

THE NABOKOVIAN

Published semi-annually  
at the University of Kansas  
by the Vladimir Nabokov Society

Editor: Stephen Jan Parker

*The Nabokovian* serves to report and stimulate Nabokov scholarship and to create a link between Nabokov scholars in the USA and abroad.

Subscriptions: individuals, \$17 per year; institutions, \$22 per year. For surface postage outside the USA add \$8.00; for airmail postage, add \$12.00.

Back issues: individuals: \$10.00; institutions, \$15; for surface postage outside the USA add \$4.00; for airmail, add \$6.00. Issues #1, 5, 7, 11, 14, 17, 23-29, 32, 33 are out of print.

Checks should be made payable to the Vladimir Nabokov Society.

Address all inquiries, submission of items, and subscription requests to:

Vladimir Nabokov Society  
Slavic Languages & Literatures  
2134 Wescoe Hall  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, Kansas 66045 USA

THE NABOKOVIAN

Number 55

Fall 2005

CONTENTS

News by Stephen Jan Parker	3
Notes and Brief Commentaries by Priscilla Meyer	7
<i>"The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Two Stories by Henry James"</i> Will Norman	7
<i>"Look at the Harlequins! Dyslexia and Aphasia, A Vision Through the Looking Glass"</i> Alain Andreu	13
<i>"Time Before and Time After in Nabokov's Novels"</i> Jansy Mello	20
<i>"Ada as a Russian Fairy Tale Spun by the Phoenix and Sung by the Sirin"</i> Alexey Sklyarenko	29
<i>"Photograph Reading in 'Signs and Symbols'"</i> Maria-Ruxanda Bontila	44

“‘La Veneziana’ Revisited” Gavriel Shapiro	48
“Afternote.” Annotations to <i>Ada</i> : 24. Part I Chapter 24 by Brian Boyd	56
Annotations to <i>Ada</i> : 25. Part I Chapter 25 by Brian Boyd	66

## NEWS

by Stephen Jan Parker

### Odds and Ends

- Please note the following corrections in the No. 54, Spring 2005 issue:

(1) Brian Boyd’s “Annotations to *Ada*: 24. Part I Chapter 24” is incorrectly listed as “Annotations to *Ada*: 23. Part I Chapter 23” in the Table of Contents.

(2) Gavriel Shapiro’s note, “Artists Exiled, Art Treasures Sold,” is incorrectly listed in the Table of Contents and on page 5 as “Exiled, Art Treasures Sold.”

- Among the various celebrations of *Lolita*’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary: A special 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the novel from Vintage publishers; a notable Nabokov symposium (May 5) along with an extensive Nabokov library exhibit (April-August) at The George Washington University, Washington, DC under the supervision of Yuri Leving; numerous newspaper and magazine articles worldwide which engaged comments from many Nabokov scholars; radio pieces on National Public Radio; lectures by various Nabokov scholars, including one by Brian Boyd at the University of West Sydney, Australia; an upcoming interview with Dmitri Nabokov in the December issue of *Playboy*.

- Two Nabokov works scheduled to appear soon: “The Word,” VN’s second short story, translated by Dmitri Nabokov, in *The New Yorker*, and “Revolution,” a very early poem, in *The Paris Review*.

- Three other upcoming publications: 1) *The Two Lolitas*, Michael Maar, trans. Perry Anderson. (New York: Verso; November 2005 release). 2) *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting*. Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson, with an essay by Liana Ashenden. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; December 2005 release). 3) *Vladimir Nabokov. Alphabet in Color*. Jean Holabird; foreword by Brian Boyd. (Corte Madera, CA; Gingko Press; December 2005 release).

- Nabokoviana: A photo in a September issue of *Sports Illustrated* with the following blurb: "Speak, memory: Did Nabokov the netminder have butterflies in his stom-Sharks? But enough literary allusions; it's time to play hockey. On Sunday, Evgeni Nabokov and the Sharks skated out for their first game in 16 months....Gone were the days when you could stand at center ice and hear a *pnin* drop."

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Nabokovians and Adaphiliacs,

The text of *Ada* in **AdaOnline** is now complete, so that the novel is fully (and legitimately) readable, and searchable by using the search tab. Please enjoy at <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/ada/index.htm>

This has been made possible through the selfless and meticulous volunteer work of the coders, Aaron Bradford, Stephen Celis, Genevieve de Pont, Sergey Karpukhin, Prokopis Prokopidis, Ludger Tolksdorf and D. Varè, and especially by Jeff Edmunds, who has designed the system, done the initial encoding himself, sought out, supervised and coordinated the coders with care and flair.

If I didn't have so many other projects piled up, I would rush to complete the annotations. I do hope that I will last long enough to compose and revise them and that they will not take another 22½ years on top of the 12 to date. I think I could finish them off in a year and a half if I were doing no other work, and maybe the day will come when I do not have more urgent projects, but that looks at least ten years away. There's some consolation in the fact that the annotations become slightly easier (though not leaner) all the time, especially the more discussion of *Ada* there is on Nabokv-L and in the *Nabokovian* (like Victor Fet's marvelous find in the last issue) and elsewhere in print, and also thanks to the kind readers who send me information directly.

But incomplete as it is, **AdaOnline** already is better than Jeff and I originally dreamed it might be. The annotations, especially for the first few chapters, have been expanded from the *Nabokovian* versions, which were from the first assumed to be provisional and designed to provoke those who could see more to report what I had missed; the motif list is expanding in fullness all the time, and the motif index, although a work in progress, already a useful new function; and the illustrations, although limited to what we can obtain permission to feature gratis, an invaluable aid to the precise knowledge and concrete imagining Nabokov wanted of his readers.

The illustrations have themselves been updated to the end of Pt. 1 Ch. 19. Jeff and I would particularly like to thank Genevieve de Pont for her meticulous and brilliant work in tracking and obtaining illustrations, in seeking permissions, and in managing the ever-expanding gallery of *Ada* illustrations. And of course to Stephen Jan Parker for running the series in the *Nabokovian* and allowing it to be redeployed on **AdaOnline**

Brian Boyd

\*\*\*\*\*

Please note that subscription prices (posted on the inside cover) have not increased for 2006. *The Nabokovian* continues to be offered at the most reasonable rates possible. Your assistance by making a timely membership/subscription renewal - thus saving the cost of sending out a renewal reminder - will be greatly appreciated. Members/subscribers are once again encouraged to add one or more dollars to their annual dues payment in support of the Zembla Website, a much appreciated dimension of the Society.

\*\*\*\*\*

I wish to thank Ms. Paula Courtney for her continuing crucial assistance in the production of this publication.

## NOTES AND BRIEF COMMENTARIES

By Priscilla Meyer

Submissions, in English, should be forwarded to Priscilla Meyer at [pmeyer@wesleyan.edu](mailto:pmeyer@wesleyan.edu). E-mail submission preferred. If using a PC, please send attachments in .doc format; if by fax send to (860) 685-3465; if by mail, to Russian Department, 215 Fisk Hall, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT 06459. Deadlines are April 1 and October 1 respectively for the Spring and Fall issues. Most notes will be sent, anonymously, to at least one reader for review. If accepted for publication, the piece may undergo some slight editorial alterations. References to Nabokov's English or Englished works should be made either to the first American (or British) edition or to the Vintage collected series. All Russian quotations must be transliterated and translated. Please observe the style (single-spacing, paragraphing, signature, American spelling and punctuation, footnotes within the text, etc.) used in this section.

### *THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT* AND TWO STORIES BY HENRY JAMES

Although a number of English and American novelists are to be found on Sebastian Knight's bookshelf, ranging from Norman Douglas to Thornton Wilder, one of the giants of Anglo-American literary culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is conspicuously absent. Henry James (1843-1916) is nowhere alluded to directly in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a novel which abounds in references to Anglophone, and specifically English writers. I suggest here, however, that two of his short stories, "The Real Right Thing" (1899) and "The Figure in the Carpet" (1897), provided an important impetus for Nabokov in the conception of his novel.

Even a brief plot summary of “The Real Right Thing” reveals manifest similarities with *Sebastian Knight*. Following the death of a prominent English novelist named Ashton Doyne, the protagonist of the story is commissioned to write his biography. Charged with this task, George Withermore, a writer of “comparative obscurity” (RRT, *The New York Edition of Henry James*, 412), is awed by the weight of responsibility, but undertakes it nevertheless. Doyne’s widow invites him to work in their London house, where Withermore locates himself in Doyne’s old study in order to have access to the necessary letters and documents. There, working at night, he senses Doyne’s presence in the room, guiding him in his research. Withermore becomes convinced that Doyne is acting as his “mystic assistant” (RRT 421) until their relationship changes and the biographer realizes that his subject’s ghost is instead warning him against continuing his task. Both Withermore and Doyne’s widow are finally persuaded by this oppressive spirit to desist in the biographical project.

Despite being a far more complex creation, *Sebastian Knight* shares the essential features of James’ story, from the idea of an inexperienced biographer writing on a famous, deceased novelist to the haunting of that biographer by his subject. Taken in isolation, these resemblances would seem unlikely to be coincidental. In addition, Nabokov also appears to have drawn directly on certain passages in “The Real Right Thing.” In one particularly resonant episode, Withermore discerns the ghost of Doyne appearing across his desk:

There were moments, for instance, when, as he bent over his papers, the light breath of his dead host was as distinctly in his hair as his elbows were on the table before him. There were moments where, had he been able to look up, the other side of the table would have shown him this companion as vividly as the shaded lamplight showed him his page. (RRT 421)

V also finds himself in his subject’s London home, searching the study for letters and documents, and he too perceives a spectral presence belonging to his subject:

From my chair beside the fireplace, which was again black and cold, I could see the fair light of the lamp on my desk, the bright whiteness of paper brimming over the open draw and one sheet of foolscap lying alone on the blue carpet, half in shade, cut diagonally by the limit of the light. For a moment I seemed to see a transparent Sebastian at his desk... (RLSK, Editions Poetry, 35)

The recurrence in these two passages of certain elements—lamps, light, desk/table, page/foolscap—as well the obvious situational congruence would appear to confirm that Nabokov’s use of “The Real Right Thing” goes beyond casual, or even unconscious recollection.

Following a number of persuasive readings of *Sebastian Knight* which dwell on Sebastian’s ghostly, or, as critical parlance now has it, “otherworldly” presence and influence on V’s narration (Fromberg [1968], Rowe [1981], Alexandrov [1991]), we should perhaps not be surprised that Nabokov drew on the most famous writer of ghost stories in English for his first English novel. However, while these readings, especially Alexandrov’s, tend to relate Nabokov’s ghost theme directly to his metaphysics, the conscious use of “The Real Right Thing” complicates this critical issue by insisting on a textual and metafictional element to the play of spirits and presences.

