

THE NABOKOVIAN

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

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CONTENTS

News by Stephen Jan Parker	3
Notes and Brief Commentaries by Priscilla Meyer	6
“The Spirit of Cynthia Vane” Priscilla Meyer	6
“‘Homeland Stuck to the Skin of My Soles’: Nabokov and Danton” Gavriel Shapiro	10
“ <i>The Woman in White</i> as a Subtext in <i>The Real Life of Sebastian Knight</i> ” Rory Bradley	14
“Topographic Nightmares in <i>Despair</i> ” Philippe Villeneuve	23
“Christian Symbolism and Nabokov’s Artistic Philosophy” Anna Morlan	32
“A Note on the Translation of Nabokov’s ‘Slava’” Matthew Walker	40

“Incest and Intertext: <i>Mansfield Park</i> In <i>Ada</i> ” Rachel Trousdale	48
Annotations to <i>Ada</i> 30: Part I Chapter 30 First Section by Brian Boyd	53
2007 Nabokov Bibliography by Stephen Jan Parker and Kelly Knickmeier	75

## NEWS

by Stephen Jan Parker

### Nabokov Society News

The annual Society panels at this winter’s MLA convention in San Francisco, 27-30 December, are (1) “Nabokov and Repetition,” chaired by Zoran Kuzmanovich and (2) “Open Session,” any aspect of Nabokov’s work, chaired by Julian Connolly.

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*The Original of Laura*, with both text and facsimile cards, will be published by Knopf most probably in early September, 2009. U.S., British, Italian, French, German, Spanish, and Russian versions will be published more or less simultaneously.

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#### Recent conferences:

1. *Lolita in America, a Symposium*, at The New School, New York City, September 27, 2008.
2. *Kaleidoscopic Nabokov—The State of Nabokov Studies in France*, at University of Strasbourg, October 17-18, 2008.

#### Upcoming conferences:

1. *Revising Nabokov Revising*, International Nabokov Conference, sponsored by the Nabokov Society of Japan in Kyoto, Japan, March 24-27, 2009.
2. 60th Anniversary Seminar on “Signs and Symbols” at Regent’s College Conference Center, London, May 11, 2009.
3. Fourth International Nabokov Conference, sponsored

by the St. Petersburg University Russian Literature Department and the Nabokov Museum, June 25-27, 2009.

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Publication of *Nabokov Studies*, Volume 11, 2007 has been delayed. It's contents, which will become part of "2007 Nabokov Bibliography" once the edition has appeared, will be as follows:

#### Essays

Monica Manolescu-Oancea, "Humbert's Arctic Adventures: Some Intertextual Explorations."

Savely Senderovich and Yelena Schvarts, "'If We Put Our Heads Between Our Legs': An Introduction to the Theme 'Vladimir Nabokov and Arthur Schopenhauer.'"

Brian Boyd, "Nabokov's Transition from Russian to English: Repudiation or Evolution?"

Matt Brillinger, "Nabokov's Evolving Use of Humor"

Dale Peterson, "Knight's Move: Nabokov, Shklovsky, and the Afterlife of Sirin."

Akiko Nakata, "A Failed Writer Redeemed: 'Spring in Fialta' and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*."

Mitch Frye, "The Enchanter's Education: Nabokov's Lectures on Dickens and the Development of *Lolita*."

Emma Lieber, "Having Faith in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*."

#### Reviews

Lelande de la Durantaye. *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. Cornell University Press, 2007. 211 pages. ISBN 978-0-8014-4563-7. Review by Ellen Pifer.

Maurice Couturier. *Nabokov ou La Cruaute de Desire. Lecture Psychanalytique*. Seyssel: Champs Vallon, 2004. 372 pp. Review by Jacqueline Hamrit.

Michael Maar, *Solus Rex: Die Schone Bose Welt des Vladimir Nabokov*. Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2007. 205 pages. ISBN 978-3-8270-0512-0. Review by Leland de la Durantaye.

#### **Odds and Ends**

– An important work recently published by the Modern Language Association of America is *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's LOLITA*, edited by Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment. This is part of the series, *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*.

– Priscilla Meyer's well-known 1988 book on *Pale Fire* came out in a Russian edition in September: *Naidite, Chto Spriatal Matros: 'Blednyi Ogon' Vladimira Nabokova*.

– **Friends of the Nabokov Museum** organization focuses on fund-raising in the United States for maintenance of the Nabokov Museum in Russia. The organization has tax-exempt status and thus all donations from US citizens are tax-deductible. For further information go to the website: [www.nabokovmuseum.org](http://www.nabokovmuseum.org)

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I wish to express my greatest appreciation to Ms. Paula Courtney for her essential, on-going assistance, for more than 26 years, 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. All contributors must be current members of the Nabokov Society. Deadlines are April 1 and October 1 respectively for the Spring and Fall issues. Notes may be sent, anonymously, to a 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 (footnotes incorporated within the text, American punctuation, single space after periods, signature—name, place, etc.) used in this section.

### THE SPIRIT OF CYNTHIA VANE



“She—a painter of glass-bright minutiae...!” (631)

Among Irving Penn's photographic portraits in the exhibit at the Morgan Library in New York (*Close Encounters: Irving Penn Portraits of Artists and Writers*, January 18-April 13, 2008) was an evocative portrait of the New York painter, Loren MacIver (1909-1998). In Penn's photo and others, though not with the hairdo from the story, MacIver resembles the type of Bohemian artist described by the nasty narrator of Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters" (1959). Like Cynthia Vane, MacIver is "handsomely dark," has "wide-spaced eyes" and "thick black eyebrows"; seen in the streets of the East Village where she lived, she was "a slim figure in faded blue jeans" (John I. H. Baur, *Loren MacIver*, Macmillan Co., New York, 1953, 8). MacIver lived in Greenwich Village from 1930 on; when Cynthia Vane moves to New York, she lives "down in the scale of the city's transverse streets" (Vintage, 623). She spent summers from 1931 to 1941 in a shack on Cape Cod in North Truro, two miles from Provincetown.

MacIver took her subjects from the smallest details of her everyday life in New York and on Cape Cod. MacIver said of her art,

“Quite simple things can lead to discovery. This is what I would like to do with painting; starting with simple things, to lead the eye by various manipulations of colors, objects and tensions toward a transformation and a reward. An ashcan suggests a phoenix; its relics begin a new life, like a tree in spring. ...My wish is to make something permanent out of the transitory by means at once colloquial and dramatic. Certain moments have the gift of revealing the past and foretelling the future. It is these moments that I hope to catch” (Robert Henkes, *American Women Painters of the 1930s and 1940s: the Lives and Work of Ten Artists*, McFarland and Co., London: 1991, 32-54, 42).

Nabokov's narrator's description of Cynthia Vane's paintings

as “glass-bright minutiae” matches John Baur’s of MacIver’s paintings: “Tern Eggs” (1933) suggests “two precious stones mounted in a circlet of minor jewels” and “Fire Escape” (1951) is “illuminated . . . by a whole string of jewel-like drops.” Her soft colors bleeding into each other “heighten the atmosphere of gentle mystery which pervades so much of her work” (John Baur, *Loren MacIver; I. Rice Pereira*, MacMillan, New York, 1953, 10; 11; 30).

And elsewhere, he writes:

“LM has captured the magic in the small commonplace things of life...the flickering illumination of her rows of votive lights, or the gleaming branches of a tree in winter mist are spiritual manifestations that shine through corporeal existence” (John I. H. Baur, *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art*, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967, 119).

The narrator of “The Vane Sisters” wonders where Cynthia’s paintings have gone, “those honest and poetical pictures that illumined her living room—the wonderfully detailed images of metallic things, and my favorite, *Seen through a Windshield*—a windshield partly covered with rime, with a brilliant trickle (from an imaginary car roof) across its transparent part and, through it all, the sapphire flame of the sky and a green-and-white fir tree” (624). Loren MacIver’s painting, “Taxi,” could have been titled *Seen through a Windshield*; in it “the streaming windshield is like a display of fireworks, an iridescent blaze of yellows, greens, reds and blues from refracted lamps and neon signs” (Baur, 1953, 30).

At the beginning of “The Vane Sisters,” the narrator appreciates, with the sisters’ incorporeal assistance, a corrugated aluminum garbage can; MacIver painted her “Ashcan” in 1944.

At the end of the story, the narrator notes after his sleepless night, “Through the tawny window shades penetrated a dream that was somehow full of Cynthia” (631); MacIver’s “Window Shade” (1948) has a pinhole of luminous light where the string handle is attached. Like Cynthia Vane, “MacIver is not only fascinated in reflected light on wet surfaces but also its iridescent effects” (Deborah A. Goldberg, [http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/getResults.jhtml?DARGS=/hww/results/results\\_common.jhtml.27](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/getResults.jhtml?DARGS=/hww/results/results_common.jhtml.27)), as the titles of her paintings suggest:

Ashcan (1944)  
Puddle (1945), Wellesley College Museum  
Oil Slick (1949)  
Window Shade (1948), The Philips Collection  
Taxi (1952), Wadsworth Atheneum  
Snowlight (1957), Hirshhorn Museum  
Spring Snow (1958), Hirshhorn Museum  
January Thaw (1961)  
Rainbow in a Room (1972)

MacIver’s paintings are owned by some major museums; the Museum of Modern Art has two, one of which was sent to the Jeu de Paume exhibition in Paris in 1938, where Nabokov could have seen it. Or he might have seen her work either in a group show at New York’s Contemporary Arts Gallery in 1942, or at the Matisse Gallery--Pierre Matisse exhibited and represented her work from 1939 on, where MacIver had individual shows in 1940, 1944 and 1949. And he might have seen “Puddle” (1945) at the Wellesley College Museum.

MacIver’s paintings are “intimations of the ineffable,” her work a manner of seeing, not a school. And like Cynthia Vane’s paintings, which are “delightful, gay, but not very popular” (624), “MacIver’s...invisibility is perplexing” (*Loren MacIver: The Painter and the Passing Stain of Circumstance*, Sandra Garbrecht, Georgetown Monograph in American Studies 4,

Georgetown University Press, 1987, 3).

More perplexing still, Nabokov wrote “The Vane Sisters” in February 1951 (Vladimir Nabokov, *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*, McGraw-Hill, 1975, 218), so that if Nabokov was familiar with MacIver’s work (might Edmund Wilson have encountered her or her paintings in Provincetown?), he foresaw “Taxi,” the painting she was to do in 1952, by a year.

