, a certain thematic affinity with the writings of the above-mentioned authors does seem to exist. This affinity thus represents a point of reference from which to begin an analysis of his works. Such a classification might hopefully lend basic understanding to Nabokov's artistic aim. As concerns textual analysis, however, Andrew Field rightly suggests that each of Nabokov's novels be considered self-contained entities of artistic endeavor. One must discern Nabokov's unique theme(s) and analyze the works accordingly. Once a critic begins to search for another writer's influence, the game is lost; Nabokov has duped him with his knowledge of literature and his parodic style; he has flaunted the artifice.

The most outstanding objection Nabokov voices toward

complacent critics concerns their frequent attempts to interpret his novels from a sociological, moral, or psychological point of view. Nabokov repeatedly claims that he strives to remain aloof from didactic import in his novels, that he is "the kind of writer who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book."⁷ Nevertheless, there seems to be an element of didacticism in the novels, but not of the usual type. Nabokov's point is that his works do not, and must not, offer remedies for social ills; they must not exploit any general ideas of a didactic nature. In this respect, Nabokov's prose supposedly reflects a disregard for the humanitarian tradition of Russian literature. Anton P. Čekhov, the social chronicler of nineteenth-century Russian literature, was also accused of such "unhumaneness."⁸ Both Čekhov and Nabokov have been unjustly labelled as mindless, literary clowns whose art has no discernible aim or direction, and which expresses indifference to the joys and sufferings of the people they portray. As a result, various factions of émigré criticism proclaimed that Nabokov's brilliant style was only a façade to hide the emptiness of his content. Emigré critic Mikhail Osorgin described Nabokov as a writer who was not only "almost entirely divorced from current Russian problems, but whose place [was]

outside of any direct influence of Russian classical literature."⁹ The very influential émigré critic, Georgij Adamovič, further emphasized Nabokov's "un-Russianness" when he wrote: "All of our native traditions are severed in him."¹⁰ In alluding to himself and the reception of his works, in Speak, Memory. Nabokov writes:

But the author that interested me most was naturally Sirin. He belonged to my generation. Among the young writers produced in exile he was the loneliest and most arrogant one. ...his work kept provoking an acute and rather morbid interest on the part of critics. ...the mystagogues of émigré letters deplored his lack of religious insight and of moral preoccupation. Everything about him was bound to offend Russian conventions and especially that sense of Russian decorum.... Conversely, Sirin's admirers made much, perhaps too much, of his unusual style, brilliant precision, functional imagery and that sort of thing.¹¹

Despite these attacks, Nabokov, as did Čekhov, continued to show a greater respect for his art than to make it profess some educational, proselytizing, religious or civic goal. His writings are works of art about the creative process; and in Nabokov's estimation, art and didacticism do not mix well. Hence, readers and critics immersed in the artless world of didacticism and the "sturdy straight-forwardness of Russian realism,"¹² cannot begin to appreciate or understand his

creations. They are "impressed by the mirror-like angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences and by the fact that the real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech...."¹³

By the creation of a literary art which manifests itself as a self-contained reflection of life in art, Nabokov's prose thus represents a confrontation between the realities of life and the fantastic, illusory reality produced by art. Nabokov seemingly feels that an understanding of life, an ability to cope with its harsh realities, and the possibility of escape come only through immersion in artistic endeavors. Only through aesthetics can one either remold hostile surroundings or find needed escape from the sham, artistic sterility of the insensitive world. As works of art sustained by the theme of art, the recurrent image of the artist is thus easily discerned. Just as Nabokov found himself in an insensitive, pretentious world of poshlust' (philistinism) as a result of his exile, so too his artist-protagonists are surrounded by an artless, sterile world which is at many times hostile toward their sentient nature. And just as Nabokov's life has been characterized by a relentless desire to escape the trivial circumstances of this reality, and to recreate the aesthetic and lyrical milieu experienced during

his childhood, so too his protagonists yearn to escape the cruel joke of their own hellish reality. They strive to manipulate reality and develop a more complete consciousness so as to enter into the free world of memory and imagination, into the world of aesthetics. Nabokov has found his escape from this finite consciousness in literary art; through literary creation he has succeeded in escaping into aesthetics. It is thus not surprising to note that his artist-protagonists also seek an escape by similar means. Occasionally the protagonists may be endeavoring to create art in the form of literature, as in The Gift and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. More often, however, the creative activity appears under the guise of some other interest: the planning of a suicide or murder (Despair and King, Queen, Knave), seduction (Lolita), chess playing (The Defense), the reconstruction of one's own identity (The Eye), the resurrection of one's own past through memory and imagination (Mary), an expedition into unknown or forbidden territories (Glory), or preservation of one's identity and the rights of Art in a hostile society (Bend Sinister and Invitation to a Beheading). Regardless of the endeavor, each of Nabokov's protagonists uses his imagination to construct an "aesthetic reality" to superimpose on that reality which

stifles his creative urge or binds his personality. As will be shown in the analysis of each novel, however, the effect of this change is not always what was expected or desired. Therefore, the oppressive nature of the protagonists' artificially-perceived first consciousness will be compared to that of the generally experienced, illusory reality in order to note the significance of an escape into aesthetics.

Vladislav Khodasevič, perhaps the most perceptive of early Nabokov critics, was the first to point out Nabokov's obsessive concern in his prose for the problems of creativity and the creative process.¹⁴ Khodasevič correctly discerned the essence of Nabokov's writings as a portrayal of the life of an artist in an artless world and the resultant problems of his struggle toward honor, significance, self-awareness, and self-expression in such an environment:

The life of the artist and the life of the literary device in the consciousness of the artist--this is Sirin's theme, revealed to one degree or another in almost all of his writings...¹⁵

Simon Karlinsky, a contemporary slavacist, has confirmed this interpretation forty years after Khodasevič originally made his statement:

Nabokov's central theme...is the nature

of the creative imagination and the solitary, freak-like role into which a gifted man with such imagination is inevitably cast in any society.¹⁶

In noting Nabokov's single artistic concern, Khodasevič also pointed out Nabokov's equally obsessive interest in style and device; he was more concerned with the "how" of his writings than with the "what," which Nabokov many times referred to as the "so what."¹⁷ Some modern students of Nabokov, in particular, Page Stegner and Julian Moynahan, agree with Khodasevič's belief that Nabokov is not a pure advocate of art-for-art's-sake. Stegner feels that one must consider the verbal felicity and wit, the original imagery, the grotesque comedy of the fictional world, and Nabokov's incredible skill in manipulating word and structure to achieve his thematic purpose; Stegner sees this as the triumph and essence of Nabokov's art. By overlooking the brilliance of his language, the sharpness of his observation, and the impressionistic rendering of reality through the combining of disparate objects into new metaphors, one could never understand fully Nabokov's intense game of deception and his searching through infinite levels of perception for a reality which brings pleasure and escape, a reality which is art.¹⁸ Julian Moynahan states this succinctly: "Nabokov is mainly concerned with the business of making art."¹⁹

Stephen Jan Parker gives more emphasis to the importance of Nabokov's thematic interests by writing that he (Nabokov) is concerned with the "literariness of literature--the proper role of the artist, his proper concerns and the nature of the correctness of his task. The constant didactic refrain is the autonomy of the artist and the independence of art."²⁰ As Parker suggests this interpretation is in step with Nabokov's insistence upon the freedom of literature from all social or ideological commitment. Nabokov once remarked in an interview:

A work of art has no importance whatever to society. There can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art.²¹

Khodasevič also made the most perceptive statement about this element of Nabokov's writings when he wrote that the perfection and skilfull use of various literary elements in the novels were as equally important as the characters and the theme itself.

Art cannot be reduced to form, but without form it has no existence, and consequently, no meaning. Therefore the analysis of a work of art is unthinkable without an analysis of form?²²

Khodasevič maintained that Nabokov did not hide his devices like other writers of form, but placed them in full view of his readers. Upon a close reading, the perceptive reader will note that Nabokov's writings are filled with devices which "construct the world of the book and function indispensably as important characters."²³ Nabokov does not try to hide these devices because "one of his major tasks is... to show how these devices live and work."²⁴ As a writer of form and device dealing specifically with the topic of art, Nabokov exposes his devices so as to suggest and create around them a whole vision of reality and life through art in which his protagonists strive to live.

In view of the above observations, it is necessary to present briefly the components of Nabokov's artifice in order to understand better both his idealistic world of aesthetics and the problems of creativity as it is manifested in the fictional world of his artists-protagonists.

The most basic feature of Nabokov's novels is complexity. Unknowing readers experience bewilderment and despair at not being able to discern any familiar or cohesive center of reasoning. Those seeking traditional themes or literary formulae will also be misled. Nabokov metaphorically described the complexity of his novels while discussing the composition

of his chess problems:

Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy; and although in matters of construction I tried to conform, whenever possible, to classical rules, such as economy of force, unity, weeding out of loose ends, I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil.²⁵

Although this is a description of the creation of his chess problems, one can be sure that Nabokov approaches the creation of his art with the same degree of cunning. In an interview with Peter Duval Smith, Nabokov spoke of the role of deception inherent in each of these disciplines:

I am fond of chess, but deception in chess, as in art, is only part of the game; it's part of the combination, part of the delightful possibilities, illusions, vistas of thought, which can be false vistas, perhaps; but I think a good combination should always contain a certain element of deception.²⁶

Yet, as Nabokov suggests, even the most complex chess problems do have solutions; each of these problems, as with the novels, will resolve themselves once the "false bottoms" have been opened.

Contrived complexity has led many critics, as previously noted, to conclude that Nabokov has attained technical virtuosity, but that "the intricately convoluted designs of his novels make them self-enclosed, sterile, and therefore finally 'minor'."²⁷ Some critics have even described the novels as manifestations of an eccentric personality. Such a categorical evaluation of Nabokov's art reflects a superficial knowledge of both Nabokov and his artifice. Nabokov is a writer of conjured obscurity; he takes great pride in this particular feature of his works:

Why did I write all of my books, after all?
For the sake of pleasure, for the sake of
difficulty...I like composing riddles and
I like finding eloquent solutions to those
riddles that I have composed myself.²⁸

But there is seemingly more justification for this artifice than just for the sake of obscurity or the creation of puzzles. To understand his motives is to understand Nabokov's art.

The most basic explanation for Nabokov's obvious delight in abstruse prose is found in an explanation of his love for nature. He experiences exuberant pleasure in the "mimetic subtlety" of nature and the inherent artistic perfection it achieves. Nabokov discovers in nature the nonutilitarian delights he seeks in art. "Both were a form of magic, both

were a game of intricate enchantment and deception."²⁹

Hence one reason for the contrived complexity of Nabokov's art is his desire to achieve artistic perfection, thus initially puzzling and ultimately enchanting his readers.

Equally as important as his desire to achieve artistic perfection through conjured obscurity is Nabokov's hope of developing more perceptive readers. He maintains that the greatest battle to take place in a literary work should not be between author and the protagonist, but instead between the author and his reader.³⁰ He asserts that the author should constantly challenge his reader's ways of thinking thereby forcing him to open up new avenues of thought and critical attitudes. Therefore, Nabokov's writings manifest themselves as games of infinite deception, like chess, which he hopes will benefit the intellectual powers of the readers. Nabokov consequently cautions the inexperienced readers, for whom these works were especially created, that whenever they begin to read one of his novels they are about to enter an intellectual game, a jousting of wits, with a much superior opponent. Nabokov adds that the impulsive, erratic, or overly confident reader who is accustomed to the stylistic, structured, or thematic tenets of formalist prose will, like the "expert chess-solver," lose the game from the very outset

by "falling from an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme...which the composer has taken great pains to plant."³¹

This motif in Nabokov's writings is directly associated with a desire to expose to his readers their fraudulent and conventional ways of thinking and reading.³² Nabokov has concluded that only by totally bewildering his readers from the outset can he get them to re-read, and preferably re-re-read, his novels. As Nabokov once said, "you can only re-read a novel, or re-re-read a novel."³³ This hopefully will result in a more comprehensive understanding of the various interpretative levels of the novel, thus enabling the reader to escape his stereotyped way of thinking and to develop a more critical approach in reading. Stephen Jan Parker, a former student of Nabokov's at Cornell University, understood firsthand the significance of this approach:

Rereading was an absolute necessity because it alone brought the dispassionate, objective point of view. At all times Nabokov said, the reader has to be alert to the author's "signs"--the details of setting or clothing or dialogue or character--in order to understand the combination of art and science, the two aspects of creation.³⁴

In acknowledging the structural and thematic complexities of

Nabokov's prose, Charles Nicol remarked:

While rereading, one begins to acquire the same method as reader that Nabokov employs as writer: seeing the entire novel simultaneously, as numerous structures, interlocking syllogisms which may proceed in reverse as well as forward order.³⁵

The development of the reader's perceptive and critical powers is essential to Nabokov's art because it gives Nabokov the possibility of establishing a totally new reality, the world of aesthetics, and having it understood. Without this conscious attempt to develop a more perceptive type of reader, Nabokov's efforts would, in all likelihood, be ill-spent.

Aside from the component of complexity, another distinct feature of Nabokov's artifice is the parody of various literary formulae--themes and characters.³⁶ This component serves three purposes in Nabokov's writing. First, as with contrived complexity, it is used to break down his readers' conventional thought patterns and critical approaches to literature. When Nabokov chooses to parody traditional literary forms and character types in his writings, he again challenges his reader's intellect by tricking him into believing that he is familiar with what is going on.³⁷ This invariably leads to the reader's identifying with what he

feels are familiar patterns. Nabokov thus manipulates his reader's critical attention so as to give him a different perspective of the novel once he has reread it and realized that he has been deceived by his own complacency. Hopefully, upon a second reading he will begin to discern the "infinite levels" of perception and interpretation beyond conventional formulae.

Nabokov also parodies traditional literary forms in his fiction so as to suggest the mindlessness of such practices. He chooses to demonstrate that "real art does not consist of the reiteration of habits of mind"³⁹ as these forms suggest themselves to be. This would explain Nabokov's outspoken contempt for writers and literature concerned solely with the conveyance of a message. For example, Nabokov is most vitriolic about the religiously didactic nature of Dostoevskij's writings and his use of stereotyped characters. His vehemence over Dostoevskij's seemingly obsessive concern for sensitive murderers and general sensationalism is most clearly represented in his novel, Despair, where he snidely parodies Crime and Punishment by having the artist-protagonist consider calling his own book Crime and Slime.

Nabokov's third use of parody is to control reality. He uses parody to impress his own vision of life and reality

on his subjects, to suggest that man is capable of manipulating reality through art.³⁹ Nabokov achieves this result by first asserting that when a writer adopts certain stock conventions, he accepts with it a stock view of reality. Reality for Nabokov, however, is a subjective affair in which perceptions of experience are varied. Accordingly, an "adopted method" limits the writer's ability to confront reality in an original way. Nabokov sees this approach as artistically immoral because it "petrifies" the imagination.⁴⁰ Because he does not allow himself to be controlled by the reality which he is trying to reproduce, Nabokov manipulates his fictional reality, and thus twists the debunking of a conventional approach into a meaningful vision of life.

Contrived complexity and parody condition Nabokov's readers to understand better the altogether new reality established in his art--a reality where only art makes existence tolerable. As portrayed in his writings, Nabokov's fictional artists are also in a constant state of "becoming," of realizing their complete selves, of finding their immortal souls through aesthetics. As a result of this, however, many of the characters who begin to escape the mindless milieu of conventional thought and find their redemption in art suddenly begin to confuse life's reality with that reality offered by

art; they begin to turn living into art, and in so doing remove themselves from the true basis of creative activity and inspiration.⁴¹ These characters no longer possess an artistic obsession, but instead become possessed by it. Nabokov regards this occurrence to be a common problem in the creative process. Hence, the majority of Nabokov's artist-protagonists are depicted in a self-created, semi-real world in which they experience despair and disillusionment because of their rejection of the first consciousness. They strive to recreate meaningful order by differentiating that reality which they had abandoned and the illusory reality which they presently experience. Although encouraging an escape into aesthetics, Nabokov does warn artists that one must never confuse the state of awareness produced by art with that reality of life from which it originated. Not to make this distinction would result in the artist being a failure not only in life, but also in art. Nabokov distinguishes himself from his fictional artists by always being the possessor of, and not possessed by, his artistic obsession. The problem of distinguishing art and reality is of primary concern in Nabokov's artistic vision. Page Stegner has stated the problem thus:

All the fun is integrally related to an 'idea' that Nabokov continually examines; an idea about illusion and reality, or more accurately, the illusion of reality.⁴²

Judging from this one may conclude that Nabokov regards the reality of the first consciousness to be illusory, and that reality offered by art to be more genuine and therefore more pleasing. The world of art is a world of timelessness and complete consciousness.

Nabokov's awareness of this other, truer reality of art was first awakened at the age of three. It was at that time that he became aware of the concept of time as a prison which limited consciousness and thereby artistic perceptiveness. Revelation came when he felt himself "plunged all of a sudden into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time"--⁴³into a nonspatial world in which all creatures were joined by this common bond. With this newly acquired sense, Nabokov then began to develop his reflective consciousness, -- a quality which he feels distinguishes man from animal, and the true artist from the ordinary man. Nabokov's solution to escaping the spherical world of time, the world of a primitive consciousness, and therefore a world of banality as well, is manifested in his fiction where he attempts to create a world that spirals out

of the chronometrical limitations of the first consciousness. Nabokov's basic premise is that once aware of time and its restrictive nature, one can begin to develop a reflective consciousness, thereby freeing memory and imagination for artistic purposes. These elements ultimately become the nucleus of the artist's cerebral excursions away from the dread reality of first consciousness. This creation of a spiral world of reality which ultimately liberates creativity and establishes a secure and serene world for the artist, has become the basic structural norm for much of Nabokov's fiction.

When asked to describe reality, because of its significant role in his art, Nabokov replied:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. You can get nearer and nearer to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of levels, levels of perception of false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless.⁴⁴

Gleb Struve offered an interesting interpretation of Nabokov's treatment of reality in his prose:

He is a realist in the sense that he uses material with which real life provides him and is endowed with an exceptional

visual keenness; but what strikes us in him is the mixture of realism and artificiality. He does not content himself with recreating the natural flow of life; he artificially organises his real-life material. His artificiality is deliberate, it is not a defect...-- it is entirely desired, a part of his artistic credo. Art must be artificial.⁴⁵

It is reasonable to conclude from this statement that Struve misunderstood Nabokov's concept of reality and the place it holds in his fiction. The reality of the characters does of course seem fictional, but in light of previous observations, this artificiality does not result from a conviction that fiction must be artificial.

This impressionistic mode of writing, a method which emphasizes the subjectivity of reality and establishes it (reality) entirely in the stream of sensations, thereby fixing reality primarily as the images of an imaginative mind, leads Nabokov to create a world which is a composite of images created from the hallucinations of his mind and the physical surroundings of that world which we call reality. As Page Stegner has noted, Nabokov's language accordingly reflects a constant attempt to find fresh metaphors, original similes, and generally to coalesce disparate objects through his metaphorical and personified imagery.⁴⁶ This feature of Nabokov's

writing has become a conventional element since it is found in nearly all of his fiction.

With an understanding of how and why Nabokov constructs his artifice, it is now possible to analyze a secondary, but closely related thematic line in Nabokov's writings: his contempt for Freudianism.

In the prefaces to most of his novels originally in English, as well as those translated from Russian, Nabokov writes "a few words of encouragement to the Viennese delegation,"⁴⁷ little notes for "little Freudians" who he expects "will no doubt continue to identify [his] characters with... comic book notions of my parents, sweethearts and serial selves."⁴⁸ For example, in the preface to The Defense Nabokov writes:

Analysts and analyzed will enjoy, I hope, certain details of the treatment Luzhin is subjected to after his breakdown (such as the curative insinuation that a chess player sees Mom in his Queen and Pop in his opponent's King).⁴⁹

In the foreword to Invitation to a Beheading he comments:

The disciples of the Viennese witchdoctor will snigger over it in their grotesque world of communal guilt and progressivnoe education.⁵⁰

Nabokov has four basic reasons for his scorn of "Freudian voodooism."⁵¹ The first is that its proponents, the "Viennese delegation," tend to direct their critical attention more to the sociological, psychological, or moral "message" of his books. As has been discussed, there are no hidden messages of didactic import in Nabokov's work. These critics who hunt for symbols and revel in allegories, and generally try to find Freudian implications in every story minimize the purely artistic value of his writings. Nabokov, of course, objects to having his novels analyzed in terms of conventional ideas; the psychoanalytic approach to literature is totally alien to Nabokov's artistic vision. Nabokov's sarcastic invective serves to fend off "the furtive feeling that a book, to be great, must deal in great ideas."⁵²

Nabokov also expresses a marked antipathy toward deep psychology because it has adopted a clinical, sterile, stereotyped language that has been made into a series of clichés through popular overuse. Furthermore, he* notes that mental disturbances have become a convention of the philistine as well as the intellectual mind. Neurosis, psychosis, and the man (Freud) who made them famous are all obvious targets for Nabokov because of his intense dislike of groups, movements, and cooperative activities.⁵³

* Stegner

Nabokov also dislikes psychology because he realizes that if it can freeze the source of man's mental disturbance, his imagination, so too it might be used to stifle the beneficial creative aspects of that imagination. In addition, it might be used to lessen man's interest in books, thereby reducing both the level of art and also the number of great books which might be written. Nabokov writes in Speak, Memory:

What a great mistake on the part of dictators to ignore psychoanalysis--a whole generation might so easily be corrupted that way.⁵⁴

An additional reason for Nabokov's distrust of Freudianism is that it challenges the creation and acceptance of his artistic reality. As an antirealist and a believer in the complete freedom of the imagination, Nabokov feels that Freudianism, with its established pattern of normal existence, is too confining for both the artist and the reader who chooses to escape the accepted norm of reality. As has been shown, illusion and reality are interrelated in Nabokov's writings, thus making his whole vision of existence concerned with appearances, illusions, and impressions of the external world, thereby suggesting an infinite range of reality. In contrast, illusion for Freud is at one end of the spectrum and reality is at the other.⁵⁵ Freudians say that Nabokov's vision

of reality tends to be nothing but illusion and because of this distorts what the essence of that reality is. Nabokov argues that only in rare cases do artists obsessed by art ever really mount an attack on reality. Many artists consider this other reality of aesthetics as only a temporary imaginative escape from the grotesquerie of the first consciousness.

Finally, Nabokov dislikes Freudian psychology because of its attitude toward art; in many respects it is antithetic to Nabokov's own. Freudianism alleges that the artist is the possessed and not the possessor of his visionary fancy. Nabokov maintains that absolute authorial control over the structure and composition of his art is essential to his creative process; in fact, it constitutes an inherent feature of his thematic intentions. Moreover, Nabokov makes especially clear in his novels the distinction between the neurotic, possessed character and the possessing, omnipotent author.⁵⁶

The tendency of the "Viennese delegation" to approach critically Nabokov's work is for them not without basis; his works are filled with misguided, disoriented individuals -- sexual deviants, cripples, and the deformed of one kind or another. But where the critics are mistaken, thereby enraging Nabokov, is that these characters do not exist as psychological

types, but "as reflections of the irony of existence, as expressions of the finite vulgarity and the pathos that are superimposed on the beauty and the sublimity of the natural world."⁵⁷ The frequency with which these figures appear in Nabokov's writings suggests that he is somewhat puritanical as concerns common reality and that he has virtually embraced aesthetics as a religion and means for his salvation. It seems that Nabokov is able to overcome the oppressiveness of this vulgar, freakish, and distorted world only by repeatedly exposing its causes. Nabokov seemingly expresses a fastidious revulsion against vulgarity in the world apparently to suggest that escape for him and his artist-protagonists can come only from a spiritual substitution, an embracing of creative, aesthetic activity.

The one word generally used to describe and explain all that Nabokov scorns in reality and therefore explains both the structure and themes of his novels, as well as his own life, is the word-concept "poshlust'." In his study of Gogol' Nabokov devotes twelve pages to the elucidation of this concept and its purveyors, the pošljaki.⁵⁸ In his understanding, this concept cannot be concisely rendered into English. English offers such approximations as "'cheap, sham, common, smutty, ... in bad taste, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry'."⁵⁹

The most common translation given is "philistinism." But poshlust' is "not only the obviously trashy, but also the falsely important, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive."⁶⁰ It is most insidious when "the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest levels of art, thought, or emotion."⁶¹ Nabokov remarks that the flowers of poshlust' bloom in such phrases and terms as "'the moment of truth', 'charisma', 'existential',"⁶² and others. In a lecture at Cornell University Nabokov spoke the following words on the concept of poshlust' (he uses philistinism as a suitable synonym):

Philistinism presupposes an advanced state of civilization. It is omniscient ... the philistine uses set phrases and clichés ... has trivial ideas which are his entire existence ... The philistine likes to impress and be impressed. A world of deception, of happy, mutual cheating. The Philistine knows and cares very little about art and literature. He is trained to read magazines.⁶³

Nabokov is most vitriolic when referring to poshlust' as it appears in literature and literary criticism. Poshlust' in these cases means:

corny, trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic, and dishonest pseudo-literature ... if we want to pin down poshlust' in contemporary writing

we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities we all know.⁶⁴

In a 1962 interview Nabokov commented further on the meaning of poshlust' thus:

I am bored by writers who join the social-comment bracket. I despise the corny philistine fad of flaunting four-letter words. I also refuse to find merit in a novel just because it is by a brave black in Africa or a brave white in Russia - or by any representative of any single group in America. Frankly, a national, folklore, class, Masonic, religious, or any other communal aura involuntarily prejudices me against a novel ... I find comic the amalgamation of certain writers under a common label of, say, 'Cape Codpiece Resistance' or 'Welsh-Working-Upperclass Rehabilitation' or 'New Hairwave School'.⁶⁵

In these personal pronouncements, Nabokov suggests that poshlust' is insidiously omnipresent. It is found in every segment of society, in every human activity, in every area of expression. Poshlust' is the conspiracy against individual creative thought and action. In accepting this, we better understand Nabokov's incessant attempts to escape into the world of pleasure, into the world of aesthetics and pure art, just as his artist-protagonists do.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Georgij Adamovič, as quoted by Andrew Field in Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 114.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. Nikolai Gogol. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1944. See pages 139-150.

³ Ibid., p. 155.

⁴ Julian Moynahan, "Speaking of Books," The New York Times Book Review, April 3, 1966, p. 14.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Page Stegner, Nabokov's Congeries (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. xxxii.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 313.

⁸ Simon Karlinsky has written an interesting and informative essay on this aspect of Nabokov and Čekhov. It is entitled: "Nabokov and Chekhov: The lesser Russian tradition." This may be found on pages 7-16 in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

⁹ Mikhail Osorgin, as quoted by Simon Karlinsky in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 8.

¹⁰ Georgij Adamovič, as quoted by Simon Karlinsky in Nabokov: Criticism..., p. 8.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), pp. 287-288.

¹² Ibid., p. 288.

¹³ Ibid.

14 Khodasevič wrote an essay entitled: "O Sirine" ("On Sirin") discussing this interpretation with respect to several of Nabokov's novels. It was originally published in Vozroždenie (February 13, 1937) and appeared later as a chapter in a reprinted edition of Khodasevič's book Literaturnye stat'i i vospominaniya (Literary Articles and Recollections) (N'ju-Jork: Izd. im. Čekhova, 1954), pp. 251-54. Information for this dissertation was obtained from a translation of this essay as found in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 96-102.

15 Vladislav Khodasevič as quoted in Nabokov: Criticism...., p. 100.

16 Simon Karlinsky, "Illusion, Reality, and Parody in Nabokov's Plays," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 183.

17 Ibid., p. 23.

18 Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), p. 56.

19 Julian Moynahan, "Speaking of Books," p. 14.

20 Stephen Jan Parker, "Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin as Teacher: The Russian Novels" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1969), p. 239.

21 Vladimir Nabokov in an interview with Alvin Toffler for Playboy magazine, "Playboy Interview: Vladimir Nabokov," Playboy, January, 1964, p. 40.

22 Vladislav Khodasevič as quoted in Nabokov: Criticism...., p. 96.

23 Ibid., p. 97.

24 Ibid.

25 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, pp. 289-90.

- 26 Vladimir Nabokov, "Vladimir Nabokov on His life and Work," The Listener, November 22, 1962, p. 856.
- 27 Robert Alter, "Invitation to a Beheading: Nabokov and the Art of Politics," in Nabokov: Criticism..., p. 42.
- 28 Nabokov, "Vladimir Nabokov on ...," p. 858.
- 29 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 125. [See also Herbert Gold, "Vladimir Nabokov: An Interview," Paris Review, Winter, 1967, p. 111, for additional Nabokov commentary on the relationship of his art and nature.]
- 30 R.H.W. Dillard, "Not Text But Texture: The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov," The Hollins Critic, III (June, 1966), 2.
- 31 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 291.
- 32 Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p. 22.
- 33 John G. Hayman, "A Conversation With Vladimir Nabokov -- With Digressions," The Twentieth Century, December, 1963, p. 449.
- 34 Parker, "Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin as Teacher," pp. 8-9.
- 35 Charles Nicol, "The Mirrors of Sebastian Knight," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 86.
- 36 Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p. 29.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., p. 35.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., p. 133.

- 42 Stegner, Nabokov's Congeries, p. xxv.
- 43 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 21.
- 44 Nabokov, "Vladimir Nabokov on . . .," p. 856.
- 45 Gleb Struve, "Current Russian Literature: II. Vladimir Sirin," East European and Slavic Review, January, 1934, p. 437.
- 46 Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p. 56.
- 47 Nabokov, The Defense (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. 10. [According to Nabokov, the "Viennese delegation" is a sarcastic reference to those readers and critics who tend to interpret novels in Freudian psychological terms.]
- 48 Ibid., p. 11.
- 49 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
- 50 Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 27.
- 51 Nabokov, Lolita (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 316. [The term "Freudian voodooism" refers to the literary criticism of those followers of psychological interpretation of literature.]
- 52 Alvin Toffler, "Playboy Interview," p. 44.
- 53 Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p. 36.
- 54 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 230.
- 55 Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics, p. 42.
- 56 Ibid., p. 41.
- 57 Ibid., p. 40.
- 58 Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol, pp. 63-74.

59 Ibid., p. 64.

60 Ibid., p. 70.

61 Herbert Gold, "Vladimir Nabokov: An Interview," Paris Review, Winter, 1967, 118.

62 Ibid.

63 As cited by Stephen Jan Parker in "Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin as Teacher," p. 67.

64 Herbert Gold, "Vladimir Nabokov," 118.

65 "Nabokov on Nabokov and Things," New York Times Book Review [an interview], May 12, 1968, p. 51.

CHAPTER TWO

MARY

Shortly after his marriage to Vera Evseevna Slonim in the summer of 1925, Nabokov began to work on his first full-length novel, Mary. This work marked the beginning of his devotion to the novel as his preferred genre. Prior to the appearance of Mary, writing under his pseudonym Sirin, Nabokov had privately published two folios of verse, two volumes of collected verse, four verse plays, and eight stories, one of which, "Vozvraščenie Čorba" ("The Return of Chorb"), later became the title story of a collection of short stories and verse -- "Vozvraščenie Čorba," Rasskazy i stikhi, Berlin, 1930.

Mary was completed by early 1926 and published by Slovo of Berlin. Emigré criticism reflected an ambivalent attitude toward this first novel. Many critics, and in particular Mikhail Cetlin, felt that Mary "byla tol'ko proboj pera" ("was only a test of the pen"),¹ but that later more sophisticated works would result from experience and literary maturation. In another review of the novel, Mikhail Osorgin labelled the story a "bytovaja povest'" ("tale of daily existence")² which, in keeping with the established tradition

of Russian émigré literature at that time, gave a subdued but accurate account of the petty, everyday details of émigré life in Berlin. In contrast, however, Osorgin made the laudatory observation that Mary lacked the publicistic and political tone so characteristic of other émigré novels:

Prekrasno v nej i otsutstvie vsjakikh
političeskikh tendencij i toj deševoj
publicistiki, kotoraja portit
khudožestvennost' v sovremennoj russkoj
literature i za rubežom i v samoj
Rossii.³

The novels which followed Mary belied Osorgin's and others' expectations that Nabokov would become the chronicler of the Russian emigration. With Mary Nabokov alienated himself at the outset from the emotional and literary concerns of the émigré community. This would explain the unfavorable critical reviews given his subsequent Russian novels. An extreme example of the many unfounded critical rebukes which Nabokov's books incurred is Georgij Ivanov's vicious attack on Nabokov's first three novels and the previously-mentioned 1930 collection of short stories and verse.⁴

The article was published in the first issue of the periodical Čisla (Numbers). In substance it was not so much

a devastating review of the works, as a harsh and deeply personal attack, both in tone and essence, on Nabokov. While commenting on King, Queen, Knave and The Defense, Ivanov concentrated his attack, however, on Mary and the collection of stories. Because of the uniqueness of this review, it is worth quoting extensively:

...V ètikh knigakh do konca, kak na ladoni, raskryvaetsja vsja pisatel'skaja sut' Sirina. "Mašen'ka" i "Vozvraščenie Čorba" napisany do sčastlivo-najdennoj Sirinym idei perelicovyvat' na udivlenie sootečestvennikam "najlučšie zagraničnie obrazcy", i pisatel'skaja ego priroda, ne zamaskirovannaja zaimstvovannoj u drugikh stilistikoj, obnažena v ètikh knigakh vo vsej svoej ottalkivajuščej neprivlekatel'nosti.

V "Mašen'ke" i v "Vozvraščении Čorba" dany pervye opyty Sirina v proze i ego stikhi. I po ètim opytam my srazu že vidim, čto avtor "Zasčity Lužina", zaintrigovavšij nas ... svoej mnimoj dukhovnoj žizn'ju, -- ničut' ne složen, naprotiv, črezvyčajno "prostaja i celostnaja natura". Èto znakomyj nam ot veka tip sposobnogo, khlestkogo pošljaka-žurnalista, "vladejuščego perom" i na strakh i udivlenie obyvatelju, ktorogo on preziraet i ktorogo on est' plot' ot ploti, "zakručivaet" sjužet "s ženščinoj", vyvoračivaet temu, "kak perčatku", syplet deševymi aforizmami i beskonечно dovolen.⁵

In lashing out at Nabokov, Ivanov did not support his

criticism with any specific examples. Moreover, he did not name even one character or incident in any novel to support his attack. Nor did he name or discuss any of the short stories or poems contained in the collection. As such, this was one of the most scandalous and unjustifiable reviews of Nabokov's writing ever to be published. In reaction to this attack, émigré reviewers strongly reprimanded Ivanov for causing a scandal and for soiling the pages of the new periodical.⁶ Despite sympathy for Nabokov, a great majority of the other critics did not give a warm reception to Nabokov-Sirin's novels. Rather than basing their criticism on personal grounds, they instead judged his works on a more scholarly basis. They felt Nabokov's writings exhibited a lack of humanity and that they were too un-Russian, thus placing them outside the realm of Russian émigré literature and its preeminently socio-political approach.

Favorable criticism did exist, nevertheless, as evidenced by the reviews of Juriĭ Ajkhenval'd in Rul', Gleb Struve in Vozroždenie, and, as mentioned previously, Mikhail Osorgin in Sovremennye zapiski.⁷ Osorgin's review is representative of many which appeared. It begins thus: "Mašen'ka ne roman, no očen' khorošaja bytovaja povest' iz èmigrantskoj žizni."⁸ He continued by naming the various characters,

establishing their circumstances and relationships to each another, and giving a brief outline of the plot. Osorgin then dealt in greater detail with the main character, Ganin. He interpreted his role in the novel as that of a positive hero searching for a desperately-needed change or escape from his stagnant émigré existence. Osorgin concluded, however, that Nabokov's attempted portrayal of a positive hero was not in keeping with the nineteenth century prototype, and was therefore unsuccessful; his depiction was too weak and the protagonist's plight too unconvincing. The closing remarks of the review are significant, however, in accurately evaluating the work:

Mašen'ka napisana s redkoj prostotoj i khorošim literaturnym jazykom. Na otdel'nikh spornikh ili neudačnykh vyraženiakh... rešitel'no ne stoit ostanavlivat'sja. Mašen'ka možno priznat' odnoj iz udačnejšikh povestej, napisannykh v èmigracii.⁹

The eminent literary critic Konstantin Močulskij gave a brief but favorable review of Mary in a Paris-published journal, Zveno (The Link, 1926, no. 168). He analyzed what he believed to be the two stylistic levels of the novel--that of the sad reality experienced by Ganin, and that of Ganin's dreamworld of the past. Močulskij concluded his

remarks with ideas that despite Nabokov's unsuccessful attempt to create a strong, significant hero in *Ganin*, he (Nabokov) did exhibit noteworthy literary ability.¹⁰

While most critics were quick to notice and to remark upon Nabokov's literary abilities in *Mary*, many concluded that he was not always successful in his attempts at character development, nor in his attempts at writing sustained psychological narrative. Nearly all felt, as did Cetlin, that this shortcoming was the result of insufficient experience and general literary immaturity. Hence fame and glory did not come to Nabokov even after he turned to prose; recognition was neither spontaneous nor unanimous. It was only after years of maturing, on both Nabokov's and the public's part, and after an almost abrupt self-awakening that the public began to understand and fully appreciate Nabokov.

Ludmilla Foster has shown in her recent essay-survey of Nabokov's reception by émigré reviewers,¹¹ that between the years 1917 and 1968 only thirty-one reviews and articles on Nabokov appeared in émigré journals. In criticism Nabokov suffered quantitatively in comparison with such writers as Bunin and Remizov. He also suffered qualitatively, as reflected in the reviews of *Mary*, since many critics judged his works by extraliterary criteria. Many critics paid

tribute to his talent and the brilliance of his literary style, but scolded him for his un-Russianness. His admirers praised him, of course, but usually with an obvious note of reservation. In general, criticism of Nabokov remained much the same in tone and content throughout his years in Western Europe. Critics strove to detect an element of literary tradition in his works so that traditional interpretation and comparative analysis could conveniently classify him with other past and contemporary writers. Despite this approach, one can see retrospectively that critics many times were not too far removed from what is now seen as Nabokov's primary thematic concern, namely the theme of art.

Returning to Osorgin's review of Mary, his conclusions that the novel was free of the usual political undertones, and that it was primarily a tale of everyday émigré existence, are incomplete and therefore inaccurate. One may properly adjust this interpretation by saying that Nabokov was only indirectly concerned with the plight of Russian exiles. Actually this first attempt at writing a novel prefigured many, more important motifs with which Nabokov would be concerned in later English and Russian novels: memory and imagination (nostalgia), childhood love, return to Russia,

German culture, sexual deviance, the eternal triangle, and the Doppelgänger motif. The plight of exiles many times serves only as a story-line basis from which Nabokov can develop themes which he feels are more important. Some critics disagree with this conclusion, asserting that there is much in this first novel which is atypical of Nabokov in retrospect, much that does not foreshadow later works. Stephen Jan Parker cites as examples the strong tones of despair and alienation, almost Čekhovian in nature, which go unrelieved by humor. This does not happen in later works. He claims that character development is too direct, almost simplistic, while there is an obvious absence or weak development of what prove to be major themes in his later works.¹² Despite these opinions, Mary does figure significantly in Nabokov's Russian oeuvre; although it does not rehearse many important later themes, it does present in full scale and with considerable talent his most important recurring theme: the theme of art and the creative impulse. In employing the motifs of memory, imagination, and nostalgia, Nabokov uses Ganin's nightmarish exile to depict symbolically the senseless, inhuman, and sterile void which he (Ganin) experiences. Escape from this consciousness, as could be expected, is effected by the creation of another reality through an

involvement in some artistic venture. Ganin's art is an act of memory through which he recreates and relives his adolescent years in Russia, in particular his love affair with a young girl named Mary. As will be shown, the experiences recollected by Ganin constitute for him a much more believable and aesthetically pleasing reality than the one he experiences in his first consciousness in the Berlin Pension.

So that one may understand the essence of Ganin's creative act, brief consideration must be given to the autobiographical aspect of Ganin's escape. In a review of the autobiography, Alfred Appel wrote:

...Nabokov does not write the kind of thinly disguised transcriptions of personal existence which too often passes for fiction. But it is crucial to an understanding of his art to visualize how often his novels are improvisations on an autobiographical theme...Speak, Memory rehearses the major themes of Nabokov's fiction: the confrontation of death; the withstanding of exile; the search for complete consciousness and the "free world of timelessness."¹³

In Speak, Memory one finds that Nabokov holds his past in dearest esteem. Of the many personal circumstances which helped to shape Nabokov's artistic conceptions, his childhood

was the most important. Thus Nabokov's post-exile story is not concerned so much with the political episodes of his life, as with his relentless quest for the lost lyrical atmosphere of his childhood. His search is for that bygone poetic environment which aroused his sentience and thereby generated a feeling of security and moments of empyreal bliss. Just as Nabokov's real concern is with his seemingly irretrievable past, so too Ganin strives to recapture the past. He (Ganin) feels isolation and disgust with his fellow exiles, all of whom are stagnating and are more like ghosts than human beings. This feeling pushes him toward the artistic act of recreating and reliving in memory the love affair with Mary during his adolescent years in Russia. Through this act Ganin endeavors both to reestablish order in his life and to create a second reality. Mary is of course the embodiment of all Russia for Ganin, although she never actually makes an appearance in the novel. She is symbolic of Mother Russia, Ganin's past and his former youth. As with Nabokov's life, there are no political motives. The act of memory is an individual and not a communal vision; throughout the novel Ganin's newly-envisioned reality remains inviolate.

In his discussion of Nabokov's world of memory, spiraling

timelessness, and expanded consciousness, Page Stegner's remarks can easily be adapted to describe Ganin's escape into the art of memory:

The fleeting moment, the state of flux, the fragmented and unregenerate world of the impressionist [Ganin and Nabokov, T.P.A.] becomes for Nabokov [and Ganin] a world in which all phenomena are thematically linked in a spiral relation to time, and which he [Ganin as Nabokov] attempts to represent by extending the 'arms of consciousness' as far as possible to encompass a single point in time.¹⁴

In describing the other reality which Nabokov (and Ganin) experiences, Stegner continues:

The impressionistic emphasis on sensations, images, and the primacy of imaginative reality tends to lead to an emphasis on the intense happiness produced by moments of vividly perceived beauty, moments in which practical reality is left far behind.¹⁵

Nabokov once commented that his past will always be with him since through memory, a tool of his art, he has given it eternal existence in his literature.¹⁶ Hence he says that he will never have to return to Russia because all the Russia he needs is forever with him in his art, his language, and his Russian childhood. In remarking on the power of his memory to sustain his own (and Ganin's) idealistic,

but solipsistic vision against the onslaughts of reality,
Nabokov wrote in Speak, Memory:

A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.¹⁷

The story and the setting of the novel are very simple. In a Russian boardinghouse situated near a commuter train line in Berlin live seven Russian émigrés: the elderly, retired Russian poet, Anton Podtyagin, who struggles in vain with bureaucratic red tape to obtain an exit visa so he may leave Berlin and join his niece in Paris; Kolin and Gornotsvetov, two unemployed, homosexual ballet dancers who seem happy with their lives and who care only about securing an engagement in Berlin; Klara, a twenty-five year old secretarial clerk with a pleasing and sentimental personality who loves Ganin in vain, and hence awaits her twenty-sixth birthday with a terrible sense of approaching age and unfulfilled dreams; Lidija Nikolaevna, the widowed, timorous landlady who passes her days in solitude reading old German

newspapers, and her nights in restless, light sleep; Alfyorov, the self-satisfied businessman who patiently awaits the arrival of his wife, Mary, from the Soviet Union; and Ganin, the main hero of the novel, who spends his days in gloom, frustration, and inactivity, until he conceives a plan to intercept Mary at the train station.

All of these characters share common feelings of dislocation, isolation, rootlessness, and despair. The passing commuter train seems to symbolize the bustling and active outside world which strongly contrasts with the inert lives of all those in the house. All characters exhibit the potential to remove themselves from their apathetic circumstances since the basic lines of human communication--interest, understanding, and sympathy--still remain open to a degree. Only Ganin, however, drawn irresistably by the train, renews and revitalizes his interest in life and frees himself, first through imagination, and later physically, from the oppressive existence of the Pension.

