

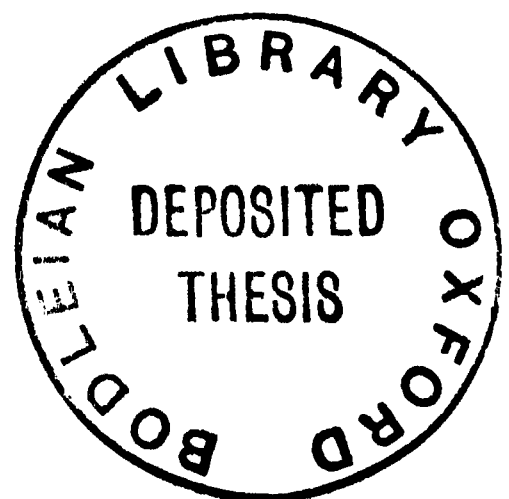
Nabokov and Play

DPhil Thesis

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Trinity, 2006



Abstract

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In December 1925, Vladimir Nabokov said that “everything in the world plays” and that “everything good in life – love, nature, the arts and domestic puns – is play.” This thesis argues that, after December 1925, play was Nabokov’s leading idea. Previous critics have spoken of Nabokov as a playful writer but have not drawn on the untranslated early Russian texts; have rarely discussed the actual games depicted in his novels; and have been vague on what it means to call Nabokov a playful writer. This thesis argues that Nabokov’s novels after 1925 are all playful or game-like in different ways related to the games they depict, and become ever more radically so. It provides a chronological narrative of play as the evolving subject and style of Nabokov’s writing.

The first chapter discusses the sources of Nabokov’s idea of aesthetic play in Kant, Schiller, and Nietzsche. The second chapter traces the emergence of play in Nabokov’s earliest writings, from 1918 to 1925, isolating the themes of play of self, play as make-believe, and play as violence. The third chapter looks at how in *King, Queen, Knave* (1927) and *The Luzhin Defense* (1930), Nabokov adopted the scheme of Lewis Carroll’s two *Alice* books, first using cards as an image of play and freedom, then chess as an image of rule and game. The fourth chapter shows that in the 1930s Nabokov wrote about play in contrast to work, and deals with *Glory* (1931), *Despair* (1934), *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935-6), and *The Gift* (1937-8; 1952). The fifth chapter is about free play in Nabokov’s American writing, and emphasises the influence of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. It covers *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Speak, Memory* (1951; 1967), *Lolita* (1955) and *Ada* (1969). The sixth chapter argues that *Pale Fire* (1962) belongs to the genre of the literary game, and is in complex intertextual relation to a previous literary game, Pope’s *Dunciad*.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the excellent supervision I have had from Andrew Kahn, Hermione Lee, and Paul Giles, who stepped in for a year when Hermione Lee was away.

Alexander Dolinin's lecture on play in Nabokov, given at the Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg in the summer of 2001, started me on the topic. Without his edition of the Russian works, and without Brian Boyd's critical biography, much of this thesis would have been impossible, or at least much harder, to write.

Various institutions and people supported me financially through this thesis and through the MPhil thesis which prepared me for it: my parents, the Arts and Humanities Research Board (now Council), Wadham College, Oxford, the Oxford University English Faculty, St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, William A. Miller, and Christ Church, Oxford. The Kennedy Memorial Trust paid for a year at Harvard in which I did some thinking and reading that fed into this thesis.

I would like to thank Richard Ramage and the staff of the wonderful Taylorian Slavonic Library, Oliver Ready, who patiently helped me with my Russian translations, and my wife, Alexis Kirschbaum, who read the sections of this thesis as they were being written and re-read the whole of it in final draft. She and my family already know, I hope, how grateful I am for their love and support.

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Translation, Transliteration, Style and Format

For Nabokov's Russian novels and stories I have used his own translations, which, though often based on rough drafts written by others, bear his final authority and can be regarded as his writing. Where available, I quote from existing translations of works by other authors. All other translations are my own. Where I quote from the *Sobranie sochinenii* or Russian *Collected Works*, and from other pieces of Nabokov's early Russian writing, I give my own translation, and only rarely quote the original Russian. So too with other Russian texts, such as Aikhenvald's and Shklovsky's. Where I do quote the original Russian I use the same slightly simplified version of the Library of Congress transliteration scheme laid out by Alexandrov in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*.¹ However, in the body of my text, I use the customary English spellings of proper names, such as Gogol, Tolstoy, Chernyshevsky, Shklovsky, and Bely, even when Nabokov spells them otherwise, and miss out the diacritical marks, giving Aikhenvald rather than Aikhenval'd. In my footnotes and bibliography, however, I transliterate Russian names exactly as they are spelled on the book-covers, so that, for example, Aikhenvald appears as Aikenval'd and Shklovsky as Shklovskii. In the body of the text I give my translations of Russian titles (except for newspapers and journals), in the footnotes I give the original Russian titles, and in the bibliography I give both. A few of Nabokov's works in Russian have titles in the English language, and in the Roman alphabet: the Cambridge poems "Football", "Lawn Tennis", and "Biology", and the lecture "On Generalities".

When I first mention a primary text, I give the date or dates of first book publication in parentheses. I have styled my thesis on the guidance of *The Chicago*

¹ Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion*, xxvii.

Manual of Style, 15th edition. This is one of the systems recommended in the Notes for Guidance provided by the Oxford University English Faculty to doctoral students. The *Chicago Manual* recommends that “if the bibliography includes all works cited in the notes, the note citations – even the citations to a particular work – can be quite concise, since readers can turn to the bibliography for publication details and other information”, and I have followed its instructions as to the form of citations, not giving publication details in footnotes.²

² University of Chicago Press, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 594.

References and Abbreviations

I have used a system of abbreviations, listed below, for my references to Nabokov's printed novels, plays, and poems, and also for the two volumes of Brian Boyd's biography. Where a single page is referred to, the reference is given in brackets in the body of the text, as, for example (*L* 42), but where the context makes it obvious which text is being referred to, the page number alone is given, as, for example, (37). In order to avoid visual clutter, where two or more page references are cited, these are given in a footnote.

SS refers to the Russian *Sobranie sochninenii* or *Collected Works* and references are given as, for example, (*SS* 2:432), referring to volume 2, page 432. Where a single piece is under discussion, after the first reference, *SS* is omitted, as, for instance, (432).

PF refers to *Pale Fire*. References preceded by l. or ll. refer to the line numbers of John Shade's poem, "Pale Fire", as for example (*PF* ll. 432-4). Other references refer to the page numbers of the book, as for instance (*PF* 124). Throughout, "Pale Fire" refers to Shade's poem and *Pale Fire* to the entire text.

EO refers to Nabokov's four-volume edition of *Eugene Onegin* and references are given to volume and page number, as, for example, (*EO* 4:321).

- A* *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. 1969. With an afterword by Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2000.
- AY* Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- BS* *Bend Sinister*. 1947. An introduction by Vladimir Nabokov was added in 1964. London: Penguin, 1974.
- D* *Despair*. Translated with an introduction by Vladimir Nabokov. 1965. London: Penguin, 2000.

- E* *The Enchanter*. Translated by Dmitri Nabokov. 1986. London: Picador, 1987.
- EO* Alexander Pushkin. *Eugene Onegin*. Translated with a commentary by Vladimir Nabokov. 4 vols. Bollingen Series. New York: Pantheon Books, 1964.
- G* *The Gift*. Translated by Michael Scammell with Vladimir Nabokov. 1963. London: Penguin, 1981.
- Glory* *Glory*. Translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov. 1971. London: Penguin, 1974.
- IB* *Invitation to a Beheading*. Translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov. 1960. London: Penguin, 1963.
- KQK* *King, Queen, Knave*. Translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov. 1968. London: Penguin, 2001.
- L* *The Annotated Lolita*. *Lolita* was first published in 1955. This edition, with preface, introduction and notes by Alfred Appel, Jr., was first published in 1971. London: Penguin, 2000.
- LD* *Laughter in the Dark*. Translated by Vladimir Nabokov. 1938. With an afterword by Craig Raine, London: Penguin, 1998.
- LDQ* *Lectures on "Don Quixote"*. Edited by Fredson Bowers. Foreword by Guy Davenport. San Diego: Harvest / Harcourt, 1983.
- LL* *Lectures on Literature*. Edited by Fredson Bowers. Introduction by John Updike. San Diego: Harvest / Harcourt, 1981.
- LRL* *Lectures on Russian Literature*. Edited by Fredson Bowers. San Diego: Harvest / Harcourt, 1981.
- NG* *Nikolai Gogol*. 1959. Corrected edition, New York: New Directions, 1961.
- NWL* *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*. Original edition published in 1979 under the title *Nabokov-Wilson Letters*. This revised and expanded edition, edited, annotated, and with an introductory essay by Simon Karlinsky, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- P* *Pnin*. 1957. With an afterword by Michael Wood, London: Penguin, 2000.
- PF* *Pale Fire*. 1962. With an introductory essay by Mary McCarthy, London: Penguin, 2000.

- PP Poems and Problems.* 1970. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972.
- RY* Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1990.
- S The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov.* Edited by Dmitri Nabokov. Translated by Vladimir Nabokov and Dmitri Nabokov. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995.
- SK The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.* 1941. With an afterword by John Lanchester, London: Penguin, 2001.
- SL Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters, 1940-1977.* Edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. San Diego: Harvest / Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.
- SM Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited.* Originally published as *Conclusive Evidence* in 1951. Revised as *Speak, Memory*, first published in 1967. With a new appendix, containing the previously unpublished Chapter Sixteen, London: Penguin, 2000.
- SO Strong Opinions.* New York: Vintage, 1973.
- SS Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh* [Collected works of the Russian period in five volumes]. Various editors, with introductions to each volume by Alexander Dolinin. 5 vols. St. Petersburg: Symposium, 1999-2000.
- TLD The Luzhin Defense.* Translated by Michael Scammell in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov. 1964. London: Penguin, 2000.
- TWI The Waltz Invention.* Translated by Vladimir Nabokov. 1966. New York: Pocket Books, 1967.
- USSR The Man from the U.S.S.R., & Other Plays.* Translated with an introduction by Dmitri Nabokov. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / Bruccoli Clark, 1985.

Introduction

In December 1925 Vladimir Nabokov gave a talk to a Russian literary circle in Berlin. His subject was an unlikely one: the recent boxing fight between the heavyweights Hans Breitensträter and Paolino Uzcudun. But Nabokov's opening was even more surprising than his subject. "Breitensträter – Paolino" begins with a rapturous vision of play as the essence of existence:

Everything in the world plays: the blood in the veins of a lover, the sun on the water, and the musician on a violin.

Everything good in life – love, nature, the arts and domestic puns – is play. And when we actually play – whether we throw peas at a tin battalion or approach the net barrier in tennis, what we feel in our very muscles is the essence of that play which possesses the marvellous juggler who tosses from hand to hand in an unbroken sparkling parabola – the planets of the universe.

People have played ever since they came into being. There are eras – holidays of humanity – when people become especially enamoured of games. So it was in Ancient Greece, in Ancient Rome, and so it is in our own Europe of today.¹ (SS 1:749)

This thesis argues that the opening of "Breitensträter – Paolino" contains Nabokov's central artistic statement. After December 1925, play would always be his leading theme. Nabokov would devote over fifty years to writing about play and games – two terms in English, but in Russian covered by the single word *igra*. His novels form the fullest, most sophisticated, and most profound treatment of play ever achieved. But they are not just about games. They are games. In 1938 Nabokov wrote: "Literature will always remain a game for me, the secret rules of which preclude my following any aim foreign to its curiously divine nature."² Each of Nabokov's novels demands to be considered as a game or form of play with its own secret rules, and there is a precise

¹ All translations from "Breitensträter – Paolino" mine.

² In a letter to his American literary agent Altagracia de Jannelli of May 18, 1938. The letter is printed by Boyd in "Welcome to the Block", 149.

relation between the games that each novel describes and the way in which it is itself playful or game-like.

After “Breitensträter – Paolino”, Nabokov would never again theorise so abstractly about play. Instead, he dramatised his ideas about play in his novels, all of which contain scenes of play and games. At the beginning of *Mary* (1925), Ganin refuses to play a guessing game. But after Nabokov had written “Breitensträter – Paolino” in December 1925, he committed himself to becoming a novelist of games. The title of his next novel, *King, Queen, Knave* (1927), refers to cards, that of his third, *The Luzhin Defense* (1930), to chess. In *Glory* (1931), there are scenes of Martin playing tennis. In *Camera Obscura* (1933), which Nabokov adapted as *Laughter in the Dark* (1938), there is an ice-hockey game. More significantly, at the climax of the novel is the cruel game that Axel and Margot play with Albinus’s perceptions once he has been blinded, and Nabokov considered calling the novel *Blind Man’s Buff* (RY 445). In *Despair* (1934), Hermann watches little girls playing a game of marbles. In *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935-6), Cincinnatus plays chess with Pierre. *The Gift* (1937-8; 1952) begins with a description of Fyodor’s childhood games and toys. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) is about a writer named in allusion to a chess-piece. In *Bend Sinister* (1947), Krug remembers the games of football he used to play at school, games whose latent violence is developed later in the “release-games” in which Krug’s son, David, is tortured to death. In *Lolita* (1955), there is the tennis-game that Humbert and Lolita play in Champion, Colorado. In *Pnin* (1957), Pnin briefly finds dignity and stature in the game of croquet that he plays with other Russian émigrés at a country house in New England. In *Pale Fire* (1962), John Shade’s epiphany comes when he imagines the gods playing a “game of

worlds". In *Ada* (1969), the games of Scrabble that Ada and Van enjoy reflect the word-games of the novel. In *Transparent Things* (1972), Hugh Person can only get to sleep by thinking of a particular tennis stroke. In *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), Vadim glimpses in a doctor's waiting-room a "wee circular labyrinth, with five silvery peas inside that had to be coaxed by judicious turns of wrist into the center of the helix." (21) Later, Vadim feels "trapped like a sliver pea teased into the center of a toy maze." (118)

These are some of the most important descriptions of games in Nabokov's novels. But they represent only a small proportion of all the toys, games, sports, and forms of play in his work. Nabokov frequently uses the Russian word *igra* and its English equivalents, "play" and "game", as well as phrases such as the "play of light" and the "play of thought". He writes about erotic play, games of illusion and deception, and the games that people play with one another. He defends play in various subsidiary forms: as idleness in the face of work, as nonsense and parody as opposed to earnestness and didacticism, as invention and make-believe as distinct from mimesis and realism, and as disinterestedness over utilitarianism.

Play was also an important part of Nabokov's life. He cultivated the image of a sportsman. All his life he composed chess problems, which in 1971 were published alongside his poems as *Poems and Problems*. He boxed, and played tennis and football. He was the goalkeeper for the team at Trinity College, Cambridge, and also for the Russian émigré team in Berlin in the early 1930s (RY 377). He derived a major part of his income in the 1920s from coaching tennis in Berlin. In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1951; 1967), Nabokov, putting back on the mask of the sportsman for his American audience, wrote at length about his boxing, football, tennis, and chess. In the

early 1920s, he published some of the first cryptic crossword puzzles in Russian. As for the other lifelong passion he describes in *Speak, Memory*, the study of butterflies, this was also a form of play inasmuch as it was a disinterested pursuit. “Psyche” in Greek means butterfly as well as mind, and the fluttering of the butterfly’s wings offers an image for the free play of thought in Nabokov’s novels, and for the delicate lives that need protection there: a butterfly pauses like a visiting angel above the game of tennis between Humbert and Lolita, and a Red Admirable arrives in *Pale Fire* just before John Shade is killed: “it flashed and vanished, and flashed again, with an almost frightening imitation of conscious play which now culminated in its settling upon my delighted friend’s sleeve.” (228)

Nabokov was a student of play in all its forms. After the initial statement on play, much of “Breitensträter – Paolino” is taken up with a learned account of the history of boxing. In the late 1920s, he wrote a series of pieces about chess, culminating in *The Luzhin Defense*, which allude to particular schools of chess and particular players. In 1926, he gave another talk, “On Generalities”, to the same literary circle at which he had delivered “Breitensträter – Paolino”. Condemning generalisations, he gave as his example discussions of sport in modern culture: “And then if the conversation turns to sport, then it is necessary to establish which people, which country, exactly which years are under consideration. And then one should call upon someone who has a good knowledge of the history of sport.”³ When he lectured on *Anna Karenina* (1878) he spoke about the history of ice-skating and tennis in Russia and drew detailed pencil-sketches of the outfits that

³ Nabokov, “On Generalities”, 13. My translation. This essay is in Russian, but the title on the manuscript is written in English.

Kitty would have worn while skating and Anna when playing tennis.⁴ When he edited *Eugene Onegin* (1964) over the course of the 1950s, he researched the card-games and the children's games that Pushkin mentions.⁵ In *Pnin* Nabokov gently mocked himself and the research he had done for these footnotes, showing Pnin in the library with a book on Russian myths, pedantically copying out "a passage referring to the old pagan games that were still practised at the time, throughout the woodlands of the Upper Volga, in the margins of Christian ritual." (64)

Nabokov also seems to have had a good knowledge of the history of ideas about play, though he used those ideas in writing his novels rather than directly discussing them. The idea that art is a form of play was one of the main theories in European aesthetics at the beginning of the twentieth century. Tolstoy, for example, discussed it in his widely read *What is Art?* (1898), a copy of which was in the Nabokov family library.⁶ Tolstoy associated the play-theory of art with aestheticism and the ideal of "art for art's sake", and traced it back to Kant and Schiller's aesthetic theories.⁷ In the *Critique of Judgement* (1790; 1793), Kant described the "free play" of the faculties in aesthetic judgement. In Kant this is a casual phrase for the indeterminacy of aesthetic experience. But in 1795 the poet Friedrich Schiller, inspired by Kant, made play (or *Spiel*) the centrepiece of his treatise *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. According to Schiller, in the world of beauty, play, and make-believe, we are free of compulsion, whether to our physical nature or to our moral laws. He argues that beauty "cajoles" from man "a delight in things for their own sake", so that people and things are treated as ends as themselves,

⁴ LRL 218-9; 234-5.

⁵ EO 2:256-67; 283-5.

⁶ *Sistematicheskii katalog* (1904), 39.

⁷ Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 96-7; 118.

and not as means to an end.⁸ For Schiller, play is a symbol of freedom and the archetype of all those activities whose end and value lie within themselves. Arguing that people are dehumanised when they are treated merely as means to an end, Schiller says that “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.” (107) Later, Nietzsche would take up the theme of play, extending it from the aesthetic sphere to a vision of the play of the whole universe, as in “Breitensträter – Paolino”. But whereas Schiller idealised play, Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1875) and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-5) imagined play as an eternal force that, like a child playing at building and demolishing sand-castles, builds worlds only to destroy them.

Nabokov’s first piece of writing on play, the long poem “Childhood”, which he wrote in 1918-9, may draw its image of the child at play from Nietzsche, whom he was reading at that time. Nabokov seems to have been aware of Schiller’s ideas about play by the time he wrote “Breitensträter – Paolino”.⁹ In *King, Queen, Knave*, the first novel he wrote after “Breitensträter – Paolino”, there are statuettes of Schiller being sold on street corners around Berlin, and *King, Queen, Knave* tests the proposition that man is only human when he plays. At the end of *Lolita*, Lolita marries a Richard F. Schiller and is then several times referred to as Dolly Schiller, in an ironic reference to Schiller’s ideas about beauty, humanity, and play: Lolita has been played with or treated as a doll.

Nabokov’s interest in play seems to have begun with aestheticism and its philosophical theorists. But as a close study of the references in his novels reveals, Nabokov soon looked for other writers interested in play, and discovered a concrete

⁸ Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 171.

⁹ For Nabokov reading Nietzsche in 1918, see RY 150.

literary history for the idea that philosophers had celebrated in the abstract. By his allusions Nabokov puts his novels at the centre of a conversation about play that encompasses not only the aestheticians who made play a respectable topic, but also a group of novelists, poets, and critics whose treatment of play had been ignored or not taken seriously. This thesis argues that in play Nabokov's novels make central an overlooked theme of literary modernism, present in writers as diverse as Lewis Carroll, Andrey Bely, Victor Shklovsky, Franz Kafka and James Joyce. Nabokov was also influenced from his earliest work by Alexander Pushkin, especially by his short story "The Queen of Spades" (1834), a parable on the invincibility of play. Gradually, but especially in the 1940s and 1950s, when he came to read English eighteenth century literature for his edition of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov became aware that Pushkin stood at the end of a tradition of literary play which goes back through Byron and Sterne to Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, and before them to Erasmus and Thomas More. In his *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov tried to footnote every possible source for every word and phrase of Pushkin's. Though it is, necessarily, less comprehensive, my method in this thesis is also to proceed through a close study of Nabokov's literary allusions and parallels.¹⁰

There is no satisfactory book on the philosophical history of play, though there are articles on it in several general reference works.¹¹ Thanks to various literary theorists, above all Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, play became a fashionable critical term in the 1960s and 1970s. But it has hardly been recognised that

¹⁰ For Nabokov's defence of allusion, see his introduction to *Bend Sinister*, 10-11.

¹¹ See Sonderegger, "Play" and Elias, "Art and Play". The only book-length study in English of philosophical treatments of play is Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*. Spariosu repeatedly forces "play" into passages in Plato and Kant where the term does not occur, and as a result produces a very unreliable guide.

there is a literary history of play: not just that the term “play” can if one wishes be casually applied to this or that writer, but that a number of writers, in dialogue with one another across a span of centuries, have consciously thought about play and games, talked plainly about “play” and “game”, and depicted scenes of play.¹² As it explores Nabokov’s allusions and references, this thesis follows in his footsteps and aims to mark out the main points of the literary history of play. Because play is usually considered too trivial for serious scholarly attention, its significance in many writers has been underestimated, and by considering play, it has been possible to shed new light not only on Nabokov, but also on other writers, especially Bely, Joyce, and Pope.

“Play” and its direct equivalent in Russian, *igra*, are elusive terms whose meaning changes greatly depending on context. In a few pages published in 1973, W. K. Wimsatt did a great deal to clarify the problems. Wimsatt was reacting above all to Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938), a work that remains the only well-known book on play. Huizinga aimed to view every aspect of human society as forms of play, ranging from war and law through scholarship, philosophy, and art. Wimsatt points out the danger of this: play is a concept which can embrace everything, “a sort of metaphysical explanation which explains too much – that is to say, which expands its focus upon a special idea until that idea coincides with the whole horizon of the knowable universe. [...] Man as player and as toy; the universe as a game played and as itself an agent playing.”¹³

In “Breitensträter – Paolino”, Nabokov did exactly this, expanding play until it covered the entire universe. Yet in this thesis I will be showing that Nabokov’s novels are

¹² The one exception is Duncan’s *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition*, which discusses the idea of the *lusus* or literary game in Lucian, Erasmus, and More. I draw on this book in Chapter Six.

¹³ Wimsatt, “Belinda Ludens”, 357-8.

full of the distinctions between kinds of play that “Breitensträter – Paolino” seems to erase. Wimsatt is illuminating on these distinctions:

We have the double sense that play is both clearly different from certain other things, and that it is a chameleon – or, as Wittgenstein would put it, only a collection of family resemblances. We know that in our everyday usage *play* has not a single opposite, but a medley – what is real, serious, or necessary, what is work, war, or woe.¹⁴

If play is contrasted with the real it may signify make-believe. If it is contrasted with what is serious it becomes synonymous with the trivial, and so imagination may be trivialised. Plato combines these two thoughts in the *Republic* when he says that because art is at one remove from the reality it claims to represent, it is “a kind of game, and shouldn’t be taken seriously.”¹⁵ But if play is contrasted with necessity, and necessity is understood as compulsion, then play may be recognised, in its full importance, as a force that, by resisting compulsion, can form a basis for freedom. This is the logic by which Kant and Schiller praise art as a form of play. If freedom is the basis for the good, then play may on this line of reasoning be more useful than utilitarian activities with pre-defined purposes. If we now return to Wimsatt’s list of the terms against which play is defined, and consider play as opposed to work, war, and woe, then play and idleness might be valued above work, play and peace above war, and a playful frivolity over the earnestness that believes sober statements of definite belief the only acceptable response to human woe.¹⁶

Nabokov’s commitment to the idea of art as play might be taken to show that he was a member of the aesthetic movement. It is an idea which one might naturally

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, section 602 b.