—Priscilla Meyer, Middletown, Connecticut

“HOMELAND STUCK TO THE SKIN OF MY SOLES”:  
NABOKOV AND DANTON

A comparison of the Bolshevik coup d’état to the French Revolution is a common trope in the contemporary political vocabulary. Bolsheviks themselves started this comparison when they proudly dubbed their bloody takeover “the Great October Revolution” after the so-called Great French Revolution (cf. Tamara Kondratieva, *Bolcheviks et Jacobins: itinéraire des analogies*, Paris: Payot, 1989). Needless to say, the Russian interwar émigré critics imbued this comparison with the opposite meaning. Thus, I. V. Shklovsky (better known by his pen name Dioneo), when commenting on the Bolshevik Red Terror, quotes Hippolyte Taine’s *Origines de la France Contemporaine*: “The Jacobin Government collected its staff and its cadres” from “ignorant and vicious scum.” He then remarks: “What was true in 1793 is still more true in 1917-18” (I. V. Shklovsky, *Russia under the Bolsheviks* [Russian Liberation Committee, vol. 1], London, 1919, 35). Nabokov’s father, Vladimir Dmitrievich, also suggested kinship between Bolshevism and Jacobinism: While discussing the situation in contemporaneous Soviet Russia, he used Carlyle’s catchword “rascality,” with which the Scottish historian succinctly expressed the quintessence of the French Revolution (see, respectively, Vladimir Nabokoff,

“Soviet Rule and Russia’s Future,” *The New Commonwealth*, Supplement No. 15, Friday, January 23, 1920, 7; Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, New York: The Modern Library, 1934, 218-19).

Nabokov, of course, was well aware of this condemnatory analogy. For example, in his 1925 lecture, entitled “A Few Words about the Mediocrity of Soviet Belles-Lettres and an Attempt to Establish Its Reasons” (“Neskol’ko slov ob ubozhestve sovetskoi belletristiki i popytka ustanovit’ prichiny onogo”), Nabokov places these two regimes side by side by way of their representative newspapers: “There is hardly anyone in France now who cherishes as relics an issue of *Mercure de France* for 1789. Our descendants, too, will hardly cherish *Izvestiia* and *Pravda*—all these organs of Communist Philistines” (“Vriad li est’ kto-nibud’ seichas vo Frantsii, kto leleet, kak moshchi, nomer ‘Mercure de France’ ot 1789 goda. Vriad li i nashi potomki stanut leleiat’ ‘Izvestiia’ i ‘Pravdu’—vse eti organy kommunisticheskikh meshchan”; see *Diaspora II. Novye materialy* [2001]: 19).

Nabokov suggests this analogy in his fiction as well. Thus, he hints at the bloody terror of the French Revolution in *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935-36) which, in his own description, “deals with the incarceration of a rebel /.../ by the buffoons and bullies of the Communazist state” (CE 217). We recall that Cincinnatus’s arrest, imprisonment and condemnation to death by beheading were preceded by the episode which describes how “at some open meeting in the city park there was a sudden wave of alarm and someone said in a loud voice: ‘Citizens, there is among us a—.’ Here followed a strange, almost forgotten word” (IB 31-32). This omitted “strange, almost forgotten word” is evidently a “traitor,” and the phrase in single quotation marks is reminiscent of the accusatory formula regularly used at the Convention: “Citizens, there is a traitor among us,” which commonly resulted in the death sentence by guillotine (see Gavriel Shapiro, *Delicate Markers*, New York: Peter Lang,

1998, 106). In addition, some of Cincinnatus's actions echo those of King Louis XVI as well as of André Chénier (see, respectively, Gavriel Shapiro, "Cincinnatus as Solus Rex," *The Nabokovian* 33 [Fall 1994]: 22-24; Alexander Dolinin, "Thriller Square and The Place De La Révolution," *The Nabokovian* 38 [Spring 1997]: 43-49).

In *The Gift* (1937-38; 1952), Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, the protagonist of the novel, who often conveys Nabokov's own point of view, clearly thinks about the analogy between the Jacobin and the Bolshevik regimes, when invoking the distinctive calendar used during the French Revolution, and projecting it on his own times. (As we recall, the Convention introduced a radical calendar reform, with the new clock, new names for the months, and the years counted from the establishment of the first French Republic.) Fyodor emphatically counts the years of his émigré existence from the Bolshevik usurpation of power, calling the year in which the novel begins, "The Year Seven" (*Gift* 17) rather than 1924, while at the same time pondering the whimsical workings of memory with regard to his native Russia and to Germany, his present-day country of residence: "It is strange how a memory will grow into a wax figure, how the cherub grows suspiciously prettier as its frame darkens with age—strange are the mishaps of memory. I emigrated seven years ago; this foreign land has by now lost its aura of abroadness just as my own ceased to be a geographic habit. The Year Seven. The wandering ghost of an émigré immediately adopted this system of reckoning, akin to the one formerly introduced by the ardent French citizen in honor of newborn liberty" (*Gift* 17). Even though Nabokov's protagonist sarcastically employs the locution "newborn liberty" with regard to the late eighteenth-century France, it is obvious that he has contemporary Russia in mind.

In the same novel, Fyodor dubs local Communist hoodlums who ransacked Vasiliev's newspaper office, "locally hired Jacobins" ("mestnye platnye iakobintsy," *Ssoch*, 4: 247) (in the

English translation, "Trotskyists" are substituted for "Jacobins" [see *Gift* 61]). (Cf. a description of several such attacks on the offices of the Berlin daily *Rul'* in I. V. Gessen, *Gody izgnaniia: zhiznennyi otchet*, Paris: YMCA-Press, 1979, 132-33.)

A less obvious allusion to the French Revolution appears in Fyodor's later musings about himself and his homeland: "Ought one not to reject any longing for one's homeland besides that which is with me, within me, which is stuck like the silver sand of the sea to the skin of my soles, lives in my eyes, my blood, gives depth and distance to the background of life's every hope?" (*Gift* 175). Here, Fyodor evidently once again expresses the inner feelings of his creator: Even though, as an émigré, he is far away from his homeland, he carries her with him—both within himself and on the surface of his skin. Nabokov expresses the latter sentiments in his poem "To Motherland" ("K rodine," 1924), where its lyrical "I" affirms that his entire body is merely his homeland's image and that his soul is like the skies over the Neva river; and in the poem "To Russia" ("K Rossii," 1928), in which its hero likens his palm to Russia's topography and links his destiny to hers (*Ssoch*, 1: 631 and 2: 591-92, respectively).

Most importantly—and this is the main point of my essay—Nabokov, an attentive reader of Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, which he calls "that admirable work" (*EO*, 3: 343; cf. Dolinin, "Thriller Square and The Place De La Révolution," 46), evidently polemicizes in this latter *Gift* passage with Georges Jacques Danton (1759-94). Shortly before being arrested and guillotined, Danton was urged by his wife and friends to flee France. Danton responds to their pleas: "If freed France cast me out, there are only dungeons for me elsewhere. One carries not his country with him on the sole of his shoe!" (Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, 674). If Danton, one of the key figures of the French Revolution, sees France merely as the revolutionary hypostasis and cannot detach himself from her, Nabokov, a vehement opponent of the bloody Jacobin-like Bolshevism,

feels that he carries the salvaged Russia with him. He believes that what he left behind is a very different country altogether, the country, where triumph “the filth, brutality and boredom of silent servitude” and where reigns “the new, the broadshouldered provincial and slave” (“No Matter How,” 1943, and “To Prince S. M. Kachurin,” 1947, *PP* 126-27; 138-39), although in “The Visit to the Museum” (1939), he poignantly addresses this tragic duality, when his narrator calls Russia “hopelessly slavish and hopelessly my own native land” (*Stories* 285).

—Gavriel Shapiro, Ithaca, New York

#### THE WOMAN IN WHITE AS A SUBTEXT IN THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT

*The Woman in White*, a mystery novel by the English writer Wilkie Collins, functions as a subtext in Vladimir Nabokov’s first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The connection to Collins’ novel is established through a direct reference to its title in a passage that Nabokov’s narrator, V, cites from Sebastian Knight’s second novel, *Success*: “That last kiss is already dead and *The Woman in White* [a film they had been to see that night] is stone-dead...” (Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Vintage International: New York, 1992. 97). Though much attention has been given to the books on Sebastian’s bookshelf, the connection between Collins’ novel and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* has gone unexamined. As the passage appears in a passage from one of Sebastian’s books, it is also unclear whether the allusion functions within Nabokov’s novel as a whole.

It is my contention that *The Woman in White* functions as a significant subtext to the whole of Nabokov’s novel. Through a series of plot and textual references, Nabokov establishes both *Success* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as doubles of

Collins’ mystery. Established by playful parodies, this doubling extends into the thematic level of the novels. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* deals with Nabokov’s transition from Russian to English; it both questions his ability to make this change and proves that he is able to do it.

*The Woman in White* is a mystery novel in which confusions about identity lead to questions about the rightful recipient of a material inheritance; *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is also a novel about inheritance, but of an intangible nature – specifically, the transference of artistic ability from one language (or brother) to another.

The doubling of *The Woman in White* with both *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Success* can be easily recognized in some of the basic plot points of each of the three novels. Collins’ mystery tells the story of two half-sisters—Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe—who share a mother but have different fathers. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov tells the story of two half-brothers—V and Sebastian Knight—who share a father but have different mothers. The two family constellations reflect one another perfectly, as if Nabokov were holding up a kind of literary mirror to Collins’ novel.

Sebastian Knight performs a similar trick in his novel *Success*. As V tells us, *Success* deals with “the methods of human fate” (RLSK, 93). It traces the series of apparent coincidences that bring its two main characters—Anne and Percival Q.—together to live “happy ever after” (RLSK, 94). The names of these two characters from *Success* are lifted from *The Woman in White*. The only difference is that in Collins’ novel, Anne Catherick and Percival Glyde are mortal enemies—Percival had Anne committed to an insane asylum in order to protect his reputation and fortune, and Anne spends much of the book trying to convince Marian Halcombe not to marry Percival. Given the details of this story, these two characters in Collins’ novel are the least likely to end up married to one another. In *Success*, Sebastian turns this mutual hatred into its inverse: a



love ordained by fate.