The central concern of the novel is the expected arrival of Mary, the former lover of Ganin, and the present wife of Alfyorov. Coincidence has brought together these two men who share adjoining rooms in the Pension. As the novel progresses, Ganin learns Mary's identity, and, as a

result, musters the will-power to break his liaison with his revolting mistress, Lyudmila, and to leave Berlin. Mary, as a symbol of happier times and circumstances, provides Ganin with the inspiration to seek another type of existence. Her expected arrival triggers in Ganin a series of recollections in which he recreates and relives in memory the various stages of his romance. These flights into the past are interspersed with glimpses into the routine incidents of the Pension and its inhabitants. As such, Ganin's recollections serve to contrast the idyllic past with the bleak present. In seeking escape through his creative act of memory, Ganin almost totally withdraws into the strongly perceived reality of the past. However, as the novel concludes, and Ganin is about to escape into the past by stealing Mary away from Alfyorov, he realizes that such an act cannot create happiness for him. He realizes as Nabokov warns, that to substitute that reality which an escape into aesthetics affords for that reality from which art originates, would be a desecration of art and would only lead to his failure as an artist and a human being. He understands that his art, his remembered affair with Mary can only be that-- a piece of art; it should not be violated. The novel concludes on an optimistic note; Ganin leaves the station where

Mary is to arrive and boards another train which will take him to new frontiers and new challenges in life.

The novel opens with a description of Alfyorov and Ganin caught between floors in the Pension's elevator. Ganin is unusually annoyed about the absurd situation in which he finds himself with his fellow boarder. Alfyorov does not seem to mind the inconvenience and is prepared to remain there all night since the porter has retired for the evening. Ganin displays his impatience by banging his fists against the walls of the elevator. He seems overly concerned about the length of this inconvenience and enforced confinement. Alfyorov tries to calm him and suggests they wait patiently by playing a party game. Ganin refuses to participate and becomes silent. When the dialogue resumes, one learns that Alfyorov is awaiting the arrival of his wife from the Soviet Union, and that Ganin is preparing to leave Berlin. Waiting again in silence, a click from above is heard. The light comes on, and the elevator begins to move upward toward the fourth floor. Upon reaching their destination, Alfyorov opens the door and offers Ganin the right of way:

But Ganin, with a grimace of impatience,
gave Alfyorov a slight push and, having

followed him out, relieved his feelings by noisily slamming the steel door behind him. Never before had he been so irritable.¹⁸

Although Chapter One is only three and one-half pages in length, the few lines of dialogue and description which take place are significant. One is introduced to Alfyorov's and Ganin's basic personalities, the basis for the story line--Mary's arrival, and the themes of decay, boredom, and isolation resulting from exile. Later chapters will fully develop these characters and the plot, and will reveal important subplots and secondary characters. Of primary importance in this first scene is the lift's sudden and unexpected stop when Ganin and Alfyorov are plunged into complete darkness. In view of developments later in the novel, this unexpected stop and the resultant darkness can only be meaningfully viewed as symbolic of the forced exile which Ganin and his fellow Russian boarders endure. Hence Ganin's marked impatience at this incident is more understandable. Ganin is irritated by the unexpectedness, the absurdness, and the unnecessary length of his wait, his exile. Alfyorov seems satisfied with his lot; after four years of waiting in exile he seemingly is in no hurry and cannot be excited. Ganin, of course, is understandably annoyed by

Alfyorov's complacency and familiarity. He rejects all common bonds with this type of man who prefers to remain passively mired in a senseless existence. In fact, Ganin strongly resents even being associated with those exiles who choose to sit out what they believe to be a temporary exile, or who no longer acknowledge the existence of Russia. Ganin longs to escape this existence. The only factor impeding his departure is his relationship with his shallow and perverse mistress, Lyudmila. She symbolically embodies all that Ganin finds repulsive in his exile, and as such she is the most active force preventing him from making a change. One suspects that prior to the opening scene Ganin had paid her a visit and was again unsuccessful in abandoning her in order to begin anew. This would further explain his belligerent attitude toward Alfyorov, and his annoyance with the symbolically stopped elevator.

During their wait, Alfyorov asks Ganin, "Don't you think there's something symbolic in our meeting like this, Lev Glebovich?" Ganin queries, and Alfyorov equates their waiting in darkness with their waiting in exile:

Well, the fact that we've stopped,
motionless, in this darkness. And
that we're waiting. At lunch today
that man --what's his name-- the old

writer-- oh yes, Podtyagin -- was arguing with me about the sense of this émigré life of ours, this perpetual waiting.¹⁹

What is more ironically symbolic, of course, is the fact that these two men should be thrown together at all. Mary, as symbolic of Ganin's youth and his homeland, was his boyhood sweetheart before her marriage to Alfyorov. Alfyorov never learns this fact during the course of the novel; and Ganin does not learn that Alfyorov's Mary is the girl of his youth until one quarter of the novel has passed. Chapter One concludes with Alfyorov reflecting on the possible symbolic meaning of their reaching the fourth floor and finding no one there. He had supposed that someone must have reactivated the lift by pushing the call-button.

Chapter Two is the longest chapter in the novel, twenty-one pages, and serves to set the scene of the main action to follow; to establish the Čekhovian atmosphere of gloom, frustration, isolation, despair, and boredom; to introduce secondary characters and subplots; to give fuller details of Ganin's existence and personality; to present discussion of Russia and émigré life; and finally, to bring Ganin to realize who Alfyorov's wife is. Unlike other chapters in the novel which present themselves as carefully written cameos or

vignettes, Chapter Two is much more narrative in nature. It is perhaps unique in Nabokov's Russian fiction because of the wealth of detail given to the reader about each character before he is shown in action. The chapter is thus important as the foundation of all that follows.

Chapter Two opens with the statement: "The Pension was both Russian and nasty."²⁰ Earlier in Chapter One, Alfyorov had mentioned that the Pension was "grubby," "even though it [was] Russian."²¹ The point of unequivocally stating this fact at the outset of the chapter is seemingly to discredit Alfyorov's discreet evaluation of the Pension, and give voice to Ganin's feelings. What would seem to be a paradox for Alfyorov is for Ganin a statement of blatant truth. Everyone and everything about the Pension is repulsive for Ganin. And even though he has confided in some of his fellow exiles, and has personalized his relations to a minor degree with others, Ganin still views all of these people as ghosts, as mere shadows of human beings. The Stadtbahn frequently draws Ganin irresistably away from the rootless, inert existence of his life in exile. He is tormented by the affect of the train and his inability to mobilize.

The physical make-up of the Pension reflects the meagre, broken existence of its inhabitants, whom Ganin despises. Upon her husband's death, Lidiya Nikolaevna is forced to rent an apartment and turn it into a rooming house so as to support herself. To furnish the rooms she pathetically breaks up various sets of furniture and other personal items (the set of encyclopedias). These items only partially fill the rooms. Her cleverness and thrift is carried to a pitiable extent when she regrets not being able to saw in half her double bed. Unlike the other characters who do manage to communicate to some degree, Frau Dorn is withdrawn. She is so introverted that many of the boarders look upon her as an old woman who has mistakenly wandered in off the streets. She spends her days either in cleaning or in idle, mindless curiosity with old newspapers and her husband's letters; she, much more than the other inhabitants, seems reluctant to live or deal with the present. She exists in her room, the smallest in the apartment, and makes an appearance only to clean the others' rooms and to preside over meals. The only person with whom she shares any confidences is the old poet, Anton Podtyagin. From him she learns insignificant details about her boarders.

According to the nineteenth century literary tradition,

Podtyagin is the true positive hero of the novel. Unobtrusive, desiring only to spend his last few months or years with his niece in Paris, the old man attracts the confidence and sympathy of all the boarders. This seems to be because he is the embodiment of all things Russian, which the others regret having to leave behind. A kindly and sympathetic man who suffers a weak heart, Podtyagin is the focal point of the others' communication, both because of his ill health and in all that he represents. To lose him, as they fear they will with his departure for France, will signify the final death blow in the other boarders' struggle for meaningful existence. Ganin establishes a seemingly honest and meaningful relation with Podtyagin; he even confides in him the facts of his affair with Lyudmila. In an act of kindness, realizing that his action might shake the others out of their lethargy, Ganin offers to help the old poet get the necessary papers to leave Germany. Prior to this Podtyagin himself had ineptly dealt with the bureaucracy. He was becoming frustrated and frightened at the possibility of not being able to leave before his money was spent. Ironically, after successfully completing the passport formalities with Ganin's help, Alfeyorov somehow loses the visa. He retires to his room, resigned to his fate, and grimly awaits death. His vain efforts represent

the hopeless and frustrated attempts of the others to escape this senseless existence; they all resign themselves to a spiritual death. Sensing the hopelessness of the situation, Ganin, of course, abandons Podtyagin in the end when he is dying, but not before he conceptualizes the importance of this man's influence on his life.

Alfyorov, of course, is concerned only with the arrival of Mary; he refuses to acknowledge the utter decadence of his ways. Although initially he plans a better future for himself and Mary, he finally concludes it would be best if they were to occupy his present room and the adjoining room until other arrangements can be made. One senses, however, that he will never relocate. He is happy where he is; one even suspects that he would be happy in the Soviet Union, although he overtly despises the idea of returning.

Kolin and Gornotsvetov, the two homosexual dancers, are truly the only characters in the novel who are completely satisfied with life; only they do not yearn for some other place, time, or person. Their role in the novel is insignificant. Their only purpose is seemingly to make evident the ridiculousness of the entire situation. At meals they are constantly either tittering or guffawing at the puns and nonsequiturs made by the others. Seemingly their existence is not nearly

as perverted as that of the others. Their own privately perverse relationship is left virtually undeveloped by Nabokov. The one advance which Kolin seems to make toward Ganin while Gornotsvetov is away, has no immoral intention as Ganin suspects, but is more a gesture of true friendship and concern for Ganin's plight; the two dancers alone seem to understand fully the meaning of all that happens around them.

Klara is by nature a sentimental, trusting, and loving girl. Unfortunately for her, somewhat in the tradition of Puškin's Tat'jana, she falls madly in love with Ganin but evokes no positive response from him. Her pathetic circumstance is heightened by the fact that she will soon be twenty-six and as yet has found no one with whom she can share her love. She is the embodiment of goodness and purity--all that Ganin seems to be seeking in a companion. Her sentimental approach to life is equal to Ganin's. Nevertheless, Ganin rejects her, perhaps feeling that her situation might again draw him back into the web of the boarding-house. Klara is continually tormented by the close physical presence of Ganin and her inability to make him respond. When she accidentally discovers him in Alfyorov's room, she thinks that she has caught him trying to steal money. Despite Ganin's attempts to convince her otherwise,

Klara believes only what she has seen. Nevertheless, she does not condemn him for the action, but only pities him, thinking of the terrible circumstances which drove him to it. Thinking that she has obligated Ganin with her forgiveness, Klara renews her attempts to win his heart. These attempts fail; Ganin had only been trying to sneak another look at the photograph of Mary and not to steal anything. As her birthday approaches, Klara becomes increasingly more depressed. Klara is further tormented by Ganin's affair with her girl-friend, Lyudmila. Lyudmila greatly increases Klara's misery by relating to her the details of her and Ganin's love-making.

Ganin unwillingly continues his affair with Lyudmila; she symbolizes the active force which prevents him from finally severing his ties with Berlin. She represents for Ganin all that is oppressive and repulsive about his émigré life. Before meeting her, Ganin had possessed good health and strong will-power; now he is flabby and weak-willed, unable even to stir from his bed. She spiritually ties him to Berlin; and despite the unceasing enticement of the passing train, he cannot bring himself to abandon her, to escape her falsity, her repulsiveness, and their mechanical love-making. Bored and ashamed, Ganin still feels a nonsensical tenderness for Lyudmila, and upon occasion kisses without passion her proffered

lips. Thus the sadness, frustration, and despair which saturates all the characters is borne symbolically by Ganin. Ganin sees no exit; he is incapable of leaving Lyudmila.

At the conclusion of Chapter Two, Ganin experiences something which will significantly change his life. Disturbed by Alfyorov's humming and whistling in the adjoining room, Ganin goes to complain. Alfyorov invites him in and proceeds to distract Ganin with questions about why he (Ganin) had never married. Alfyorov then produces a photograph of Mary and shows it to Ganin. Ganin looks, and silently leaves the room. Alfyorov wonders why he leaves and concludes that he is just rude. The reader of course learns that Ganin recognizes Alfyorov's wife as the Mary of his adolescent love affair.

Chapter Three is very short and presents itself as a neatly written bas-relief showing Ganin walking the streets of Berlin -- alone and trying to conceive of what he has just seen as being possible. The neon sign of a store flashes "Can-it-be-possible?"²²

Chapters Four through Nine, the middle third of the book, cover three days of activity in the present, interspersed with flights into the past covering several years of action. In a Proustian act of recreation Ganin relives in memory his

entire romance with Mary. Chapter Four opens with Ganin displaying revitalized spirits because of the previous evening's event. Nabokov overtly foreshadows Ganin's intention of reliving the past by writing: "People who shave grow a day younger every morning. Ganin felt that today he had become nine years younger."²³ Ganin dresses, goes to Lyudmila's apartment, tells her that their affair is finished, and then leaves; he then immerses himself into the aesthetics of his artistic act of memory:

He was a god recreating a world that had perished. Gradually he resurrected that world, to please the girl whom he did not dare to place in it until it was absolutely complete. But her image, her presence, the shadow of her memory demanded that in the end he must resurrect her too -- and he intentionally thrust away her image, as he wanted to approach it gradually, step by step, just as he had done nine years before. Afraid of making a mistake, of losing his way in the bright labyrinth of memory, he recreated his past life watchfully, fondly, occasionally turning back for some forgotten piece of trivia, but never running ahead too fast.²⁴

At this time Ganin recalls the first time he saw Mary; the development of their secret, passionate love; their love making; their separation because of school; their reunion; and the growth of indifference toward each other as their lives began to change and follow individual courses. In 1917 Ganin met Mary for the

last time while waiting for a train. The meeting was sad for both. And as symbolized by the physical change in Mary, she had undergone a change of heart; her neck showed the signs of another lover's passion. When she departed the train and Ganin, she never looked back.

Punctuating these moments of memory are glimpses into the routine activity of the present. These scenes of tedious activity and trite conversation serve primarily as contrasts to the lyrical scenes of Ganin's memories. Ganin is persistently badgered by grotesqueries of the present, as in the case of Klara catching him in Alfyorov's room. In Chapter Five Ganin, endeavoring to enrich his memories, goes to see Podtyagin so that they can reminisce about the old, romantic days in Russia. As is learned only later, in Chapter Thirteen, it is Podtyagin's verse which Mary quotes in one of her love letters to Ganin, and which he so fondly remembers. Ganin's desire to reminisce is not fulfilled, however, since the old man is entertaining a guest -- a former schoolmate. Once again the pathos of this poor soul is brought to the foreground when his friend gives Podtyagin some money to sustain his beggarly needs. The old poet is humiliated by this man's condescending attitude and gesture. He is even more humiliated by his own response of taking the cash. Once again the banal atmosphere of the present

begins to pervade Ganin's dreams and bring him back to reality. Ganin fights off these impressions and retires from Podtyagin's room, saying that he had started a new affair and was going to see Mary. There follows a description of the first time he and she met. Chapters Seven and Eight present repeated attacks on Ganin's memories. Lyudmila continues to exert her influence on Ganin; she wants him back, but he will not return. The noise of the trains continues to mingle with the sounds of the morning housework and Ganin experiences a renewed sense of oppression and desire to escape. He reflects how in the photo Mary appears to be unchanged; she is just as she was when they last saw each other. But Ganin is horrified to think that his past was now lying in someone else's desk, a part of someone else's past and present. Ganin despairs at the thought that his sweet and gentle Mary had surrendered herself to a repulsive man like Alfyorov. She represented everything that he (Alfyorov) was not: beauty, sincerity, and purity. Ganin's only consolation is that he had possessed her first.

In the beginning of Chapter Eight Nabokov describes the confrontation of Ganin's two worlds thus:

He was so absorbed with his memories that
he was unaware of time. His shadow lodged

in Frau Dorn's Pension, while he himself was in Russia, reliving his memories as though they were reality. Time for him had become the progress of recollection, which unfolded gradually. And although his affair with Mary in those far-off days had lasted not just for three days, not a week but for much longer, he did not feel any discrepancy between actual time and that other time in which he relived the past, since his memory did not take account of every moment and slipped over the blank unmemorable stretches, only illuminating those connected with Mary. Thus no discrepancy existed between the course of life past and life present.

It seemed as though his past, in that perfect form it had reached, ran now like a regular pattern through his everyday life in Berlin. Whatever Ganin did at present, that other life comforted him unceasingly.

It was not simple reminiscence but a life that was much more real, much more intense than the life lived by his shadow in Berlin. It was a marvelous romance that developed with genuine, tender care.²⁵

Through memory, Ganin, like Nabokov, spirals out of the spherical and chronometric limitations of his first reality to create another, more perfect reality -- a more complete and reflective consciousness which he superimposes upon the harsh and insensitive reality of his first consciousness.

Chapter Nine recounts Ganin's last few meetings with Mary, and from here the story moves to a rapid conclusion.

Klara conveys a message from Lyudmila who is renewing her attempts to ensnare Ganin; arrangements are made for a party; Ganin aids Podtyagin with his passport formalities; Podtyagin resigns himself to dying in Berlin; and Ganin packs to leave. While packing he discovers four letters written to him by Mary during his soldiering days in the Crimea. In perusing these letters Ganin realizes the intensity of his love for Mary and wonders how he ever could have existed without her. At the party given by the two dancers, he conceives a plan to steal Mary away from Alfyorov. Ganin plans to get Alfyorov drunk at the party and then put him to bed, setting his alarm clock back a few hours so that he will be able to meet Mary before Alfyorov is ever up. Podtyagin suffers another heart attack, this time seemingly fatal, and the party ends. Everything goes according to Ganin's plan. In the early morning hours, after doing some final packing, Ganin stops in to say goodbye to Podtyagin. The old man is very near death, but manages to recognize Ganin and to acknowledge his farewell. Ganin fondly reflects on Podtyagin's contribution to his present happiness. He stands up and accompanied by Klara leaves the room. With only a bow and the slight regret that he had never explained his presence in Alfyorov's room, Ganin leaves Klara at the door to the

apartment. At this moment she dies a spiritual death as awesome as Podtyagin's physical death.

Strolling through the streets amidst the early morning activity of the awakening town, Ganin undergoes a spiritual awakening. He is relieved by his departure from life in the Pension, but does not allow his memories to overtake him. He instead resolves to make a new future; his past had dominated the present, but now it would serve only as a bridge to his future. Ganin steps out of that reality offered by his art and back into that reality from which it had sprung; his memory had served its purpose as the necessary inspiration for him to abandon his intolerable liaison and his senseless existence. Ganin acknowledges the ethereal quality of his memories, realizing that to renew his romance with Mary would be to desecrate these. Ganin's initial excitement at the prospect of seeing Mary yields finally to the ironic concession that his romance with her had ended in Russia. He now sees the world with pristine eyes. At the culminating moment of the story Ganin realizes fully that the past cannot and must not be recaptured:

As Ganin looked up at the skeletal roof
in the ethereal sky he realized with
merciless clarity that his affair with
Mary was ended forever. It had lasted

no more than four days -- four days which were perhaps the happiest days of his life. But now he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them, and the image of Mary, together with that of the old dying poet, now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory.

Other than that image no Mary existed, nor could exist.²⁶

He waits until Mary's train arrives and then, without seeing her, hails a cab and goes to another station. This act is a testament to his renewed will-power. In rejecting his plan to meet Mary, Ganin protects the sanctity of his art, his memories. He boards another train with pleasurable excitement and thinks "how he would cross the frontier without a single visa; and beyond it was France, Provence, and then -- the sea."²⁷ The story ends thus on a positive note. The art of memory remains pure, unprofaned even by life itself.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Mikhail Cetlin, "Podvig," Sovremennye zapiski, Vol. 51, 1933, p. 458.

² Mikhail Osorgin, "Mašen'ka," Sovremennye zapiski, Vol. 28, 1926, p. 474.

³ Ibid., p. 476. [Translation: "The beauty in it (the novel) is the complete absence of all political tendencies and that cheap publicism, which spoils the high artistic value of contemporary literature both abroad and in Russia itself."]

⁴ Segments of this review can be found in Gleb Struve's "Mladšie prozaiki: 1. Nabokov-Sirin," Russkaja literatura v izgnanii (N'ju-Jork: Izd. im Čekhova, 1956), pp. 280-281.

⁵ Ibid. [Translation: "...In these books all of Sirin's essence as a writer is fully revealed before one's very eyes. Mary and The Return of Čorb were written by Sirin with the witty intention, to the great surprise of his fellow countrymen, of imitating the 'best foreign models,' and the (Sirin's) authorial nature, not masked by the stylistics borrowed from others, is naked in these books in all of its repulsive un-attractiveness.

Mary and The Return of Čorb represent Sirin's first attempts in his prose and poetry. And according to these attempts we see right away that the author of The Defense, having intrigued us with his imaginary spiritual world, is actually in no way complicated; on the contrary, his nature is 'exceptionally simple and straight-forward.' This well-known type of gifted, scathing philistine-journalist, 'wielding a skillful pen' to the fear and surprise of the average man, whom he despises and one of whom he is, bone of bone and flesh or flesh, 'twists' the subject 'with a woman,' twists the theme 'like a glove,' spouts cheap aphorisms and is extremely satisfied." [The grammatical disagreement in the last sentence of the original Russian text is the fault of either Ivanov or the editor of Čisla.]

⁶ According to Andrew Field, the incident which provoked Ivanov's harsh reaction was of a personal nature. It seems that Nabokov had written an unfavorable review of the novel Isolde (1929).

This was the work of the novelist-poetess, Irina Odoevceva, -- the wife of Georgij Ivanov. See Andrew Field's Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 87.

⁷ Gleb Struve notes this fact in his "Mladšie prozaiki . . .," p. 279.

⁸ Osorgin, "Mašen'ka," p. 474. [Translation: "Mary is not a novel, but a very good novelette (tale) of everyday existence in émigré life."]

⁹ Ibid., p. 476. [Translation: "Mary is written with unusual simplicity and in a masterful literary language. It is decidedly not worth dwelling on individual expressions which are of debatable or unsuccessful quality. It is possible to acknowledge Mary as one of the most successful novelettes written in (the Russian) emigration."]

¹⁰ A summary of this review can be found on page 331 of Ludmilla Foster's article "Nabokov in Russian Emigré Criticism." Russian Literature Triquarterly, no. 3 (Spring, 1972), 330-341.

¹¹ Ludmilla Foster, op. cit., 330-341.

¹² Stephen Jan Parker, "Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin as Teacher: The Russian Novels" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1969), p. 22.

¹³ Alfred Appel, Jr., "Nabokov's Puppet Show, II," The New Republic, January 21, 1967, p. 25.

¹⁴ Page Stegner, Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), p. 54.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov in a BBC Television interview with Peter Duval Smith. The text of the interview was printed in The Listener, November 22, 1962, pp. 856-858.

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 77.

¹⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, Mary (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill Company, 1970), p. 4.

- 19 Ibid., p. 3.
- 20 Ibid., p. 5.
- 21 Ibid., p. 2.
- 22 Ibid., p. 26.
- 23 Ibid., p. 28.
- 24 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 55-56.
- 26 Ibid., p. 114.
- 27 Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

KING, QUEEN, KNAVE

King, Queen, Knave is one of Nabokov's major novels. It is a most brilliantly visual novel, as well as being that rare achievement in literature, a totally created work of the imagination. As such, it presents as well as could any critical commentary Nabokov's themes and highly imaginative artifice. In describing a certain variety of butterfly he once discovered in the French Alps, Nabokov could very easily have been describing King, Queen, Knave when he said:

It may not rank high enough to deserve a name, but whatever it be -- a new species in the making, a striking sport, or a chance cross -- it remains a great and delightful rarity.¹

When the novel first appeared in English translation in 1967, its originality of theme and precision of technique led a great number of readers and critics (mostly those who had not read his works in Russian) to wonder suspiciously whether the author had not deceptively written a book into his own past.² The probability of this is remote, for Nabokov rarely assumes a frivolous attitude toward his art. Just as Henry James in his old age reissued his accumulated writings, Nabokov at sixty-six had simply resurrected another old novel

from his Russian-writing past. Despite some contrary opinions, King, Queen, Knave was actually Nabokov's second Russian novel, written from July to June of 1927-28, and issued in 1928 by the Russian émigré publishing house, Slovo of Berlin.³ There is no denying Nabokov the pleasure of dubbing this remarkable work, as he did in the foreword to his English version, the "gayest" of all his "bright brutes." Aside from wishing to convey to his English readers the remarkable literary experience which this work affords, Nabokov also gave another, more metaphysical reason for reissuing this novel forty years after its original appearance:

But I do think that even a godless author owes too much to his juvenelia not to take advantage of a situation hardly ever twinned in the history of Russian literature and save from administrative oblivion the books banned with a shudder in his sad and remote country.⁴

Despite the freshness and originality of King, Queen, Knave in its Russian variant (the title was Korol', dama, valet"; the English title was an exact translation), the novel elicited very few critical reviews from the émigré press, even fewer than did the substantially less sophisticated Mary. This circumstance was inexplicable, for although Mary might rightfully have been only a "test of the pen," King, Queen, Knave was obviously much superior and, as it turned out, a

display of all the literary ability which later would characterize the best of Nabokov's writings. Herein lay the problem with the novel's reception, however. Disbelieving readers were reluctant to accept the originality and sophistication of Nabokov's second literary attempt, saying that it was written in a style completely unlike any which had hitherto appeared in Russian literature. Nabokov was thus accused of emulating foreign models in an attempt to deceive the public. As representative of those few reviews which did appear, Mikhail Cetlin wrote a critique for Sovremennye zapiski in which he stated:

Oba romana Sirina ("Korol', dama, valet" i "Zaščita Lužina") ... nastol'ko vne bol'sogo rusla russkoj literatury, tak čuždy russkikh literaturnikh vlijanij, čto kritiki nevol'no iščit vlijanij inostrannykh⁵

Cetlin further claimed that Nabokov was striving to complete an experiment in literary expressionism in accordance with the style of Leonid Andreev.⁶ Cetlin was correct in his assertion only to the extent that Nabokov was more concerned with the "how" of his writing than the "what." The contrary opinion was expressed by Gleb Struve who, in a review characteristic of his literary foresight, saw the novel's dissimilarity from existing models as this work's inherent strength. He felt that the work was "remarkable" and "original," "similar

to nothing of its time or prior to that in Russian literature,"⁷ and should accordingly be given more attention.

Another point of criticism advanced by émigré reviewers was that the novel was "un-Russian." With Mary, critics had attacked Nabokov for his apparently unsympathetic portrayal of Ganin and his fellow exiles in their homeless plight. With King, Queen, Knave, critics went one step further in their attack by asserting that Nabokov had exhibited an unforgivable disrespect and lack of concern for Russian literature, especially in its émigré branch, since neither the characters nor the place of action were Russian. Nabokov answered these remarks forty years later when in the foreword to the English version he claimed to have been unconcerned about the social and political situation of those times: he noted that "Expatriation, destitution, nostalgia had no effect on its elaborate and rapturous composition..."⁸ He further wrote that he "was absolutely sure, along with a number of other intelligent people, that some time in the next decade ... [he] would ... be back in hospitable, remorseful, racemosa-blossoming Russia."⁹ In another remark Nabokov hinted that he was not satisfied with the approach demanded of him in those days:

The "human humidity," chelovecheskaya vlazhnost', permeating my first novel,

Mashen'ka ... was all very well but the book no longer pleased me.... The émigré characters I had collected in that display box were so transparent to the eye of the era that one could easily make out the labels behind them.¹⁰

Nabokov was not concerned with causes when he wrote his second novel; while in Mary the "labels" were clearly evident behind each of the characters, in King, Queen, Knave he was more concerned with "pure invention":

At a stage of gradual inner disentanglement, when I had not yet found, or did not yet dare apply, the very special methods of re-creating a historical situation that I had used ten years later in The Gift, the lack of any emotional involvement and the fairytale freedom inherent in an unknown milieu answered my dream of pure invention.¹¹

Thus Nabokov's tendency to display a literary artifice as an assertion of the independence of fiction manifested itself in this early Russian novel. Politics or social causes were not the motive behind this work. The motive was rather an earnest attempt to demonstrate the workings of his art.

At one level, as the title suggests, King, Queen, Knave is a stark and very plain triangular love story. The scene is laid in Berlin; and the three title characters are: Kurt Dreyer, a wealthy, self-made German businessman; Martha,

Dreyer's pretty and flirtatious wife -- many years his junior; and Franz, Dreyer's twenty-one-year-old nephew -- a bespectacled country boy who comes to Berlin in search of easy women and a job in his uncle's department store.

The story line is quite simple. Traveling by train on his way to Berlin, Franz affords himself the luxury of riding second-class and consequently shares a railway compartment with a vigorous middle-aged man and his sybaritical young wife. Franz makes the tedious journey more pleasurable for himself by indulging in sexual fantasies about this woman, calculating how many days of his life he would give to possess her. Upon arriving in Berlin, Franz goes directly to his hotel, where he accidentally breaks the lenses of his glasses while trying to wash. He consequently spends the rest of that night and the next entire day and a half in a state of myopic euphoria. When the time comes for him to pay his first respects to his uncle, he still has not replaced his lenses and hence does not recognize his Aunt Martha as the woman with whom he had been traveling two days before until she alludes to the trip. Aunt and nephew engage in trivial conversation until Franz's uncle arrives home from the tennis courts. Franz is relieved to see him since he had been feeling rather self-conscious about his previous sexual fantasies. Beginning at this point in the action, the plot follows the expected course

with the gradual development of the triangle. There is the anticipated seduction (surprisingly, by Martha and not Franz), a few near-escapes from detection, and the traditional machinations to get rid of the third leg of the triangle -- the husband (who surprisingly does not suspect any connivance).

Paralleling this hackneyed plot, but at a different level, is the more meaningful story of Dreyer's aspirations toward artistic, romantic fulfillment. Throughout much of the book, the reader sees Dreyer through the eyes of his wife. From this point of view, he appears an amiable fool, seemingly oblivious to everything but his own mediocre jokes -- and the acquisition of wealth. From a different perspective, through his interior dialogue and the added remarks of the narrator, Dreyer appears as a much more inquisitive and elusive character: "Under his perfectly bourgeois, matter-of-fact sober exterior he hides poetic imagination, a passion for far-off wanderings, an interest in things outlandish, and a subtly ironic and yet romantic attitude toward life."¹² Dreyer's artistic aspirations are manifested in the novel by his business dealings with an unnamed character simply referred to as "the Inventor." This mysterious figure proposes to create for Dreyer life-like mannequins which would walk around in his store displaying selected articles of clothing. Dreyer is thoroughly intrigued by this idea, and at one point refers to the scheme as "pure

witchcraft."¹³

Martha's character contrasts strikingly with her husband's. She is a small town beauty -- conceited, vulgar, and suspicious. As such she is: "[the] embodiment of philistinism, as are some of the minor characters who appear as the couple's friends or Dreyer's business associates."¹⁴ Martha is a dull-witted individual whose chief frustration is that she has been married for a number of years but has never taken a lover. She has no imagination and therefore hates Dreyer's jokes, his caresses, and his easygoing ways. Dreyer of course, in keeping with his true self, has always kept mistresses and continues to do so even after his marriage. He bears no hard feelings toward Martha for her coldness toward him because he considers it reasonable that he should have to beg her for his few and brief sexual delights. In fact, he sees her frigidity as a sure indication that she will never deceive him. According to him, she did not know even the first letter of adultery. As the reader learns, however, Martha does not stop with simple adultery, but engages in harlotry.

Irked by Dreyer's manifest sexual indifference toward her, by his erratic moods, and by his mysterious business preoccupations, Martha decides to have an affair with Franz. The boy's appearance on the scene provides her with an ideal situation: he is part of the family and his constant presence will not seem

odd; and he is poor, timid, and so provincial in background that he can be strictly controlled and molded to her whim. Although feigning dislike for Franz so as not to arouse any suspicion, Martha slowly draws the inexperienced youth into her dangerous but pleasurable web of adultery, molding him as she would soft wax in her hands. After many fruitless attempts to evoke a real sexual response from Franz, Martha finally goes to his room, strips, and succumbs to his shy wishes. From the very first encounter, the affair is intense.

As the affair develops, Martha finds great satisfaction in being with her lover, and she becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her rich husband. Nevertheless, she is unable to conceive of happiness without wealth. She occasionally yields to the amorous advances of Dreyer only because she desires his fortune. Finally, however, unable to tolerate his suffocating existence any longer, she decides to get rid of him in such a way that she may inherit his fortune. Outright murder is out of the question. She therefore begins to hatch a variety of preposterous schemes to kill him. Franz, of course, is to be her accomplice. As Struve pointed out, whereas Martha's seduction [of Franz] is one of the main threads of the story line, "the real psychological interest of the plot lies in the presentation of the slow maturing of the plan in Martha's mind, and of the way she 'infects' Franz with the idea."¹⁵

After considering and rejecting a number of possible methods, Martha accidentally overhears her husband mention to a friend during a conversation that he does not know how to swim. She had forgotten about this, and decides that drowning will be the method, especially since it is natural and simple. Plans are consequently made for them to spend their annual vacation at the seashore. In the end, she and Franz work out an elaborate plan to get Dreyer into a small boat and out away from shore, for he is afraid of water and has to be cajoled. Just when the two plotters are about to push Dreyer overboard, he remarks on an enormous business deal that he is on the verge of completing. In self-defeating greed, Martha halts her plan in hopes of obtaining even more wealth to secure her future days. Martha merely delays the murder for several days, however, making sure that she will get another chance by having Dreyer promise to return and take her rowing (he had enjoyed the exercise). But then, after Dreyer leaves to complete his business deal, Martha contracts a high fever and suddenly dies from pneumonia (there are several foreshadowings of this end in the novel). Dreyer, recalled from Berlin, is greatly grieved over Martha's death; despite the fact that she had openly disliked him, Dreyer concludes that he had always loved her and still does. He never suspects her involvement with Franz. Franz, on the other hand, is greatly relieved by Martha's death. He

had felt powerless with her, just as Martha had felt with Dreyer. The final scene shows him laughing in youthful mirth at once again being free.

In his book-length study of Russian émigré literature, Gleb Struve remarked generally about Nabokov's prose that he usually played easily and unconstrainedly with his themes, "whimsically and capriciously twisting and turning his plots," so that "in each move of his topical combinations, in each twist and turn of his verbal patterns, one feels the creative, directive, and formalized will of the author."¹⁶ Struve added that the explicit authorial manipulation in each of Nabokov's stories reminded one of a game of chess in which there is conformity with the laws of chess and the whimsy of chess combinations. Nabokov is indeed fond of leading the reader down blind alleys and deliberately providing clues which only dazzle and deceive, thus making his books a maze of mirrors. Reconsideration of the novel's opening scene will provide an adequate example of Nabokov's contrivance.

From the first chapter, when awkward, myopic Franz stumbles out of a third-class railway coach, unable to bear the horrors of another passenger's mutilated, skull-like features, Nabokov's delicate mechanism is in motion. The plot unfolds with economy and precision, but Nabokov never wastes "a move." Franz yields to the irresistible luxury of

traveling second-class and, as mentioned, by a typical Nabokovian twist of fate he shares a compartment with a couple who later turn out to be his aunt and uncle -- his wealthy Berlin relatives who have promised him employment and the beginning of a career. But they have never met and, as the train speeds toward the city, they remain aloof. Nabokov is toying with the reader. He has arranged his characters in proximity, like pieces on a chessboard, and is allowing the reader time to look the situation over before the author makes his first move. The reader is able to observe Dreyer's inner and outer world, Martha's waspish boredom, and the sexual fantasies of poor, timid Franz -- all elements crucial to the action of the book -- without having to become involved. The book is full of such manipulation: Martha's seduction of Franz, the juxtaposition of scenes (a round of adultery followed by a quiet dinner at home with aunt and uncle), the serio-comic dilemma of Martha and Franz searching for an appropriate murder weapon, and even the appearance of Nabokov and his wife at the seaside resort in the final chapters.

In choosing a traditional formula (the eternal triangle) for the story line of this novel, Nabokov parodies the hackneyed plot in order to frustrate the reader's predictable responses in certain thematic situations. In so doing, Nabokov strives to redirect the reader's attention to the actual manner in which

the story is told. Aside from the carefully placed gestures and neatly drawn scenes which foreshadow unsuspected later developments, Nabokov also achieves the desired result by distorting the traditional characterizations and by lending unexpected twists to the plot. This strategy marks the most obvious level of Nabokov's contrivance in asserting the basic unreality and independence of his fiction.

As suggested previously, Martha's characterization is convincingly drawn within the framework of her traditionally recognizable role. She is scheming, avaricious, stupid, and domineering. As she is presented, the reader comforts himself with the expectation that all will proceed according to plan. The young nephew will seduce the somewhat reluctant aunt, their affair will blossom, the cuckolded husband will discover their conspiracy, and the novel will conclude either with the disappearance of the lover or the death of the husband, whichever suits the author's whim. His expectations are frustrated, however, since the two male figures in the drama never develop according to their conventional molds. Franz initially appears to be the typical naïve male who comes to the big city, ripe for a life of dissipation and numerous sexual encounters. With Franz, however, Nabokov distorts the traditional image of his literary predecessors. Although Franz does manage to satisfy his sexual fantasies with Martha, it is not he who does

the seducing, as he had anticipated, but instead the woman. Nabokov symbolically prefigures this by having Franz arrive at his uncle's nearly blind because he has no glasses. Thus Franz stumbles into the liaison. And while the love affair evolves in a somewhat expected manner, Franz never attains the status of the male seducer and thus remains static throughout most of the story; he is unable to overcome the domineering spirit of his mistress.

Nor does the husband, Dreyer, conform to expectations. Although cast in the role of a simple-minded, aloof businessman (through the eyes of his wife), Nabokov affords Dreyer another, more important image. Primarily through internal dialogue and additional information supplied by the omniscient narrator, the reader learns that Dreyer is a man of romantic inclinations and of artistic aspirations frustrated, unfortunately, by his wife. His world closely parallels, but sharply contrasts with the philistinistic world of his wife. His attempts at immersion in artistic activity are manifested in two ways in the text. One is the midnight lesson he gives to Franz at his store on how to sell neckties:

And it was not on personal experience, not on the recollection of distant days when he actually had worked behind the counter, that Dreyer drew that night as he showed Franz how to sell neckties. Instead, he soared into the ravishing realm of inutile imagination,

demonstrating not the way ties should be sold in real life, but the way they might be sold if the salesman were both artist and clairvoyant.¹⁷

The second manifestation of Dreyer's artistic predilection is in his fascination with automated mannequins -- robots which he sees as more realistic than his wife and nephew. Thus Dreyer is depicted not as an oblivious fool, but as a confident individualist living in a world seemingly distant from that of the conspirators.

Nabokov's distortion of the simple love story configuration is carried one step further by his lending an unexpected twist to the denouement. The murder is not carried out, the mistress dies unexpectedly, and the husband remains unaware of the machinations against him; the whole triangle dissolves without the expected repercussions. In parodying the worn-out plot, Nabokov denies the reader's expectations and thereby exposes to him the mindlessness of such an approach to literature. In doing this Nabokov also asserts the independence and unreality of his fiction by making explicit his control over the subjects and themes of his work. Hence, by exposing the triteness of this literary form with his unorthodox treatment, Nabokov actually revitalizes the traditional formula and lends it new individuality. The surprise ending furthers this cause, and more importantly exposes the hand of the omnipotent creator. Because the action is as neatly concluded as

it is, Nabokov bars speculation on events beyond the text and the literary experience. Time becomes finite with the last page and thus attention is rediverted once again to the "telling," the authorial stratagems.¹⁸

Nabokov adds further dimension to this conjuring by the inclusion of himself in the story under the guise of Franz's landlord, Enricht. He is described thus about half-way through Chapter Five:

He was quite content with his life in general, gray old Enricht in his felt houseshoes with buckles, especially since the day he discovered that he had the remarkable gift of transforming himself into all kinds of creatures -- a horse, a hog, or a six-year-old girl in a sailor cap. For actually (but this of course was a secret) he was the famed illusionist and conjuror Menetek-El-Pharsin.¹⁹

Judging by the few scattered remarks made by this character, he claims supreme power for himself. He informs the reader, that Franz, Martha, Dreyer, and all the rest of the characters are but emanations of his mind; at his discretion everyone and everything can be changed, transmuted, and will cease to exist. Near the end of the story he decides that he is tired of Franz, and that he must replace him. The following quotation is the longest and most significant statement made about Enricht in the novel; it therefore deserves complete citation:

He knew perfectly well that there was no Franz behind the door, that he had created Franz with a few deft dabs of his facile fancy. Yet the jest had to be brought to some natural conclusion.... Besides, old Enricht was getting bored with this particular creature of his. It was time to dispose of him, and replace him with a new one. One sweep of his thought arranged the matter: let this be the fictitious lodger's last night;... Thus, having invented the necessary conclusion, old Enricht, alias Pharsin, dragged up in retrospect and added to it in a lump that which in the past must have led up to this conclusion. For he knew perfectly well -- had known for the last eight years at least -- that the whole world was but a trick of his, and that all those people -- eight former lodgers, doctors, policemen, garbage collectors, Franz, Franz's lady friend, the noisy gentleman with the noisy dog, and even his own, Pharsin's wife, a quiet old lady in a lace cap, and he himself, or rather his inner roommate, an elder companion, so to speak, who had been a teacher of mathematics eight years ago, owed their existence to the power of his imagination and suggestion and dexterity of his hands. In fact, he himself could at any moment turn into a mousetrap, a mouse, an old couch, a slave girl led away by the highest bidder. Such magicians should be made emperors.²⁰

In this person, then, the author, who had until then kept aloof from the world he had created, seems to peep into the fictional world to remind the reader that he is the sole and arbitrary creator and master of this world.²¹ The remarks which Enricht (alias Menetek-El-Pharsin) makes therefore represent almost a direct statement from Nabokov concerning the prerogatives of a writer -- the creator and the one supreme power in his fictional

world. Thus the element of artifice is introduced directly into the story as one of the motifs. Nabokov and his wife actually make an appearance at the end of Chapter Twelve ("the appearances of my wife and me in the last two chapters are merely visits of inspection,"²² italics mine, T.P.A.):

The foreign girl in the blue dress danced with a remarkably handsome man in an old-fashioned dinner jacket. Franz had long since noticed this couple; they had appeared to him in fleeting glimpses, like a recurrent dream image or a subtle leitmotiv -- now at the beach, now in the café, now on the promenade. Sometimes the man carried a butterfly net. The girl had a delicately painted mouth and tender gray-blue eyes, and her fiancé or husband, slender, elegantly balding, contemptuous of everything on earth but her, was looking at her with pride.²³

In King, Queen, Knave, as in Nabokov's supposedly more sophisticated later novels, the important theme is the nature of fiction itself. By overtly controlling the stream of action and characterizations, he never allows the reader to forget that fiction is essentially artifice. The reader is taught to relish the author's surprises, the carefully set-up situations, complete with conventional foreshadowing, where the reader's initial recognition of a commonplace literary situation is frustrated throughout and is finally dissolved in the end when the plot takes an unpredictable twist. In

King, Queen, Knave the artifice may seem a bit too obvious, but this after all is the creator's intention.