¹⁶ For my account of the interaction between different antitheses of play, I am indebted to the discussion of art as play in Sparshott, *The Structure of Aesthetics*, 207-218.

attribute to aestheticism. Aesthetes such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, trying to be true to the essence of art as they understood it, emphasised invention and parody over realist mimesis, producing works which depict idleness instead of work, flaunt their seeming amorality and metaphysical frivolity, and resist being reduced to any earnestly didactic message. Iulii Aikhenvald, the critic at whose colloquium Nabokov had delivered “Breitensträter – Paolino”, pointed to Wilde as the contemporary exponent of the view that “art, broadly speaking, is play”.¹⁷ Nabokov is often considered the last of the great aesthetes, and *Speak, Memory*, with its long descriptions of his luxurious childhood, its defence of idleness, and its accounts of butterfly-collecting, does little to discourage the view. Photographs of Nabokov as a young man show him dressed as a dandy, and in *The Gift*, Nabokov offers a portrait of the young aesthete which clearly draws on many details of his own life.

Yet among all Nabokov’s books, only *Speak, Memory* and *The Gift*, the first an autobiography, the second semi-autobiographical, paint a flattering picture of play. Nabokov’s novels, on the other hand, though they often allude to the utopian view of play, are mostly about the potential danger and cruelty inherent in play. They celebrate the imagination, only to show how rapaciously it seizes its toys from the outside world, trapping them in games of deception and exploitation. Nabokov’s novels show all the ways that play goes wrong, all the things there are in play apart from innocence and goodness. It is the last refinement of Nabokov’s war against the didactic that in play he gave his novels an aesthetic model which, as a phenomenon, those novels frequently condemn. The distinction between Humbert, playing with Lolita, and Nabokov, playing

¹⁷ Aikhenval’d, *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 80. This and all subsequent translations from *Praise of Idleness* are my own.

with words, can be disturbingly faint: “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with”, cries Humbert (*L* 32). Here Nabokov’s voice joins with Humbert’s.

Nabokov’s insistence on seeing the less wholesome side of play is part of his critique of aestheticism. Like other modernists, such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, Nabokov presses forward with aestheticism’s insistence that art must be free and uncensored by didactic imperatives, but he tears away the veneer of superficial beauty with which aestheticism had been associated. Looking beneath the surface of consciousness, Nabokov investigates subterranean impulses such as violence, disgust, loathing, and desire, and traces the aesthetic to an erotic source which frequently expresses itself in perversity. “Breitensträter – Paolino” seems in its opening paragraphs a defiant exclamation of the aestheticism which, fixing only on what is good and beautiful in life – love, nature, and art, and play – ignores ugliness and pain. Yet the remainder of the piece is about boxing, the form of play closest to fighting, and reminds us that there is an element of conflict and therefore, potentially, of violence, in all forms of play. In *The Gift*, Fyodor would claim that even noughts-and-crosses involved aggression, reflecting that the “little pleasures” of shooting a gun are “represented moreover in other special branches of sport, such as: tiger hunting, noughts and crosses, professional boxing” (121). When we return to the opening paragraphs of “Breitensträter – Paolino” we notice that the examples of play Nabokov lists are instances of people playing at war. A child is throwing peas at a battalion of tin soldiers. Someone is approaching the net barrier in tennis: the word that Nabokov uses for barrier, *bar’era*, suggests the duelling-line.

The customary rhetorical antithesis between play and war blatantly disregards the conflict and aggression in play and games. So, too, by habitually contrasting play with

work and woe, Western culture implies that play is pleasant and easy, even though a moment's consideration will show that play is often strenuous and sometimes unpleasant. Play is often contrasted with teaching, but modern education since Rousseau has taken it for granted that children, and adults, learn through play. Nabokov's novels destroy all of these contrasts, and by taking play seriously as their central subject, they also make nonsense out of the contrast between play and seriousness. This contrast helps to preserve all the other illusions about play: by making play seem trivial, it protects it from close scrutiny and safeguards the innocence and unknowingness which culture wants to attribute to play.

Nabokov's claim in "Breitensträter – Paolino" that "Everything good in life – love, nature, the arts and domestic puns – is play" is belied by the rest of the essay. It is the first move in a complex deceptive game. Everything in Nabokov's world is play, the bad as well as the good. Nabokov's novels re-define not only play, but also love, nature, and art, by denying that they are necessarily good. In *Lolita*, Humbert's love is exploitative and is indifferent to the suffering of the loved one, and is pricked on by shame and self-disgust. The desire for youth it describes is not in essence unnatural: as Humbert says, "I have but followed nature. I am nature's faithful hound." (135) The art of *Lolita* cannot be resolved into a single moral intention. By playing with love, nature, art, and even play, Nabokov's novels draw our attention to the often ugly reality which these terms tend to hide in their approval.

Nabokov once praised a philosopher for his "splendid determination to take no nonsense from words", saying approvingly that "he is not to be taken in by the imp of

ambiguity in a messenger boy's disguise.”¹⁸ In *Speak, Memory* he recounts that, as an undergraduate at Cambridge, he found “a secondhand copy of Dahl's *Interpretive Dictionary of the Living Russian Language* in four volumes. I bought it and resolved to read at least ten pages per day, jotting down such words and expressions as might especially please me, and I kept this up for a considerable time.” (204) Nabokov would have read the entries on *Igrat*’, “To Play”, and *Igra*, “Play”, in which Dahl painstakingly works through several dozen sentences exhibiting all the actual usages of the word and their individual nuances. Nabokov would do the same in his novels. At the head of the entry Dahl says the following: “A child plays with a doll, a cat with a mouse, but everybody [plays] with their favourite dream. Children play with dolls, but we [play] at cat and mouse, at blind man's buff, at cards”.¹⁹ Nabokov's novels never get free, and never wish to get free, from the dangerous ambiguities which haunt Dahl's definition of play. In the seemingly innocent play of the child with a doll, the imagination enlists an inanimate object to its purposes. Adult play, which can involve one person making a doll of another person by involving them unwittingly in their imagination, has the potential for menace suggested by cat and mouse. But in that very play the dedicated student of human nature can also find the favourite dream of every person and draw on it as the material for art.

Most writers on play have drawn attention to its inherent ambiguity. The anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith, who has devoted his career to the subject, has summed up his work in a book entitled *The Ambiguity of Play*. This ambiguity reflects not just the word “play” but the phenomenon itself. As Sutton-Smith says, “play is a

¹⁸ Nabokov, “Prof. Woodbridge in an Essay on Nature Postulates the Reality of the World”, 15.

¹⁹ Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar*’, 7. My translation.

paradox, because it is and is not what it appears to be. Animals at play bite each other playfully, knowing that the playful nip connotes a bite, but not what a bite connotes.”²⁰ Play in this sense involves doing something, yet somehow not doing it. In play, too, children and adults learn skills which they have not yet fully understood. Further, play entails an attempt to reconcile the inner world of subjectivity and the outer objective world, the wishes of the imagination and the demands of reality. Then, too, as the child psychologist Erik Erikson says, “play is a borderline phenomenon to a number of human activities and, in its own playful way, it tries to elude definition.”²¹ One of the meanings of play is “free play”, play without rules, the rapid, measureless, and unpredictable movement indicated by phrases such as “the play of light”, “the play of swords”, or “the play of thought”. This sense of “play” (and *igra*) is concealed when we subjugate play to game and think of play only as the verb for playing a game.

“Play”, as a metaphor for freedom, contrasts in English with “game”, as a metaphor for convention, structure, and order. Russian, like French and German, has no second word to set against *igra*, equivalent to the English word “game”, so that *igra* must signify two directly opposite things, freedom and necessity, whereas in English “game” allows us to separate them out, at least in part. As Wimsatt wrote: “‘play’ does not always entail ‘game’ [...] ‘game’ in fact is only one very special kind of play. Sometimes we play games; at other times, as when we gambol, or romp, or swim, or walk in the woods, or yodel, or doodle, we are just playing.”²² Such “free play” is principally to be found where one person is playing on their own, in infants and young children, or as a

²⁰ Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 1. Here Sutton-Smith is paraphrasing Bateson’s view in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

²¹ Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 212.

²² Wimsatt, “Belinda Ludens”, 359.

description of inanimate phenomena such as thought, light, or meaning. This is the sense of “play” (or *Spiel*), which Kant is using when he talks about the free play of the faculties in aesthetic experience, and which Derrida employs when he writes that “Play is always lost when it seeks salvation in games”, or in the original, more paradoxical French, “Le jeu se perd toujours en se sauvant dans les jeux”.²³ At its limit play in this sense can signify chance, what is entirely random or cannot be subdued to a system.

Games begin with conventions and rules, which can be explicit, as they are in sports and board-games, or implicit, as in some of the games children play with one another in the playground. The distinction between play and games is gradual, not absolute. A child bouncing a ball against a wall will gradually evolve patterns, so that its play may eventually become a game. Chess is a game designed to exclude chance and play, but even in chess the element of chance cannot be excluded, since there is another player whose moves cannot be predicted. This is the central theme of *The Luzhin Defense*. Play, as Nabokov learned from Pushkin’s “The Queen of Spades”, cannot be eliminated from the game of existence. Those who believe they can master the game are doomed to madness and death. The world is not a puzzle to be solved. In chess problems, which Nabokov enjoyed composing, the element of chance is completely excluded. But chess-problems, and puzzles more generally, are not games, because they exclude the element of play which all games require.

Nabokov’s novels are not puzzles, though they sometimes contain puzzles. At the end of his 1951 story “The Vane Sisters”, the first letters of the words in the final paragraph form an acrostic containing a message from the dead sisters of the title. When Nabokov pointed out the acrostic to Katharine White of the *New Yorker* magazine, who

²³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 158. Derrida, *La Dissémination*, 182.

had rejected the story, she loftily replied that “We did not work out your acrostic, to be sure, that being rather out of the New Yorker’s line” (SL 118). Her comment expresses the feeling shared by many sophisticated readers, that the puzzles in Nabokov, though prized by pedants and academics, are beneath serious literature. Apart from *Pale Fire* Nabokov’s novels are not nearly so full of puzzles as people think, but Nabokov evidently valued the puzzles he did compose, and considered them a legitimate part of literature, or at least of ludic literature. They are the outermost expression of the subtler games beneath the surface of the text. Nabokov’s games and his puzzles yield solutions which, like the solutions to chess problems, reveal a hidden pattern, a set of rigorously logical aesthetic principles which are different and distinct in each novel.

How, then, does this thesis fit into the existing criticism on Nabokov? The Russian émigré critics who reviewed Nabokov’s novels in the 1920s and 1930s did not notice the importance of play in his work. But American critics were quick to do so, thanks perhaps to *Speak, Memory*, in which Nabokov had not only written about games but also explicitly said about nature and art that “both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.” (98) In 1962, for instance, Mary McCarthy, a friend of Nabokov’s, wrote about *Pale Fire* as “a game of three-dimensional chess – three simultaneous games played by a pair of chess wizards on the three transparent boards arranged vertically.” (PF xii) In 1971 Alfred Appel, who had also had the benefit of conversations with Nabokov, published *The Annotated Lolita*, whose widely read introduction argues that there is a “game-element central to the book” (L lxiv). In his review-essay on *Ada* of 1969, John Updike said that “Nabokov stakes his

career” on the idea that art is a game.²⁴ In *The Modern American Novel*, written in 1984, Malcolm Bradbury put the point interestingly: “Nabokov is the novelist as nominalist, the writer who believes that the world is literally named into existence, is born of the play of language. Art is both a comic and a cosmic game of knowledge, or a fictive acrostic with transcendental properties.”²⁵ Brief comments along these lines can be found in many works on Nabokov and in many overviews of modern American literature.

The longest treatment of the subject is Janet Gezari’s 1971 PhD thesis, “Game Fiction: The World of Play and the Novels of Vladimir Nabokov”. This deals principally with Nabokov’s chess problems and their metaphorical implications for the novels, while also setting Nabokov’s games alongside those of Borges and Robbe-Grillet. In her final chapter, Gezari goes on to discuss three parallel games played by the characters in *Pale Fire*.²⁶ This description of the plot-lines of *Pale Fire* as games, simply because they involve conflict, has little justification in the text and ignores the more specific ways in which *Pale Fire* does talk about play and present itself as a game. Gezari’s thesis does not draw on Russian sources and considers only four of his novels, without attempting to work out the sources and contexts of Nabokov’s depictions of play, the relations between them, the ideas behind them, or their formal and aesthetic implications.

In his 1979 essay, “Nabokov: Homo Ludens”, Mark Lilly restated Gezari’s interpretation of the games in Nabokov as conflicts between author and reader. Lilly writes that Nabokov’s “novels actually become games in which the readers are players, their task being to ‘solve’ the problems set by the games master-novelist. It is in this

²⁴ Updike, *Picked-Up Pieces* 208.

²⁵ Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, 192-3. See also Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 770: “Like all Nabokov’s novels, but even more than most, *Lolita* is a verbal game”.

²⁶ Gezari, “Game Fiction”, 152 – 153.

sense that we can properly refer to Nabokov as *homo ludens*: man the player”.²⁷ David Packman’s *Vladimir Nabokov* (1982) contains a long introduction discussing play through various theorists. Like Lilly, he uses the metaphor of games to express his view that the novels draw attention to their own artifice and demand the active participation of the reader.²⁸ Carl Eichelberger interprets the concept of game more broadly, arguing that “*Pale Fire* demands not only a creative reader, but a reader willing to participate in a series of involuted and complex games woven into the novel’s texture”. These include a number of intricate word-games, which for Eichelberger reflect the game of language.²⁹ Warren Motte’s *Playtexts* (1995) contains a chapter on *Pale Fire*, arguing that “it is an agonistic game that pits Kinbote against Shade, the Shadeans against Kinbote, Kinbote against us the readers, Nabokov against Kinbote, we the readers against Nabokov.”³⁰

Comments on play are also common in Russian writing on Nabokov of the last five to ten years. In his introductions to the Russian *Collected Works*, published between 1999 and 2000, Alexander Dolinin remarks on Nabokov’s interest in play, linking it to the conceit of life as a theatre in the early plays, and writes on cards and chess in *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Luzhin Defense*.³¹ Unlike critics in English, Dolinin considers the relation between the artistic games of Nabokov’s novels and the games on which they are based, in this case cards and chess, the one a game of chance, the other a game of strategy designed to exclude chance. Nora Buks, Oleg Kostandi, and Andrei Rogachevskii have also explored the significance of cards in *King, Queen, Knave*.³² In 1999, A. M.

²⁷ Lilly, “Nabokov: Homo Ludens”, 89.

²⁸ Packman, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 2-3.

²⁹ Eichelberger, “Gaming in the Lexical Playfields”, 176.

³⁰ Motte, *Playtexts*, 81.

³¹ SS 1:21-3; 2:23-30.

³² Buks, *Eshafot v khrustal’nom dvortse*, 42-8. Kostandi, “‘Korol’, Dama, Valet’”. Rogachevskii, “‘Korol’, <Pikovaia> Dama, Valet’”.

Liuksemburg and A. Pimkina published brief articles on Nabokov's "play-poetic". Liuksemburg suggests that *Pale Fire* be thought of as a labyrinth, and that this labyrinth is an aspect of Nabokov's "play-poetic".³³ Pimkina discusses the ways in which *The Luzhin Defense* is modelled on a chess-game, and the play between narrator and author in *Pnin*.³⁴ Mikhail Shulman devotes one of the sixty-six thematic sections of his book, *Nabokov: Writer* (1998) to play, suggesting that Nabokov's use of play as an ideal to set against utilitarianism was inspired by Pushkin's poem "The Poet and the Crowd".³⁵

While contemporary Russian scholars take it for granted that play is an important aspect of Nabokov's work, scholarship in the English-speaking world in the last twenty years has largely ignored the topic, most likely because of two influential books which reacted against the view of Nabokov that Appel and others had canonised. In *Nabokov and the Novel* (1980) Ellen Pifer set out to reject the view that Nabokov "preferred patterns to people and the challenges of art to the intractable problems of life", and tried to show that Nabokov was a humane and ethically serious writer capable of vivid characterisation.³⁶ As the dust-jacket puts it, "Ellen Pifer challenges the widely held assumption that Nabokov is more interested in literary games than in living human beings." In *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991), Vladimir Alexandrov said he was trying

to dismantle the widespread critical view that Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is first and foremost a metaliterary writer and to suggest instead that an aesthetic rooted in his intuition of a transcendent realm is the basis of his art. [...] Those who consider Nabokov merely a brilliant but shallow stylist and gamesman are simply unaware of the hidden depths in his works.³⁷

³³ Liuksemburg, "Labirint kak kategorii Nabokovskoi igrovoi poetiki".

³⁴ Pimkina, "Igrovoy printsip tvorчества V.V.Nabokova".

³⁵ Shul'man, *Nabokov, pisatel'*, 186-7.

³⁶ Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel*, i.

³⁷ Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 3; 6.

Of the seventy-four articles in the authoritative *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (1995), which Alexandrov edited, the only one to touch on play is Janet Gezari's essay on "Chess and Chess Problems", and neither "play" nor "game" appear in the otherwise comprehensive index. Nor is play discussed in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (2005).³⁸

This thesis, therefore, represents a return to a subject which has fallen from favour, and which, though once paid a great deal of lip-service, was never the subject of detailed study. What has been written on Nabokov and play rarely goes beyond *Pale Fire* and, to a lesser extent, *Lolita*. It comments on Nabokov's ideas about play but rarely on his actual depictions of games. It clings to the model of chess and structured games, and tends to impose a rigid theoretical framework, often drawn from Huizinga, which ignores the range and ambiguity of play in Nabokov's work. It does not ask where Nabokov got his interest in play or enquire into his allusions to other writers on play, nor does it consider the evolution of Nabokov's treatment of play.

The existing criticism on play in Nabokov also does not draw on his early untranslated Russian writings. Scattered through rare émigré journals, these have only recently been gathered together in the Russian collected works published by Symposium in 1999-2000. Some plays and essays which Nabokov never published, and which are not in the Symposium edition, have also been published over the 1990s in *Zvezda*, a Russian literary journal. This material is crucial for understanding how and why Nabokov first became interested in play. Without "Breitensträter – Paolino", Nabokov's treatment of play would be much harder to understand. Published in *Box Sport* in Berlin and also in *Slovo*, a Latvian émigré journal, it was left to languish in the back pages of these obscure

³⁸ Connolly, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*.

journals for the next fifty years (RY 563). Nabokov never republished it, nor did he ever refer to it again. In his 1990 biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Brian Boyd dispensed with “Breitensträter – Paolino” in a few sentences, considering it primarily as a piece on boxing. In the only other scholarly reference, Donald Barton Johnson dismissed “Breitensträter – Paolino” in 1995 with these words: “Apart from a very few flashes, the whole is stylistically flat and reeks of what now seems adolescent machomania”.³⁹ It has never been translated into English.

This thesis aims to fill these gaps and to offer the first comprehensive study of Nabokov and play. By weight of example it tries to justify its claim that play was Nabokov’s leading idea. In doing so it counters two previous views. The first is Alexandrov’s claim that the “otherworld” was Nabokov’s main theme, a view inspired by a comment which Nabokov’s widow Véra made in her introduction to a collection of Nabokov’s poems published in 1979. The second is that art itself is Nabokov’s principal theme, a view that goes back to Russian émigré criticism of the 1930s. In an essay of 1937, Nabokov’s friend Vladislav Khodasevich argued that all of Nabokov’s main characters were metaphors for the artist: “The life of the artist and the life of the device in the consciousness of the artist – this is Sirin’s theme”.⁴⁰ So, too, in 1934 Victor Weidle wrote that “The theme of Sirin’s art is art itself.”⁴¹ Nabokov’s first biographer, Andrew Field, quoting Khodasevich’s article, wrote that “there is much to be said for this view that provides a universal key which ‘works’ in almost all of Nabokov’s fiction”.⁴² I do not deny that art and the otherworld are crucial and ubiquitous themes in Nabokov. But

³⁹ Donald Barton Johnson, “The Latvian Nabokov”, 33.

⁴⁰ Page, ed., *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, 63.

⁴¹ Quoted by Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 235.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

they are hardly original themes. One would be surprised not to find them in the writings of any author born out of aestheticism and symbolism. I hope to show that it is through play that Nabokov thinks about faith and art, and expects his readers to think about them, and it is in this sense that I call play his leading idea.

This thesis is not however an attempt to restore the image, dislodged by Pifer and Alexandrov, of Nabokov as a cold and trivial aesthete. Play in Nabokov's novels is not trivial. It is something of enormous moral and metaphysical significance, and serves as a bridge between art and faith. So, for instance, in his major epiphany in *Pale Fire*, John Shade, having decided that there is no absolute truth about the world and the beyond, concludes it is enough to imagine "some kind of correlated pattern in the game" (l. 813) of the world. From this metaliterary game Shade infers a possible metaphysic, imagining the gods who might play such a game, but saying that "it did not matter who they were." (l.816) As Alexandrov himself notes, it is characteristic of aestheticism that Shade should qualify his intuition of the transcendent by an ironic sense of its uncertainty.⁴³ In "The Poetic Principle" (1850), Edgar Allen Poe said that in beauty, "we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses" of eternity.⁴⁴ In "Music and Literature" (1894), his final artistic statement, Mallarmé defined art as a "game" insofar as, "in a dream of fiction, we seize the ideal which is absent here below, yet explosively present up above, and hurl it to some forbidden, thunderbolt height of heaven."⁴⁵

As for the moral contrast between games and human beings, Nabokov's novels consistently investigate the proposition that man is only human when he plays, though they do not affirm or deny either this or any other moral or metaphysical proposition.

⁴³ Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 7.

⁴⁴ Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 456.

⁴⁵ Mallarmé: *Selected Prose Poems, Essays, & Letters*, 48.

Nabokov's artistic play articulates the Kantian view that art must be free from all external coercion, including determinate ideas of goodness and truth. As Schiller put it in the *Aesthetic Education*: "the agreeable, the good, the perfect, with these man is merely in earnest; but with beauty he plays." (105-7) To Nabokov, as to Schiller, such play, far from being trivial, is the essence of freedom, and art is most educative when it is free from fixed messages or prior purposes, moral or metaphysical. As he wrote in a letter of 24 October 1945:

I never meant to deny the moral impact of art which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art. What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralizing which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skilfully written. [...] In my opinion, the fact that *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *The Power of Darkness* were written with a deliberate moral purpose largely defeats their purpose, killing the inherent morality of uninhibited art. (SL 56-7)

This, I suggest, is part of what Nabokov meant by "freedom of art", which in an interview of 1964 he named alongside "freedom of speech" and "freedom of thought" as one of the three permanent articles of his "political creed" (SO 34-5).

Play is Nabokov's favourite metaphor for art and artistic freedom. But it is not his only metaphor. In his public pronouncements, unwilling perhaps to be too explicit, he preferred to talk of art not as play, but as magic (LL 3). Although Nabokov does sometimes use this metaphor in his novels, most notably in the title of *The Enchanter*, the ur-work of *Lolita*, he does not depict magic, whereas he does write about actual games such as chess and tennis. However, Nabokov's plots do elaborate several other metaphors for artistic indeterminacy, including dreams, madness, jokes, mistakes, and incest.⁴⁶ All

⁴⁶ There is a remarkable parallel here with Freud, for whom dreams, jokes, games, and mistakes are all "royal roads" to the unconscious. Freud was also influenced by post-Kantian aesthetic theorists, as in *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), where he supports his view of jokes by quoting the view that

of these phenomena are described in ways which often border on play. Crime is another of Nabokov's metaphors for the lawlessness of art. The gift, which is free in the sense of being freely given, serves Nabokov as an image for the freedom of artistic genius. In *The Gift*, Fyodor gradually gives up teaching, like Joyce's Stephen Daedalus: that is, he becomes an artist by abandoning the didactic role. Reluctantly travelling to a lesson, Fyodor imagines that passers-by were "looking at him as if he were carrying an illegal treasure (which his gift was, essentially)" (79).

Unlike all these metaphors, however, play gestures towards law as well as freedom, since in games there are rules, without which play would not be possible. Games therefore serve as the perfect metaphor for several of the paradoxes which Nabokov inherited from Kant and made central to his novels: that we must be morally free, but free to give ourselves laws which we wish to be universal; that art must be created without any prior rule or determinate concept, and yet that artistic genius will intuit new rules which will allow a free yet harmonious play of the faculties, so that a work of art will possess both freedom and rule; and that in aesthetic experience, the mind oscillates both between the material (phenomenal) world and the (noumenal) beyond, and between a sense of absolute order and a sense of freedom, giving the "indeterminate glimpses" of eternity which Poe describes.

Over the course of his career, Nabokov's novels, which begin by describing games, become ever more radically playful or game-like at the fundamental levels of form, language, and thought, and as they do so, explicit images of play and game become somewhat less widespread in the American novels than they were in the Russian novels.

"aesthetic freedom consists in the playful contemplation of objects'", and later that art – again, like jokes in Freud's view – is disinterested. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, 602; 660.

Critics of Nabokov have often used the presence of play in Nabokov as a cue for describing the novels as playful or game-like in whatever way they please. There is unquestionably a quality about Nabokov's writing which, in the light of the games of the novels, asks to be called playful, and which takes a different aesthetic form in each novel. A fully aesthetic analysis of this playfulness in Nabokov's novels would require another thesis. This thesis, instead, follows Nabokov more literally, analysing the game of each novel in terms of the games that each novel itself depicts and discusses, and as such it is essentially a study of Nabokov's intellectual and aesthetic intentions, written in the belief that those intentions are in themselves interesting and in the hope that they form a valuable guide to the aesthetic achievement of the novels.