Both Nabokov and James explore the possibilities offered by biography to reconstitute their subjects in a literary sense, in compensation for their living absence. In both cases, too, the result is a failure of this biographical project, for we never really discover who the “real” Sebastian Knight is, just as Doyne’s “real” life never finds its way into print. Nabokov’s deployment

of "The Real Right Thing" is thus more than just a convenient source for the ghost theme. It is part of a strategy for undermining the orthodox assumptions governing literary biography. Withersmore believes that Doyne's spirit intervenes "to save his Life. He's there to be let alone" (RRT 428). This can be traced to Doyne's skepticism concerning literary biography, apparently voiced before his death, which holds that "The artist was what he *did*—he was nothing else" (RRT 415). Sebastian too, "belonged to that rare type of writer who believed that nothing should remain except the perfect achievement: the printed book" (RLSK 32). Thus the "real" Sebastian is not to be found in the anecdotes which V collects, but within his own books, where he is "laughingly alive in five volumes" (RLSK 47). For both writers then, that which endures beyond the grave is not the life of the author, or his spirit, but his creative works: the ghost of literature past.

In "The Real Right Thing" the reader is not permitted the tantalizing view of his author's fictions which Nabokov gives us in *Sebastian Knight*, where those novels are eventually found to shape the very reality of V's quest. As in another of his stories from this period, "The Figure in the Carpet," James prefers to maintain the mystery surrounding his enigmatic author-figure by purposefully circumventing the very knowledge desired by the reader. Nabokov however, does manage to incorporate this sense of the author teasing his reader with the possible disclosure of secret, hidden mysteries. In particular, Sebastian's last novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, is supposed by V to contain what he describes as "the absolute solution": "And now we shall know exactly what it is; the word will be uttered" (RLSK 159). He is frustrated, though, as the man about to utter the secret dies abruptly, leaving him with the feeling that 'the absolute solution' is there somewhere, concealed in some passage I have read too hastily" (RLSK 159).

As a number of critics have noticed, this aspect of *The Doubtful Asphodel* is mirrored in the ending of *Sebastian*

*Knight*, when V fails to reach Sebastian before his death. What has not been explored, however, is the way in which these themes resonate strongly with "The Figure in the Carpet," in which Hugh Vereker triggers a frantic search for the underlying pattern to his novels before dying unhelpfully, and effectively ending the narrator's chances of discovering it. That which he calls his "little trick," or, less modestly, "an exquisite scheme" (FC 231), is a unifying principal behind all his fictions: "The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps someday constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it" (FC 231). Although V is convinced of the encapsulation of "the absolute solution" in a single word, *Sebastian Knight* suggests that he would do better, as Vereker suggests, to attend to the "the order, the form, the texture" of literature. The famous realization at the end of that novel, that "any soul may be yours if you find and follow its undulations" (RLSK 181) is thus only the last of a number of indications in *Sebastian Knight* that textual meaning is to be found as process, the gradual manifestation of a pattern, or what would later, in *Pale Fire*, be called the "web of sense" (PF, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 63).

In his recent article on Nabokov's transition to English, Neil Cornwell links "The Figure in the Carpet" indirectly to *Sebastian Knight* through "Ultima Thule," a chapter from Nabokov's unfinished Russian novel written in late 1939 or early 1940, and later published in English as a short story: "'Ultima Thule' may be considered a counterpart to Henry James' 'The Figure in the Carpet.'" In the tradition of *Sebastian Knight*, it tantalizes the reader with a vital undisclosed secret" (Cornwell, *Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, 165). It is certainly right that Falter's claim, in "Ultima Thule," to know "the essence of things" (UT, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 513) and his refusal to explain it to Sineusov, also bears comparison to "The Figure in the Carpet." My own judgment is that the evidence of "The Real Right Thing" presented above, together with the recurrence of Jamesian withheld knowledge in both *Sebastian Knight* and

“Ultima Thule,” indicates that Nabokov was very interested in James in the late thirties, and found in these two stories an inspiration for his own writing. It is not only the death of a great author which links these texts, but also the ways in which that author’s existence continues to be perceived. Nabokov found in “The Real Right Thing” an expression of the biographical project as failure, the novelist asserting the right to allow his works to endure in place of his concluded life. In “The Figure in the Carpet” he found lingering textual mysteries outliving their creator. The central themes of both stories are combined in *Sebastian Knight*, exemplified in Sebastian’s own writings and Nabokov’s novel, where the literary text itself is endowed with an existence which extends beyond the life of its author, exerting a living presence.

Nabokov was generally critical of Henry James. In their correspondence he constantly teased Edmund Wilson about his fondness for the writer, writing in 1941 for example that “he has charm..., but that’s about all,” and in 1952 describing him as a “pale porpoise” writing “plush vulgarities” (*NWL*, Rev. ed., 59, 308). These reservations do not preclude the possibility that Nabokov drew upon two of James’ short stories in writing *Sebastian Knight*. However, in the light of this discussion, it might be better to remember a more ambiguous comment made in *Strong Opinions*:

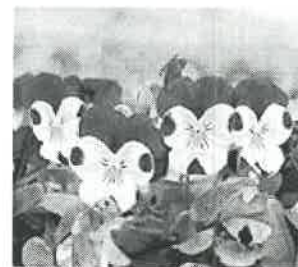
My feelings towards James are rather complicated. I really dislike him intensely but now and again the figure in the phrase, the turn of the epithet, the screw of an absurd adverb, cause me a kind of electric tingle, as if some current of his were also passing through my own blood. (*SO*, Vintage, 64)

Nabokov, in his playful coding of James’ short story titles, parodies just that aspect of the writer which appealed to him—the hidden pattern. This final statement of affinity, so surprising

after the criticisms which preceded it, directs us back towards a textual ghost originating in James’ short stories and finding its continued existence in Nabokov’s fiction, a “current” passing through his blood. This is the very process mirrored in the relationship between Sebastian’s writing and V’s biography-turned-novel. James can be regarded therefore as a significant figure operating within Nabokov’s own, idiosyncratic literary history, affecting not only its shape, but also the dynamics of its flow.

— Will Norman, Oxford University

LOOK AT THE HARLEQUINS! DYSLEXIA AND  
APHASIA, A VISION THROUGH THE LOOKING  
GLASS



Butterfly Harlequins Flowers.

Nabokov’s last novel, *Look At The Harlequins!* (April 3, 1974), whose acronym *LATH*, like VN’s last unfinished novel, *The Original Of Laura*, forms a word which has its own meaning in English, is without doubt one of the most surprising. It is a negative of Nabokov’s autobiography, written by a second-rate writer afflicted with nervous pathologies and exasperating behavior.

The element of surprise is shocking: after *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, which made Nabokov one of the greatest stylists of the century, the confused style of *LATH* contrasts with all of his previous works. Right away *LATH* appears to be a singular book, halfway between cartoon and autobiography. VN himself was conscious of this even before having finished his composition: in a letter written by Véra on December 12, 1973 and addressed to Stephen Jan Parker, she quotes VN: "he also says that his new novel *LATH* has traveled the main mountain pass, and that 'it will cause hacks to shy and asses to kick'" (524). Besides the challenge, one can ask what made Nabokov compose this story—written in the first person by an individual who is the opposite of himself and handicapped by a fragmentary memory, which is also a negative of his self portrait. Brian Boyd, in his biography *VNAY*, brilliantly analyzes this Nabokovian autobiography as seen from the other side of the mirror. Vadim, a neurotic character, forgetful and depressive, tells us of his life in the light of his failed conjugal experiences, his nervous disorders (he suffers from, among other things, chronic attacks of neuralgia), and his literary career. Right from the beginning of the novel, one realizes that Vadim Vadimovich N. (whose complete patronymic we never learn) has suffered from these disorders since childhood, very probably due to undetected dyslexia. This is only pure hypothesis because he never gives names, if even there are any, to his pathologies. This much said, we will see that the text seems to corroborate this hypothesis. Lastly, we will see that one also finds symptoms of aphasia in Vadim's behavior.

Dyslexia is a reading disorder in children who are otherwise intelligent (Einstein was a famous dyslexic). The most obvious difficulty, besides failure in school, is the confusion of certain letters because of their symmetrical forms (the «d» and the «b», the «q» and the «p»), confusion with sounds, difficulties orienting oneself in time and space, poor pinpointing in geometry, a lack of concentration (daydreaming), a certain awkwardness with

gestures, difficulties in writing (dysgraphia), calculations, problems with memorization, poor interpretation of sentences or poor sentence division, difficulty with counting by twos, etc.

VN took great care with the description of Vadim's "pre-cambridgian" phase at the beginning of the novel to scatter, one by one, page after page, all of the difficulties mentioned above. Thus Vadim's principal problem, which he feels obliged to confess, hidden as a prelude to all of his new conquests, consists of the impossibility of imagining himself, in the center of moving from point H to point P, stopping and then turning around to advance in the other direction, reversing the perspective. The descriptions of his sicknesses, which he presents several times in the novel, are only met with indifference by Iris and the others, until at the end of the story, "You" (which is an unreversed reference to Véra) makes him realize that he is confusing space and time and that, in fact, he cannot imagine this about-turn as one cannot "imagine in physical terms the act of reversing the order of time." Also, one can see his excessive wordiness that his entourage has a hard time understanding ("the driver ignored the question I put to him..." [I, 1]).

Through Vadim's story, VN exposes us to his difficulties concentrating. "As a child of seven or eight, already harboring the secrets of a confirmed madman... I kept daydreaming in a most outrageous fashion" (II, 1). When he is ten and his great aunt tells him to "look at the harlequins," the young Vadim thinks that she is pronouncing the four words together (lookaty). In the same way, when she tells him "Put two things together... and you get a triple harlequin" (I, 2), one can conjecture that she is referring to his difficulties in counting.

In chapter III of part one, VN describes Vadim's awkwardness when he is "...skirting prickly-pear shrubs that caught at the raincoat over my arm." The awkwardness in his gestures resembles that in the language which inspires Ivor. In chapter 9 of part I, Ivor "was in the act of mimicking someone, with bizarre intonations and extravagant gestures." Vadim



understands, a little late, that he is the object of that imitation. Finally, Vadim admits: "... I notice that dreams and other distortions of "reality" are written down in a special left-slanted hand... A lot of the pre-Cantabrigian stuff displays that script..." (I, 4). In the following chapter, he goes back to this detail once again: "My health and handwriting very soon reverted to normal" (I, 5).

Aphasia is a speech and/or memory disorder caused by a partial destruction of the cortical zone in the brain provoked by a stroke. The first types of words to disappear are proper nouns, then common nouns, then verbs. Vadim describes this disorder at the end of the book (VII, 2), and the following chapter begins with a key phrase, revealing the aphasia he suffers from: "To the best of my knowledge my Christian name was Vadim; so was my father's." Just as in a detective novel, one discovers at the end of the book all the answers to the questions that were being asked in the beginning. Therefore, Vadim began writing his autobiography *after* his stroke, and this explains, among other things, his memory problems. He himself confesses: "After fifty summers...I might have been unable to recall my novitiate in sensory detail had not there been those old notes of mine..." A stroke can happen at any moment in life but it is more frequent after the age of fifty, and atherosclerosis is one of the favorable factors. Vadim is a potential candidate, if not for a stroke, at least for atherosclerosis, because VN insists on his pronounced taste for alcoholic drinks. In the second part (ch.2), the narrator confesses that he had to give up his favorite foods, foie gras and scotch whiskey, to pay for the services of a typist when the neuralgia had reached "his extremities."