It is a temptation to think of Nabokov's early works mainly as literary precursors of his English masterpieces, and so one must stress that this novel is as polished as any that have followed. King, Queen, Knave is notable for the same energy and verbal brilliance that is characteristic of his later novels. If, however, it seems that King, Queen, Knave is lexically less ostentatious, and less concerned with circuitous allusions than some of Nabokov's later works, then one must nevertheless emphasize that it is no less controlled. If one sees that its plot is simpler and its characters are insipid, then again one must add that they are no less cleverly conceived. What is unquestionably the most remarkable and undeniable feature of this cardboard world and its inhabitants, however, is the way in which Nabokov breathes life into these two-dimensional figures -- thus manipulating his subjects and giving them a depth they would otherwise not have. He becomes their third dimension.²⁴ Gleb Struve wrote in 1934:

As the title suggests, Sirin chose here a trite, hackneyed subject, the eternal triangle of husband, wife, and lover. Yet so original in his handling of this subject, so peculiar the architectonic of the novel and so fresh and striking its verbal texture, that the impression of freshness and originality prevails despite the banal theme.²⁵

Nabokov's emphasis on the "telling" becomes more evident in a comparison of the revised English edition with the original Russian text. Such a comparison shows that Nabokov not only concentrates more intensively on the lexical features in the new text; but it also indicates that after forty years Nabokov was significantly more sensitive to his own prose. Unlike the English Despair, in which changes of relatively minor tonal and stylistic details are evident, the English King, Queen, Knave exhibits a much greater variety of alterations and is in greater depth. Carl R. Proffer has written a perceptive article which deals at some length with the many revisions effected in the English version.²⁶ Because of the unavailability of the Russian version for this study, Proffer's article will be used as a reliable source for the salient differences between the two texts.

Whereas in Despair Nabokov altered the text simply by deleting certain passages and modifying others, in King, Queen, Knave one notes that the most common and important change is interpolation -- especially of characterizations. Many times Nabokov either rewrites, or rewrites and expands considerably those segments which he feels are weak. In noting these changes, one immediately sees that the art of language, and therefore literature, is Nabokov's primary thematic concern. One example should suffice; the Russian text reads:

Believing that in such matters the details are more important than the essence, Martha...

The English text shows the following interpolation:

Believing, with so many novelists, that if the details were correct, the plot and the characters would take care of themselves, Martha...²⁷

Because of the interpolations, characters in the English text are substantially more convincing than their Russian predecessors. Physical description is more meticulous, biographies more circumstantial, and plot motivations more convincing. Notice the developed characterization of Martha in the following examples (interpolated remarks are included in brackets):

'Tom won a prize at the show. Didn't you Tom!' [she spoke to Tom only in the presence of guests.] (p. 29)

Martha, though, would refuse to come [preferring a trim suburban lawn to the most luxuriant jungle. She would sniff sarcastically] were he to suggest that they take a year off. (p. 15) ²⁸

Added details about sex, money, and death make Martha's character and motivation in seeking a lover and killing her husband more convincing. In addition, her relationship with Franz is made more plausible by the expansion and modification

of the dialogue between the two. The most noteworthy changes show added sexual allusions.

Franz's character is also made considerably more interesting in the new version by the addition of expanded biographical material. Aside from the cowardice and emotional cretinism of Franz, Nabokov shows him to be, like Martha, a potentially unpleasant person. Sitting in the garden listening to Martha talk about the Tyrol (during Chapter Two), Franz "nostalgically ... remembered a nasty old lady's old pug (a relative and great enemy of his mother's pet) that he had managed to kick smartly on several occasions."²⁹ This reflection has been added to the new text, thus giving shape to another facet of Franz's character.

Dreyer is also more carefully portrayed in the Englished variant, although he changes the least in translation. His biography, like both Franz's and Martha's, is substantially altered and expanded to bring out his artistic aspirations. Dreyer's boredom and dissatisfaction with his mundane career are made more convincing by the addition of a passage (on page 223) beginning with "Secretly he realized that" and ending with "Goldemar had in his more famous work." Also, Dreyer's pronouncements about the other characters are more sharpened in the new variant. For example, the long passage beginning "The observant, sharp-eyed Dreyer" and ending "Franz as an

amusing provincial nephew" is an interpolation.

Proffer also distinguishes another category of additions to the novel. He labels them "dirty details," since the English text is considerably more bawdy than the original. As Proffer wrote, "While it is true that death and murder are important themes, it sometimes seems that scatology precedes eschatology."³⁰ Proffer then lists allusions to simultaneous incest, masturbation, menstruation, prophylactics, a douche bag handed down from generation to generation, and suggestions of necrophilia -- all new in the translation.³¹

Less remarkable changes include the more frequent use of foreshadowing, false foreshadowing, and repeated motifs in the English version in order to improve upon the "telling" and the presentation of theme. Proffer also remarked that all references to the movie house being built near Franz's apartment, all references to Goldemar and his play King, Queen, Knave, and all references to the film King, Queen, Knave are new in the translated text. The reader should realize that Goldemar is Nabokov (he appears or is referred to by several names in the text: Mr. Vivian Badlook and Blavdak Vinomori, among others).

As Proffer observed, the stylistic changes which characterize the new version of the novel occur on virtually every page. Many of them are quite extensive: the final six

pages, for example, are totally recast. There are numerous insignificant changes resembling the type found in Nabokov's Despair: similes are cut and metaphors are interpolated everywhere. Nabokov's word play, a remarkable feature of his writing, is many times translated intact, both the precision and the alliteration being preserved. Only rarely does his English become too overburdened. New puns abound in the English version, and new phonetic games are created.³²

There is an abundance of stylistic features which deserve close study, but can only be noted in passing at this time. Neutral Russian phrases become examples of peculiarly Nabokovian English;³³ and the syntax many times slips because of its Russian descent.³⁴ The narrative tone is somewhat different in English because of the addition of many narrative exclamations and parenthetical/non-parenthetical comments. In concluding his essay, Proffer gave several examples of literary allusions, illusions, and parodies which figure throughout the novel.³⁵ Among the names evoked by Nabokov are Puškin, Tolstoj, Čekhov, Oleša, Gogol', and Flaubert.

In the foreword to the 1966 version of Speak, Memory, Nabokov wrote that in searching for a title for the first edition of that particular work (1951, Drugie berega), he "toyed with The Anthemion which is the name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding

clusters, but nobody liked it."³⁶ This would have been a fitting sub-title for King, Queen, Knave since Nabokov's conscious authorial involvement, like a grand anthemion itself, entwines the narrative structure of the novel to make artifice the central thematic concern. His controlling presence is traced in the novel's elegantly ordered networks of geometric configurations, "coincidences," narrative prefigurations, butterfly references, anagrammatic characters, and infinite regressions.

Although present everywhere by implication, the novelist appears personally with his wife in the last two chapters. His exclusiveness is exaggerated, but he is not the only artist present. Dreyer is an unrealized artist, a man whose "fantasies were not salable." And he, along with the Inventor and the landlord-conjuror, Menetek-El-Pharsin, all pose profound artistic questions: the primacy of imagination, and the fruitlessness of a merely decorative style; the desire for verisimilitude, and the impossibility of heightening it; the necessity of role-playing and self-transformation, and the solipsism, perhaps madness, thus risked. Thus the novel is a discussion between a creator and his creations concerning the nature of art. Despite the existence of other artistic creatures in this and subsequent works, the example set by King, Queen, Knave clearly establishes Vladimir Nabokov as the only artist of major stature to appear in Nabokov's works.

The involuted design of each of these novels reveals that all of the artists exist solely in a universe of fiction arrayed around the consciousness of their creator.

FOOTNOTES

¹ As quoted in "Great and Delightful Rarity," Time, May 17, 1968, p. 102 (an anonymous review).

² Henry Tube, "Beyond the bounds," review of King, Queen, Knave in The Spectator, October 4, 1968, p. 478.

³ For full details on the Russian edition see the Selected Bibliography to the present work under Primary Sources, "Works in Russian," -- Korol', dama, valet".

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, King, Queen, Knave (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1968), p. x.

⁵ Mikhail Cetlin, as quoted by Gleb Struve in Russkaja literatura v izgnanii (N'ju-Jork: Izd. im. Čekhova, 1956), p. 284. [Translation: "Both of Sirin's novels (King, Queen, Knave and The Defense) ... are so much outside of the main current of Russian literature, so alien to Russian literary influence, that critics automatically search for foreign influences"]

⁶ This information was obtained from Ludmilla Foster's article, "Nabokov in Russian Emigré Criticism," Russian Literature Triquarterly, no. 3 (Spring, 1972), 33. [Cetlin's review appeared originally in Sovremennye zapiski, no. 37, 1937, pp. 536-538.]

⁷ Gleb Struve, Russkaja literatura v izgnanii, p. 279. [Translation mine, T.P.A.]

⁸ Nabokov, King, p. vii.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. viii.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gleb Struve, "Nabokov as a Russian Writer," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 50-51.

- 13 Nabokov, King, p. 109.
- 14 Struve, "Nabokov as a Russian Writer," p. 51.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Gleb Struve, Russkaja literatura v izgnanii, p. 285.
[Translation mine, T.P.A.]
- 17 Nabokov, King, pp. 69-70.
- 18 Stephen Jan Parker, "Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin as Teacher: The Russian Novels" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1969), p. 41.
- 19 Nabokov, King, p. 99. [The name Menetek-El-Pharsin is a biblical allusion to the well-known passage concerning the "writing on the wall"; see The Old Testament, Daniel V: 25-28. In the Russian version of this novel the name appeared as "Menetekelfares," which derives from the words which God writes on Belshazzar's palace wall: MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. Daniel interprets the words thus: MENE:"God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it."TEKEL:"thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting." UPHARSIN:"thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." Thus Enricht claims "supreme power" over the very existence of the characters.]
- 20 Ibid., pp. 227-228.
- 21 Struve, "Nabokov as a Russian Writer," p. 51.
- 22 Nabokov, King, p. viii.
- 23 Ibid., p. 254.
- 24 See Page Stegner, "Games Cards Play," review of King, Queen, Knave in Saturday Review, May 18, 1968, p. 39.
- 25 Gleb Struve, "Current Russian Literature: II. Vladimir Sirin," East European and Slavic Review, January, 1934, 438.
- 26 Carl R. Proffer, "A new deck for Nabokov's Knaves," in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds.

Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 293-309.

²⁷ As quoted by Proffer, op. cit., p. 294. [Subsequent quotations from the novel will have the page numbers indicated in parentheses.]

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ As referred to by Proffer, op. cit., p. 298.

³⁰ Proffer, op. cit., pp. 301-302.

³¹ Proffer lists textual references on page 302 of his article.

³² Proffer gives many examples on pages 304-305 of his article.

³³ For example: "obsolete socks," instead of "old" or "worn-out" (in Russian "postarevšie").

³⁴ "... She was the wife of the man on whom depended his whole future," is a good example. The word order is influenced by the original Russian.

³⁵ See pages 307-308 of Proffer's article for these examples.

³⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 11.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEFENSE¹

The Defense was the first of Nabokov's novels to be serialized in Sovremennye zapiski. When in 1930 the émigré publishing house Slovo of Berlin first brought out The Defense² in book form, public and critical reaction was for the most part considerably more favorable than with Nabokov's first two novels. The notable exception was Georgij Ivanov's personal attack³ which was discussed in Chapter Two of this study. Gleb Struve and Nikolaj Andreev both came to Nabokov's immediate defense in laudatory reviews of the novel.⁴ Struve saw Nabokov as the greatest gift of the emigration to Russian literature, claiming that his manner of depicting reality was totally new and not an imitation of other Russian or foreign writers.⁵ Andreev called Nabokov the most interesting representative of the new Russian prose, and praised his ability to synthesize Russian literary traditions with Western innovations. In addition Andreev praised Nabokov for combining the Russian concern for psychology and the Western fascination with plot and perfection of form.

Al. Novik favorably reviewed the novel in Sovremennye zapiski and noted that the chess game was a form of artistic creativity for the novel's protagonist. Scholarly Soviet

literary response also was favorable. In emigration, Evgenij Zamjatin described Nabokov as an "interesting and brilliant writer"⁶ and highly praised The Defense as one of the most important émigré novels of the time. Emigré poet and critic Vladislav Khodasevič held the novel in great esteem. He struck the most positive note when he wrote:

The Defense is the first work in which Sirin [Nabokov] rose to the full stature of his talent because here, perhaps for the first time, he found the basic themes of his novels.⁷

Khodasevič continued by saying that The Defense contained a transition to the second series of Nabokov's writings. Although still concerned with the theme of art and the creative personality, Nabokov had confirmed for the first time that a blind obsession with aesthetics, a "permanent residence" in the world of art, would destroy an artist. Khodasevič also pointed out that Nabokov appeared to make a distinction between men of talent and men of true artistic genius; if the artist was only a man of talent, and not of genius, the system [art] would "suck out his human blood, turning him into an automaton which is not adapted to reality and which perishes from contact with it."⁸

In Speak, Memory Nabokov wrote that The Defense was about "a champion chess player who goes mad when chess problems

pervade the actual pattern of his existence."⁹ Later he compared the composition of chess problems with:

... [the] writing of one of those incredible novels where the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients.¹⁰

For Nabokov, the world of chess is a world of art which possesses joys and terrors similar to those of writing. The Defense describes the life of a talented chess player, and therefore artist, who is sensitive to the patterns of the game, his art. But not being a true genius, he involuntarily allows his imagination to function separately from reality and thus falls out of harmony with the deeper forces of life. Soon this obsession becomes so intense and deeply rooted that the protagonist, Luzhin, begins to see his true reality in the patterns and combinations of his art form rather than in that truer reality from which it originated. Nabokov thus presents Luzhin as a person destined to be destroyed both as an unsuccessful man and as an unsuccessful artist.

It has been suggested that since life can be considered a miniature of the theatre, or of the novel, Nabokov chose chess as the unifying metaphor of his novel to demonstrate that life is a microcosm of the chessboard.¹¹ Indeed, chess as the stuff

of prose and poetry is as old as the Persian romances of the 700's A.D., where the fate of a kingdom or of a marriageable princess hinged on the outcome of a chess game.¹² Contemporary motion pictures have also utilized chess as the predominant metaphor; Ingmar Bergman's Seventh Seal masterfully employed the metaphor of chess to depict life's battle against death.¹³ It is hard to believe, however, that Nabokov wanted to portray life as a massive chess game. Instead, he chose chess as the unifying metaphor for The Defense to suggest a much deeper significance. By making Luzhin a grand-master in chess, Nabokov symbolically presents him as an artist. The fact that Luzhin begins to see life as a game of chess is only secondary to his subconsciously allowing art to become his reality and only salvation. As Khodasevič suggested, Nabokov's apparent reason for choosing chess as the specific form of art as opposed to writing, was that "if he had represented his heroes directly as writers, ... [Nabokov]... would have had, in depicting their creative work, to place a novel within a novel or a story within a story, which would excessively complicate the plot and necessitate on the part of the reader a certain knowledge of the writer's craft."¹⁴ Hence Nabokov strips Luzhin of all professionally artistic attributes, but still presents him working on his chess problems in the same manner in which an artist works on his creations.

Another apparent reason why Nabokov chose chess as the unifying metaphor is that it possesses inherent qualities for developing the player's (artist's) consciousness and sense of reality. A developed consciousness is an essential requirement for a successful artist; and, as so often happens, the more involved a true artist (player) of genius becomes in his work (game), the more developed his consciousness becomes and the more reality he encounters in his surroundings. Nabokov's rationale for this conclusion is related to his idea that individual consciousness transmutes experience into personal reality. Furthermore, the key to any sense of reality is the perception of pattern; consciousness needs at least the illusion that it can control some of the data it encounters and see in them order to be able to believe in their reality.¹⁵ As consciousness integrates this data into meaningful patterns, it encounters more and more reality. Consciousness, and the mind's ability to perceive or freely create patterns and consequently find a sense of security and delight, serve as the medium through which reality comes into being and makes man's life more meaningful and enjoyable. The art form of chess, a game founded wholly on pattern and the perception of an infinite number of these patterns, serves as the most expedient means by which Luzhin can perceive some order in his life and achieve a truer sense of reality. In embracing chess, Luzhin

rejects the inharmonious and philistine complexities of his everyday world; chess becomes the antithesis to the rejected reality. Through this art form Luzhin perceives more pattern and harmony than he experienced in the existence he has renounced. He consequently develops his consciousness and in effect establishes a more convincing and aesthetically more pleasing reality for himself.

Chess serves not only as the predominant symbol of the novel, but also as its basic structure. In the Foreword Nabokov repeatedly hints that The Defense is structured on a chess game:

My story was difficult to compose, but I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a fatal pattern into Luzhin's life and to endow the description of a garden, a journey, a sequence of humdrum events, with the semblance of a game of skill, and, especially in the final chapters, with that of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellow's sanity.¹⁶

Later he also writes:

But the chess effects I planted are distinguishable not only in these separate scenes; their concatenation can be found in the basic structure of this attractive novel.¹⁷

And indeed this is an attractive novel; while reading about

Luzhin's preoccupation with chess, the reader soon discovers that in fact he is challenged to replay the moves of the plot. The novel represents a literary game of chess in which one must consider every move and possible offensive as suggested by Nabokov. The rationale for this involuted structure is Nabokov's apparent desire to force his readers to reread the novel in order to understand and to become convinced of Luzhin's obsession and ultimate fate.

The deliberate conjuring in this novel is directly associated with Nabokov's idea concerning the use of parody. The Defense represents a parody of all of those novels which have unsuccessfully tried to convert actual games of chess into fiction. Literary history offers several outstanding examples of this style. But as Robert J. Clements pointed out, the only authors other than Rabelais, and to some extent S.S. Van Dine in The Bishop Murder Case, who appear to have successfully created fiction out of actual games are Paul Anderson in his story "The Immortal Game" and ~~Lewis~~ Carroll, who described a madcap chess game in Through the Looking Glass.¹⁸ In parodying these prototypes, Nabokov forces his readers to play through the moves of the novel and Luzhin's defense and to fall right into a "Fool's Mate," thereby proving that his novel is successfully structured on a chess game. Once discovering himself "in check," the reader must go back and replay

the moves of the plot.

The novel is neatly divided into three parts. The first fifty-six pages constitute the first part of the work and represent the most significant section. More detailed attention will therefore be devoted to the development of this section. In it Nabokov deals with Luzhin's childhood up to the point where his genius as a chess prodigy is recognized. One first encounters Luzhin as a small boy in Russia before the Revolution. He is the only son of a philistine, but gentlemanly writer of boys' adventure stories, and of a pity-seeking mother. Nabokov gives birth to his protagonist in the opening sentence of the novel and also foretells an important change in Luzhin's life:

What struck him most was the fact that
from Monday on he would be Luzhin.¹⁹

The fact that starting Monday Luzhin will be referred to by his surname instead of his first name and patronymic is indicative both of the family's annual move from the country to the city and of the boy's enrollment in school for the first time. Young Luzhin is unusually disturbed about this seemingly normal state of affairs. What frightens him so is that he does not want to enter school; instead he would prefer to remain

indefinitely at his parents' country residence. School symbolically represents the callous, disorganized world of adulthood; the summer house and surrounding estate represent his lyrical and deeply enchanting childhood. But as his father aptly remarks in a dictation: "Being born in this world is hardly to be borne."²⁰ Luzhin of course leaves blanks for the words "born" and "borne." If young Luzhin is to be properly born into life, he must enter into the adult world. Ironically, Luzhin Sr. is correct because it is in the midst of the adult world that his son discovers chess and is finally brought forth into life.

Luzhin is terrified of the adult world as represented by his parents, whom he sees menacingly revolving around him in ever narrowing circles. He is incessantly made the victim of his father's philistine Wunderkind phantasies and is thoroughly disgusted by his mother's slothful habits. Luzhin Jr. fears that the security of his idyllic childhood, which is characterized by morning walks along Nevsky Prospect and drinking milk from a silver cup in the afternoon, will be lost forever by this move to the city and his entry into school. As he stands on the railroad station platform ready to depart, Luzhin gazes around only to notice, among other things, a little girl eating an apple. For him this little girl represents the childhood which he is about to leave behind. In

defiance of this transition, he leaves the station and returns to his parents' summer home. There he hopes to hide and stave off the move into the adult world. While sitting in the attic, in isolation and security, he begins to rummage through an old box of his parents' possessions where he discovers "a cracked chessboard, and some other not very interesting things."²¹ Thus Nabokov strikes the first note of his theme; in seeking escape from the world of his parents, Luzhin symbolically encounters the art form which in a short time will provide him with the means to escape all of his surrounding reality.

The boy is retrieved from the attic and taken to St. Petersburg. While at school, Luzhin's classmates ridicule his father and scorn him. He becomes sullen and morose. Before one of the recess periods, Luzhin Sr. goes to the school in hopes of having his son's teacher shower compliments on him for the boy's budding genius. The teacher simply remarks:

The boy undoubtedly has ability, but
we notice a certain listlessness.²²

Hoping that he is indeed the father of a Wunderkind, Luzhin Sr. concludes that the teacher understands his son even less than he himself does. The father then accompanies the teacher during a recess period where they see Luzhin sitting in a corner in self-imposed isolation from his classmates. He refuses to

take part in "lapta," a Russian form of baseball. Afterwhile this isolation becomes reciprocal; his classmates stop taking notice of him and do not bother to speak to him. As a result, Luzhin begins to find solitary amusement in the adventures of Phileas Fogg and Sherlock Holmes. He later admits, however, that his interest in the stories of these two men was prompted by neither an inclination for mysterious adventures nor a thirst for distant peregrinations, but rather by their exact and relentlessly unfolding patterns. In them he found order and security, and as a result, developed his consciousness.

Luzhin then becomes interested in magic for a short time. But he later abandons this interest in search for a hobby which could provide much more harmonious simplicity than magic. Mathematics, and especially geometry, also provide a passing interest. This amusement too is eventually discarded in favor of jigsaw puzzles; like a writer laboring over a novel:

... he would spend hours bent over a card table in the drawing room, measuring with his eyes each projection before trying if it would fit into this or that gap and attempting to determine by scarcely perceptible signs the essence of the picture in advance.²³

Suddenly, Luzhin reaches "that inevitable day ... when the whole world suddenly went black":

and in that darkness only one thing remained brilliantly lit, a newborn wonder, a dazzling islet on which his whole life was destined to be concentrated. The happiness onto which he fastened came to stay; that April day froze forever, while somewhere else the movements of the seasons, the city spring, the country summer, continued on a different plane - dim currents which barely affected him.²⁴

Although Luzhin has not yet formally been introduced into the world of chess, these lines serve as an indication that he has isolated himself from the temporal and spatial bounds of this reality and is about to enter into the reality of the chess world. Young Luzhin is informally introduced to chess during a social gathering given on the anniversary of the death of the boy's maternal grandfather. Luzhin Sr. has organized an evening of musical entertainment at his home, during the course of which young Luzhin stealthily retires to his father's den to escape the trite comments, stupid questions, and generally oppressive atmosphere of the adult guests. During the evening the featured violin soloist receives a telephone call in the den, after which he opens the small box with which he had been toying during the conversation; it contained chess pieces. Luzhin, anxious to see the contents of the mysterious box, peers out from his hiding place and is discovered. The musician is enthusiastic about this "igra bogov" ("game of the gods") because of the "infinite possibilities" it possesses.

He asks whether or not the boy or his father plays, but before Luzhin can answer his father enters and the conversation is cut short. Luzhin, however, does not forget those magic words: "infinite possibilities." And just as his mother's diamonds glint in the half light of the room when she comes in to tuck him into bed, so too those carved chess figures glimmer in young Luzhin's imagination as he drops off to sleep.

The next morning he awakens "with a feeling of incomprehensible excitement."²⁵ He later remembers that morning and lunch "with an unusual brightness, the way you remember the day preceding a long journey."²⁶ Luzhin has a premonition that chess is the long sought after key to his feelings of despair and isolation. Later in the day when Luzhin's mother confronts her husband with the fact that he has been carrying on an affair with the boy's aunt, Luzhin Jr. and the aunt retire to another room where she gives him his first formal lesson in chess. It is significant that it should be his father's mistress who first formally introduces Luzhin to chess; seemingly Nabokov equates these two matters. Subconsciously Luzhin concludes that both chess and his father's affair are matters not to be discussed, but to be kept secret. And so young Luzhin secretly begins to study the game of chess. He reads old magazines containing chess problems and reconstructs

the games on his own chess board. As he becomes more absorbed and proficient in the game, he no longer finds the need to physically reconstruct the games, but instead replays the problems in his head. The fact that he is able to play these games mentally, suggests that Luzhin is beginning to withdraw into the chess world of patterns and designs. While sitting one day on the veranda, he views the avenue in front of the house on which "sunflecks" take on the aspect of regular light and dark squares.

Luzhin's obsession becomes increasingly intense. He plays games with his father, whom he beats consistently, and later also defeats various guests whom his father invites to challenge the boy. The sixth game he plays (and wins) is with an old Jew, a senile chess genius of past fame. Ironically this faded old grandmaster is a figure symbolic of Luzhin's future circumstances. Later in the novel, when playing his most outstanding opponent for the world championship in Berlin, Luzhin fears that he is losing the game, and subconsciously sees his luck fading just like that of the old Jew whom he had played in his childhood.

Near the end of Chapter Four, Luzhin suffers his "October chess-permeated illness,"²⁷ an illness which in time will become sempiternal. Life becomes more and more obscured to the point wherein chess serves as the needed means through

which Luzhin can mentally escape from his surrounding reality. Physical escape is effected when chess patterns so thoroughly permeate his mind that he has a mental breakdown and is allowed to leave school. He later also leaves his father and is adopted by the embodiment of his obsession, his "chess-father," Valentinov, who chooses to manage the boy's career and life. Luzhin's chess victories become increasingly frequent to the point where the boy's genius is widely recognized.

Suddenly, in a paragraph near the end of Chapter Four, Nabokov introduces a stylistic effect whereby he transposes the time of the action to a point sixteen years later when Luzhin is thirty years old. In doing this "Nabokov islands the childhood, frames its naive brightness so that superimposed upon the grown figure [Luzhin's adult years], it operates as a kind of heart, as an abruptly doused light reddens the subsequent darkness."²⁸ Hence Luzhin's childhood is distinctly set apart from the rest of his life. The reason for this is that although the first fifty-six pages do not represent the physical center of the novel, they do constitute the thematic core. The entire validity of Luzhin's obsession with chess, his success as a player, his attempted repatterning of life resulting in the creation of an alternative reality, as well as his ultimate failure, are all based on the convincingness of this first section. The rest of Luzhin's tale will reflect it.

The second section of the novel marks a significant change in Luzhin's character. As a man of eccentric and unprepossessing habits, all of his faculties seem to have been absorbed in chess permutations and combinations. He plays matches throughout Europe and is shown as an infinitely lonely figure who sees nothing except chessboards; he is almost entirely oblivious to external reality. Valentinov deserts Luzhin for other enterprises; he is no longer a prodigy; and although still a great player, he is dogged by a baffling inability to win tournaments outright -- "a ghostly barrier" prevents him from coming in first.

Luzhin becomes so obsessed with the reality which he finds in chess, that he begins to confuse it with the reality which surrounds him; and he begins to prefer his chess reality. This is characterized by the special pleasure he takes in playing chess matches blind. In so doing he finds deep enjoyment without having to deal with the materiality of the chess pieces which always seem to him the crude shell of the invisible chess forces. Thus Luzhin prefers to isolate himself in his world of chess and totally ignore his surroundings. As the tale continues, Luzhin's situation degenerates to the point where life becomes a completely passive experience to him. He senses only that some strange, invisible force is taking him from tournament to tournament; his alienation deepens.

Luzhin is subsequently portrayed as an enigmatic man whose "very art and all the manifestations and signs of this art were mysterious."²⁹ Even his manager, Valentinov, had been interested in Luzhin only inasmuch as he remained an odd phenomenon.

It is interesting to note Valentinov's relationship to Luzhin and the reasons which prompt him to treat the boy as he does. When Luzhin met Valentinov in his chess-childhood, he immediately became attached to him - "and later he regarded him the way a son might a frivolous, coldish, elusive father to whom one could never say how much one loved him."³⁰ Valentinov thus serves as the embodiment of chess for Luzhin and keeps him physically aloof from his surrounding reality. In actuality, Valentinov is a fast-talking, self-important, confidence-man who is interested in Luzhin only as a chess player; thus he imposes a set of strict rules upon the boy as would an athletic trainer. He prohibits Luzhin from eating certain foods and drinking liquor. Furthermore, he even controls Luzhin's sexual urges:

Finally he had a peculiar theory that the development of Luzhin's gift for chess was connected with the development of the sexual urge, that for him chess represented a special deflection of this urge, and fearing lest Luzhin should squander his precious power in releasing by natural means the beneficial

inner tension; he kept him at a distance from women and rejoiced over his chaste moroseness.³¹

Hence one sees Valentinov as an extremely influential factor in prompting Luzhin to accept chess as a surrogate for life. Later, as Luzhin becomes disillusioned with his chess prowess, his re-entry into life's reality, symbolized by his marriage, is a kind of defensive castling. As has been previously mentioned, Luzhin thus places himself in a world of poshlust', which he also finds repulsive.

As Valentinov sees Luzhin's chess powers waning, he gives him some money and disappears. At that point, Luzhin is actually at the pinnacle of his career and is about to face his most able rival for the chess championship of the world, the redoubtable Italian player, Turati. Luzhin has heard a great deal concerning this man and his victories throughout Europe. He was a player of the latest fashions in chess. And although a player with a mentality somewhat similar to Luzhin's own, Turati had gone further:

Luzhin's game, which in his early youth had so astounded the experts with its unprecedented boldness and disregard for the basic, as it seemed, rules of chess, now appeared just a little old-fashioned compared with the glittering extremism of Turati. Luzhin's plight was that of a writer or composer who, having assimilated the latest things in art at the beginning of his career

and caused a temporary sensation with the originality of his devices, all at once noticed that a change had taken place around him...³²

Luzhin feels that his game is inferior to Turati's. In recognizing the possibility that his chess supremacy might be seriously challenged, and that he might lose his significance in the chess world, Luzhin proposes to prepare the best possible defense against the complex opening of the Italian master. Luzhin becomes increasingly neurotic to the point where he actually begins to see reality as a chess game. Hence his defense against Turati becomes for Luzhin more a defense of his own life. Luzhin reaches that paraphasia familiar to many chess addicts in which the spatial relationships of everyday life (furniture, trees, telegraph poles, and flecks of moonlight) assume their place on a hallucinatory exchequer. He is no longer able to cope with reality because his only reality is that of the chess board. Even sleep provides him with no peace; he continually dreams of gigantic chessboards in the middle of which Luzhin always sees himself as pawn, standing and staring at the other pieces.

After the first day of play with Turati in which the Italian master does not use his famous opening, thereby rendering Luzhin's defense utterly useless, Luzhin returns to his room only to see a square of moonlight on the floor;

in that square he sees his own shadow. Luzhin has thus become a pawn in his own game of chess; he is entirely immersed in life's chess game. This section of the novel is thoroughly permeated with chess images which justify the totality of Luzhin's obsession. They seem to stitch together the very fabric of Luzhin's being. Checkerboards of black and white dance through his consciousness as images of his past career and as literal markings on Berlin taxicabs. Even some of the characters are personified chess pieces; a couple of drunken characters named Kurt and Karl act briefly as pawns in a gambit too large for them to comprehend. With each passing session of the championship tournament Luzhin finds it increasingly difficult to crawl out of the world of chess concepts:

The only thing he knew for sure was that from time immemorial he had been playing chess - and in the darkness of his memory, as in two mirrors reflecting a candle, there was only a vista of converging lights with Luzhin sitting at a chessboard, and then smaller still, and so on an infinite number of times.³³

During the final match with Turati Luzhin lights a match, but being so absorbed in the game, he forgets he has done so and remembers only when he is burned. Therein he suddenly realizes the full horror of the abysmal depths of chess. He grows weary of the game, but is held and absorbed by the

pitiless chess pieces. Yet, despite the horror in this, he experiences a mysteriously overpowering sense of harmony. When the crucial game with Turati is adjourned, Luzhin collapses; he is suffering from exhaustion, mental fatigue, and despair at the thought of irrevocably losing the match and therefore his place in the secluded and secure reality of chess. Thus ends part two of the novel.

The period from Luzhin's collapse until the end of the novel constitutes the third part of the novel. During the course of a somewhat dubious convalescence, his psychiatrist and fiancée (referred to only as "she" before their marriage) implore Luzhin to forget the pernicious habit of chess. In forgetting chess and withdrawing into the real world, Luzhin discovers what he believes to be the only possible means of staving off defeat in his match with Turati. To signify this transition back into reality, Luzhin marries his fiancée after he is set free from the sanatorium. His marriage, however, results only in a mother-son relationship. Actually, Mrs. Luzhin possesses a kind and philanthropic nature, despite her domineering attitude toward her husband. Her primary function in the novel is to precipitate new situations according to Nabokov's interests and thus further the plot. In stressing her functional role, Nabokov parodies the couple's courtship by having Luzhin assume the passive role in the traditional

male-female relationship. One day before their marriage she drops a handkerchief and Luzhin picks it up. Instead of pursuing the matter and winning her, however, he instead waits for another handkerchief to be dropped, thus expressing his desire to make her the active partner. As Mrs. Luzhin, she must therefore be wife, nurse, and mother to her husband. Throughout the third section of the novel, Luzhin engages in innumerable childish activities and follows his wife around like a son does his mother. Because of her nature, Mrs. Luzhin provides her husband with a marvelous opportunity to return to his truncated childhood. Therein Luzhin finds total oblivion in the world and a defense against the "offenses" he sees mounting against him in his chess reality.

As could be expected, their marriage is characterized by the absence of physical love. Mrs. Luzhin instead devotes herself to the task of renovating Luzhin's life. Her aim is to transform her husband and offer him the way back into what she considers to be a normal life. Luzhin obediently practices his drawing and plays "jolly geography" with her. Unfortunately however, loving and courageous as she is, his wife is just another sordid sentimentalist forcing Luzhin into her own novelettish version of life. His inlaws' flat which so engrosses Luzhin's wife with all its "Russian" qualities, is utterly bogus to Luzhin. Hoping he will take an interest in émigré politics, his wife reads émigré

newspapers aloud to him. Luzhin does his best to look attentive; but he is right, émigré politics are "pure twaddle"; Mrs. Luzhin even feels it herself. The life in which she strives so tenderly to interest him is not just childish (for that would indeed have been appropriate), but inane more than anything else. In introducing her husband to a variety of friends and acquaintances, and to current émigré affairs, Mrs. Luzhin actually only offers the solipsistic Luzhin an existence of banality. This world of trite conversation and superficiality only forces Luzhin ultimately to withdraw further into himself. Luzhin despises this wretched existence of poshlust' because it is so reminiscent of the life his parents had led which initially prompted him to seek escape in chess. Luzhin nevertheless accepts "this external life as something inevitable."³⁴ And suddenly, despite all his wife's caution, some accident - a chess game in a film or an overheard reference to his aunt - reminds him of chess. Luzhin soon senses that it is no accident and consequently suspects that the pattern of his life is about to repeat itself. His idyllic life since the breakdown begins to reveal a sinister pattern:

Just as some combination, known from chess problems, can be distinctly repeated on the board in actual play - so now the consecutive repetition of familiar pattern was becoming

noticeable in his present life. And as soon as his initial delight had passed, as soon as he began to go carefully over his discovery, Luzhin shuddered. With vague admiration and vague horror he observed how awesomely, how elegantly, how flexibly, move by move, the images of his childhood had been repeated... but he still did not quite understand why this combinational repetition inspired his soul with such dread.... But now he resolved to be more circumspect, to keep an eye on the further development of these moves.³⁵

Luzhin begins to look upon his wife, family, and society as hostile forces, as "opponents," trying through some perfidious combination to checkmate him. As Luzhin follows the repetition of his life, therein finding his security, he establishes a defense to combat these social forces just as in a game of chess. He abjures "jolly geography" and drawing, and allows the tangible world to slip away, once again abandoning himself to the beautiful and terrible harmonies of chess. When his "chess-father," Valentinov, reenters Luzhin's life, he [Luzhin] realizes that a decisive move has been made against him. Valentinov reappears on the excuse of using Luzhin in a film. Luzhin, however, understands the significance of this move; he sees the movie as a pretext, a trap to inveigle him into playing chess. He decides, however, that this move will not be made. Luzhin suspects all too well that life is a chess

game which, through a repetition of patterns, is forcing him to be absorbed once again in chess. He foresees that this will lead inevitably to the conclusion of the match with Turati, a match which he realizes will generate his ultimate defeat. Reflecting upon the significance of his situation, Luzhin sees the pattern in the game and contemplates the alternatives for his ultimate defense. He paces back and forth through the three adjoining rooms of his flat as his wife watches in complete bewilderment and inexplicable terror. Ironically she tells him to sit down, that he will die if he walks so much. She even says that they will go to the cemetery the following day to tend his father's grave.

And suddenly Luzhin stopped. It was as if the whole world had stopped.³⁶

Luzhin had conceived his defense. A demented man, he runs out of the room, saying that he has to drop out of the "game." He returns once again to the room, kisses his wife as if bidding her farewell, and then runs into the bathroom where he locks the door. He smashes the window and climbs through:

Now both legs were hanging outside and he had only to let go of what he was hanging on to -- and he was saved. Before letting go he looked down. Some kind of hasty preparations were under way there: the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm

was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at that instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at that instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him.³⁷

Expected guests at his wife's dinner party break into the bathroom only to find that Luzhin has jumped. The final sentence of the novel reads: "But there was no Alexandr Ivanovich."³⁸ He had committed "sui-mate."³⁹

Luzhin had found security and happiness in the aesthetics of his art. But because he was unable to control his reveries and passion, Luzhin had irreparably disassociated himself from life and thus destined himself to be a failure in both life and art. His art had permeated his reality so completely by the novel's conclusion that the only escape from his maddening consciousness that Luzhin could see was the absence of consciousness -- his ultimate defense to checkmate life and its offense was self-destruction. But even in death, as in life, Luzhin, is doomed to the abysmal horrors of chess. By his self-destruction Luzhin concedes the ultimate victory to chess. R.H.W. Dillard stated this succinctly:

...[Luzhin's] imagination functions apart from reality and is, thus, out of harmony with the richer creative forces of life... [He is] so deeply involved...in his art that his perception of reality is distorted.

Chess becomes for him the real world,
and the human world, especially that
of love and simple human relationships,
seems a dream, pleasant and desirable
but fragile to the disruptive and des-
tructive influence of "reality", of
chess.⁴⁰

FOOTNOTES

¹ As noted in the Preface, an uncontracted version of the present chapter appeared earlier as Chapter V of the author's Master's Thesis, "The Image of the Artist in Two of Nabokov's Russian Novels" (unpublished, Montreal: McGill University, June, 1971).

² The original Russian title was Zaščita Lužina. Berlin: Slovo, 1930.

³ G.B. Ivanov's review of Mašen'ka ("Mary"), Korol', dama, valet ("King, Queen, Knave"), Zaščita Lužina ("The Defense") and Vozvraščenie Čorba ("The Return of Chorb"), appeared in Čisla, I, 1930, pp. 233-236.

⁴ Gleb Struve in the Paris published newspaper Rossija i Slavjanstvo, May 17, 1930; and Nikolaj Andreev in a Tallin journal, Nov', October, 1930.

⁵ Information concerning the reviews by Struve, Andreev, and Al. Novik was obtained from Ludmilla A. Foster's "Nabokov in Russian Emigré Criticism," Russian Literature Triquarterly, no. 3 (Spring, 1972), 332-333.

⁶ As quoted by Andrew Field in Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 178.

⁷ Vladislav Khodasevič as cited in "On Sirin," Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 99.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 290-291

¹¹ Robert J. Clements, "Life Was Like A Chessboard," review of The Defense, Saturday Review, September 26, 1964, p. 45.

¹² Ibid.

- 13 Ibid., p. 46.
- 14 Khodasevič, "On Sirin," p. 100.
- 15 Robert Alter, "Invitation to a Beheading: Nabokov on the Art of Politics," Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 45.
- 16 Vladimir Nabokov, The Defense (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. 8.
- 17 Ibid., p. 12.
- 18 Clements, op. cit., p. 46.
- 19 Nabokov, The Defense, p. 15.
- 20 Ibid., p. 17. [It is interesting to note that the original Russian text did have a play on words, but that it was not translated literally into English, nor did it carry any apparent symbolic meaning as the English pun does. The Russian text reads: "Èto lož', čto v" teatre net" lož"." This translates as: "It is a lie that there are no loges (boxes) in the theatre." The word play in Russian was between lož' (lie) and lož" (one ending in a soft sign, the other in a hard sign), - the second being a form of the word "loža," a theatre box.
- 21 Ibid., p. 23.
- 22 Ibid., p. 27.
- 23 Ibid., p. 38.
- 24 Ibid., p. 39.
- 25 Ibid., p. 43.
- 26 Ibid., p. 44.
- 27 Ibid., p. 71.
- 28 John Updike, Assorted Prose (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), pp. 322-323.

- 29 Nabokov, The Defense, p. 90.
- 30 Ibid., p. 93.
- 31 Ibid., p. 94.
- 32 Ibid., p. 97.
- 33 Ibid., p. 135.
- 34 Ibid., p. 191.
- 35 Ibid., pp. 213-214.
- 36 Ibid., p. 251.
- 37 Ibid., pp. 255-256.
- 38 Ibid., p. 256.
- 39 Ibid., p. 8.
- 40 R.H.W. Dillard, "Not Text But Texture: The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov," The Hollins Critic, III (June, 1966), 4.

CHAPTER FIVE

GLORY

Glory, Nabokov's fourth Russian novel, was published in 1932, two years after the appearance of The Defense. Unlike the overwhelmingly enthusiastic reception given its predecessor, Glory received only nominal critical attention from émigré reviewers; even those few reviews which did appear were far from laudatory. The basis for this virtual neglect was the same complaint that had plagued Nabokov earlier in his career -- his prose exhibited technical virtuosity but lacked any substantial "message" for his readers. Many individual passages and scenes were cited as being some of the best that Nabokov had ever written; nevertheless Glory was categorically dismissed because it seemed to be of no value outside of itself.

In an exemplary review of the novel, Vladimir Varšavskij evaluated all of Nabokov's fiction, and Glory in particular, thus:

... utomitel'noe izobilie fiziologičeskoj
žiznenosti poražet, prežde vsego, v Sirine.
Vse črezvyčajno sočno i krasočno, i kak to
žirno. No za `etim razlivšimsja v dal' i
v šir' polovod'em -- pustota, ne bezdna, a
ploskaja pustota, pustota kak mel', strašnaja
imenno otsūtstviem glubiny.

Kak budto by Sirin pišet ne dlja togo,
čtoby nazvat' i sotvorit' žizn', a v silu kakoj-to

fiziologičeskoj potrebnosti. Na èto skažut
 "nu i khoroso, i pticy tak pojut." No
 čelovek ne ptica.¹

Varšavskij continued by saying that Nabokov belonged to that group of writers who strove for technical virtuosity in their functional art but who, despite their success and talent, produced nothing of value and were "to no end" ("ni k čemu")².

In referring specifically to Glory, Varšavskij wrote:

Čitaja Podvig", ja vsjo vremja čuvstvoval,
 čto èto očen' khorošo i talantlivo napisano.
 Pravda, mne ne očen' nravilos'. Prust
 govoril, čto obyknovenno ljubjat tekh
 pisatelej, v kotorikh uznajut samogo sebja.
 V khorošikh pisateljakh znaet samikh sebja,
 svoju zizn' bol'sinstvo ljudej. Čitaja
 Sirina, skvoz' nekotoruju èkzotičnost' ego
 obrazov, ja vsjo-taki znaval neposredstvennyja
 percepcii pjati čuvstv. No dal'se uže
 ničego nel'zja bylo uznat'.³

Varšavskij stated that at one point he thought he had found the "idea" of the novel, but later conceded his error, remarking that the work was devoid of any teaching and was simply a presentation of the "raw material of the immediate perception of life."⁴ Varšavskij's review contained little substance and gave no textual references for those faults which he pointed out. His only noteworthy statement occurred at the beginning of the review:

Očen' trudno pisat' o Sirine: s odnoj
 storony èto molodoj pisatel', v to že vremja--

priznannyj "klassik".

I vot ne znaeš' čto skazat': očen
talantlivaja, no malo ser'joznaja kniga --
esli molodoj pisatel', beznadežnoe sniženie
"dukha" -- esli klassik.⁵

Varšavskij thus dispensed with both Nabokov and Glory because he could not precisely identify him or his work with any existing literary tradition.