The thesis adopts a simultaneously chronological and thematic approach to the subject. In each period of Nabokov's writings, one aspect of play comes to the fore. In pursuing this approach, it has not been possible to deal with every aspect of play in every novel, nor has it been possible to provide a full reading of every novel. In particular, Nabokov's last three novels receive short shrift. *Ada* is dealt with at less length than it deserves, and *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!* are hardly dealt with at all. I have said relatively little about Nabokov's poetry and short stories. Although Nabokov sometimes thinks about play in his poems and stories, and though they bear some of the marks of Nabokov's playfulness, it seems that it was specifically the novel that Nabokov saw as the vehicle for his obsession with play.

The first chapter of the thesis discusses the philosophical idea of play and its place in the aesthetic theories in Kant, Schiller, and Nietzsche. It discusses the routes through which Nabokov received these ideas: through aestheticism generally, through his reading

of Nietzsche, through Iulii Aikhenvald, and through Andrei Bely, whose novel *Petersburg* (1916; 1922), which Nabokov rated highly, sets Kant's ultimately orderly view of play against Nietzsche's idea of destructive and anarchic play.

Play only becomes central to Nabokov's art after "Breitensträter – Paolino", in December 1925. The second chapter deals with Nabokov's earliest writings on play, from the poem "Childhood", composed 1918-9, up to "Breitensträter – Paolino" in 1925. It also discusses the influence on his ideas of play of Lewis Carroll and of Iulii Aikhenvald, Nabokov's early mentor. In these years play is a subsidiary theme, which occurs erratically and unsystematically in relation to other themes, such as violence, deception, faith, and the self. If there is an overarching theme to Nabokov's fragmentary writings on play in these years, it is play as make-believe, a theme which Nabokov developed dialectically, showing that make-believe could signify play as imagination and invention but also play as cruelty and deception. Nabokov came back to this idea of play on make-believe when he wrote the lecture on Dostoevsky that he used to give at Cornell, in which he says that "we must always bear in mind that art is a divine game", and specifies that "it is a game, because it remains art only as long as we are allowed to remember that, after all, it is make-believe" (*LRL* 106).

Nabokov translated Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) in 1922.⁴⁷ This, and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), are a crucial source of Nabokov's ideas about play. The third chapter discusses Nabokov's second and third novels, *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Luzhin Defense*, which, like the *Alice* books, are structured, respectively, on cards and on chess. The first is about play as attack and the second is about play as defence. The first demonstrates that free play without rule is not

⁴⁷ I subsequently refer to this book by its usual abbreviation, *Alice in Wonderland*.

possible or desirable, the second that play and chance cannot be eliminated from the game of life. In the section on *The Luzhin Defense* I also discuss Nabokov's other writings on chess over the course of the 1920s, showing how detailed Nabokov's interest in particular chess-players and schools was.

In the late 1920s Nabokov was particularly interested in understanding play through the specific qualities of individual games and sports. In the 1930s he was thinking about play in relation to its antitheses, above all with use and with work. The fourth chapter is about play as the opposite of work in the novels of the 1930s. In the same month, December 1925, that Nabokov wrote his manifesto for play in "Breitensträter – Paolino", he also wrote a vision of art and the world as work in "A Guide to Berlin". Nabokov's vision of play is haunted by the competing vision of work, and in *Glory*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Despair*, both play and work are treated as provisional stages on a path towards some more complete life-goal. But in the later 1930s Nabokov engaged in a battle against the nineteenth-century idealisation of labour, which he believed led into the Soviet and Nazi ideologies. In *The Gift*, he mounts an unambiguous assault on the culture of labour in the figure of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, the Russian radical of the 1860s.

Over the course of the 1930s, Nabokov's writing moves ever closer to the terrifying prospect of play without rules. The fifth chapter is about free play and childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, and deals with Nabokov's poems and plays in the late 1930s and early 1940s, going on to substantial discussions of *Bend Sinister*, *Speak, Memory*, and *Lolita*, before finishing with a brief section on *Ada*. Meeting Joyce in Paris in 1938 and reading the already published parts of *Finnegans Wake* (1939) – the nearest

literature has ever come to absolute free play – encouraged Nabokov's writing in its movement towards indeterminacy. The chapter of *Finnegans Wake* on children's games, "The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies", is referred to in *Lolita*. Nabokov's son Dmitri had been born in 1934 and in all the American novels Nabokov confronted his fears about the well-being of children and the harm posed to them by free play. Yet for Nabokov as for Joyce, children's play was also desirable and in need of protection from control. Like dreams, it resists interpretation and it therefore served Nabokov as a figure for the aesthetic uncertainty towards which his art was progressively moving in the thirty years after *The Gift*.

Although the main movement of Nabokov's American writing is towards free play, in *Pale Fire* he produced a work which is like a game, in the way it encourages an active reader to rearrange its pieces, to try out various imaginative possibilities, and to solve its innumerable puzzles. John Shade's epiphany about the gods playing a game of worlds provides an image for *Pale Fire*, which is about the relation between world games and word-games. Chapter Six shows how in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov wrote a literary game inspired by his work on *Eugene Onegin*. *Pale Fire* imitates Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1728-9; 1733-4) and weaves an intricate allusive web to Pope's work, because in Pope Nabokov found a tradition of the *lusus* or literary game which goes forward from Pope to Pushkin and back from Pope to Erasmus and More.

Chapter One Nabokov and the Philosophical History of Play

What an exciting experience it would be to follow the adventures of an idea through the ages. With no wordplay intended, I daresay that this would be the ideal novel: we would really see the abstract image, perfectly limpid and totally unencumbered by humanity's dust, enjoying an intense existence that develops, swells, displays its thousand folds, with the diaphanous liquidity of an aurora borealis. One could select, for instance, the idea of beauty, follow its historical tribulations, and turn it into something vastly more vivid than an adventure novel.¹ (Nabokov)

Where are the origins of Nabokov's statement in "Breitensträter – Paolino" that "everything in the world plays"? In this chapter I aim to answer this question by offering a sketch of the idea of art and the world as play as it develops from Kant, through Schiller and Nietzsche, and in the Russian novelist Andrey Bely, in whose novel *Petersburg* Nabokov will have found those views dramatised, and which he considered one of the four "masterpieces of twentieth century prose", alongside Joyce's *Ulysses*, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (SO 57). As I shall show in the next chapter, Nabokov had by 1925 found encouragement for his interest in play in various literary writers. But it is doubtful that he would have formulated the idea of art and the world as play without the theoretical framework he inherited from German philosophy.

It is extraordinary that Nabokov should have taken the theory of art as a form of play so literally and illustrated it in all his novels, but it is not at all surprising that he should have been aware of the theory. It was one of the best-known ideas in Western aesthetics in the first years of the twentieth century. Tolstoy discussed it in *What is Art?*, attributing it to Kant and Schiller, as did the Marxist aesthetician Plekhanov in his 1912 essay "Art and Social Life", and so had Chernyshevsky, in an essay that Nabokov would

¹ Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible", 42.

have read when he went through Chernyshevsky's works in 1933-4.² In his 1907 essay, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming", Freud argued that "the creative writer does the same as a child at play", because "he creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously".³ In 1911, the English writer Vernon Lee wrote that the connection between art and play dominated contemporary aesthetics, and in 1910, the American philosopher John Dewey wrote: "That art originated in play is a common saying".⁴ According to the article on "Aesthetics" in the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1910, "the relation of this [aesthetic] attitude to that of Play" is a "point much discussed in recent aesthetic literature". The article on "Fine Arts" devotes a quarter of its length to the relationship between art and play.⁵

Many writers, like Tolstoy, emphasised that aestheticism, or the "art-for-art's-sake" movement, was rooted in Kant and Schiller's theories. These theories had been taken up in France by such writers as Victor Cousin and Mme de Staël and popularised, in a simplified and somewhat distorted form, by theorists of the *l'art pour l'art* movement such as Victor Hugo and Théophile Gautier. In the English-speaking world they were transmitted by Coleridge, Poe, Ruskin, Pater, and finally Wilde.⁶ Nabokov grew up reading Wilde and Poe, and other British aesthetes (SO 42-3), as well as contemporary Russian writers who revered them. The fashion for aestheticism in St. Petersburg at the beginning of the twentieth century gave rise to the Anglophilia which

² Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life*, 166-228. Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, 430.

³ *The Freud Reader*, 436-43; 437. For Freud's reading of Kantian aestheticians, see *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, 602.

⁴ Lee is quoted by Sparshott in *The Structure of Aesthetics*, 207. Dewey, *How We Think*, 219.

⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. "Aesthetics" and "Fine Arts".

⁶ See Wilcox, "The Beginnings of l'Art Pour l'Art"; Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake*; and Wilkinson and Willoughby's introduction to Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*, cxxxiii-cxcvi.

led to Nabokov being taught English from an early age.⁷ Nabokov absorbed the precepts of aestheticism as a teenager. In his writing the idea of play fits neatly into its place amongst those precepts, since like them it derives from post-Kantian aesthetics.

Nabokov would have absorbed the essence of Kantian aesthetics from the famous slogans of aestheticism. It was well known that Poe had rejected the “heresy of the didactic” and divided the mind into “Pure Intellect, Taste, and Moral Sense”, in which taste distinguishes beauty sharply from morality and truth, and yet also bridges them. All this comes in three pages of Poe’s well-known essay, “The Poetic Principle”, which also presents the view that in beauty, “we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses” of eternity.⁸ From the phrase “art for art’s sake” Nabokov would have gathered the idea that art should be an end in itself, and he would have heard that beauty should be purposive without purpose, that it must not be “useful”. The Russian Symbolist poets, too, had articulated Kant’s vision of man existing on the border between two worlds, one of necessity, the other, intuited but not known, of freedom and absolute truth, and of art as the intermediary between those two worlds.

The vision of play, which finishes in Nietzsche and Nabokov as a cosmic principle, begins in Kant as only a casual phrase: the “free play” of the faculties in aesthetic experience.⁹ Kant is hardly conscious of play as an ideal or even as a theme in its own right. Several times he speaks of “mere play” and contrasts it disparagingly with the “serious”.¹⁰ Kant cannot convince either himself or his reader that play is superior, even in the limited case, to seriousness. This is a good example of a more general

⁷ Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance*.

⁸ Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 454-6. Poe’s works entered the Nabokov family library sometime between 1904 and 1911. They are listed in the 1911 catalogue: *Sistematicheskii katalog* (1911), 14.

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 26 and throughout.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122; 129; 184; 204; 206.

problem faced by those who wish to give play importance, which is that to do so will always have an appearance of nonsense or folly about it, since we are so used to contrasting play with seriousness. It means coming up against one of the walls of the language; to pass through that wall, and enter a world in which play is approved unreservedly, requires re-engineering the connotations of play, and is therefore something that literature can do but philosophy cannot do. Nabokov's novels realise the idea of aesthetic play. Philosophers could only state it.

For Kant, the free play of the faculties is a characteristic of aesthetic judgement. This is a special type of "judgement", the more common sort being teleological judgement. In the first two *Critiques*, the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant had argued for the existence of two "domains", or alternative views of existence. One is nature, the entirely predetermined law-governed clockwork universe disclosed bit by bit by science. This is the world of appearances or *phenomena*. But there remains the possibility of a world behind this, the *noumenal* realm, the domain of freedom. It cannot be proved that this world exists, but we must suppose its existence if we are to be free, and therefore if we are to be moral. These two domains are "barred" from one another "by the great chasm that separates the supersensible from the appearances." Judgement, however, "provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom" (80-1).

In aesthetic judgements, however, the determinate relation of the faculties is loosened. The faculties are set into a free play, which is not anarchic but harmonious. In art it is the gift of genius to imagine, without prior rules, the artwork that will stimulate this harmonious play. Very broadly, in Kant play is a bridge between the two worlds of

freedom and necessity. Kant means us to understand this harmonious play as verging on a miracle; if the harmony within cognitive play could not be maintained, then the aesthetic would no longer bridge the chasm between nature and freedom, but widen it, and attest to the incompatibility of the two worlds man inhabits. It is this miraculous and inexplicable harmony of play that Schiller, Nietzsche and Bely will see as a weak point, at which they can gain leverage to re-orient or even undermine the whole Kantian system.

When we judge an object teleologically, we grasp it by asking what sort of object it is supposed to be (purposiveness). When we judge an object aesthetically, however, we approach it as having the appearance of a designed object, but we do not conclude precisely what it is supposed to be. This is what Kant calls purposiveness without purpose, and it is the way of looking at the world that we find in aesthetic judgement. Kant expresses the difference when he says that with teleological judgements, there is a “problem” which we aim at solving, but in aesthetic judgements there is a “free and indeterminately purposive entertainment of the mental powers with that which we call beautiful” (126). The understanding tries out one concept after another, each of which almost fits the object without quite doing so; the productive imagination responds with a flow of intuitions to add what is missing to make up the object supposed by the understanding. Recognition is continually tantalised. There is a glimpse of possible chaos. And yet the free play of these faculties against one another is, thanks to the mysterious quality of natural and artistic beauty, carried on in a harmony which is pleasurable, because the harmony of the faculties gives us a sense of life (128).

In short, for Kant art and beauty are free. They are free from the compulsions of desire, morality, truth, interest, and determinate concepts. A lecture he gave in 1794 offers an unusually clear statement:

Artes liberales are the arts that cultivate freedom [...] The beautiful arts are such that they do not coerce approval from people, but leave their judgements free, so that their approval is given spontaneously. In them no rules can be despotically prescribed, since they are rather a free play of the imagination [...] they make us free from the impressions of the senses and the productive imagination is free, we are self-creators. Humanity is thus the capacity and the inclination to communicate one's thoughts and feelings.¹¹

Kant's greatest influence was in having emphasised that the aesthetic is a sphere distinct or "free" from truth, usefulness, and morality. From Gautier and Baudelaire through De Quincey, Poe, and Wilde, writers who inherited Kant's ideas were quick to draw the conclusion that beauty and art are therefore indifferent to truth and amoral, or even that they are deceiving and immoral. Kant did not mean to imply these things. Although he argued that beauty must not be didactic with respect to either truth or morality, he also believed that beauty was a symbol of morality, and stressed what Nabokov called "the inherent morality of uninhibited art" (*SL* 57). Yet it is easy to see why Kant was so quickly misread, and why his aesthetics quickly came to be distorted into their decadent parody. It is easy to assert that free beauty is moral, but almost impossible to demonstrate, because its freedom is supposed to lie in an indeterminacy which cannot be turned into statements. Kant's argument comes in a notoriously brief and elliptical passage which has provoked a lot of disagreement, but it is possible to infer from Kant's theory a number of supporting arguments.¹² Firstly, beauty offers fleeting glimpses of the noumenal or "supersensible" other world, which needs to be posited for

¹¹ Reprinted in *Critique of Judgement*, 387-388.

¹² *Critique of Judgement*, 225-28. See Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*, 125-157; and Cohen, "Why Beauty is a Symbol of Morality".

the sake of freedom and morality. “The indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us” is “the sole key to demystifying this faculty” of judgement (217). Secondly, beauty offers a series of analogies for Kant’s moral teachings. Just as beauty is free and indeterminate, so the moral law cannot be fixed by external constraints. Just as artistic genius gives itself its own rules, which cannot be predicted in advance but will form the model for other artists, so to be moral one must freely impose on oneself laws which one wishes to be universalised. Aesthetic judgement must be disinterested, that is, it must not want something from the object of its appreciation. There is an analogy here for the first law of Kant’s moral theory, the categorical imperative, which states that everyone must be treated as an end and not as a means. Kant’s argument is opaque. Yet its opacity reflects the mystery of aesthetic experience, which somehow links the incommensurable worlds of freedom and necessity and squares their paradoxes.

In his aesthetics, Schiller tries to clarify these mysteries and paradoxes. By amplifying Kant’s comments on play, he dramatises Kant’s aesthetics and links them more explicitly to his ethics. Schiller went far beyond Kant by recasting as a tragedy Kant’s argument that man is divided between the two worlds of the phenomenal and the noumenal. In the *Aesthetic Education*, he redefines Kant’s two “domains” as two contrary “drives” in human nature, which must be reconciled if we are to regain our full humanity. In his rewriting of Kant, the world of phenomena is expressed by a “sense-drive” and the world of the noumena by a “form-drive”. The sense-drive “proceeds from the physical existence of man, or his sensuous nature. Its business is to set him within the limits of time, and to turn him into matter.” The form-drive “proceeds from the absolute existence of man, or from his rational nature, and is intent on giving him the freedom to bring

harmony into the diversity of his manifestations, and to affirm his Person among all his changes of Condition [...] it annuls time and annuls change.”¹³ The opposition of these two drives threatens to destroy “the unity of human nature” (85).

Schiller proposes, however, that the two drives can overlap and produce a third drive, the play-drive, which reconciles their differences and reunifies human nature. The play-drive is “directed towards annulling time within time, reconciling becoming with absolute being and change with identity ... It will, [...] since it annuls all contingency, annul all constraint too, and set man free both physically and morally.” (98) Schiller takes it that Kant’s use of play to describe aesthetic experience marks a more unconstrained freedom than that to be found in moral law, rewriting Kant as follows: “the agreeable, the good, the perfect, with these man is merely in earnest; but with beauty he plays.” (105-7) Aesthetic play is constrained by no reason and by no purpose. Between “the kingdom of forces” and the “kingdom of laws”, the aesthetic impulse is building “a third kingdom of play and of semblance, in which man is relieved of the shackles of circumstance, and released of all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and in the moral sphere.” (215) In this way, beauty “cajoles” from man “a delight in things for their own sake”, in which people and things are treated as ends in themselves, and not as means to an end (171).

This third kingdom of play, beauty, and semblance also contains a reconciliation of the other two drives. Beauty is the repository of an undivided humanity and, paradoxically, “truth lives on in the illusion of art.” (57) Schiller is here using “truth” to signify the utopian truth of a humanity restored to wholeness. The utopian illusion of aesthetic semblance must not be mistaken for a falsehood about actuality. “Only the first

¹³ Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 79-81.

is play, whereas the latter is mere deception.” (195) So long as semblance is distinguished from the real world, and does not seek to realise itself, it poses no threat to morality. In the realm of semblance, man is free to create himself without worrying about moral considerations; “nothing need here be sacred to him except his own law, if he but observes the demarcation separating his territory from the actual existence of things.” (197)

Nietzsche radicalised the ideal of play by erasing this demarcation. Nietzsche had been a craze in Russia in the 1890s and 1900s, embraced both by Symbolists such as Bely, Blok, and Ivanov, and by the aesthetes of the *World of Art* such as Diaghilev and Benois. By 1904, in the *Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov treats Nietzsche as a household name.¹⁴ When Nabokov’s father was put in solitary confinement in 1908, Nietzsche was one of the writers he took the opportunity of studying (RY 76). Brian Boyd does not report which of Nietzsche’s books Nabokov himself read in 1918; the family library held *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-1885), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *Untimely Meditations* (1873-1876), and an anthology of Nietzsche published in 1910.¹⁵ But Nabokov will surely have read the most influential of Nietzsche’s works in Russia, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).¹⁶ The beginning and end of these two works contain Nietzsche’s essential ideas about play.

As Schiller radicalised Kant’s notion of aesthetic play, so Nietzsche went one step further, arguing that the aesthetic is the only mode of consciousness which can reconcile us to the pain and ugliness of life and in which the world can be renewed. He proposes

¹⁴ Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia*.

¹⁵ *Sistematicheskii katalog*’ (1904), 104. *Sistematicheskii katalog*’ (1911), 75.

¹⁶ Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia*, 10.

that the whole world be thought of aesthetically, as play, according to what he calls the “tragic myth”:

How can ugliness and discord, the content of the tragic myth, produce aesthetic pleasure?

At this point we must make a bold leap into the metaphysics of art, repeating our earlier assertion that existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Accordingly, the tragic myth has to convince us that even ugliness and discord are an artistic game which the will, in the eternal abundance of its pleasure, plays with itself.¹⁷

This is a dramatic version of Kant’s doctrine of purposiveness without purpose. Kant had argued that in judgement generally we view nature as if it were as purposively ordered as art, while in aesthetic judgement we are simultaneously aware that the object of judgement does not really attain to that order. Nietzsche boldly argues that this oscillation between the Apollonian perception of order and the Dionysiac perception of chaos, between seeing the world and seeing through it, can, once we have identified with it, reconcile us to the alternation between happiness and suffering; and that this alternation is comparable to the way music modulates between harmony and dissonance:

For we now understand what it means to wish to look, in tragedy, and to go beyond that looking; we might characterize this condition with reference to artistically applied dissonance, by saying that that we want to hear and long to go beyond hearing. The striving for infinity, the wingbeat of longing, that accompanies the supreme delight of clearly perceived reality, reminds us that both states are aspects of the Dionysiac phenomenon: over and over again it shows us the spirit that playfully builds and destroys the world of individuals as the product of a primal pleasure: similarly, dark Heraclitus compares the force that builds worlds to a child placing stones here and there, and building sandcastles and knocking them down again.¹⁸

This aesthetic vision of the world at play, which can reconcile us to suffering, also promises us the freedom to renovate the world, by escaping from those values of the past which have become a burden, and by then creating new values. In the account of the three

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 115.

¹⁸ Ibid.

metamorphoses at the beginning of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche puts the point in an allegory: “how the spirit shall become a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child.” The camel is the load-bearing spirit, who unquestioningly carries forward the values of the past. The lion is the critical spirit, which annuls the values of the past, but cannot put new values in their place. Its “sacred No even to duty” creates the freedom in which the child, and only the child, can create new values through its play:

The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport [or game – the word in the German is *Spiel*], a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes.

Yes, a sacred Yes is needed, my brothers, for the sport [*Spiel*] of creation: the spirit now wills *its own* will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins *its own* world.¹⁹

In 1918, the year that he was reading Nietzsche, Nabokov was also studying Andrei Bely. It makes sense that Nabokov should have read Nietzsche and Bely at the same time. Bely was a serious student of philosophy, and had written at length about Nietzsche as well as Kant. He first read *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 1898 and conceived a “crazy passion” for Nietzsche. He wrote several essays about Nietzsche, including his 1908 essay “Friedrich Nietzsche”, in which he puts Nietzsche alongside Christ as a “teacher of life”.²⁰ Bely was particularly engaged by the idea of the Dionysiac, as a way of thinking about the regeneration of culture.²¹ Over the same period of time, Bely was struggling to find his way through and out of Kant’s system. He gives a brilliant précis of Kant’s system in his 1904 essay “Criticism and Symbolism”, which was published in *Symbolism*, the volume containing the system of prosody that Nabokov studied with enormous care. In his memoir, *The Beginning of the Century*, Bely describes how from 1903 on, “Kantianism, having become my very atmosphere, proceeded to

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 54-55.

²⁰ Quoted by Clowes in *The Revolution of Moral Consciousness in Russian Literature*, 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

poison me, as a lyric poem would.” In “Criticism and Symbolism”, Bely argues that the Kantian system contains the possibility of self-destruction. He locates the point at which the integrity of the Kantian system can be breached as the gap between “reason” and “feeling”, and the gap between the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the other two *Critiques*.²² This is the chasm analysed above between nature and freedom, the phenomenal and the noumenal.

In *Petersburg*, Bely pits the Kantian and Nietzschean versions of play against one another. He attempts to dramatise the self-destruction of the Kantian system, and he does so by fixing on Kant’s unstable notion of the play of thought – the centrepiece of the bridge Kant tries to throw across the gap between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds. *Petersburg* is set in the autumn of 1905, the year in which revolution in Russia seemed to be a strong possibility. A student, Nikolai Apollonovich, is involved with a revolutionary organisation, which orders him to assassinate a high-ranking government official. This official turns out to be his father, Apollon Apollonovich. A second story involves Nikolai’s handler, Dudkin, who goes mad and murders the head of the revolutionary party, Lippanchenko. The novel is freighted with metaphysics. Dudkin tells Nikolai that “We are all Nietzscheans, and you are a Nietzschean, though you won’t admit it.”²³ As the name “Apollon” suggests, the reader is invited to apply Nietzsche’s distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac to the forces of order and revolution in the novel. Apollon Apollonovich embodies the cultural qualities against which the Nietzschean Dionysiac was usually invoked as ammunition. As a reader of Mill and Comte, he is a positivist and a utilitarian: that is to say, he identifies truth with observable

²² Quoted by Cassedy in “Bely the Thinker”, 313; 315.