Nabokov therefore afflicted Vadim Vadimovitch with all the disorders: dyslexia that lasts during the whole pre-cambridgian period, and then aphasia due to a stroke described at the end of the story which is responsible for the narrator's memory problems. Nabokov counterbalances these afflictions with humor: the experienced reader of Nabokov will be amused by

the details of this reversed autobiography such as the titles of his novels in the index at the beginning of the book (*Ardis* for *Ada*, *A Kingdom by the Sea* for *Lolita*, and so on).

Nabokov does everything to make readers hate Vadim's character: he invites himself to the home of a distant acquaintance (whom he has met only twice), and takes him a bottle of whiskey, but confides that he intends to try it even before his host has time to open it. If Vadim appears totally despicable at the beginning of the story, his behavior seems to "normalize" from chapter to chapter, until the moment of his encounter, troubled by a yellow butterfly (a Harlequin), with «You,» the last of his "three or four successive wives" who discovers that she is the only one who understands and is really interested in him. "You" herself is a reversed image of Vadim's previous wives who are all pathetically intellectually empty: VN seems to allude to Véra as he sees her in "real life." It's as if this encounter (which, like *Speak, Memory*, intervenes at the end of the story) corresponded to the symmetric central point of the autobiographical motif beyond which the image of "real life" finally replaces its artificial reversed image.

Seen from the angle of the pathologies that Vadim suffers from, *LATH* takes on another dimension. Besides the character's exasperating egocentrism, one can feel an almost superhuman will in him to overcome his handicaps and to succeed in his marriage and literary life: Vadim, the narcissist, is above all a sick man conscious of his affliction who is looking for a response and a solution to his sicknesses. After all, the story is written by an aphasic, plagued by serious memory problems following a stroke. However, if Vadim's stroke at the end of the story explains many things, one question remains: why did VN choose to write it?

Perhaps the answer is found in the interest that Nabokov always had in time, space (which he calls the two first mysteries [VNAY, XVI, 11]) and memory. In writing *Ada*, without a doubt

VN had the opportunity to dive into Henri Bergson's philosophy once again in mid-February 1959 when he sat down to write the outline of what was going to be the central theme of *La Texture du temps* (see "Nabokov or Plausible Time," A. Andreu, *The Nabokovian* N°53). For Nabokov, studying the problems of perception, language (for example: the paronomasia in *Bend Sinister*), and memory is a way to explore the mechanisms of his own vision of time and space. One knows VN's admiration for the first part of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* by Marcel Proust, a writer gifted with hypersensitivity. In his lectures on Proust, VN explained to his students that *A La Recherche du temps perdu* must be seen as a treasure hunt in which the treasure is Time and the Past is the hiding place. In 1897, Bergson announced the basis of a sensory motor theory of perception in his work *Matière et mémoire* and thus offers his own alternative version to the theories of the realist and the spiritualist such as Berkeley, who see only a simple view of the mind in material things.

In chapter III of *Matière et mémoire* which Bergson entitled "*De la Survivance des images, la mémoire et l'esprit*," a schema is found which outlines the progression of events going from perception to pure recollection, passing through recollection-image. In the previous chapter, for example, Bergson used nervous pathologies like aphasia, psychic blindness and deafness to better show the intrinsic relationship between perceptions and the image memories that are associated with them, more or less numerous depending on the state of tension of our mind.

The autobiography of Vadim Vadimovitch, as a story about an aphasic entirely based on written notes, is more or less a matter of pure memory in which one would have, upstream, split the perception which was supposed to reveal this same memory. Vadim's present, ordinarily made of sensations and perceptions, remains perturbed until his miraculous encounter with "You,"

where, finally, VN indirectly reveals to us the narrow relationship between *LATH's* theme and *Ada's*: thus, in the last chapter, Vadim is anxious to know "how you had liked the fragment of Ardis..." This passage is in fact Vadim's confession regarding his space and time orientation problem: he reconnects, through the pathology angle, this novel with *Ada* because if *Ada* explores the vision that VN had of Time by following the colors of his protagonists' remarkable memory, *LATH* explores this vision through the angle of a deformed perception and a failing memory.

In conclusion, one must recognize that, from a strictly medical point of view, the aphasia that Vadim suffered from following his stroke described at the end of the book is not compatible with the writing of this autobiography. The speech problems of an aphasic are too severe and the capacity to recuperate is too minimal to make the writing of such a work possible. But it doesn't matter. After all, from an artistic point of view, the pretext is interesting and conforms to Nabokov's vision of art as «*pittoresque du vrai*» (see his essay written in French, «*Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable*»).

Nabokov was a synesthete, and like all synesthetes, his memorization capacities were extraordinary: not seeing objects as common mortals do, he associated sounds, colors, and odors, which explains his exceptional memory. In an interview for the *La Revue Automobile Suisse*, Dmitri Nabokov confirmed that his father had «*une vision colorée de l'être*.» For this reason, his "true" autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, is the obvious corollary. By afflicting Vadim with a stroke at the end of his story, VN justifies in a way the failing memory of the protagonist. He finally brings into conflict the synesthesia (never seen as a sickness but rather as a gift by those who are affected) with his gleaming vision of things and of beings, with the sad aphasic, accompanied by his pathetic speech and memory problems.

Translated by Curt Robinson.

I wish to thank Priscilla Meyer and Dr. Lam Nguyen for helpful discussions.

—Alain Andreu, Papeete

#### TIME BEFORE AND TIME AFTER IN NABOKOV'S NOVELS

I hesitated for a while if I should start these memoirs from the beginning or from the end, if I should first describe my birth or my demise...Properly speaking, I am not a deceased author...my tomb was my second cradle. Moses, who also wrote about his death, did not commence with it...: a radical distinction between this book and the Pentateuch.

Machado de Assis, "Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas" (Chapter One, 1881).

The first chapter of *Speak Memory* ends with the abrupt transition from how young Nabokov watched his father's mien during a session of "levitation" to the moment when he looks at that same face in an open coffin. He had started his essay with the statement: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for" (SM 19).

In a special note to John Shade's opening lines in *Pale Fire*, Brian Boyd (*Nabokov's Pale Fire, the Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 178; 281, 1999) brings up the double blackness of Nabokov's sentence. He adds that when Shade wrote: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain," he was thinking about his

origin and that of his ornithologist father because he had "in mind the void before him as well as the void after." As Brian Boyd observes, this "image, ultimately derived from Lucretius, had already featured in *The Gift* (11); and in *Bend Sinister* (192-99)."

The picture of a cradle bracketed by time is linked to VN's remembrance of his father who, like his character, was shot by mistake. Nevertheless these thoughts, Nabokov's own and his character's, do not suggest a close identification between Nabokov and Shade, although Brian Boyd's association between the first line of "Pale Fire" and the "two voids" makes such a connection inevitable (whatever meaning we ascribe to these "two eternities of darkness" or to their transformation into "voids").

Shade's poem remained unfinished but Kinbote, his commentator, believes that the missing line is the repetition of the poem's initial one. In that case the first and last lines could be interpreted either as a frame that embraces the poem, or as the reassertion of the eternal recurrence of events.

In the present note I would like to follow the various shapes and turns of Nabokov's own contrasting views about "time before and after," as they reappear in some of his novels before I discuss the first lines of Shade's poem, "Pale Fire." It is my contention that although Nabokov describes at length his characters' fears, mourning and deaths while hinting at the interference of ghosts from the afterlife (*Pale Fire, Ada, or Ardor, Transparent Things*), he also expresses another point of view by rhetorical devices and stylistic twists which might come closer to his beliefs.

I found more names in connection to the origins of the poetic vision of "twin eternities," besides Brian Boyd's vague reference to Lucretius, probably the Roman Titus Lucretius Carus in "De Rerum Natura" (1<sup>st</sup> Century BC) who states that "Time exists not of itself; but sense reads out of things what happened long ago, what presses now, and what shall follow after. No man, we

must admit, feels time itself, disjoined from motion and repose of things," while he construes a rational argumentation against superstition and established religion. Even a very modern furious speech, by Samuel Beckett's Pozzo ("Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When!...They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more") denies the assumption that any concept of time may fight off the meaninglessness of life (*Waiting for Godot*, 1954). A different analogy construed a century after Lucretius's also comes close to the spirit of Shade's verses, while it still refuses the idea that we can learn about the darkness that encircles our life if we are not inspired by Christian faith. The Venerable Bede (AD673/AD735), in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, compares man's life on earth to the arrow flight of a small sparrow crossing a lighted hall "passing from winter into winter" (Cf. Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 1988, 73).

When Nabokov writes in *SM* about what "common sense tells us," he is suggesting that there is another way to understand time and immortality. In his lecture "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" (1951), he says that "human life is but a first installment of a serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution, becomes something more than an optimistic conjecture, and even more than a matter of religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules immortality out."

Like him, Van Veen (*Ada or Ardor*) cannot accept the rational demarcation of human finitude. His memoirs reach towards the limits of sensuous memory by probing "the texture of time" while his book bends over itself to disrupt conventional chronology, using the same tactics we see in VN's biography of Nikolai Gógol. The "ardis of time" flowing between the covers of his "chronicle" is smashed, reiterating themes and expressions

which Nabokov had been using since 1937 (in *Dar*, [*The Gift*]), or even earlier.

Van "distinguished text and texture, contents and essence of time" (*SO* 120). Although Nabokov confessed that he loathed Van Veen, he later admitted that he considers him a "charming villain," with whom he cannot fully agree as to "all his views on the texture of time" (*SO* 143). This disagreement does not hinder Nabokov from lending to "his creature" old instruments that twirl his perspectives of time.

Doubling the image of "turning life upside-down so that birth becomes death" (*The Gift* 18) behind the masks of Mascodagama, Van enacts the idea of discovering "the real point, the contrapuntal theme" which will become "not text, but texture; not the dream but topsy-turvical coincidence" (*PF* 62-3) and adds a new thrust to it. His Mascodagama stunt uses maniambulation to "perform organically what his figures of speech were to perform later in life—acrobatic wonders that had never been expected from them and which frightened children" (*A* 185). Mascodagama's bodily inversions will become a visual rendering for "standing a metaphor on its head." And yet Van is not able to control coincidences nor does he acknowledge the three insistent feminine figures who, like the fates of Greek mythology, keep intruding into his reconstructed "Memoirs." Despite his efforts to coax Mnemosyne into expanding his sentient recollections beyond his own past, memory and perception are always at war in the strange temporal triptych which carries the present in its central panel.