In another review⁶ of Glory, written by Mikhail Cetlin for Sovremennye zapiski, the evaluation was contrary to that given by Varšavskij. This was an unusual occurrence, especially since in previous reviews Cetlin had tried unmercifully to discredit Nabokov's talent. There are several explanations for Cetlin's sudden change of heart, the most reasonable of which is that Cetlin saw a need for conciliation since Nabokov's prose was being serialized in Sovremennye zapiski. The review began with Cetlin noting that Nabokov's writings had always been received with interest by his readers, but they had never evoked much critical response because they deviated from the norms of the Russian literary tradition. Unlike Leonid Andreev, with whom Cetlin himself had once compared Nabokov, Cetlin felt that Nabokov would never become a favorite of the critics because his novels lacked ideas and soul-searching:

Avtor dlja kritika tol'ko tramplin, prelog
dlja sobstvennogo tvorčestva, a knigi Sirina
ne udobnaja kanva dlja vyšivanija kritičeskikh

uzorov. ... V Sirine že, požaluj,
"ideologii" sliškom malo.⁷

In comparison with his earlier works, however, Cetlin felt that Glory represented one of Nabokov's better novels to date. Mary was just "a test of the pen,"⁸ although it indisputably reflected Nabokov's unique talent; and King, Queen, Knave was "a strange nightmare in the sense of German 'expressionism'."⁹ With The Defense Cetlin claimed that for the first time Nabokov had found himself artistically. In comparing Glory with The Defense, Cetlin admitted that Glory did not have the completeness nor the depth of the previous work.

Naprjažennyj, uskorennij temp Sirinskoj
prozy nakhoditsja v nesootvetstvii so
sliškom bol'simi razmerami knigi, sliškom
bol'simi dlja eja neskol'ko rasplyvačatogo
i bednogo sjužeta. V romane my iščem
"polifonii", raznoobrazija vyvedennykh
lic, izobraženija celoj gruppy ljudej,
social'noj "sredy", iščem mnogoobrazija,
svedennogo k edinstvu. Dlja četogo edinstva
i nužen jasnyj, interesnyj sjužet ili "ideja",
slovom to, čto možet služit' centrom proizvedenija.¹⁰

He continued by writing that although the reader was introduced to many characters, one did not get to know any of them very well because of their great number and the fragmented manner in which they were presented. Unlike other critics, he did not view the novel as disjointed, but rather as somewhat strangely but cleverly unified. He clarified his previous

statement and warned critics and readers about approaching the novel with any preconceived notions:

Ne nado podkhodit' k Sirinu s gotovymi
merkami i iskat' togo, čego v njom net,
lučše radovat'sja tomu, čto v njom est'.
Čitatel' ne možet ne ocenit' metkost'
vzgljada avtora, cepkost' ego pamjati,
umen'e videt' vsjo svoeobrazno i v
neožidannom razreze. Podvig ves' napisan
i často prevoskhodno. Proza dlja Sirina
nikogda ne javljaetsja prosto sredstvom,
ona vseгда samocel', vseгда iskusstvo.¹¹

In late 1971 Glory appeared for the first time in English translation. American and British reviewers were for the most part more appreciative of the novel than were émigré critics: Nabokov's well-founded reputation virtually ensured their praise. This observation is substantiated by the fact that although many reviews warmly welcomed Glory, few reflected any appreciable understanding of the work. However, several reviewers did note some interesting features of the novel, and a few even offered an interpretation. In an unsigned review-essay for the Times Literary Supplement,¹² the critic savored the ironic possibility of reviewing Glory in light of Podvig" (the original Russian title) and Nabokov's subsequent Russian and English prose. Contrasting Glory with all that had appeared since its creation in 1932 and its translation in 1971, the critic paralleled Nabokov's changing artistic outlook:

...he seems to have grown younger, more restless, moody, playful: Glory was obviously written by a more controlled, sensitive, shy fellow than the chap who enjoys it so much in the preface [of the 1971 translation, T.P.A.]. Glory, after all (he hardly disguises it), was a rather pallid and brittle affair. The easiest metaphor for the style (and for the "autobiographical" manner) is an old photograph, whose dimness and blotches become part, inseparably, of the façade, the ruined landscape...indeed if Nabokov's Europe is always less exciting at first than his America, it seems to be because he never found there the special mix of "eerie vulgarity" and enchantment he discovered in Lolita. It does, after all, take some coaxing to adjust to this rather prim, faded texture.¹³

In defense of "the dull patina of phrase-making,"¹⁴ the confusing assemblage of characters, and the fragmented story-line, the Times' critic said that Glory reflected Nabokov in a much more stable period in his life -- a period in which youthful experimentation with his art was more sacred than the defensive, impersonal manner of caricature and parody which he adopted in his later works. This was not to suggest that Glory was superior to Nabokov's later novels, but only that it seemed to convey a sense of artistic and creative freedom which Nabokov must have felt during his early years and which he has since relegated to a place of secondary importance in favor of a more sophisticated, polished art form. Glory, therefore, represents a significant chapter

in the story of Nabokov's developing art. Instead of transposing Glory, as was done with King, Queen, Knave, Camera Obscura, and Despair, Nabokov chose to translate it literally into English so as to convey exactly the essence of his style and his original artistic vision. Through the original fabric of Podvig one sees in Glory that Nabokov has reduced himself in subsequent writings to the more impersonal level of a trickster and artificer. Nabokov the youthful, inexperienced, unsophisticated novelist of the late twenties and early thirties is today "immeasurably more gross and vital than his youthful shadow."¹⁵ The Times' critic continued his remarks by saying that Nabokov had purposely appropriated the "brainless logic and coarse jargons"¹⁶ of his later heroes, not simply to become more coarse or logical, but to build up a combative toughness against today's changing world. This defensive shell reflected both increased fineness of perception and "a sharper awareness of how to protect and preserve those 'immemorial and tender banalities' of love and heroism that have always been his concern."¹⁷

Thus viewed, Glory represents, both in English and in Russian, an anomaly, a deviation from Nabokov's literary tendency. It is the only Nabokov novel which does not challenge the reader's intellect with complex thematic interpretations. The simple narrative eschews the intellectual gamesmanship of

Pale Fire and Despair; it stands at the opposite pole to the overtly contrived and manipulated narrative patterns of The Defense, Invitation to a Beheading, and ultimately The Gift. Despite this feature, however, the form and structure of Glory play an important part in the novel, as is suggested by its literal translation. The story-line is presented by an omniscient author from the third-person point of view, but there is no artifice nor any authorial manipulation. The novel is superbly written, well controlled, and should be regarded as one of Nabokov's outstanding works. Nabokov seems to feel that his art does not need baffling complexity, acridity, or mocking humor to be great.

In a review written for the New Statesman, Mary Borg also pointed out the difference between Glory and Nabokov's other novels:

Like all Nabokov's novels, Glory is, among many other things, the passionate outpouring of a towering intelligence. But unlike some of his later works, it flows in less elitist, less scornful, more humane channels. Neither readers nor characters are treated with hauteur. Other major novelists have not, of course, lacked intelligence; but that quality has been exercised, in a sense, unobtrusively, as both object and instrument. With Nabokov, the exercise and display of intelligence itself becomes art.¹⁸

In overlooking faults which other reviewers had discerned, Borg acknowledged the hint of thematic interests and creative

techniques which were later more fully developed by Nabokov, but did not state explicitly what these were; she left that task for Nabokov enthusiasts, who she was sure would recognize the seeds of later fruition.

In a review for Time magazine, Martha Duffy saw the "autobiographical theme"¹⁹ as the most important feature of Glory. Indeed there are many facets of Nabokov's life and character which are seemingly brought to fiction and attributed to the protagonist, Martin Edelweiss; Nabokov admits this. But in the foreword Nabokov enjoins readers against "avidly flipping through Speak, Memory in quest of duplicate items or kindred scenery. The fun of Glory is elsewhere."²⁰ Nabokov does caress and exalt his opulent memory with this novel, but with no more intention than he does in Mary.

In evaluating Glory for readers of the National Review, D. Keith Mano acknowledged the great stylistic control which Nabokov exercised in his "evanescent, barely meaningful novel."²¹ He saw it primarily as a typical Bildungsroman, in which meaningful events "occur between the commonplace images and events".²²

A few aspects of Glory are overstated, others are inexplicable, still others are unimportant: nonetheless style provides an ex cathedra authority that overrides objections. Glory is a tricky, perhaps essentially sterile artistic problem set by Nabokov for Nabokov.²³

In an enthusiastic review for America, Daniel Coogan labeled Glory "a jewel of brilliance."²⁴ He felt that Nabokov could "delineate with just a few deft strokes the human uniqueness of each individual."²⁵

Best of all, however, in this spell-binding novel, is the incredible word-magic of Nabokov's style, perhaps not yet as glittering and polished as it was later to become in Lolita and Ada, but unmistakably present...²⁶

Coogan saw Nabokov attempting to demonstrate in the novel that the dreams, longing, and imagination of childhood could be made to come true in adult life. Martin supposedly fulfilled his dreams by means of a quixotic deed -- an illegal crossing into the Soviet Union. Coogan saw the motivation as consistent and impelling throughout the novel, but he never truly ascertained what sparked Martin's dreams. The theme of Martin fulfilling a childhood wish is not motivated by political zeal, nor is it fostered by a desire to overcome some basic fear -- both of which Coogan suggested.

Finally, in a more perceptive review, V.S. Pritchett characterized Glory as having "the prickly worded yet non-chalant detachment of the best European writing of that period."²⁷ According to him, Nabokov recorded "the general experience of growing a will and imposing it on the sensibility."²⁸ Pritchett mistakenly saw this not as the

act of an aesthete, but of a person who experienced a sense of inner exile. Thus Martin's gallant feat, his exploit, was depicted not as a creative act, but as an exotic inner journey which would be of greater interest to Martin than the creative, non-utilitarian act. As Pritchett stated, there was no moralizing or exhorting in the book, although he believed an important part of the novel to be the portrayal of Russian liberals whose existence had been crudely ignored in Europe and America. Pritchett ultimately characterized the book as an assertion of the joy experienced by one whose career sprung forth as the result of a childhood fantasy.

As has been shown, contemporary criticism, although more favorably inclined toward Glory, was for the most part no more able to discern the true theme than was émigré criticism. Many critics, and in particular V.S. Pritchett, were only vaguely aware of the thematic element which meaningfully joined the multitudinous scenes and characters. Many reviewers saw faults in the novel, but usually dismissed them as the result of literary immaturity. One of the most frequently cited faults was that the novel exhibited an unevenness and lack of focus due to excessive fragmentation of events or locales and to an over-abundance of secondary characters. Indeed, there are forty-eight chapters (fifty in the Russian

edition) in which twenty-two changes of locale occur: thus one sees the action kaleidoscopically unfolding in Russia, Biarritz, Berlin, Athens, Marseilles, Lausanne, Cambridge, London, Mogniac, and Riga. Ironically, however, the unevenness which irritated critics and readers is structurally and thematically an integral part of Glory; it is both a symbol and a cause of the type of existence which Martin leads and which pushes him toward his daring exploit. In the preface Nabokov stated this obliquely when he wrote that the theme:

... is to be sought in the echoing and linking of minor events, in back-and-forth switches, which produce an illusion of impetus: in an old daydream...²⁹

What this means is that the essence of Martin's life, and therefore Nabokov's theme, is carefully presented in the series of semi-related events which comprise the novel. The action is intentionally fragmented in order to convey to the reader the sense of disorientation which Martin himself feels.

Now that past and contemporary criticism has been surveyed to show what Glory is not about, it is necessary to present the story-line and to establish a working interpretation from which one may view the text. The story is basically very simple: Martin Edelweiss, a young man from a broken family,

is forced to leave Russia in 1919 with his mother because of revolutionary activity. He and his mother take up residence at the home of Martin's paternal uncle -- Henry Edelweiss. Mrs. Edelweiss is soon married to her brother-in-law, and Martin goes to Cambridge University for his education. He concentrates his studies on Russian literature, but upon graduation does not seek employment; instead he vacillates between London, Berlin, and Lausanne. He falls in love with a young girl, Sonia, also an émigré, but never succeeds in winning her love. While traveling through Southern France, he works as a day-laborer for a short time. Gradually he is introduced to various members of the émigré community in London and Berlin, and becomes increasingly interested in the activities of an anti-Bolshevik organization. Ultimately, after much consideration, Martin makes a dangerous, illegal foray into the Soviet Union. Well aware of the dangers, Martin sees this act as the greatest feat of his life. The novel concludes with Martin having disappeared (we are not actually shown him crossing the border), and his friend and former school-mate, Darwin, going to tell Martin's mother about his deed and the probability of his never returning.

As previously suggested, the narrative structure of the novel is as important to an understanding of the novel as are the incidents actually described. In terms of the

uneven narration, Martin is vividly depicted as a young man searching for self-identity and a purpose in a chaotic world. The narrative device of travel makes possible the multiple shifts of locale which serve to illustrate symbolically the sense of dislocation and alienation that Martin has always suffered. In terms of the actual incidents, the reader learns why Martin is never able to form any lasting relationships and that he is barely able to communicate with other human beings. In addition, he is never able to maintain even those ties which he had already established: his childhood is left behind in Russia, his girlfriend is in London, his best friend and education are in Cambridge, and his family is in Lausanne. Martin is therefore shown traveling between these points, meeting people, gathering impressions and juxtaposing his findings and experiences upon his remembered past, all in an attempt to discover his identity and to establish some sense in his life of meaningless activity. Despite various attempts, however, all is in vain. He remains to the end a man enduring a rootless, alienated, and lonely existence.

In terms of this study, Martin's exploit is seen as an artistic act by means of which Martin strives to escape the oppressiveness of his first reality. His final deed represents for him an attempt to bring meaning to his life and

recognition from those around him. Martin approaches his trip across the Soviet border with the same degree of cunning and disciplined preparation that an artist practices in attempting to create his masterpiece; he immerses himself in the aesthetics of his act and in fulfilling his plan hopes to escape life's realities. In so doing, Martin is of course doomed to failure, since, as with Luzhin, he allows that reality which his art affords to supplant that reality from which his art originates. The reality offered by life in the Soviet Union will be no less real than that of emigration; and one suspects that he will find it neither less oppressive nor any more satisfying.

In most respects Martin is similar to other Nabokov protagonists. Many of them are homeless wanderers who are forced by their real or self-imposed exile to replace their terrestrial roots with various forms of distracting obsessions which enable them, through an absorption with the aesthetics of their various infatuations, to escape the sufferings of their vagrant existences. What distinguishes Martin from the other protagonists (and Nabokov as well), is the fact that he is not endowed with any specific artistic talent with which he can fight for existence in the surrounding world. Until he conceives his glorious deed, every activity in which Martin engages brings him little or no satisfaction or peace: he is

ostracized by the émigré community in which he resides, he fails in his attempts at love, and his family unit begins to disintegrate with the marriage of his mother and Uncle Henry, whom Martin despises. Martin's alienation is compounded and made complete by the fact that, unlike Ganin in Mary, he does not have any soothing childhood memories on which to rely in moments of depression. This fact of Martin's life is the most agonizing aspect of his alienation and despair, and forms the basic motivation for his trip into the Soviet Union. His sense of dislocation, symbolized by his aimless roaming throughout Europe, arises because as a child he is raised surrounded by English customs, not by Russian customs. Thus, when Martin tries to associate with the Russian world in which he is forced to live, and which he later sees it is his destiny as an émigré to protect, he has no cultural basis. Other than his birth in Russia, Martin shares no common bond of experience with his fellow émigrés, nor does he have any bond with his English or European friends, since his English upbringing was old-fashioned and impractical. Hence, in making a trip to the Soviet Union, Martin hopes his act will bring him recognition from his peers and will restore to him the feeling of being Russian. Many critics have remarked that Martin's ultimate deed is one which is committed in a void -- one which is irrational and impulsive. But as Andrew Field has

suggested, Martin's motivation, trip, and destination are all prefigured throughout the novel. His feelings for things Russian clearly motivate him for this deed from the early part of the novel. Nothing is really left unresolved or hazy. The predicament in which Martin finds himself, and the intensity with which he endeavors to extract himself from his circumstances, make this one of Nabokov's most exciting novels. In scene after scene the reader, along with Martin, suffers the intense desire for him to create a meaningful life out of his frustrated and tattered existence.

The foreword to Glory, like the forewords to all of the translated Russian novels, tells us much of what to expect and what not to look for. Despite the admission of obvious faults (lapses into "false exoticism or commonplace comedy"),³⁰ Nabokov holds this work in high esteem; he says that "it soars to heights of purity and melancholy that.... [he has] only attained in the much later Ada."³¹ The importance of this work in Nabokov's oeuvre is implied by the fact that the very essence of "Russian preoccupations" ("physical movement and gesture, walking and sitting, smiling and glancing from-under-the-brows"),³² which permeated the original had to be conveyed in the translation. The quintessence of Russian émigré life was to be shown, not nakedly, but naturally by conversation and movement.

The theme of the novel, however, as has been suggested, is not the depiction of émigré life per se, nor is it concerned with social problems or politics; such an approach would violate Nabokov's position on the nature and the purpose of his art. The real key to the theme is found in the book's title. The working title was Romantičeskij vek ("Romantic Times"), which Nabokov admits he chose because of his desire to portray "the thrill and the glamour that...[his] young expatriate finds in the most ordinary pleasures as well as the seemingly meaningless adventures of a lonely life."³³ Nabokov says that the theme of Martin's destiny is with the fulfillment of his dreams. The reader is not told exactly what the dreams are, but is reminded beforehand that the fulfillment is permeated by poignant nostalgia. Nabokov drops a hint when he writes:

The memory of the childish reveries blends with the expectation of death. The perilous path that Martin follows into forbidden Zoorland... only continues to its illogical end the fairy-tale trail winding through the painted woods of a nursery-wall picture.³⁴

Zoorland is a euphemistic reference to the Soviet Union; it is an imaginary land which he and Sonia idly create and which Martin subconsciously likens to the Soviet Union.

In further examination of the title, one learns in the foreword that the original Russian title was Podvig",

which literally translated means "exploit." For translation Nabokov rejected this possibility and chose instead the more oblique title Glory, which in his estimation, although less literal, conveyed much more fully the tone of the original Russian choice. Thus Martin's theme may be seen as the fulfillment of an exploit which creates "the glory of high adventure and disinterested achievement; the glory of this earth and its patchy paradise; the glory of personal pluck; the glory of a radiant martyr [*italics mine*, T.P.A.]."35 The only question which is seemingly left unresolved at the novel's conclusion, is what really motivated Martin to accomplish such an action. As has been shown, the answer is clearly implied by the plot and the narrative structure of the novel.

In terms of the present study, Nabokov obliquely states the obvious symbolic interpretation of Martin's act:

... among the many gifts I showered on Martin, I was careful not to include talent. How easy it would have been to make him an artist, a writer; how hard not to let him be one, while bestowing on him the keen sensitivity that one generally associates with the creative creature; how cruel to prevent him from finding in art -- not an "escape" (which is only a cleaner cell on a quieter floor), but relief from the itch of being.³⁶

Nabokov is saying here that he has intentionally deprived Martin of any artistic ability in order to obscure the nature of his life and the meaning of his exploit. Presumably, Nabokov did

not want to expose blatantly the image of the artist and his contrived escape through an obvious artistic endeavor. He seemingly wanted to concentrate more on the basis of Martin's ill-ease and dissatisfaction with life in order to make credible the need for the exploit. In all, this unusual approach to a familiar theme presented itself as a task of considerable difficulty for Nabokov. The plausible construction and presentation of Martin's life and his illegal border crossing was diabolically difficult. But, "the temptation to perform ... [Nabokov's own] little exploit within the omnibus nimbus prevailed."³⁷ Nevertheless, although lacking the usual trappings of a true artist, as a sensitive man Martin approaches the fulfillment of his dreams with the ardor of a writer finishing his greatest work. The exploit is Martin's means to escape from his grotesque first consciousness; unfortunately, the reveries he seeks will not materialize.

Also in the foreword, Nabokov describes Martin's theme of fulfillment as "fugal." As the reader discovers, this concept is of key importance to an understanding of Martin's life and the manner in which it is presented. The theme of Martin's dislocation and his desire to perform an act which will bring him recognition is carefully plotted through the forty-eight chapters of the novel, each of which imitates and repeats the "theme" while showing it from another angle.

Chapter I of the novel carefully establishes the foundation of Martin's sense of dislocation from Russian culture when the reader is told that his grandfather and father were Swiss, but that his grandmother and mother were Russian. Martin, from birth, is torn between national heritages and cultures. With the death of his grandfather and the destruction of all his memory (the photography book was destroyed by marauding soldiers), as well as the separation of his parents and the death of his father, Martin sees his childhood world collapsing even before it had time to establish itself. He and his mother are forced to flee Russia forever because of the Revolution. Despite his having to leave Russia, and the fact that he is of mixed heritage, Martin's childhood suffers another more serious blow, considerably more decisive than physical removal from his beloved homeland. Although his mother is Russian, Mrs. Edelweiss is an Anglomaniac and consequently chooses to raise Martin not according to Russian customs, but according to English customs as she had been. Therefore, instead of the usual Russian milieu in which a Russian child would be expected to live, Martin's life is instead permeated with all things English: language, consumer items, games, stories, and books. Mrs. Edelweiss firmly despises most Russian traditions and mannerisms, and resolves herself to raising Martin properly.

Martin, of course, responds to these new and different manifestations of life, and develops an attitude in accordance with his mother's desires. As a child Martin has little idea of the significance of this upbringing, and only years later does he discover that the English customs artificially imposed upon him had deprived him of the true Russian customs of which he had yearned to be a part:

Thus early in childhood Martin failed to become familiar with something that subsequently, through the prismatic wave of memory, might have added an extra enchantment to his life.³⁸

Nabokov is obviously suggesting here that had Martin become familiar with Russian customs in his childhood, he might have been able to find refuge in this tradition later in life, instead of being driven to the Soviet Union. Nabokov sarcastically closes Chapter I with the following remark:

However, he had no lack of enchantments, and no cause to regret that it was not the Russian knight-errant Ruslan but Ruslan's occidental brother that had awakened his imagination in childhood. But then what does it matter whence comes the gentle nudge that jars the soul into motion and sets it rolling, doomed never to stop?³⁹

In Chapter 2 one sees Martin's initial urge to escape symbolically depicted by his childhood desire to disappear into

the picture which hangs above his bed. The picture, painted by Martin's paternal grandmother, is a constant reminder to him of that other, Russian culture of which he is not a part, even though he is living in Russia. Symbolically each night his mother removes the picture from the wall fearing that the child's vivid imagination will foster a nightmarish adventure into the realm of that dark, wooded world.

Early in childhood, as previously mentioned, Martin's parents separate because of marital problems, and later Mr. Edelweiss dies in unclear circumstances. Martin is of course greatly shocked by the actual physical death of his father, although spiritually he had never been close to him. He in fact is actually ashamed by his indifference to his father, only later realizing what a lonely death he must have suffered. Nabokov treats this death symbolically as the prime indication of the difficulty Martin will have in establishing and maintaining close personal ties. Acting in a shy and reserved manner as did his father, Martin longs for human love and companionship, but cannot bring himself to express these feelings and provoke a similar response in others.

Aside from her Anglomania, Mrs. Edelweiss is a good mother; she sees to every one of Martin's needs and encourages him throughout the book to develop himself and to achieve success. The only problem is that her love smothers and suppresses Martin

because it is so intense; it therefore results in a negative reaction on Martin's part.

Chapter 4 relates a very interesting fact of Martin's personality. Despite his unusual ability to control his emotions, Martin feels that he is a coward and that he must hide this weakness. As a result, Martin resolves himself to behave fearlessly whenever the opportunity presents itself. This attitude forces Martin to react impulsively and foolishly in certain circumstances, all for the sake of "proving himself." Virtually every activity is seen by Martin as a trial, and ultimately as a pretext for the assertion of his desire for recognition.

Chapter 6 strikes a new chord in Martin's life. He is shown at the age of sixteen traveling through France, Germany, and Russia. Aside from the obvious use as a narrative technique, by which Nabokov may link disparate events, places, and characters, travel becomes for Martin one of the great joys in his life. The constant movement, the intransience of other people, the mystery of travel by night, the excitement of new towns, all draw upon Martin irresistibly. This desire to travel and to see new and unknown, even forbidden lands, prefigures Martin's trip to the Soviet Union. Later in the novel Martin compares his life and activities to a long train. Various people and events are situated in different cars -- all joined together --

but interchangeable without any damaging results because their order made no difference to Martin. He sees his entire life as a series of vaguely coupled events and people.

When Martin leaves the Crimea with his mother in 1919, he watches the shoreline of Russia fading into the distance:

And Martin followed the Russian shore with almost an indifferent gaze as it receded in the rainy mist, so restrainedly, so simply, without a single sign that might have hinted at the supernatural length of the separation.⁴⁰

Seemingly only after everything was out of sight, does Martin realize the significance of what had happened. Nevertheless, he becomes intoxicated with the thrill of this sea adventure and immerses himself into the life of a seaman, soon forgetting Russia. During the voyage Martin meets a young poetess, Alla Chernosvitov, by whom he is later seduced in Greece, their destination. He views his affair with her as another challenge, and an opportunity to assert himself. The scene depicting the consummation of his animal desires is relieved by pathetic humor when Alla must discreetly help him and then muffle his impassioned murmurings. Martin is the seduced, not the seducer. He later realizes the foolishness of this liaison and forgets Alla. The sexual impotence which Martin suffers is symbolic of, among many things, the social impotence he experiences throughout his life.

Martin and his mother arrive at his uncle's chalet in Switzerland where they are to make their permanent residence. Martin is enchanted by the surrounding natural beauty and can think only of Russia and the smell of the Russian autumn which he has left behind. In Switzerland, Martin's activities are limited; he must satisfy his need for challenges by trying to seduce the niece of the chambermaid, and by playing tennis. He is never successful with the former desire, and only rarely victorious in tennis. He concludes that happiness is very, very hard to capture.

Plans are made for Martin to attend Cambridge University. He is thrilled with the idea of the imminent trip and dreams of how he will make the whole adventure even more exciting by seducing some English girl as soon as he gets to England. Upon his arrival he takes a girl to his hotel room and seduces her, telling her that he leads the romantic life of a riverboat gambler. She, of course, listens, and in the morning while Martin is still asleep, relieves him of ten pounds and disappears. Upon discovering this Martin is not dismayed, but attributes it to the type of dissipated life which he fancies himself to be leading. He feels that he has deceived the girl, and not vice versa.

Martin then visits some family friends -- the Zilanovs, émigré Russians residing in London. One of their daughters,

Sonia, is a significant character in the book since it is ultimately because of her that Martin tries to prove himself with his exploit. Because of her refusal to reciprocate Martin's love, and because of her incessant badgering, Martin sees her as the greatest challenge of his life. He undertakes his exploit only as a last desperate attempt to win her admiration and approval.

At Cambridge Martin feels ill-at-ease and out of place. The English upbringing given to him by his mother was incomplete and unnatural; it had been filtered through her and suffused with peculiar Russian traits. Martin feels foreign and alienated and begins to search for something that will stabilize his life. He makes friends with a classmate -- Darwin, who is the embodiment of all English customs and mannerisms. He is envious of Darwin and tries to arouse Darwin's envy. He lies impetuously about his wanderings, activities, and conquests of women; Darwin remains passive. Later, from his tutor, Martin learns that Darwin's lineage and personal history are considerably more impressive than anything Martin could have created for himself. Martin therefore strives toward a friendship with Darwin, but later ruptures it when he learns that Sonia is in love with his friend. The situation irritates Martin considerably and ultimately leads him into a fistfight with Darwin, in which he is miserably defeated. Martin continually drives himself

to find new ways to impress Sonia, but nothing works; she is not in the least impressed by his victories in tennis, soccer, or boxing. Her flirtatious and ambivalent attitude toward Martin finally drives him to his disastrous deed.

Together with this aggressive attitude toward life, Martin senses a growing love for his motherland. This inspires him to concentrate his studies on Russian literature. He feels compelled to pursue this course since he is doomed never to return to Russia. In addition, Martin also sees his immersion in Russian literature as a mode of excitement. As an exile, Martin considers himself a romantic hero, the guardian of a dying literary tradition. Martin views Russian literature as the key which will unlock all his vague and tender feelings toward Russia, and will also distinguish him from his university colleagues.

The embodiment of all things Russian at Cambridge is Martin's professor, Archibald Moon. A distinguished scholar, this man loves only Russia. His love is so great that he cannot divert any of it to a woman, and he is therefore portrayed as a homosexual. He ostentatiously exhibits his knowledge. Martin is initially captivated by Moon's knowledge and amazed that he can speak Russian better than a native. Later, however, Martin grows to despise him and excludes him from his circle of associates. The cause of Martin's objection to Moon is his attitude toward

Russia's present state of affairs. Moon feels that the birth of the Soviet state brought to an abrupt end the history, the culture, and the tradition of Russia. For him Russia no longer exists; nor would it ever again appear on the historical scene. This disposition understandably offends Martin's sensibilities since he believes that Russia and her tradition still exist; that they need only to be resurrected from the ashes left after the revolutionary holocaust. He is skeptical of and repelled by Moon's insistence that his beloved Russia is gone forever.

Subsequent chapters depict various scenes at school and at home. A wealth of secondary characters is introduced to further the plot and to shed more light on Martin's character. Of importance among these figures is the émigré writer, Bubnov. Seemingly he has achieved a degree of success in writing for Russian émigré periodicals. At first Martin admires him and aspires to be as successful as he. Later, however, he sees Bubnov for what he really is -- a man mired in the banality of hopes and dreams. In fact, the entire émigré community from which Martin has been ostracized is depicted as dreary, boring, aimless and without optimism. Only one facet of emigration holds any enchantment for Martin -- counter-revolutionary activity. This provides Martin with additional impetus to plan his illegal border crossing. Gruzinov, an acquaintance of the

Zilanov family, and the most courageous member of the counter-revolutionary forces, becomes for Martin the symbol of all that he appears to be. When Martin consults Gruzinov about his plan, however, he is ridiculed for his impulsiveness and impracticality. Martin disregards his warnings and continues to work on his plan.

While his relationship with Sonia shows no improvement, his home-life, too, disintegrates because of his mother's and uncle's marriage. This act serves as the final blow to Martin because Uncle Henry represents all that Martin despises -- a self-made, complacent, business-minded man who has forgotten that Russia even exists. Martin is further irritated by his uncle since he continuously badgers Martin about finding employment. He charges that Martin's study of literature is worthless since it did not prepare him for any worthwhile occupation. Martin does not understand why his chosen field is any less important than engineering or banking, and rationalizes that even Columbus made preliminary explorations to gather information before setting out to conquer a distant land. Martin sees his studies of Russian literature as preliminary investigations for a later exploration; he tells his uncle that he, too, plans to discover a new land.

Near the conclusion of the novel, Martin visits the Zilanovs and tries once again to win Sonia's admiration by

hinting to her that he belongs to a secret organization and that he will soon make an illegal entry into the Soviet Union. Sonia is horrified by this thought, but Martin tries only half-heartedly to convince her otherwise. Martin later develops this idea by creating an imaginary land about which he and Sonia talk whenever they meet. This place is called Zoorland and symbolically represents the Soviet Union for both Martin and Sonia, although neither admits it. They describe its strange customs and unreasonable attitudes toward human existence. Through their discussions one sees that Martin realizes the danger of his exploit. He nevertheless continues with his plans, hoping they will help him with Sonia and will steep him in the Russian cultural traditions which he so desperately seeks.

Martin leaves Sonia and travels by train through Southern France. While riding he assumes the identity of an Englishman to deceive the Frenchman traveling with him in the same compartment. Martin experiences a great thrill at being able to assume a foreign identity and to remain anonymous. Upon stopping at a small village called Moliŕnac, Martin disembarks to explore the hamlet. Soon he decides to remain there, to assume yet another name and national identity, and to take a job as a day-laborer. He views this as a trial run for his impending trip. He prides himself on being able to remain

mysteriously anonymous and to travel incognito. Surprisingly, Martin finds great satisfaction in this simple way of life, and he sees this as an indication of the success he will have in his next, real exploit. He receives a letter from Sonia in which she again rejects his proposals. Martin then decides to return to Switzerland in order to obtain a small loan from his uncle to cover his expenses.

He remains at home only a few days and then leaves for Berlin to meet Darwin. On arrival he does not immediately find Darwin, so instead he goes once more to visit Sonia. Initially, he had planned to say many things to her; but upon seeing her he realizes that nothing he can say will change the situation. She is colder and more elusive than she has ever been. Martin leaves the house and experiences a feeling of relief. The time had come. He buys several postcards since he had promised to write to his mother, who believes that he is going to remain and work in Berlin. Darwin finally returns to his hotel and discovers Martin. Martin tells him of the plan, but Darwin can only stare at him in horrified disbelief. Martin requests that Darwin send his mother a series of postcards while he is in the Soviet Union -- cards which he has already written and prepared for posting. Darwin agrees. Realizing that he is serious in his intent, Darwin finally decides to dissuade Martin from making such a foolish mistake;

but when he turns to speak to him, Martin has gone. A few minutes later the phone rings; it is Martin reminding Darwin of his promise to mail the cards. Before Darwin has a chance to address him, Martin hangs up, saying that his train is about to depart.

For a week or two Darwin carries out Martin's wishes by mailing the pre-written cards. Finally, however, he decides to ascertain where Martin has really gone, and what this game is about. Darwin still cannot believe that Martin went to the Soviet Union. He goes to visit the Zilanov family and determine what they know. Darwin and Mr. Zilanov question Sonia who confesses to knowing Martin's plans. She then breaks into a hysterical fit of grief at the loss of Martin. It seems that she did actually love Martin and was perhaps sorry that she had driven him so far. Her engagements to Darwin and later to Bubnov had both been broken, most likely because she did love Martin. He, of course, was oblivious to this and misinterpreted all she had said and done. Darwin and Mr. Zilanov realize that Martin's death or permanent imprisonment is inevitable. Darwin departs for Switzerland to tell Mrs. Edelweiss the news of her son's activities.

The final scene shows Darwin entering the chalet while the narrator describes in monotonous terms the approach of an early winter in the Swiss Alps. Darwin comes out of the house

and disappears into the nearby dark and damp woods.

Martin has disappeared forever -- a failure in life and
in art.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Vladimir Varšavskij, Podvig, Čisla, no. 7, 1933, p. 266. [Translation: "... a tiresome profusion of physiological vitality strikes one, above all, in Sirin. Everything is unusually rich and colorful, and somehow lush/rich. But beyond this overflowing, far and wide, like a flood there is emptiness, not an abyss, but flat emptiness -- emptiness like a sandbank, frightening, namely, in the absence of death.

It is as if Sirin writes not in order to name and create life, but because of some sort of physiological need. To this one says, 'very well then, and thus do birds sing.' But man is not a bird."]

² Ibid., p. 267.

³ Ibid. [Translation: "Reading Glory, I felt all the time that this was very well and talentedly written. In truth, I did not like it very much. Proust said that he usually liked those writers in whom he could recognize himself. In good writers one recognizes oneself, one's own life in the majority of the people. Reading Sirin, through the certain exoticism of his images, I still recognized the immediate perception of five senses. But beyond this nothing at all could be recognized."]

⁴ Translation mine, T.P.A. The original Russian reads: "[Èto kak by] syroj material neposredstvennykh vosprijatij žizni." Vladimir Varšavskij, p. 267.

⁵ Vladimir Varšavskij, p. 266. [Translation: "It is very difficult to write about Sirin: from one side he is a young writer, and at the same time a recognized 'classic.'

And here one does not know what to say: the book exhibits talent but a lack of seriousness - if he is a young writer; [on the other hand, the book is] a hopeless lowering of 'spirit' - if he is a classic."]

⁶ Mikhail Cetlin, "Podvig," Sovremennye zapiski, Vol. 51, 1933, pp. 458-459.

⁷ Ibid., p. 458. [Translation: "For critics an author is only a trampoline, a pretext for his own writing, but the books of Sirin are not a convenient canvas for the embroidery of critical patterns... . I think that there is too little ideology in Sirin."]

8 Ibid.

9 Translation mine, T.P.A. The original Russian reads: "... èto byl strannyj košmar, v dukhe nemeckogo 'èkspressionizma!'," Mikhail Cetlin, p. 458.

10 Mikhail Cetlin, p. 458. [Translation: "The strained, speeded-up tempo of Sirin's prose is found in the discrepancy between the too large dimensions of the book and its somewhat diffuse and scanty subject. In the novel we seek 'polyphony,' a variety of significant characters, a portrayal of a whole group of people, the social 'means,' we seek multiformity brought into unity. For this unity is needed, in a word, a clear, interesting subject or 'idea,' that can serve as a center for the work."]

11 Ibid., p. 459. [Translation: "One does not have to approach Sirin with prepared measures and look for that which is not in him; it is better to rejoice in that which is in him. The reader cannot appraise the accuracy of the author's views, nor the tenacity of his memory, nor his ability to see everything originally and in connection. Glory is fully 'written' and often is excellent. Prose for Sirin is never simply a means: it is always an end in itself, always art."]

12 "Stealing Across The Border." Review of Glory. The Times Literary Supplement, March 24, 1972, p. 325.

13 Ibid., p. 325.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Mary Borg, "Art of Memory," New Statesman, March 24, 1972, p. 398.

19 Martha Duffy, "An Old Daydream," Time, January 24, 1972, p. 58.

20 Vladimir Nabokov, Glory (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), p. xiv.

- 21 D. Keith Mano, "A Variety of Talents," National Review, March 3, 1972, p. 226.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., p. 227.
- 24 Daniel Coogan, "Glory," America, February 19, 1972, p. 185.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 V.S. Pritchett, "Genesis," The New York Review of Books, February 24, 1972, p. 12.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Vladimir Nabokov, Glory, p. xiv.
- 30 Ibid., p. xi.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., pp. ix-x.
- 33 Ibid., p. x.
- 34 Ibid., p. xii.
- 35 Ibid., p. xiii.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., p. 4.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid., p. 25.

CHAPTER SIX

LAUGHTER IN THE DARK

When Lolita finally made its authorized appearance on the American literary scene in 1958, critics were quick to condemn its unabashed treatment of sexual matters. Some reviewers even went out of their way to diminish the literary significance of the work by looking for symbols of sexual perversion, and finding many which did not exist. Defenders of moral purity in American literature were shocked by Nabokov's impudence; and on the whole, public disposition toward the novel was unfavorable. Both the author and his creation were relegated by critics to the lower ranks of contemporary literature. As fate would have it, however, the great furor raised by this scandalous work did more to escalate public interest in Lolita and Nabokov than any number of favorable reviews could have. Prior to the novel's appearance Nabokov's literary reputation had been at best only marginal; both Bend Sinister and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight had evoked little serious attention from critics. The publication of Lolita marked Nabokov's full-fledged initiation into the upper echelons of American prose writers.

After the publication of Lolita, Nabokov began to reissue those works which had been created in his Russian-writing past;

one of these was a short novel entitled Laughter in the Dark. The original Russian version was written in 1932, in Berlin, under the title Camera obskura. It appeared serially in Sovremennye zapiski in 1932, in Volumes 49-52, and also in book form in 1932 (published by Parabola of Berlin). In 1936 an English translation (authorized by Nabokov) appeared under the title Camera Obscura. It should be noted that this was the first of Nabokov's Russian novels to be translated into English. This translation, done without revisions, was made by Winifred Roy. In late 1937, however, Nabokov became dissatisfied with Camera Obscura and with the Russian original; he consequently reworked and reissued the novel in 1938, this time under the new title Laughter in the Dark. It is this version which will be used for the analysis in this chapter.

Little attention was given the novel, however, even after its re-publication twenty years later, in September, 1958 just after the appearance of Lolita in March of the same year. The few critical reviews which it did evoke were only cursory ones, and were lost, so to speak, in the wake of its predecessor. One wonders why the novel was so neglected, especially since it was very much akin to Lolita in its moral tenor; its sexual imagery was no less explicit and its theme was no less provocative. Perhaps Lolita had already conditioned critical response to this type of subject; perhaps the reading

public was not yet ready for another novel of this type; possibly the work was not widely enough distributed to evoke a public response. Whatever the reason, Laughter in the Dark has remained neglected critically despite the enthusiasm attracted by lesser works (Pnin, for one).

In comparison with Lolita (its English predecessor) and The Defense (its Russian predecessor), the novel is of much less literary stature; in fact, it is the least important work in Nabokov's Russian oeuvre. Nevertheless, it does warrant attention in this study since, as in the other novels, its central concern is the theme of art. Like King, Queen, Knave it shows the controlling hand of its creator in its parodic treatment of a stereotyped plot. Once again the nature of fiction is of prime thematic importance. Whereas in King, Queen, Knave the themes of the primacy of artifice and the independence of fiction were the chief issues, in Laughter in the Dark Nabokov goes one step further in the exposition of his themes. In King, Queen, Knave the reader is shown Nabokov presenting his literary philosophy through his fictional spokesman, Menetek-El-Pharsin; the author's prime intention is to assert his exclusiveness as the only artist of significance in his fictional world (Kurt Dreyer is only of peripheral importance). His distortion of recognizable character types and manipulation of plot are the final assertions of his involuted theme. In

Laughter in the Dark Nabokov again makes an anagrammatic appearance in the character Udo Conrad (a writer), who makes several meaningful statements concerning literature. This time, however, Nabokov is not solely concerned with flaunting his artifice or with proving of his exclusiveness because in this story there is more than one artist; there are four (at least) --- three being failures, and the fourth, Conrad.

Laughter in the Dark is therefore the story of artists who are condemned by Nabokov/Conrad to fail in their artistic endeavors either because they distort their artistic insight or because they misuse it to further their own selfish criminal machinations. As authorial spokesman, Conrad's involvement in the plot makes possible a dual configuration of the theme: his statements about the nature and purpose of (literary) art serve primarily to contradict the ideas held by the characters, therefore prefiguring (for the reader only) their ultimate ruin; and his disclosure of important story-line details to the protagonist makes obvious the formal workings of the story and the inherent authorial contrivance. Laughter in the Dark is therefore a highly convoluted work: at one level it is the story of unsuccessful artistic aspirations; at another related level it is the material proof of the importance of artifice and the independence of fiction.

As in King, Queen, Knave, the story is that of the

ruinous eternal love triangle. Albert Albinus is a prosperous, middle-aged art critic and dealer living in Berlin in the late 1920's. The protagonist of the story, he possesses a genuine "passion for art" which incites him to search for and to possess physically the most perfect art form -- the body of a beautiful woman. Prior to his marriage this obsession led him into several rather sordid love affairs, all of which served only to heighten his desires. His eventual marriage to Elizabeth, although "happy," proved to be a disappointment since she was neither exceptionally beautiful nor especially sensual; significantly she could never provide him with the erotic thrills he had hoped for in marriage. In the text she is described as "docile,"¹ "gentle,"² and possessing a love that was of the "lily variety,"³ blossoming only occasionally into flame. They have one child, Irma, who inherits her mother's passive and reserved nature. Albinus spends his evenings either at home in the company of his family and brother-in-law, Paul, or in the company of fellow art enthusiasts. His marriage is stable and respectable. But despite the fidelity he shows in his marriage, Albinus nonetheless suffers uneasiness and dissatisfaction with life. Admitting to a sincere love for his wife, he harbors a duality of feelings which confuses him greatly: the one secret and foolish craving which burns a hole in his life is his desire to experience amatory adventures with pretty

young girls. This, he feels, would restore to his life a dimension of erotic intensity missing in his marriage. Even when his wife is pregnant, Albinus dreams of coming across a beautiful girl lying asprawl on a hot lonely beach; his dreams are always cut short, however, when he fears that his wife will discover him.