Sebastian does not just play with plot of *The Woman in White*, he also parodies a passage from the book in the excerpt that V quotes. Lamenting the death of his love Laura Fairlie, a character named Walter Hartright in Collins' novel writes:

Torn in her own lifetime from the list of the living, the daughter of Philip Fairlie and the wife of Percival Glyde might still exist for her sister, might still exist for me, but to all the world besides she was dead. Dead to her uncle who had renounced her; dead to the servants of the house, who had failed to recognise [sic] her; dead to the persons in authority who had transmitted her fortune to her husband and her aunt; dead to my mother and sister, who believed me to be the dupe of an adventuress and the victim of a fraud; socially, morally, legally—dead. [...] . . . dead. And yet alive! (Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*. The Modern Library: New York, 2002. 422)

The passionate tone of this passage is sincere. The reader mourns the loss with Walter and wishes with him that somehow things could have happened differently. Walter's writes in a tone of resolve; he is looking backwards and remembering Laura with some hope in his mind of resurrecting her; his lament ends with a reversal: "...dead. And yet alive!"

In *Success*, Sebastian presents his rendition of this passage just after making the allusion to *The Woman White* mentioned above. The character speaking is named William, who is described as "Anne's first, queer effeminate fiancé" (RLSK, 96). As he walks home from Anne's house, William thinks to himself:

That last kiss is already dead and *The Woman in White* [...] is stone-dead, and the policeman who passed is dead too,

and even the door is as dead as its nail. And that last thought is already a dead thing by now. (RLSK, 97)

William's tone is cynical, as opposed to the passionate emotion that Walter displayed about Laura. Rather than looking back in the hope of resurrecting what has passed, William is quick to rush forward from the present into the future, calling moments that have only just passed "dead" in the interest of moving beyond them. Sebastian is not only mirroring the plot of Collins' novel in *Success*, he is also doubling its text, reflecting it in the form of a parody.

Nabokov undertakes something similar in parts of *The Real of Sebastian Knight*, though his manipulations of the text are less concentrated than Sebastian's parody. They appear first in descriptions of Sebastian Knight, which parallel some of Collins' descriptions of a minor character named Professor Pesca in *The Woman in White*. Pesca and Sebastian, in their respective novels, are depicted as foreigners in England who are overzealous in adapting to English culture. Pesca, originally from Italy, is described as follows:

The ruling idea of his life appear to be, that he was bound to show his gratitude to the country which had afforded him an asylum and a means of subsistence, by doing his utmost to turn himself into an Englishman. (WIW, 5)

To do this, Pesca adopts first the "personal appearance" of an Englishman and then the "habits and amusements" of an Englishman, including sports, fox hunting and swimming (WIW, 5-6). Despite his best efforts it is clear that Pesca has not really succeeded in making all of these English habits his own. Walter Hartright describes Pesca's participation in these English events: "I had seen him risk his limbs blindly at a fox-hunt and in a cricket-field" (WIW, 6). Though excited about participating in English games, it is clear that Pesca is anything but adept at

them. In adopting the “personal appearance” of an Englishman, Pesca goes overboard as well—he does not just carry an umbrella and wear gaiters, he does both “invariably”(WIW, 5).

Sebastian’s attempt to become an Englishman is similarly overzealous and unsuccessful. V describes the half-Russian, half-English Sebastian realizing with “a kind of helpless amazement” that, though “he had expected more from England than she could do for him... , his new surroundings played up to his new dreams” (RLSK, 42). Sebastian makes every attempt to look like an English undergraduate, following the advice he was given and breaking the corner of his “academical cap”; during rainstorms, “Sebastian piously got wet and caught colds,” since in early 20<sup>th</sup> century England “hats and umbrellas were tabooed” (RLSK, 42). That changed once Sebastian met D.W. Gorget, who always carried about an umbrella; after that Sebastian did as well. Like his counterpart in *The Woman in White*, Sebastian “was definitely poor at games,” and for a time this upsets him greatly (RLSK, 43). His overzealousness is best summed up by his friend P.G. Sheldon, who describes Sebastian as “trying to out-England England” (RLSK, 44).

All of these features of Sebastian’s character map perfectly onto the descriptions of Pesca from Collins’s mystery: the appreciation for England, the overzealous and often failed attempts to become English, the adoption of English appearances, the desire and failure to participate in English sports. There are also two major identifying characteristics of Pesca’s that do not carry over to Sebastian; Pesca’s manner of speech and his name. Instead, these aspects of Pesca’s character are given to a different figure from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: the detective Mr. Silbermann.

The pairing of Pesca and Silbermann is most readily identifiable in their manner of speaking. Professor Pesca makes several long speeches at the beginning of *The Woman in White* which convey the man’s humorously broken English. One example is as follows:

So the Papa says, ‘I have got a letter from my friend, the Mister; and he wants a recommend from me, of a drawing-master, to go down to his house in the country.’ (WIW, 11)

Collins does not over-emphasize the accent of his Italian character, but truncation from the intended “recommendation” to “recommend,” as well as the humorous identification of “my friend, the Mister” lend a foreign lilt to the man’s speech patterns. Silbermann’s speech is similarly stylized, though the accent is more heavily emphasized: “‘You will send me your book,’ he said lifting a stumpy finger. ‘And pay for possible dependences’” (RLSK, 128). Other mutations litter Silbermann’s speech – “dat” for “that,” “anyfing” for “anything” – and the effect for the reader is similar to that which Collins creates in Pesca’s speech: it clearly identifies the character’s humorous speech as that of a foreigner. These characters are the only two in their respective stories who speak in this way, making Silbermann the only candidate for Pesca’s speech-double in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

Though Silbermann does not share Pesca’s name directly, as Anne and Percival from *Success* share Anne Catherick’s and Percival Glyde’s, one of Silbermann’s exclamations connects him to the Professor’s name. After learning that V is Russian, Silbermann rattles off the few Russian words that he knows. One of the three phrases he knows (the other two being “do you speak Russian” and “dear brother”) is “*Rebah!*” (RLSK, 126). He translates it himself—“Fish, so?” (RLSK, 126). Since Pesca can also be translated into “fish” from Italian to English, the fact that Silbermann knows this particular Russian word (that, unlike the previous two, is not thematically relevant to RLSK) connects him with Collins’s character. In demonstrating his knowledge of Russian, Silbermann is also naming his literary model.

One other textual game appears exactly once in both *Suc-*

cess and the rest of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: a simple but subtle pun on the name of Collins' baronet, Sir Percival Glyde. Just before naming *The Woman in White* directly, Sebastian writes: "I cannot stand that backwards glide into the past" (RLSK, 97). This pun is itself a parody of Collins' novel, since *The Woman in White* might aptly be described as just that—"a backwards glide into the past." In the preface written in 1860, Collins writes of his novel: "The story of the book is told throughout by the characters of the book. They are all placed in different positions along the chain of events; and they all take up the chain in turn" (WIW, xxiii). The novel is a reconstruction of past events told by characters looking backwards to retell their parts in it. The mystery itself involves a "glide" into the past (which also has a Glyde in it) to discover Percival's secret and to "reincarnate" Laura Fairlie, who has been proclaimed dead.

In the rest of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, there is only one other iteration of the word "glide." It also occurs in a citation from one of Sebastian's books; V is explaining that Sebastian "inherited from [his mother] that strange, almost romantic passion for sleeping-cars and Great European Express Trains." To illustrate this, he cites a passage in which Sebastian describes the motion of the train as "the gliding move into darkness" (RLSK, 8). Trains are another critical motif for this book; it is a train that carries Sebastian and V out of Russia forever, (see RLSK, 22-23) and V rides an overnight train to St. Damier and Sebastian on the night that Sebastian dies (see RLSK, 190-194). *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* may seem to be a similar "backward glide into the past," but it more closely resembles the motion of a train "gliding... into darkness." It is the story of a man reconstructing his half-brother's life, yet the act of doing so always carries V forwards and not backwards. In reconstructing Sebastian's life, V also participates in it, following the same paths that Sebastian followed and nearly being seduced by the same woman who was Sebastian's downfall.

Even the documents that aid in his reconstruction come to life and participate in his ongoing adventure. V's train ride on the night he goes to St. Damier echoes the "gliding move into darkness," but the darkness is not the darkness of the past—it is the darkness of death. This is the darkness which Nabokov is exploring in his mystery story. Characters speak from beyond the grave and return as ghosts in various forms to give messages and point to patterns, and secrets are disclosed by dying and dead men.

This takes us to the crux of the matter, and perhaps the most important function of the subtext in Nabokov's book. *The Woman in White* is not only a textual subtext, but also a thematic counterpart to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The primary concern of Collins' story is material inheritance. Sir Percival Glyde is trying to hide the fact that his parent's were not legally married in order to protect his inheritance. At the end, with the death of both Percival Glyde and Count Fosco, there is hope that the fortune can be returned to its rightful owner. Nabokov's story is also concerned with an inheritance, but not a material one. His question is metaphysical; the inheritance is of a soul: "any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations" (RLSK, 202).

In being a question of soul, it is simultaneously a question of artistic ability. In his first book in English, it was important to Nabokov to consider the question of crossing over from one language into another. Would he be able to write as he had in Russian? Would he, like Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*, be resurrected from his Russian death and have his metaphysical fortune returned in English?

As is the case in Wilkie Collins' novel, the question is never answered directly. We are not sure whether Laura Fairlie will ever have her fortune returned, and at the end of Nabokov's novel, we are similarly unsure about the fate (or even identity) of V and Sebastian. In many ways, however, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* both poses the question and answers it in the

very fact of its existence. Having written an intriguing, playful, and allusive mystery, Nabokov has proven his ability to make the transition, proven that he is already “resurrected.”

Many will see the hint at this in the book’s final sentence—“I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps both are someone whom neither of us knows” (RLSK, 203)—but we can find the author hidden behind the scenes elsewhere also, and appropriately connected with the characters from *Success*. Sebastian writes that William stops by the door of a “conjurer” whom he finds

...standing in his underwear and inspecting a pair of black old trousers. ‘Well?’ said William... ‘They don’t kinda like my accent,’ he replied, ‘but I guess I’m going to get that turn all the same.’ (RLSK, 97)

Later William asks him whether he can buy the conjurer a rabbit, and the conjurer simply replies that he will “hire one when necessary” (RLSK, 98).