²³ Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. Maguire and Malmstad, 57.

facts and the good with a visible improvement in those facts (79-80). The city of St. Petersburg, as he sees it, and as it is presented to us in the novel, is a rectilinear projection of pure reason, all planes, straight lines, and geometric shapes (10-11). He rides around St. Petersburg in a cube-shaped carriage. Whatever in Russia is not apprehensible as a projection of Apollon's mind he thinks of as a void; this void is a sign of the noumenal realm of freedom dreamed of as a revolution in consciousness, the revolution that would allow a "leap across history".²⁴ To a great extent his son Nikolai is also a rationalist. He is a student of Kantian philosophy and has a bust of Kant in his study (27). He is a near-double of his father: the forces of political order and revolution are from one perspective agents of the same rationality.

Petersburg is principally interested in consciousness. At the centre of Apollon's and Nikolai's mind is the following picture: "Here, in his own room, Nikolai Apollonovich would truly grow into a self-contained center, into a series of logical premises that flowed from the center and predetermined thought, soul, and this very table. Here he was the sole centre of the universe, conceivable as well as inconceivable." (28) At the margins of their consciousnesses another process is going on, however, introducing dangerous elements and expanding the circle of experience over which the centre has to preserve its dominion. This is the play of thought, which Bely calls *mozgovaia igra* – cerebral play, brain play – and, less frequently, *umstvennaia igra* – mental play. He even thought of calling the novel *Cerebral Play*.²⁵ The terms *mozgovaia igra* and *umstvennaia igra* recur throughout the novel, sometimes varied into *prazdnaia*

²⁴ Ibid., 65; 93.

²⁵ In a letter of December 1913. Quoted by Alexandrov, *Andrey Bely*, 110.

mozgovaia igra – idle cerebral play – or just *prazdnye mysli* – idle thoughts.²⁶ The world of *Petersburg* is a projection of Apollon's "thought trains". Even the house he lives in is a picture of his mind, with steps "soft, like the convolutions of the brain" (21), and corridors opening off from his head (93). Cerebral play has a role in building the geometric logical world Apollon inhabits, "constructing misty planes".²⁷ But cerebral play is also threatening and chaotic. Its products refuse to be considered as if designed for the benefit of Apollon's consciousness. Like Nietzsche, Bely is capitalising on the glimpse of chaos involved in the Kantian doctrine of purposiveness without purpose. Cerebral play creates the agents by which the "I" will self-destruct.²⁸ Apollon's cerebral play is given credit for conceiving the son who will attempt to kill his father, and the agent, Dudkin, who will pass the bomb to him. At the beginning of the novel, we are shown Apollon idly conceiving, unforeseen by his "code of rules", the "stranger" who will turn out to be Dudkin (14). From an idle thought at the margins of consciousness Dudkin develops. "And one fugitive thought was the thought that the stranger really existed. The thought fled back into the senatorial brain." (21)

Here Apollon falls into one of the chief pitfalls of the aesthetic as conceived by Kant and Schiller, that of believing that aesthetic judgements depict something that actually exists. But this contrast between the self-contained centre constructed by logic and the encroachments of cerebral play seems to reproduce the contrast in the *Critique of Judgement* between ordinary judgement and aesthetic judgement. While Apollon's world of straight lines and cubes recalls Kant's specific insistence that geometric forms cannot

²⁶ Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. Malmstad and Maguire, 129; 136. For the Russian, see Belyi, *Petersburg*, 182; 200.

²⁷ Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. Malmstad and Maguire, 19; 249.

²⁸ "In place of the former 'I' there was darkness": *Petersburg*, trans. Maguire and Malmstad, 254.

be aesthetic, because they rely on a determinate concept, cerebral play is repeatedly identified with patterns on the wallpaper, which Kant gives as his example of free beauty.²⁹ When Apollon tries to push Dudkin out of his mind, “cerebral play was retreating to the edge of the field of vision, as were the whitish patterns of wallpaper.” (19) Dudkin is driven mad by a face he hallucinates in patterns on the wallpaper. Another character, Anna Petrovna, also hallucinates the pattern.³⁰ It seems, then, that Bely wants us to see the aesthetic play of thought as a term in which freedom will always eventually proliferate beyond law, whether or not the aesthetic falls prey to corruption. We are to take Apollon’s consciousness as the inevitable source of its own destruction: consciousness and the bomb are to be seen as one.

Like Nietzsche, Bely in *Petersburg* takes the concept of the aesthetic play of thought from Kant and emphasises that it is the source of all genuine creation and destruction in the world. When Nikolai tells Dudkin of a nightmare about standing over the bomb and feeling as if “the bandage had fallen off all sensations”, Dudkin replies: “And you were like Dionysus being torn to pieces, Nikolai Apollonovich. But, all joking aside, now you’re speaking in another language, not that of Kant.” (180) In the epilogue of the novel, Nikolai has gone to Egypt and “Kant is forgotten.” (292) Inasmuch as the play of thought allows entry to an element of chaos which Kant has not foreseen, it serves as a backdoor through which Dionysiac forces can enter the rationalist mind: “Cerebral play is only a mask. Under way beneath this mask is the invasion of the brain by forces unknown to us.” (35) These forces are imaginatively associated with the Mongol and proletarian hordes projected throughout the novel as a substratum of Apollon’s Russia;

²⁹ *Critique of Judgement*, 114; 126.

³⁰ *Petersburg*, trans. Maguire and Malmstad, 58; 60; 193; 266.

and Apollon's last name, Ableukhov, is a sign of his Mongol descent. *Petersburg* conforms to Nietzsche's description of the tragic myth: "It shares with the sphere of Apolline art an utter delight in appearance and looking, and at the same time it negates that pleasure and draws even higher satisfaction from the destruction of the visible world of appearances." The whole of the novel, including both its creation and destruction, can be seen in Nietzschean terms as "an artistic game which the will, in the eternal abundance of its pleasure, plays with itself".³¹ The revolutionary leader Lippanchenko is pictured shortly before being murdered as looking "just like a child" and playing with toy trains (190). At the end of the novel, Apollon "began laying out a game of solitaire on a small mother-of-pearl table." (282) A final twist on this is that if the events in *Petersburg* can be considered as a game played by Apollon's will, through cerebral play building itself up and conceiving the agents of its own destruction, Apollon and the novel as a whole are also presented as the offspring of the play of thought. Dudkin is an "idle shadow" that "arose by chance in the consciousness of Senator Ableukhov and acquired its ephemeral being there. But the consciousness of Apollon Apollonovich is a shadowy consciousness because he too is the possessor of an ephemeral being and the fruit of the author's fantasy: unnecessary, idle cerebral play." (35) The challenge of *Petersburg* is to see how art can at the same time and without contradiction be considered as a bomb and as idle play.³²

³¹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, 114-115.

³² Maguire and Malmstad, in "Petersburg", 139-140, quote Bely's description of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as a bomb Nietzsche has thrown at us, and his statement in "The Crisis of Consciousness and Henrik Ibsen" that "To place dynamite under history itself in the name of absolute values, which consciousness has not yet revealed – this is the terrible conclusion to be drawn from the lyrics of Nietzsche and the drama of Ibsen."

Nabokov's passion for *Petersburg*, whose apocalyptic tone and open metaphysical aspirations are so unlike the tenor of his own work, surprises many readers. If Bely's writing is explosive, Nabokov's is idle and playful. But as a reading of *Petersburg* suggests, the idle play of thought is a revolutionary principle in consciousness. *Petersburg* seems to have been crucial in helping Nabokov move forward from the watercolour aestheticism of *Mary* to the subversive modernism of *King, Queen, Knave*, in which, as in many of his later novels, Nabokov adopted Bely's scheme of starting with a surface of Apollonian order, akin to a game, which is then subverted and destroyed by underlying forces of freedom and play. And Bely's antinomy between seeing art as a bomb and seeing it as child's play seems to have been close to Nabokov's idea of *Lolita*, which, in two letters sent on February 3, 1954, he called both "a timebomb that I have just finished putting together" and a "little girl" (SL 143-4).

Chapter Two The Origins of Play in Nabokov, 1918-1925

Introduction

It seems to have been reading Nietzsche that inspired Nabokov's first piece of writing on play, the long poem-sequence, "Childhood", which he wrote sometime between 1918 and 1919.¹ But Nabokov was slow to see the possibilities of play. At Cambridge, he wrote a couple of poems on sport, but most of his earliest writing does not deal with play. In 1923, however, after translating *Alice in Wonderland*, he began to take play as one of his principal themes, though not yet as his dominant theme, and without always labelling as such themes and motifs which he would later treat as play. Right up to 1925 we find in Nabokov's writing not only an attraction but also a resistance to play: his first novel, *Mary*, which he wrote in 1925, opens with a refusal to play. Only in December 1925, with "Breitensträter – Paolino", would Nabokov announce play as his major idea.

Up to 1925, and especially up to 1923, Nabokov had not yet given enough sustained attention to play to systematise his ideas on the subject, and my account, which follows chronological sequence, is, necessarily, somewhat episodic. It falls into four sections. The first discusses Nabokov's earliest writings on play in 1918 and 1920, and how Nabokov later reworked them. The second suggests that Nabokov's sudden development of the idea of play in 1923 was inspired by the conjunction of two major influences: his early mentor Iulii Aikhenvald, whom he probably came across soon after returning to Berlin from Cambridge in 1922, and Lewis Carroll, whose *Alice in Wonderland* he translated in 1922. The third discusses the place of play in Nabokov's

¹ The editors of the Symposium edition do not date this poem, and Boyd merely tells us that it was written when Nabokov was nineteen: *RY* 189.

writing from 1923-4. The fourth discusses his writing on play in 1925, especially “Breitensträter – Paolino”.

1918-1921: Childhood and Sport

“Childhood” is a poem of sixteen sections varying in length between five and fifteen lines, in which Nabokov lingers at the edges of a childhood he cannot quite re-enter (SS 1:514). In the second section, he reduplicates this central idea. Just as he cannot now remember quite what it was like to be a child, so as a young child he once stood watching his little brother, unable to enter his infantile consciousness and understand his solitary game. The nature and rules of his brother’s game, if they existed at all, could only be conjectured. His brother’s toys were ordinary objects, but imbued by his imagination in hidden ways:

Once, full in heart, I stood by the window:
 My little brother in the garden, playing God knows what [*Bog vest’ vo chto igraia*],
 Was putting rocks on the cornice. Suddenly, strangely frozen,
 I thought: was even I really like him?
 And at that moment everything, that later I loved,
 Everything, that I came to know, insults and successes,
 Everything grew misty in the quiet, light laughter
 In the infant years rising up before me.² (1:512-3)

These lines are at the same time simple and enigmatic, like infant play itself, as mysterious as a dream. Something about infant play and laughter confuses or “makes misty” the adolescent Nabokov’s certainty about his future knowledge and values. Is it that an infant’s play seems to a grown boy almost impossibly indeterminate and spontaneous, since it cannot be based on any discursive rules? This scene, apparently so personal, has radical metaphysical implications (“God knows what”). Nabokov was reading Nietzsche around the time he wrote “Childhood”, and the image of a child playing at building with stones closely recalls the passage of *The Birth of Tragedy*

² Translations from “Childhood” my own.

comparing the universe to a child at play, “placing stones here and there, and building sandcastles and knocking them down again.”³

The tacit narrative of “Childhood” is of how Nabokov’s infantile experience of play was lost and, by the time of the poem’s writing at the end of childhood, partially recovered. In between comes the loss of visionary experience and then the child’s initiation into writing – “I loved the many-coloured pencils, / The thick drops of strong-smelling sealing wax” – and into literature, and art, in the form of the Arthurian Tales and the reproduction of a painting (1:514). Towards the end of the poem, in the thirteenth section, Nabokov is able to remember how, like his little brother:

Silently, all by myself, I played on the ground;
In innocent fantasies, with sacred carelessness,
I imitated life in childish inspiration;
Out of the fat dictionary I made a bridge [...] (1:515)

By the fifteenth section of the poem, the intervening years of childhood seem themselves to have been a dream, and Nabokov has crossed back to that earliest experience of play, becoming a writer and using language (“the fat dictionary”) as his bridge to the world outside his immediate experience. It seems to him “that here now, now I stand again as a little child / And in the corner I find my ball and locomotive ...” (1:516) By becoming a poet Nabokov is able to recover the radical experience of play. In the mid-1930s, he would look back on “Childhood” as the beginning of his art, using its progression as the template for the book of poems Fyodor has just published at the beginning of *The Gift*: “fifty twelve-line poems all devoted to a single theme: childhood” (G 16). Like “Childhood”, Fyodor’s *Poems* end with the rediscovery of a ball.

³ *The Birth of Tragedy*, 115.

A year or two later, at Cambridge, Nabokov produced two poems on sport which, like “Childhood”, would be recapitulated in his later fiction, and take their inspiration from another writer. In his 1913 collection *Stone*, Osip Mandelstam had published a poem entitled “Tennis”, and around the same time two poems entitled “Football” and a poem entitled “Sport”. In “Tennis”, the tennis-racket replaces the lyre, as if sport were a continuation of art. Mandelstam treats the game as a sublimated battle, describing it as “an Olympic duel” and comparing the players to “Attic warriors”.⁴ Nabokov knew Mandelstam by heart as a boy (*SO* 97), and in his Cambridge years was imitating all the poets he admired. In 1920 he wrote “Football”, dated to 26 February 1920, and “Lawn Tennis”, dated to 10 December 1920.⁵ In these two poems, he for the first time sketched a contrast that would become crucial to his writing. This is the contrast between the potential violence of free play and the containment of that violence by the demarcated boundaries and rules of a game. In “Football”, Nabokov is in goal and overhears a conversation on the sidelines between an English girl, to whom he is obviously attracted, and a young English fellow sucking on a pipe, who says that Nabokov is “by birth / From that wild country, where blood drops on the snow.” England, by contrast, is a place where violent and sexual energies can be sublimated by sport, and then in turn by art. The ball, which seemed to be “alive”, keeps on bouncing in Nabokov’s imagination that night, implicitly becoming the poem we are reading: “you could not know, / That one of the carefree players, / In silence, at night, is – patiently – creating / Harmonies for other ages.” (*SS* 1:529-30) In “Lawn Tennis”, a spectral scene finds two young men, each

⁴ Mandelstam, *Stone*, 146-147. For the other poems, see Mandel’shtam, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniiv*, 334; 335; 337-338.

⁵ The date of “Lawn-Tennis” is not given in the printed text but appears on the holograph in the Berg Collection, Restricted Material, Box 2.

“white and light”, playing one another: “the game of white youth...”⁶ (SS 1:542) This final phrase of the poem suggests a political allusion, given the recent battles in Russia between Whites and Reds, and the description of the back-line as a *cherta*, a word also used in duelling, signals a nostalgia for the era of gentlemen, when conflicts could be settled under a code of honour. So, too, in his 1926 talk “On Generalities”, Nabokov would say that:

Football arrives as a substitute for the goose march, lawn tennis for the arts of war. [...] Sport, whether hunting or knightly tournaments, or the cockfight, or good Russian *lapta*, has always gladdened and attracted mankind. To search in it for signs of barbarity is pointless, if only because a real barbarian is always a truly awful sportsman.⁷

Nabokov wrote hundreds of Russian poems while he was at Cambridge, but “Football” and “Lawn Tennis” clearly came to seem of particular importance to him. They form the basis of two extended sections in *A University Poem*, the novella-length poem about his time at Cambridge that he published in 1927. In the sequence about football, Nabokov is now on the side-lines watching a match with a girl named Violet. A goal is scored but she deflects his advances (SS 2:567-9). Whereas Nabokov’s original tennis poem was haunted, in *A University Poem* tennis replaces football as spring replaces winter. With the change of season play is no longer a struggle on frozen earth, no longer conflictual, but is at one with the rebirth of the world in spring. “The whole world has begun to play”, Violet accepts his kisses, and Nabokov says about tennis: “There is no sweeter sport in the world [...] / In heaven we will play with a ball.”⁸ (2:573-4) In *Glory*, his 1931 novel about his time at Cambridge, the scenes of tennis are set outside Cambridge, in Switzerland and Berlin, but the scene of football is the one in

⁶ Translations mine.

⁷ “On Generalities”, 13-14. My translation.

⁸ My translation.

Nabokov's original poem, with Martin in goal trying to impress Sonia, standing with Darwin on the sidelines. The implicit idea of play as competition for sexual success is drawn out in the later boxing fight between Martin and Darwin.⁹ In his account of Cambridge in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov writes about his tennis matches with his brother Sergei and about goal-keeping for the Trinity football team.¹⁰

Once Nabokov had developed his ideas about play, it suited him to talk up his sports career at Cambridge in retrospect. But the apotheosis of sport in Nabokov's personal mythology should be set against the disconcerting passage in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where V. returns to Cambridge to learn more about his half-brother's life there, seemingly expecting to hear that Sebastian, like the Nabokov of *Speak, Memory*, was a keen sportsman. V. is told that though Sebastian tried to be "good at games" as an attempt "to out-England England", he was poor at tennis and "soon got over the game complex." (37-8)

The titles of "Football" and "Lawn Tennis" are given in English, not Russian, and in Roman, not Cyrillic characters, and this in itself suggests that Nabokov regarded sport as a specifically English theme. Certainly, Nabokov's émigré audience seems to have seen his passion for sport as an English quality. In an interview of 1932, Andrei Sedykh wrote that "Cambridge gave [Nabokov] the mark of the sportsman" (SS 5:641).¹¹ The "game complex" is the key to Nabokov's Anglophilia. While he wants to acknowledge the violent and sexual truths being thrown up by modern thought and politics, by Freud and Lenin, Nabokov also wants to defend himself against them, to show and then hide them. He seems to have seen England as a sporting nation, in which the forces of

⁹ *Glory* 52; 104; 117; 129.

¹⁰ *SM* 198; 206.

¹¹ My translation.

sexuality, violence, and spiritual passion could be sublimated into cultural forms which hide them from view and keep them out of explicit speech: a definition of culture as sport. In his first essay, “Cambridge”, published in October 1921, Nabokov describes how “boring” and “tedious” student life is there, before acknowledging that the rigorously guarded system of petty custom in Cambridge erects “a low glass wall” that keeps out inspired frenzy of the sort that torments Russia. Cambridge is a “world round and strong, like a carefully painted globe”, where the expression of passionate and sincere feeling is “obscene”, a world so stable that it seems immutable and therefore capable of reflecting eternity (SS 1:726).¹²

Oxford and Cambridge were often described as playgrounds for the upper classes in Nabokov’s time. In 1908, G.K. Chesterton, whom Nabokov had read, wrote that “A gentleman is taught to treat half his work as play”,¹³ and in his essay “Oxford from Without”, he advanced the view that “the true object of all human life is play [...] To be at last in such secure innocence that one can juggle with the universe and the stars, to be so good that one can treat everything as a joke – that may be, perhaps, the real end and final holiday of human souls.”¹⁴ This parallels Nabokov’s vision, in “Breitensträter – Paolino”, of God as a “marvellous juggler who tosses from hand to hand in an unbroken sparkling parabola – the planets of the universe” (SS 1:749).

In *The Pole*, his 1923 verse drama about the ill-fated Scott expedition to the Antarctic, Nabokov would celebrate the ideal of the English gentleman who always seems to be playing, even in the face of death. The epigraph to the play is a line from

¹² My translation.

¹³ Chesterton, *The Essential G.K. Chesterton*, 249.

¹⁴ Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 66. For Nabokov’s reading of Chesterton in the years 1907 to 1913, see SO 56.

Scott's notebook, "He was a very gallant gentleman" – a line given in English, like the titles of "Football" and "Lawn Tennis".¹⁵ The expedition to the South Pole is a non-utilitarian "exploit" or *podvig* of the sort that *Glory* (in Russian, *Podvig*) is about, and therefore an example of "sport" in the broad sense.¹⁶ In his diary Scott praises Kingsley: "Bravo for Kingsley. Always looks like / he's playing [*vsë budto / igraet*]" and elsewhere in this short play, despite the miserable conditions, Kingsley deliriously imagines himself at a football match, Fleming yearns to chase a ball, and Scott proposes playing chess.¹⁷

¹⁵ *USSR* 269. *SS* 1:710-725; 710.

¹⁶ In an interview given in 1969, Nabokov would complain about the indifference of the English press to the moon landings: "After all, Englishmen should understand that thrill, they who have been the greatest, the purest explorers." *SO* 150.

¹⁷ *USSR* 280; 274; 278. *SS* 1:719.

1922: Aikhenvald and Carroll

When Nabokov returned from Cambridge to Berlin in June 1922, he was the author of a few poems which mention or deal with play. But he was also the author of hundreds more poems, shortly to be published in *The Cluster* (December 1922) and *The Empyrean Path* (January 1922) which have nothing to do with play. In 1923, however, play begins to emerge as one of his three or four main themes, although Nabokov was not yet very explicit about it. In his précis for *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, the play he wrote between December 1923 and January 1924 and never published, we find Nabokov's first explicit statement that the world is play, a statement that anticipates "Breitensträter – Paolino". Why did Nabokov begin to move towards play? One answer is clear. In the summer of 1922 he was commissioned to translate *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian. It was published in March 1923. Carroll supplied Nabokov with an armoury of images, ironies, and aesthetic ideas about play on which he would draw for his entire career.

But there is a second, less obvious influence. This is Iulii Aikhenvald, at whose colloquium Nabokov would deliver "Breitensträter – Paolino" and, subsequently, other papers such as "On Generalities". Nabokov read out *Mary* to the Aikhenvald group in January 1926 (RY 257).¹⁸ Aikhenvald was trained as a philosopher and was the translator of Schopenhauer into Russian, but he was best known as a literary critic. His *Silhouettes of Russian Writers* (1909-10) was frequently reprinted in the years before the revolution. One of the 220 intellectuals exiled by Lenin in 1922, he became the main literary critic on *Rul'*, the newspaper which Nabokov's father had helped to found, and in which

¹⁸ I am indebted to Stephen Blackwell's *Zina's Paradox* for directing me to Aikhenvald. Blackwell's main emphasis is on Aikhenvald's essay "Writer and Reader" as an inspiration for writer-reader relations in *The Gift*. But on page 28 he also mentions Aikhenvald's essay "Praise of Idleness", which I argue is a major inspiration for Nabokov's ideas about play, and draws the same connection I draw to the passage in *Speak, Memory* in which Nabokov defends idleness.

Nabokov frequently published.¹⁹ In 1922-1923 he lectured on “Philosophical Themes in Russian Literature” at the recently founded Religious-Philosophical Academy in Berlin.²⁰

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov only mentions his friend in passing as “Aykhenvald – a Russian version of Walter Pater” (220), but Aikhenvald was the first critic to recognise Nabokov’s talent, calling him “a new Turgenev” (RY 288). Aikhenvald wrote the first favourable review of Nabokov’s poetry, in *Rul’* in January 1923 (RY 201), and by March 1924 at the latest he and Nabokov knew one another: Aikhenvald was present at two separate readings of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* in that month (RY 229). By February 1925, Aikhenvald and Nabokov were setting up the *Arzamas* publishing house together (RY 238). When Aikhenvald died on his way home from the Nabokovs’ Christmas party in December 1928, Nabokov wrote a long memorial for him, couched as a protest against his death.²¹

In Nabokov’s “The Passenger,” an author and a critic, sitting in a pub, discuss how to make a short story out of an incident on a train, and the critic expounds some high-flown literary metaphysics to the author: “The Word is given the sublime right to enhance chance and to make of the transcendental something that is not accidental.” (S 187) Nabokov explains in a note that “The ‘writer’ in the story is not a self-portrait but the generalized image of a middlebrow author. The ‘critic’, however, is a friendly sketch of a fellow émigré, Yuliy Ayhenvald, the well-known literary critic (1872-1928).” (S 649) We can suppose that this situation elaborates the sort of conversations Nabokov and Aikhenvald actually had.

¹⁹ On Aikhenvald see Chamberlain, *Philosophy Steamer*; Rejtlat, “Julij Ajchenval’d in Berlin”; Reitlat and Dranov, “Aikhenval’d”.

²⁰ Rejtlat, “Julij Ajchenval’d in Berlin”, 359.

²¹ SS 2:667-8.

In 1922 Aikhenvald published a collection of essays entitled *Praise of Idleness*. The title essay of this collection aims to outflank the ideology of the workers' state by protesting against the idealisation of labour, arguing that "it is not labour that befits man, but creation". The soul must be cultivated, through creativity and art, in short "by creative play, in the broadest and most philosophical, Schillerian sense of the word".²² Aikhenvald was fond of this idea. He writes about the ideal of play throughout "Praise of Idleness" and elsewhere in the essays of *Praise of Idleness*.²³ When he read "Breitensträter – Paolino" out then, Nabokov was developing an idea he owed to his most important auditor, Aikhenvald. Where "Breitensträter – Paolino" responds to the passages about play in "Praise of Idleness", another piece that Nabokov also wrote in December 1925, "A Guide to Berlin", responds to the passages about work in "Praise of Idleness", and provides the strongest evidence that Nabokov was responding specifically to Aikhenvald. Several of the other essays in *Praise of Idleness* correspond to major themes of Nabokov's oeuvre. The longest essay is "Immortal *Poshlost*" – *poshlost*', meaning, roughly, kitsch. Nabokov satirises *poshlost*' throughout his novels, and attacks it by name in his 1944 book *Nikolai Gogol* (63-74). There is also an essay on "Suicide", which is one of the major plot elements in Nabokov, if often camouflaged. From reading Aikhenvald and talking to him Nabokov will have learned not only about Schiller's idea of play but also about the Kantian aesthetic framework, which Aikhenvald's writing takes for granted. In "Immortal *Poshlost*", for instance, Aikhenvald says that man is both "an object of nature" and "its freely willing subject, in the Kantian sense", and speaks of "our simultaneously belonging to two kingdoms, the kingdom of freedom and the kingdom of

²² *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 12.