Concurrent with his sexual fantasies, Albinus thinks of launching new art projects which he feels might be profitable and might take his mind off his sexual frustrations. His most recent interest is in the new popular art of motion pictures. He conceives the banal scheme (it is not really his idea) of producing cartoons which would animate the figures of a famous painting, giving the figures momentary life through an entire episode. Since he has no talent for drawing, Albinus attempts to recruit the services of the graphic artist and caricaturist, Axel Rex, to combine his own knowledge of art with the necessary skill of an animated cartoonist. The attempted collaboration proves impossible, however, because Rex is away in America drawing newspaper cartoons. Rex nevertheless replies to Albinus' inquiries, writing that he is indeed interested, but that he would require a fairly substantial fee, half payable in advance, before he could return to Germany. Albinus becomes disenchanted with his whole scheme and decides to put it off for awhile. The arrival of Rex's letter coincides with a critical

period in Albinus' life, the circumstances of which have more to do with the delay of the project than Rex's monetary demands.

Because his watch is running fast one day, Albinus is forced to waste the unexpected gift of one free hour before a business appointment. He wanders that evening into a small movie house named Argus, and there beholds the embodiment of pure beauty for which he had long been searching; her name is Margot Peters - - she is the usherette. His initial encounter is described thus in the text:

Whilst shuffling into his seat he looked up at her and saw again the limpid gleam of her eye as it chanced to catch the light and the melting outline of a cheek which looked as though it were painted by a great artist against a rich dark background.⁴

Albinus is instantly enchanted by the girl's beauty and yearns to possess her both for sexual and for aesthetic reasons. He is somewhat reluctant to make his intentions known, however, feeling a twinge of conscience and fearing discovery. Nevertheless, he returns spellbound every night for a week to the cinema, each time with firmer resolve at least to look directly at the girl if not to make an advance. Eventually Margot responds to Albinus' tentative advances and the affair begins. It is at this point in the action that Albinus receives his letter

from Rex; he is so overcome with fear and guilt that he cannot possibly give attention to his "other" project.

The affair soon becomes a wretched obsession for Albinus which, in addition to scandalizing his family, leads to the breakup of his marriage; Margot gives him what his wife is incapable of giving him -- the embodiment of pure beauty and the satisfaction of his wildest sexual fantasies. From this point until the reappearance of Rex in Germany, the plot follows its expected course. Margot plays her hand well and makes Albinus succumb to her every wish. She gets him to set her up in a richly furnished apartment, forces him to live apart from his wife and family (thus effecting legal separation), bullies him into divorce proceedings (which never actually materialize, of course), and finally pushes him into financing a motion picture in which she will have a starring role. This last demand fulfills a long-standing desire on her part; all of her previous jobs as a life model in drawing studios and the usherette job were taken by her only as the necessary steps preceding stardom. At this point Axel Rex returns from America to assist Albinus in his project. The reader first encounters him during a cast party given by Albinus and Margot. Judging by his conversation with various other guests, Rex is a cynical and cruel man. He takes great pleasure in laughing at the misfortune of others, and seeks only to be in a position where he

can direct or assist life's cruel jokes to further his own amusement. Although a talented artist, Rex perverts his talent by forging masterpieces. His career as an animated cartoonist furthers his opportunity to mock life since his caricatures stress the vicious side of life rather than its amusing and charming aspects.

Ironically, Rex turns out to be Margot's first lover; he had abandoned her exactly two years prior to the opening scene of the novel (in Margot's biography Nabokov gives a brief account of the affair, but identifies Rex only by the name Miller -- a name assumed for anonymity since at that time Rex was wealthy and famous). Seeing a good opportunity to have fun by making Albinus be the wrong side of the triangle, Rex secretly renews his relationship with Margot. Although at first hesitant because she was in love with Albinus' wealth and the opportunities afforded by his influence, Margot at last agrees to the conspiracy. From this point in the story, it is a painful account of the ruin of a good-natured but weak man by two completely selfish people. With Irma's unexpected death from pneumonia, Albinus loses all hope of reconciliation with Elizabeth when he does not return to her. Not suspecting the malicious conspiracy taking place before his very eyes, Albinus unknowingly causes his own downfall because of his perverted sense of morality and aesthetics, and his misuse of the faculty

of vision. He feels he has been morally and aesthetically blind.

While vacationing in Southern France, he learns by chance of the plotters' intentions (Conrad relates to him a conversation he overheard during a bus ride). In a fit of rage, Albinus packs his belongings and drives away with the complaining Margot at his side; Rex, their chauffeur for the trip, is left behind. Because he does not really know how to drive, and because he is so incensed by the machinations against him, Albinus has an accident in which he loses his eyesight. Margot takes the blind Albinus to Switzerland where he hopes to regain his sight with the aid of medical specialists. Because he thinks that Rex has returned to America, Albinus enjoys his convalescence thinking that Margot must certainly love him if she is still at his side. Unknown to Albinus, however, Rex joins the couple in Switzerland; he in fact occupies a room in the rented chalet and makes love nightly to Margot without Albinus even suspecting his presence. Albinus' blindness, in fact, supplies Rex with a perfect and rare opportunity to direct a real-life farce: he likes to watch Margot's comic disgust when Albinus kisses or embraces the girl. In addition, Rex himself lightly touches Albinus on occasion, and dissolves into silent laughter when the latter thinks it's a fly or Margot's caressing touch. Gradually Albinus is bled of his

fortune and is saved from further humiliation only when Paul senses foul play (inordinate amounts of cash are disappearing from the bank account in Berlin) and comes to rescue him from the clutches of Margot and Rex.

While living with his wife and Paul, Albinus resolves to kill Margot for deceiving him. One day he learns that she has returned to his old apartment and is stealing all of the paintings which he had collected during his career. Armed with a gun, Albinus makes his way across the city and confronts Margot. A struggle ensues, he loses the pistol, and is shot by her. The final scene shows him lying dead on the floor, the furniture overturned, the door wide-open, and Margot disappeared with the art treasures (all of them fakes).

Of this novel L.S. Dembo wrote: "Albinus' story remains that of a man whose obsession blinded him spiritually long before it did physically. Nabokov is only incidentally interested in the moral consequences of Albinus' behavior; his concern is with depicting a kind of sensibility."⁵ Laughter in the Dark may therefore be seen as the tale of misguided artistic passion. It is the story of three failed artists and the punishment they receive in retribution for confusing the passions appropriate to art and to life. It is an ironic commentary on art epicureanism entwined in a melodramatic plot. In his obsessive desire to possess sheer beauty in the female form, Albinus fails to

distinguish between true artistic form and its sham replica, thus misusing his artistic sensibilities and leading himself into aesthetic and social pathology. Albinus does not understand, as does his creator, that those forms which beckon man are only for seeing, not for possessing.⁶ By consciously allowing himself to envision Margot as something beautiful and artful, Albinus cannot escape the appropriate punishment for his spiritual and aesthetic sins. Albinus' predisposition toward the "beautiful" and the "happy ending" shows he equates beauty with simplicity, and reveals him as a bad artist. Albinus' artistic insensitivity is stressed throughout the novel by continual references to his lack of originality and imagination: his project of animating a famous picture is not really his own, he asserts that sound will "kill" motion pictures, he grossly misjudges the writings of a skilled poet, he never realizes that the pictures he has collected as an art connoisseur are forged fakes (one of them ironically done by Rex), and ultimately he never fully understands Margot. At its loftiest, Nabokov's theme is the degradation by lust of dignity, intellect, and artistic aspiration. Destroyed physically, morally, and spiritually both by himself and at the hands of the conspirators, Albinus becomes the object of that awful laughter in the dark of the novel's title.

Axel Rex is an artist of remarkable talent which he uses

in a perverted manner strictly to amuse himself. His ability as a caricaturist is used to cultivate cruelty and then to see the humor inherent in it. He takes special delight in making people feel ill-at-ease. For example, during the course of the cast party he has the following brief conversation with Dorianna Karenin (the leading actress in Margot's film):

(Dorianna) 'Haven't I met your sister once?'
 (Rex) 'My sister is in Heaven.'
 (Dorianna) 'Oh, I'm sorry.'
 (Rex) 'Never was born.'⁷

He mockingly chides Albinus in discussing the latter's book:

(Rex) 'I happened to read on the boat
 your excellent biography of
 Sebastiano del Piombo. Pity,
 though, you didn't quote his
 sonnets.'
 (Albinus) 'Oh, but they are very poor.'
 (Rex) 'Exactly, that's what is so charming.'⁸

Rex's vicious personality is especially apparent in his attitude toward life:

It amused him immensely to see life made to look silly, as it slid helplessly into caricature. He despised practical jokes: he liked them to happen by themselves with perchance now and then just that little touch on his part which would send the wheel running downhill. He loved to fool people; and the less trouble the process entailed, the more the joke pleased him. And at the same time this dangerous man was, with a pencil in hand, a very fine artist indeed.⁹

His view of the art of caricature further reflects this attitude:

The art of caricature, as Rex understood it, was thus based... on the contrast between cruelty on one side and credulity on the other. And if, in real life, Rex looked on without stirring a finger while a blind beggar, his stick tapping happily, was about to sit down on a freshly painted bench, he was only deriving inspiration for his next little picture.¹⁰

Surprisingly, however, Rex's harsh attitude toward life does not apply to Margot and their special relationship. In her case, even in the artistic sense, "the artist-painter in Rex triumphs over the humorist-caricaturist."¹¹ But by renewing his old ties with Margot he not only allows himself a chance for real affection, but also a chance to watch and participate in the real-life farce of Albinus' hopeless situation. When Irma dies, Rex does not sympathize but laughs at Albinus' conviction that he has reached the depths of despair. For Rex it is only the beginning of a jolly parodic comedy to be presided over by himself as the omnipotent stage manager:

Rex reflected... that... it was merely the first item in the program of a roaring comedy at which he, Rex, had reserved a place in the stage manager's private box. The stage manager of this performance was neither God nor the devil... . The stage manager whom Rex had in view was an elusive, double, triple, self-reflecting magic Proteus of a phantom, the shadow of many-

colored glass balls flying in a curve,
the ghost of a juggler on a shimmering
curtain...¹²

When Albinus loses his sight, a lucky hand dealt by fate according to Rex, the character of the drama (the triangle has since turned trapezoid) changes considerably. The cuckoldry now becomes a wild parody in the hands of Rex -- a comedy acted out by one man for the amusement and at the direction of another man. Rex's cruel antics at the chalet prefigure his ultimate destruction by Nabokov since his artistic aspiration is becoming a motiveless malignity. Nabokov allows for parody and acrid humor in art, but not for perverse, inhumane cruelty. Rex receives his initial punishment in the story when Paul arrives to rescue Albinus. Upon first entering the chalet, Paul chases Rex and beats him with a walking stick. Rex can only cower and protect his animal parts like the vicious creature that he is. Even in defeat he rationalizes his beating as just an amusing epilogue to the farce over which he had been presiding.

Margot is considerably less innocuous than Rex; her chief concern in the action is to benefit from the financial security afforded by Albinus and the opportunity he provides her with to appear in a motion picture. She is merely a bad actress and a harlot looking for someone to support her and to satisfy her desires. Throughout the novel, especially in her biography and in her personal dealings with Albinus, she is

shown to be shallow and crass. Her sole artistic desire of emulating Greta Garbo is obliterated when, after her poor acting in the film, she is horrified to see her own awkwardness and ugliness. When she agrees to assist Rex in separating Albinus from his money, and actually takes part in the grotesquerie at the chalet, she condemns herself to failure. Not only will she lose Albinus' support, but she also will be punished by the police for helping to rob him. Although in the end she escapes the scene apparently unscathed, one feels certain that her capture in the fictional future is inevitable. The final scene shows the apartment stripped of its art treasures, but filled with obvious clues to her identity:

Stage-directions for the last scene: door-- wide open. Table-- thrust away from it. Carpet-- bulging up at a table leg in a frozen wave. Chair-- lying close by dead body of man in a purplish brown suit and felt slippers. Automatic pistol not visible. It is under him. Cabinet where the miniatures had been-- empty. On the other (small) table, on which ages ago a porcelain ballet-dancer stood (later transferred to another room) lies a woman's glove, black outside, white inside. By the striped sofa stands a smart little trunk, with a colored label still adhering to it: "Rouginard, Hotel Britannia."

The door leading from the hall to the landing is wide open, too.¹³

Some critics are greatly confused by the punishment Rex

receives in the story, believing that he is a spokesman for Nabokov. His individuality and creative character almost dictate this assumption. The fact is, however, that Rex is the opposite in nature to Nabokov simply because of his cruel application of art. Secondary characters evince the lack of moral depth and complexity in all three failed artists, but especially in Rex. The most fascinating secondary character in the novel is Udo Conrad, the exiled writer. It is his art and opinions which directly contradict those of Rex and coincide with those of Nabokov.¹⁴ Albinus first evokes his name (and displays his ignorance of literary art) at the cast party:

'... what do you think of Udo Conrad? It would seem to me that he is that type of author with exquisite vision and a divine style which might please you, Herr Rex, and that if he isn't a great writer it is because -- and here, Herr Baum, I am with you -- he has a contempt for social problems which in this age of social upheavals, is disgraceful and, let me add, sinful.¹⁵

Later in a discussion of literature with Albinus, Conrad makes the following remarks:

'Well, when a literature subsists almost exclusively on Life and Lives, it means it is dying. And I don't think much of Freudian novels or novels about the quiet countryside. You may argue that it is not literature in the mass that matters, but the two or three real writers who stand aloof, unnoticed by their grave,

pompous contemporaries. All the same it is rather trying sometimes. It makes me wild to see the books that are being taken seriously.¹⁶

Without question Conrad is Nabokov thinly disguised. His Memoirs of a Forgetful Man is Nabokov's Speak, Memory, and The Vanishing Trick ("... about the old conjuror who spirited himself away at his farewell performance.") is most certainly Invitation to a Beheading (to be discussed later in Chapter Eight). Furthermore, Albinus' remarks about the authorial techniques of Conrad's writings reproduce the two most frequent judgments made about Nabokov's fiction -- "exquisite vision" and "divine style."¹⁷

Nabokov's concern with the author's relationship to his novel, and his attempt to make it a conscious part of the literary experience were not new concepts when he wrote Camera obskura. As discussed in Chapter Three, Nabokov and his wife made several "visits of inspection" in the final two chapters of King, Queen, Knave. In King, Queen, Knave, the conjuror-landlord, Menetek-El-Pharsin, voices the fictional rights of an author, thus presaging the novel's denouement; and in Laughter in the Dark, Conrad performs the same type of task. He solves for Nabokov the technical problem of having Albinus discover that he is being betrayed by Margot and Rex. The problem is this: since only Margot and Rex know of their plot, and are not about

to turn themselves in, only the author can let Albinus in on the secret. So, through Conrad, Nabokov imparts the crucial knowledge to the hero, and the plot reaches its conclusion, naturally and simply.¹⁸ In doing this Nabokov not only exposes the formal workings of the novel, but also proclaims his control over the theme and the characters. Thus the theme of art in this novel manifests itself both in the author's pronouncements on the nature and purpose of art, and in the disclosure of artifice as an integral part of the literary experience.

The opening words of the novel reveal Nabokov's intention of manipulating plot and characters:

Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.

This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound to moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome.¹⁹

In other words, Nabokov plans to parody a well-known literary formula to redirect his reader's attention to the "telling." Unlike King, Queen, Knave, Nabokov distorts the conventional plot by lending a dual configuration to the eternal triangle:

Rex's appearance and the renewal of his relationship with Margot make Albinus the unsuspecting victim of his own scheming, adulterous activity. Aside from this unexpected development in the action, the reader's expectations about characterization are generally met. Albinus is shown ripe for adultery; Elizabeth is the epitome of the passive and colorless wife who frustrates her husband sexually and thus drives him out of "the nest"; Paul, Albinus' rescuer, is an example of virtue and respectability; Margot assumes the recognizable role of the scheming seductress. She is given the attributes of a serpent throughout (see pp. 44, 45, 63, 89). She is bent on getting her lover's money and forcing him to separate from and divorce his wife; and Rex is shown as having all of the recognizable attributes of a Hollywood opportunist -- he is a scheming, deceitful confidence man. His career as a caricaturist makes him the agent of authorial fate in the story, and thus he challenges the established cliché plot. What does frustrate the reader's expectations in these characterizations is the deceptive depth Nabokov lends to their motivations despite his obvious manipulation; they are completely believable despite their parodic nature.

In addition to distorting the plot and giving unusual depth to the characters, thus redirecting the reader's attention to the "telling," Nabokov also employs extensively the technique

of foreshadowing to make known his authorial control. The novel is full of instances which foretell Albinus' fate. The two scenes which Albinus sees in his visits to the movie forebode his accident, his loss of sight, and his death at Margot's hand:

... a girl was receding among tumbled furniture before a masked man with a gun.²⁰

and:

A car was spinning down a smooth road with hairpin turns between cliffs and abyss.²¹

He refuses to see that these scenes are the final episodes of his own life. He unconsciously begins the "story" by visiting the theatre and maintaining the unsavory liaison with Margot. Albinus' unsuccessful affair with Margot is foreshadowed early in the story by the narrator's remarks concerning the protagonist's former failures in romance, all for the sake of possessing beauty:

...there had been hundreds of girls of whom he had dreamed... they had just slid past him, leaving for a day or two that hopeless sense of loss which makes beauty what it is: a distant lone tree against golden heavens; ripples of light on the inner curve of bridge; a thing quite impossible to capture.²²

The "beauty" and possession of Margot are equally elusive:

...she passed to and fro, quite near to him several times; but he turned away because it hurt to look and because he could not help remembering how many times beauty -- or what he called beauty -- had passed him by and vanished.²³

Margot's basically shameless character is continually emphasized throughout the early chapters of the book; her life is full of illicit sexual incidents which clearly indicate the future course of her affair with Albinus. The narrator suggests her eventual return to Rex (alias Miller):

But no matter how tender and thoughtful he was in his lovemaking, she knew, all along, that for her it would always be love minus something, whereas the least touch of her first lover had always been a sample of everything.²⁴

The hopelessness and banality of Albinus' art projects are strongly emphasized throughout the novel (the narrator says that he is not especially "bright").²⁵ The project of animating pictures is not his own, but was suggested "by a phrase in Conrad."²⁶ Nevertheless Albinus makes it his own idea "by liking it, by playing with it, letting it grow upon him,"²⁷ thus stressing his lack of imagination. The art treasures carried off by Margot at the novel's conclusion are all fakes, yet Albinus never realizes this, which stresses his lack of artistic

sensitivity. Even at the close of the novel, just before discovering the conspiracy against him, Albinus remains not only physically blind but also spiritually blind to the inane artistic passion of wanting to possess Margot. The reader of course realizes from the early part of the novel that all Albinus' hopes and efforts will be in vain.

Aside from foreshadowing, Nabokov employs a variety of other narrative techniques, all in emphasizing the "telling": biographical details to further the plausibility of motivation, interior monologue, symbolism, a shifting point of view in narrative voice, and the fragmentation of chapters and scenes to allow the reader to view concurrently incisive moments in the plot occurring in different locales. Nabokov's verbal dexterity is keenly evidenced in his brief but strikingly concise account of Albinus' honeymoon:

The chestnuts were in full bloom. A much treasured cigarette case was lost in a forgotten garden. One of the waiters could speak seven languages. Elizabeth proved to have a tender little scar -- the result of appendicitis.²⁸

As was the case with King, Queen, Knave, Nabokov's emphasis on the "telling" is perhaps nowhere more evident than in a comparison of the original Russian text with the revised English version. In all, the changes effected in translating Camera obskura were more far-ranging than in Despair (to be

discussed in Chapter Seven), and to about the same degree as in King, Queen, Knave. Motivation is made more plausible; language is carefully selected; dialogue is contracted, expanded, or deleted; the sequence of events is changed (although it remains the same story); characters are renamed; more narrative description is added; narratorial remarks and parenthetical statements abound; and interior monologue is more effectively used. In all, Laughter in the Dark is considerably more contrived, less dispersed, and shows greater concentration on Albinus than does Camera obskura.²⁶

An example of the many instances when passages which occurred in the Russian text were not carried over into the English version is the opening scene. In Camera obskura Rex (named Robert Horn) is a cartoonist who conceives the idea of animating the comic adventures of a cartoon figure named "Cheapy." This scheme results in movie cartoons which make Rex/Horn wealthy and famous, and which figure throughout the novel. Laughter in the Dark, as was suggested, opens with a statement that the novel is more Albinus' story and not Rex's/Horn's. In Camera obskura the connection between Rex/Horn and Albinus/Kretschmar (Kretschmar being used in the Russian text) is established through a joint association with a film company. In Laughter in the Dark the "Cheapy" is done away with and the Albinus-Rex connection is made more ironic and coincidental.³⁰

The nature of interpolated dialogue is exemplified by the following citation:

'Do be reasonable,' said Kretschmar conciliatorily. 'Just think, I do everything you want ... the film, for example ... please, Magda, please, my dear ...'31

This becomes the following in Laughter in the Dark:

'Do be reasonable,' said Albinus coaxingly. 'I do everything you ask. You know quite well pussy ...' He had gradually got together quite a little menagerie of pet names.³²

Aside from technical alterations, the revised version of the story indicates that characterizations underwent a change. In Laughter in the Dark Albinus' personal background is more fully developed: he is given, for example, a history of sordid affairs prior to his marriage which he did not have in Camera obskura;³³ thus his adulterous act is made to seem more plausible. Margot's character is "softened" in the newer version of the story; before she was not only morally repulsive, but physically disgusting as well. Rex remains the same superficial and unattractive character as in the Russian text, although it seems that his sardonic and cynical side is more fully developed in the later edition. Udo Conrad (Dietrich von Zegelkranz in the Russian variant) is all but written out of the plot in the

revision. Before, he was more important to the development of the story; in Laughter in the Dark he functions primarily as Nabokov's spokesman and internal agent to effect the dénouement.

One other aspect of the narrative technique employed by Nabokov is the cinematographic mode in which the story is told. Dabney Stuart has written a very interesting and convincing article discussing Nabokov's use of this mode.³⁴ She believes that this modus operandi is widely used by Nabokov in structuring his novels and that their meaning depends pervasively on the explicit and successful execution of the technique. She sees the effect and intention of this narrative pattern as two-fold: (1) "continually to remind the reader, through the form of the book that he is reading, that he is reading a book,"³⁵ and (2) "to embed in the form of the book itself the possibilities of parody that are more immediately obvious in particular details, character, gestures, and diction."³⁶ She continues by writing that the major implication derived from the use of this technique is that fiction is basically parody, despite the author's concern for verisimilitude; and that the best fiction is that which most consciously acknowledges its own parodic nature. Stuart continues by claiming that the best fiction has as its object to keep the reader at a substantial distance from both the characters and the book in which they appear. This

technique results in giving the reader an opportunity to witness clearly the "game of composition," and to remind him that recognition of authorial manipulation is an integral part of the literary experience imparted by reading.

Stuart then proceeds to give a detailed analysis of the novel's first three chapters, pointing out the use of the cinematographic mode in narration as it is supported by dialogue, parenthetical remarks, and the arrangement of scenes. She then carries her interpretation through the book, stopping only occasionally to cite salient bits of evidence in support of her theory. She concludes that Conrad's appearance as authorial spokesman performs "a parodic function, directing the overall parody of the novel toward itself."³⁷ The notion that the whole work is encapsulated in a cinema-theatrical frame contrived by the author is, in Stuart's opinion, evident in the last scene; the ending closely parallels Menetek-El-Pharsin's declaration in King, Queen, Knave of authorial control.

In view of the above remarks, one may only conclude that despite the neglect shown this novel, the integration of plot and the themes of misguided aesthetic passions and overt authorial control make Laughter in the Dark a sound example of Nabokov's presentation of the theme of art in his Russian fiction.

FOOTNOTES

1 Vladimir Nabokov, Laughter in the Dark (New York: Berkeley Corporation, 1969), p. 6.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 12.

5 L.S. Dembo, "Vladimir Nabokov, An Introduction," Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 6.

6 Julian Moynahan, Vladimir Nabokov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 30.

7 Nabokov, Laughter, p. 71.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 78.

10 Ibid., p. 79.

11 Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 162.

12 Nabokov, Laughter, pp. 100-101.

13 Ibid., pp. 159-160.

14 Field, op. cit., pp. 164-165.

15 Nabokov, Laughter, p. 73.

16 Ibid., p. 118.

17 Dabney Stuart, "Laughter in the Dark: dimensions of parody," Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 92.

- 18 Ibid., p. 93.
- 19 Nabokov, Laughter, p. 5.
- 20 Ibid., p. 12.
- 21 Ibid., p. 13.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
- 23 Ibid., p. 13.
- 24 Ibid., p. 64.
- 25 Ibid., p. 5.
- 26 Ibid. [The reference is to the fictional writer, Udo Conrad, who appears briefly in the novel.]
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid., p. 10.
- 29 Stephen Jan Parker, "Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin as Teacher: The Russian Novels (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1969), pp. 105-106.
- 30 Ibid., p. 107.
- 31 As quoted by Parker, op. cit., p. 111.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Field, op. cit., p. 161.
- 34 Dabney Stuart, op. cit., pp. 72-94.
- 35 Ibid., p. 73.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid., p. 93.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DESPAIR

The sixth Russian novel, Despair, was written in 1932 and appeared serially in Volumes 54-56 of Sovremennye zapiski in 1934. It was published in book form in 1936 by Petropolis of Berlin. Nabokov translated the novel into English in 1937 and published it the same year in England. The translation was made without revisions. Unfortunately for literary scholarship, only a few volumes of this translation exist today since the original stock was destroyed during an air attack in the Second World War. Nabokov himself has a copy, and he thinks that a few more are still to be discovered in large libraries. The destruction of these books did not greatly distress Nabokov since the novel was selling poorly despite the publisher's attempts to make it widely available. As a result of the book's original failure in English, Nabokov did not make a subsequent translation until 1965. This event was prompted by the success of his first English novels and the great enthusiasm shown for the English versions of some of his other Russian writings. At that time, instead of simply transposing Despair into English as he had done with Invitation to a Beheading, The Gift (both of which will be discussed in subsequent chapters), and The Defense,

Nabokov chose to revise and enlarge slightly the text for its new publication. The changes effected make the novel a polished manifestation of Nabokov's original artistic vision. The altered and expanded text facilitates a more thorough analysis of the novel's thematic concern; and since the "telling" of the story is of considerable importance in this novel, as it is to a greater or lesser degree in all of Nabokov's works, the rephrased dialogue and narration are of noteworthy significance. Since the 1965 translation is based on the 1937 translation and the original Russian version, Nabokov considers those scholars fortunate who have the opportunity to compare the three texts; by determining the thematic and lexical embellishments in the new text, one can ascertain the most consequential portions of the novel. For those interested in the specific textual alterations, Carl R. Proffer has written a unique study dealing with these changes.¹ In addition to noting the numerous but relatively minor adjustments in sound structure, puns, syntax, similes, and metaphors, Proffer also discusses the significant interpolations affecting the imagery, allusions, and illusions in the novel. As Proffer suggests, these changes are instructive since they reveal important facets of the protagonist-narrator's character and consequently his story. The revisions and their importance will be briefly discussed later in this chapter.

As in the previously discussed novels, the thematic focal point in Despair is the portrayal of a protagonist immersed in the artistic fulfillment of an obsessing goal. Whereas in the other novels this artistic activity is usually obscured by allegory, in Despair the image of the artist and his aesthetic preoccupation are openly presented. Hermann, the hero, is a self-styled criminal who undertakes the planning and execution of what he believes will be a perfect crime in order to satisfy his creative impulses. As the story opens, however, the crime's motivation appears at first to be something entirely different. A floundering chocolate salesman, Hermann apparently conceives his misdeed in order to save himself from bankruptcy by illegally collecting his life insurance. While on a business trip to Prague, he is struck by his resemblance to a vagrant, Felix, whom he comes upon during a casual stroll through the city. Seeing an opportunity to avert financial disaster, Hermann plots to murder Felix, convinced that if he dresses the corpse in his own clothes the world will think that he himself has been killed. His wife could then collect the insurance and meet him abroad at a predetermined location. By assuming the unknown vagrant's identity, Hermann and his wife could then "remarry" and spend the rest of their lives in anonymous security. In initiating his plan, Hermann establishes a relationship with Felix on the pretext that he (Hermann) might

be able to find some work for him at some future date. Plans are made so that the two men will remain in contact with each other through correspondence. After this point in the narration it becomes increasingly clear that Hermann is motivated to commit murder not so much for the sake of gain, but more for the sake of the experience itself. He wants to see if he can escape undetected. Naturally he does not want to leave behind any clues which would arouse suspicion, but the overly meticulous preparations he makes for the skillful and unblemished execution of his crime indicate that he views the whole incident as an act of art. A very distinct hint of this being the true motive is made in the novel's opening paragraph when Hermann remarks:

I should have compared the breaker of the law... with a poet or a stage performer.²

Later in the recounting he partially dismisses the motive of gain when he addresses the reader:

But I give you my word, gentlemen, my word of honor: not mercenary greed, not merely that, not merely the desire to improve my position...³

After all preparations are made, the two men once again meet outside a small town in Southern Germany. By pretending

to be an actor in search of a double to work with him in his films, Hermann tricks Felix into donning his (Hermann's) clothes and then shoots him. He then puts on the dead man's discarded rags and replaces his own credentials with Felix's, thus assuming the victim's name and identity. After that he goes to a small village in Southern France to await further developments in the plan. To pass the time while awaiting the arrival of his wife with the money, Hermann eagerly looks through the daily newspapers for an account of his crime. He fully expects to find that the police are baffled and frustrated by the complete absence of any incriminating clues. To his great horror and disbelief, however, he learns he is being sought for the shooting of some tramp. The authorities have established him as the killer because of the credentials found on the body. The only facet of the deed which puzzles the police is why Hermann should dress his victim in his clothing and leave behind his identification papers. What has happened is that Felix did not in any way resemble Hermann. Hermann of course cannot believe that Felix was not his exact double and therefore sees the reports as some sort of trick to put him off his guard. He finally despairs at the authority's refusal to see him as the victim and scornfully likens the police to literary critics:

In getting into their heads that it was not my corpse, they behaved just as a literary critic does, whomat the mere sight of a book by an author who he does not favor, makes up his mind that the book is worthless and often proceeds to build whatever he wants to build, on the basis of that first gratuitous assumption.⁴

Although believing in the perfection of his crime, Hermann realizes that his capture is imminent; he therefore decides to record the planning and execution of the murder. The novel which he writes while awaiting arrest is the one we read, Despair. And although he claims to feel no remorse as a misjudged artist, the account he writes is not just a record of his act, but more importantly a vain justification of its inherent faultlessness:

I maintain that in the planning and execution of the whole thing the limit of skill was attained; that its perfect finish was, in a sense, inevitable; that all came together, regardless of my will, by means of creative intuition. And so, in order to obtain recognition, to justify and save the offspring of my brain, to explain to the world all the depth of my masterpiece, did I devise the writing of the present tale.⁵

The final two chapters describe events which take place as Hermann is describing them. Before assigning a title to the work or writing the final few paragraphs, Hermann decides to reread what he has already written. In so doing he discovers

the piece of evidence which incriminates him: Felix's walking stick, which has his name and address carved on it, was left behind at the scene of the crime. From this point in the narration, the account lapses into the form of a diary as Hermann goes totally insane. He entitles his work Despair. The final scene, appropriately dated April 1st, shows Hermann crushed by his mad solipsism and hopelessly entangled in his own nets of insanity:

Not the fact of their finding his stick
and so discovering our common name,...
but the thought that the whole of my
masterpiece, which I had devised and
worked out with such minute care, was
now destroyed intrinsically, was turned
into a little heap of mold, by reason of
the mistake I had committed.⁶

He realizes that even if the police had mistaken the corpse for his, they still would have captured him thinking that he was Felix. This fact disgraces him most...

For ... [his] ... whole construction had
been based upon just the impossibility
of a blunder, and now it appeared that a
blunder there had been -- and of the very
grossest, drollest, tritest nature.⁷

Hermann's immediate reaction is to believe that all he experiences is a bad dream. With reality closing in around him he makes one final frenzied attempt to justify the senselessness of his

unbelievable circumstances: he imposes a subjective, artistic illusion upon the surrounding world by telling the crowd that has gathered to watch his arrest that the whole business is simply a "getaway scene" in a movie. He tells them that the police, too, are actors; and instructs the crowd to participate in the scene by making possible his planned escape. When he leaves the building he is of course captured.

Thus the theme of art through the allegory of crime is seen as the most obvious interpretation of Despair. A great many critics, both past and contemporary, have not looked beyond this explanation, primarily because the protagonist's actions do coincide with the preconceived notion of Nabokov's major concern in writing -- the portrayal of a person immersed in the artistic fulfillment of some activity, be it chess, writing, murder or simply the recollection of one's past. When the novel first appeared, Vladimir Weidlé wrote the following in the Parisian almanac Krug (The Circle):

Really, there is no point in writing reviews about Despair. Everyone who has not yet lost interest in Russian literature has read this novel or will read it. Everyone who has not yet lost his sensitivity to literary innovation and freshness in Russian prose will acknowledge the enormous giftedness of its author.⁸

Weidlé was thus one of the first émigré critics to see Nabokov as something more than a superficial virtuoso of technique. He saw in Despair the constant motif of creativity, which he felt

was central to all of Nabokov's works. He saw that the protagonists were symbols of artists who had created their own world, their own reality; and that when they failed in their artistic endeavors, they suffered despair and frustration. According to Weidlé, this was the case with Hermann in Despair:

The theme of Sirin's art is art itself; this is the first thing that must be said about him.... The urge to transfer himself into his double, to turn the reality surrounding the narrator inside out, to achieve something like a frustrated suicide by means of murder, and finally the failure of the whole plan, the detection behind all the fictions and apparitions, behind the crumbling reality and the destroyed dream of the bare, trembling spiritual protoplasm which is condemned to death -- does not all of this bespeak an intricate allegory behind which is concealed not the despair of a murderer scheming for money, but the despair of an artist incapable of believing in the object of his art? This despair constitutes the basic motif of the best things created by Sirin. It puts him on a level with the most significant [artists] in contemporary European literature, and moreover gives him a place occupied by no one else in Russian literature.⁹

Later, in 1937, Vladislav Khodasevič confirmed Weidlé's interpretation by stating that all of Nabokov's fiction was concerned solely with the theme of art. In writing generally about Nabokov's art and specifically about Despair, Khodasevič remarked:

Here ... [in Despair] are shown the sufferings of a genuine, self-critical artist. He

perishes because of a single mistake,
 because of a single slip allowed in
 a work which devoured all of his
 creative ability. In the process of
 creation he allowed for the possibility
 that the public, humanity, might not be
 able to understand and value his creation
 -- and he was ready to suffer proudly from
 lack of recognition. His despair is
 brought about by the fact that he himself
 turns out to be guilty of his downfall,
 because he is only a man of talent and
 not of genius.¹⁰

Both Weidlé's and Khodasevič's interpretations are certainly justifiable within the context of Nabokov's obvious literary intentions; the intended aesthetic approach to the crime is made even more strikingly evident by Hermann's continual comparison of his wrongdoing with an act of profound artistic genius. The obvious interpretation gains further credibility by the fact that the basis for Hermann's obsession is one which is common to most of Nabokov's protagonists. Despite claims that he is satisfied with his smug middle-class way of life, one senses that Hermann feels hopelessly mired in banal mediocrity. And like many of Nabokov's Russian émigré heroes who suffer similar feelings, Hermann is not satisfied with the material benefits of his achievements; he longs to find an outlet for his creative urge and gain recognition of his creative genius from a world which covets only meretricious art. He views the perpetration of a perfect crime as the one

truly creative endeavor of his life. This accomplishment, he feels, will bring him recognition and will firmly establish his individual identity above the philistinistic masses. When this fails, for reasons which he only imagines, he writes Despair as a defiant testament illustrating his creative genius.

Despite the apparent simplicity of this tale, Despair is in actuality one of Nabokov's most intricate works. The use of a traditional literary formula in Nabokov's writings usually implies a much deeper vision and intent than is conveyed by a cursory reading of the text. This fact becomes clear when, in the light of the interpretation offered, one sees that the many narratorial asides, certain dialogue, and reports of select incidents, ideas, or feelings do not coincide with the apparent purpose of the novel. The many allusions to Puškin, Gogol', and in particular Dostoevskij, as well as Hermann's remarks about the literary brilliance of his novel, seem to indicate that he is more concerned with the artistic expression of his deed than with a justification of the crime's failure. For the reader, the essence of Hermann's purpose abruptly changes near the novel's conclusion, when one learns that Felix was not Hermann's double. Since their physical similarity has been the underlying motivation for all that was said and done, the reader suddenly suspects the veracity of all that Hermann has related. With the final scenes and the

revelation of Hermann's insanity, the reader becomes convinced that the entire account of the murder has to be reexamined to ascertain the true motive of the crime. In so doing one hopes also to determine Nabokov's intended thematic concern. As Nabokov himself once said about the contrived complexity of his novels:

'I reread my books rarely, and then only for the utilitarian purpose of controlling a translation or checking a new edition; but when I do go through them again, what pleases me most is the wayside murmur of this or that hidden theme.'¹¹

The basic problem confronting the reader upon completion of the novel is the reassessment of Hermann's motive. Throughout the first half of the novel Hermann deceives the reader, as he does his wife, into believing that the crime is committed for the sake of gain. He continually calls attention to the anxiety and despair he suffers because his business is failing. And despite the presence of clues in earlier chapters contradicting this motive, only in Chapter Seven does he blatantly suggest another reason for his misdeed when he compares his crime with art. Believing that "the invention of art... [contains] ... far more intrinsical truths than life's reality,"¹² Hermann reflects on the surprise most readers would have experienced if Conan Doyle had completed his Sherlock Holmes epic by writing one more episode in which the murderer was none other than the chronicler of the tale, Dr. Watson. Hermann thrills

at the idea of such deception in literature. As a result, he scorns all great novelists who wrote of criminals, but who never committed a crime, and he has only contempt for criminals who never read the great crime novelists; "what are they in comparison with ... [him?]"¹³ Hermann is saying here that he is deserving of laudatory recognition, since, by virtue of his great knowledge of literature and his perfect planning and execution of a murder, he is an artist and a criminal of inventive genius. In Chapter Ten he finally dismisses the motive of financial gain when he muses:

I know, I know: it is a bad mistake from the novelist's point of view that in the whole course of my tale there is -- as far as I remember -- so very little attention devoted to what seems to have been my leading motive: greed of gain. How does it come that I am so reticent and vague about the purpose I pursue in arranging to have a dead double? But here I am assailed by odd doubts: was I really so very, very much bent upon making profit and did it really seem to me so desirable, that rather equivocal sum ..., or was it the other way round and remembrance, writing for me, could not ... act otherwise and attach any special importance to a talk in Orlovius's study ...?¹⁴

Thus the motive shifts from that of greed to that of crime for art's sake. Thereby he dismisses one motive and suggests another in discussing the literary presentation of the crime. This makes the search for the real reason for the crime take a deceptive, involuted turn. In addition to committing the

crime for artistic reasons, he also did it in order to have something to write about -- a reason to practice his literary art. Chapter One had in fact opened with a statement which indicates this as the true motive:

If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness ... not only should I have refrained from describing certain recent events, but there would have been nothing to describe, for, gentle reader, nothing at all would have happened.¹⁵

With this double motive in mind, the entire complexion and purpose of the novel changes. Hermann can no longer be viewed solely as a fictional artist having gone astray; instead, he becomes by example of his novel, a spokesman and artificer in lieu of his creator. Everything he says and writes reflects Nabokov's own ideas and attitude toward art and its purpose. Thus, Despair is a convoluted work of art which spirals in on itself to show how it was created. The reader is given numerous hints about this intent in the novel when Hermann continually comments that all his life he had desired to be a writer. In addition, the account is full of examples by which Hermann boastfully presents his literary credentials: false starts, word-play, varying narrative approaches, and the derisive parody of well-known writers. He considers himself an expert in literature and offers his wife as a contrastive

example of one who knows nothing about literary art. In thus drawing attention to his literary expertise, Hermann, as Nabokov's spokesman, assigns primary emphasis to the "telling" of his tale. He rejects the notion of using literature to express ideas. Nabokov himself voices this sentiment in the foreword of the novel when he dismisses a Freudian interpretation by saying that any hints which seem to indicate the validity of such an approach are only "derisive mirages organized by ... [his] agents."¹⁶ His agent is, of course, Hermann. He equally frustrates the sociological approach by remarking that the novel has "no social comment to make, no messages to bring in its teeth. It does not uplift the spiritual organ of man, nor does it show humanity the right exit."¹⁷ Felix expresses Nabokov's attitude toward philosophic literature when he says: "... philosophic speculation is the invention of the rich. Down with it."¹⁸ Hermann's and Nabokov's novel is the story of a writer and the act of writing. In asserting the primacy of art created for art's sake alone, Hermann naturally exhibits a particular dislike of writers such as Dostoevskij, who treat criminal plots from a psychological point of view. In sharing with his creator a fondness for words, Hermann maintains that the "how" or the "telling" rather than the "what" is the magical element of any story:

The mistake of my innumerable forerunners

consisted of their laying principal stress upon the act itself and in their attaching more importance to a subsequent removal of all traces, than to the most natural way of leading up to that same act which is but really a link in the chain, one detail, one line in the book, and must be logically derived from all previous matter; such being the nature of every art.¹⁹

As previously suggested, a distinct feature of Hermann's literary technique is parody. During the entire account Hermann consciously manipulates his narration: first, to show his knowledge of writing, and second, to parody and unmask all those literary commonplaces which he posits and rejects. A prime example of this procedure occurs at the beginning of Chapter Three, when Hermann proposes and ultimately rejects three alternative openings to the chapter. He takes great pride in his ability to wield a variety of literary devices; ever since childhood he has made a hobby of playing with literature:

And speaking of literature, there is not a thing about it that I do not know. It has always been quite a hobby of mine. As a child ... I composed abstruse verse and elaborate stories, with dreadful finality and without any reason whatever lampooning acquaintances of my family.²⁰

In addition to parodying general literary traditions of form, Hermann also parodies commonplace themes; in particular, he directs his attack at the psychological account of

Raskol'nikov's crime in Dostoevskij's Crime and Punishment.