The details of this passage show us that the conjurer is not successful yet; he has no rabbit of his own, and he presses his pants under the mattress for want of an iron. His reference to his own “accent” and the fact that he draws out the word “‘necessary’ as if it were an endless ribbon” also tell us that he is not a native English speaker (RLSK, 98). We know that Nabokov associates writers with conjurers, and can see in this character the young foreign writer just starting on a new career in English.

How appropriate then that at the end of this long journey, the conjurer should reappear, “wait[ing] in the wings with his hidden rabbit” (RLSK, 203). The curtain is about to rise on the “turn” that he had referred to one hundred pages before, the conjurer is about to take the stage, and the *Success* that the title of Sebastian’s novel promises is nearly upon him. Here, perhaps even more than in the novel’s final sentence, we can

see Nabokov, ready now to present himself to the English-speaking world.

—Rory Bradley, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

#### TOPOGRAPHIC NIGHTMARES IN *DESPAIR*

Nabokov comments in his foreword to *Despair* that Hermann Karlovich is a “neurotic scoundrel” (xiii). Following suit, critics have generally, if not unanimously, declared Hermann imperceptive, derivative, as well as a bungler. G.M. Hyde writes: “his [*i.e.* Hermann’s] ‘novel’ [is] a schizoid projection of shameless borrowings from Dostoyevsky (with a dash of Turgenyev here and there) and an unforgivable misappropriation of one of Pushkin’s greatest lyrics” (109) [*cf.* *Vladimir Nabokov: America’s Russian Novelist*. London: M. Boyars, 1977]. For his part, Boyd believes that Hermann’s failure as a writer arises out of his egocentrism: “Hermann’s bloated sense of self and his obliviousness to everyone else makes [sic] him for Nabokov the antithesis of the artist” (RY 385). Undeterred, Hermann holds high opinions of his literary and murder-scheming skills. The novel’s opening sentence delivers an unmitigated declaration of his self-assurance as writer. He considers the murder he devises an unsurpassed masterpiece (195), but since the world refuses to recognize it, he employs his “power to write and marvelous ability to express ideas” (3) in order to create a literary masterpiece analogous to the first. I would like to argue that Hermann has actually crafted a rich, deceptive narrative.

Most critics have chosen to focus on the novel’s frequent allusions to literary texts. Alexander Dolinin observes how Hermann, ensnared in an “intertextual trap,” frequently misquotes or incorrectly attributes literary passages, and in the process exposes his limited knowledge of the classics he claims his own narrative

will outdo [cf. "The Caning of Modernist Profaners: Parody in *Despair*." *Cycnos*. 12.2 (1995): 43-54]. Julian Connolly switches to a focus on Dostoyevsky, and argues that though Hermann repeatedly derides the Russian writer, he nevertheless confirms, by emulating so many character traits of Raskolnikov, "the continuing cogency of Dostoyevsky's conception of 'crime and punishment'" (160) [cf. "Dostoyevsky and Vladimir Nabokov: The Case of *Despair*." *Dostoyevsky and the Human Condition After a Century*. Ed. A. Ugrinsky and V. Ozolins. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986. 155-162]. Connolly rightly insists that Hermann is a literary double of Raskolnikov, in that both find justification for murders motivated by financial motives in abstract ideas concerning their superiority (Raskolnikov's *Übermensch* theory and Hermann's belief that artistic genius can concoct a perfect crime). That being said, Hermann has another double in Dostoyevsky's novel, *i.e.* the detective Porfiry Petrovich. Porfiry tirelessly taunts and toys with Raskolnikov, exploits his hypochondria and exhausts him psychologically in order to provoke an unintentional confession. Late in the novel he describes his method thus: "And I am willing to bet that you suppose I am trying now to cajole you by flattery. Well, perhaps that is just what I am doing, he, he, he! Perhaps, Rodion Romanovich, you ought not to believe what I say, perhaps you should never believe me completely" (389, Norton edition). For his part, Hermann claims "light-hearted, inspired lying" (4) is one of his essential traits and freely acknowledges he fills his narrative with pitfalls for the reader: "I am merely producing gleeful sounds. The kind of glee one experiences upon making an April fool of someone. And a damned good fool I *have* made of someone. Who is he? Gentle reader, look at yourself in the mirror, as you seem to like mirrors so much" (24). Evidently, both characters enjoy misleading their audience and admit doing so. Porfiry dangles fabricated evidence as a decoy before a distraught suspect, hoping his shattered nerves will take the bait. He is convinced Raskolnikov is guilty based on psychological

profile (he is the only client of the murdered pawnbroker who did not come forward to claim his pawned wares, and he faints in a police station while the crime is being discussed), but since he has no forensic evidence to support this, he simply makes it up. Likewise, Hermann's narrative eccentricities at times seem to endow him with the profile of a psychopath capable of murder, but what if the evidence he provides for murder in the novel upon closer examination proves fabricated?

Numerous places are named in *Despair*: Berlin, Dresden, Moscow, Paris, Pignan, Pilsen, Prague, Reval, Roussillon, St-Petersburg, and Zwickau, to name a few. These toponyms all correspond to the topographic coordinates of their extra-literary counterparts. For example, Berlin is not capriciously placed outside Germany, or Moscow separated from St-Petersburg by a mere twenty minutes walking distance. When Hermann describes the site of Felix's murder, however, all loci are suddenly inexplicably dislodged from their familiar locations.

Felix is murdered in the village of Waldau near a lot of land purchased by Ardalion. The latter provides Hermann with a map of the area, "a three hours drive from Berlin" (33), but the map defeats its purpose by locating useful information on how to get there beyond its margins. Hermann asks the reader to visualize the following: as he holds the map, Berlin (point of departure) is located somewhere near his left elbow (ergo off the map); a railway travels as far as Koenigsdorf, or Hermann's wristwatch (also off the map), at which point it changes direction and heads towards Eichenberg, or Hermann's waistcoat button (again, off the map). A bus covers the seventeen kilometers separating Koenigsdorf from Waldau, or Hermann's left thumb nail (thus located on the very edge of the map's left side). The information concerning Eichenberg is given because Hermann plans to take the Berlin train to Koenigsdorf, from there take the bus to Waldau, murder Felix, and then walk to the station in Eichenberg to take the train back to Berlin.

For a number of reasons, this map proves one of the most

puzzling oddities found in the novel. What do we make of a document that marginalizes the information it is meant to convey? If only a portion of this information makes it onto the map's periphery, what does the remaining graph describe? And if the map is merely a document of the areas surrounding Waldau, not of Waldau itself, then why cite it as a guide to facilitate orientation? Does it make sense to use a map of Toronto in order to explain to someone how to get from one place to another in Ottawa simply because one does not have a map of the latter city at hand?

But the map's most striking oddity lies elsewhere. Even if Hermann is using the wrong map, his directions are clear and precise, and we cannot fail to get from Koenigsdorf to Waldau if we follow them because they indicate the exact distance between point A and point B (seventeen km), and even suggest a convenient mode of transportation (we are told that a bus makes the trip three times a day). Unfortunately, clarity and precision are useless without accuracy. If Hermann travels three hours northward from Berlin (left elbow) to get to Koenigsdorf, this should place him somewhere in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Koenigsdorf, Waldau, and Eichenberg are common toponyms in Germany, but none are found north of Berlin. Maybe Hermann is holding the map upside-down? A number of Eichenbergs and Waldaus are located south of Berlin, but only in Kassel are they found within walking distance from each other. The problem is that the only Koenigsdorf near a Waldau in all of Germany is in North-Rhine Westphalia, and they are forty-eight km apart, not seventeen as Hermann claims. There is another glitch: three hundred km separate this Waldau (in North-Rhine Westphalia) from the nearest Eichenberg, the one in Kassel, obviously an impossible distance to cover on foot in one day. Furthermore, the Waldau in Kassel is 386 km from Berlin, the one in North-Rhine Westphalia 622 km; in 1930-31, neither distance could have been covered by car in three hours. Obviously, Hermann has taken the liberty to significantly reconfigure topographic

coordinates here, but to what end?

Actually, another incident takes place in a topographically inaccurate location before the murder occurs. Hermann meets Felix in Tarnitz, located somewhere in Saxony (63), where he plans to arrange a later meeting between the two in Waldau. The problem, once again, is that the only *real* Tarnitz found in Germany is a street located in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, not a town in Saxony. A meeting is arranged in a non-place to arrange a murder committed in another non-place. Stephen Suagee has already argued that Tarnitz is "a kind of illusion within the book" (56) on the grounds that it is a construct of Hermann's confused memory [*cf.* "An Artist's Memory Beats All Other Kind: An Essay on *Despair*." *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. Carl R. Proffer. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1974. 54-61]. He notes the following remnants of Hermann's past found in Tarnitz: Felix's stick appears there after Hermann dreams of it, though there is no sign of it during their earlier meeting in Prague (thus the fatal clue which exposes the murderer's identity is actually a red herring, for it does not exist, but is simply dreamt into being); the name Carl Spiess on a fishmonger's sign recalls a homonymic fishmonger Hermann knew in a Volga village (*Despair* 68); double-trunk birch trees appear there but also near Ardalion's lakeside lot; Hermann notices a familiar woman buying a carpet from a familiar Tartar. The woman turns out to be Christina Forsmann, a girl "whom Herman had known carnally in 1915" (67). Notwithstanding these, one difficulty remains if we wish to attribute the illusory nature of Tarnitz to Hermann's faulty memory. Whether or not Tarnitz exists at all, Hermann is not the only character who erroneously locates it in Saxony. Early in the novel, Felix says he has worked the previous year as a gardener in a small village in Saxony (10). A few pages later he adds that the village is not far from Tarnitz (13). How could Felix have made the same mistake Hermann will later make when he travels to Saxony and comes across Tarnitz? If we answer that Hermann the author simply makes

up Felix's statement, he still consciously manipulates another's testimony in his text, and in the process reveals an intention to locate Tarnitz in Saxony. Authorial intent, not faulty memory, conjures the topographical inaccuracy, and consequently the illusory meeting held there.