We can follow in *Ada* how Van's figures of speech turn over the "cradle of life" when he describes the seduction of his mother by Demon in the interval between the two acts of a play, after his father has been struck "by the wonder of that brief abyss of absolute reality between two bogus fulgurations of fabricated life" (*A* 12). A theatrical *absolute reality* is also ironically described by Humbert Humbert as the "play's profound message" in reference to the Poet in "The Enchanted Hunters,"

for whom “mirage and reality merge in love” (*The Annotated Lolita* 201).

Van’s verbal wonders are again put to the test for a next rotation of the analogy:

The mind of man, by nature a monist, cannot accept two nothings; he knows there has been one nothing, his biological inexistence in the infinite past, for his memory is utterly blank, and that nothingness, being, as it were, past, is not too hard to endure. But a second nothingness — which perhaps might not be so hard to bear either — is logically unacceptable... (A 314).

Later Van returns to it and observes that “In every individual life there goes on from cradle to deathbed the gradual sharpening and strengthening of the backbone of consciousness, which is the Time of the strong. ‘To be’ means to know ‘one has been.’ ‘Not to be’ implies the only ‘new’ kind of (sham) time: the future” (A, 559) because unconsciousness “envelops both the Past and the Present from all conceivable sides.”

Although VN seems haunted by the darkness generated by unconsciousness, he indicates his confidence in immortality when he mentions “the actual existence of a permanently moving bright fissure (the point of perception), between our retrospective eternity which we cannot recall and the prospective one which we cannot know” (BS, 306, Library of America). At the same time he playfully induces us to make false links between the unknowable “time before and after” and the ideas of “past, present and future.” Mascodagama’s tricks are also an attempt to excise the excess of “verbal body” from his work (“We think not in words but in shadows of words. James Joyce... gives too much verbal body to his thoughts” [SO, 30]) by placing Van’s bodily inversions side by side with his project of inverting metaphors — as if tropes were similarly bound to physical space or could be flicked over like the heads or tails of

a coin. The incantatory reversion of words he so often uses in his novels (like “repaid” and “diaper” in *Ode to a Model*, quoted by Alfred Appel in his introduction to the *Annotated Lolita*) can almost conjure up the image of poor Hazel as “Mother Time” changing the diaper of an immaterial baby in a “toilest.”

We may find a certain mockery on VN’s part, concerning his characters’ preoccupation with perfect knowledge, by which he questions his omniscient role in the realm of fiction. It is by his authorial interference that Krug in a sudden moonburst of madness, understands that... nothing on earth really matters, there is nothing to fear, and death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution. And as Olga’s rosy soul, emblemized already in an earlier chapter (Nine), bombinates in the damp dark at the bright window of my room, comfortably Krug returns unto the bosom of his maker” (BS, Introduction). Now it is no longer a cradle that hangs over an abyss but words, encased in the sentence like prisoners of commonsense standing in line over an abyss of silence.

Marina Grishakova recognizes that “[t]he Pascalean subtext and the fiction of the ‘invisible observer’ as the Author of the World vs. the author of the text appears already in Nabokov’s Russian novels.” She quotes the French Mathematician: “What will we do then, but perceive the appearance of the middle of things, in an eternal despair of knowing either their beginning or their end. All things proceed from the Nothing, and are borne towards the Infinite” (“V. Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister*: A Social Message or an Experiment with Time?” *Sign Systems Studies* 28, Tartu University Press, 2000, 242-263).

Probably the preoccupation with individual time and omniscient observers shared by Nabokov and Jorge Luís Borges encourages people to link their names and to investigate common perspectives. In his short-story “El Aleph,” Borges says: “*Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es*” (“What my eyes perceived was simultaneous, what I shall now transcribe

will come in succession, because such is language"). In *Transparent Things* likewise, Nabokov recognizes the limitations of ordinary writing: "Fortunately for my self-esteem that book will not be written—not merely because a dying man cannot write books but because that particular one would never express in one flash what can only be understood *immediately*" (1972, 84). Nevertheless Nabokov tries to advance a step ahead of Borges when he avoids the temporality of narrated events by employing gaps (*blancs*), which not only convey two forms of negation of time, but are signifiers for what is ineffable (Yona Dureau, *Nabokov ou le sourire du chat*, 2001). Writing about "Plausible Time" in *Bend Sinister, Prnin and Ada or ardor* (Nabokovian, 53, 33-42), Alain Andreu recalls VN's "philosopher friend" Vivian Bloodmark's assertion that "while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time" (*Speak, Memory*, Chapter XI) to inquire if the "negation of time could be part of an acute perception of eternity... a total and immediate perception of all instants in time."

In *Ada or Ardor* Nabokov argues that Van Veen examines "the essence of Time, not its lapse." He considers that "Van's greatest discovery is his perception of Time as the dim hollow between two rhythmic beats, not the beats themselves, which only embar Time. In this sense human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat" (*SO*, ch.19). Van's discovery of time as a "dim hollow" that holds the fulgent flash of human life between the two bars of non-being endorsed Nabokov's own. His description of Van Veen's discovery does not require the presentation of philosophical arguments (such as Berkeley's and Bergson's) about duration and time. It becomes a very definite rendering of an experience, which, as a scientist, he tries to reproduce again and again in writing.

Although Van's conceptual evolution seems far from Shade's perplexities, there are proofs that Shade already knew how to develop, like Van, stylistic acrobatics. Despite hints of "serial

souls" which interfere in his text with messages from the hereafter, like the inspiring red butterfly which guides his pudgy hand, and even Kinbote's (Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*), I prefer to investigate the "missed heartbeat" in his fiction, the syncope in the opening stanzas of *PF*. In this way I hope to come closer to the interval between the "eternities of darkness," when these are considered brackets or beats that "embar time."

We meet a multitude of personal pronouns "I" in *Pale Fire*. Its first line brings an "I" as the shadow of a dead bird, an illusory, perhaps accidental product of the second "I," the one who notices how a diffuse bluishness in sky and mirror led a waxwing to search for one in the other: "I was the shadow of the wax wing slain/ By the false azure in the windowpane." The invented third "I" survived the shock against glass because John Shade's own "I" divides it into a "smudge of ashen fluff" and a living reflection: "I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I/ Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky."

We can follow how Shade suspends time by creating an interval between these two events by presenting them simultaneously. To confuse the sky with its reflection, as if both were interchangeable, is a deathly experience but there is a space in between that might reveal a new level of experience.

Shade's exercise of pure imagination undoes the objective existence of sky, glass, mirror and bird while he objectifies the double "I" into mirages, shadows or mirror reflections. Jotting down an apparently addictive "and" ("and I lived on...") he makes the surviving "I" more real than the landscape from which it emerges.

As readers, we are invited to watch with him how the furniture inside his cozy study is hung "out in the crystal land":

And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate  
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:  
Uncurtaining the night, I'd let dark glass  
Hang all the furniture above the grass,

And how delightful when a fall of snow...

But no! Shade has not simply blended that which lay inside and what was kept outside the nest of his room because, another missed heartbeat later (signaled, like the others, by "and"), he has already dropped us from a shimmering blue day into a dark wintry night. Like the sparrow in Bede's tale entering a heated hall while crossing over from a freezing nothingness into another, we can escape the illusion created by the "and" to follow Shade from the transient warmth of his verse to what lies outside the realm of words and meaning.

The multiple "I" in *PF* are not only presentations of a divided subject who, by describing himself in a given moment, is turned into a series of "objects" in the eyes of an observer. When Shade verbally recreates the image of a sunny lawn he once saw through the glass, he smashes it against the actual barrier of reflections thrown onto the snow by the contrasting lights of his studio and external darkness. Stunned into awareness by the brusque temporal transition the reader, like the waxwing, may escape the fictional dimension and isolate his "I" from the voice speaking in the poem. Or he may allow himself to be carried away by the magic carpet of Shade's "and," under the illusion of wandering from present into past and back again like an entrapped bird flying back and forth inside a speeding rocket. In a different context, Marina Grishakova (op.cit) writes that "Nabokov's intention was apparently the embedding of several individual time-orders, their 'objective' exposition as different perceptual fields within the single subjective field of perception. The device of the 'serial observer' discloses an affinity between the metafictional and metaphysical problems: the status of the fictional world, its development in time, the fiction of the creator."

Nabokov observes that he tends "more and more to regard the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination" (*SO*, 154) and, through Shade, he gives us a

glimpse of who remains suspended between the sentences he conjoined by "and." He even allows us to accompany him in the diastema of a "missed beat." Such an experience requires the deliverance from the "saddle of personality" that weighs metaphors down, when a "purer" metaphorical "I/Eye" makes its appearance after the unity of time and place has been broken. The heraclitean fluidity of words in succession becomes the medium from which the poet creates his intended caesura. Perhaps this is why Nabokov believes that "Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors" and describes Shade as "by far the greatest of *invented* poets" (*SO*, 59).

Thanks to Carolyn Kunin for calling my attention to Samuel Beckett's lines in "Waiting for Godot". Special thanks to Priscilla Meyer's invaluable advice and criticism.

—Jansy Mello, Brazil

#### ADA AS A RUSSIAN FAIRY TALE SPUN BY THE PHOENIX AND SUNG BY THE SIRIN

In the beginning of the chapter of *Ada* which deals with "Flavita" (Russian scrabble), I.36, Ada tells Van that "verbal circuses, 'performing words,' 'poodle-doodles' and so forth, might be redeemable by the quality of the brain work required for the creation of a great logogriph or an inspired pun..." Flavita is an anagram of *alfavit* which means simply "alphabet" in Russian, not "an old Russian game of chance and skill based on scrambling and unscrambling of alphabetic letters" as Van affirms. But Nabokov himself seems to use the Russian alphabet in *Ada* exactly in Van's sense—as the material used to create a remarkable logogriph and an inspired pun.

The first meaning of the word "logograph" in the dictionary is as follows: "an anagram, or a puzzle involving anagrams." One such covert puzzle fitted by Nabokov into *Ada's* text and texture will be studied in the first half of this article. The anagrammatist makes use of the fact that three Russian words (all of them substantives in the nominative singular) differing, like poodle and doodle, only by their first letter, form anagrams with three different words. Apart from three pairs of anagrams, Nabokov's puzzle also involves the names of three Russian writers beginning with the letter G (representing the sound "ch") and those of three Russian publishers. The magical number 3 links Nabokov's logograph to fairy tales, particularly Russian "female" fairy tales, where it often occurs.

Fairy tale motifs penetrate *Ada*, so it is small wonder that the number three plays a crucial role in it. Van has three major rivals: Philip Rack, Percy de Prey, and Andrey Vinelander. In August 1888 (note the three eights!), upon learning that the former two were *Ada's* lovers, Van leaves Ardis. After his duel with Tapper, Van finds himself in a hospital in Kalugano where he meets one of his rivals, the German musician Philip Rack. Poor Rack, who apparently was poisoned by his jealous wife, is dying. Van, on the contrary, recovers speedily and soon is fit enough to pay a visit to Rack who is on his deathbed. The male-nurse Dorofey, who has brought Van to Rack's ward in a wheel-chair, sits down in a corner and opens the Russian-language newspaper *Golos* (*Logos*), I.42.