If one concedes that Hermann voices the views of his creator, then his aversion to Dostoevskij's writings has two principal bases. First, Hermann feels that Dostoevskij was primarily a writer of ideas -- an approach to literature which Hermann wholeheartedly disdains. As an artist who believes that art should be for art's sake, he feels that the philosophic writings of Dostoevskij would have no true artistic merit if they were voided of their ideas, for then nothing would remain. The manner in which a writer presents his tale is the true essence of literary art. Second, according to Nabokov's stated attitude toward reality -- that it is a wholly subjective affair, he cannot possibly accept Dostoevskij's belief in a system which limits individual perception and freedom of choice and action. Both writers are concerned with the question of individual freedom, but whereas Dostoevskij proposes a religious guiding influence, Nabokov admits of no restriction to individual freedom. Hermann destroys himself because his attempt at a self-reproduction is based on the erroneous assumption that he totally perceives his own reality and is therefore capable of recreating himself in a double.²¹ Thus Hermann's choice of crime as the necessary impetus for the writing of his novel is seen as his attempt, through parody, to write a crime novel without all of the psychological trappings of his

predecessors. Art is the motivation, and not an ill-conceived philosophy. Near the end of the novel, he parodies Raskol'nikov's philosophic rationale for his crime when he reflects:

Let us suppose, I kill an ape. Nobody touches me. Suppose it is a particularly clever ape. Nobody touches me. Suppose it is a new ape -- a hairless, speaking species. Nobody touches me. By ascending these subtle steps circumspectly, I may climb up to Leibnitz and Shakespeare and kill them, and nobody will touch me, as it is impossible to say where the border was crossed.²²

But despite Hermann's reworking of Raskol'nikov's superman theory, his own crime has as its basis an elaborate, mock-intellectual motivation: the justification of murder for art's sake. He further justifies his immoral deed in his own disbelief in God. He writes:

... the fairy tale about him is not really mine, it belongs to strangers, to all men; it is soaked through by the evil-smelling effluvia of millions of other souls that have spun about a little under the sun and then burst; it swarms with primordial fears; there echoes in it a confused choir of numberless voices striving to drown one another.... If I am not master of my life, not sultan of my own being, then no man's logic and no man's ecstatic fits may force me to find less silly my impossible silly position: that of God's slave.²³

Thus Hermann opposes Dostoevskij's mystic panacea with his own declaration that he cannot believe in God. One therefore

sees that Hermann's crime, and more importantly, his artistic drive, are directed at establishing his uniqueness. He cannot accept any belief that is the property of all mankind and which denies him the undivided control over his own life. Raskol'nikov too was a non-believer, but whereas the epilogue of Crime and Punishment suggests Raskol'nikov's eventual spiritual regeneration, no such possibility is in the offing for Hermann. He has desecrated his art by ignoring the reality from which it has sprung. One therefore understands more fully the parodic statements which Hermann makes in reference to Dostoevskij's use of the Doppelgänger theme, the confessional tone of Notes from the Underground, and the psychological approach in his Crime and Punishment. One salient example illustrates all other instances. While sitting in a tavern attempting to gain Felix's unwitting help in the plan, Hermann suddenly pauses to remark:

There is something a shade too literary about that talk of ours, smacking of thumb-screw conversations in those stage taverns where Dostoevsky is at home; a little more of it and we should hear that sibilant whisper of false humility, that catch in the breath, those repetitions of incantatory adverbs -- and then all the rest of it would come, the mystical trimming dear to that famous writer of Russian thrillers.²⁴

As Stephen Jan Parker has suggested, the true complexity of Despair does not lie in an overly obscured and allegorical presentation of the theme, but instead in the "telling" of

the tale. This complexity is accomplished by Nabokov's use of the first person point of view "because it places the reader one step further from the novel's events. It removes the ambiguity of the relation between authorial and narratorial voice in the third person narrative, but adds the more difficult problem of determining the nature and the reliability of the "I" narrator from whose point of view the work is presented."²⁵ Therefore, since every detail reflects the narrator's intent and purpose, it is necessary first to assess the character of the narrator and determine his purpose before one can evaluate what is being said. The task is further complicated by the fact that, for the most part, events are recalled wholly through memory, thus adding the factor of temporal complexity to the veracity of the account. In Hermann's case, his memory is irrational and therefore confuses the account. At his first meeting with Felix he states this fact:

During the following night my rational memory did not cease examining such minute flaws, whereas with the irrational memory of my senses I kept seeing, despite myself, my own self, in the sorry disguise of a tramp.²⁶

The narrator is thus seen looking back, selecting and arranging past moments in time while already aware of the story's outcome up to the present moment in time; selection is therefore conscious and purposeful. Near the end of the novel, when

Hermann is recounting incidents which are actually taking place as he records them, he is no longer selective and purposeful in his account. At this point in the novel, contrivance of all that was previously conveyed becomes readily apparent to the reader. It is at this point that one realizes the necessity of doubling back through the text to redetermine the basis for Hermann's obsessive desire to commit a crime and describe it in writing.

The reader's task is further complicated by the untrustworthiness of the narrator, both in his deliberate lying and in his uncontrollable insanity. In the first chapter of the novel, after introducing some biographical information about his family, Hermann pauses in the telling and remarks:

A slight digression: that bit about my mother was a deliberate lie. ... I could, of course, have crossed it out, but I purposely leave it there as a sample of one of my most essential traits: my light-hearted, inspired lying.²⁷

Thus the reader is cautioned to be careful of what to believe when Hermann narrates, especially since when another character speaks, one sees that he usually contradicts the narrator. Thus, in ironically discussing the dissimilarity of all human faces, Hermann's nephew, Ardalion, poignantly remarks:

You forgot, my good man, that what the artist perceives is, primarily, the difference between things. It is the vulgar who note their resemblance.²⁸

Nevertheless, in stressing more the literary aspect of his deed, Hermann addresses the reader to gain his participation and acceptance of what he says. Concerned more with the reader's acceptance of his literary talent, he longs to convince the reader:

How I long to convince you! And I will convince you! I will force you all, you rogues, to believe...²⁹

Later in the novel he adds:

It should be admitted that I exercised an exquisite control not only over myself but over my style of writing. How many novels I wrote when I was young -- just like that, casually, and without the least intention of publishing them.³⁰

And finally:

... although in my soul of souls I had no qualms about the perfection of my work, believing that in the black and white wood there lay a dead man perfectly resembling me, yet as a novice of genius, still unfamiliar with the flavor of fame, but filled with the pride that escorts self-astringency, I longed, to the point of pain, for that masterpiece of mine ... to be appreciated by man, or in other words, for the deception -- and every work of art is a deception -- to act successfully...³¹

Hermann's insanity is apparent throughout the novel.

Upon beginning to write Despair he describes his feelings thus:

My hands tremble, I want to shriek or smash something with a bang.... This mood is hardly suitable for the bland unfolding of a leisurely tale. My heart is itching, a horrible sensation. Must be calm, must keep my head. No good going on otherwise. Quite calm.³²

When he comes upon Felix in the Prague suburb he writes:

I doubted the reality of what I saw, doubted my own sanity, felt sick and faint -- honestly I was forced to sit down, my knees were shaking so.³³

A few paragraphs later he remarks:

A clever Lett whom I used to know in Moscow in 1919 said to me once that the clouds of brooding which occasionally and without any reason came over me were a sure sign of my ending in a madhouse.³⁴

In describing his aesthetic impulses, he suggests that the...

Frolics of the intuition, artistic vision, inspiration, all the grand things which have lent my life such beauty, may, I expect, strike the layman, clever though he be, as the preface of mild lunacy.³⁵

While informing the reader of his wife's idiosyncracies, he

suddenly interrupts his narration with the following
aside:

Tum-tee-tum. And once more -- TUM!
No, I have not gone mad. I am merely
producing gleeful little sounds. The
kind of glee one experiences upon
making an April fool of someone. And
a damned good fool I have made of some-
one. Who is he? Gentle reader, look
at yourself in the mirror, as you seem
to like mirrors so much.³⁶

Finally, Hermann's schizophrenic personality is marked most
significantly by his having twenty-five different handwritings:

... it is also extremely probable that some
rat-faced, shy little expert will discover
in its cacographic orgy a sure sign of
psychic abnormality. So much the better.³⁷

In comparing the English version of Despair with
the original Russian version, one notes the addition of many
erotic and coprological descriptions and allusions. The
sexual fantasies and obsessions which Hermann suffers are the
symptoms and the cause of his schizophrenic personality.³⁸
In addition to parodying the mentally deranged Raskol'nikov
of Dostoevskij's work, Nabokov has made these changes and
additions to intensify the impression of Hermann's loose
grip on reality, and also to suggest, long before the reve-
lation of the murder plan, that he (Hermann) has criminal
intentions. The most noteworthy addition, one referred to

by Nabokov in the foreword of the novel, is the imaginary "dissociation" Hermann seems to experience while making love to his wife.³⁹ He tells the reader that while he is engaged in sexual intercourse with his wife that he can imagine himself standing in the middle of the room watching the whole scene. He is amused by this and begins to practice more frequently this "split." With every passing night he moves farther and farther away from the bed until one night, with the aid of a strategically placed mirror, he envisions himself as watching the act from the next room. Suddenly, however, Nabokov breaks the illusion by having Lydia, Hermann's wife, say while they are supposedly making love: "Bring the red book in here please."⁴⁰ To this point the reader believes that the mad Hermann's imagined self was the one watching, but it turned out that the fantasy self is the one making love, and that the real Hermann is watching. Thus Nabokov makes the reader believe in the illusion rather than in reality, then shows him to be fooled.⁴¹

Other imagery is also altered to harmonize with the double theme.⁴² The English version is full of mirrors, bodies of water, and other reflecting surfaces. The development of the double as a theme plays two important roles in the novel: it serves first to illustrate Hermann's madness, and second to parody Dostoevskij's overworked use of this theme.

In conclusion, one sees that Hermann's failure is the result of a "hypertrophied imagination" which leads him away from and out of the world which surrounds him. In his desire to immerse himself in the artistic aspect of a crime in order to be able to write a parody of Dostoevskij's Crime and Punishment, Hermann betrays that reality from which his art originated. His artistic crime fails because the double does not really exist and because he had left behind a clue. His attempted perfect parodic account then becomes a failure because it lapses into a broken diary-like form with the recognition of its inherent inconsistencies. Thus, Despair is the story of a man who, like Raskol'nikov, feels no guilt and finds no expiation, and who is simply a murderer and a madman, the victim of artistic dreams which have failed through lack of creative imagination, or rather through having an imagination without connections in reality. He learns that he is a man of considerable talent, but not a genius. He learns too late that although life may copy art, art must be formed from life. Man's freedom is involved in finding and fulfilling his destiny rather than changing it. His final despair is the realization that his only artistic act in life is not this fulfillment, but instead a defense of his failure in both art and crime. And despite his pleas to the reader, his crime convinces no one of its artistic value; it gives, in fact,

the opposite impression.⁴³ Hermann is a man doomed to failure for allowing that reality of artistic inspiration to overcome and replace that reality from which it sprung. In a Playboy interview with Alvin Toffler, Nabokov remarked that "the artist should know the given world" or else his art will be no more than "the crank's message in the market place."⁴⁴ Hermann's art is a "crank's message" because as a man and an artist he is a fool. Despite his attempts to further the illusion of his artistic vision as reality in the novel's conclusion, reality awaits him.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Carl R. Proffer, "From Otchaianie to Despair." Slavic Review: The American Quarterly of Soviet and East European Studies, June, 1968, 258-266.

² Vladimir Nabokov, Despair (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 13.

³ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 201-202.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 204-205.

⁶ Ibid., p. 213.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ As quoted by Andrew Field in Nabokov: His Life in Art (Little, Brown and Company: Boston and Toronto, 1967), p. 235.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Vladislav Khodasevič, "On Sirin," in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 99-100.

¹¹ As quoted by William W. Rowe in Nabokov's Deceptive World (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. vi.

¹² Nabokov, Despair, p. 132.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 187-188.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid.

- 18 Ibid., p. 85.
- 19 Ibid., p. 132.
- 20 Ibid., p. 55.
- 21 Stephen Jan Parker, "Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin as Teacher: The Russian Novels" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1969), p. 138.
- 22 Nabokov, Despair, p. 220.
- 23 Ibid., pp. 111-112.
- 24 Ibid., p. 98.
- 25 Parker, op. cit., p. 122.
- 26 Nabokov, Despair, p. 27.
- 27 Ibid., p. 14.
- 28 Ibid., p. 51.
- 29 Ibid., p. 26.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 89-90.
- 31 Ibid., pp. 189-190.
- 32 Ibid., pp. 14-15.
- 33 Ibid., p. 32.
- 34 Ibid., p. 18.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., p. 35.
- 37 Ibid., p. 90.
- 38 Carl R. Proffer, op. cit., p. 260.
- 39 Nabokov, Despair, p. 38.
- 40 Ibid.

41 Proffer, op. cit., p. 260.

42 See the following pages in Despair: 44, 45, 46, 47, 62ff., 128, 129, 130, 173, 212, 219.

43 R.H.W. Dillard, "Not Text But Texture: The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov," The Hollins Critic, III (June, 1966), 2.

44 Alvin Toffler, "Playboy Interview: Vladimir Nabokov," Playboy, January, 1964, p. 42.

CHAPTER EIGHT

INVITATION TO A BEHEADING¹

Nabokov once described his political outlook as being:

... as bleak and changeless as an old grey rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art.²

Judging from this statement one may conclude that Nabokov is more concerned with the moral structure of politics than with the ideological aspects. This political aloofness, however, has not always been the case with Nabokov; it is only the product of many years of reflection on the relative ineffectiveness of Russian émigré writers. He has come to realize that the political upheavals of 1917 were unpreventable and that for all practical purposes the results cannot be altered today by external forces, least of all by émigré lamentations. His only publically expressed objection today about the Soviet regime is that it does not allow the most basic human rights: freedom of expression and thought. Nabokov therefore claims to have made his last political speech during his university years at Cambridge where he pursued an ardent interest in émigré politics. At that time he debated unsuccessfully the con side of Bolshevism with an apologist for the Soviet regime

from the Manchester Guardian.³ Since then Nabokov has found it superfluous to argue about contemporary politics and has remained totally oblivious to such matters. He has instead redirected his interests toward literature.

As concerns the expression of political ideas in artistic fiction, on many occasions Nabokov has expressed lofty and resounding disdain for those writers who strive to permeate their writings with a political "message." Along with social, psychological, moral, and spiritual notions, Nabokov feels political opinions also have no place in literature. Regardless of these expressed sentiments, however, many readers and critics have misconstrued much of what Nabokov has written as being a personal expression of deep political convictions.⁴ One outstanding example is an article entitled "An Anniversary," which appeared in Rul' (The Rudder), November 18, 1927. The occasion for this was the tenth anniversary of the 1917 November Revolution.⁵ As Andrew Field pointed out, the essay is "an eloquent and stirring émigré profession de foi"⁶ in which Nabokov called upon fellow émigrés to celebrate...

Ten years of contempt, ten years of fidelity,
ten years of freedom - isn't this worth at
least one anniversary speech?⁷

Nabokov then proceeded to criticize communism. It is important to note, however, that his excoriation of the Soviet system was

primarily on the grounds of its moral structure and not its political ideology. Critics are gravely mistaken when classifying this article under émigré political literature. Instead, as Andrew Field suggested, "'Anniversary' is an important document in the history of Russian émigré culture, and... it will at some unforeseeable date have a place in the intellectual history of Russia in the twentieth century."⁸

Aside from this article, there was a period of approximately twelve years, 1935-46(47), during which many of the pieces Nabokov wrote also seemingly expressed political sentiments. Most often, however, one feels that he used "political" themes only in a playful and humorous vein as a medium through which he could explore and demonstrate artistic problems. Perhaps the most outstanding example is his Invitation to a Beheading, Nabokov's seventh Russian novel. It was written in 1935-37, appeared serially in Sovremennye zapiski, and was published in book-form in 1938. Because of the seemingly political nature of the novel, it evoked the most controversy and commentary of any of his Russian novels.⁹

The tale is unusually complex and cannot be reduced simply to any one point. The work's general obscurity has fostered a wide range of critical interpretations. Nabokov accurately predicted his critics' and readers' reactions when he wrote:

The worlding will deem it a trick. Old men will hurriedly turn from it to regional romances and the lives of public figures. No club-women will thrill. The evil-minded will perceive in little Emmie a sister of little Lolita, and the disciples of the Viennese witch-doctor will snigger over it in their grotesque world of communal guilt and progressivnoe education.¹⁰

As could have been expected, the great majority of critics tended to interpret Invitation to a Beheading as an allegorical condemnation of a totalitarian state. The émigré reviewer V. Varšavskij placed the time of the novel's action in a distant future socialist state.¹¹ As he interpreted the novel, it was a condemnation of all totalitarian states, and in particular the Soviet Union. With the exception of the main protagonist, Cincinnatus C., all of the other characters in the novel were seen as allegorical masks which represented the various social functions of the state. Cincinnatus, on the other hand, was the only man to break away from his society's rituals. In refusing to conform, he asserted his individualism, his "I," and in so doing found only repudiation and the penalty of death.

North American and West European critics also have had a tendency to read a great deal of politics into the novel. In a review for The Christian Century, Dean Peerman referred to Invitation to a Beheading as "a Nabokovian 1984" in which the

main theme supposedly was the dehumanization that inevitably accompanied totalitarianism.¹² In his review of Andrew Field's book, Alfred Appel, Jr. suggested that the novel was unquestionably related to Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's Brave New World.¹³ In another article entitled "Nabokov's Beheading," John Wain interpreted the novel's emotional pitch as Nabokov's "hatred for tyranny."¹⁴

Although such critical opinions are plentiful, most of them miss the point entirely. Indeed, the most superficial reading for plot does lend itself to interpretations of this type. The protagonist does appear to be an individual in a totalitarian state who has been incarcerated and condemned to die by beheading for what appears to be his refusal to conform to the habits and customs of the society in which he lives. By its very nature the totalitarian state cannot allow individualism and accordingly sees the only panacea for such a disease as being the destruction of those who cannot, or will not, adapt themselves to society's rigid rules. However, as Nabokov's most ostentatious artifice, Invitation to a Beheading lends itself to a much wider scope of interpretation. Maurice Richardson wrote:

My impression is that the content of the dream [the narration of the novel, T.P.A.] is largely personal and metaphysical and that it is a waste of time to start looking for political meaning.¹⁵

What Richardson seemed to mean by the term "metaphysical" is abstruse and bewildering philosophical speculation. About what he thought Nabokov was philosophizing was never made explicit. Nabokov gave a significant hint about the novel's meaning when he said in an interview:

I am aware of a certain central core of spirit in me that flashes and jeers at the brutal farce of totalitarian states, such as Russia, and her embarrassing tumors, such as China. A feature of my inner prospect is the absolute abyss yawning between the barb-wire tangle of police states and the spacious freedom of thought we enjoy in America and Western Europe.¹⁶

One may interpret this statement to mean that Nabokov objects to totalitarian states only on the grounds of its moral structure; he is distressed by the fact that such societies do not allow basic human freedoms. As John Wain put it, Nabokov "hates the thought of a world in which the individual is denied the right to live and develop in his own way."¹⁷ Seemingly Cincinnatus lives in just such a society which does not allow these natural freedoms; consequently Nabokov seems to be philosophizing about the relative status of art in such an environment. But whether or not Cincinnatus lives under a political dictatorship is a matter totally irrelevant to Nabokov and should be so for any reader. As

Andrew Field remarked, even taken as a political tale, Invitation to a Beheading is "equally applicable to (and thus equally independent of) [*italics mine, T.P.A.*] fascism, communism, or any other form of oppression, including democratic tyranny."¹⁸ Nabokov's primary thematic concern in this novel is with the existence and significance of art in any artistically callous society which contrives to extirpate individualism, to suppress, or better yet, to obliterate consciousness, and consequently to stifle and paralyze art.

The many critics who have seen Invitation to a Beheading as a novel of political ideas have been correct in one observation: they saw Cincinnatus as an individual striving to retain a sense of individuality within his society. In light of Nabokov's personal convictions about art, a justifiable interpretation would be that the novel is a direct allegory of life in which Cincinnatus represents an "everyday" man who possesses a sentient nature. The "everyday" society in which he lives, a society characterized by poshlust' and bad art, is insensitive, unresponsive, often hostile toward men of his disposition. The prison in which Cincinnatus finds himself is an allegory of both the actual world from which he seeks to escape (both literally and in dream) and the hallucination

of a hypersensitive mind that cannot live in such an antagonistic society. The underlying tension of the novel is Cincinnatus' continual fear that he will be influenced by the society around him and accept its notions of life and art. He sees all of society, as represented by the various inhabitants of the prison and his family, as staging a theatrical production by which they hope to influence his way of thinking. The beheading which Cincinnatus so fears is symbolic of his possible conformity and acceptance of his society's ideals, thereby drowning forever his individualism in the sea of poshlust'. As a man of true artistic consciousness, a man embodying a sense of artistic consciousness which is common to all human beings, Cincinnatus aspires to become a writer; he envisages a life in art as the fullest, most human response to his condition in such a society. That Cincinnatus rises from the beheading-block and walks away in the novel's final scene is symbolic of the fact that he, at the point where he is about to conform to his philistine society, finally decides to assert his individuality, to become a writer, and to live a life in literary aesthetics.

In justification of this interpretation, it is necessary to draw attention to the most important recurring symbols and images in the text. The very first consideration to be made is with the nature of Cincinnatus' crime. The novel opens in medias res with Cincinnatus having just been sentenced

to death. From this point the narrator gradually reconstructs Cincinnatus' history, revealing at first only fragmentary information concerning the protagonist's circumstance. Finally, at one point in the narrative, the nature of Cincinnatus' crime is revealed; he [Cincinnatus] has stopped to reflect on the reasons for his imprisonment and the fact that he would have to "don the red top-hat."¹⁹ He evokes his entire life history in order to comprehend exactly his situation; thus he realizes that he is...

accused of the most terrible crimes, gnostical turpitude, so rare and so unutterable that it was necessary to use circumlocutions like 'impenetrability,' 'opacity,' 'occlusion'; sentenced for that crime to death by beheading; imprisoned [sic., T.P.A.] in the fortress in expectation of the unknown but near and inexorable date...²⁰

The reader is not really told the exact nature of this crime until the narrator describes it thus:

From his earliest years Cincinnatus, by some strange and happy chance comprehending his danger, carefully managed to conceal a certain peculiarity. He was impervious to the rays of others, and therefore produced when off his guard a bizarre impression, as of a dark obstacle in this world of souls transparent to one another; he learned however to feign translucence, employing a complex system of optical illusions, as it were - but he had only to forget himself, to allow a momentary lapse in self control, in the manipulation of cunningly illuminated facets

and angles at which he turned his soul, and immediately there was alarm ... Cincinnatus was opaque.²¹

Cincinnatus is an "opaque" individual in a "translucent" society. Because of this characteristic he is ostracized, or at least feared as being dangerously different, throughout his entire life. As a result, Cincinnatus exists as an infinitely pathetic figure, fearful of the surrounding society, and longing for someone with whom he could commiserate about his situation and share his hideous difference. He senses that all living beings, and even the physical environment, are in hostile collusion against him. At the age of fifteen, he marries in desperation a young girl named Martha whom he had met at the doll factory where he worked. In this marriage Cincinnatus had hoped to find a kindred soul and a sense of security and belonging. Unfortunately, this connubial tie becomes only a source of constant torment for Cincinnatus; Martha openly takes lovers and continually taunts her husband with explicit details of her illicit sex relations. He soon realizes that she too is as "translucent" as the society in which she lives. Even their children, which are not Cincinnatus' own, are a pair of grotesques - one "lame and evil-tempered," the other "dull, obese, and nearly blind"; they are symbolic of life's ultimate irony and hostility toward Cincinnatus. His world is understandably depicted in bizarre and horrifyingly

dark tones.

Read as an allegory of life, the novel depicts a world of artistically insensitive human beings with Cincinnatus representing an aesthetic solipsist. He feels his world to be hostile toward, or at least oblivious to, men of his sentient nature -- men who possess a true sense of reality and the pleasurable nuances of life's chemistry. Predictably enough, Cincinnatus' most ubiquitous torture is bad art as symbolized by photography; this is the art par excellence of this banal world. The culmination of this mechanical art is the "photo-horoscope" as devised by Cincinnatus' executioner, M'sieur Pierre. This gadget utilizes a series of someone's retouched snapshots, placing the face in montage with the photographs of older people, in order to effect a chronological record of a person's life from birth to death. The result is predictably unconvincing; this art-form is to be regarded as the ultimate achievement of bad art.

The epitome of literary art in Cincinnatus' world is a novel entitled Quercus. A three thousand page work devoted to the life of an oak tree, it was considered to be the "acme of modern thought."²² The description of this work is Nabokov's reductio ad absurdum of the naturalistic novel and the principle of exhaustive documentary realism. The novel subverts everything that art should be and is "... mindless,

formless, pointless, infinitely tedious, devoid of humanity. It denies imagination, spontaneity, the shaping power of human consciousness."²³

The embodiment of all that is characteristically perverse and banal in Cincinnatus' world is his executioner, M'sieur Pierre. In talking with Cincinnatus on various subjects such as sex, art, and gastronomic delights, Pierre expresses the distorted communal values of the society which he represents and thereby exposes it as a world of mediocrity. He remarks to Cincinnatus about his favorite topic, sex:

'Recently I had sexual intercourse with an extraordinarily healthy and splendid individual. What pleasure when a large brunette ... Yes, a red rose between her teeth, black net stockings up to here, and not a stitch besides... There's nothing more pleasant, for example, than to surround oneself with mirrors and watch the good work going on... when it comes to caresses I love what we French wrestlers call 'macarons': You give her a nice slap on the neck, and the firmer the meat... .'²⁴

Some critics have tenuously suggested that M'sieur Pierre is Cincinnatus' physical double. This writer has not found much support in that hypothesis. Instead, one feels that Cincinnatus has his own double within himself. There are continual references to "an additional Cincinnatus," the "real" Cincinnatus as opposed to "another," and "one Cincinnatus" or "the other." This "other Cincinnatus" is interpreted as

Cincinnatus' alter ego; one Cincinnatus being cowardly and ready to succumb to the desires of his society; the other being the assertive force, the writer, the Cincinnatus who overcomes and walks away from the beheading. In doing this Cincinnatus rejects bad art as symbolized by the beheading (the perpetrators of this act of murder look upon it as a form of art and M'sieur Pierre as an artist). A man of Cincinnatus' character cannot help but view this world as one of horror, as symbolized by the spider in his cell, and doom, as reflected by the frequent use of the colors red and blue in descriptions. Understandably Cincinnatus regards this society as a grotesque and incomprehensibly improbable farce in which the inhabitants are seen not as real people, but instead as parodies of humans, as specters. To him the world seems flat, two dimensional; better yet, it takes on the appearance of a huge and disturbingly bizarre stage production in which the actors (society) are incessantly trying to convince him of some point about life. This would certainly explain Nabokov's extended use of the theatre-metaphor throughout the novel. People assume various roles (some playing two roles as with the case of Cincinnatus' jailer and the prison director) and seemingly enter and exit on cue. Cincinnatus himself says:

'I ask three minutes - go away for that time or at least be quiet - yes, a three-minute intermission - after that, so be it, I'll act to the end my role in your idiotic production.'²⁵

He views all of the activity of his imprisonment as a series of carefully directed scenarios. He even sees the natural environment as hastily painted scenes. Even nature seemed to be controlled:

A summer thunderstorm, simply yet tastefully staged, was performed outside.²⁶

In the novel's foreword, Nabokov describes his work as "a violin in a void."²⁷ This description is in fact more appropriate for Cincinnatus himself. He finds himself to be the only "alive" person in his world -- a world totally devoid of true artistic inspiration. Cincinnatus places his only hope of escape from this world (the prison) in Emmie, the prison director's daughter. However, after seeing her image in M'sieur Pierre's photohoroscope, Cincinnatus realizes that it will be only a matter of time before she too will lose her innocence and her purity. Salvation through Emmie becomes hopeless. In fact, time has always been Cincinnatus' enemy; primarily it symbolizes the incessant perpetuation of the grotesque reality in which he finds himself.

The underlying tension of the novel is Cincinnatus' fear that he too in time will succumb to the influence of his surrounding reality and accept its false logic, its stifled outlook on life, and its banal notions of art. The beheading which he fears is symbolic of his possible final acceptance of and collusion with this alien world of bad art. Developing concurrently with the exposition of Cincinnatus' relation to his reality is the theme of Cincinnatus' individuality. Awaiting his execution, Cincinnatus sits in his cell and reflects on the nature of his being and the relevance of his role in society. He comes to the conclusion that he is the only "alive" being in his world. In so thinking Cincinnatus becomes aware of his "oneness," his "selfhood," and concludes that the only logical means of escape from the world of sham is through the assertion of his individuality. He consequently rejects his surrounding reality as a neatly contrived two dimensional scene. In rejecting this reality, Cincinnatus replaces it with another reality which he has seen since childhood only in his dreams. He describes this other world as a place in which people become "captivatingly majestic, free and ethereal":

There, tam, là-bas, the gaze of men flows with inimitable understanding; there the freaks that are tortured here walk unmolested ... there, there are the originals of those gardens where we used to roam and hide in this world; there everything

strikes one by its bewitching evidence, by the simplicity of perfect good; there everything pleases one's soul, everything is filled with the kind of fun children know; there shines the mirror that now and then sends a chance reflection here.²⁸

Cincinnatus has come to believe in the existence and reality of this other world:

'I have long since grown accustomed to the thought that what we call reality is semi-reality, the promise of reality, a foreglimpse and a whiff of it; that is they contain, in a very vague, diluted state, more genuine reality than our vaunted waking life which, in its turn, is semi-sleep, an evil drowsiness into which penetrate in grotesque disguise the sounds and the sights of the real world, flowing beyond the periphery of the mind.'²⁹

As Cincinnatus mentions, however, his flesh ties him to this first, grotesque reality. He is only partially in that dream-world:

... the greater part of him was in a quite different place, while only an insignificant portion of it was wandering, perplexed, here -- a poor, vague Cincinnatus, a comparatively stupid Cincinnatus, trusting, feeble, and foolish as people are in their sleep. But even during this sleep... his real life showed through too much.³⁰

Cincinnatus puts a great deal of faith in his dreams because it is through his dreams that he becomes more convinced of his individuality and the definite existence of his other reality.

Convinced of his individuality and of another reality, Cincinnatus next faces the problem of determining through what means he can assert his "selfness" and communicate the knowledge and beauty of this other world. Cincinnatus concludes that he must escape into aesthetics and become a writer. Yet, despite his desires, Cincinnatus feels inadequate as a writer:

'Not knowing how to write, but sensing with my criminal intuition how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its neighbor's sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence; while I sense the nature of this kind of word propinquity, I am nevertheless unable to achieve it.'³¹

What Cincinnatus is searching for is new words and new combinations and relationships of these words. He claims that if he were to have the time, "... [his soul] would have surrounded itself with a structure of words."³² Cincinnatus strives to find another language for another reader. He realizes that the words used by other men are inaccurate and therefore inadequate. He later expresses the desire to become a poet, to have at his command all of the necessary words to express himself:

'My words all mill about in one spot.
Envious of poets. How wonderful it

must be to speed along a page and,
right from the page, where only a shadow
continues to run, to take off into the
blue.³³

Cincinnatus' lack of words makes his isolation from the surrounding reality complete. From here the novel progressively moves towards Cincinnatus' point of view and the reality which encompasses him becomes more and more intangible. The final scene of the supposed beheading is one in which Cincinnatus symbolically asserts his individuality and finally decides to become a writer. He rises from the chopping block, thereby throwing off the oppressive yoke of society's influence. He leaves behind him only the rubble and fallen props of a theatrical set:

Little was left of the square. The platform had long since collapsed in a cloud of reddish dust ... The fallen trees lay flat and reliefless, while those that were still standing, also two-dimensional, with a lateral shading of the trunk to suggest roundness, barely held on with their branches to the ripping mesh of the sky. Everything was falling. A spinning wind was picking up and whirling: dust, rags, chips of painted wood, bits of gilded plaster, pasteboard bricks, posters; an arid gloom fleeted; and amidst the dust, and the falling things, and the flapping scenery, Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him.³⁴

Robert Alter has written a most interesting analysis of the novel entitled: "Invitation to a Beheading: Nabokov on the Art of Politics."³⁵ Alter has convincingly analyzed the novel both as a direct allegory of life and as an allegory of a totalitarian state. This interpretation will be dealt with here in some detail since some of the ideas expressed are similar to those which underly the basis of the analysis presented in this chapter. In dealing with this work, however, it is necessary to point out briefly some incongruencies which Alter has seemingly overlooked in his analysis.

Alter begins by stating that although critics have generally acknowledged the technical virtuosity of Nabokov's novels, most critics feel that they are in fact outstanding only as ostentatious artifices and therefore are to be considered minor. As Alter points out, in bringing together all social, political, and psychological materials into a circumscribed inner concern with art and the artist, Nabokov has enraged his critics to such an extent that they unjustly condemn him as an ineffectual novelist, a writer who has failed to engage himself in the larger realm of human experience.³⁶ This is generally the case with regard to Nabokov's apparent reluctance to teach the reader something about the social, political, and world milieu in which he resides, or to comment on the moral character of man's complex psychological make-up.

In particular, critics object to Nabokov's seemingly frivolous artistic indulgence in utilizing a totalitarian state as a convenient dramatic background for his recurrent theme of the nature of the creative imagination and the solipsistic role which a man gifted with such an imagination is forced to assume in any society.³⁷ They feel that Nabokov avoids his responsibilities as a writer by converting totalitarianism, the most ugly and disturbing of modern-day political actualities, into the stuff of a fable about art and artifice.

Alter is convinced that there is indeed an inner connection between the special emphasis Nabokov puts on artifice and the totalitarian worlds which he seemingly uses as the background for his novels. Using Invitation to a Beheading as his working example, he chooses to reveal this connection and show that Nabokov, primarily, through his concern for art and the fate of the artist, is able to illuminate a central aspect of the supposedly human condition in an era of police states and totalitarian terrors.

Working from the assumption that Nabokov sees consciousness and its perception of patterns as the medium through which reality comes into being, Alter maintains that if consciousness is obliterated, reality is obliterated. He then remarks that execution, the mechanical means by which human agents destroy human consciousness, represents the supreme principle of

"irreality" (Alter's word). The world in which Cincinnatus lives, a world which apparently contrives to numb, cloud, cripple and finally extirpate individual consciousness, has execution as its central rite. He therefore sees Cincinnatus' society as one consciously dedicated to the assertion of "irreality." Moreover, any being possessing a truly human consciousness who lives in such a society, as does Cincinnatus, must consequently view this world of collusion in the surrender of human consciousness as a grotesque and improbable farce. Alter remarks, however, that the totalitarian state in which Cincinnatus resides is by no means a disguised description of some real regime, but rather a fictional fantasy revealing only the ultimate implications of the totalitarian principle and its conceivable possibilities. Cincinnatus is then analyzed as a sentient being, an "opaque" figure, who lives in a grotesque world of specters and parodies of human beings. He lives in a world which is insensitive to the aesthetic qualities of life, a world which is characterized by cheap, false, meretricious, mechanical art, a world where the primary concern is the obliteration of human consciousness and the affirmation of the principle of "irreality," a world which abounds with poshlust'. Alter also asserts in defense of his argument that Nabokov sees the totalitarian state as the ideal model of a philistine society. Nabokov had remarked in his discussion of poshlust'

apropos of the novel Dead Souls that it (poshlust') is a quality which "yawns universally at times of revolution or war."³⁸ Alter then concludes that "Nabokov notes the prevalence of poshlust' under conditions of political absolutism not merely because it is an observable and offensive aspect of revolutionary and militant regimes - ... but because he recognizes in it an indispensable principle of such regimes, a necessary expression of their inner nature."³⁹

Alter analyzes characters and scenes which he feels assert the principles of "irreality" and poshlust', and accordingly he contrasts Cincinnatus' feelings and ideas with this world. He ultimately concludes that Cincinnatus symbolically embodies the artistic endeavors which are potentially within every individual in a totalitarian society. However, Alter mistakenly claims that Cincinnatus becomes a writer, not because there is a streak of the aesthete within him, but because seeing himself as a creature with an artistic consciousness in an existence which offers nothing to explain or tolerate this incredible fact, this is the most human response to his own human condition.

Alter, then, sees Invitation to a Beheading as essentially illuminating the entire question of the inexorable antagonism between totalitarianism and authentic art. As previously mentioned, however, one strongly feels that Nabokov

did not intend to comment on totalitarian states in this novel, whether it be on ideological or moral grounds. Granted, Nabokov has used political themes in his writings ostensibly as a background for a discussion of the inherent problems of the creative process in such a society.⁴⁰ But this particular novel does not lend itself to such an interpretation. And although execution is the central rite both of Cincinnatus' world and of a totalitarian state, one senses that there is no substantial component of politics in Cincinnatus' world. In consideration of the protagonist's fate (for Alter it is death), Alter's interpretation could only lead one to see Invitation to a Beheading as a condemnation of totalitarianism. It is felt that although Nabokov senses strongly the antagonism between art and police states and describes this problem in his writings, he never would be so bold as to condemn this situation openly. For the most part, Alter has correctly interpreted Cincinnatus' personal problem of living in an insensitive society; one would nevertheless prefer to interpret this world as everyday society in the light of Nabokov's pronounced commitments about art and didacticism.

In defense of the analysis presented in this chapter, it is necessary to note two obvious incongruencies seemingly overlooked by Alter in his article. First, since he realizes that Nabokov sees poshlust' as the most prevalent characteristic

of political absolutism, Alter concludes that Cincinnatus' world must necessarily be a totalitarian society. The invalidity of this conclusion can be easily exposed by simply drawing attention to any one of a number of Nabokov's prose writings which portrays a philistine society, but which is not in the least reminiscent of a dictatorship or has as its background a political milieu. Second, it seems that if Nabokov had intended to portray a dictatorship of any type, this situation would necessarily presuppose that a significant portion of the population living under such a system would feel a great deal of resentment about it; but in Invitation to a Beheading Cincinnatus' crime of asserting his individualism is described as "rare and unutterable."⁴¹

Regardless of the exact political nature of the society in which Cincinnatus lives, Nabokov depicts him as an individual victimized by a distorted view of both life and the importance of art for mankind. In asserting his individualism and escaping the world of meretricious art, Cincinnatus becomes a writer; he chooses a life in aesthetics as his escape from the wretched world of his first consciousness. Cincinnatus thus survives his ordeal and disassociates himself from his past, his condemned self, and his "death." Purged of his despair, sure of his own destiny, and in harmony with the realities of both life and art, Cincinnatus views the world

of his imprisonment as truly a bad stage set. He therefore moves out of it and enters into a life beyond illusion. He masters his imagination, and by that feat fulfills himself and finds the direction of reality; Cincinnatus exits the final scene a true artist-hero. As Hermann, the protagonist in Despair, once said:

'The invention of art contains far
more intrinsical truths than life's
reality.'⁴²

FOOTNOTES

¹ As noted in the Preface, an uncontracted version of the present chapter appeared earlier as CHAPTER VI of the author's Master Thesis, "The Image of the Artist in Two of Nabokov's Russian Novels" (unpublished, Montreal: McGill University, June, 1971).

² As cited by Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 181.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Two examples are: Robert Phelps in "The Unique Vision of Vladimir Nabokov," review of Invitation to a Beheading in The Herald Tribune Book Review, November 22, 1959, p. 16; and Dean Peerman in "Invitation to a Beheading," review of Invitation to a Beheading in The Christian Century, February 3, 1960, p. 141.

⁵ Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 182.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ As cited by Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 182.

⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

⁹ See Gleb Struve, Russkaja literatura v izgnanii (Russian Literature in Exile) (N'ju-Jork: Izd. im. Čekhova, 1952), pp. 278-290.

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), pp. 7-8.

¹¹ V. Varšavskij, "O Poplavskom i Nabokove" ("About Poplavskij and Nabokov"), in Opyty (Experiences) (no. IV, 1955), p. 70.

¹² Dean Peerman, "Invitation to a Beheading," in a review of Invitation to a Beheading in The Christian Century, February 3, 1960, p. 141.

13 Alfred Appel, Jr. in a review of Nabokov: His Life in Art, by Andrew Field, in Contemporary Literature, vol. IX, 1968, p. 244.

14 John Wain, "Nabokov's Beheading," in a review of Invitation to a Beheading in The New Republic, December 21, 1959, p. 19.

15 Maurice Richardson, "New Novels: Invitation to a Beheading," review of Invitation to a Beheading in New Statesman, June 4, 1960, p. 833.

16 "Nabokov on Nabokov and Things," New York Times Book Review, May 12, 1968, p. 51.

17 Wain, "Nabokov's Beheading," p. 18.

18 Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 182.

19 Nabokov, Invitation, p. 21. [The expression means: "to be beheaded," or "to get the axe."]

20 Ibid., pp. 72-73.

21 Ibid., p. 24.

22 Ibid., p. 122.

23 Robert Alter, "Invitation to a Beheading: Nabokov and The Art of Politics," in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 54-55.

24 Nabokov, Invitation, p. 144.

25 Ibid., p. 209.

26 Ibid., p. 129.

27 Ibid., p. 7.

28 Ibid., p. 94.

- 29 Ibid., p. 92.
- 30 Ibid., p. 120.
- 31 Ibid., p. 93.
- 32 Ibid., p. 204.
- 33 Ibid., p. 194.
- 34 Ibid., p. 223.
- 35 Robert Alter, op. cit., pp. 41-60.
- 36 Ibid., p. 42.
- 37 Simon Karlinsky, "Illusion, Reality and Parody in Nabokov's Plays," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 183.
- 38 Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1959), p. 65.
- 39 Robert Alter, op. cit., p. 55.
- 40 The most notable example is Bend Sinister.
- 41 Nabokov, Invitation, p. 72.
- 42 Vladimir Nabokov, Despair (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 132.

CHAPTER NINE

THE GIFT

In his 1937 article entitled "On Sirin,"¹ Vladislav Khodasevič emphasized Nabokov's (Sirin's) artistic intention of making the literary devices of his writings become one of his primary thematic concerns; artifice was to be as important as the characters and the fictional plan of the novel. The key to understanding Nabokov, Khodasevič wrote, was to discern the important role that artistry of form played in his fiction. Nabokov consequently perceived the protagonists as artists and the theme as the life of a device in the consciousness of the artist. As Khodasevič maintained, however, and as has been shown throughout the present study, Nabokov never portrayed the artist directly, but under the guise of some other activity. The reason for this seemed obvious to Khodasevič, since to make the protagonist a writer, for example, would complicate the plot; it would necessitate the inclusion of a story or novel within the novel, and would require that the reader have some previous knowledge of the writer's craft in order to understand the author's intentions. Khodasevič was nevertheless hopeful that Nabokov would someday directly depict an artist at work; he concluded his article by writing that "Sirin, who has at his disposal a wide range of caustic

observations, will someday give himself rein and favor us with a merciless satiric portrayal of a writer. Such a portrayal would be a natural development in the unfolding of the basic theme with which he is obsessed."² Nabokov's eighth Russian novel, The Gift (Dar), partially fulfilled Khodasevič's prophetic belief: the main protagonist is a writer, but the sarcasm is reserved for another figure in the work.

Because of the inherent complexity created by the use of this fictional plan, there are three interconnected narrative levels at which the novel can be read. At one level, it is the story of a young Russian émigré, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, living in Berlin during the 1920's. At this level Nabokov has caught the intellectual frustration of the hermetic émigré community where Fyodor is forced to live; the pretentious public readings, the many literary journals (all read by the same handful of people), the jealousies and vicious quarrels of a group cut off from its roots are facetiously yet sympathetically described. The banality which permeates Fyodor's daily existence is subtly suggested by his relations with fellow émigrés, and also by his frustrated dealings with the local natives and German culture in general. The theme of philistinism is not novel in this work. Throughout his Russian fiction Nabokov reveals his obsession with depicting this aspect of life, and in each case he indicates that escape from oppressiveness is

effected by immersing oneself in an artistic activity. Fyodor is also shown this escape. Whereas in earlier novels the obsession was destructive, in this work it is constructive.

Aside from the problem of the suffocating banality surrounding him, Fyodor is also concerned with the nationalistic problem of Russia's future, the quality and fate of émigré literature, and the personal problems of love and general human relations among friends. The only enduring relationship which Fyodor forms throughout the book is with a young Russian girl, Zina Mertz, the stepdaughter of his landlord. Thus, at the primary level, the novel is the story of Fyodor's growing love for a sensitive girl who shares his feelings of isolation. Like a complex musical fugue, the secondary fictional elements sustain the development of Fyodor's personal history, and at the same time are connected with the second narrative level in the novel: the gradual development and maturation of Fyodor as a writer and the early history of his literary career.

In each of the five chapters Fyodor is shown immersed in the art of writing, with each new effort indicating a necessary step forward in his artistic maturation. In the first chapter he has just finished writing a book of mediocre verse containing fifty twelve-line poems which tell the story of his childhood. The second chapter shows him attempting to write a biography of his father. He ultimately abandons the

project because of the inherent difficulties of writing in this genre. Chapter Three shows him turning from poetry to prose; subsequent to this change he writes a highly satiric biography of the famous nineteenth century Russian author and socio-literary critic, N.G. Černyševskij.³ This work constitutes the entire fourth chapter of the novel. His final literary attempt, the projected culmination of his efforts, is foreshadowed in the fifth chapter, and is a work entitled The Gift -- the novel we read. The fifth chapter also contains a series of reviews critically appraising Fyodor's work. At the second level, then, the novel is the story of a young writer's awareness of his poetic and imaginative abilities. The reader is thus shown the writer in search of true insight and inspiration, and the words to express his highly personal artistic vision. His predilection for non-utilitarian artistic values leads him to search for a language which is suitable to his vision and which will be suitable for a generally insensitive audience. Although his attempts to find the proper mode of expression are many times frustrated throughout his literary efforts, Fyodor nevertheless believes in "inspired expressiveness"; he finds it at last when he writes The Gift.