Following the murder, Hermann wonders what might have happened if this meeting in Tarnitz had never taken place: "Yes thus [Felix] would still be sitting to this day, and I would keep remembering him, with wild anguish and passions; a huge aching tooth and nothing with which to pull it out; a woman whom one cannot possess; a place, which, owing to the peculiar topography of nightmares, keeps agonizingly out of reach" (63-64). Let us ponder the implications of this confession in which metaphor provides three images to describe an unmet Felix. Concerning the first image, Hermann has earlier revealed that "to dream you had lost a tooth portended the death of someone you knew" (22). Thus if a Felix unmet in Tarnitz evokes a tooth Hermann cannot pull out, there is no evocation of death, *i.e.* no murder. Concerning the second image, we know that Lydia fits the bill as a woman one cannot possess; during one of her husband's disassociation performances, she yawningly asks him to bring her a book, thereby abruptly dispelling his illusion that they were engaged in intercourse (28). Here Felix unmet represents not murder but *happiness* denied in marital affairs. Finally, we now know that two loci in the novel fit the description of the third image: the Waldau and Tarnitz where the murder and meeting are supposed to have taken place do not exist on any real topographic map. This might lead us to believe that both the meeting and the murder never occurred (if the places where the acts are believed to have occurred do not exist, then the acts themselves cannot have occurred, at least not in a locus external to the imagination conceiving them), but then why write a 212-page confession insisting they did? Surely here we have clear evidence of madness: either Hermann is masochistically driven towards self-incrimination and seeks

to convince others (and himself) he is guilty of murder, in which case the topographic inaccuracies are simply a slip on his part due to distraction or carelessness, or he is sadistically driven to induce others into error and false accusation by, once again, convincing them of his guilt, in which case the inaccuracies act as a gauge by which he measures his cunning against the reader's percipience.

Of course, there is no reason to correlate madness with intentional acts of wrongful self-incrimination and deception of readership. The non-correspondence of topographic coordinates in fiction and the world is a liberty Nabokov would himself make use of in his later fiction such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, albeit in a radically different manner; whereas the loci are consistently dislodged and renamed in the latter works, Hermann merely dislodges (and never once renames) loci on two occasions in *Despair*, both of them related to the murder. Yet as writer of a "leisurely tale" he is not bound to faithful and consistent reproduction of the extra-textual world, and if he is caught telling a fib here and there, such non-referential use of language is not indicative of madness, but of the fiction writer's prerogative of independent invention. As a result, we cannot assume that Hermann's narrative will always accurately reflect objective and extra-textual realities.

Unreliability is not necessarily indicative of madness until we have proven that previous symptoms of madness exist to which we can then add that of unreliability (mad men may lie, but not all liars are mad). There are numerous reasons why Hermann might give false information about a murder that may or may not have occurred, one of them being that he is writing a detective novel. If Hermann's narrative does not contain a *real* murder (because the place a murder has occurred in is not *real*), then what we are left with is a plot relating a man's efforts to write a murder story. And since, as Helen Oakley points out [*cf.* "Disturbing design: Nabokov's manipulation of the detective fiction genre in *Pale Fire* and *Despair*." *Journal*

of *Popular Culture* 36.3 (2003): 480-496], the murder story's "generic triad of victim, villain, and detective" (480) is short one player in *Despair*, i.e. the detective, we can assume that the reader is meant to play the part in this radically new kind of detective story.

And how have we fared as detective readers? By unanimously dismissing Hermann as an obtuse, oblivious bungler, previous criticism of the novel has made it difficult to discern instances when Hermann acts out of character, as he does when he demonstrates enough lucidity to dissimulate non-loci that have escaped detection by careful readers for over seventy years now. One would like to answer that in the name of character consistency, it seems highly improbable that a purportedly mad, clumsy narrator could uncharacteristically have displayed on this single occasion enough astuteness to elude a slew of rational literary critics. But there are other instances when Hermann fails to act the fool. In Chapter four, Lydia tells Ardalion that her husband is traveling to Dresden, upon which the painter asks Hermann to send his "kindest regards to the Sistine" (65). The reference is to Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, located in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Gallery of Old Masters) in Dresden. Claire Rosenfield [cf. "*Despair* and the Lust for Immortality." *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*. Ed. L.S. Dembo. Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1967. 66-84] makes an understandable mistake and assumes that Ardalion's reply is intended to unmask a hack-artist "who believes that the Sistine Chapel is in Dresden" (77). She also claims that "the imperceptive narrator" (84) is one of the devices Nabokov employs to reveal Hermann's madness. If so, Nabokov misses a superb opportunity to display this imperceptiveness at work by having his protagonist/narrator make the same misassumption Rosenfield makes. The point is not to fault Rosenfield's otherwise insightful discussion of the novel; as a cultural signifier, the word Sistine conjures in most, if not all of us, the chapel in Rome before it does the painting in Dresden. Rather, the fact

that Hermann does not make the misassumption should arouse our suspicions concerning frequent examples of his obtuseness, which he might be using as a decoy distracting us from the astuteness he wields elsewhere, as in the case of the undetected topographic inaccuracies, or Felix's chimerical stick. Thus the April fools he is playing on his readers (24) might be the obtuseness he consistently displays throughout his narrative, an obtuseness which Hermann may only be feigning, for it is so ridiculously exaggerated as to evince necessary duplicity on his part. After all, are we seriously expected to believe that he does not even recognize what his own face looks like (if he readily admits his intention is to fool us, shouldn't we suspect the main premise of the novel might be disingenuous)? Or that a writer who cheekily promises his narrative will make previous masters of crime fiction look like "blundering fools" (142) would deem fitting to advise us that his "devices seem to have got mixed up a little" (45), without any hidden motives? Alongside an unmitigated boasting of one's superiority, such obtuseness purposefully exposes a self-infatuated, incognizant dullard, only to better dissimulate the occasional subtleties of text that allow him to make a fool of those who come to look for the blunders and therefore miss the dextrous stroke. From the moment our minds are made up about this error-prone narrator, we construct rigid patterns of behavior and narration he is not expected to depart from, and lowering our guard, fail to review our assumption once such departures occur, just as Hermann repeatedly fails to review his erroneous identification to Felix. Hermann's *morosophia*, or fool's wisdom, works by constantly brandishing foolishness in order to conceal occasional cunning. And a reappraising of his character based on such a claim is likely to reveal more hidden cunning at work in the laying of his narrative April fools.

—Philippe Villeneuve, Ottawa, Canada



## CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM AND NABOKOV'S ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY

In an interview with Alfred Appel in 1970, Vladimir Nabokov describes the period when he wrote his short story "The Word" as "aimed at preserving nostalgic retrospections and developing Byzantine imagery (this has been mistaken by some readers for an interest in 'religion' which, beyond literary stylization, never meant anything to me)." (Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973, 160) Nabokov's purpose in using Christian symbolism may be, if not to express his "interest in religion," then to create and define his artistic philosophy, either by paralleling or juxtaposing it with a set of Christian beliefs. We can see this by examining Nabokov's short stories "The Word," "Beneficence," and "The Christmas Story," all written in the 1920s, which have a number of subtle, and thus often overlooked, Christian references, but also focus on the process of artistic creation, and thus better show the connection between Nabokov's use of Christian symbolism and his artistic philosophy.

In the short story "Slovo" ("The Word"), written in January 1923, and finally translated and published in *The New Yorker* on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2005 ([http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/12/26/051226fi\\_fiction2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/12/26/051226fi_fiction2)), the narrator finds himself in Paradise, trying to catch the attention of the angels passing by, in order to tell them of his country, "dying in agonizing darkness," and with their help bring back to his land "such joy that human souls would instantly be illumined, and would circle beneath the plash and crackle of resurrected springtime, to the golden thunder of reawakened temples." From these last words we can deduce that the churches of his country are closed, and the people are suffering in darkness, which in Christian theology the absence of God would create. The narrator believes that with the angels' help he can save his country by filling his people's souls with light and resurrecting their faith. He senses that religion--the

"reawakened temples"--can save his land.

He finally manages to catch the attention of one of the angels, who "had not yet totally abandoned earth," which gives the narrator hope that his prayer is more likely to be understood, but as he begins, he can not find the words that would either describe the wonders of his land or the horrors of its downfall. Instead, babbling and repeating himself, he can only come up with what he feels are trifles:

"some burned-down house where once the sunny sheen of parquet had been reflected in an inclined mirror... old books and old lindens... knickknacks... [his] first poems in a cobalt schoolboy notebook... some gray boulder, overgrown with wild raspberries, in the middle of a field filled with scabiosa and daisies... of rooms in a cool and resonant country house, of lindens, of [his] first love, of bumblebees sleeping on the scabiosa,"

and though to the narrator these things seem mundane and unimportant, unable to convey the full scope of his sorrow, to his surprise, the angel understands. What the narrator does not see is that the trifles that he so lovingly remembers are much more powerful in expressing both the beauty of what once was and the depth of its loss.

Responding to the narrator, the angel utters just one word, but that word seems to be the answer to his prayer. In the angel's reply, the narrator finds the joy that he was looking for, the key to the salvation of his people, which words like "edenic song" and "heavenly warmth" point to as being spiritual rebirth. But at the end of the story, as the narrator awakes to the "greenish dawn" of reality, he can not remember the word that contained all these answers. Later in his literary career, Nabokov will often use this trope of a universal solution that is about to be revealed, but for one reason or another, never is. However, in the case of "The Word," enough clues are given for us to at-

tempt to identify this answer. The prominent Christian symbolism of the text points us in one direction – from the beginning of the story, the narrator believes that the solution will be not just spiritual, but religious: the “reawakened temples” in “The Word” lead us to the Bible, and to the “Word” mentioned in the first few lines of the *Gospel According to Saint John*: “At the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1-1) Just as the Bible equates Word with God, in this story, and in his own way, so does Nabokov. After all, words, trivial details, allow the narrator of this story to transcend his earthly plane of existence and communicate with the angel. His prayer is a list of words, not even in complete sentences, and yet they allow the angel to understand him. And in the end, the angel gives the narrator one word, but it is the word that fills him with heavenly joy, and holds within it the universal answer.