The name of the newspaper puzzles the reader at first. Although they are anagrammatically close, the Russian word *golos* ("voice") and the Greek word *logos* ("word") mean quite different things. But while *Golos* hints at the well-known nineteenth-century Russian liberal newspaper, *Logos* seems, to say the least, a strange name for a newspaper that discusses topical political questions. How did it get here? What is it, just a garble, a "mocking echo," as it were, of the very word that means "voice"? I think it's something more: a hidden allusion to

another Russian periodical of the time, the magazine *Slovo* ("The Word"). I would not claim this so confidently, if this name were not present in one of the two other pairs of Russian anagrams that I think Nabokov has inserted into *Ada's* subtext. Those two hidden pairs are *volos/slovo* and *kolos/sokol*. (*Volos* means a hair, *kolos*, an ear [of a plant], and *sokol*, a falcon.) Nabokov's logograph thus consists of three pairs of anagrams, of which only one, *golos/logos*, is manifestly present in the text of the novel. The two other (implied) pairs are hidden at the subtext level and have to be discovered by an attentive reader.

Before we consider the logograph itself, we shall say a few words about the real newspaper and the real magazine. The point is that certain publications in them (which I propose to discuss in my essay, "The Details of the L disaster") shed some light on the mysterious L disaster and on the Terra-Antiterra opposition in *Ada*. A. A. Kraevsky's paper *Golos* came out daily in Petersburg from 1863 until 1884 (it is the "liberal newspaper" that Steve Oblonsky is reading in the beginning of *Anna Karenin*). *Slovo* also appeared in Petersburg, from 1878 till 1881. Both the newspaper and magazine ceased to exist before 1888.

In literature there had already been puns on the name of the paper *Golos*. In his satirical short story *Krokodil. Nebychainoe proisshestvie ili passazh v passazhe* ("The Crocodile. The Strange Incident, or a Pretty Pass at the Passage") (1865), Dostoevsky turned this name into *Volos*. Here, in *Volos*, poor Ivan Matveich, who was swallowed alive by a crocodile displayed at the Passage (a parody of Chernyshevsky imprisoned in the Peter-and-Paul fortress), intends to publish reports of his stay inside the belly of the reptile. (It is worth noting that there is a Russian proverb, cited by Dahl in his dictionary, which both Dostoevsky, when he worked on "Crocodile," and Nabokov, when he worked on *Ada*, are likely



to have had in mind: *Ni golosu, ni volosu ne ver'* ["Trust neither the voice, nor the hair!"]).

"Volos," into which "Golos" was transformed in Dostoevsky's story, is an anagram of the word "slovo" ("word" in Russian). At the same time, *Logos* as part of the name of Dorofey's newspaper, means "word" in Greek. Therefore, in the invented newspaper *Golos* (*Logos*), Nabokov combines the names of two real periodicals, the newspaper *Golos* and the magazine *Slovo*, not only by using a direct semantic link, but also by means of two pairs of anagrams:

GOLOS (LOGOS)  
(VOLOS) SLOVO

But volos/slovo is not the only "coded" pair of anagrams in Nabokov's logograph. Besides the word "volos," there is one more word in the Russian language which differs from "golos" by the first letter: "kolos." And this word has an anagram, "sokol." So we have another concealed pair of anagrams: kolos/sokol. Its presence in *Ada* and the important role it plays in the novel become evident when yet another Russian-language newspaper, whose name also contains the word *golos*, is mentioned. When Van's last rival, Ada's husband Andrey Vineland, contracts tuberculosis and starts to die slowly (it will take him seventeen years), his sister Dorothy (the female version of the name Dorofey) reads him old issues of *Golos Feniksa* (III.8).

As usual, Nabokov's text is precise and full of additional (hidden) meanings. On the one hand, Phoenix is the capital of the Russian (at least, on Antiterra) state Arizona and Andrey Vineland is "an Arizonian Russian." On the other hand, *Feniks* (Russian for Phoenix) is the name of a legendary bird that burns itself every five or six centuries and rises again from the ashes with renewed youth. In Russian mythology its name first became "Finiks" and then "Finist." That was the way a

new character of Russian fairy tales was born, *Finist iasnyi sokol* (Finist the Bright Falcon). In A. N. Afanasiev's collection of Russian fairy tales, the one about Finist is entitled *Pioryshko Finista iasna sokola* ("A Little Feather of Finist the Bright Falcon"). It seems to me that there are most interesting parallels between that particular fairy tale and *Ada*.

The fairy tale about Finist belongs to the category of the so-called "female" fairy tales (see V. Ia. Propp, *Morfologiia volshebnoi skazki*, "The Morphology of the Fairy Tale," 1928), in which the protagonist is a female. Finist is a handsome prince (*tsarevitch*) who can turn into a falcon and visit the heroine as a person, if she manages to obtain his magical feather. A beautiful girl (*krasnaia devitsa*, in some versions of the fairy tale about Finist she also has the name: Mar'iushka, a diminutive form of "Maria"), the youngest and kindest of several sisters, asks her father three times to buy her not rich and sumptuous dresses, that her sisters ask him to buy, but a magical feather of Finist the Bright Falcon. When finally the father brings her a feather and the girl is alone, the feather flies out of a box, strikes itself against the floor and turns into the prince. They start "sweet, good conversations" between them. These conversations are overheard by the envious elder sisters who are anxious to put an end to the nightly trysts of the couple. But each time they try to catch the two off guard, Finist turns into a feather and flies out the window as a falcon—to return on the following night. However, on the third night the evil sisters manage to injure Finist, having stuck knives and needles into the window frame in the younger girl's room. Finist cannot fly in the window and, bleeding, flies away forever. The poor girl is left alone and can find Finist only when she has worn down three pairs of iron shoes, broken three cast-iron walking sticks, eaten three communion breads of stone. In the end, she does find him and wins his love again, for "the real wife is not the one who betrays and deceives, but the one who loves deeply." (The fairy

tale about Finist in Afanasiev's collection has no moral, but a moral is present in some other variants.)

It may seem that, if there are any characters in *Ada* who are associated with Finist and the girl of the fairy tale, it is Van and Ada. Ada's sister-in-law, Dorothy Vinelander, watches her and goes out of her way to stop Ada's meetings with a mysterious lover in Mont Roux (III.8). Just like the elder sisters of the fairy tale, she can feel his existence, but cannot find out who he is. When at last she succeeds, thanks to fate, in separating Van and Ada, Van, like Finist, flies far away.

But the similarity ends here. Nabokov links quite different heroes with Finist and the fair girl. Lucette, Ada's younger sister, is much kinder and on the whole more attractive than Ada. She has much more in common with the girl of the fairy tale than her elder sister. As early as summer 1884, when Lucette is only eight, Mlle Larivière, her governess, reproves Van for making of Lucette "a fairy tale damsel in distress" (I.23). Like other heroines of the "female" fairy tales, the beautiful girl from the fairy tale about Finist, too, finds herself in distress. In the fairy tale from the Afanasiev collection, the heroine has no name, but in the variant that ends in a moral, the beautiful girl is called Mar'iushka. Now, in his *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* Brian Boyd has shown that Lucette's fate in the novel is inseparably connected to that of a flower, *souci d'eau*, mistranslated by Fowlie as "care of the water" in his version of Rimbaud's poem *Mémoire*. One of the vernacular "nick-names" of that flower is, according to Ada, "marybud" (I.10). It seems to me that, just as another vernacular "nick-name" of marsh marigold (Rimbaud's *souci d'eau*) suggested by Ada, "mollyblob," links Lucette to Molly Bloom, the heroine of Joyce's *Ulysses* (see Boyd), "marybud" links her to Mar'iushka, the heroine of the fairy tale about Finist the Bright Falcon. Finally, Lucette is a redhead, and *krasnyi* (as in *krasnaia devitsa*, the idiomatic phrase by which the girl is designated in the fairy tale) means "red" in modern Russian. In

his book "The Slavs' Poetical Views on Nature" (1865), Afanasiev writes of this word: "*Krasnyi* originally meant bright, full of light, sparkling, fiery; this adjective is kin to such words as "kres"—fire, "kresny"—the summer solstice, "kresnik"—the month of June, when the solstice occurs." Lucette kills herself in June, and she spends her last day basking in the sun with Van (III.5). The traditional epithet for the sun in Russian fairy tales is *krasnoe*. It is also worth noting that in that tragic chapter there is an allusion ("the Sun Horse") to the Old Slavic god of the sun, Hors (mentioned also in "The Song of Igor's Campaign"). After her death Lucette is associated with the color red, just as she is associated with green, the color of her eyes and dresses, in her lifetime. The very name Mont Roux (Mount Russet) serves as a reminder to Van and Ada of their unhappy half-sister. Thus, after the death of Lucette it becomes clear that it was she, and not Ada, who was the actual *krasnaia devitsa* from the fairy tale entitled *Ada*. But who among the heroes is associated with Finist the Bright Falcon?

I think it is Ada's husband, Andrey Vinelander. In contrast to Van, who cannot tell the name of a bird by its voice in the general hubbub (I.7), Andrey is well versed in ornithology (III.8). And no wonder: the falcon is a bird that preys, as a rule, on other birds. If Andrey is really the falcon, he by definition must know other birds and their ways. In his mature years Van is shortsighted and wears glasses, while the falcon is famous for its eyesight. Andrey is a good hunter and it is quite possible that he has a sharp eye. In addition, Van when he leaves Ada remains safe and sound. It is Andrey who suffers from hemoptysis and is sent to America—far away. Thus Andrey has much more in common both with the real bird falcon and with the Finist of the fairy tale, than Van whom we are at first inclined to take for Finist.

However, the closest connection between Andrey and Finist the Bright Falcon is established by means of Nabokov's logograph. To set this hidden associative connection Nabokov

uses not just the pair of anagrams kolos/sokol, but also the names of three Russian litterateurs, each beginning with a "Ch," and the names of three Russian publishing houses, one Soviet and two émigré. The "Ch" are Chernyshevsky, Chekhov and the critic Cheshikhin-Vetrinsky; the three publishing houses are *Kolos*, *Slovo* and *The Chekhov Publishing House*. How does Nabokov combine all those names?