Apart from the purely artistic motivation to write, Fyodor also seeks to escape from the banality of his surroundings through this artistic preoccupation. This motivation is clearly

underscored in several instances in the text. The most outstanding example is an imaginary conversation which Fyodor holds with a fellow poet, Koncheyev. During this conversation Fyodor proposes a theory about time which is appropriate to the artist's necessary transcendence of the material world; it is a theory in accord with the artistic need for spiritual escape from banality. From a literary point of view it constitutes Fyodor's reaction against the humanitarian, utilitarian approach to literature and the sentimental values this approach imposes on society. Fyodor thus strives for transcendence of the social and human requirements imposed on him as a human being and an artist.⁴ The narrative structure also points to this inner yearning. Throughout the novel the narrative voice shifts between the first person "I" and the third person "He." This interchange does not represent any psychogenic abnormalities, but merely reflects Fyodor's dualistic nature. The "I" is Fyodor's artistic consciousness, and the "he" is his external self living in the real world. In addition, the entire structure of the novel signifies Fyodor's dual consciousness; the real world is many times juxtaposed with moments of interior dialogue or flights of imagination.

The Gift is thus the only Russian novel in which Nabokov discloses the essential workings of the introspective literary consciousness. He adds another facet to this theme, however,

by having the writer both explain and illustrate his writing on the one hand, and evaluate the nature of his literary efforts on the other. Apart from the reviews listed in the beginning of Chapter Five, the second imaginary conversation which Fyodor holds with Koncheyev reveals some of the most incisive criticism that the biography on Černyševskij receives. The "gift" in the title is therefore the gift of poetic talent possessed by Fyodor (and by his creator), as manifested by his culminating literary effort, The Gift. The gift is a tradition of literary excellence which, in both Fyodor's and Nabokov's estimation, has been passed down through generations of Russian writers and poets, but which has been passed on only to those with true talent. Fyodor aspires to receive this gift through an utmost effort of critical understanding and development of his artistic powers. He desires to share this gift with the immortals of Russian literature and then to pass it on to future generations without having compromised its pure tradition.⁵

The third level of interpretation consists of Fyodor's (and Nabokov's) views on Russian literature. In many ways this level is intertwined with the fictional plan of the previously discussed levels, but in many respects it constitutes a separate, second thematic structure. It is at this level that the novel is inaccessible to most readers, and because the literary discussion entwines the narrative plan it usually

frustrates readers who sense but cannot enter into this other thematic dimension. The great profusion of literary discussions and allusions cannot possibly be understood by one who is not thoroughly acquainted with Russian history, language, and cultural affairs. In the novel's foreword, Nabokov wrote that the heroine of the tale is not Zina, but more properly Russian literature.⁶ Simon Karlinsky has aptly labeled The Gift "a hybrid between fictional and critical genres,"⁷ because of the extensive use of literary and critical materials. He notes that the main discussion centers around the literary and social critic N.G. Černyševskij; in its broadest terms the issue under consideration is the constant conflict within Russian literature between those who see literature as a medium to express the creative urge (art for art's sake), and those who see it primarily as a medium through which to express extra-literary values. The internal conflict in the novel is between the utilitarian, socially-oriented approach to literature as represented by Černyševskij's views, and the non-utilitarian, aesthetic approach to literature as represented by Fyodor's writings. The biography constituting the fourth chapter of the novel focuses the attack on the social function of art as originally advanced by Černyševskij. With the growth of his artistic awareness and ability as a writer, Fyodor realizes that literature should not have any social functions;

in his biography he ultimately challenges the traditional opinion that art must be utilitarian in nature if it is to be meritorious. For him and his creator, art is a personal experience that must not be disrupted by society's pressures. Fyodor's second imaginary conversation with Kocheyev occurs in Chapter Five. There Nabokov voices his belief through Koncheyev that literary art must remain an individual experience:

The real writer should ignore all readers
but one, that of the future, who in his
turn is merely the author reflected in time.⁸

The novel and the life of a literary device are more important than society or some problem that it wishes to have expressed. Thus The Gift celebrates the life of literature and contrasts, by implication, the extremes of the literary tradition in Russian literature: Puškin and Černyševskij. By showing Fyodor's artistic maturation, and by juxtaposing his views with those held by the followers of Černyševskij, Nabokov depicts a major writer in the process of completely mastering his art. The description is done in such a way, however, that the question of his ultimate emergence as a major writer is never in question.⁹ Thus each chapter advances Fyodor's personal history and development while simultaneously undertaking assessments and recapitulations of Russian literary art. In

the novel's foreword Nabokov offers an outline which reflects the fundamentally literary plan of the novel:

The plot of Chapter One centers in Fyodor's poems. Chapter Two is a surge toward Pushkin in Fyodor's literary progress and contains his attempt to describe his father's zoological explorations. Chapter Three shifts to Gogol, but its real hub is the love poem dedicated to Zina. Fyodor's book on Chernyshevski, a spiral within a sonnet, takes care of Chapter Four. The last chapter combines all the preceding themes and adumbrates the book Fyodor dreams of writing some day: The Gift.¹⁰

Nabokov informed the reader in the foreword that the novel was written in 1935-37, in Berlin; and that it was serialized in the leading Russian émigré journal, Sovremennye zapiski (Vols. 63-67). He continued by writing that Chapter Four, the biography of Černyševskij, was omitted "for the same reasons that the biography ... was rejected by Vasiliev in Chapter Three (p. 219): a pretty example of life finding itself obliged to imitate the very art it condemns."¹¹ Thus only four of the novel's five chapters were serialized; and although the omission was made explicit in the course of the serialization, it must have been bewildering and frustrating for the readers to have the critical reviews and not the biography itself. Although Nabokov admittedly consented to the omission, one can imagine his fundamentally shocked reaction, especially considering the liberal nature of the journals and its readers,

and the fact that he was one of the journal's most frequent contributors. Nevertheless, the deletion of Chapter Four by the chief editor, Mark Višnjak, testified that there was a limit to the journal's liberalism. Furthermore, despite its refusal to associate with any political faction on the émigré scene, a rare circumstance in itself, the indication was clear that the editorial board of Sovremennye zapiski would not tolerate literary iconoclasm towards Černyševskij.

Despite his seeming disenchantment with Russian literature, no one expected Nabokov to take the highly critical and irreverent stand which he took against one of the official saints of the Russian nineteenth century progressive movement. Nabokov, however, anticipated his readers' reaction to the biography and parodied their future remarks by excerpting in Chapter Five several reviews which, as it turned out, were remarkably similar to those which The Gift received in its uncut version. One can imagine that the various members of the journal's editorial and censoring staff were predictably uneasy when reading the mock reviews of "The Life of Chernyshevski." In fact, as Simon Karlinsky pointed out, these critical appraisals follow a symmetry of their own, which does not coincide with that of the fictional narrative of the novel.¹² Their inclusion in the text constitutes one of the rare occasions in which Nabokov lashes out directly at his critics.

Another instance in the text also points to Nabokov's anticipating trouble. In searching for someone to publish his "Life," Fyodor turns to the editor of the local émigré newspaper, Vasiliev; his refusal to publish the biography is typical of the reaction Nabokov himself no doubt must have encountered in looking for a publisher. Vasiliev says to Fyodor:

'Here's your manuscript, take it. There can be no question of my being party to its publication. I assumed that this was a serious work, and it turns out to be a reckless, antisocial, mischievous improvisation. I am amazed at you.... There are certain traditions of Russian public life which the honorable writer does not dare to subject to ridicule. I am absolutely indifferent to whether you have talent or not, I only know that to lampoon a man whose works and sufferings have given sustenance to millions of Russian intellectuals is unworthy of any talent. I know that you won't listen to me, but nevertheless ... I beg you as a friend not to try to publish this thing, you will wreck your literary career, mark my words, everyone will turn away from you.'¹³

As a result of similar émigré reaction in real life, the first complete version of the novel appeared only in 1952; it was published by the Chekhov House of New York. The novel was translated into English in 1963 by Michael Scammell with the collaboration of Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov. This edition was without revision of the original Russian text. It is this text which is being used for the analysis in this chapter.

Again in the novel's foreword, Nabokov wrote: "I can speak of this book with a certain degree of detachment. It is the last novel I wrote, or ever shall write, in Russian."¹⁴ As such it is ironically the culmination of Nabokov's career as a Russian writer. Even before readers had a chance to read the unexpurgated version, the general consensus of opinion was that this was Nabokov's most original, most unusual, and most interesting novel. Gleb Struve even saw it as the key, the focal point, of all of Nabokov's writing in both English and Russian.¹⁵ In a BBC television interview, Nabokov himself expressed this sentiment by saying that The Gift was "the best, and the most nostalgic of my Russian novels."¹⁶ Andrew Field, Nabokov's most thorough critic, also supported this opinion in his full-length study of Nabokov. He wrote that the novel flowed smoothly like a great river, "serenely picking up its already subdued tributaries and, in the process, gradually but unmistakably expanding its shores."¹⁷ Field questioned Struve's assertion that the novel was the key to Nabokov's art; he wrote that in substance it did indeed look backward to the early sources, and in form it unquestionably looked forward to Pale Fire. But Field felt that because of its particular tone and manner it deserved a place apart from the other writings; it was, in his opinion, unique in the Nabokov canon and, beyond that, "the greatest novel Russian literature has yet produced

in this century."¹⁸ In one way it is the culminating example of Nabokov's overriding concern for the theme of art in his novels. In another way it is an assault against those critics who had persistently claimed that he was outside the great Russian literary tradition; the wealth of critical and literary material alluded to show that he was fully conscious of the Russian heritage. In a third way it is a faultless proof, by example, that the humanitarian, utilitarian approach to literature is fruitless and therefore artistically unsound. Nabokov thus asserts for the last time during his Russian literary career that only art should be the business of literature, and not society's ills.

Because of the great length and highly complex nature of the novel, one shall deal primarily with the second narrative level of the work. In passing, however, the other levels will be pointed out as they sustain the analysis. The theme of art in this novel is therefore perceived as the maturation of Fyodor's literary gift.

Chapter One is primarily concerned with the presentation of Fyodor's credentials as an aesthetically sensitive young poet. He is shown in the opening scenes inspecting the new neighborhood into which he has just moved. One sees from the

observations made by the narrator, Fyodor's imagination, that his apparent consciousness is concerned primarily with the details of his natural and social surroundings. He methodically scrutinizes his milieu in search of minutiae which will become familiar sore spots for his artistic sensibilities. He is acutely aware of such trifling things as the color and arrangement of buildings on the street, drops of water on twigs which later will nurture new leaves, rusty thumbtacks in trees which perpetually preserve old notices that have outlived their usefulness but have not fully been torn off, and the irritating sham of architectual details. Upon first inspection, however, he finds nothing which offends his sensibilities. Significantly, what Fyodor is doing in the opening pages is "personalizing" his new surroundings. Just as the new room into which he has just moved will have to be molded to fit his creative personality before he can begin to write, so too the external world must become familiar and personal. Fyodor's reaction upon seeing his room for the first time characterizes the essential natural affinity between inspiration and environment:

It would be hard, he mused, to transform the wallpaper ... into a distant steppe. The desert of the desk would have to be tilled for a long time before it could sprout its first rhymes and much cigarette ash would have to fall under the armchair and into its folds before it would become suitable for traveling.¹⁹

What Fyodor mostly fears is the encroachment of social and individual banality upon his artistic consciousness. Although for the most part he can avoid contact with individual philistines, society represents an insurmountable problem. The first chapter is filled with instances of society's triteness. German culture and the German people present the most omnipresent problem; the cult of the office, the "lavatory humor" and the crude laughter, the lack of fastidiousness, the barbaric filth of the bathrooms, all combined with a superficial air of respectability force Fyodor to seek refuge in the Russian émigré colony. This hermetic group, however, maintains its own brand of offensiveness; the pretentious public readings, the petty quarrels about politics and literature, and the moral recompense sought for being an exiled race all exemplify the mediocrity of this sanctimonious coterie. In general, the repulsiveness of society is neatly embodied in the ceremony of business transactions, and "the exchange of cloying compliments before and after."²⁰ The "nobility of the discount" and the "altruism of advertisements" seem to him only a nasty imitation of goodness which degrades people and takes advantage of their trusting good nature. Fyodor rejects the world of the Germans and of the Russian émigrés, but realizes that their offensive manners will always impinge upon his consciousness; he will always be getting "that extra little payment in kind

to compensate ... [for his] ... regular overpayment for merchandise foisted on ... [him]."21 Thus by showing Fyodor's attempts to individualize the commonplace, by making evident his poetic consciousness of the surrounding natural elements, by showing him in constant search for detail and order, and by illustrating his contempt for banality, Nabokov provides his protagonist with a set of credentials that testify to his aesthetic sensitivity. The fictional plan of the first chapter also makes clear the existence of his poetic sensitivity; moments of external awareness are frequently juxtaposed with oblivious flights of imagination. The shifting narrative voice gives expression to his poetic, creative side; after reflecting that he would someday start a novel with a scene which he witnesses at the beginning of this novel, the third person narrator interjects the following remark:

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.22

Having established Fyodor's credentials, the narration then turns to the first of the three focal points in the chapter which provide examples of his literary gift and sensibilities. Chapter One shows Fyodor mainly concerned with a volume of his poetry which has just been published. Several of the poems are given in full in the text, and

testify to the juvenile nature of his efforts; the majority of them, however, are presented only in extracts with supplementary comments in prose. An interesting and revealing feature of this section in the novel is Fyodor's musings on how he thinks his reviewers will appraise his collection. Although purely introspective, this running commentary provides disclosing insight into the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the poems. This autocritical method is a technique which is widely used in the novel to reveal Fyodor's growing literary awareness of his gift. Among the many points raised, the problems of overt authorial control, the use of parody, lyrical quality, structural devices, and rhyme pattern are especially important to Fyodor. His primary preoccupation is with what he later terms "wordsmithy;" this concerns the task of finding words which will accurately convey all that he sees and senses. He is distraught about the possibility that his dreams and visions will be either lost or unnoticed in his poetry. As a result he yearns for sensitive readers and reviewers who will see not only the "picturesqueness" of each of his experiences and sensations, but also his special poetic meaning.

In choosing the subject of childhood, Fyodor decides that each of the poems should be dedicated to some aspect of a normal child's happy life: toys, games, a trip to the dentist,

illness, and petty torments. The narrator describes the collection thus:

In fervently composing them, the author sought on the one hand to generalize reminiscences by selecting elements typical of any successful childhood -- hence their seeming obviousness; and on the other hand he has allowed only his genuine quiddity to penetrate his poems -- hence their seeming fastidiousness. At the same time he had to take great pains not to lose either his control of the game, or the viewpoint of the plaything. The strategy of inspiration and the tactics of mind, the flesh of poetry and the specter of translucent prose -- these are the epithets that seem to us to characterize with sufficient accuracy the art of this young poet.²³

Because Fyodor's imagination relates to the reader the contents of the collection, the chapter even cites the text of a poem which was not submitted for publication. The narrator remarks:

This poem is the author's own favorite, but he did not include it in the collection because, once again, the theme is connected with that of his father and the economy of art advised him not to touch that theme before the right time came.²⁴

Earlier in the same section the reader is told that a special intuition had forewarned Fyodor that he would want to speak of his father, not "in miniature verse with charms and chimes, but

in very, very different manly words."²⁵ These remarks foreshadow Fyodor's gradual shift from poetry to prose in his artistic maturation. This change is manifested in Chapter Two when he attempts to write a biography of his father, and in Chapter Three when he does write a biography of N.G. Černyševskij.

The second focal point of Chapter One is the imaginary story of Yasha Chernyshevski's tragic suicide. Through his attendance at a series of literary gatherings organized to honor Yasha, Fyodor becomes acquainted with the boy's parents. Because of his literary gift (his poems had just appeared) and his physical resemblance to the deceased, Mme. Chernyshevski floods Fyodor with details about Yasha's life and the circumstances of his death. It soon becomes clear to Fyodor that he is being placed under an obligation to write a povest' (long short-story) about Yasha. Fyodor outwardly rejects the temptation to write this story, saying that he "would have become enmired involuntarily in a 'deep' social-interest novel with a disgusting Freudian reek."²⁶ In so doing Fyodor rejects the notion of writing literature that is didactic in nature; he refuses to commit his talent to the creation of a story which only would attract "corny" men of ideas, and "serious novelists" who would project a social-psychological frame over the introspective moments of the text. He is made speechless

by the suggestion of such a project. Nevertheless, there follows in the text the story of Yasha's death.

Yasha and Fyodor had both attended Berlin University but had never known each other. Yasha becomes involved in a complex triangular affair with a fellow student, Rudolph Baumann, and a young Russian girl, Olya G. The relationship is described by Yasha as "a triangle inscribed in a circle";²⁷ the circle represented the normal friendship, and the triangle the more complex love relationship. Olya is in love with Yasha, and Yasha is in love with Rudolph. The three agree never to discuss their love relationship, fearing that it would erode their friendship. A New Year's celebration and too much champagne lead to a discussion, however, and gradually the relationship begins to disintegrate. The final blow occurs when Yasha catches Rudolph having sexual relations with Olya. In a moment of metaphysical irrationality, Yasha decides that all three should end their lives together and enter into another consciousness, once again friends. Taking the initiative because of his seniority, Yasha shoots himself; the other two, however, see the absurdity of the whole affair and report the incident to the police.

Despite the professed artistic qualities in the imagined story, Fyodor prefers to think of it as merely a bit of reportage. For him it is really only a piece of raw material for a

novelist's future use. To sustain this conviction and to show that the tale is actually held within the bounds of reportage, Fyodor tacks onto the end a page-long chronicle of news events which took place at the same time as or shortly after Yasha's death.²⁸ The fact is, however, that the story is so artistically ordered that Nabokov himself published it as a separate short story entitled "Triangle in a Circle" in The New Yorker.²⁹ Although rejecting the temptation of writing the story, Fyodor's imaginary prose reveals to him the power of that genre; later he will exploit this aspect of his talent to the fullest in his biographies and that "thick, old-fashioned novel," The Gift.

The third focal point in Chapter One is an imaginary conversation which Fyodor holds with a rival poet, Koncheyev. The conversation takes place at the end of the chapter after Fyodor has left the Chernyshevski residence. He leaves with Koncheyev, but the two men part at the first street intersection; the reader does not know this, however, until the dialogue is over. In the course of four and a half pages the conversation centers around a brief but highly accurate survey of Russian literature during the nineteenth century (although the Russian Symbolists are also evoked). In a rapid and allusive manner the great authors of the period are mentioned; and when the conversation has ended, the reader realizes that at least a minor point has been made about each of these writers. In holding this

imaginary conversation Fyodor works out the artistic credo which will serve him throughout the rest of the novel. He dismisses all the "progressive," socially-oriented, utilitarian writers, poets and critics who, in his opinion, marred the shiny surface of Russian literature. In so doing Fyodor shows his predilection for the aesthetic side of literary art, as opposed to the didactic side. Later, in his biography of N.G. Černyševskij, he manifests his beliefs and feelings in a full scale attack against the traditional views about the purpose of literature. The third focal point therefore exemplifies Fyodor's fully matured philosophical outlook. It now remains only for him to practice and to understand the nature of his gift. He realizes the power and the beauty of prose compared with poetry; in Chapter Two he turns to the genre of biography to test his insights and ability.

Chapter Two shows the maturation of Fyodor as a writer under the stylistic influence of A.S. Puškin. In addition, the chapter centers around the problem of Fyodor trying to mold his aesthetic artistic inspiration into the factual form necessary in the biographical genre. As the chapter opens the reader is shown several isolated incidents of Fyodor's childhood which he has evoked in his imagination. The narrator tells the reader

that Fyodor is intensely disturbed by the mediocrity of the life which surrounds him. Unable to force himself to mix with people either for money or for pleasure, Fyodor spends most of his energy in pursuit of his fleeting memories. During the course of the chapter his mother arrives to spend a few days with him during the Christmas holiday season. During her short visit, she and her son reminisce about the happy times the family had in Berlin three years ago. Fyodor finds solace in their recollections, and is especially excited when his mother renews his hope that his long-missing father is still alive and will return someday. Actually Fyodor is somewhat ambivalent about his father's reappearance; although he often imagines what it would be like if he did return, Fyodor has generally accepted the fact of his father's death. Nevertheless, he realizes the importance of these memories for himself and his mother, and continues to soothe her with his ostensible hope. Fyodor, like his literary predecessor, Ganin, realizes that the past is irrevocable, and that to live believing only in the past is fruitless. Fyodor decides to take a more positive approach to the immortalization of his father's memory by writing his biography. "Chapter Two is a surge toward Pushkin,"³⁰ Nabokov wrote in the foreword. Thus the literary focal point of this chapter centers around Fyodor's literary progress under the impact of his studies of Puškin, studies which lead him to "his

attempts to describe his father's zoological explorations."³¹

Before he comes under Puškin's influence, however, Fyodor reaches a point in his literary development where he suspects that poetry can no longer sustain his creative urges. While his mother is visiting him, he takes her to a public poetry reading during which Fyodor himself reads some of his own work. After this unsuccessful attempt to charm others with his poetic gift, Fyodor realizes that he must discard the genre:

...Fyodor thought with heavy revulsion of the verses he had written that day, of word-fissures, of the leakage of poetry, and at the same time, with proud, joyous energy, with passionate impatience, he was already looking for the creation of something new, something still unknown, genuine, corresponding fully to the gift which he felt like a burden inside himself.³²

After his mother leaves, Fyodor begins to read the works of Puškin which he had only cursorily looked at as a child. In immersing himself in the biographical and critical studies of Puškin, Fyodor realizes how he can satisfy fully his creative urge. He writes a letter to his mother telling her of his project to write a biography of his father. She replies with the guiding remark that although she believes in his ability to fulfill this task, she also realizes the inherent difficulty of such an undertaking. She cautions him to remember that he will need a great deal of exact information and very little "family

sentimentality." Fyodor believes that he sees the problems, and subsequently decides to perfect his prose style before he begins to write. Consequently, under the masterful example of Puškin's prose, Fyodor establishes a rigorous training program to develop his style:

Continuing his training program during the whole of spring, he fed of Pushkin, inhaled Pushkin... . He studied the accuracy of the words and the absolute purity of their conjunction; he carried the transparency of prose to the limits of blank verse and then mastered it.³³

Thus did Fyodor "harken to the purest sound of Pushkin's tuning fork."

While simultaneously collecting data about his father and his expeditionary journeys to Central Asia and beyond, and studying the prose style of his poetic master, "Pushkin entered his blood. With Pushkin's voice merged the voice of his father."³⁴ He makes the rhythm of Puškin's era commingle with the rhythm of his father's life. Following Fyodor's long preparations and research, there appears to be the beginning of the biography. However, the factual details given are only the final touches that will be incorporated into the biography after the real essence of his father has been defined. Fyodor wants to convey the inner nature of his father, to reveal his unique human essence and leave the factual data to the superficial biographer

or to the readers of encyclopedias. Such an approach, he feels, will not only give life to his father's memory, but will record the quintessence of his father's personality. Fyodor wonders whether he should really pry into this aspect of his father's memory. He turns to his mother for advice and some indication of what he was really like. She writes him a long letter in response in which she relates a highly personal account of some of their early days together. Fyodor reads the anecdote and wonders if this is the type of information that should be included in biography. He senses that it is too markedly tinted with personal sentimentality, the nature of which would be incomprehensible to those who did not know his father personally. Fyodor next contemplates the question of whether a biography can artistically consist of anecdotes such as the one furnished by his mother. He concludes that it cannot and abandons the plan to determine his father's inner being. He then turns to a more ascertainable facet -- the tastes and mental attitudes that have been transferred to him as the son.³⁵ The narrator writes:

In general our whole daily life was permeated with stories about Father, with worry about him, the expectations of his return, the hidden sorrow of farewells and the wild joy of welcomings. His passion was reflected in all of us, colored in different ways, apprehended in different ways, but permanent and habitual.³⁶

Although this view of his father might also be unintelligible to

most readers of the biography, Fyodor feels that at least it will convey the unique magic with which his family was imbued because of his father's radiant personality. Indeed, the magic is perfectly conveyed by Fyodor, but without the "family sentimentality" against which his mother had cautioned him. Thus his account attains the level of true poetry in prose.

All of these musings lead Fyodor to imagine that he had actually accompanied his father on several of his far-flung explorations. The text of the novel contains an account of such an expedition in which, writing under the stylistic influence of Puškin, Fyodor describes in exotic yet scientifically exact detail the vegetation and the wildlife along the way.³⁷ The account, however, is only imaginary, yet as such represents one of Fyodor's most outstanding imaginative flights. For him the real excitement in preparing to write this work is not so much the preservation of his father's memory, but the thrill he receives in the "telling" of the tale. But once again, as with his poetry, Fyodor senses an inability to properly express his poetic visions. He consequently decides to abandon the project with the realization that he cannot mold the aesthetic demands made on himself to fit the rigorous factual demands of biographical prose. The project is unattainable; he remarks in a letter to his mother:

...But what is the use of that to me [his research, T.P.A.] when this labor of liberation now seems to me so difficult and complicated and when I am so afraid I might dirty it with a flashy phrase, or wear it out in the course of transfer onto paper.³⁸

He later adds the following remarks:

I myself am a mere seeker of verbal adventures, and forgive me if I refuse to hunt down my fancies on my father's own collecting ground. I have realized, you see, the impossibility of having the imagery of his travels germinate without contaminating them with a kind of secondary poetization, which keeps departing further and further from that real poetry with which the live experience of these receptive, knowledgeable and chaste naturalists endowed their research.³⁹

Despite Fyodor's disillusionment with his efforts, he has managed to convey in imagination a highly stylized biography of his father which indeed conveys the uniqueness of his character. And although he regards his attempt in the biographical genre a failure, it, in fact, serves as the necessary training for his creation of a new form of biography. This form will be solely dependent on Fyodor's aesthetic urges. The experiences with his father's attempted biography furnish Fyodor with the theoretical justification of his artistic belief; Chapter Three shows him attaining a greater degree of artistic maturity when he writes the biography of N.G. Černyševskij; Chapter Four is the fruit of his belief.

Chapter Three serves primarily as a transition chapter in the story of Fyodor's artistic maturation. It has three major lines of development: Fyodor's recollection of how his interest in poetry began and progressed to the point where he abandoned the genre for prose, his relationship with Zina, and the research and writing of a critical biography of Černyševskij.

The chapter opens with the memory of a young girl whom Fyodor had once loved. He recalls that it was originally because of his love for her that he was inspired to express his innermost feelings in poetry. There follows a lengthy description of his investigation of the creative process in poetry and the principles of Russian versification. In striving to find words and modes of expression to convey the inexpressible, he studied the classic poets of the nineteenth century and later the Russian symbolists. He meticulously examined their versifications, their rhyme scheme, and the sound clusters of their verse. In so doing Fyodor developed his own mode of expression after innumerable rudimentary efforts. At the conclusion of his studies he came to the realization that all that is worth cherishing in later Russian verse is a mere extrapolation of Puškin's artistry. He senses the hopelessness of creating anything new in Russian verse, and ultimately abandons verse in favor of the more flexible prose genre. This feeling of liberation from the demands of poetic expression, he says, stirred in him

when he was working on the little volume of verse described in the first chapter of the novel. The time of the action in the chapter under consideration is two years subsequent to the publication of this collection. And although he does not regret having written this work, he feels that it represents only the juvenile phase of his development. Beyond this, he looks back upon this early attempt as a pleasurable and necessary step in his literary maturation. In pondering who bought the fifty-one copies of the book, he informs the reader that he knows the fate of at least one copy; Zina Merta had bought one.

Zina is the stepdaughter of Fyodor's landlord. There follows a kaleidoscopic description of the circumstances of her life before she met Fyodor and of how her relationship with Fyodor developed. Aside from being a faithful companion and lover, Zina is significantly more important to Fyodor as an actuator of his effort to write "something to make everyone gasp."⁴⁰ Thus she aids and sustains him during his writing of Černyševskij's biography.

The decision to write this biography is conceived in his mind one day as he reads a hostile review of Koncheyev's most recently published collection of poetry. Fyodor suspects the pretentiousness of the review when the critic writes: "when the very air is imbued with a subtle moral angoisse..., abstract and melodious little pieces about dreamy visions are incapable

of seducing anyone."⁴¹ This review, in the tone of the utilitarian critics of the sixties in Russia, ultimately leads Fyodor to a study of the nineteenth century critics. His choice of Černyševskij, although originally suggested by Alexander Yakovlevich Chernyshevski in the first chapter (p. 52), is finally made when he buys a copy of the Soviet chess magazine 8 X 8; this contains an extract from Černyševskij's diary entitled "Chernyshevski and Chess." When Zina prompts him to write something which will be a true expression of his artistic genius, he half-jokingly says that he will write a biography of this progressive critic.

Later in the chapter Fyodor finally gets around to reading the article in the magazine, after he has solved all of the chess problems (he loves to create and solve chess problems). As he reads he takes careful note of the "drolly circumstantial style, the meticulously inserted adverbs, the passion for semi-colons, the bogging down of thought in midsentence and the clumsy attempts to extract it."⁴² As he reads on Fyodor is "amazed and tickled by the fact that an author with such a mental and verbal style was considered to have influenced the literary destiny of Russia."⁴³ He begins some preliminary research into Černyševskij's life and writings, "and as he read his astonishment grew, and this feeling contained a peculiar kind of bliss."⁴⁴ Later that week, while attending a social affair at the home of

the Chernyshevskis, Fyodor semi-humorously announces his project. Alexander Yakovlevich immediately warms to the idea:

'I begin to like the idea. In our terrible times when individualism is trampled underfoot and thought is stifled it must be a great joy for a writer to immerse himself in the bright era of the sixties. I welcome it.'⁴⁵

Alexander Yakovlevich voices the traditional view of Černyševskij when, ignoring his anti-aesthetic, utilitarian approach to literature, he reveres him as the founder and protector of human rights, the cult of freedom, and the ideas of equality during Russia's stormy years of the last century. He feels that Černyševskij was a man with a vast, versatile mind who endured dreadful human sufferings for the sake of his ideology, for the sake of humanity, for the sake of Russia. This, he adds, redeems the harshness and rigidity of his critical reviews.

Alexandra Yakovlevna reacts the opposite way and wonders why Fyodor would want to choose this man as the subject of a biography when his whole mentality is so alien to the young writer. A third guest replies that he was never permitted to read Černyševskij's works, and often confused the title of his What is to be Done? with Gercen's Who is Guilty? Still another says that he has no interest in the anti-aesthetic views of Černyševskij. Needless to say the variety and intensity of

reaction to his proposed project only makes Fyodor's decision final; he must go ahead with the writing.

Contrary to the opinion of Alexander Yakovlevich that the incorporation of certain facts in the study is more important than the approach, Fyodor realizes during his research that the approach is the most important aspect of his projected work.

He describes his plan to Zina thus:

'I want to keep everything as it were on the brink of parody... . 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. And most essentially, there must be a single uninterrupted progression of thought. I must peel my apple in a single strip, without removing the knife.'⁴⁶

Fyodor immerses himself into the development of Russian thought surrounding Černyševskij and finds that he must extend his field of activity two decades in either direction. He studies in depth the fifty years of utilitarian criticism, from Belinskij to Mikhajlovskij, in order to sort out the "mishmash of political ideas of the time."⁴⁷ In so doing "it seemed to him that in the very roll call of names, in their burlesque, there was manifested a kind of sin against thought, a mockery of it...."⁴⁸ Fyodor concerns himself not so much with the political philosophies of Černyševskij, as with the latter's predominant views on aesthetics

and literary art. Gradually, as the winter passes, Fyodor's efforts pass imperceptibly from accumulation to creation. In a flash of intense inspiration when he is supposed to be at a party with Zina, Fyodor finishes his writing. Both he and Zina are overjoyed and begin immediately to search for a publisher. There are difficulties, as Fyodor expected, but he finally manages one day to find a publisher with the aid of a second-rate émigré playwright. The chapter closes with Fyodor about to tell the good news to Zina. Chapter Four contains the entirety of "The Life of Chernyshevski."

Insofar as they are known at all, the great majority of Russian writers of the nineteenth century are admired in the West. The writings of Lermontov, Gogol', Turgenev, Gončarov, Dostoevskij, Tolstoj, and Čekhov are generally found in anthologies of world literature; many times their works are read and discussed in classes of comparative literature. Russians and non-Russians are likely to disagree on the relative merits of each of these writers, but in general both sides acknowledge their outstanding contributions to literature. Less well known in the West, but equally important to the development of Russian literary thought at that time, are those Russian thinkers who are not primarily recognized for their imaginative writing.

Again, Russians and non-Russians would disagree about the quality of their literary contributions. Alexander Gercen, for example, is treated with much more reserve in Russia than abroad. Russians, however, highly acclaim such writers as Belinskij, Dobroljubov, and Pisarev. For the most part, many of the great nineteenth century revolutionary writers are frowned upon politically in Russia, and are tolerated only on intellectual grounds abroad. Nikolaj Gavrilovič Černyševskij, however, remains a major figure in the Russian heritage on whom natives and foreigners cannot agree. Since Chapter Four of The Gift presents a satirical biography of this figure, and since this lampoon will be a first introduction to his life for many of Nabokov's readers, it is useful to sketch briefly the traditional biography in order to understand better the nature of Nabokov's invective.⁴⁹

Nikolaj Gavrilovič Černyševskij (1828-1889) was a writer and a socio-political philosopher during the socially unstable and politically reactionary middle years of the nineteenth century in Russia. Despite his unquestionable influence on the development of Russian political thought during those years, he is more widely known in the West for his role in the development of Russian literary criticism. As is generally the case even in contemporary Russian society, literature and politics were two realms of human activity which were inseparable in Černyševskij's

day. Thus most of Černyševskij's review-essays were more concerned with social criticism than literary appraisal. Because of his deep-seated belief that literature was to depict the wretched condition of the people and thus advance the cause of reform, he used his criticism either to condemn or to praise those writers who did or did not follow this plan. Many times he simply expounded on burning social or political questions under the guise of literary criticism. As a proponent of the utilitarian approach to literature, his aesthetic philosophies eventually became the basis for the doctrine of "Socialist Realism" during the Soviet regime. For him, art had to serve a purpose and be understandable to all mankind if it was to be meritorious. Needless to say, his merit as a thinker and writer was seriously questioned during his lifetime; today, his merit remains an issue on which Russian and foreign opinions are most widely divergent.

Most literate Russians regard him as a perceptive philosopher, a discerning and sometimes caustic social critic, the author of a great novel (What is to be Done?), a martyr to a revolutionary cause, and a noble person. Communists revere him as one of the great liberators of mankind; accordingly, they believe that he was the greatest revolutionary of any country who was not actually a Marxist because he independently discovered many of the doctrines of Marx. Along with Marx and

and Engels, he is seen as one of the three great teachers of Lenin. Non-Communist Russians usually regard Černyševskij as a giant from an age when the revolutionary movement and its leaders were still pure.⁵⁰ As an example of the traditionally held view of Černyševskij's posthumous importance, Andrew Field quoted the Brockhaus-Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary:

His death had a significant effect towards returning him to his proper place. The press of various political shades paid him the tribute of respect for his extremely broad and strikingly multi-faceted knowledge-ability, his brilliant literary talent, and the extraordinary beauty of his moral character.⁵¹

On the other hand, non-Russians have rarely heard of Černyševskij; when they have, they usually do not remember his name as they do those of the literary giants of the period. Some may have heard of his celebrated novel, What is to be Done?, but they usually confuse it with Lenin's pamphlet of the same title. Specialists in Russian and Soviet studies must learn something about Černyševskij during the course of their training, but they usually do not return to him after that. The general consensus of opinion shows that he is too politically oriented, and a boring novelist.

Born in Saratov on the Volga, Černyševskij led a difficult life. He faced the nearly insurmountable task of rising through the social ranks by his own initiative and innate abilities.

Because of his intelligence and ability to learn languages, he entered the Philological Institute of St. Petersburg University in 1846. There he developed many interests outside his chosen field, and generally educated himself beyond his social and financial status.

The period of history into which Černyševskij was born was important for the development of his social and aesthetic opinions. The reactionary régime of Nicholas I and the difficulties he encountered with Russia's class structure forced him into political rebellion and intellectualism; he saw this as the only rational response to the wretchedness and injustices of Tzarist rule. He believed that science was the key to the alleviation of human suffering and the elimination of tzars and petty bureaucrats. In opposing the Tzarist régime, he urged the reorganization of society along socialist lines; Russian arts and letters were to be the medium for dissent and ethical judgments.

Having a strong inclination towards intellectual matters, he maintained a deep and abiding interest in philosophy throughout his life. As a follower of German materialism, he denied the existence of God and the immortality of man's soul; he believed that the universe and man were only various combinations and activities of matter. He further asserted that man's only sources of true knowledge were the various natural and

social sciences. And although he believed in a deterministic universe, he always made strong ethical and political demands on all mankind. He believed in "egoism," the pursuit of enlightened self-interest that would simultaneously coincide with the interests of mankind. By this he meant a kind of utilitarian self-development involving radical activities. He completely rejected the social and political conditions of the Russia in which he grew up; because of this, many of his critics seized upon the term "nihilism" to describe his extensive denunciations.⁵² But Černyševskij's reactionary activities were, in fact, only a pose for him, considering the great progress that was made in social reform during Alexander II's "relaxed" reign. Nevertheless, the government of the time was not especially tolerant toward extremist or mildly-subversive activity. Černyševskij was consequently arrested in June of 1862 and sent to St. Peter and St. Paul's Fortress in St. Petersburg for two years. Just prior to this incident, the journal for which he wrote and which he edited, Sovremennik (The Contemporary), had been ordered to close by government decree for printing extremist views. He was sentenced to seven years at forced labor and lifetime exile on May 24, 1864. He lived the next fifteen years in various Siberian cities. Only in 1889 was he allowed to return to Saratov; at that time he was near death. He finally died a few months after his homecoming.

Černyševskij's literary output was scant. His first major publication was his Master's Essay, The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality (1855). This work was originally conceived as a means of getting a professorship at the university. Even at that time, however, his radicalism made it unlikely for him to receive an appointment; his thesis ended his chances because it invited so many revisions and excisions from the government censoring board. His second work, Essays in the Gogol Period of Russian Literature, appeared serially in The Contemporary. Although constituting a major contribution to the critical writing of this time, the work is generally recognized as a prime example of Černyševskij's civically-oriented literary criticism. During his two-year imprisonment he wrote What is to be Done?, which appeared serially between March and May in the pages of The Contemporary. Shortly thereafter, it was published in book form, but only because of a misunderstanding between the police and the censor. The book was banned and remained so until the 1905 Revolution, when it suddenly reappeared and was hailed as an outstanding revolutionary novel. Although a forceful radical novel, the work today is generally regarded as artistically weak. Beyond this, Černyševskij wrote very little of significance because of legal restrictions; nevertheless, he had made his mark. His insistence on reason, science, materialism, revolutionary endeavor and self-sacrifice, socially useful

literature, and Russia's socialist future powerfully advanced the revolutionary cause of his time and that of the future Soviet era. Lenin was deeply impressed by What is to be Done?, which remained his favorite work of imaginative literature. After the Russian Revolution, Černyševskij was greatly honored, reprinted, and propagandized throughout the entire Soviet Union as one of the truly great forerunners of the socialist revolutionary cause.⁵³

As concerns his views on literary art, Černyševskij did not value formal skill or private concern as the ultimate ends of art. Instead, literature was a means to express, illuminate, and promote his great aim -- the open, public, and inevitably political struggle to renovate human life in Russia and throughout the world. Flights of fancy in literature were unimportant to him. Černyševskij's Master's Essay contains the essence of his views on the necessary utilitarian function of art. In it he maintains that art is lower than science and that it must be made as much like science as possible:

'Respect for actual life, distrust of a priori hypotheses even though they tickle one's fancy, such is the character of the trend that now predominates in science. The author is of the opinion that our aesthetic convictions... should be brought into line with this.'⁵⁴

The major thesis of his essay was that art must be attractive to the masses, and not be merely "pure art" to amuse only a select

group of readers. This ethical and political position was later to become the founding principle of Socialist Realism. He underscored the necessary didactic element in a work of art when he wrote:

'The first and general principle of all works of art ... is to reproduce the phenomena of life that are of interest to man.'⁵⁵

What he meant was that a work of art must not be of interest only to the artist, but to mankind, to the bulk of men. If the common man was not able to understand the work, it was not fulfilling its purpose because "art has another purpose besides reproduction, namely to explain itself." He later remarked that only the untalented or lazy artist would portray what is of interest solely to himself:

'[Since man is]... 'interested in the phenomena of life, man cannot but pronounce judgment upon them, consciously or unconsciously. The poet or artist, unable to stop being a man, could not, even if he wanted to, refrain from pronouncing judgment on the phenomena he depicts ... this is another purpose of art, which places it among the moral activities of mankind.'⁵⁶

Thus his essay transformed aesthetics into a branch of revolutionary morality. "It provided the pattern after which the arts and letters became the chief mode of revolutionary struggle for the next generation. It supplied the rationale

by which revolutionaries could judge, condemn, and eventually remold the arts."⁵⁷ The choice of Černyševskij as the subject for a satirical biography is therefore not unexpected. Everything that Černyševskij stands for, aesthetically and politically, is diametrically opposed to Nabokov's (and Fyodor's) views. As has been suggested, Fyodor was originally attracted to Černyševskij as a subject because he realized that a great chasm existed between his weak artistic ability and the exalted place assigned him in Russian literature by literary historians. Fyodor's personal views on literature consequently place him in the same camp as Puškin, and in the camp opposite to Černyševskij. Fyodor's decision to write the biography therefore represents a long-awaited attack, as he sees it, against the principles of utilitarian art. His purpose is to expose Černyševskij as the undeserving leader of Russian literary tradition. He must show that his good intentions and his abundant sufferings in the name of righteousness "...cannot excuse the dullness, the dogmatism, and the anti-aesthetic bias on his judgments and influence."⁵⁸ "The Life of Chernyshevski" consequently forms the polemic climax of the third narrative level in The Gift. Fyodor challenges the anti-aesthetic tradition incarnate in followers of Černyševskij's ideas; he exposes them as responsible for the philistinism insidiously omnipresent in the Russian cultural and literary spheres.

To describe the biography in detail would necessitate a separate extensive study. One must say, however, that the structure and lexical devices in the work point to the technical sophistication of Fyodor's (and Nabokov's) literary gift. Artifice, while an essential facet of the work, is subtly employed and lends a unique quality to the craftsmanship. The research on Černyševskij is thorough and impressive; at times it presents a very amusing portrait of this man, while at the same time dealing with a serious social, philosophical, and literary problem. In purely biographical terms, the side of Černyševskij which Fyodor shows his readers is mockingly irreverent. In choosing facts to describe his life, Fyodor selects those which are frequently bypassed by other biographers. The details which Fyodor drags up show Černyševskij as a cretinous idealist; this destroys his hallowed public interest. Fyodor goes one step further in his satire, however, by inventing a previous biographer named Strannolyubski as a collaborator in his fantasy biography. Through him, Fyodor introduces many invented facts which further destroy Černyševskij's reputation. In so doing, Fyodor takes full poetic license with the biography and masters that genre as he was unable to do with the planned work on his father. The difference here is that he can freely satisfy his creative aesthetic urge without destroying the factual element necessary in biography; the "telling" of the life

provides more pleasure than the orderly presentation of factual material. Furthermore, in choosing to recount this life by structuring the tale around personal themes ("traveling," "angelic clarity," "pastry shops"), Fyodor is able to illustrate artistically his ideas of what life actually is and how lives are really shaped. The seemingly inconsequential details comprising Černyševskij's life actually enliven the subject and give the reader a fairly accurate indication of the man's true inner essence. With the writing of this work, Fyodor achieves near perfection in his literary art. The culmination will be The Gift.