What does this mean to Nabokov as a writer? If a word, just one word, can do all that – if it can transcend and carry in it the key to human salvation -- then he must be on the right track. After all, the “black syncope” of the narrator’s land, the thought of his homeland that pierces him like a “naked flame of suffering,” is also the thought of Nabokov’s homeland, ravaged by the Revolution that closed down or desecrated the temples and “silenced voices,” like that, perhaps, of Vladimir Nabokov’s father, once a prominent political figure, killed less than a year earlier in a political assassination. It seems interesting that two years later, on the third anniversary of his father’s death, Nabokov will write to his mother, in words strongly echoing “The Word,” his first story to be published after his father’s death:

“...every trifle relating to father is still as alive as ever inside me. I am so certain, my love, that we will see him again, in an unexpected but completely natural heaven, in a realm where all is radiance and delight. He will come towards us

in our common bright eternity, slightly raising his shoulders as he used to do, and we will kiss the birthmark on his hand without surprise.” (Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 239)

The “radiance” of his father’s heaven will mirror the “heavenly iridescence” of the narrator’s Paradise, and the pale birthmark on his father’s hand—the angel’s birthmark that lets the narrator know the former has not quite abandoned earth. In this letter, Nabokov will stress the trifles that keep his father alive inside him, just as the narrator of “The Word” keeps his homeland alive by “babbling about trifles.” This power of re-creating life by putting into words seemingly trivial details, parallels, for Nabokov, God’s creation of the universe, and it’s a power that he, as a writer, possesses. He too can fill his readers with the joy his narrator experiences upon hearing the angel’s word, and to reawaken their spirits, not through preaching religion, but through the beauty and art of his words.

The short story “Blagost” (“Beneficence”), written in March 1924, contains further parallels between Nabokov’s use of Christian symbolism and his theory of artistic creation. The title may have been better translated as “Grace” (as Brian Boyd does when referring to the story in *The Russian Years*), since the word “grace” in English today has the same religious connotation, often defined as God’s beneficence, as the Russian archaic term “blagost’,” which means God’s mercy and kindness. Thus translated, the title gives a religious undertone to the narrator’s experience, which somewhat changes our interpretation of it.

In this story, the narrator is a sculptor, who experiences a spiritual revelation as he watches a woman selling postcards at the Brandenburg Gate enjoy a hot cup of coffee offered to her by a stranger. As the woman’s enjoyment of her coffee transcends her physical experience of it, and becomes spiritual,

a transference occurs: the sculptor feels that his “soul, too, was drinking and heating itself, and the brown little woman tasted of coffee with milk” (Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, 77). Thanks to the kindness of an unknown guard as well as the woman’s profound enjoyment of the moment, the narrator becomes aware “of the world’s tenderness, the profound beneficence [grace] of all that surround[s him], the blissful bond between [him] and the rest of creation” and that the world represents “shimmering bliss, beneficent trepidation, a gift bestowed on us and unappreciated” (77). The sculptor sees in this exchange between the soldier and the woman, but also in the woman’s ability to so deeply enjoy such a trifle as a hot cup of coffee, proof of God’s grace, a gift that is bestowed on us by Him, which we too often fail to notice or appreciate.

This epiphany alters the sculptor’s observations: before, he sees the people around him in a negative light and describes them with hatred and bitterness, for example: “Berlin clerks were leaving their offices, ill-shaven, each with a briefcase under his arm and, in his eyes, the turbid nausea that comes when you smoke a bad cigar on an empty stomach – their weary, predatory faces, their high-starched collars, flashed by endlessly” (78). But even when his descriptions are not negative, he only notices the surface: “a woman passed with a red straw hat and a gray karakul coat; then a youth in velvet pants buttoned under the knees; and others still” (78). As an artist, he is trained to notice details, but these details are meaningless, uninspiring, purely physical. He doesn’t care about the people he sees walk by, and neither do we. The sculptor walks home, however, “peering into the faces of passerby, capturing smiles and amazing little motions—the bobbing of a girl’s pigtail as she tossed a ball against a wall, the heavenly melancholy reflected in a horse’s purplish, oval eye” (78). Brian Boyd calls this a “flash of lyric insight” (229): the details the sculptor picks out are just as trivial, but they are no longer generic; instead they

inspire him to create some magic of his own. Transformed by his spiritual experience, the sculptor now sees everything as part of God’s grace, and that connection fills the trivial details with meaning and beauty, just as the narrator’s passion in “The Word” transforms the minutiae of his memories, and the particulars of Nabokov’s father keep him alive in the writer’s mind.

If grace can inspire, what happens when it is ignored? “Rozhdestvenskiy rasskaz” (“The Christmas Story”), written in December 1928, shows us the consequences of such an unappreciated gift. Set in the early years of Soviet Russia, the story presents Novodvortsev, a writer with a “secure but pallid reputation,” (*The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 222) who’s goaded by a critic, on Christmas Eve at a time when Christmas is no longer celebrated, into writing a “Christmas story. New-style.” (224). Nabokov is disdainful of his main character from the beginning, making fun of his foolish pride and his lack of talent, but nevertheless he gives him a chance—after all the name “Novodvortsev” stems from the word “novyi” (“new”), hinting, perhaps, at the fresh insight that is about to be revealed to the character. In what can only be a true Christmas miracle, or as one Nabokovian critic, R.H.W. Dillard, puts it, “grace itself” (R.H.W. Dillard, “Nabokov’s Christmas Stories,” *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. by Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994, 50), in the midst of Novodvortsev’s clichéd thoughts, he gets a glimpse of something real:

“suddenly, for no apparent reason, [he] remembered the parlor of a merchant family’s house, a large volume of articles and poems with gilt-edged pages...the Christmas tree in the parlor, the woman he loved in those days, and all of the tree’s lights reflected as a crystal quiver in her wide-open eyes when she plucked a tangerine from a high branch. It had been twenty years ago or more—how certain details stuck in one’s memory...” (226)

This is the only time in the entire story when Novodvortsev does not see Christmas and all that comes with it as mere symbols to juxtapose against the accepted ideology, but as a moment, fleeting and seemingly trivial, yet so full of personal meaning that he remembers it twenty years later. Just as in "Beneficence" grace fills the details of the writer's memory and grants him inspiration, if he would only notice it. But Novodvortsev does not take this chance and dismisses this gift of vision in favor of his old propagandist clichés, and does not even realize his loss. Instead, he proceeds to write about the "collision of two classes" and Nabokov's "Christmas Story" ends with the first line of Novodvortsev's writing: "'The insolent Christmas tree,' wrote Novodvortsev, 'was afire with every hue of the rainbow'" (227). The Christmas miracle, the grace of inspiration, have been tossed aside, and upon choosing to write about social struggle rather than "genuine human feeling" (Dillard 50), Novodvortsev loses the beauty of the details that made his recollection so bright and meaningful: even the "crystal quiver" of the tree's lights disappear in the generic "every hue of the rainbow."

Of course the irony of the story is that the Christmas tree, whether in Novodvortsev's pallid story or his inspired recollection, is, of course, a symbol, and a very prominent one. Although it came into Christianity fairly late—perhaps as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although some evidence points to fir trees decorated with apples being used in 11<sup>th</sup> Century morality plays to represent the tree of good and evil—and became common in Russia only by the late 1800s, the Christmas tree is often seen as a symbol of rebirth and undying hope for the salvation of human kind. In pre-revolutionary Russia, Christmas trees were traditionally decorated with fruit, such as apples or tangerines, representing the original sin, and lit candles, representing the light of Christ (an interpretation which adds another, rather suggestive meaning to the scene of Novodvortsev's beloved reaching to pluck a tangerine from a branch as the lights of the tree reflect

in her eyes). In Novodvortsev's story, the Christmas tree in the parlor of his beloved's house, as well as the Christmas tree as a Christian symbol and all it means for Christians around the world, are reduced to a simple, one-layer metaphor of wealth and easy living as opposed to the working class strife. Obviously, Nabokov does not believe that a writer driven by ideology, who uses a generic approach to writing, can create anything real or worthwhile. In his famous 1964 *Playboy* interview with Alvin Toffler, Nabokov will stress that "what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art" (*Strong Opinions* 33).

Nabokov compares words and trifles of genuine human experience to God's grace, because only through noticing and cherishing them can one create, and in doing so, parallel our original Creator. This idea is summed up in Nabokov's essay "Good Readers and Good Writers" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, 1-6) written in 1948, where he urges us to "notice and fondle details" (1), describing a good writer as "the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib" (2), and tells us that such a writer does not see our reality as "an accepted entirety" but as a chaos that needs to be "recombined in its very atoms" before it can "flicker and fuse" (2). The real writer is being compared here to the Almighty, whom in his above-mentioned *Playboy* interview Nabokov will call a creative writer's rival (*Strong Opinions* 32), and the atoms of reality that must be recombined to create a work of literature are, of course, the words and details that Nabokov asks us to cherish. A great author is the God of his creation, as he's able to bring his work to life in the minds of good readers. Later on in the essay Nabokov tells us that a good reader, meaning of course the kind of reader that he would like to have for his audience, must "passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers—the inner weave of a given masterpiece" (4), referring, once again, to the words, details, and allusions that

form the texture of literature. The reader is asked to enjoy them with the same passion with which the narrator of Nabokov's "The Word" rejoices in the word given to him by an angel, or the sculptor of "Beneficence" takes in the details that surround him, or even Novodvortsev, who doesn't appreciate the grace of his vision, but finds momentary pleasure in the details of his sudden recollection. The process of literary creation is based on these inspired details, but the writer can not simply accept the grace that fills them, he must equal the One who grants it and give life to his own universe in the work that he creates.

Although Christian rhetoric is not as present in "Good Readers and Good Writers" as it is in Nabokov's earlier works, the artistic philosophy both so reverently and irreverently based on it remains the same. Alvin Toffler will end his interview with Vladimir Nabokov by asking him a direct question that surprisingly no one had ever asked him before (and will never ask him again), at least not in print: "Do you believe in God?" To this Nabokov will respond, in his usual mystifying tone: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more" (*Strong Opinions* 45). This knowledge, along with his fluency in Christian symbolism that is apparent in his early works, form the foundation of Vladimir Nabokov's artistic philosophy that equates writing with creating universes, moments of inspiration with grace, and word with God.