Van meets Andrey only once—in the presence of Andrey's family (his wife Ada and his sister Dorothy, or "Dasha," Vinelander) and three perfect strangers (again that number three!), III.8. When the latter leave, the conversation between Van and the three Vinelanders is conducted in Russian and parodies conversations in Chekhov's plays. But if Andrey is associated with some Chekhovian personage, it is most certainly not with the retired professor Serebriakov from "Uncle Vanya," and not even with Andrey Prozorov from *Three Sisters* (as Van would have preferred it), but with poor Doctor Dymov from the short story "Grasshopper" (*Poprygunia*, 1892). The heroine of this story realizes too late what a wonderful person her husband was and how much better he was than her worthless lover, the painter Riabovsky. Interestingly, the life Riabovsky leads, "independent, free, devoid of any worldly interest," at first reminds the heroine of that of a bird. But just like Nabokov's heroine, she doesn't notice that she has preferred "a crow to a falcon." (The Russian saying *poliubilas' vorona pushche yasna sokola*, literally: "fancying a crow more than a bright falcon," occurs in Chekhov's story *In Autumn*, 1883, and in his play *On the High Road*, 1885, based on that story). There seem to be parallels between Chekhov's Dymov and Andrey Vinelander, as well as between Riabovsky and Van Veen. However, in contrast to Dymov, Andrey Vinelander dies not at once, of diphtheria, but piece-meal, of tuberculosis, like Anton Chekhov himself. (It is perhaps not by chance that the disease which killed Chekhov is mentioned in *Ada's* Part Three, in which we first meet Ada's husband. In his letter to Van,

Demon, Van's and Ada's father, refers to Chekhov as "consumptive Anton" [III.6]).

Thus, Andrey, who is reminiscent of Chekhov's positive characters, also reminds the reader of their creator, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). The critics of his time called the young Chekhov, who was not even an aristocrat, the Crown Prince of contemporary Russian letters. In the charmed kingdom of Russian literature, low-born Chekhov proves a fairy tale prince. Andrey Vinelander is but a modest farmer and has no relation to literature whatsoever. But in my opinion it is to Chekhov (who, like his Dymov, was a doctor by profession and just as modest a person as he) that Andrey owes his fairy tale title—*tsarevich*. Besides, I think Nabokov uses Chekhov's name to introduce yet another Russian writer whose name begins with a Ch—Chernyshevsky. To be more precise, Andrey is linked not directly with Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828-1889), but with his image as created by Nabokov in *The Gift*. Completed in 1937 and published in the émigré magazine *Sovremennye zapiski*, with the exception of Chapter Four ("The Life of Chernyshevsky"), the novel came out unabridged only in 1952, from the *Chekhov Publishing House* of New York.

In *The Gift* Nabokov portrayed Chernyshevsky as a worthless writer and a deceived husband. And yet even Nabokov acknowledges that, for all his shortcomings as a writer and for all his family problems, Chernyshevsky was a heroic person worthy of our compassion. I think in *Ada* Nabokov links the image of the slowly dying Andrey Vinelander to the image of Chernyshevsky from *The Gift*, banished to a far corner of Siberia where he is dying in the course of almost twenty years. We may add that they are linked not only by the simple fact that they are deceived husbands, but also by the fact that their unfaithful wives do not leave them when they are in distress. Ada does not leave Andrey, sacrificing her personal happiness, when he contracts tuberculosis, and Chernyshevsky's wife follows her husband to Siberia. There are, therefore, certain

parallels between Andrey and Chernyshevsky. But just as Nabokov uses Chekhov's name to make Andrey *tsarevich* from a fairy tale, in a similar manner he uses Chernyshevsky's name to make Andrey a falcon. How does he do it? And what can there possibly be to link the pitiable shortsighted Chernyshevsky to such a noble and sharp-eyed bird as the falcon?

Chernyshevsky is the butt of parody, and, sometimes, of malicious mockery, not only in *The Gift*, but also in the already mentioned short story by Dostoevsky, *The Crocodile*. When Dostoevsky wrote his (rather funny) lampoon, Chernyshevsky had been doing his time in Siberia, from where Dostoevsky himself had returned only some six years before. Dostoevsky was accused of scoffing at a man who suffered, as he himself had earlier suffered, from the authorities' arbitrary rule. Dostoevsky realized his mistake and hastened to refute his critics who thought that, in *The Crocodile*, he had intended to make fun of Chernyshevsky who wrote his novel (which ends with the famous exclamation "To the Passage!") in imprisonment (the chapter "Something Personal" in "The Writer's Diary" for 1873). Dostoevsky's (insincere) explanations were taken at face value by the critic V. E. Cheshikhin-Vetrinsky (whose name looks as if it were invented by Chekhov), author of the book *N. G. Chernyshevsky, 1828-1889*, Petrograd, *Kolos*, 1923. One of its chapters is entitled "Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky. The Parallels." Among other things, in this chapter the critic compares the famous Fourth Dream of Vera Pavlovna from *What to Do?* and Dostoevsky's "The Dream of A Ridiculous Man," which is crucial to understanding the Terra-Antiterra opposition in *Ada*.

Although critics have so far failed to notice Cheshikhin's monograph as Nabokov's possible source in his work on Chernyshevsky's biography in *The Gift*, I have no doubt that Nabokov read it. It is from this book that he could get some data concerning the future critic's childhood and youth. I suspect

that it was the name of the publishing house, *Kolos* (the imposing vignette on the frontispiece depicts a thin ear entwined with a broad ribbon with the inscription in large characters on it: KOLOS), echoing both the name of the newspaper *Golos* and its corruption *Volos* in Dostoevsky's lampoon, that gave Nabokov the idea to play upon the three words differing by only their first letter in *Ada*. He probably noticed that the word *kolos* also had an anagram, *sokol*, and included that third pair in his great logograph.

The entire logograph can be presented in the following form:

GOLOS    LOGOS

VOLOS    SLOVO

SOKOL    KOLOS

The words *golos*, *volos* and *kolos* that differ by only their first letter form the central vertical axis of the logograph. Three pairs of anagrams are arranged horizontally. The word *sokol*, being the anagram of the word *kolos*, doesn't mean what the words *logos* and *slovo* mean ("word"), so it is placed at the opposite side and stands somewhat apart. But it is this word that provides the connection between *Ada* and the Russian fairy tale, "A Little Feather of Finist the Bright Falcon."

We shall return to this fairy tale and to fairy tale motifs in *Ada*. In the meantime we shall make one little addendum about publishing houses. That Nabokov uses their names in his riddle is indirectly confirmed by the fact that Nabokov's (Sirin's) own first novels and short stories were brought out by the émigré publishing house *Slovo* of Berlin. It is not by chance that Van (or Nabokov behind him) mentions the names of two fictitious publishing houses that issued his first novel, *Letters from Terra* (II.2). Since there are certain parallels between Van's *LFT* and

Nabokov's first novel *Mashen'ka*, 1926, a reader could ask himself what was the name of the publishing house that brought out Nabokov's first novel? This name, *Slovo*, is a part of Nabokov's logograph and is only two steps away from the word *kolos* (see the scheme), which is the name of the publishing house that brought out Cheshikhin's book on Chernyshevsky.

Ironically, Chernyshevsky was never especially enthusiastic about *kolos* (in a Russian poetical idiom, it usually *zolititsia*, "shines like gold"). A reader of *The Gift* will remember that during his trip from Saratov to Petersburg the young Chernyshevsky was reading because "he preferred his 'war of words' to the 'corn ears bowing in the dust,'" and during his trip from Petersburg to Irkutsk he was bored, because reading was not allowed. It is not the case with Andrey Vineland. For him, a passionate and committed agronomist (despite the fact that Van makes fun of his "agricultural machines"), the very word *kolos* must be not mere sound, but probably the very incarnation of gold, much more precious than the metal itself which is, or seems to be, a great concern to Van. (The pretext for Van and Ada's secret trysts in Mont Roux, when they deceive Andrey and his sister, is the late Lucette's fictitious Swiss bank accounts).

Another Russian proverb says: *Ne vsio to zoloto, chto blestit* (it corresponds to the English "All that glitters is not gold"). And vice versa, a dull, unprepossessing appearance often conceals a heart of gold. Van is unable to see behind Andrey's ordinary looks a pure and beautiful soul, just as he would fail to understand the simple moral of the fairy tale about Finist the Bright Falcon: "The true wife is not the one who betrays and deceives, but the one who loves deeply." Van doesn't recognize his true wife, Lucette, who loves him deeply and faithfully, and prefers to her the one who betrays and deceives (first Van himself, and then her husband Andrey Vineland), Ada. Because of her unrequited love for Van, Lucette commits suicide; Andrey is taken ill probably because

he doesn't feel his love reciprocated by his wife, Ada, and suspects her of being unfaithful to him (but doesn't want to offend her by his suspicions). The true *tsarevitch* and *krasnaya devitsa* of the fairy tale die, while Van and Ada live to see old age and die—as happy lovers in Russian fairy tales do—on the same day.

Is it fair? Of course not. But then *Ada* is not a fairy tale with a happy ending but a great parody of a fairy tale, or, rather, it is a fairy tale, too, but, in some sense, a more "realistic" one than those that we are accustomed to from our childhood, about Ivan Tsarevitch and Vasilisa the Beautiful, a fairy tale that has been made "closer to life." On the other hand, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin* or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* that have been made even "closer to life" than *Ada* cannot be called *byt'* ("a true story") either. Actually, Nabokov himself used to stress in his lectures that all great works of literature are principally great fairy tales. Fairy tales often begin similarly ("Once upon a time there lived..."). In keeping with the tradition, *Ada*'s first sentence repeats (reversing the meaning) the first sentence of Tolstoy's novel, or "fairy tale." I would go so far as to suggest that *Ada* also ends like *Anna Karenin*, reversing the situation. Not *Ada*, who, like Tolstoy's *Anna*, is unfaithful to her husband, commits suicide, but poor Lucette, who is in love with Van as Kitty is with Vronsky. At the same time, Van and *Ada*, who are associated with Alexey Vronsky and *Anna* throughout *Ada*, remain to live long and happily, like Lyovin and Kitty in Tolstoy's novel. "All happy families are more or less dissimilar" indeed (as Van, not Tolstoy, affirms at the beginning of *Ada*).

*Ada* was initially conceived by Nabokov as a parody of *Anna Karenin*. So it is not surprising that these two great fairy tales of world literature should have so much in common (more or less similar beginnings and endings, same themes and motifs, etc.). At the same time, we cannot help noticing a significant difference. What could it be? I think the main difference between the two novels lies in the fact that, in *Anna Karenin*,

we constantly hear Tolstoy's own intonations, as a kind of author's voice "off screen" (in Vivian Darkbloom's "Notes to *Ada*" appended to the Penguin edition of the novel, Tolstoy's intonations are described thus: "as if spoken by an outside voice"). In *Ada*, on the contrary, there seems to be no author's voice at all! It is as if the author were everywhere in it, but, at the same time, "neither here, nor there"—as in an ideal novel that Flaubert dreamt of writing (he partly managed to accomplish it in his greatest fairy tale, *Madame Bovary*).