²³ *Ibid*, 80.

necessity”.²⁴ Nabokov first overlays these two kingdoms in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, and would continue to do so over the course of his career. There is a passage in *Morn* which suggests that Nabokov had read *Praise of Idleness* by the time he wrote the play in December 1923 to January 1924, and in itself the statement in the précis that everything in the world is play suggests Aikhenvald’s influence.²⁵ I suspect that Nabokov had read Aikhenvald earlier, at least by the summer of 1923, when we find him conceptualising the idea of art as a form of play, if not yet directly stating it.

If it was through Aikhenvald that Nabokov came to the idea of art and the world as play, it was Lewis Carroll who gave him ideas about how to realise that idea in literature. Nabokov had been fond of Carroll from childhood (“in common with other English children”), first reading him in 1906.²⁶ Carroll was a devotee of games. He published at least seventeen separate books or articles commenting on existing games, such as “Lawn-Tennis Tournaments” (1883), inventing new ones, such as *Croquet Castles* (1863), *Doublets* (1879) and *Circular Billiards* (1890), or presenting other subjects in the form of a game, such as *The Game of Logic* (1886).²⁷ Nabokov was sufficiently interested to have taken the trouble to look at these obscure works of Carroll’s: the game of word-golf that Shade plays in *Pale Fire* comes from *Doublets*.²⁸ The *Alice* books are full of games. In *Alice in Wonderland* there are the caucus-race, the game of croquet with flamingos and hedgehogs, and the characters out of a deck of cards, such as the Queen of Hearts, with whom Alice interacts in the last third of the book. A

²⁴ Ibid, 22; 19.

²⁵ In *Tragediia gospodina Morna*, 81, Dandilio says that “we should sing / As we work; to live on the earth means/ to work for the master/ [...] but the work ends, / and we leave for a holiday in eternity”. This closely reproduces the logic and language of “Praise of Idleness”. My translation.

²⁶ SO 81. RY 197; 201. In a letter of September 18, 1973, Véra reported that Nabokov had no “prior plans” to translate *Alice in Wonderland*: SL 519-20.

²⁷ Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport*, 1; 56-7.

²⁸ As Field points out in *The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, 345.

game of chess structures the whole of *Through the Looking-Glass*. This orientation towards play is clearly linked to the way the *Alice* books consistently mock the didacticism, sentiment, work ethic and self-important clock-watching and busy-ness of Victorian respectability. As a young girl, and heroine of play, Alice makes the perfect foil to this ethos of adult male officialdom.

Nonsense can itself be seen as a game. It plays language and logic off against one another.²⁹ The rules of particular “language-games” are violated and their assumptions, so unnervingly complex once noticed, become absurd and therefore explicit. There are games with aggression, such as when Tweedledum and Tweedledee agree to fight until six, and then have dinner; games with time, as when the White Queen promises “jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam *to-day*”; and games with conversation, such as the one Humpty-Dumpty arranges (““He talks about it just as if it was a game!’ thought Alice.”).³⁰ Carroll defamiliarises forms of life as embodied by language-games. He had a profound sense of all the ways in which language can be disrupted when its conventions are defied, that is, of all the hidden rules that communication relies on: his *Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-Writing* (1890) is a nice joke about this.³¹ This was what fascinated Wittgenstein about Carroll, with whom Wittgenstein’s later philosophy begins, with its close study of “language-games”, that is, of how words work in actual situations, regardless of what we think they mean or want them to mean. Thus *The Blue Book* (1933) starts with a meditation on what it means to say “This is tove” – one of the words Humpty Dumpty over-confidently defines in his explication of the

²⁹ See Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, 1-5; 25-36.

³⁰ Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, 243; 247; 265.

³¹ Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport*, 77.

“Jabberwocky”.³² Nabokov’s radical rethinking of “art” and “love” and “play”, his demonstration of the actual complexity of the experiences hidden behind the anodyne senses we have in mind when we use such words as empty expressions of approval, can also be seen as a development of Carroll’s language-games.

Carroll so much liked turning the world upside down that he even turned himself upside down, or inside out. “Lewis Carroll” is an alias based on inverting Carroll’s real name, Charles, and mother’s maiden name, Lutwidge, and substituting for Charles the Latin word Carrollus and Lewis for Lutwidge. Dodgson held many of the views that he mocked when he wrote as Lewis Carroll, such as the view expressed by Humpty Dumpty, that one should be able to define any word any way oneself. In his guise as a respectable don Dodgson subscribed fastidiously to the principles of order from which he would escape by imagining himself as a little girl called Alice – as Nabokov would later re-imagine himself in the person of Lolita. As Chesterton wrote about Carroll: “His strange double life in earth and in dreamland emphasises the idea that lies at the back of nonsense – the idea of *escape*, of escape back into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness”.³³ The charmingly pedantic way in which Alice is always talking to herself, quizzing herself, and scolding herself is a joke about the illusion that thought is a silent soliloquy. It also dramatises the splitting of the self that can result from self-consciousness taken to an extreme, and Carroll presents this doubleness or capacity for inverting oneself as a kind of play in the very first chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*:

³² *The Annotated Alice*, 271. Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, 2ff. For an excellent examination of the links between Carroll and Wittgenstein, which nonetheless misses the point about “love”, see Pitcher, “Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll”. Wittgenstein mentions Carroll twice in *Philosophical Investigations*, 7, 198.

³³ Chesterton, *The Defendant*, 65.

‘Come, there’s no use in crying like that!’ said Alice to herself, rather sharply. ‘I advise you to leave off this minute!’ She generally gave herself very good advice, (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself, for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people.³⁴

The principle of inversion also governs the relation between the two *Alice* books.

While *Alice in Wonderland* is set in summer, and presents a holiday world of free spontaneity where it is always tea-time, *Through the Looking-Glass* is set in the depths of winter, and paints a frozen, law-governed landscape. W. H. Auden defines the contrast: “In Wonderland, Alice has to adjust herself to a life without laws; in Looking-Glass Land, to one governed by laws to which she is unaccustomed.”³⁵ One might say that *Alice in Wonderland* is about play and *Through the Looking-Glass* about games. This is expressed in the contrast between the two sorts of games on which each book is centred, cards and chess. Here one finds the clearest sign of Carroll’s crucial importance to Nabokov’s developing ideas about play, for in the first two novels Nabokov wrote about play, *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Luzhin Defence*, he followed Carroll’s scheme, beginning with a novel whose title links it to cards and then going on to a novel about chess. In both Carroll and in Nabokov, however, the polarity of play and game is only provisional. In *Alice in Wonderland*, rules are frequently invoked, though they are never abided by, while the rules in *Through the Looking-Glass*, though all-determinative, can never be defined or reached, just as the chess-game that supposedly underlies the events of the book does so according to an indefinably complex system of by-laws we can only

³⁴ *The Annotated Alice*, 32-3.

³⁵ Auden, “Today’s ‘Wonder-World’ Needs Alice”, 9.

imagine. Similarly, Nabokov liked to hint at specific chess games underlying his novels, but would withdraw the suggestion when his tease was taken too literally.³⁶

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Alice in Wonderland* is one of the books that Sebastian keeps on his shelf, and the hotel manager who refuses to help V. on his quest for Sebastian's true past is described as speaking "in the elenctic tones of Lewis Carroll's caterpillar."³⁷ Alice's conversation with the caterpillar is largely about problems of knowing who one is and specifically what size one is, and this is one of the main questions in the relationship between V. and his "greater" half-brother Sebastian.³⁸ In *Ada*, Nabokov would take up the croquet match played with flamingos and hedgehogs in *Alice in Wonderland*. Van tells Ada that "'Playing croquet with you [...] should be rather like using flamingos and hedgehogs'", a comment that suggests Ada's way of slipping out of rules and is also a laughing allusion to the game she had proposed just the page before, in which the playthings were to be pools of light on the forest floor (*A* 46-8). Ada's games do not, or should not, work, since one can only play with things that one can control and keep stable: as Elizabeth Sewell argued, "the only really safe things, the reliable unchanging things suitable for play, are dead."³⁹ This is the point of the comedy of the croquet scene, in which Alice finds it impossible to play croquet with flamingos who are always twisting their heads around and hedgehogs who are always untwisting. Many of Nabokov's novels turn on the attempt to play games with another person, to turn a living creature into a toy, and on the attempts of the plaything to escape the game being

³⁶ In the 1963 introduction to *The Luzhin Defence*, 10, Nabokov presses the analogy between events in the book and moves on a chessboard, but see Nabokov's letter to Edmund Wilson of October 21, 1941, insisting about *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* that "there is no 'chess-idea' in the development of the whole book." *NWL* 58.

³⁷ *SK* 35; 101. See J. B. Sisson's article on the novel in Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion*, 633-43.

³⁸ *The Annotated Alice*, 66-74.

³⁹ Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, 41.

imagined to imprison them. Throughout *Pnin*, the narrator surreptitiously mocks his protagonist. Pnin, after all, is so out of place in America that it is easy to make him seem absurd. Only in the fifth chapter, in which Pnin goes to a country house filled with other Russian émigrés, and is returned to his natural environment, do we glimpse Pnin at his true dignity and – in the terms of Carroll’s use of size to suggest identity and self-esteem – at his true stature. And this is focussed on a game of croquet: “As soon as the pegs were driven in and the game started, the man was transfigured. From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback. It always seemed to be his turn to play.” (*P* 108-9) For a moment, Pnin escapes his game, ceases to be the toy, and becomes the player.

1923-4: Play and Make-Believe

In March 1923 Nabokov's translation of *Alice in Wonderland* was published, and from that month he began to write concentratedly if not exclusively about play. In two essays on the Russian cabaret in Berlin, published in late summer 1923 in the cabaret's English-language programme notes, he effectively envisages art as deriving from play.⁴⁰ In "Laughter and Dreams", he paints a vivid picture of the various toys he remembers being sold at Catkin Week, the traditional Russian spring fair, and says that the world of toys has been brought back to life in the Russian cabaret. In "Painted Wood" he says that the magical world of folklore, which has disappeared from the drab reality of Soviet Russia, is preserved in old toys, and that these toys have come alive again in the exile cabaret. "Painted Wood" ends surprisingly with the thought that these living toys would only seem wonderful to a non-Russian. Some distance is needed to reverse the process of disenchantment by which one grows out of one's toys, and to re-enter that original world of make-believe.

The central theme of Nabokov's writing on play in 1923-4 is that art involves make-believe, the property that Schiller called aesthetic semblance, which is neither truth nor falsehood. Nabokov seems to have found inspiration for this idea in Carroll. Both he and Nabokov use games as a metaphor for the kind of literature they are aiming to write, a kind that asks from its readers only the provisional suspension of disbelief and not full-blown faith. The point of a game, after all, is that one is supposed to care only provisionally; it must always be possible to console oneself for losing with the thought that "it's only a game", though this is never to deny that the interest with which one

⁴⁰ I have not been able to find Nabokov's original English text, but only a translation into Russian, from which I paraphrase. Nabokov, "Smekh i mehti" and "Raspisnoe derevo", trans. Tolstoi.

invested the game was, so long as it lasted, genuine. Somehow, one believes and yet does not believe, like the White Queen who says that “sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” So in *Through the Looking-Glass* Alice’s “favourite phrase” is “let’s pretend”, while in the prefatory verses to *Alice in Wonderland*, Carroll describes how the story originated, when he invented it for the three Liddell girls, who in his poem “half believe it true”.⁴¹ Characteristically, Nabokov develops this idea in two opposite ways, showing that aesthetic make-believe can be mistaken as either faith or deceit. Art and play are like faith in the sense that they demand that one believe things to be other than they seem to be, though they differ from faith in allowing one to qualify one’s beliefs, allowing for half-belief or make-believe. But make-believe can be abused so as to deceive people by playing cruel games with their perceptions.

Nabokov would invoke the idea of make-believe twenty years later in his lecture on Dostoevsky. He told his students they must always remember that art is a “divine game”:

It is divine because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming a true creator in his own right. And it is a game, because it remains art only so long as we are allowed to remember that, after all, it is all make-believe, that the people on the stage are not actually murdered, in other words, only so long as our feelings of horror or of disgust do not obscure our realization that we are, as readers or as spectators, participating in an elaborate and enchanting game. (*LRL* 106)

What Nabokov is presenting here as a general truth will immediately seem less persuasive if we think not of plays and novels but of poetry, and especially of the poetry on religious subjects that Nabokov was writing in significant quantities well into the mid 1920s: a pious religious writer could hardly wish his subject matter to be taken as make-believe. Although make-believe is the subject matter of “Childhood”, divinity is the

⁴¹ *The Annotated Alice*, 251; 179-81; 23.

subject of another of the major suites of poems Nabokov wrote when he was nineteen, “Angels”, which is dedicated to the mystic Vladimir Pohl (*SS* 1:516-26). This sequence appears next to “Childhood” in *The Empyrean Path*. Fifty years later Nabokov said that his interest had only been in “Byzantine imagery (this has been mistaken by some readers for an interest in ‘religion’, which, beyond literary stylisation, never meant anything to me)” (*PP* 13-14), but it would be incautious to take this statement on trust. Nabokov’s preference for aesthetic play to religious faith was well-established by 1971, and he was clearly somewhat embarrassed by these early poems. Brian Boyd sees “playfulness” in the “Angels” suite, pointing to “a very Nabokovian sense of level after level of being”, and a sense of “how tentative he wishes to remain about anything beyond the human” (*RY* 153). To me, however, the poems show a nearly inhuman absence of irony, obliquity, or doubt: they seem to aspire to the declaratory purity and harmony of the angelic order of experience, and give every appearance of being religious poetry in a straightforward sense.

Nabokov’s personal religious views at that time cannot now be known, but the “Angels” sequence shows that he was capable of producing an exclusively divine art with a minimum of play or make-believe. It may be that translating Carroll encouraged him to turn his back forever on that sort of writing, developing the mode of “Childhood” not that of “Angels”. It would not have been surprising if Nabokov had turned to faith at this time. His father was shot in January 1922. Nabokov’s mother was to become a Christian Scientist (*RY* 354), and in April 1922 he published a poem on his father’s death entitled “Easter” (*SS* 1:458). In January 1923, Nabokov’s miseries deepened when his fiancée Svetlana’s parents told him that they were breaking off the engagement because of his

poor prospects (*RY* 202). But Nabokov would reject the consolations of religion. Instead, in 1923, play enters as a defence of life on earth against the seductions of the beyond. We can detect a seed of this in the 1922 essay, “Rupert Brooke”, in which Nabokov praises Brooke because he “passionately loves the earth”, even though he has a strong awareness of the “otherworld”. Nabokov cites a poem in which Brooke writes of the Virgin Mary’s desolation after the annunciation, commenting: “She, probably, understood, that her earthly life had finished, that she would never more play and sing and pet the little white goats” (*SS* 1:734).⁴²

Nabokov explored the idea of play as an alternative to faith in three stories of 1923-4: “Gods” and “Wingstroke”, which he wrote in October 1923, and “The Thunderstorm”, from the summer of 1924. Each of these stories contains a reference to the crucifixion,⁴³ and they presuppose the Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung*, or twilight of the gods, but Nabokov puts a comical spin on this portentous theme: the gods have quite literally fallen to earth, becoming bathetic. In “The Thunderstorm” Elijah descends into a city because a wheel has fallen off his chariot, and stumbles about grumpily looking for it. The narrator notices “on a pile of rubbish, amid broken glass, a narrow-rimmed iron wheel that must have belonged to a baby carriage.” (*S* 88) In “Gods”, a boy is “sketching a god” on the pavement using chalk and charcoal. The god “looks skyward” from the pavement onto which he is flattened (*S* 44). In “Wingstroke”, the demonic angel that comes to visit Isabel in her hotel room is weak, smelly, and helpless, and can be squashed away into the wardrobe. These stories take the downfall of the gods as an effect of nineteenth century science and not a matter of personal belief. In “Wingstroke” Kern

⁴² My translation.

⁴³ *S* 42; 44; 88.

offers the following fragmentary explanation of his atheism: “‘Biblical God ... Gaseous vertebrate ... I am not a believer’”, to which Monfiori comments “‘That’s from Huxley’” (36) – referring to Darwin’s best-known apologist. Kern believes that God is a projection of the human mind, which shaped him by imagining a vertebrate made of gas.

In “Gods”, play emerges as a form of consolation for death. The narrator and his wife have lost their child, but he is trying to show her how much joy and wonder remain in existence. He begins where Kern left off, by seeing that the divine is a projection of consciousness, not something external and alien, as in the Bible. This creative element of consciousness is seated in the childlike capacity for play, which is why his consolatory vision of the world begins with the child doodling a god on the pavement. He then turns to his wife and sees what this scene has reminded her of: “In a corner of our bedroom, under the icon, there is a colored rubber ball. Sometimes it hops softly and sadly from the table and rolls gently on the floor.” (45) The image of the ball hopping out from under the icon suggests how the play of thought takes on a life of its own, escaping from faith.

Play is more central in “Wingstroke”, though it introduces some insoluble ambiguities. Kern is mourning his wife when he comes to an Alpine ski resort, and meets a beautiful and vivacious girl, Isabel, who is such a swift and avid skier that she is nicknamed “Airborne Isabel” by the men who follow her “along the snowy slopes in a play of sparkling dust.” (25) Being a sportswoman, Isabel, naturally, is English. Kern sees Isabel, this figure for play, as a force of life and a screen against “cosmic drafts” (28). But it turns out that while skiing after dark she has made contact with the beyond, meeting a demon – or angel – lover. Play puts her on the border between this world and

the otherworld, in Kantian terms, the boundary between the phenomenal and the noumenal.

In a parallel plot of the story, Kern is also seduced by an otherworldly presence, more devil than angel. Monfiori, who is first seen playing billiards, travels the world searching for those who will allow him to watch them commit suicide, and identifies Kern as a promising candidate. His first move is to propose a drinking game. Monfiori's is the first of many diabolical games in Nabokov, that is, games played with someone's life. The most mysterious, perhaps insoluble, aspect of "Wingstroke", is the characterisation of Monfiori, as "a pale red-haired little fellow who recognized only the Bible and the carom" (27), "the little fellow who recognized only Bible and billiards" (33). What does it mean that this choice between faith and sport, reminiscent of the ball hopping out from under the icon in "Gods", should be attributed here to a person plainly diabolical? That there ought to be some middle ground between faith and play, certainty and doubt? Monfiori is writing a reinterpretation of the Book of Job, and he introduces the principle that everything is subject to endless reinterpretation, a principle that Nabokov observes in describing Isabel's death in mid-air, the diabolically ambiguous conclusion to the story. In "Wingstroke", and in the back-and-forth play between the Isabel and Kern plots, Nabokov seems to be meditating on the fundamentally ambiguous nature of play, which stands Janus-like on at least two boundaries, that between this world and the next, and that between the angelic and the demonic. Perhaps the solution to the dilemma posed by Monfiori is the make-believe character of art, which, if it is understood in terms of other human activities, will be mistaken for either faith or deceit.

In *Death*, a closet drama that he wrote in March 1923, Nabokov had already written about systematic doubt and the cruel games with perception that it makes possible. The play is set in a Cambridge college in 1806. There are two characters, Gonville, a tutor, and Edmond, his best student. Edmond has been deprived of his faith in the “heavenly father” by “devastating books”, and Gonville, a scientist, has taught him his “unassailable deduction” that “there is neither sense nor purpose” in the world (SS 1:679).⁴⁴ All that keeps Edmond alive is his secret love for Gonville’s wife Stella. Gonville is jealous and is determined to find out whether Stella has been unfaithful to him. Summoning Edmond to his room, he tells him that Stella is dead. Edmond demands a poison so he can kill himself. Gonville gives him a hallucinogen, persuades him that he is dead and that his imagination, still active, is conjuring up the scene. But when Gonville, bored of his trick, explains it to Edmond, Edmond refuses to believe him. He tells Gonville, “You cannot prove that I am not dead and that my interlocutor [Gonville] / Is not a ghost” (1:693). Just so Alice is told that she is a figment of the Red King’s dream, but realises that he may be only a figment of hers.⁴⁵

Gonville’s jealousy only partly explains his actions. The play opens with him revelling in his experiments with Edmond’s mind: “this power over another mind / I compare with my science” (1:676). But Edmond, and Nabokov, turn the tables on Gonville, science, and reason. The beyond, which Edmond thought he was experiencing, may be an illusion. But, conversely, the everyday world given us by the senses may also be an illusion. Gonville proved the world was only “a worm-eaten ball, turning in rotation” (1:679), but as *Death* shows, reason on its own terms cannot disprove the non-

⁴⁴ My translations from *Death*.

⁴⁵ *The Annotated Alice*, 238-9.

existence of that worm-eaten ball; nor can it disprove the “rumble of countless worlds” that Edmond heard in Stella’s “occasional whispers” (1:690). A little doubt destroys faith in a transcendent realm, but a lot of doubt restores it, not as the definitive truth of orthodox religion, but as an indeterminate intuition of possible alternative worlds. Nabokov’s witty philosophical parable probably derives from his reading in Descartes and Montaigne for the course on “French Literature, Thought and History, 1495-1688” at Cambridge. Only ten months earlier, in May 1922, he had sat the exam for that course, in which he was asked to “Contrast Montaigne and Descartes in their use of Doubt.”⁴⁶

One can think of *Death* as a play about games of perception, and how they can issue either in deceit or in an escape into the beyond. But *Death* does not especially encourage one to think of it in terms of play: it contains only one brief mention of a game and a couple of chance uses of the word *igra*, or play. The game of fives is mentioned (1:687), and Edmond speaks of deaths “playing” inside poisonous gemstones (1:681), and later of how his thought “plays and weaves freely / A coloured pattern from the phenomena of life” (1:692). There is a potential contrast here between destructive and creative play, but it remains embryonic. Ten years later, however, Nabokov wrote a novel in which he reworked the idea of *Death* and made explicit the idea of the cruel game with perception. This is *Camera Obscura* (1933), which he revised in 1938 as *Laughter in the Dark*.⁴⁷ Albinus, a prosperous art historian, leaves his wife for a sexy young girl, Margot. Axel Rex, a brilliant cartoonist, conducts an affair with Margot behind Albinus’s back. When Albinus is blinded in a car accident, Rex and Margot set up house with him, letting him believe that only Margot is present. Rex moves silently about the house, delighting

⁴⁶ “French Literature. Thought and History, 1495-1688”, Modern and Medieval Languages Tripos, Part II. Cambridge University Examination Papers (1922), 1059.

⁴⁷ For the sake of convenience I give the names of the characters as they appear in *Laughter in the Dark*.

with Margot in their joint power to control and deceive Albinus's perceptions. Like Gonville, he does this for the pleasure of experimenting with a human being, something made plain by the original opening of *Camera Obscura*, which, like the opening of *Death*, is a description of the scientific dissection of matter. Rex's "dangerous game" (LD 163) is illustrated by his love of poker, in which one wins by bluffing, that is by tricking someone's perceptions.⁴⁸ It is like a game of "blind man's buff" (186). Albinus is Rex's doll (187). As his name suggests, Rex is king over Albinus's perceptions. He is the demon Descartes imagined, who might devote himself to playing games with man's perceptions.⁴⁹ Another comparison is provided by the allusions to Shakespeare's *Othello* throughout the novel (145): Rex is an Iago, the archetype of the cruel game-player, the playwright within the play, who uses real people as his characters and constructs scenes to deceive them. "It amused him intensely to see life made to look silly" (91-2), because of "his innate conviction that everything that has ever been created in the domain of art, science, or sentiment, was only a more or less clever trick." (117) Nabokov stresses that Rex, despite being a lifelong sadist, is "a very fine artist indeed" (92). But he differs from Nabokov because he treats make-believe as mere deception. His play is entirely destructive.

In *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, a five-act tragedy modelled on Shakespeare's tragedies, Nabokov explores make-believe as both faith and deceit. *Morn* is a direct response to the Russian Revolution, an attempt to counter a revolutionary politics, grounded in the ideal of equality, with a conservative politics, grounded in the ideal of happiness. The play takes place in an imaginary kingdom repeatedly described as having

⁴⁸ LD 90; 95; 148.