—Anna Morlan, New York

#### A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION OF NABOKOV'S "SLAVA"

Nabokov's 1942 Russian poem "Slava" has come to occupy a key place in critical accounts of his oeuvre. Vera Nabokov, in her

foreword to *Stikhi*, the posthumous collection of her husband's Russian verse published by Ardis in 1979, cites "Slava" as the one work in which Nabokov comes closest to what she calls his main theme, *potustoronnost'* (which Vladimir Alexandrov translates, "not wholly satisfactorily," as "otherworld" [Vladimir Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3]). Critics have taken her remark as license to read "Slava" as something of a policy statement on the author's metaphysics: for instance, its conclusion serves as the epigraph for Alexandrov's book, and D. Barton Johnson introduces "Slava" as a signature "embodiment," if not the fullest elaboration, of what he terms "Nabokov as Gnostic Seeker" (D. Barton Johnson, *Worlds In Regression* [Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985] 185-186), while Brian Boyd, in more or less the same vein, sees it as promising the ultimate recuperation of Nabokov's relationship with his reader (Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991], 41).

Boyd also argues that "Slava" is perhaps Nabokov's "finest piece of Russian verse" (*ibid.*), and while he may be correct, I would add that it may be one of his most ambiguous. For after all, how can one speak with certainty about embodiment or readers in a poem whose "secret" seems to render the body, the reader, and even its own proper name, "slava," an "empty dream"?

Eta taina, ta-ta, ta-ta-ta, ta-ta,  
a tochnee skazat' ia ne vprave.  
Ottogo tak smeshna mne pustaia mechta  
o chitatele, tele, i slave.

That main secret, tra-tá-ta tra-tá-ta tra-tá—  
And I must not be overexplicit;  
this is why I find laughable the empty dream  
about readers, and body, and glory.

(“Slava” ll. 105-108; “Fame” ll. 105-108, *Poems and Problems*, 110-111)

A rigorous reading of the poem has yet to be undertaken, and this is something that would have to be part of a larger reappraisal of the question of Nabokov and metaphysics vis-à-vis his valorization of writing—a problem at least as old as Plato’s *Phaedrus*, but not one that has attracted much attention in Nabokov studies. Wood’s *The Magician’s Doubts* is the exception that proves the rule.

For the time being I would simply like to direct Nabokovians to what may be a rather remarkable instance in “Slava” of Nabokov’s practice as a translator. When Nabokov “Englished” it almost thirty years later for *Poems and Problems* (1970) he did not give it the title “Glory,” which is the word he uses to translate “*slava*” in the lines I have just quoted, but “Fame.” Both are valid lexical translations (perhaps Nabokov was merely holding “Glory” in reserve for the forthcoming translation of *Podvig*), but the result is that for the English reader the correspondence in “Slava” between the poem’s title and the “empty dream about the reader, the body, and *slava*” is muffled, if not effaced altogether. Perhaps this is as it should be—most translators dream of a reader—but it is nevertheless far from the only place in which “Fame” diverges from the original: as with many of his auto-translations, Nabokov feels free to depart here from the “servile path” of the literalism he advocates so vehemently in *EO*. Of course, one could say that if anyone has the right to do this, Nabokov does—after all, he is translating himself, and what author cannot separate his own spirit from the letter? But then again, this may well have been precisely what was at stake in “Slava” in the first place—this is clearly the case in the opening lines of the poem, and it may well be that the matter is not altogether resolved in its conclusion. If so, then a translation that merely “must not be overexplicit” has arguably taken some liberties with an original that “does

not have the right to speak more precisely” (*i tochnee skazat’ ia ne vprave*).

Be that as it may, there are indications that the translator of “Slava” is not quite the same person its author was. Late Nabokov leaves his traces. One that will be obvious to any reader who can read both versions appears in lines 54-56: in “Slava” these read “*Uvy, / eti trista listov belletristiki prazdnoi / razletiatsia*” (Alas, these three hundred leaves of idle belles-lettres will scatter), but in “Fame” the page count has increased markedly: “Alas, / those two thousand leaves of frivolous fiction / will be scattered...” (ibid, pp. 106-107).

There may be at least one other such moment in the poem—and this is the one I want to bring to your attention. In lines 37-44 we read:

Daleko do lugov, gde rebenkom ia plakal,  
upustiv apollona, i dal’she eshche  
do elovoi allei s poloskami mraka,  
mez h kotorymi polden’ skvozil goriacho.  
No vozdushnym mostom moe slove izognuto  
cherez mir, i chredoi spitsevidnykh tenei  
bez kontsa po nemu prokhozhu ia inkognito  
v polykhaiushchii sumrak otchizny moei.

It is far to the meadows where I sobbed in my childhood  
heaving missed an Apollo, and farther yet  
to the alley of firs where the midday sunlight  
glowed with fissures of fire between bands of jet.

But my word, curved to form an aerial viaduct,  
spans the world, and across in a strobe-effect spin  
of spokes I keep endlessly passing incognito  
into the flame-licked night of my native land.  
(ibid, 104-105)

The scene will be familiar enough to any reader of *Drugie berega* or *Speak, Memory*: an early “I,” the author in his youth, chasing and missing a butterfly (*Parnassius apollo*) that could just as well have been a poem, and a later “I” who returns from a spatial and temporal exile to observe his previous self, incognito, by a linguistic slight-of-hand: a “curve” of the word that seems to return the “I” to its origin.

However, rather than any genuine return, the lines that surround the passage seem to suggest that this act of reflection effects something more like an estrangement between “I” and “self” than any kind of reappropriation, a motif that can be said to pervade the poem, even in its famous, seemingly triumphant final lines:

No odnazhdy, plasty razumen'ia drobia,  
 uglubliaias' v svoe kliuchevoe,  
 ia uvidel, kak v zerkale, mir i sebia,  
 i drugoe, drugoe, drugoe.

But one day while disrupting the strata of sense  
 and descending deep down to my wellspring  
 I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world,  
 something else, something else, something else.  
 (ibid, 112-113)

One can argue about what this “something else” is—the repetition may suggest that it simply remains “something else”—but what seems clear is that whatever the process of reflection in “Slava” produces, it does not produce an identity between “I” and “self.” Earlier, in the first half of the poem, which Boyd aptly describes as an *exigi monumentum* in reverse (Boyd, 42), we see the lyrical “I” “hurrying and afraid to look back, / like a phantom dividing in two” (*toropias' i boias' oglianut'sia, nazad, / kak razdvaivaiushcheesia prividenie* [ll. 34-35]), while in lines 45-48 of the Russian the lyrical “I” sees itself as an idol:

Ia bozhkom sebia vizhu, volshebnikom s ptich'ei  
 golovoi, v izumrudnykh perchatkakh, v chulkakh  
 iz lazurnykh cheshui...

To myself I appear as an idol, a wizard  
 bird-headed, emerald gloved, dressed in tights  
 made of bright-blue scales...

(ibid, 104-105)

Note that in the English the perspective is reversed: the “I” appears to the self. In a gloss for the American reader, Nabokov identifies this “self” as “an allusion to the *sirin*, a fabulous fowl of Slavic mythology, and ‘Sirin,’ the author’s penname in 1920-1940” (ibid, 113), speaking all the while in the third person, where in other glosses he speaks from the first. Then, after the “I” sees the idol (or the idol “I” appears to the self), in line 47 we read: “I pass by” (*Prokhozhu*). This is a lexical repetition of line 43 (*moe slovo izognuto / cherez mir i... bez kontsa po nemu prokhozhu incognito / v polykhaiushchii sumrak otchizny moei* [italics mine]) where the “I” passes “without end” across the “curved word” (or the “world”—grammatically *po nemu* could refer to both) into his homeland. Yet here, between the “I” and “Sirin,” it by no means clear to whom or what this “I” that “passes” necessarily refers. Who passes? Is it the “I” that sees the idol, the idol that appears to the “I,” or both? From the standpoint of this question the “injunction” that follows in lines 47-48 (“Reread it / and pause for a moment to ponder these lines” [*Perechtite / i ostanovites' na etikh strokakh*]) becomes radically contradictory: on one hand, it demands a halt to the process of reflection, but on the other it can only set it in motion once again, by sending its addressee back to reread the “I” that wrote “these lines”—which makes that “I” that which is read, that is, the object, not the agent: a self. The poem itself seems to acknowledge this instability when it names the addressee of this “injunction” in the next line: “Addressed to non-beings”

(*Obrashchenie k nesushchestvuiushchim* [1.49, *ibid*, 106-107]). In his gloss Nabokov identifies these “non-beings” as neither “I” nor “self,” but rather those “probably non-existing” readers “who might care to decipher” the allusion here to Sirin (*ibid*, p. 113). However, if anyone definitely cares to decipher the allusion, it is Nabokov—he has deciphered it for us—but more importantly, one might argue that addressing the injunction to the reader actually implicates him or her in the same non-being of its author. It may well be the privilege of great writers to create their readers (*Nikolai Gogol*, 41), but we may err if we think this privilege bestows upon either the author or the reader anything that can properly be called “being.”

In fact, in the preceding gloss concerning his translation of line 42 Nabokov identifies the “strobe-effect spin” of the return (and, by extension, the recovery of the self in the reflection it describes) as nothing other than an optical illusion generated by what is actually its opposite—forward movement:

Line 42/ *strobe-effect spin*. The term renders exactly what I tried to express by the looser phrase in my text “sequence of spokelike shadows.” The strobe-effect causes wheels to look as if they revolved backward, and the crossing over to America (line 36) [Nabokov refers here to the aforementioned “phantom dividing in two,” sailing into the sunset—M.W.] becomes an optical illusion of a return to Russia (*Poems and Problems*, 113).

“Renders exactly what I tried to express”: as far as I can tell this is the only gloss in *Poems in Problems* where Nabokov makes a point of boasting of his fidelity to the original, save for the note on line 23 of “Parizhskaia poema” (The Paris Poem, 1943), where we are told that “*ostaius’ s privideniem*,” (I remain with specter), a pun in the original on “*ostaius’ s uvazheniem*” (I remain with respect) allows for a similar pun in English: “I remain your specterful.” “Every now and then,”

Nabokov writes, “fidelity receives a miraculous award” (*ibid*, 125). Nabokov is clearly pleased when he can remain faithful to his ghosts. In “Slava,” however, the reader who demands such miracles may find that, despite whatever exactitude Nabokov claims, the phrase in question there has nevertheless not come into English altogether intact. “*Chredoi spitsevidnykh tenei*” may be translatable as “by a sequence of spokelike shadows,” but in Russian *ten’* can also signify “ghost”—and thus one could just as well translate the phrase as a “sequence of spokelike ghosts.” What would therefore be absent in Nabokov’s English translation, “a strobe-effect spin / of spokes,” would be precisely the ghosts of the Russian.