But a strange thing: although Nabokov has seemingly completely given up the narration to his hero, Van Veen, we also sense the real author's constant presence in the novel, in every word written by him—down to the last comma. We also feel that the real author's voice must surface somewhere in the novel, at least once, to show that everything is under control, that Van is but one of the puppenmeister Nabokov's puppets. Enabled to have intricate and colorful dreams, Van is just a character in his inventor's "creative dream."

It seems to me that Nabokov's own voice surfaces only once in *Ada*—in the name of the second Russian newspaper, *Golos Feniksa*. *Feniks* not only refers to Finist the Bright Falcon of Russian fairy tales, but also is a legendary bird that symbolizes eternal rebirth and immortality. But it was never famous for its voice. It was another bird of Russian mythology, Sirin, that was famous for its beautiful entrancing voice which gave people sweet oblivion. Sirin was Nabokov's pen name before he switched to English in the late 1930s. All his Russian novels and short stories are signed with this pseudonym, including *The Gift*, his last completed Russian novel and his best Russian novel.

On the cover of the 1952 edition of *The Gift*, which contained "The Life of Chernyshevsky," the author is indicated as V. Nabokov. Subsequently, two more books by Nabokov came out not under the pseudonym, but under the author's real name. In 1954, the same Chekhov Publishing House published

a Russian version of Nabokov's autobiography, *Drugie Berega*; and in 1965, shortly before he started working on *Ada*, Nabokov completed the Russian translation of *Lolita* (it was published in 1967 by Phaedra). In these three Russian books of his "American" period Nabokov seems to rise from the dead—or, like the Phoenix, from the ashes—for his Russian readers who knew him as Sirin. That's why I think that "Phoenix" in the newspaper name is a hint at Nabokov, and at his former incarnation as a Russian writer in the guise of another legendary bird, Sirin. And, who knows, maybe the "old issues of *Golos Feniksa*" are not really issues of a newspaper (there's no indication that *Golos Feniksa* is a newspaper) but Sirin's old novels? In that case, Dorothy reads to her dying brother old novels of Nabokov himself (in fairy tales, nothing is impossible). *Golos Feniksa* would be then a note of compassion and consolation that Nabokov sends, unbeknownst to Van, to his character.

It is interesting that Nina Berberova compares Nabokov to Phoenix in her autobiography *The Italics Are Mine* that appeared the same year as *Ada*, 1969. She refers to Phoenix when speaking of Sirin's first Russian masterpiece, *The Luzhin Defense*, 1929, that preceded *Ada* by forty years and at once placed Nabokov among the best émigré authors: "A tremendous, mature, sophisticated modern writer was before me; a great Russian writer, like a phoenix, was born from the fire and ashes of revolution and the exile. Our existence from now on acquired a meaning. All my generation were justified." The comparison of Nabokov's early novels to an as yet unfledged phoenix that tries to beat its wings also occurs in Berberova's earlier article: *Nabokov i ego Lolita* ("Nabokov and his *Lolita*"), 1959, *Novyi Zhurnal* no. 57. Nabokov was certain to have known this article by the time he was working on *Ada*. Who knows, perhaps it was Berberova's comparison that suggested to him the idea to associate himself with Phoenix—now a fully fledged bird capable of fabulous flights?

Moreover, if *golos=logos* (as the name of the first Russian-language newspaper seems to suggest) and Phoenix=Nabokov=Sirin, *Golos Feniksa* can be read as “Logos of Phoenix, Golos of Sirin.” The Divine Logos, or simply “Log” as Van and Ada call it, seems to be the Supreme Being on Antiterra that controls the destinies of characters and of the whole invented planet. But behind this deity is Antiterra’s creator, Nabokov, whose sometime pen name was Sirin.

Sirin managed to go through a really unique metamorphosis: as if he has voluntarily burnt himself as a Russian writer in order to rise again as Nabokov—an American author writing in English which is accepted as an international language all over the world. After the publication of *Lolita* in 1955, he became internationally recognized as one of the greatest living writers and, in effect, became immortal, thus turning from Sirin into Phoenix. But in *Ada*—the novel, in which he turns again to the distant, now almost legendary, past, the Russian years of his childhood and youth, Sirin is reborn in him. I would even say that it is the imperishable Phoenix singing with the beautiful voice of the sad Sirin. And as to *Ada* itself, I would call it a *Russian novel written in English* (with some French phrases sprinkled here and there, as is common in the classical Russian novel).

I thank Sergey Karpukhin for his help in translating this essay, Donald B. Johnson for his critical comments and Priscilla Meyer for her editorial suggestions and help.

—Alexey Sklyarenko, St. Petersburg

#### PHOTOGRAPH READING IN “SIGNS AND SYMBOLS”

Nabokov’s story “Signs and Symbols” (1948) can function

as an epitome of the writer’s “ethics of aesthetics” that is, an example of Nabokovian poetics both of reading and of writing. My argument is meant to explain how the writer is building, in this particular story, the “ethics of discomfort” as a condition of being in the world, of finding oneself one piece of the “pile of debris” which Walter Benjamin called history. This is magnificently achieved in the story by means of fictional photography, as when the distressed mother chooses to spend her time with her “old albums” (“she remained in the living-room with her pack of soiled cards and her old albums,” 56). What follows is a loop in time on an itinerary established by a photographic album. My contention is that, at the semantic level, photograph reading, i.e. the fictional photograph, succeeds where text cannot; it offers the “unsymbolizable,” where the threshold to the “real” of the past can be crossed (see R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, London, Flamingo, 1980/1984, 113). The photograph through its appeal to “the absolute particular” (4) can communicate what language fails to, and in doing so, it assumes the superior function of bridging both souls and minds, but it may also provide “counter-narratives” as long as there is potential for alternative readings and ways to construe identity (see Barbara Harrison, “Photographic visions and narrative inquiry” in Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews (eds.), *Considering Counter-Narratives. Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense*, John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2004, 113-136, 119). In this particular case, fictional photograph is charged with the status of tragedy by the way constitutive thought is retrieved in its search for an ordering pattern.

The Romantic consciousness on the watch in this very passage (“When he had gone to bed, she remained in the living-room with her pack of soiled cards and her old albums (...). This, and much more, she accepted—for after all living did mean accepting the loss of one joy after another, not even joys in her case—mere possibilities of improvement,” 56-57), voices

despondency by admitting to loss at both the empirical level (contingency), and the universal level (history). Photographs *and* album, within the aforementioned fragment, are, simultaneously, celebrations of the uniqueness of every moment of being, every configuration of shadow *and* an elegy upon them ("As a baby he looked more surprised than most babies"; "From a fold in the album, a German maid they had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiancée fell out"). Photographs, in this text, are as heavily mediated as paintings are, depending on light, camera angle, the grain of paper, the mood of the artist, but mostly, the mood of the viewer ("a slanting house front badly out of focus"; "Four years old, in a park: moodily, shyly, with puckered forehead, looking away from an eager squirrel as he would from any stranger").

Nabokov will make us see that photographs of the same person taken by different/same people, at different moments, become different utterances not only about the play of light and mood, but also as epiphanies of transience. The present revaluation of "Aunt Rosa" ("a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths—until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about") is the empirical turned typical, life turned history.

The photograph showing the son "[a]ged six—that was when he drew wonderful birds with human hands and feet, and suffered from insomnia like a grown-up man," creates what Walter Benjamin calls "dialectics at a standstill" (see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA and London, MIT Press, 1991, 259). The mother's first thought bespeaks her quest for the essence of the beloved son, her second thought spells out repressed worry; the juxtaposition re-signifies the mother-son relationship, in offering some not-yet-uttered truth.

As in a film, photographs precipitate the "never again" of the fleeting moments into a dialectical movement fraught with contradictions: the pageantry of "not even joys in her case—mere possibilities of improvement" and "endless waves of pain," pain let loose in images and words. The mother's search for the essence of her son intensifies in a space of "monstrous darkness" in which time stops and thought moves: "This and much more, she accepted..." The "ethics of discomfort" as key to this fragment returns us to the photograph as repository of the "unspeakable," "unrepresentable," "inexplicable" of "past" and "present."

Before proceeding to "examine" the photographs at the beginning of the fragment, the woman pulled the blind to protect herself from the image of "a black-trousered man," "lying supine on an untidy bed," whom she could see framed in a "window... blandly alight." I read this image or live photograph as both "sign" and "symbol." The former in light of "the monstrous darkness" accumulating within the story, the latter in light of a by far more disturbing thought that the photograph shapes into being: to what extent the story of my life is my own creation or a mere intertext compiled by all the members of the community I am a part of. The photograph allows this thought into being (Barbara Harrison's "counter-narrative"), a thought that finds philosophical backing in MacIntyre's narrative theory of identity and virtue philosophy (see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, trans. Catrinel Plesu, Bucuresti, Humanitas, 1981/1998, 232-248). Whatever plausibility this theory of concurrent narratives as identity might have, it certainly doesn't free us from worries since, both in real life and fiction, we can hardly choose the stories to figure in. Thus, the "second (main story)," as Nabokov would say, is this, our being framed to become our own theory as well as the idea that the very best aim of art is incarnation concretized within our own experience through the act of narration. This definitely replicates Nabokov's warning:



“In order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much” (*Speak, Memory*, 1:1).

I thank Priscilla Meyer for helpful advice and graceful discussions on the text.

—Maria-Ruxanda Bontila, “Lower Danube” University of Galati

#### “LA VENEZIANA” REVISITED

In his short story “La Veneziana” (written in 1924) Nabokov employs Sebastiano del Piombo’s (1485-1547) *Portrait of a Girl with a Basket*, also known as *Dorotea* or *The Roman Girl* (1513, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin).



Aside from “La Veneziana,” in which del Piombo’s masterpiece plays such a pivotal role, the painter is mentioned

in *Laughter in the Dark*: Albinus, the protagonist and professional art critic, wrote a “biography of Sebastiano del Piombo” (*Laugh* 129) that the cartoonist Rex calls “excellent” (*ibid.*). Rex’s only critique was that in his monograph on the artist Albinus “didn’t quote his sonnets,” “very poor” in Albinus’s opinion (*ibid.*). Rex’s suggestion to cite del Piombo’s sonnets precisely because they are “very poor” once again demonstrates the workings of his warped and sinister mind. Curiously, both Albinus and Rex err here: Sebastiano del Piombo never wrote any sonnets, good or bad. In fact, the only testimony of del Piombo’s literary output is Vasari’s intimation that the Venetian-born artist, in response to his close friend Francesco Berni (1497-1536), a comic poet, “who wrote a poem to him,” “was even able to set his hand to writing humorous Tuscan verse” (see Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, 10 vols., trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, London: Macmillan and Co. & The Medici Society, 1912-15, 6: 184). Sebastiano’s authorship of this verse, however, had been proven wrong: as late as the mid-nineteenth century, scholars discovered that it was Michelangelo who composed the reply to Berni in the name of Sebastiano (See Cesare Guasti, *Le rime di Michelangelo Buonarroti, pittore, scultore e architetto*, Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1863, 287n. 2). Both Rex and especially Albinus should have known these facts. In the universe of Nabokov’s fiction, where attention to details is essential and professional ineptitude is inexcusable, it is telling that Rex the artist mistakenly avers that del Piombo composed sonnets and that Albinus the art critic, who wrote the biography of the Venetian-born painter, does not correct him but rather comments on their poor poetic quality. The expert incompetence of Albinus and Rex is Nabokov’s additional, surreptitious, scathing comment earlier in the novel on these already quite unappealing characters.