⁴⁹ As Craig Raine suggests in his afterword, LD 195.

the air of a *skazka* or fairy-tale. Four years before the beginning of the play, a long period of revolution was brought to an end by the accession to power of a king who rules incognito, Mr. Morn. As Boyd says, Morn shows people how to see the world “as if it were the handiwork of some artist of reality [...] Morn seems to have made possible his country’s good fortune not by any practical measures of rational politics, but simply by knowing this twist of thought that taps the generosity of the world.” (RY 225) Ganus, a former revolutionary, recognises, “after the revolution, the country recovered its strength miraculously / The king alone has achieved all this [...] The power of the king, living / And harmonious, inspires me now, / Like music”.⁵⁰ Morn’s example has aestheticised the world, restoring order by turning it into a fairy-tale or a play: if even the King is an actor, then all identity is not something sovereign but something performed, and he shows people how to act as they would wish to be. He is a fantasy of the Stranger, a mysterious figure who enters at the beginning and the end of the play and comes from the real world of revolutionary Russia, and has “dreamed of some marvellous king” (86): it is Nabokov wishing for a King to return and rescue Russia from the Bolsheviks. There is a semi-Kantian allegory here: for the sake of order, morality, and happiness in the real world, people must make-believe in the possibility of an ideal world. Morn says:

I created
 An era of happiness, an ear of harmony ... O God,
 Give me strength ... As if in play [*igraiuchi*], lightly
 I ruled; I appeared in a black mask
 In the ringing hall to my dignitaries,
 Who were cold, senile ... imperiously I brought them back to life –
 And left again, laughing, laughing ... (49)

⁵⁰ *Tragediia gospodina Morna*, 49. All translations from *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* mine.

Nabokov had written *The Pole* six months earlier, and Morn is a more developed version of Scott and the other polar explorers, a hero who is recognised by his laughter, who plays, even in the face of death, and by doing so sustains the courage to live.

The image of Morn riding about in a closed coach is an allegory for the fairy-tale of God. “The King is a dream” (58). When Morn seems to have died, Ganus decides to become a Christian so as to fill the void (89). But when Ganus discovers that Morn has been a coward and fearfully shirked death, he loses faith: “Morn is living, / God is dead. That is all.” (97) Having lost a duel, Morn flees the city, and revolution sweeps back in, causing death and destruction. One character comments, “it is as if we have passed from a fairy-tale / Into the most banal reality” (101). The revolutionary leader, Tremens, embodies the reality-principle which Morn had resisted. Like Gonville before him and Rex after him, Tremens believes that all make-believe is mere deception: “There is no fairy-tale, / It is only Morn!” (78) Tremens had once been a painter of harmonious landscapes but since his wife’s death he has devoted himself to his new idea of “the limit of beauty” – “shadows of ruins” (16). He yearns for “deadly / Revolts; dumb destruction; / Bliss; non-existence.” (18) His “tigerish playfulness” (52) is the opposite of Morn’s playfulness. Whereas Morn’s play defies death, Tremens’s play imitates death, aiming to raze the whole world to its base materials and to rid it of make-believe.

Yet in between Morn’s creative play, a make-believe in which others find faith, and Tremens’s destructive play, which sneers at make-believe as deceit, Nabokov gestures towards a third idea of play, which he embodies in Dandilio, the elderly councillor. Dandilio is a radical aesthete who loves everything in the world, good and evil, life and death: “There is no sin on earth”, he asserts. “Love, suffering – everything is

necessary, everything is beautiful.” (19) His most fervent speech in praise of the world comes while an innocent woman and her baby are being shot off-stage, just before he is about to be shot.⁵¹ Through Dandilio Nabokov appears to be glancing towards Aikhenvald in the audience: he speaks lines which recall “Praise of Idleness” (81). Dandilio accepts the Nietzschean vision of the play of the world, creative and destructive, which Nabokov had adumbrated in “Childhood”. In his synopsis Nabokov wrote that: “Dandilio has a calm and so to speak radiant attitude to everything. For him everything in the world is play, always equally amusing, always equally accidental.” (97) This is Nabokov’s first explicit statement that the world is play. It anticipates the opening of “Breitensträter – “Paolino”, but also casts new light on it. Nabokov clearly intends Dandilio to be a disquietingly amoral figure. Is the narrator of “Breitensträter – Paolino” also to be viewed with disquiet?

⁵¹ As Boyd points out: *RY* 225.

1924-5: Play, Violence and Doubt

Having broached the theme of play, in 1924 Nabokov retreated from it somewhat, though late in 1924 he published “Three Chess Sonnets” and “The Boxer’s Girlfriend”, and on February 5th 1925, he wrote “The Skater”, a poem comparing the patterns formed by an ice-skater to those formed by the poet.⁵² The stories he wrote in 1924 do not deal with play, and play is also largely absent from his first novel, *Mary*, conceived and written between January and October 1925. Ganin, a young Russian émigré in Berlin, is stuck in a purgatorial condition, unable to move forward and leave behind his nostalgia for Russia and Mary, the girl with whom he was once in love. Now he has no will, although “once (in the days when he had walked on his hands or jumped over five chairs) he had been able not merely to control his will but to play games with it.” (10) The novel begins with Ganin trapped in a lift with Alfyorov, one of his neighbours, a situation whose symbolic resonance Alfyorov himself points out. Alfyorov suggests that they “play some party game”, specifically a numerical guessing game, but Ganin refuses (2). This refusal to play seems connected to Ganin’s inertia. At the end of the novel, Ganin decides not to wait for Mary, re-inhabits the present, forges a new passport, and is ready to move away, his memories of Mary exhausted and dispelled (113-4). Now perhaps Ganin is ready to play, and to become an artist of exile, physically and metaphysically, not minding that, as Alfyorov told him in the lift, “the floor is horribly thin and there’s nothing but a black well underneath it” (3).

In late June and early July of 1925, Nabokov wrote a story, “The Fight”, which returns covertly to the ambiguous nature of play that Nabokov had examined in “Wingstroke”, though some of the ambiguities here are new. In the first part of the story,

⁵² SS 1:629-30; 622-3; 635.

the narrator describes sunbathing in the park outside Berlin. “At the very edge of the forest, sun-browned youths play a hard game of catch, flinging their soccer ball one-handed in a motion that revives the immortal gesture of the Discobolus” (*S* 142). In the second part of the story, the narrator witnesses a fight outside a pub between the publican, Otto, who had been one of the sunbathers, and a man who had been wooing Otto’s daughter. The story presents itself at first glance as a study in opposite states of experience. But as “Breitensträter – Paolino” will suggest, fighting is the basis of play, in its most violent, agonistic and non-conscious form, and play may also be the basis of fighting. The description of the movement of sun and shadow at the beginning of “The Fight” is couched in a language that suggests a struggle between the sun and the clouds: “the sun tried to slip in between them, but they would sweep over it with their blinding edge” (142).⁵³ Even the play of light and shadow, though it is the most non-conflictual, incorporeal form of play, can still be seen as conflict. Conversely, conflict can be subsumed into the category of play. That is the conclusion the narrator draws at the end of the story, when in the final sentence he reflects that “perhaps what matters is not the human pain or joy at all but, rather, the play of shadow and light on a live body” (146). Nabokov is exploring an extreme of aestheticism where “what matters” is only how human life can be abstracted into the most fundamental patterns of consciousness. In this perspective, events are the constructions of the mind, and the narrator also reflects that the pre-history of the fight he has given us is only one of many possible ways he might have imagined what had happened.⁵⁴ Here, as at the end of “Wingstroke”, another sort of

⁵³ Connolly has remarked on this in “The Play of Shadow and Light in ‘The Fight’”, 32.

⁵⁴ Nabokov would make the same point next year in “On Generalities”, 12, when he imagines an ancient historian who, glimpsing from his study a street fight whose cause cannot be reconstructed, is chastened

play is mooted, the play of interpretation. The story leaves us room to reverse the narrator's conclusion, deciding instead to reject play and to see how the ineradicably hostile nature of life is reflected in the agonistic nature of consciousness. Whether or not one sees life as play or as conflict depends on whether or not one feels at home in the world, as the sunbathers do: the fight begins when the jilted man says to the publican "I thought I was at home here" (145), but is violently shown that he is not "at home" anymore.

"The Fight" casts light on Nabokov's decision, in "Breitensträter – Paolino", to present his fullest statement on art and play in the context of an essay on boxing. Its opening statement that "Everything in the world plays" is a part of an aestheticism that culminates in the following assertions:

The point, of course, is absolutely not that a heavyweight boxer after two or three rounds is a little bloody, since a white vest offers just as visible a picture, as if red ink had spilled from a fountain pen. The point, firstly, is the beauty of the very art of boxing, the perfect exactitude of the lunges, of the sideways leaps, the dives, the different blows, curved, straight, with the back of the hand, – and secondly, the excellent manly excitement that this art arouses. (SS 1:750)

The image of blood on the boxer's vest as ink on a page suggests that the writer has merely projected the immediate object of his perceptions, the page and ink in front of him, onto the object of his imagination, just as in "The Fight" the narrator may have extrapolated the conflict of light and shadow into the scene of a fistfight. The comparison of blood and ink is the give-away that in "Breitensträter – Paolino" Nabokov is describing the writing process, engaging in metaphysical reflection and testing how far aestheticism can go in formalising material that would seem to resist being formalised – even boxing, even blood and pain. He is echoing the formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky,

into seeing that his "deeply pondered reasoning" on the origins of an ancient war was "unsubstantiated" and "incidental".

who in his 1921 essay, “Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*” had written that “blood (*krov*) in art is not bloody, it rhymes with ‘love’ (*liubov*)”.⁵⁵ In his opening sentence, the narrator of “Breitensträter – Paolino” had forced blood and love into a single thought when he said that “the blood in the veins of a lover” plays (749).

In the *Aesthetic Education*, just before his central proposition that “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being”, Schiller argued that the artistic inferiority of Ancient Rome to Ancient Greece was the natural corollary to the savagery of its gladiatorial contests, as compared to the Olympic Games: “we shall not go far wrong when trying to discover a man’s ideal of beauty if we enquire how he satisfies his play-drive.”⁵⁶ In “Breitensträter – Paolino”, however, the narrator derides those who are disgusted by boxing, “just as in Rome, probably, there were people, who frowned on it, that a pair of sturdy gladiators, demonstrating the very best in the art of the gladiator, should slug each other with iron blows” (1:750). Nabokov’s essay develops the principle, one of the premises of “The Fight”, that there is always conflict in play. In 1926 Nabokov would join a secret organisation named VIR, whose purpose was “to combat Bolshevism on an ideological level” (RY 260). By insisting on the element of conflict in play, he had already done so:

There is no play without competition; which is why some forms of play, as, for example, gymnastic festivals, when a brigade of men or women draws up in a communal area in figures of a single movement, seem insipid, as if lacking in the main thing, which gives play its entrancing, thrilling delight. Which is why the communist system is so absurd, in which everyone is condemned to do everything as one and as in the boring gymnastics, not allowing, that anyone might be better built than his neighbour. (1:749-50)

⁵⁵ Shklovskii, *O teorii prozy*, 192.

⁵⁶ *Aesthetic Education*, 107.

“Breitensträter – Paolino” rejects the superficial idea of play as something innocuous. Nabokov’s essay shows that there is a competitive element in all play that results in conflict and violence. In boxing, this violence in play finds its apotheosis. The examples of play given in the opening paragraph of the essay, “the blood in the veins of a lover, the sun on the water, and the musician on a violin”, all fit into the innocuous idea of play. But the second paragraph makes the transition from play to violence enacted in “The Fight”: “When we actually play – whether we throw peas at a tin battalion or advance towards the net barrier in tennis” (1:749). The allusion to duelling contained in the word Nabokov uses here for “barrier”, *bar’era*, suggests how play formalises and sublimates violence, and by doing so trains its participants for war: “Not for nothing did Nelson say, that the battle of Trafalgar was won on the football and tennis pitches of Eton. And the Germans of recent times have understood, that the goose step doesn’t get you very far and that boxing, football, and hockey are more important for war than all other sorts of gymnastics.” (1:750)

Nabokov’s insistence that play requires competition and therefore an opponent leads up to his claim that “a child knows well, that in order to play to his heart’s content, it is necessary to play with somebody or in the extreme case to imagine somebody, to double himself.” (1:748) This recalls Carroll’s Alice, the “curious child” who “was very fond of pretending to be two people”, and sometimes tried to box her own ears.⁵⁷ In Russian literature doubling is associated principally with Dostoevsky, in whose works it is driven by humiliation and self-disgust so bitter that the protagonists can only survive by abandoning their identity. Instead of this, Carroll showed Nabokov how to conceive of doubling as free and creative play. This is what Nabokov did in writing “Breitensträter –

⁵⁷ *The Annotated Alice*, 32-3.

Paolino”, first inventing in the narrator a distorted version of himself, and then outlining the shadow of that double. At one point the narrator suddenly invokes a strange figure on whom he pours contempt:

A nervous man, who doesn't like to wash himself in the mornings while stark naked, and who is inclined to be surprised, that a poet, who works for two and a half connoisseurs, earns less money, than a boxer, who works for a crowd of many thousands (who, by the way, have nothing in common with the so-called rabble, and are stimulated by an excitement much purer, more sincere, and more clean-breathed, than is the crowd [which is] a meeting of citizen heroes), this nervous man looks with indignation and disgust at a fistfight (1:750).

Only the year before, in November 1924, Nabokov had written in his short story, “The Dragon”, an allegory of how the artist is inevitably corrupted if he abandons his solitude. And in his poem “The Boxer’s Girlfriend”, also written in 1924, he gave the lie to the claim that the violence of boxing is disinterested play, either for the boxer or the spectator: the boxer’s girlfriend is pleased when he is knocked out, since he had struck her earlier that day (*SS* 1:622-3). The narrator’s bloodthirsty views are not, then, Nabokov’s own. But neither is the nervous man Nabokov. The nervous man, who dares not look at himself naked in the morning, who is disgusted by violence and who prefers poetry, is the empty shell of Nabokov, left behind by the artist who flits upwards and casts a cold eye back upon himself. He is the shadow-self whom the narrator boxes. The nervous man embodies Nabokov’s fear of his own shadow, while the narrator embodies the cruelty incited by that fear. “Nabokov himself”, that perfectly self-knowing, perfectly designing author we desire and dream of, we can construct only as the vanishing point at which, somewhere beyond the writing, the nervous man and the narrator of Breitensträter – Paolino might converge.

But the sport – and art – of “Breitensträter – Paolino” lies in the way that Nabokov escapes himself, plays one part of himself off against another, and stages his conflicts rather than resolving them, as if they were boxing it out. He wishes to vindicate competition and therefore violence so as to reject communist unanimity, but he wants to emphasise the formal properties of boxing instead of its violent purposes and effects, so as to reject communist utilitarianism; he is using boxing and its “manly excitement” to distance his aestheticism from the suspicion of effeminacy, but at the same time he is denying that boxing causes actual pain; and the wish for an audience and the envy of popular culture’s appeal are set against a pronounced fear of crowds. Part of what makes the essay difficult is its almost violent refusal to meet its audience halfway. The two and a half connoisseurs to whom Nabokov first read out the essay at the Aikhenvald circle, and the scepticism they might have been expected to feel about the claim that there is no pain in boxing, are blankly ignored. Violence destroys the context of common decency in which judgements would ordinarily be made. This refusal to acknowledge the reader’s moral instincts produces an eeriness that Nabokov had earlier explored in “Russian Spoken Here”, a short story from 1923, in which an émigré shopkeeper locks up a communist agent in his bathroom, and the narrator breezily ignores the possibility that this act of torture might be anything else than a very good joke.

Brian Boyd has pointed to “the sudden advance in Nabokov’s art late in 1925” (RY 253). With “Breitensträter – Paolino” he had defined the subject and the style that he would work through for the rest of his life. Behind him was *Mary*, an undistinguished Turgenevian novel of longing and loneliness. Ahead of him was *King, Queen, Knave*, a cruel novel about play, in which Nabokov inverted all his ideals and for the first time

discovered the acid-etched tone and cut-glass images which would become his signature style. Over all his subsequent novels there would preside, not the kind young fellow who wrote *Mary*, but a different authority, the playful, divided, juggler-god of “Breitensträter – Paolino”. In *Laughter in the Dark*, Axel Rex, appropriately, glimpses him again:

He watched with interest the sufferings of Albinus [...] The stage manager of this performance was neither God nor the devil. [...] The stage manager whom Rex had in view was an elusive, double, triple, self-reflecting Proteus of a phantom, the shadow of many-coloured glass balls flying in a curve, the ghost of a juggler on a shimmering curtain. (118)

Chapter Three
Cards and Chess: *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Luzhin Defense*

Introduction

While “Breitensträter – Paolino” is Nabokov’s first full statement of the importance of play, *King, Queen, Knave* is his first novel to deal with play. But Nabokov did not begin writing *King, Queen, Knave* until January 1928 (RY 227). For two whole years, 1926 and 1927, he produced relatively little work. This delay suggests the enormous conceptual advance Nabokov was about to make. The preparations for writing *King, Queen, Knave* seem to have taken most of the second half of 1927. Of his two major works of these years, *A University Poem*, written in December 1926, deals relatively superficially with play, while there is no reference to play in the slight drama *The Man from the U.S.S.R.*, written in the autumn of 1926. Of the six stories he wrote in 1926 and 1927, only one, “A Nursery Tale”, written in the summer of 1926, touches even tangentially on play. The devil offers a young man, Erwin, his choice of all the women he passes on the street on a given day, so long as the number is odd. Some readers will consider this a “game”, as Boyd does (RY 259), though the text does nothing to encourage the idea. Two poems of these years deal with play. “Ski-Jump”, dated between 25 December 1925 and 7 January 1926, returns to the alpine sports of “Wingstroke” (SS 2:554). “The Chess Knight”, which appeared in *Rul’* on October 23 1927, is the seed of *The Luzhin Defense* (SS 2:558-9).

In writing *King, Queen, Knave* in 1928 and *The Luzhin Defense* in 1929, Nabokov did as he had done in “Breitensträter – Paolino”, doubling himself off to produce a carefully calculated antithesis. *King, Queen, Knave* is a satirical novel which attacks its characters. It tears away their illusions. It describes free play, only to argue that play

without rules is impossible, and leads to disaster. *The Luzhin Defense* is, as its title suggests, a book about defence. It defends the illusions in which people live. It describes a person trying to eliminate play from life, and insists that this is impossible, and that the attempt leads to destruction. Whereas *King, Queen, Knave* is an artistic realisation of a universe in continual play, quick and nervous in tone, and sparkling with reckless images, the art of *The Luzhin Defense* is that of cerebral form abstracted as far as is possible from the flux of the universe, imitating the measured, deliberative, and structured character of chess. The distinction between the two novels, like that between *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, is symbolised by the contrast between cards and chess.

It was in the 1920s that Nabokov's work was most closely related to the previous writing on play that I outlined in Chapter One. *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Luzhin Defense* are constructed on the blueprint of Bely's *Petersburg*, in which a controlling Apollonian mind forges a rigid linear world over which it presumes to exercise absolute sovereignty, only to discover at the cost of death or madness that the eternal play of the universe cannot be controlled. Pushkin's short story "The Queen of Spades", which Nabokov often alludes to in this period, offered him a similar thought, and he found it confirmed in a third variation, in Schiller's dictum that "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays".¹ In *King, Queen, Knave*, Nabokov explores how full humanity is lost when play is dominated and distorted by an excess of what Schiller called the sense-drive, in *The Luzhin Defense* by an excess of what he called the form-drive.

Schiller, Nietzsche, and Bely had all been content to write about play without considering what games they had in mind, but in the 1920s Nabokov carried out a

¹ *Aesthetic Education*, 107.

searching enquiry into what play actually means, that is, to what particular activities play actually refers. Nabokov reads the characteristics of one sport into another in surprising ways. In “Breitensträter – Paolino”, he writes about boxing as if it were chess, while in *The Luzhin Defense* he writes about chess as if it were boxing: that is, he describes boxing as if it were formal and without effect, while he treats chess as a blood sport. In 1926, in “On Generalities”, Nabokov had insisted on how important it was to have “a good knowledge of the history of sport.”² He was interested in what sport meant in Germany in the 1920s as opposed to what sport meant in England in the same period. In “Breitensträter – Paolino”, Nabokov gives a history of boxing. In *King, Queen, Knave*, he does not only use cards in general as a metaphor, he also refers to a particular card-game, “Skat”, and draws on its particular rules as analogies to the plot. When it came to chess, Nabokov took a great interest in the different grandmasters who were contending for the world title in the 1920s, and in *The Luzhin Defense* he exploits the potential intellectual and aesthetic implications of the new school of chess-play known as “hypermodernism”. Nabokov’s writings on chess through the 1920s engaged in great detail with particular chess players and schools, and this chapter shows how these writings lead up to *The Luzhin Defense*.

² “On Generalities”, 13.

King, Queen, Knave

As the title suggests, *King, Queen, Knave* is based on the metaphor of a card game. At the end of the book a film entitled *King, Queen, Knave* is about to be shown, advertised by “three gigantic transparent-looking playing cards” (216), and the characters are also transparent-looking, animated caricatures who act out a game familiar from a hundred nineteenth century novels: a young provincial, Franz, comes to work at the Berlin department store of his rich uncle, Dreyer, and is seduced by Dreyer’s wife, Martha. The plot to murder Dreyer is ultimately foiled by Martha’s greed and by the sheer force of accident. In his 1967 introduction, Nabokov compared himself to a poker-player (viii), supporting the idea that the author is to be taken as a card-player which had begun as early as Aikhenvald’s review in *Rul’*.³ Close to the centre of the novel, three silent Germans are playing cards in the café where Martha first conceives the murder (110-11). The game being played, Skat, reflects the plot of the novel. It involves two players combining to try to beat the third player, the “banker”; the cards laid to one side are called the “widow”. There is a variation in which knaves are the only trumps (and the novel ends with the laughter of Franz, the knave). The pregnant woman who looks on at the Germans’ card game, the “kibbitzer”, serves as an image for the Hitchcockian appearances Nabokov sporadically makes in the book through various proxy characters.⁴

³ Aikhenvald speaks of “the exceptional refinement with which the whole game with animated human cards is won.” Aikhenval’d, “Korol’, Dama, Valet”, 36.

⁴ See Kostandi, ““Korol’, Dama, Valet””, 242-4; and Rogachevskii, ““Korol’, <Pikovaia> Dama, Valet””, 280-1. Both Kostandi and Rogachevskii seem, however, to have confused German Skat with the much simpler American Scat and so they miss the point about the knave being trumps when the declarer calls Grand.

The theme of play in *King, Queen, Knave* is linked to the idea that chance is the governing force in history. In “On Generalities”, Nabokov had attacked the “demon of generalities”, historical determinism:

Why should we in fact be like those paradoxical enemies of enthusiasm, who at the green table in Monte Carlo for years calculate, how many times strokes fall on the red, how many on the black, in order to find a sure system? There is no system. The roulette of history knows no laws. Clio laughs at our clichés [...] Chance, Donna Anna, chance, as is said in *The Stone Guest*.⁵

The trip to the seaside at the end of the book is described as “a boon for everybody concerned, including the god of chance (Cazelty or Sluch, or whatever his real name was), once you imagined that god in the role of a novelist or a playwright, as Goldemar had in his most famous work.” (224)

The mention of Pushkin’s *The Stone Guest* (written in 1830) in “On Generalities” shows that the idea of Chance was associated in Nabokov’s mind with Pushkin (though the reference to roulette also suggests Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler* (1866)). In particular Nabokov will have found his theme encapsulated in Pushkin’s famous short story about gambling at cards, “The Queen of Spades”. Hermann, a German engineer in St. Petersburg, watches others gamble at cards every night but is too cautious and calculating ever to take part, until he hears the story of an elderly Countess to whom the secret of winning at faro was once entrusted. Though he scares the old lady to death, her ghost seems to give him the secret combination of three, seven, and ace: the first two cards win for him on two successive nights, but on the last night he loses his entire fortune. One lesson that emerges is, then, that, as Nabokov said in the passage of “On Generalities” quoted above, “there is no system”, or, to put it another way, that play cannot be eliminated from life. Nabokov’s most explicit allusion to “The Queen of Spades” comes

⁵ “On Generalities”, 12; 13. Translation mine.

in *Despair*, in which the protagonist's name is Hermann Hermann. A number of Nabokovians have lent their support to the view that “nearly all of Nabokov's Russian prose comes out of ‘The Queen of Spades’” – not least in the way that Nabokov, like Pushkin, frequently requires his reader to play the game of choosing between multiple possible interpretations.⁶

The very title of *King, Queen, Knave*, with its three cards, would prime any educated Russian reader to think of Pushkin's story, and a number of smaller correspondences confirm the parallel.⁷ In his seminal article on cards and “The Queen of Spades”, Iurii Lotman describes how in the 1830s “Pushkin repeatedly contrasted dead and inflexible law with chance, as death with life” and argues that this contrast is expressed in “The Queen of Spades” by the way that “the heroes move in turn from the predictable into the domain of the unpredictable and back again, now coming to life and now turning into dead (literally and metaphorically) automata.”⁸ Nabokov takes this stream of metaphor in “The Queen of Spades” and literalises it in *King, Queen, Knave*. In one subplot, an inventor who is developing automata approaches Dreyer with the suggestion that they should be used as “automannequins” in his shop-windows. The characters are frequently described as automata or machines, especially Franz, whose “day ran its course automatically but his nights were formless and full of terror”, and for whom “the morning jolt of the alarm clock was like a coin dropped into a vending machine.” (200) This machine imagery runs in parallel to the underlying conceit that the characters are as flat as playing cards, which culminates in the description of Franz's

⁶ See Alexander Dolinin at SS 2:27. For the polyvalency of “The Queen of Spades”, see Kahn's introduction to Pushkin, *The Queen of Spades*, xxiv-xxvii.