Chapter Five assembles Fyodor's experiences as they have been shown in the novel, and brings to a close the second and third narrative levels. In anticipation of the critical reaction against "The Life of Chernyshevski," the chapter opens with excerpts from imaginary reviews of the biography. The parodied criticisms are a settling of accounts between Nabokov and his critics; it is his final rebuttal of the many unjust charges laid against him by his compatriots. As could be expected, Fyodor is charged with being un-Russian and anti-émigré because of his irreverent treatment of Černyševskij. Nabokov discredits the remarks of these reviewers, however, either by stressing

their incompetence, or by making evident the politically reactionary or fanatically religious perspectives of the critics. The capricious and pretentious styles used by these appraisers only underscore the worthlessness of their judgments. Of the six reviews given, only Koncheyev's is positive, and it is the only one to treat the biography as a work of art. As Nabokov once said in an interview, "Everything that can profitably be said about Count Godunov-Cherdyntsev's biography on Chernyshevski has been said by Koncheyev in The Gift."⁵⁹ The closing words to Koncheyev's review reflect the seriousness of Fyodor's biography and provide a derisive commentary on the judgments of the other reviewers:

'Alas! Among the emigration one will hardly scrape up a dozen people capable of appreciating the fire and fascination of this fabulous witty composition.'⁶⁰

He continues by writing that in Russia itself, "you could not find even one to appreciate it...."⁶¹

The third level of the narrative in this chapter is therefore concerned primarily with the artistic invalidity of Russian émigré literature. The literary discussion which precedes the fifth chapter finally centers itself on the question of the émigrés' utilitarian approach to literature. Nabokov has dealt seriously with this question in previous chapters; he gives Černyševskij as the prime example of a man who fails art

and who is consequently failed by life. In Chapter Five Nabokov again attacks the problem with the serious intention of discrediting the traditional views, but this time in a more openly satiric manner. The communal view that worthwhile art must be utilitarian is put to final rest with Nabokov's mimicry of the stylistic and philosophic idiosyncracies of the reviewers. He condemns their methods as fruitless and their attitudes as banal. Nabokov casts another aspersion at émigré attitudes and abilities when Fyodor encounters the novelist Shirin during a leisurely walk. In evaluating Shirin, and all other émigré writers as well, Fyodor muses:

He was blind like Milton, deaf like Beethoven, and a blockhead to boot. A blissful incapacity for observation ... is a quality frequently met with among the average Russian literati, as if beneficial fate were at work refusing the blessing of sensory cognition to the untalented so that they will not wantonly mess up the material.⁶²

Fyodor rejects Shirin's proposal that he sit on the executive board of the Inspection Committee, by saying that he will not have any part in the petty, philistinistic squabbles of this group. Later Fyodor changes his mind and attends the meeting, but only as an observer. He does so with the hope that he might encounter readers who are unfavorably disposed toward his biography. While there he witnesses the petty arguments which

only justify his earlier convictions. He realizes that the situation of émigré literature is hopeless. As if to pass final judgment on the distressing ludicrousness of the meeting, Nabokov himself appears at the meeting under the name Vladimirov. This figure is described as being the author of two novels at the age of twenty-nine. Significantly, Vladimirov, like Fyodor, does not participate in the activities surrounding him, but only observes and barely conceals a disdainful smile. He is further described as being "derisive, supercilious, cold, [and] incapable of thawing to friendly discussions."⁶³ Fyodor finds solace in the general opinion of Vladimirov since people say the same thing about him and Koncheyev. He leaves the meeting with the feeling that his affinity with these talented artists is a sure indication of his future literary success.

Later in the chapter, Fyodor imagines a second conversation with Koncheyev in which Koncheyev makes several critical remarks about Fyodor's biography. In essence these judgments reveal some weaknesses of Fyodor's prose style and thus constitute the most perceptive criticism ever made of Nabokov's prose. Koncheyev allays Fyodor's fears, however, by saying that he will overcome these difficulties and will develop into a brilliant writer. He warns Fyodor, however, not to concern himself with pleasing the émigré reading public; he must write only for himself and his future readers; nothing else matters. Filled with

inspiration, Fyodor suddenly realizes that he has not been talking to Koncheyev, but instead has been daydreaming while sitting next to a German youth. He returns home and writes a letter to his mother in which he expresses his new-found conviction about Russian émigré literature. In the letter, he writes that he would gladly return to Russia in order to escape the oppressiveness of the émigré literary milieu. He even suggests that perhaps only in his homeland could he escape the "cloying rhetoric" of his compatriots; he realizes, however, that such desires are only idiotic sentimentality. He tells her that his place is outside Russia; there he can fulfill his artistic aspirations with the realization that someday he will live in Russia in his books, or at least in some researcher's footnote. He closes the letter with the glad news that he intends to start a new novel which will epitomize his artistic gift; this will be "a classical novel, with 'types,' love, fate, conversation, ... and with descriptions of nature."⁶⁴ With the announcement of this project, the first and second levels of the narrative are suddenly brought together and lead the novel to its swift conclusion.

Because Zina will be allowed to remain behind to tend the apartment while her parents are in Copenhagen setting up a new residence, Fyodor has a chance to finally consummate his love for her and to tie together the different strings of his émigré existence. The reader is assured at this point that the two

will marry and lead a happy life together. The second level is brought to a close when Fyodor realizes that the subject of his next major literary project will be the story of the growth and culmination of his and Zina's love affair. Fyodor says that the work must be "surrounded by dense life -- my professional passions and cares."⁶⁵ Zina contends that this would result in "an autobiography with mass executions of good acquaintances."⁶⁶ In response, Fyodor outlines for her his intended approach:

Well, let's suppose that I shuffle, twist, mix, re chew and rebelch 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.⁶⁷

This, ironically, is a description of The Gift. And, as such, the novel which Fyodor plans to write turns out to be The Gift, the work the reader is finishing. In it Fyodor will succeed in describing his "professional passions and cares," while twisting and re chewing the pertinent facts of his life and the affair with Zina. In addition, he will explore and exhibit the depth of his literary knowledge and the range of his ability while making incisive judgments about Russian literary art. The novel concludes with Zina and Fyodor returning to the apartment to consummate their love. The "dust" of the autobiography is

all but swept away, however, when Nabokov once again asserts the essentially literary plan of the novel by making the last paragraph stand beyond the conclusion of the principal narrative. As Simon Karlinsky has pointed out, it is a parody of an Onegin stanza printed to look as if it were prose. In it Nabokov speaks without disguise and pays final homage to Puškin, the greatest writer of all Russian literature.⁶⁸ The final statement that these words do not "terminate the phrase" indicates the basically circular form of the novel. The reader can look forward to reading The Gift. At the conclusion, then, Fyodor has matured as an artist; he is happily and reciprocally in love with Zina, and he has managed to pass sound literary judgment on Russian literary art as he understands it. With the novel's conclusion Nabokov too has achieved his goal; the theme of art is unquestionably brought into center focus.

The Gift is Nabokov's most happy and most nostalgic novel. In it he enters into a dialogue about the development and relative merit of Russian literary art; he repudiates the émigré contention that he knows nothing about the Russian literary tradition and is outside of its influence; and at the same time he gives an unquestionable example of his "humaneness." Beyond all of this, he has written a remarkable classical novel in which he illustrates

that the theme of art is his primary concern. This novel therefore epitomizes all that Nabokov had been asserting thematically throughout his entire career as a Russian writer. The Gift is audaciously conceived and masterfully executed; and as the story of art and of an artist, it constitutes Nabokov's gift to the world and to life. In the end it opens up to reveal not an ending, but only a beginning. After this last Russian novel, Nabokov will go on to state his theme and develop his forms in America. Full literary maturity will already be his, artistic stature in this new land will grow, and Nabokov will find the ideal audience, just as Fyodor did in Zina and Koncheyev. Full appreciation and understanding of Nabokov's gift will come, however, only with recognition of the Russian novels, and in particular The Gift. They provide the key to everything that comes afterward.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Vladislav Khodasevič, "On Sirin," in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes, eds. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 96-101.

² Ibid., p. 101.

³ As mentioned in the Preface to this study, the system of transliteration employed in this dissertation is the one recommended by the Slavic Review. As also mentioned, the names of historical figures appear in their more accurate transliterated form, and not according to their conventional spelling. The names of the characters appearing in the novels, however, retain the spelling which Nabokov used in his translations. This system meets with some difficulties in this chapter, since some of the characters in The Gift are historical figures. As a result, the following deviation has been adopted in rendering names: the names of historical figures will continue to be rendered in their transliterated form, and the names of fictional characters will be rendered as they are given in the translation. When a conflict arises, however, the names of historical figures will be rendered in their transliterated form unless the reference appears in a quotation from the text; in this case they will be given as Nabokov transliterated them. Therefore, Puškin, for example, will be rendered as such in textual discussions. The more conventional spelling, Pushkin, will be retained in quoted textual examples. The spelling for the family name Chernyshevski is retained except in discussions of the historical figure, Nikolaj Gavrilovič Černyševskij.

⁴ L.S. Dembo, "Vladimir Nabokov, An Introduction," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 15.

⁵ Julian Moynahan, Vladimir Nabokov (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 37-38.

⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), the second page of the Foreword.

⁷ Simon Karlinsky, "Vladimir Nabokov's Novel Dar as a Work of Literary Criticism: A Structural Analysis," Slavic and East European Journal, Vol. VII, no. 3 (1963), 286.

- 8 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, p. 352.
- 9 Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 248.
- 10 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, the second page of the Foreword.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Karlinsky, "Vladimir Nabokov's Novel Dar...," 286.
- 13 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, p. 219.
- 14 Ibid., the second page of the Foreword.
- 15 See Gleb Struve, Russkaja literatura v izgnanii (N'ju-Jork: Izd. im Čekhova, 1956), p. 282, footnote 54.
- 16 Vladimir Nabokov in a BBC Television interview with Peter Duval Smith. See The Listener, November 22, 1962, p. 857.
- 17 Andrew Field, op. cit., p. 249.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, p. 20.
- 20 Ibid., p. 17.
- 21 Ibid., p. 18.
- 22 Ibid., p. 16.
- 23 Ibid., p. 21.
- 24 Ibid., p. 36.
- 25 Ibid., p. 27.
- 26 Ibid., p. 53.
- 27 Ibid., p. 54.
- 28 Andrew Field, op. cit., p. 243.

- 29 Ibid., p. 241.
- 30 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, the second page of the Foreword.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., p. 106.
- 33 Ibid., p. 109.
- 34 Ibid., p. 110.
- 35 Andrew Field, op. cit., pp. 16-17.
- 36 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, p. 118.
- 37 Julian Moynahan, Vladimir Nabokov, p. 38.
- 38 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, p. 150.
- 39 Ibid., p. 151.
- 40 Ibid., p. 206.
- 41 Ibid., p. 180.
- 42 Ibid., p. 206.
- 43 Ibid., p. 207.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid., p. 209.
- 46 Ibid., p. 212.
- 47 Ibid., p. 214.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Information about the life and works of N.G. Černyševskij was obtained from Francis B. Randall's work, N.G. Chernyshevskii. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967.
- 50 Francis B. Randall, p. 7.

- 51 As quoted by Andrew Field, op. cit., p. 20.
- 52 Francis B. Randall, op. cit., p. 9.
- 53 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
- 54 As quoted and translated by Francis B. Randall,
op. cit., p. 40.
- 55 Ibid., p. 50.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid., p. 52.
- 58 Julian Moynahan, Vladimir Nabokov, p. 39.
- 59 As quoted by Alfred Appel, Jr. in "An Interview
With Vladimir Nabokov," Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed.
L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin
Press, 1967), p. 21.
- 60 Vladimir Nabokov, The Gift, p. 320.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid., p. 327.
- 63 Ibid., p. 333.
- 64 Ibid., p. 361.
- 65 Ibid., p. 376.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Simon Karlinsky, "Vladimir Nabokov's Novel Dar...,"

CONCLUSION

Now that Nabokov is reaching old age, one might expect that he would spend his remaining years enjoying the recognition due after his impressive literary career. The fact is, however, that Nabokov has not yet received that recognition; at least he has not received it to the degree in which it is deserved. Although he has been mentioned as a possible candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature, he never has, in fact, been nominated. The general reading public is hardly aware of his writings with the exception of Lolita; even today, only fifteen years after its publication, readers do not necessarily associate Nabokov's name with that work as the author -- and they may not even know his name. Specialists in Russian literature also know little about this man, believing him to be just another mediocre émigré novelist who turned to American prose to support himself. This is not to say that Nabokov's most recent English language novels have not aroused the interest of serious readers of contemporary literature. But the fact is that his most devoted followers constitute only a small segment of the general reading public; even these disciples are concerned for the most part with his English prose only. One would venture to say that Nabokov cares very little about the lack of appreciation shown his work; he, like his fictional character Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, is concerned only with

future readers -- with himself as author projected forward into time. Nabokov continues to work at his art form, finding solace in the fact that at least he and his wife recognize and understand the genius of his talent. His most recent novel, Transparent Things, is yet another remainder that Nabokov is still with us, and still beyond most of us. Today, living in virtual isolation in Switzerland, Nabokov continues to build up that impressive corpus of work which someday will distinguish him as one of the most outstanding prose writers of the twentieth century. As for the moment, he is already a unique phenomenon in Russian and American letters.

As readers of this study have no doubt discerned by this time, the present writer has a deep respect for Nabokov's writings and for him personally. His iconoclastic, obstinate, and eccentric manner has been the very thing which attracted many of his most avid followers. One also feels respect for his literature because his themes and literary intentions, on close study, suddenly come alive; everything is meaningful. This is a personal reaction to Nabokov, but one suspects that it is unavoidable if one understands fully the importance of his prose. One feels that if others were to immerse themselves in a study of his works, they too would come away from Nabokov with a sense of awe and respect. The problem encountered by most readers is where to begin their study; Pale Fire, Ada,

and Transparent Things are at one end of the Nabokov corpus, and as such represent the culmination of nearly fifty years in literature. The place to begin is with those works written in the mid twenties and early thirties of this century. Between the years 1926 -1938 Nabokov wrote his eight major novels in Russian while living in Western Europe. The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze and to acquaint readers with the art of these works; they constitute the foundation of his more widely read English prose.

In deciding upon a critical approach to these novels, it was chosen to distinguish and formally analyze the most explicit and most important recurring single theme of these novels -- the theme of art. This approach appeared to provide the essential key to a deeper understanding of Nabokov's literary intentions in both his Russian and English prose. Prefacing the textual analyses, attention has been devoted to several facets of Nabokov's artifice to show that its complex integral parts reflect Nabokov's personal vision of life and reality in art. The intellectual aesthetics of games, deceptions, allusions, illusions, parodies, and distortions has allowed Nabokov to escape vulgarity and freakishness when he applies it to his writing. Thus, at one level, the theme of art concerns Nabokov's technical virtuosity. Another level shows this theme to be the portrayal of an individual who immerses himself in the aesthetic

aspect of some obsessive activity; this is the level at which the eight novels have been analyzed. Nabokov's protagonists are shown striving to slip out of their first consciousness by an escape into aesthetics. This definition of art evolves from the psychological approach to aesthetics which emphasizes the study of the creative process in the artist. Although the protagonists are usually shown working under the guise of some activity not usually associated with artistic endeavor, Nabokov carefully constructs their psychological make-up to show that this activity, at least for them, is basically artistic in nature. The theme of art therefore centers around the nature of the creative process and aesthetic sensibility. Only once, in The Gift, is the artist depicted directly. In some instances the theme of art manifests itself as an allegorical discussion of literary art between the characters and their creator. Also, the theme of art is seen as a discussion of the problems existing for the artistic process and the aesthete in an insensitive society. In general, then, this work is not a philosophical discussion of Nabokov's literary theory, but a reading of the eight novels. One feels that this approach will be more beneficial to scholars unacquainted with Nabokov's Russian novels. Studies of his technical devices, the brilliance of his language, his wit, and his impressionistic rendering of reality are still to be written.

Considering the structure and the nature of the present study, a lengthier conclusion is superfluous. One has already dealt specifically with the basic elements of Nabokov's artifice to ensure at least a basic understanding of his primary thematic intention. As concerns original conclusions regarding the novels, nearly all that can be usefully said about the chosen thematic approach has already been stated in chapters dealing specifically with those works. Thus, the interpretations offered constitute a basis for a deeper understanding of his novels and for further studies of related thematic topics. This study was originally conceived as a work from which chapters could be read separately as an introduction to any one of the eight novels. This has been accomplished. In so doing, many aspects of Nabokov's art have inevitably been left untouched. Nevertheless, one hopes that the insight afforded by this study or any of its chapters will foster future investigations into Nabokov's Russian oeuvre. As mentioned at the conclusion of Chapter Nine, they provide a key to Nabokov's art in general, and an insight into the writings of one of this century's most talented artists. It is essential to understand his Russian prose, because Nabokov's art is still evolving at the time of writing.

APPENDIX

ABSTRACTS OF UNPUBLISHED DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS

APPENDIX I

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS ART: AN ESSAY ILLUSTRATED BY STUDIES OF
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF HENRY ADAMS, ERNEST HEMINGWAY, AND
VLADIMIR NABOKOV [227 typed pages].

Kenneth Huntress BALDWIN, JR., Ph.D.
The John Hopkins University, 1970.

This dissertation presents an interpretive theory of autobiography as a genre in the first chapter and applies it, in the next three, to Henry Adam's The Education of Henry Adams, Ernest Hemingway's A Moveable Feast, and Vladimir Nabokov's Speak, Memory.

Traditionally, autobiography has been viewed as a branch of history, and particular life-stories have been judged on the basis of factual accuracy. Only recently have considerations of such factors as time, memory, and point of view suggested an authentic relationship between autobiography and fiction. After an exploration of this relationship, it is suggested in Chapter I that autobiographies may also be conscious literary creations - fictions of the self - with themes, images, and symbols structured by the creative imagination.

The full meaning of The Education of Henry Adams, for example, depends upon a metaphorical interpretation of literal events. Adams organized his personal narrative around a quest motif in which a spatial journey, both on land and water, becomes a temporal one. Particular people and events in the Education contribute to a larger synthesis in which life as a whole is seen as a journey with education the goal, time the antagonist, and death the outcome.

A Moveable Feast is Hemingway's version of the theme of the education of the artist. Its twenty chapters are really interlocking short stories that alternate between a description of the idyllic life of the young artist and a dramatization of the destructive forces of the external world. That artistic pattern governs Hemingway's manipulation of objective facts, and each chapter prepares, in some way, for the fall from innocence to experience which occurs in the last. The structure is completed by a complicated interweaving of symbol and metaphor through which Hemingway raises himself to the stature of artist-hero.

Speak, Memory is based on the sense of sight; a concentration on vivid acts of physical observation gradually grows into a figurative equivalent for the metaphysical process of perception. Nabokov also uses the patterns of light (conscious, imaginative existence) and dark (ignorance and death) to describe various stages of self-awareness. His interest in "seeing" various patterns, combined with a concentration on images of metamorphosis, leads Nabokov to the discovery of a spiral pattern in the events of his own past, a pattern that is at once the ethic and esthetic of Speak, Memory.

APPENDIX II

VLADIMIR NABOKOV: THE THEME AND PRACTICE OF ART [272 typed pages].

Irene Elizabeth BRENALVIREZ, Ph.D.
Arizona State University, 1970.

Vladimir Nabokov: The Theme and Practice of Art is a study of the thematic use of art and the fictional techniques that successfully support and enliven the art theme in Nabokov's novels, particularly Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada. Intensely concerned with art and aesthetics, Nabokov writes novels whose aestheticism is often their main point, and in his fiction he frequently explores the complex relationship between art and reality. A declared philosophical monist, whose view of reality resembles Whitehead's and Bergson's, Nabokov does not share the literary realist's dualistic concept of reality as an objective entity that can be apprehended and rendered in art. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, for example, the protagonist pursues the chimera that is the real Sebastian in order to write a book about him, but his efforts are futile. The point of the novel is that the artist who seeks to capture reality in a work of art is destined to fail because reality is unattainable. Art rather than reality, according to Nabokov, is the proper subject of art.

Referred to by appreciative critics as a magician, a conjurer, or an artificer, Nabokov is a masterly technician whose craftsmanship is undisguised in any fashion. By emphatically directing attention to the artifice of his works, Nabokov diminishes the conditioned responses of readers accustomed to realistic novels. Parody of various literary forms and conventions is the principal technique employed by Nabokov to sever the possible connection between situations created in various novels and analogous ones that might occur in what philosophers like G.E. Moore and Thomas Reid refer to as the world of ordinary experience. Other devices frequently utilized by Nabokov are works within a work, mirroring, doubling, and patterning. Nabokov's development as a writer is characterized by the constant refinement of methods he began to test as a young man and by the increasingly elegant combination and recombination of familiar techniques which, despite their long use, retain their aura of freshness and originality

even in Nabokov's most recent novels.

Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada are about artists and Nabokov's favored techniques are most successfully applied to the theme of art in these three works. In Lolita is found the greatest portrait of the artist as failure that Nabokov has yet produced, Humbert Humbert, whose efforts to stop time and insure himself and Lolita immortality in his posthumously published memoir are based on a misunderstanding of both the nature of reality and the legitimate functions of art. Parody, particularly of Poe, literary allusion, and patterning of images, details of plot, and verbal repetitions turn Humbert's grotesque and unreliable narrative into a superbly formed work of art.

The relationship between art and criticism in Pale Fire is explored through doubling, mirroring, patterning, and parody, mainly of Swift and Pope. The doubling involves Shade and Kinbote, poem and commentary, New Wye and Zembla, as does the mirroring, which is reinforced by patterned mirror and glass images. Especially meaningful patterns are those concerned with Shade's death. Ada celebrates life, love, and art, thematically linked in a parodic memoir. Richly allusive, Ada is a compendium of nineteenth-and twentieth-century literary conventions, which are transcended by the form of Ada itself. This form emerges out of the metaphoric relationship of the work within the work and the rest of the novel and from the repetitive patterns of various allusions, particularly to Chateaubriand, Baudelaire, and Marvell. Van Veen, Ada's narrator, represents the godlike power of the artist as creator, who, like Nabokov, can bring into being universes entirely his own.

APPENDIX III

VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S AMERICAN FICTION.

Leonard FELDMANN.

Although this dissertation was begun for the Department of English and Comparative Literature for Columbia University in 1966 personal correspondence with the Thesis Director has revealed that the work was never finished, at least not for that department.

APPENDIX IV

READING NABOKOV [346 typed pages].

Douglas Russel FOWLER, Ph.D.
Cornell University, 1972.

This dissertation is a study of Vladimir Nabokov's fiction in terms of the constancy of its character types, esthetic concerns and narrative design. The novels examined are Bend Sinister, Pale Fire, Pnin, Lolita, and Ada; the stories examined are "Cloud, Castle, Lake," "Lance," "Signs and Symbols," "Spring in Fialta," and "Triangle in a Circle;" a good deal of reference is made to Nabokov's autobiography Speak, Memory and to his own critical work; and his poetry serves here to reflect in microcosmal concentration the themes and predilections of his prose.

The readings are intended to establish certain generalizations about Nabokov's fiction. The most important of these generalizations is that claim that Nabokov creates within all his major novels an important figure I call an "equivalent," that is, a European male sensibility of enormous gifts whose mind and personality seem to resemble Nabokov's own, and that the narrative, thematic and structural elements of his major fiction can be viewed most productively as subordinate to Nabokov's interest in that equivalent sensibility. The presence of the equivalent in each fictional world seems to displace the narrative in some instances toward melodrama in which the equivalent is usually only a passive agent set upon by dangerous and insensitive automatons; in other instances, linear narrative suspense in the fate of the equivalent has been dismissed almost entirely, and our primary interest in the work at hand is in watching over the shoulder of the equivalent-as-artist as his sensibility plays upon memory and experience and shapes it into art. The readings try to show the limitation and obligations Nabokov has set for himself in creating a narrative subordinate to this equivalent.

One of the primary interests in my study is Nabokov's habitual concern with the preposterous horror at the fact that human consciousness, "the only thing in the world...now vaster than the starry sky, now smaller than a drop of mercury" is imprisoned in time-bound, "death-padded" mortality. A good deal

of attention is given to the clash of the sensibility of the equivalent with Time and with Death, and the claim is advanced that it is this undercurrent of outrage at the brutal and banal facts of Time and Death that helps create that atmosphere of fairytale and fantasy, madness and make-believe that marks Nabokov's created worlds.

The dissertation also discusses at length Nabokov's technical intentions and achievements as a stylist and narrative designer. He has claimed that great art affords us a realm of experience where "curiosity, tenderness, kindness and ecstasy" are normative, and one in which our satisfactions are both intense in degree and different in kind from other sorts of human experience. The techniques and predilections out of which Nabokov attempts to generate these satisfactions are a constant concern in my study.

The dissertation is addressed to the non-professional reader of Nabokov's fiction. Secondary material is brought to bear on the work at hand, but no familiarity with this material is assumed on the reader's part. The intent has been to provide a useful map of Nabokov's major landscapes without attempting to either replace the scenery or ignore the terra incognita.

APPENDIX V

FOLDING THE PATTERNED CARPET: FORM AND THEME
IN THE NOVELS OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV [278 typed pages].

Susan FROMBERG, Ph.D.
University of Chicago, 1966.

[No abstract for this dissertation is available. In lieu
of this, it is hoped that Dr. Fromberg's chapter headings
will give some indication of the dissertation's content.]

- Chapter I. Introduction.
 II. Pattern and Theme in The Eye.
 III. Invitation to a Beheading.
 IV. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.
 V. Bend Sinister and the Novelist as an
 Anthropomorphic Deity.
 VI. Crime and Punishment in Lolita.
 VII. The Links and Boblinks of Pale Fire.

APPENDIX VI

A STUDY OF MIRROR ANALOGUES IN VLADIMIR
NABOKOV'S PALE FIRE [293 typed pages].

Frank Joseph GALATI, Ph.D.
Northwestern University, 1971.

The purpose of the study is to examine mirror analogues in Pale Fire. For the study, a mirror analogue is understood to be that element in the novel, Pale Fire, which constitutes an equivalency or likeness to the form and function of a mirror. The use of the mirror has a long tradition in literature as a symbol of the artist's representation of reality. For Nabokov, the mirror serves both to reflect and to reveal. The study demonstrates that in Pale Fire, point of view, character doubles, time, language distortions, translations, literary allusions, and trompe l'oeil devices may be seen to function as mirror analogues.

The study points out that Pale Fire has been accused of being a spectacular game, void of real meaning or human warmth, but Pale Fire is a novel about love and death and the imagination of the artist. Pale Fire is viewed as a reflexive novel, a novel about itself, a work of narrative art that reveals the very nature of fictional art. Pale Fire is a novel about artists, biographers, and critics, who deal in various ways with the representation of reality in art and hope to reach a religious ultimate in the process.

As a meta-novel, Pale Fire continually turns in upon itself and features, through conscious artifice and an involved design, mirror reflections of its own nature and the nature of art. The dissertation suggests that by moving the reader through a series of representational levels, Pale Fire centers finally around the special reality of fiction, a reality which the novel sees as having more force and truth than the brutal reality of the non-fictive world. Pale Fire is seen to promote the reality of the imaginary.

The method of analysis in the study is practical. The text of the novel is kept constantly in view in order to allow the discussion of mirror analogues to grow out of close and careful examination of individual passages from the novel.

The first chapter of the dissertation serves as an introduction to the study. The second chapter examines point

of view as a mirror analogue. It is suggested that Nabokov uses point of view as an analogue for the mirror because he allows the novel to have a double perspective. Point of view, the study indicates, is established in the glass of the novel between the perspectives of the two narrators who may be seen to function as Doppelgänger. The third chapter considers time as a mirror analogue. The analysis is based upon Nabokov's discussion of the time spiral in his autobiography, Speak, Memory. Pale Fire is seen to have three mirrored time-zones: the thetic, antithetic, and synthetic arcs of the spiral. The fourth chapter examines the function of language distortions, word-play, and literary allusions as mirror analogue. In the sixth and concluding chapter the mirror is established as the central metaphor and the principal controlling element in the design of the novel.

APPENDIX VII

TYPES OF FORMAL STRUCTURE IN SELECTED NOVELS OF
VLADIMIR NABOKOV [134 typed pages].

Charles David NICOL, Ph.D.
Bowling Green State University, 1970.

This study of the formal structures in the novels of Vladimir Nabokov begins with an analysis of his manipulation of individual scenes, then considers the devices that determine the structure of various novels, and then attempts to establish the dynamic that informs the canon of Nabokov's novels.

The first chapter investigates Nabokov's manipulation of his reader's expectations as a formal device, with Laughter in the Dark as the primary example. Lolita, where the technique is modified, is compared with the earlier work.

The second chapter applies Nabokov's idea of "thematic designs" to Invitation to a Beheading. These inter-connecting networks of submerged references are seen as reinforcing the surface structure of the novel.

The third chapter investigates the larger structures that define the form of The Eye. The novel is seen as a series of different formal approaches to the writing of a novel, and these authorial perspectives are considered individually.

The long final chapter attempts a broad perspective on the organization of Nabokov's novels, through the application of a generalization about the interplay of memory and parody. This duality in Nabokov's aesthetics is investigated in Invitation to a Beheading, The Gift, Invitation to a Beheading, The Gift, Bend Sinister, Lolita, Pale Fire and Invitation to a Beheading.

APPENDIX VIII

VLADIMIR NABOKOV-SIRIN AS TEACHER:
THE RUSSIAN NOVELS [248 typed pages],

Stephen Jan Parker, Ph.D.
Cornell University, 1969.

Under the pseudonym of V. Sirin, Vladimir Nabokov wrote eight novels in Russian in the period 1926-1938. Drawing upon Nabokov's assertion that a novelist plays three roles in his novels, those of entertainer, teacher, and enchanter, the primary intent of this study was to identify Nabokov himself in one of these roles. Each of Nabokov's Russian novels were considered in their chronological order of publication in an attempt to identify Nabokov as teacher and to extract the substance of his teaching, both as related to each individual work and to his Russian novels as a whole.

Our study has determined that Nabokov emerges as a propagandizer and as a dispenser of information. We have found that he teaches through a variety of methods. In the most direct manner a character defends an identifiable small personal taste of the author. In the broadest manner the author's tastes and values are propagandized in the total attack on the poshlyaki (roughly, philistines) waged by narrator, characters, and situations. This attack ranges from the smallest details of everyday life to the weightier concerns of literary creation and criticism. The thematic polarity which we find in the novels between poshlyak vs. individual represents as well the polarity of the teaching. The continuous propagandizing against the poshlyaki is balanced by the positive propagandizing on behalf of the solitary protagonist.

Our study suggests a resolution to the two major diverse assessments of Nabokov's teachings--one of which proposes that Nabokov's fiction is "mainly concerned with the business of making art," and the other which proposes that Nabokov is very concerned with the human condition and views the world as a real and devastated prison from which the protagonist seeks his escape. On the one hand we have found that the bulk of Nabokov's propagandizing is indeed centered around the defense of the literariness of literature--the proper role of the

writer, his proper concerns and the nature and the correctness of his task. The constant didactic refrain is the autonomy of the artist and the independence of art free from social or ideological commitment. On the other hand, Nabokov's last two Russian novels in particular suggest that the world is also a prison. The conclusion drawn from our study is that the artist alone is able to perceive and then pursue the reflections of another, truer world. He is the unique individual amid the herd of poshlyaki, and he alone has the ability not only to perceive the other world, but more importantly to probe it and communicate his knowledge of it through the gift of his art.

Secondary concerns of this study were to consider the nature of the revisions in the English editions of the six Russian novels which have been translated, and to survey Russian émigré and English language criticism attending each of the novels. We have found that three of the novels were literally translated and that the English texts serve as ideal copies of the originals. Three other novels were greatly revised, and we have considered in each case and in some detail the nature and effect of these revisions. Our survey of criticism shows that Nabokov's critical bibliography consists mainly of short book reviews rather than lengthy in-depth studies of the individual works. In particular, we have elucidated the generally negative and controversial Russian émigré reception of Nabokov-Sirin's Russian novels.

APPENDIX IX

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PARODY IN THE MODERN
NOVEL: MANN, JOYCE, AND NABOKOV [186 typed pages].

Bertel Sigfred PEDERSEN, Ph.D.
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1972.

Traditionally discussions of parody and related forms have confined themselves to defining and identifying elements of parody in terms of split and discrepancy between "form" and "content." They have, with very few exceptions, such as the works of the Russian Formalists, failed to examine the ways in which parody participates in the literary tradition and its change. Unfortunately this critical tendency has had the affect* of limiting criticism on parodic works to the practice of labeling devices—a reductive practice which is particularly inadequate to the task of revealing the complex structures and metaphysics of modern parodic texts.

Thus in the first chapter, following a summary of recent discussions of the nature of parody, an alternative theory is outlined which is not based on assumptions of a distinction between form and content but rather, in accordance with the Russian Formalists, considers parody as a practice which "lays bare devices" formerly used without reflection. Parody can then be considered as a special form of irony orienting itself toward literary conventions and indicating their limited validity—a mode of writing which is an important factor in the dynamics of literary change. Finally the farcical aspect of parody is discussed in the framework of M. Bakhtin's aesthetics of the grotesque indicating the ability of the parodic practice to translate into laughter and mockery, and thereby transcend, the literary norms institutionalized by the tradition.

In the second chapter Doktor Faustus is interpreted as a complex paradigm in which the parodic practice is duplicated in a "theoretical" discussion of the function of parody—a discussion which is evolved from music, an art form not susceptible to a form/content dichotomy. Here the Bildungsroman and artist's biography constitute the immediate models for Mann's parodic practice which finds its final significance, however, in its attempt to demask the demonic as a problem which questions the very possibility of the work of art and the activity of writing.

* [sic, T.P.A.]

The third chapter begins with the transition from Mann to Joyce written in extension of Peter Egri's comparative study of the two writers. Parody in Ulysses, most frequently discussed in a traditional manner in connection with the "Oxen of the Sun" episode, is examined in detail in the "Tower" and "Cyclop" episodes to demonstrate its radical and complex basis. These sections and the larger structure of the Homeric parallels illustrate how various literary techniques and models are generated mockingly and exhausted parodically as a means of discovering the demonic paralysis of Dublin which lies at the center of the work.

The fourth chapter presents a discussion of two novels by Nabokov, Lolita and Pale Fire, in which the parodic narrative manner described in the earlier chapters is continued and modified. The problem of the attitude toward the literary tradition (the models for parody) is described in connection with the use of the models of the confession and the scholarly discipline of annotation to question finally the basic possibility of perceiving and writing coherently.

In conclusion the readings of the four novels are used to suggest the problem in which both theory and practice of parody find themselves situated: the refusal to accept institutionalized limitations and the effort to transcend those limits playfully.

APPENDIX X

THE MINOTAUR WITHIN: VARIETIES OF NARRATIVE
DISTORTION AND READER IMPLICATION IN THE WORKS
OF FRANZ KAFKA, JOHN HAWKES, VLADIMIR NABOKOV,
AND ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET [280 typed pages].

Linda SLOTNICK, Ph.D.
Stanford University, 1970.

This comparative work explores the structure and art of selected novels by Kafka, Hawkes, Nabokov, and Robbe-Grillet. Of main concern is the manner in which these novelists' philosophical, psychological, and moral preoccupations shape the very form of their fiction as well as the content.

A pained scepticism about man's ability to know his world or to judge his experiences in it underlies these novels. They suggest that objective truth is a dubious concept, that reality itself is subjectively imagined, and consequently, that realism is unattainable in art and actually incompatible with the act of artistic fabrication. To think or to judge is to invent. Uncertainty supplants truth, and the joy of deliberate invention replaces the satisfaction of knowledge. This is, essentially, a departure from traditional expectations of fiction, a departure especially evident in the form - the narrative distortion - which characterizes the novels studied. Chronological order and consistent narrative point-of-view, for example, are most determinedly violated by the authors. In general, wherever the techniques of realism might have been applied - in description, characterization, even in the likelihood of events - the authors use forms of distortion which clearly reject the concept of fictional realism. Their search for alternative modes of narration consequently questions our expectations of verisimilitude and asserts the essentially inventing nature of art. The vision of these novelists is frankly inventive, fabricating, artificial. Creation, not objective truth, is their ultimate goal.

Most significantly, the puzzles and plot-mazes these novelists construct force the reader to become an active participant in the invention and ordering of the plot. In fact, the reader becomes a co-creator, a dreamer, a novelist. Together with the authors and their narrating personae, he, too, becomes implicated in the invention and judgment contained in the fiction.

My introductory chapter studies in detail the intellectual condition which informs the fiction of Kafka, Hawkes, Nabokov, and Robbe-Grillet. It considers problems of phenomenology, narrative voice, morality, and reader implication. Similarities aside, in their search for meaningfully new modes of narration, these authors create divergent fictional constructs. The emphasis of this work rests on that divergence, and subsequent chapters take up closer textual analysis.

Kafka's The Castle is seen largely as a phenomenological search for absolute knowledge within a world of fluid apprehensions. Hawke's The Cannibal extends, morally and politically, the phenomenological confusion characterized by Kafka. The inventive quality of knowledge and art is explicit in The Cannibal, for Hawkes liberates the narrative voice from the limitations of point-of-view. The discussion of Second Skin expands further the exploration of Hawkes' imaginative and moral vision. In both novels fantasy, plot distortion, and narrative voice engage the reader in the act of inventing and judging. Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading seems to be a political novel but gradually reveals itself a playful and fantastic artifact. Pale Fire is a more complex invention which implicates the reader in both the humor inherent in creation and the painful despair and loneliness which are its inevitable companions. Finally, Robbe-Grillet's novels trace a progression towards total fantasy. The Voyeur, by involving the reader inextricably in the mental processes of an inventing consciousness, creates intense moments of psychological and moral implication; Jealousy expands the exploration of alternate versions of fact; and In the Labyrinth centers on the evolution of the imaginative potentials which reside in such alternate versions.

Seen together, these novels do not represent any one idea of a modern novel, but they do express divergent creative approaches to the philosophic and esthetic problems of our day.

APPENDIX XI

THE NECESSARY RIPPLE:

THE ART OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV [419 typed pages].

Carol Ann Traynor Williams, Ph.D.
The University of Wisconsin, 1967.

"The Necessary Ripple," by which Nabokov describes Gogol's art, aptly defines his own aberrant images of "real life." These images illuminate the pervasive contemporary rhetoric of antagonistic intimacy, by which Nabokov invites his reader to a communication which, because of his rebuffs (e.g., misleading or withheld information, unreliable "voices") appears to be a delusion, but which rewards the reader who decodes the author's "message" that paradoxically they share knowledge of each man's essential discreteness and mystery. Like his rhetoric Nabokov's subject is ironic: an artistic man's impulse to possess beauty, knowledge, or immortality dehumanizes, or kills both his subject and himself, no less human.

Chapter II presents Pale Fire as the irony of a translator - Nabokov, translating Eugene Onegin--who compares his mean self to the god-like artist. This analysis introduces Nabokov's metaphysics (Chapter III) and his aesthetic (Chapter IV) by way of Kinbote-Shade-Gradus, one artist-man, pathetic--but ironically triumphant--in a divine aspect (Kinbote), fated to kill and to die (Gradus), blundering, but sane enough to learn his (mortal) place: Shade. Like those of Poe and Baudelaire, Nabokov's philosophy-aesthetic appears as the paradox of artist-heroes who reach for divine Oneness while cherishing the (paradoxically) most holy human characteristic, the discreteness which dooms their quest. The "mad" outcast (Smurov, Sebastian, Pnin, Cincinnatus, Krug, Humbert, and several short story characters) is equally pathetic and divine: thus Nabokov preserves the enigma of the gods' presence in life. Absolute unity is circular, but man's "'urge to break out of the [mortal] circle'" is his "'howl for...freedom,'" i.e., for immortality (The Gift): "The spiral is a spiritualized circle" (Speak, Memory), for "...nameless bliss no [human] brain can bear" ("Restoration"). Nabokov, insisting on man's original ignorance, refuses to "name," hence his collector of beauty, Humbert, is doomed for "pinning" Lolita.

After Chapter V, a history of the rhetoric of insult and deceit concentrating on Sterne and Gogol, Chapters VI-VIII explore the technique for his philosophy-aesthetic--primarily his rhetoric (VI) and his tri-arc'd Hegelian "pattern" (VIII), and also the image and rhythms of several games (tennis, chess, and make-believe) which structure his works. Nabokov's rhetoric is outlined in Speak, Memory, Chapter 14, Section 3, which is (deceptively) about chess-problem solving, but which actually directs the "ultra-sophisticated" reader on Nabokov's "round-about" way through Zemblalands to the "synthesis of... artistic delight" in which the apparently contradictory thetic and antithetic "arcs" of every Nabokov hero and each plot are reconciled in the Hegelian manner, i.e., aufheben, or "put aside," in the sense both of "preserved" and "cast off." Devices to obscure "truth" in the novels include point-of-view shifts, tricks on traditional narrative devices--e.g., the trustworthy narrator, the climax to a suspense "pattern," and realism (e.g., Lolita's coincidences)--and, above all, the merger of life and art in, especially, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Laughter in the Dark, Invitation to a Beheading, and Lolita, a correspondence represented supremely by the game structure of Nabokov's art.

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Note: A near complete bibliography of Nabokov's writings through May of 1966 can be found in Andrew Field's Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, and Company, 1967), pp. 352-380. Mr. Field used as a base for his listings of Nabokov writings the bibliography compiled by Dieter E. Zimmer entitled: Vladimir Nabokov: Bibliographie des Gesamtwerks (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1963; revised edition 1964). In striving to perfect Zimmer's compilation, Mr. Field chose to alter Zimmer's entry format in order to increase its readability and usefulness. In addition to corrections, fuller entries, and the inclusion of over eighty items not found at all in Zimmer's bibliography, Mr. Field added [on his pages 353-367] "over three hundred additional listings (such as first lines from all poetry collections)." Despite these efforts, however, Mr. Field's bibliography is still incomplete. Nevertheless, one may say that virtually everything of importance has been included. The only omissions of Nabokov's works are: (a.) his most recent writings, (b.) the translated titles of three of his early Russian-language novels, (c.) a few now nearly inaccessible early poems and translations, (d.) an occasional fragment from the Cornell Daily Sun, and (e.) several short poems and reviews from some issues of the Paris published Russian émigré periodical, Poslednie Novosti (Latest News).

One additional feature of Mr. Zimmer's bibliography deserves mention. For those interested in the exact Russian titles and all information concerning the translation of Nabokov's works, Zimmer's listings in the revised 1964 edition are complete and correct with reference to all that Nabokov had written up to 1963.

In order to present a workable bibliography of primary sources for this dissertation, only Nabokov's novels and memoirs have been included. This was done solely because of the existence of Field's and Zimmer's works. Scholars interested in other primary material will find these works more than adequate. The bibliography in the present dissertation includes: his memoirs (written originally in English, later translated into Russian, as well as revised and enlarged, and finally translated back into English with further revisions and additions, all by the author himself); eight full-length novels written originally in Russian and their English translations; a novelette, later in English

translation promoted to the rank of a separate novel; an incomplete novel; and six* full-length novels written originally in English, one of which was officially translated into Russian by Nabokov (Lolita).**

In order to make the present list of primary sources a workable basis from which other scholars may begin their research, the following system of organization and annotation has been adopted: under "Primary Sources, Works in English," works written originally in English, memoirs (only the English editions), and translations by Nabokov (or co-translators) of works written originally in Russian have been listed together. For works originally in English, the standard bibliographic entry format was used. Where this entry differs from that of the first edition, first edition information follows immediately in brackets. For the works translated from Russian, when extant, the bibliographic entry is followed by the transliterated Russian title with a cross-reference to "Primary Sources, Works in Russian," for the complete citation. Also, when any revisions have been made during translation, this fact has been noted.

Works written originally in Russian are arranged according to the name under which they were originally published. Most of Nabokov's Russian novels were written, published, and consequently entered under his pseudonym, "Sirin", V.". Two works, however, Dar ("The Gift") and Druǒie berega ("Other Shores"), although written under "Sirin", were published originally by exception under Nabokov's own name and hence entered under such.

After each title-entry of the Russian-language novels there follows in parentheses and quotation marks the English translation title, when extant. When segments of any novels were published prior to the book's appearance, the date and place of publication follows immediately in brackets.

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* It is now seven. See ADDENDA, Transparent Things.

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