This is a significant omission, one would think, unless the *teni* Nabokov really wanted *were* “shadows,” not “ghosts.” However, the reader of “Slava” and “Fame” who knows another language, Dutch, may detect something rather uncanny in the same line, something just about as miraculous or random as “*uvazhenie*” converging with “specter.” The English “spoke” is pronounced exactly like the Dutch *spook*, which of course has the same meaning as the English “spook.” We know Nabokov’s novel *Ada*, published in 1969, the year before *Poems in Problems* appeared, plays more than a game or two with Dutch—recall Uncle Dan having to look up *groot* in a pocket “wordbook” (“The simplicity of its meaning annoyed him” [*Ada*, 68-69]), or the “homespun pun[s] in a Veenish vein” on the proper Dutch pronunciation of the hero’s surname: “Vain Van Veen” (*ibid*, 239, 299)—so it is not altogether improbable that in the course of translating “Slava” just after his work on *Ada* Nabokov might have engaged in one more linguistic prank with “Neverlands” (cf. *ibid*, 350).

If he did, then one can say “Fame” indeed “renders exactly” what is left unexpressed in the original—whether the *teni* are “shadows,” “ghosts” or both—but whether one can still properly say “Slava” has been “Englished” becomes another matter entirely, for this opens up another, larger question (one quite



relevant to coming to grips with *Ada* as well): does a translation that disappropriates the very language of those who would need it to understand the original, that makes that language other, or “something else,” still, strictly speaking, communicate?

But if this is not so, and these Dutch ghosts are accidental, then “Slava” and “Fame” present us with a strange case in which language, the medium of reflection in both poems, reveals a power to randomly generate spirits all on its own. In this sense, the author who says “I spoke” or “I have *spoken*” turns in translation into the most uncanny thing of all.

—Matthew Walker, Madison, Wisconsin

#### INCEST AND INTERTEXT: *MANSFIELD PARK* IN *ADA*

In his notes to *Ada*, Brian Boyd identifies a series of references to Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814). Some of these references are direct, as when *Ada* says Ardis’ larch plantation is “borrowed... from Mansfield Park” (Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. New York: Vintage, 1990, 231); some less direct (the Ardis footmen Price, Norris and Ward echo the surnames of the protagonists of Austen’s novel); and some quite covert: Marina’s warning to Van that “*cousinage-dangereux-voisinage*” (232) echoes Sir Thomas Bertram’s concern early in *Mansfield Park* that bringing his impoverished niece Fanny Price to live at Mansfield along with his own children will raise the risk of “cousins in love” (Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*. Ed. and Introduction by Margaret Drabble. New York: Signet Classics, 1996, 25). Sir Thomas’ sister-in-law Mrs. Norris dismisses this concern: “Suppose her a pretty girl, and seen by Tom or Edmund for the first time seven years hence, and I dare say there would be mischief... But breed her up with them from this time... and she will never be more to

either than a sister” (26). Nabokov, who taught *Mansfield Park* in his European literature course at Cornell, clearly treats the love of Fanny Price for her cousin Edmund as a precedent for *Ada*’s story of a love between cousin/siblings. But what kind of a precedent is it?

Sir Thomas’ concern for exogamy is not based on either genetic or moral grounds. Marriages between cousins were common in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Instead, Sir Thomas is concerned that a cousin marriage diminishes the family’s ability to acquire new “connexion”: the purpose of marriage is to join together compatible families (“in the same county, and the same interest”) to add to the family’s social and financial means (53). A cousin marriage does nothing to expand the family circle. Given the isolation of life at Mansfield (and in country houses throughout Jane Austen’s novels), this concern appears reasonable.

Sir Thomas’ foreboding of “cousins in love” proves correct: almost from the moment of her arrival, Fanny is in love with Sir Thomas’ younger son, Edmund. By the end of the novel, however, Sir Thomas is delighted to see Fanny married to Edmund. His change of position is the outcome of systematic critique of “intimacy” outside of the family circle embedded in the novel’s several failed exogamous marriage plots (56). The arrival in Mansfield of the rich, charming Crawford siblings, Henry and Mary, appears to provide matches for some of the young people at Mansfield. Instead of seeking out one of the unattached young ladies, however, Henry flirts with Sir Thomas’ older daughter, Maria, who is already engaged to the rich, stupid Mr. Rushworth. Mary Crawford finds herself attracted to Edmund, who is unsuitable to her ambitions both because he is only the second son and because he plans to enter the clergy. The ensuing web of flirtations ends in catastrophe: Henry Crawford elopes with Maria, leaving any alliance between Mary Crawford and Edmund impossible. Instead, Fanny, who has proven her worth through an earlier rejection of the unreli-

able Henry, gains her reward when Edmund finally thinks that "her warm and sisterly regard for him [might be] foundation enough for wedded love" (405). (Nabokov notes this passage's "slight suggestion of incest" in *Lectures on Literature*. Ed. Fredson Bowers, Introduction by John Updike. New York: Harvest, 1982, 55.)

The novel's resolution, with Fanny safely married to Edmund, reverses Sir Thomas' initial concern by treating connections outside the family as inevitably inferior to sibling love, which grows out of a shared past:

...even the conjugal tie is beneath the fraternal. Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits, have some means of enjoyment in their power, which no subsequent connexions can supply; and it must be by a long and unnatural estrangement, by a divorce which no subsequent connexion can justify, if such precious remains of the earliest attachments are ever entirely outlived. (211)

While *Mansfield Park's* cousin marriage is not precisely an incest story, then, it is a story which presents marriage between cousins who have been raised as siblings as the strongest possible form of marital intimacy. While Johanna M. Smith argues that *Mansfield Park* demonstrates the "crippling effects of brother-sister love," the relentless destruction of all but brother-sister bonds in the novel appears instead to suggest that we should take this passage at face value, as Glenda Hudson does in her work on incest in Austen's fiction. (Johanna M. Smith, "'My Only Sister Now': Incest in *Mansfield Park*" *Studies in the Novel* 19: 1 (1987): 1-15, 1; Glenda Hudson, *Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen's Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.)

Nabokov's use of *Mansfield Park* in *Ada* encompasses Smith and Hudson's contradictory readings of the book's treatment

of incest. Van and Ada refer to *Mansfield Park* as a model for celebrating their own love and its long-standing intimacy. As Boyd notes, we actually first learn Van's name in a roundabout manner which both Ada and Darkbloom identify as Austenian (Brian Boyd, "Annotations to *Ada* 1: Part 1, Chapter 1" *The Nabokovian* 30 (1993): 9-48, 43-44). Ada mentions "Dr. Krollik, our local naturalist, to whom you, Van, have referred, as Jane Austen might have phrased it, for the sake of rapid narrative information (you recall Brown, don't you, Smith?)" (8). Darkbloom explains: "Jane Austen: allusion to rapid narrative information imparted through dialogue, in *Mansfield Park*" (592) (Boyd takes this allusion to refer particularly to Mrs. Norris' introduction of Sir Thomas' sons). Van's introduction, then, contains several important overtones: first, it establishes that his intimacy with Ada is of long standing even at this early scene in their lives and in the book; second, it casts him briefly as the hero of a Jane Austen novel; and third, it places the lovers in a larger literary tradition of aristocratic romance.

The Austen reference appears to justify Van's lifelong obsession with recreating the first summer of his affair with Ada: the foundation of their passion is in precisely that "fraternal" tie of shared past and shared blood which Austen identifies as the highest form of love. Van and Ada's invocations of Austen seek to legitimize their relationship by finding a precedent for it in the marriage of the two characters who are by far Austen's most stodgy and conservative. Rather than being immoral, possessing "an aspect prohibited by law" (588), incest, in this framing, appears to be a means of preserving the most valuable family ties.

Readers will see through this move, however, since unlike Fanny and Edmund, Van and Ada really are brother and sister. Instead of legitimizing their relationship, then, the allusions to Austen undermine Van's argument for the sublimity of his love for Ada. More peculiarly, through its overt and somewhat awkward insertion into the text, the Austen theme links the no-

tion of incest to literary allusion itself. (Don Barton Johnson notes similar linkings of incest to allusion in *Ada's* treatment of Byron, Chateaubriand, and Pushkin. *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985, 117). Van and Ada's treatment of *Mansfield Park* as providing both a setting and a precedent for their romance seems to suggest that literary allusions, too, can be a *dangereux voisinage*, rendered both attractive and perilous — and possibly sterile — by virtue of their familiarity. *Mansfield Park's* privileging of the familiar over the new love becomes, in *Ada*, a hidden critique both of the protagonists and of the inward turning of literary traditions.

—Rachel Trousdale, Decatur, Georgia

ANNOTATIONS TO *ADA*  
30: Part 1 Chapter 30

by Brian Boyd

**Forenote**

After showing Van and Ada in the briefest of reunions at Forest Fork in the previous chapter, Nabokov again shifts, as in the chapter before that, back to Van at Chose without Ada. Once again he reveals an even more unexpected side of Van's rich life without Ada and his casually brilliant accomplishments, both in his role as Mascodagama and in the early success of his work on Terra, insanity and eternal life.

We have already seen Van's skills at handwalking, in the picnic on Ada's twelfth birthday, but nothing has prepared us for his sudden world success as a variety artist, or the eerie metaphysical and artistic notes his Mascodagama role seems to sound. And after I.27 introduced Van at Chose only as an expert card-sharper, nothing has prepared us for his intense research and precocious accomplishment in investigating the insane and the Terra-obsessed and their possible relations to a Next World—even if we instantly recognize that Van's fascination with Aqua's madness and Terra-fixation underlies his immediate research specialization.

In Part 1 Chapter 30 Van mentions neither Ada nor Ardis. His life may seem empty without Ada, but he also shows it as full of interest, accomplishment, and sexual adventure ("He spent his free time in gross dissipation"! ). Once again Nabokov emphasizes the rhythm of Van's other occupations in his time away from Ada, and the spiky heterogeneity and centrifugality of his life, despite Ada's centripetal role—yet at the same time provocative but elusive links somehow connect Van's Mascodagama routine and his work on Terra, insanity, and eternity.

Most of all, perhaps, this chapter, taking us by surprise in