⁷ Rogachevskii, “‘Korol’, <Pikovaia> Dama, Valet”, 276-9.

⁸ Lotman, “‘Theme and Plot’: The Theme of Cards and the Card Game in Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century”, 478; 480.

wish that Dreyer will fit neatly into the murder plot: as opposed to “the dangerous irksome Dreyer who walked, spoke, tormented him, guffawed [...] there was a second, purely schematic, Dreyer, who had become detached from the first – a stylised playing card, a heraldic design – and it was this that had to be destroyed.” (177) Franz and Martha are determined to make Dreyer a toy in their game, but to be fully manipulable, Dreyer needs to be dead.

Of all the characters, Martha is most like Pushkin’s Hermann, and she reduces the world to a projection of her one-dimensional will. For her, “life should proceed according to plan, straight and strict, without freakish twists and wiggles.” (10) When she finds herself attracted to Franz, “for the first time in her married life she experienced something that she had never expected, something that did not fit like a legitimate square into the parquet pattern of their life” (41). The basic plan for *King, Queen, Knave* is that of Bely’s *Petersburg*, to show the flat rectilinear landscape projected by Martha’s mind, and then to show that world destroyed by the subterranean mental forces of eros and play.⁹ Just as Apollon’s mind conjures up his assassin, Martha’s desire produces Franz and the plot that will finally lead to her death. As Bely writes, “cerebral play is only a mask. Under way beneath this mask is the invasion of the brain by forces unknown to us.”¹⁰ Franz’s mind is described as a “playground” (79) in which all sorts of balls are bouncing about, but “behind these regular everyday thoughts, as behind words written on glass, lay darkness, a darkness into which one ought not to peer” (200), and as the novel progresses Martha finds that “some kind of atrocious dreamland was encroaching upon her charts.” (197)

⁹ See Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 158, and Buks, *Eshafot v khrustal'nom dvortse*, 50, for previous comments on the relation of *King, Queen, Knave* to *Petersburg*.

¹⁰ *Petersburg*, trans. Maguire and Malmstad, 35.

As Brian Boyd writes, in *King, Queen, Knave* Nabokov “shows consciousness always ready to decay into something automatic or less than fully human” and “tries to define what being human means”.¹¹ The novel follows “The Queen of Spades” in showing how people lose their humanity when they lose their capacity for spontaneity and play, becoming automata, but two scenes of monkeys dressed in human clothes serve as a reminder that to be human requires reason as well as spontaneity.¹² Human beings lurch between the animal and the mechanical, losing their humanity when they deny either their rationality or their freedom. The emotional climax of the book can be placed at the moment when Franz realises that he has been reduced to an instrument of Martha’s will: “A human being, and after all he was a human being, was not supposed to go on enduring such oppression.” The word “human” acts like a spell: “It was at that moment that Franz regained consciousness like an insufficiently drugged patient on the operating table.” (254)

King, Queen, Knave’s picture of man caught on the narrow middle ground between ape and automaton recalls Schiller’s diagnosis of the conflict in man between the sense-drive and the form-drive, and the book takes place in a Berlin in which bric-a-brac shops sell busts of Schiller for a quarter – the same price as a kitchen pan (100). When Franz remembers that he is a human being and regains consciousness, he is “toying with the string of a balloon tied with a bottle” (254), suggesting that, having recovered his humanity, he can play, and that play will set him free. But Schiller has come to be valued at the rate of a cheap household article, and if *King, Queen, Knave* does test his

¹¹ RY 281; 285.

¹² KQK 66; 118. Compare with one of the poems in *The Empyrean Path*, in which the poet puts a monkey in a dress only to see it tear apart “a book of songs, a book of comfort”. “Obez’ianu v saraphane”, SS 1:544-5.

theory that play can heal the division in man's nature, save him from treating his fellow-man as an instrument, and restore his humanity, the experiment does not produce a reassuring result. Play in *King, Queen, Knave* is manipulative, violent, commercialised and superficial. In response to Martha, Dreyer thinks: "But allow me to play a little too – leave me my nephew ..." (40) Martha plays with Franz in the bedroom, and Dreyer plays with him at the shop, turning him into a vending machine. This kind of play is nearly lethal, and when Dreyer finally takes on Franz at tennis, he measures up the height of the net "with the thoroughness of an executioner preparing his block" (187). There is already this sublimation of violence into play in "The Queen of Spades", where the game of faro at the end is "like a duel".¹³

There is a more historically specific idea here as well. In "On Generalities", Nabokov says that "in Germany sport has only just been born, born quite rapidly and [...] for this reason jumps out at one. Football comes as a substitute for the goose march, lawn tennis replaces the art of war."¹⁴ The sort of play Nabokov is describing in the Germany of *King Queen Knave* is a thin and poorly understood façade set upon a predisposition for aggression. Neither Martha nor Franz understand tennis. She thinks that the ball-girl is just getting in the way, while he cannot play, and does not recognise the umpire: "Beside one of the further courts a kind of judge, or guardian of games, sat on a stepladder shaking his head in rhythm – denying, denying, denying" (187). This is a telling misunderstanding: Franz is always oppressed, never liberated, by the rules of the games in which he is caught up.

¹³ *The Queen of Spades*, 98.

¹⁴ "On Generalities", 13.

Dreyer, by contrast, can play tennis but cannot ski or swim, because these are forms of play without rules, and he cannot grasp the element of freedom in play. Although he does have many of the attributes of an artist in Nabokov's eyes – he has some instinct for play, a keen sensitivity, a taste for uselessness and idleness and a love of poetry – he is, as a number of critics have pointed out, one of Nabokov's near-artists.¹⁵ As the owner of a shop that sells sporting goods, he commercialises play, and deals economically with his own sensitivity by relying on his first impressions of people and things, which is why it is so easy for Franz and Martha to deceive him. Dreyer's idea of art is revealed in the scene where he takes Franz on a night-time visit to his department store and shows him the art of selling ties, teaching him to play on the customers' social insecurities, to make the colours flare up before their dazzled eyes, and to sell them more than they had come for, “demonstrating not the way ties should be sold in real life, but the way they might be sold if the salesman were artist and clairvoyant.” (70) Dreyer's shop is called “Dandy”, and Dreyer, with his “playful nonchalance” (73) and callow egotism is himself a dandy, and this mode of vision is an old-fashioned aestheticism.

Nabokov goes beyond this mere aestheticism, searching out aspects of mental experience for which no salubrious visual representation is possible. *King, Queen, Knave* pulls away the mask from the world, as Franz pulls away Dreyer's mask at the ball (145). But it also pulls away the face beneath this mask, alerting us to this procedure at its opening by the startling image of a man from whose face the nose and skin seem to have been burned away (3). The keynote of the book is a thrilled disgust with the raw flesh beneath the skin. For Franz, play is a nauseating memory of filthy children in a schoolyard with slippery skin and spittle, and desire itself is extraordinarily close to this

¹⁵ See Connolly in Alexandrov ed., *The Garland Companion*, 208.

experience of disgust (4). In one of the many erotic details in *King, Queen, Knave*, when Franz helps Martha out of her raincoat, “the silk lining was crimson, as crimson as lips and flayed animals, and smelled of heaven.” (95) When he reviewed *King, Queen, Knave* Aikhenvald said that “Sirin [...] sins against taste in that he displays a strange leaning towards the unnecessary mention of nasty and repulsive things.”¹⁶ In December 1927, Nabokov had reviewed Khodasevich’s *Collected Poems*, saying that “his choice of theme knows no boundaries [...] he pranks, plays, coldly revels in his gift of singing the unsung”, and praising “this sacred lack of squeamishness in his muse.”¹⁷ (SS 2:651) Nabokov and Khodasevich’s harsh play, their fascination with disgust, distinguishes them as modernists in contrast to the more innocuous play of Aikhenvald’s old-fashioned aestheticism.

In *King, Queen, Knave*, Nabokov for the first time discovered his tone of supercilious contempt for his characters, a sportive hostility that harks back to “Breitensträter – Paolino”. Nabokov had celebrated contempt in November 1927, in “Anniversary”, the essay he wrote for the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, writing that “we have studied the science of contempt to perfection. We are so satiated with it that sometimes we grow lazy in mocking our object.” But contempt, properly understood, is not just an attack but a defence: “The strength of my contempt lies in the fact that, feeling contempt, I do not allow myself to think about spilled blood.” (SS 2:645-6) The tone of contempt in Nabokov’s writing is the protective barrier he erects against the objects of his satire. It allows him to create a world in which he is at home, and yet from which he can safely watch the potentially menacing outside world.

¹⁶ Aikhenval’d, “Korol’, Dama, Valet”, 39. My translation.

¹⁷ Translation mine.

Nabokov makes a cameo appearance in the final pages of *King, Queen, Knave*, dancing with his wife and “contemptuous of everything on earth but her” (254). This goes back to the first two sentences of the novel, in which, as Franz’s train pulls off, “the clock face will slowly turn away, full of despair, contempt, and boredom” (1). Nabokov sees the banal action of his novel from that perspective. The very title *King, Queen, Knave* points to how Nabokov has consciously adopted as his subject the frivolous and tired story of three very unimaginative people acting out the perennial tale of greed, lust, and adultery dealt with in so many nineteenth century novels. Life seen from this inhumanly distant perspective is, in the most limited sense of the phrase, only a game. Franz is granted a glimpse of this perspective in a delirious dream, where Dreyer is winding up a phonograph and “Franz knew that in a moment the phonograph would bark the word that solved the universe after which the act of existing would become a futile, childish game like putting one’s foot on every flag edge at every step.” (202-3)

This sense of life as a futile game is illustrated in the apparently purposeless reappearances of Dreyer’s dog Tom throughout the novel, playing with an old tennis ball. Martha expresses the rational view that “dogs that play with balls are always stupid” (30). What makes life seem a futile game is that, from a perspective completely external to human affairs, few if any objects justify the interest with which people invest them. In Pudovkin’s 1925 film *Chess Fever*, probably a source of *The Luzhin Defense*, there is a similar image of a cat playing with a ball of wool, the effect of which is to suggest how absurd one’s play with the world can appear to an external eye.¹⁸ The reader, though he

¹⁸ In her commentary on *The Luzhin Defense*, Olga Skonechnaia discusses Pudovkin’s film as a source: *SS* 2: 716. The close parallel with *The Luzhin Defense* makes it seem probable that Nabokov saw it, but Leyda says that “the film was never shown abroad until the Museum of Modern Art acquired it from Moscow in 1937.” Leyda, *Kino*, 175.

views the action of *King, Queen, Knave* from the perspective of the clock, is also put in the position of the dog chasing after the ball. As Kostandi says, “The whole sequence of references to balls leads, in fact, nowhere”.¹⁹ But the process of chasing them up is emblematic for the way that as one reads the novel – and the world – one creates interest and life. As Dreyer acknowledges, “to have a passion for something is the greatest happiness on earth.” (233) At the end of the novel Martha has had the dog poisoned. The play of the novel, its evolution and subsequent destruction of illusions, is at an end, and Nabokov focuses this idea by using Nietzsche’s image of the universe at eternal play. At the end of *King, Queen, Knave*, two children are building a sand-castle, constantly repairing it as the waves sweep its structures away (259-60).

¹⁹ Kostandi, “‘Korol’, Dama, Valet’”, 251.

Chess and *The Luzhin Defense*

A number of critics, following Nabokov's preface to the English translation of *The Luzhin Defense*, have made comparisons between events in the novel and particular moves of chess pieces.²⁰ But we should be put on guard by the fact that in this preface Nabokov, having a bit of sport with reviewers who might not read the whole book, mentions scenes that do not appear in the novel. Lewis Carroll began *Through the Looking-Glass* with a detailed chess-game, but the game is based on nonsensical rules. Similarly, the chess analogies in *The Luzhin Defense* tempt the reader with parallels and patterns that can never quite be defined, producing what Luzhin sees in his childhood delirium, "the semblance of a kind of monstrous game on a spectral, wobbly, and endlessly disintegrating board." (71) As Leona Toker has argued, "its chess patterns stand for all the patterns and systems that prove tragically inadequate when preferred to or violently superimposed on the natural flow of life."²¹ Art is like a game in its structure but also like play in its freedom.

For Luzhin, chess is an alternative to play with other children and to his father's "play". His mother is depressed and the atmosphere at home is tense and anxious because of his father's infidelity, that is, his "playing around". The school chosen for Luzhin places a great emphasis on games. "Tradition had it that during the early part of its existence the teachers had played with the boys during the long recess" (26), but Luzhin sits sullenly to one side of the schoolyard and is bullied by his classmates, his head being shoved down a toilet. From the beginning, play means unreliability, threat, and the

²⁰ See *TLD* 9, for Nabokov's comparisons and *TLD* 263, for Updike's comparison, in his afterword, of Luzhin's marriage to a defensive castling. The longest such account is Janet Gezari's in "Game Fiction", 96-106.

²¹ Toker, *Nabokov*, 67.

disgustingly physical side of life. Even before he goes to school, he is surrounded by boys who “aimed tin pistols at him” and in response to this memory, he “played for a while with a beetle nervously moving its feelers, and then had quite a time crushing it beneath a stone” (22). Not that the young Luzhin has no instinct for play: he enjoys solitary games such as mathematical puzzles and jigsaws (36-7). But since play must always involve some element that the ego does not control, Luzhin soon enough extinguishes his capacity for play and tries to eliminate play from chess. In the central scene of the book, Luzhin’s nemesis Turati beats Luzhin and drives him mad by introducing an element of human unpredictability, when he chooses not to play his famous opening, against which Luzhin has laboriously prepared the “defence” referred to in the title of the novel.

For Luzhin’s subsequent “defeat”, his withdrawal from the crucial game against Turati, his descent into insanity, and his final suicide, the book offers many solutions, allowing for a play of possible interpretations, as in “The Queen of Spades”. Of these various solutions, the most overarching is the Pushkinian equation of play with life, and the rejection of play with death: chess boxes are compared to wooden coffins (140). As a young prodigy, Luzhin is consistently and mistakenly compared to Mozart, but in fact he is a version of Pushkin’s Salieri, the systematiser and murderer who cannot bear the element of play in life and art, or like Hermann in “The Queen of Spades”, another opponent of play: Luzhin’s profile, like Hermann’s, is compared to Napoleon’s at one point.²² By excluding play, Luzhin seems also to exclude love. A compassionate young woman, never named, identifies Luzhin as the ideal object for her pity, and in the central chapters of the book, courts him, marries him, and tries to cure him of chess and save him

²² TLD 163. Pushkin, *The Queen of Spades*, 90.

from madness. But she cannot break the tyranny of chess over his perceptions: he sees people and objects as menacing chess pieces and the world as a grid of black and white squares. Finally, suicide is the only way “to drop out of the game.” (252)

Like Bely's Apollon Apollonovich, Luzhin lives in a geometrical world of straight lines over which he believes himself to have complete mastery, and even when he gives up chess he draws geometric shapes, such as a cube that recalls the cube-shaped carriage in which Apollon rides around St. Petersburg (206-7). Just as Apollon's mind produces the assassin sent to destroy him, so Luzhin seems to conjure up his double, Turati, a player whose style is much like his own, and who is never fully embodied (97). One night, after working late on his defence against Turati, Luzhin sees in his room “an enormous square of moonlight, and in that light – his own shadow.” (117) That shadow is Turati, and Luzhin is always playing against himself, trying to predict the responses that Turati will make to his own moves, and his counter-responses, and so on indefinitely, to the point of madness: “in the darkness of his memory, as in two mirrors reflecting a candle, there was only a vista of converging lights with Luzhin sitting at a chessboard, only smaller, and then smaller still, and so on an infinity of times.” (135) As in “Breitensträter – Paolino” and *Alice in Wonderland*, Luzhin plays by doubling himself off, but since for him playing chess means mobilising “the militant, bright, charging force he sensed within him”, this doubling ultimately leads to his turning those violent energies against himself to the point of madness and death (68). The black and white of the chessboard allows Nabokov to literalise the theme of “The Fight”, of the play of light and shadow turning into a death-struggle. At one moment, “Luzhin involuntarily put out a hand to remove shadow's king from the threat of light's pawn.” (128)

The theme of a chess player going mad was one that Chesterton had given in *Orthodoxy* (1909) as his prime example of how abstract reason, and not poetic imagination, leads to madness.²³ The use of chess as a metaphor for life is a traditional one. In Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, about which Nabokov had written in *Rul'* in May 1928, there are lines in which human beings are compared to pieces played with by God. Nabokov would quote them in his *Lectures on Don Quixote*. As Alexander Dolinin points out, they would make a good epigraph to *The Luzhin Defense*.²⁴

[Men are]
But helpless Pieces of the Game He Plays,
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days (*LDQ* 168).

In 1924 Nabokov published "Three Chess Sonnets", in which for the first time he dealt with the specifics of chess, while at the same time sustaining a witty comparison between chess and poetry (*SS* 1:629-30). In the sonnet, Nabokov chose a poetic form comparable to chess for its strict rules, its restricted material, and its self-containment. The rhyme scheme of Nabokov's sonnets is, however, unorthodox, something he alludes to in the opening of the third when he writes: "I did not write a lawful sonnet" (1:630).²⁵ Each octet is composed on a strict abba abba rhyme scheme, but the sestet is an inversion of the last six lines of a Shakespearean sonnet, with the couplet at the head of the sestet: cc dede, a rhyme scheme which in the first and third sonnets runs against the stanzas, which are set out ccd ede.²⁶ These poems look forward to *The Luzhin Defense* not only by their subject matter but also by their form, since the fourteen chapters of *The*

²³ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 25: "Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do."

²⁴ See Dolinin in *SS* 2:27. For the piece on Khayyam, see *SS* 2:657-60.

²⁵ Translations from "Three Chess Sonnets" mine.

²⁶ In 1927, Nabokov would publish translations of Shakespeare's seventeenth and twenty-seventh sonnets: *SS* 2:603.

Luzhin Defense are divided like a sonnet. The first eight chapters form a whole, running up to Luzhin's match against Turati and Luzhin's descent into madness. Within this "octet" two "quatrains" can be discerned: the first four chapters deal with Luzhin's childhood and chess apprenticeship, culminating with his mother's death at the end of chapter four, while chapters five to eight deal with his preparation for the match against Turati and his peculiar courtship with the never-named girl whom he eventually marries. As John Updike remarks, chapters nine to fourteen feel more aimless, and the pattern they gradually reveal is a haphazard one clear only to Luzhin in his paranoia (*TLD* 264). In this respect the sestet of *The Luzhin Defense* also mirrors the irregular sestet of Nabokov's chess sonnets, whereas the regularity of the opening octet mirrors the regularity of the chessboard with its eight vertical and horizontal columns.

The first of the sonnets dramatises a game from the 1921 world championship in Havana, in which the Cuban player José Raul Capablanca took the title from Emanuel Lasker, who had been the reigning champion since 1894. The opening compares the movements of the rook to an iambic rhythm and those of the bishop to an anapest. The second sonnet depicts the mind immobilised as it broods over an insoluble chess problem. Momentarily, with the couplet in lines nine to ten, a solution seems to glimmer, but the conclusion is a false one, the rhyme disappears, "and again the mind is in gloom." (1:629) Though the first sonnet had a stanza break after the eleventh line, the second sonnet violates this expectation since the sestet is printed as a single stanza, so that the sense of gloom produced by the loss of rhyme and pattern in the eleventh line is quickly alleviated by the fact that this line turns out to be the opening of a concluding quatrain, and by the thought the last lines contain:

But the faerie of rhymes on the chessboard
 Appears, casting a reflection on the lacquer,
 And flies lightly off on its sock. (1:629)

The return of rhyme brings light and agile motion to the gloom and stasis of a mind that could not, on its own, release itself from the riddle in which it is bound. The chess problem is not solved, but the sonnet is satisfyingly concluded, leaving the reader with a delicate distinction between chess and poetry: like chess, literature is based on conventions, but unlike chess, literature is always extending and redefining conventions such as those of rhyme and stanza, using them to create novelties of thought and emotion which the mind would not have reached without the aid of such external structures.

In the third sonnet Nabokov undertakes an inversion (appropriately, since the subject is chess, in which the opposing pieces are set out in an inverted pattern). Now, instead of solving a chess problem, he is sitting up through the night trying to compose one. Where in the second sonnet the emphasis was on how the mind is illuminated at the moment that it liberates itself from the conventions it has imposed on itself, the third sonnet inverts this idea. Just as a chess problem, by the apparently static organisation of a few pieces, encodes the long sequence of preceding and subsequent moves, so in a sonnet a few images and words are magnified by their precise positioning and selection in the rigorously organised structure, so that they come to imply the emotions and experiences of an entire world:

And I locked away in its pattern the answer
 To all of our night, to all of your cries,
 And the shadow of branches, and the bright streams
 Of the fluctuating stars, and the craft of the poet. (1:630)

In the second sonnet Nabokov wanted to escape the conventions of art. In the third sonnet he is reconciled to them by a profounder understanding of the truth they can embody.

This secret understanding and sense of reconciliation with his form is the final “solution” to the problem. In the final sestet Nabokov realises that Lasker, Capablanca, and even the long-dead Phillidor have been watching benevolently over him, and see “That I love passionately and lucidly, / That on the board I have constructed a sonnet.” (1:630) He sounds surprised, as if he has written a sonnet without meaning to, a conclusion that looks forward to “The Skater”, which he would publish in February of the next year, where the poet, after describing the patterns formed by the skater on the ice, then notices that he himself has in his poem “left behind a single verbal figure, / An instantly unfolding flower, inked.”²⁷ In the last chess sonnet, similarly, the poetic pattern has been formed unconsciously, a point fully in accord with the Kantian principle that genius must give itself its laws freely and without predetermination.

In *The Luzhin Defense*, Luzhin’s mother-in-law says that the professionalisation of sport is a symptom of cultural decline (111). This was a contemporary cliché. In “On Generalities”, however, Nabokov had insisted that it was important to know the history of sport, and his willingness to incorporate Capablanca, Lasker, and Phillidor into his poetry, like the extended history of heavyweight boxing champions he gives in “Breitensträter – Paolino”, also expresses his admiration for individual greatness in any field. In this history Nabokov is particularly interested in the lives of the boxing champions after their careers had ended, and there is a striking contrast between the happy scene he creates of the nineteenth century champions reliving their victories in convivial pubs and the farcical story of Jack Johnson, who in 1910 became the first black world heavyweight champion, only to become a music-hall exhibit and end up in prison (SS 1:751). In “The Chess Knight”, a poem published in late October 1927, Nabokov

²⁷ SS 1:635. Nabokov, “The Skater”, trans. Dmitri Nabokov.

would adapt these scenes to chess, describing a dishevelled former grandmaster sitting in a bar, who comes to see the chequered floor of the bar as a chess board and two people coming in as the black pawn and knight. Imagining himself as a chess piece, the chess master begins hopping around the room like a knight (SS 2:558-9). As Brian Boyd points out, this poem is the seed of *The Luzhin Defense*. In *The Luzhin Defense*, as in “The Chess Knight”, Luzhin sees shadow and light as the black and white of the chessboard. Luzhin’s madness consists in imagining himself as a chess king under attack, who can only escape checkmate by committing suicide and quitting the game (RY 275). The crucial moment when Luzhin stops seeing himself as a player and becomes a piece is carefully placed at the end of the eighth chapter of *The Luzhin Defense*, the turn of the sonnet from the octet to the sestet: “His legs from hips to heel were tightly filled with lead, the way the base of a chessman is weighted.” (143)

Three weeks after “The Chess Knight” Nabokov reviewed Evgeny Znosko-Borovsky’s *Capablanca and Alékhine* (1927), a book published in anticipation of the world championship match that would take place two weeks later, in which Alékhine, a Russian émigré with a background similar to Nabokov’s, took the title from Capablanca. Nabokov’s review begins with the comment that “this little book will seem to lovers of the art of chess like the most entertaining novel”²⁸ (SS 2:644), and it seems likely that *Capablanca and Alékhine* encouraged and inspired Nabokov in formulating *The Luzhin Defense*. There is one specific parallel: Znosko-Borovsky says that in Alékhine’s play “everything is saturated with electricity”, while Luzhin is described controlling the

²⁸ My translation.

energies of the pieces, “here gathering in and there releasing electric power.”²⁹ But some more general links are also instructive. Znosko-Borovsky talks of chess in the formalist terms that Nabokov liked to deploy in relation to art, writing that “chess players have no biographies”, that the relationship between personality and style of play is mysterious, but that this mystery allows us to “enjoy the beauty of chess creation without regard to the personality of their creators, without sullyng our aesthetic pleasures by psychological intrusions or by any situations external to the circumstances of art.”³⁰ Likewise Luzhin’s “real chess life” contrasts with his physical and even mental existence, which is relegated to the automatism of habit (133). In this respect he perfectly embodies Nabokov’s principle that an artist’s “real life” is “the life of his books” (NG 26).