Let us now turn to “La Veneziana” in which del Piombo’s *Dorotea* (or rather its skillful forgery) is of such great import.

Intriguingly, the Colonel in “La Veneziana,” too, wrongly asserts that Sebastiano del Piombo “composed indifferent sonnets,” and even though he is reportedly “inflamed by a noble passion for paintings” (*Stories* 95 and 91), like Albinus, he is unable to tell the original from the fake. With regard to sonnets, the Colonel, like Albinus and Rex after him, apparently confuses Sebastiano del Piombo with Raphael who indeed composed several mediocre love sonnets. (Nabokov could familiarize himself with Raphael’s sonnets, for example, in François Anatole Gruyer, *Raphaël, peintre de portraits, fragments d’histoire et d’iconographie sur les personnages représentés dans les portraits de Raphael*, 2 vols., Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1881, 1: 82-84; and in Louis Alexander Fagan, *Raffaello Sanzio, His Sonnet in the British Museum*, London, The Fine Art Society, 1884). The Colonel also never questioned the authenticity of the painting, even though he should have known that the original had been at the Berlin Kaiser-Friedrich Museum since 1885, when it was acquired from the Blenheim collection of the Duke of Marlborough—the latter provenance is apparently alluded to in the English-castle setting of the story. When the Colonel discovers that a new figure (that of Simpson) was painted into the portrait, all he cares about is to remove it as soon as possible so that he could show off the painting to the “young Lord Northwick from London” (*Stories* 113). The Colonel “complacently” (*Stories* 94)—a significant and unfavorable marker in the world of Nabokov’s fiction—utters platitudes about Sebastiano del Piombo in which the accurate facts are muddled with unsubstantiated anecdotes. Thus, he repeats the “legend” about the rift between Sebastiano and Raphael over “a Roman lady called Margerhita, known subsequently as ‘la Fornarina’” (*Stories* 95). The tale about “la Fornarina” appears to be “one of the most enduring myths,” despite “the fact that there is no indication of Raphael’s mistress in contemporary documents, salacious poems, or gossipy letters [which] must be taken as indicating that she did not exist” (see Leopold D. and

Helen S. Ettlinger, *Raphael*, Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1987, 12). The Colonel’s assertion about Raphael and Sebastiano’s romantic rivalry is evidently based on the existence of Raphael’s *La Fornarina* (1518-19, Galleria Nazionale, Rome) and of the *Portrait of a Young Lady*, also known, even though most likely incorrectly, as *La Fornarina* (1512, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), and attributed to Sebastiano. Another source of this “legend” could be the Blenheim collection’s misattribution of Sebastiano del Piombo’s *Dorotea* as Raphael’s portrait of Fornarina (see Hans Posse, *Die Gemäldegalerie des Kaiser-Friedrich-Museums*, 2 vols., Berlin: Julius Bard Verlag, 1909, 1: 174).

On the other hand, McGore, a “restorer, reframer, and recanvasser,” is a true “old connoisseur of art” who “dedicated” his “whole life to this” (*Stories* 91 and 100). McGore’s attentiveness to minute detail in works of art characterizes him well in Nabokov’s fictional universe. Thus when describing Raphael’s (1483-1520) *Virgin with the Veil* (1510-11, Musée du Louvre, Paris), McGore notices that “at a distance, two men stood by a column, calmly chatting. I eavesdropped on their conversation—they were discussing the worth of some dagger” (*Stories* 101). (There is indeed a third person “by a column,” standing near the interlocutors and ostensibly eavesdropping.)

It is noteworthy that one of the sources for the story plotline—a skillful forgery mistaken for a masterpiece—could be an anecdote about Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) that Richard Muther (1860-1909), a German art historian of the turn of the twentieth century, recounts in his *History of Painting in the XIXth Century*. Muther reports that Reynolds “had already at Hudson’s [Thomas Hudson, 1701-79, an English painter, quite fashionable at the time, at whose studio in London Reynolds underwent his early artistic training] acquired great facility as a copyist, and of Guercino, in particular, he had made numerous copies. During his Italian tour, however, he became the greatest connoisseur of old masters that the eighteenth

century possessed." To illustrate this, Muther tells the following tale: "the Chevalier Van Loo [Muther apparently had a French portraitist Louis-Michel van Loo, 1707-71, in mind], when he was in England in 1763, vaunted himself one day, in Reynolds' presence, upon his unfailing discrimination in telling a copy from an original. Whereupon Reynolds showed him one of his own studies of a head, after Rembrandt. The Chevalier judged it to be, indisputably, a masterpiece by the great Dutchman" (Richard Muther, *The History of Modern Painting*, 4 vols., London, J. M. Dent & Co., 1907, 1: 21). This anecdote appears to be at the core of Nabokov's story "La Veneziana" in which another Englishman, Frank, fools his own father, the Colonel, ostensibly an expert on Italian Renaissance art, who mistook his son's forgery for the original of Sebastiano del Piombo's *Dorotea*. And it is quite possible that, when composing the story, Nabokov recalled this anecdote from Muther's book (on the possible impact of Muther's book on Nabokov, see Gavriel Shapiro, "Vladimir Nabokov and Richard Muther," *Slavic Almanac* 11, 2005, forthcoming).

Nabokov scholars discussed the role of *Dorotea*'s description in the writer's short story and viewed it functioning as a framing or ekphrastic device, or as an indication of otherworldliness (see, respectively, Christine Raguët-Bouvard, "European Art: A Framing Device?" in *Nabokov at the Limits: Redrawing Critical Boundaries*, ed. Lisa Zunshine, 183-212, New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1999; Michel Niqueux, "Ekphrasis et fantastique dans la *Vénitienne* de Nabokov ou l'Art comme envoûtement," *Revue des Études Slaves* 72, nos. 3-4, 2000 [*Vladimir Nabokov dans le miroir du XXe siècle*], 475-84; Maxim D. Shrayer, *The World of Nabokov's Stories*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1999, 28-32). It has apparently escaped notice, however, that the painting also manifests the authorial presence in the story, although Michel Niqueux has aptly observed that "[T]he walk through the landscape with a path in the background of the portrait (this path is not in the

Italian original, in del Piombo's *Dorotea*) can be interpreted ... autobiographically, as a return to a child's phantasm, described in *Glory* and in *Speak, Memory*" (Niqueux, "Ekphrasis et fantastique," 484). The authorial presence comes to expression in the story through the description of the painting in which the index and the middle fingers of the sitter's right hand form a 'V' configuration which Nabokov evidently detected and in which he undoubtedly recognized his first-name, as well as his patronymic, initial. (This explicit V-shaped gesture can be also found in *Portrait of a Woman*, attributed to Sebastiano del Piombo, especially in one of its versions located in the Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest; see Carlo Volpe and Mauro Lucco, *L'opera completa di Sebastiano del Piombo*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1980, 135 [fig. 193b]. A similarly contrived V-shaped gesture also appears in the painter's alleged portrait of Christopher Columbus [1519, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York]. On the meaning of the "V" configuration in early sixteenth-century Venetian-school painting, see Nancy Thomson de Grummond, "VV and Related Inscriptions in Giorgione, Titian, and Dürer," *The Art Bulletin* 57, no.3, September 1975, 346-56. I intentionally refrain from using the term "V-sign" because of its contemporary, irrelevant connotations). It certainly did not elude Nabokov's attention that del Piombo had created a perfect "V" configuration by altering the natural proportions of the fingers: the index and middle fingers appear in the portrait to be of equal length, whereas in reality the index finger is usually noticeably shorter than the middle one.

It is noteworthy that all five descriptions of the painting's sitter, including the one (the second) of Maureen, *Dorotea*'s look-alike, draw the reader's close attention to the shape and position of the right-hand fingers (see *Stories* 94, 99, 106, 110, and 115).

When Nabokov points to the sitter's "long fingers, spread in twos" or about "extending and twinning her slender elongated

fingers," he clearly means the index and middle fingers of her right hand that create this "V" configuration, since her thumb is not shown, her little finger is only partially visible, and her ring finger is not stretched but is rather positioned slightly under the extended middle finger. The ring and the little fingers are somewhat spaced but they can be hardly described as "spread in twos" or "stretched toward her shoulder." And Nabokov indubitably directs the reader's attention to the deliberate and contrived position of the right-hand fingers, and specifically to that of the index and middle fingers, when emphasizing that "with the elongated fingers of her right hand spread in pairs, she seemed to have been at the point of adjusting the falling fur but to have frozen motionless" or that "her long fingers paused on their way to her fur wrap" (*Stories* 94 and 99) (Nabokov was undoubtedly mindful of Raphael's *Portrait of a Lady*, ["*La Donna Velata*," 1512-13; Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence] in which, by contrast, the sitter holds her right hand on her heart, with the index and middle fingers spread in the most natural way, without any visible tension).

"La Veneziana" seems to be the earliest work in which Nabokov included the "V" configuration as a manifestation of his authorial presence. Its other example, encoded through the shape of his first initial, can be found in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), his first English novel. It originally appears rather inconspicuously in the description of the work by Sebastiano del Piombo's fictional namesake, the plotline of Sebastian Knight's novel *Success*, where "[t]he two lines which have finally tapered to the point of meeting are really not the straight lines of a triangle which diverge steadily towards an unknown base, but wavy lines, now running wide apart, now almost touching" (*RLSK* 95). While on the surface this butterfly-fluttering description speaks of Sebastian's novel's plotline (although, on the other hand, as we may recall, lepidoptery is another significant mode of Nabokov's self-encoding), it iconically alludes to the presence of the narrator V., but more

importantly, to the presence of the author, his initial-sake. Later in the novel, it is manifest once again, this time more overtly, through the image of the writer's first initial in the form of "a V-shaped flight of migrating cranes" (*RLSK* 137). Several years afterwards, this crane imagery reemerges in Nabokov's poem, "An Evening of Russian Poetry" (1945): "On mellow hills the Greek, as you remember, / fashioned his alphabet from cranes in flight" (*PP* 158). In this programmatic poem, however, Nabokov imbued the imagery of "cranes in flight" with a new and telling meaning—*nomen est omen*. This fatidic imagery seems to intimate that Nabokov was destined to become a writer, as his first initial, "V," that resembles "cranes in flight" from whom "the Greek" "fashioned his alphabet," lies at the base of verbal creation. The latter image constitutes an important milestone in Nabokov's growing self-confidence as a writer at the time of his making the English language his main medium of expression.

—Gavriel Shapiro, Cornell University