Znosko-Borovsky, who was a literary historian, tells the story of Capablanca as the story of his style, the evolution of his “art” in relation to the history of chess. The history of the dashing inventive combinational play of the early nineteenth century giving way to the patient, “scientific” positional play ushered in by Steinitz and Lasker in the mid-nineteenth century, and then the rediscovery of wit and flair by Alékhine and the “hypermodernists” in the early twentieth century, is presented by Znosko-Borovsky in terms that recall the history of Russian literature, with Pushkin usurped by the realist novel and utilitarian criticism before fantasy and imagination were reinstated by the modernists. Znosko-Borovsky contrasts Lasker’s typically Germanic brooding psychological depth and philosophy of life as struggle with Capablanca the “sportsman”, much admired by the English, who passes straight from the chessboard to the tennis court, and who plays with a brilliant intuitive understanding of his medium, never

²⁹ Skonechnaia makes this link in her note at SS 2:712. See TLD 92, and Znosko-Borovskii, *Kapablanka i Alekhin*, 83. All translation from *Capablanka and Alékhine* mine.

³⁰ *Kapablanka i Alekhin*, 15-6.

bothering about theory, whereas Lasker at the board seems “to be turning up underground springs”, and with exhausting effort mines profound insights and forces them into chess.³¹ To those who regret it that Capablanca has dethroned the philosophical Lasker, Znosko-Borovsky replies:

But we need not wander forever in the austere kingdom of Beethoven, in the mystical insights and sadism of Dostoevsky’s ecstasies: the radiant Mozart and the luminous Pushkin are no less attractive. And for chess to return from the austere province of science to the sphere of gay and joyous art, there was need of just such an ‘idle playboy’.³²

By the time he faces Turati, Luzhin’s game has come to seem “old-fashioned”, a product of the period before the War, when static positional play reigned and most games ended in draws.³³ He is like a once original artist who has been left behind by subsequent innovations. “The bolder his imagination, the livelier his invention during his secret work between matches, the more oppressive became his feelings of helplessness when the contest began and the more timidly and circumspectly he played.” (*TLD* 97) When he is forced out of his solitary mental world and has to play another person, Luzhin can only defend and react, never attack and create. He tries to reach positions that are as static as he is himself. He is like Lasker, or, more precisely, like a later disciple of the positional school, Akiba Rubinstein, whom Nabokov acknowledged as a model for Luzhin.³⁴ Like Luzhin, Rubinstein was at his strongest just before the War, and had a nervous disorder that made him afraid of other people. His wife used to tell visitors, “Do not stay too long, for if you do stay too long he will leave by way of the window”, as Luzhin does when he

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20-1.

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

³³ Compare *TLD* 97, with *Kapablanka i Alekhin*’, 13; 11.

³⁴ Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 177. See also *TLD* 107, where Luzhin’s future mother-in-law says “‘His real name is Rubinstein or Abramson.’”

throws himself from a window at the end of *The Luzhin Defense*.³⁵ Znosko-Borovsky says that Rubinstein “brought to its last refinement this play on minimal weakness” of the positional school.³⁶ Yet just as Nabokov sees Luzhin, for all his lack of invention, as the model of the artist for his utter absorption in chess and instinct for structure, so in his *Modern Ideas in Chess* (1923), the most influential chess book of the interwar period, Richard Réti called Rubinstein “the greatest artist among chess players”, praising him, in terms that make him sound like Mallarmé, as “a priest in his art”, “the type of man who lives only for his self-appointed task, a veritable ascetic”, one whose “games create the impression of a great structure from which not one stone can be shifted.”³⁷

In *Modern Ideas in Chess* Réti makes an explicit comparison between art and games: “in a materialistic sense, both are absolutely objectless and further, the player of games, equally with the artist, builds up his own world and flies from the sameness of the everyday one to the kingdom he has set up for himself. And lastly every art was once a game and a pastime.”³⁸ Nabokov is alluding to Réti in the name of Luzhin’s main opponent Turati, who like Réti is a pioneer of the “hypermodern” school of chess play that in the 1920s was turning chess on its head, and which Réti himself considered a parallel and even a vindication of modernism in the arts.³⁹ In April 1926 Nabokov played a match against the hypermodern grandmaster Nimzowitsch (RY 259). He explains hypermodernism in his description of Turati: “This player, a representative of the latest fashions in chess, opened the game by moving up on the flanks, leaving the middle of the

³⁵ Crandall, “Akika Rubinstein.”

³⁶ *Kapablanka i Alekhin*, 13.

³⁷ Réti, *Modern Ideas in Chess*, 94; 98.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 104-5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3. Johnson makes the link between Réti and Turati in *Worlds in Regression*, 89.

board unoccupied by Pawns but exercising a most dangerous influence on the center from the sides.” (TLD 96)

Like Réti, Nabokov evidently saw interesting intellectual and aesthetic implications to the hypermodern revolution in chess. In May 1928, he published an enigmatic *jeu d’esprit*, a mock-review of a non-existent anthology of translations of “lunar poetry” into Russian by one S. Revokatrat (SS 2:660-1). This name, if reversed, spells S. Tartakover (whom Alékhine thought was the model for Luzhin).⁴⁰ Savelii Tartakover was one of the most prominent hypermodern players, had published a Russian translation of German expressionist poetry in Berlin in 1923, and had a reputation for intellectual buffoonery and paradoxical wit. One contemporary spoke of the “elegant somersaults of his logic” and wrote that “he liked to play with words, metaphors, conclusions, and contradictions as if they were chess pieces.”⁴¹ Tartakover also had a reputation for lunacy (hence “lunar” poetry), publishing poems which he claimed had been dictated to him by the spirits of Pushkin and Lermontov; if the poems were bad, that was their fault.⁴²

The review is made up of a series of short riddling quotations from various lunar poets, most of whose names reverse the names of famous Russian poets. Thus from “Ninese” (Esenin backwards): “I searched for you everywhere, I found you somewhere, I lost you in my very self”⁴³ – to which the solution is, perhaps, love. Or this from “Nirisa” (A - Sirin backwards): “Who before the stars and before the earth comes so late on a donkey?” – here the answer perhaps is Christ, whose entry into Jerusalem on a donkey is

⁴⁰ Nabokov denied it in an interview: SS 5:643.

⁴¹ Quoted in Crandall, “Sawielly Grigoriewitsch Tartakower.”

⁴² See SS 2:733-4.

⁴³ Translations from “Anthology of Lunar Poetry” mine.

a traditional emblem for St. Paul's paradox of "wise folly" which lies behind such works as Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. Chesterton's "The Donkey", a much-anthologised poem, is about this: it ends with this moment of the donkey's glory, and begins with the nonsense inverse world:

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.⁴⁴

Nabokov's opening lunar quotation goes back to the main source of this tradition in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. Where Paul with intricate irony says: "We *are* fools for Christ's sake, but ye *are* wise in Christ; we *are* weak, but ye *are* strong",⁴⁵ indicating the folly of the Corinthians' vain wisdom and the weakness of their much-vaunted strength, the lunar poet Kepach, seeing things from an unearthly perspective, says: "Strength does not know, whom to break, weakness does not know, how to break, guile does not know, why to break." Guile thinks its way out of the assumption, shared by the "strong" and the "weak", that life is a battle ("to break") which can only be won by strength, and that such "strength" constitutes knowledge. The impression of nonsense is produced by an insight that subverts the premises of the discourse in which it is framed: compare Kinbote's "rather anti-Darwinian aphorism" in *Pale Fire*: "The one who kills is *always* his victim's inferior." (PF 185) There is an analogy to this in the hypermodern idea in chess. Traditional chess theory, working on the logic of "strength", had always assumed that the best course was to exercise maximum control by throwing one's pieces into the centre from the first move. But in hypermodern theory, the player,

⁴⁴ *The Works of G.K. Chesterton*, 248.

⁴⁵ 1 Cor. 4: 10.

exercising guile, hangs back, allowing his opponent to expose and eventually destroy himself as a result of his own aggression.

The idea that Nabokov is capitalising on – that hypermodern theory is so radical that it questions not only an orthodoxy of chess theory but an assumption deeply embedded in all of human culture – was reflected by Tartakover when he remarked of hypermodernism, “Credo quia absurdum” – “I believe it *because* it is absurd”, the classic anti-rationalist defence of faith.⁴⁶ One of Nabokov’s symbols for this absurdist escape from ordinary logic is the knight’s move, “lawless fantasy, a knight’s move off the board into space”, and the use of the knight in the opening was a hallmark of hypermodernism.⁴⁷ Turati’s famous opening, against which Luzhin is furiously preparing, suggests the celebrated “Réti gambit”. This was a knight opening which Réti used to inflict on Capablanca in 1924 the first defeat he had suffered for ten years, in the so-called “Game That Went Around the World”. In *Modern Ideas in Chess* Réti argued that dogged adherence to the rules of chess theory and a need for positional certainty could never lead to greatness. “The Hyper-moderns are the greatest opponents of routine play.”⁴⁸ Tartakover also liked to emphasise this point, saying, “I make errors, therefore I am”, and “The existence of chess can only be justified by the necessity of making errors.”⁴⁹ This acceptance of indeterminacy is reflected in the insoluble riddles of Nabokov’s “Anthology of Lunar Poets”, and in the mock-quotation that ends the piece: “Believe, but do not think, that that is truth, know, but do not think, that that is thought.”

⁴⁶ Quoted by Réti in *Modern Ideas in Chess*, 140.

⁴⁷ This quotation comes from the unpublished continuation to *The Gift* in Nabokov, *Nabokov’s Butterflies*, 213. It expresses the logic that lies behind the name of Sebastian Knight. The knight’s move is a symbol of radical uncertainty for Shklovsky in his 1923 book of essays *The Knight’s Move*: Shklovskii, *Khod’ Konia*, 10; 11: “Do not choose. – Everything is true. [...] do not think, that the knight’s move is the move of a coward.”

⁴⁸ *Modern Ideas in Chess*, 120; 122.

⁴⁹ Crandall, “Sawielly Grigorievitch Tartakower.”

Like Rubinstein in Réti's description, Luzhin cannot tolerate uncertainty.⁵⁰ If he has failed to make good on the brilliant promise of his childhood it is because he clings to the comfort of "routine play". His life is completely ruled by habit and he seems to live "unconsciously". "Only rarely did he notice his own existence" (95). Luzhin is so well hidden that he appears not to be there. He discovers his first chess board at a crucial moment in the opening chapter when he runs away from the train taking him back to St. Petersburg and goes to hide in the attic of his parents' country house. He is a series of defences organised around a hollow centre, like chess pieces huddled around their powerless king (55). As figures for this hollowness the novel offers Luzhin's hunger and his homelessness. Descending into madness in his match against Turati, Luzhin decides that "home" is "the key to the combination" (141). But he has no home to come back to, literally and psychologically, and is found the next day having slept rough in the street.⁵¹

As in "The Fight", not being at home in the world exposes Luzhin to seeing life as a battle and everything in the surrounding world as a threat. Luzhin is in the position of "weakness" in Kepach's lunar aphorism, and Turati beats Luzhin by allowing him the time and space to break himself. His fear of the material world is so great that even chess is not abstract enough for him; he needs to dematerialise the chess pieces by seeing them as forces, and prefers playing blind, when these "exquisite, invisible chess forces" are freed from the "crude, mortal shell" of wooden pieces (91).⁵² In Schiller's terms he is the formal artist *par excellence*, whose imperative is to "make his form consume his

⁵⁰ *Modern Ideas in Chess*, 100.

⁵¹ In this respect Nabokov attributed to Luzhin the homelessness he had claimed as his own in his earliest published literary piece in English, "Home", a poem of 1920 about the precarious condition of exile: "Home,/ My home magnificent is but a word/ On a withered page in an old, dusty book." Nabokov, "Home", 26.

⁵² Réti and Alékhine were notable "blind" players and Alékhine's remark that he saw the chess pieces as symbols of force in the mind seems a likely source for this passage in *The Luzhin Defense*. Alékhine is quoted by Sewell in *The Field of Nonsense*, 30-1.

material”.⁵³ Channelling “the militant, charging, bright force he sensed within him”, Luzhin strips the world bare, seeking out its essence (68). He embodies a lust for absolute and final knowledge, a wish to spy on the world naked that Nabokov allegorises in a painting of *Phryne Taking Her Bath*.⁵⁴ Luzhin’s father is on the right track when he suspects that Luzhin, locked up in his room with a magazine of chess games, playing them in his head, “might have been looking for pictures of naked women” (57). Luzhin is the instrument of an analytic and essentialist drive in modern culture: laying bare or “making naked” (*obnazhenie*) the device was one of the slogans of the Russian formalists, and Luzhin is taken at one point for a Bolshevik, at another moment for a cubist (he does, after all, draw cubes).⁵⁵ Man’s normal relation to the world has been inverted in Luzhin. Whereas in “Man and Things”, a talk given to the Aikhenvald circle in January 1928, Nabokov had set out the view that “the thing is a human likeness”, and that man turns dumb objects into meaningful things by projecting his life outwards into them, Luzhin disarms objects and turns them into pieces on the chessboard of his thought.⁵⁶

In Schiller’s terms, Luzhin is in the state of man before he has been civilised by beauty: “Either he hurls himself upon objects to devour them in an access of desire; or the objects press in upon him to destroy him, and he thrusts them away in horror.”⁵⁷ He lacks the healthy capacity for play which generates beauty, unites the two drives of sense and form, and humanises the world: “The play-drive [...] will endeavour so to receive as if it

⁵³ *Aesthetic Education*, 157.

⁵⁴ TLD 38. This image is repeated when Luzhin’s wife takes a bath on her wedding night, 182.

⁵⁵ On “making naked”, see Shklovskii, *O teorii prozy*, 176: “Zdes’ dano obnazhenie dikkensovskogo priema”. On Luzhin’s alleged Bolshevism and cubism see, respectively, TLD 108; 208. Réti compares the modern movement in chess to cubism in *Modern Ideas in Chess*, 140.

⁵⁶ “Chelovek i veshchi”, 21. My translation.

⁵⁷ *Aesthetic Education*, 171.

had itself brought forth, and so to bring forth as the intuitive sense aspires to receive.”⁵⁸ Not that Luzhin has no capacity for play, but in him play is morbid because it is strictly solitary, so that he falls into the first of the sicknesses brought on by chess when the elderly man who was his regular opponent dies (70-1). The two objects Luzhin finds with the chessboard in the attic say a great deal about what chess will mean to him.⁵⁹ There is “a shuttlecock with one feather”, suggesting that Luzhin will not be capable of flight into another dimension, artistic or romantic, and there is “a large photograph (of a military band)” (23), suggesting the warlike forces that Luzhin will channel into chess.⁶⁰ Luzhin takes control of the aggression he senses in the world by turning it against himself. This results in a fatal psychic rupture, foreshadowed by a crack in the chessboard that Luzhin finds. Khodasevich put the point in a review, where, true to the Kantian view of the aesthetic as a passageway between the phenomenal and the noumenal, he described the artist as an intermediary between the world of art and the world of reality. To Khodasevich, Luzhin lacks genius, the “measure, harmony, perpetual balance” by which alone the divided nature of human existence can be borne.⁶¹ Khodasevich only failed to see that Nabokov, like Schiller, defined that lack of balance in Luzhin specifically as a failure of play.

Luzhin’s analytic drive to see the essence of matter is kin to the impulse that seizes Franz when he pulls away Dreyer’s mask at the ball. But whereas *King, Queen, Knave* itself follows Franz and tears away the illusions designed to keep out of sight what is disgusting and destructive in reality, *The Luzhin Defense* is, as its title suggests, a

⁵⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁹ As Dolinin has argued at SS 2:32-3.

⁶⁰ Here I subscribe to Dolinin’s view and disagree with Boyd when he says that Luzhin is a man “with access to a fourth [dimension] that transcends our own.” RY 321.

⁶¹ Mel’nikov, ed., *Klassik bez retushi*, 66. For a translation, see Khodasevich, “Luzhin’s Defence”.

defence of illusion. In his 1963 English foreword Nabokov pressed this point, saying that Luzhin rhymes with illusion (7). Schiller mounts just such a defence in the final pages of the *Aesthetic Education of Man*, where he argues that “semblance” is the ground of freedom and originates in play.⁶² In punning on “illusion” (in Russian *illiuziia*), Nabokov discovered the link between semblance and play as a longstanding intuition of the European languages: illusion contains and is etymologically derived from the Latin word *ludo*, I play.

In his foreword Nabokov commented that “of all my Russian books, *The Defense* contains and diffuses the greatest ‘warmth’ – which may seem odd seeing how supremely abstract chess is supposed to be.” (10) But this oddity is readily explained: the benevolent human surfaces that Luzhin tears away, *The Luzhin Defense* restores; though Luzhin cannot sustain love, he is himself made very lovable. As so often in Nabokov, a book inside the book gives the clue to *The Luzhin Defense*’s aesthetic purposes. This is *The Gambit*, the sentimental novel about a young chess prodigy that Luzhin’s father starts to write in 1928, around the time that Nabokov conceived *The Luzhin Defense*. Luzhin Senior tries to cut out his memories of the revolution and the war, and the crabbed unhappy figure of his son in adulthood. “This image of his son, purged of all alien matter and carried to the point of tenderness” (78), he sets out to portray, first finding “the coloration – warm and vivid” (82). The elder Luzhin is a writer of English-style children’s books which portray children as adults would like them to be, kind and innocent, and he is roundly mocked for them, just as his son is bullied when one of the books, *Tony’s Adventures*, is brought into class (30). As Leona Toker writes, “The elder Luzhin’s sentimental species of humanism (*chelovekolyubiye*) is a widespread thought

⁶² *Aesthetic Education*, 190-219.

system with no provision for the violent fermentations of the pre-Revolutionary years or for the harsh realities of war and revolution [...] For old Luzhin, the writing of fiction is a defence against pain, a palliative for ills and wrongs.”⁶³ He dies before he can write the book but in this, as in much else, *The Luzhin Defense* carries forward Luzhin’s attempted defence of his son, adding to the black and white abstraction of his life such warm, vivid colours and solidity of representation as to give us the intimate world of humanised objects Nabokov spoke of in “Man and Things”. Aesthetically, it reminds one of Chardin, many of whose paintings also celebrate innocence by depicting children at play; a reproduction of Chardin’s “The House of Cards” (1736-7) hangs in Krug’s study in *Bend Sinister*, “the only pure thing in the room.” (BS 38) That is, *The Luzhin Defense* has the quality, often ascribed to Chardin, of “a grasp of solid pictorial form and a feeling of intimacy with the substantiality of commonplace objects”, and this screen of humanity, erected to defend Luzhin from the violence of his own mind, is understood as a fragile structure of illusion or house of cards.⁶⁴ *The Luzhin Defense* carries forward the English idea of culture as a rule-governed and therefore game-like system designed to keep out destructive forces. Nabokov had already explored this idea in “Cambridge” and in *A University Poem*, and would revisit it the year after he wrote *The Luzhin Defense*, in *Glory*.

If *King, Queen, Knave* is an art of attack, *The Luzhin Defense* is an art of defence. There is a moment late in *The Luzhin Defense* when we overhear the tail-end of a conversation in which Luzhin’s father’s writing seems to have been defended, by an anonymous nobody “whose sole function in life was to carry [...] some tender, priceless

⁶³ Toker, *Nabokov*, 70.

⁶⁴ Osborne, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Art*, 220.

trifle, a line from Pushkin or the peasant name of a wild flower.” (230-1) This humble guardian of Russian culture is uniquely capable of understanding the value of Luzhin senior’s books, and of an art that defends the illusions of innocence. This idea of art as a defence and an illusion so radically violates the modern idea of art as expressive and truth-telling, that is, of art as a kind of speech, that it cannot be heard, only overheard. Nevertheless it is as old as epic: in the *Aeneid*, the shield of Aeneas portrays civilisation, and the poem is itself a shield against savagery. Defence is central to the public persona Nabokov created in *Speak, Memory*, where he writes about having been a goalkeeper in football (205-6) and about his interest in protective mimicry in butterflies (98). Alexander Dolinin has argued that camouflage was the guiding principle of Nabokov’s life.⁶⁵

Nabokov’s artistic exploration of defence, though idiosyncratic and un-modern, put him in uncomfortable proximity to a very modern figure, towards whose scientific analysis of human illusions he had violently defensive feelings, rehearsed in every one of the prefaces to his novels.⁶⁶ In writing *The Luzhin Defense* Nabokov was entering into competition with Freud’s ideas on neurosis, repression, and defence.⁶⁷ He tells the classic Freudian story of neurosis, where a defence outlives its original purpose and becomes a destructive force. Chess is first Luzhin’s citadel, then his prison, and finally his torture-house. The satire on Freud that Nabokov would publish in 1931, “What Should Everyone

⁶⁵ In an unpublished lecture given at the Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg in July 2001.

⁶⁶ A number of critics have written about Nabokov’s intimate duel with Freud. See Berman, *The Talking Cure*, 211-38; and Green, *Freud and Nabokov*, 78: “In opening up a text by Nabokov, whenever we might forget about the existence of Freud, there is Nabokov, reminding us of Freud’s presence and thus establishing him as a figure within Nabokov’s world. It is as if Nabokov had a need to create Freud, a fictional Freud who became for Nabokov a manufactured foil or double to his own authorial persona, analogous to those doubles so prevalent in his fiction.”

⁶⁷ Freud first formulated his ideas about defence in his 1894 paper, “The Psycho-Neuroses of Defence”, but soon began to use the term “repression” interchangeably with “defence”. Only in an appendix to his 1926 *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxieties* did he attempt to distinguish the two terms. For a comprehensive treatment see Madison, *Freud’s Concept of Repression and Defense*.

Know?” expresses the feeling that psychoanalysis is normative and invasive (SS 697-9). The fears behind this feeling are dramatised in *The Luzhin Defense*, where a black-bearded psychiatrist tries to cure Luzhin of chess and seeks out in his childhood the origins of his condition. His appearance marks the reappearance of the black-bearded peasant, the “future inhabitant of future nightmares”, who carried Luzhin down from the attic at the end of the first chapter (24). By invading Luzhin’s hiding place, and disarming his defence, the psychiatrist initiates the perceived attack that drives Luzhin to suicide. Chess is the keystone of a defence of silence and repression that Luzhin must maintain at the cost of his life, and because Luzhin has invested in it all his erotic energies, he cannot consummate his marriage and his life is empty when he is forbidden to play chess.

Luzhin’s shady manager Valentinov thinks that “Luzhin’s gift for chess was connected with the development of the sexual urge, that with him chess represented a special deflection of this urge” (94). By putting the idea of sublimation into Valentinov’s mouth Nabokov is able to include it while also disclaiming it. The idea which Nabokov mocks in his satire on Freud, that games are “based on eroticism” (SS 3:699), is, then, already mooted in *The Luzhin Defense*, as it is in *Glory*.⁶⁸ In fact Freud never made this claim, and in “What Should Everyone Know?” and *The Luzhin Defense*, we can recognise Nabokov first attributing his own idea to a shadow enemy and then attacking it. This procedure illustrates two of the defences Freud identified, condemnation and “turning round upon the subject’s own self”.⁶⁹ In “Breitensträter – Paolino”, Nabokov had described this process of doubling as a game. This dangerous game, the blood sport

⁶⁸ Translation mine. Nabokov would repeat this claim in a letter to Edmund Wilson of December 15, 1940: “a solemn Freudian contention that children like playing ball because balls remind boys of their mother’s breasts and girls of their father’s balls”. *NWL* 36.

⁶⁹ See “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” and “Repression”, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Strachey, 14:109–141, 126; and 14:141–159; 146.

of self-consciousness, is an essential ingredient of Nabokov's fiction. But for Luzhin it proves to be fatal.

In his English preface, Nabokov compares the central three chapters of *The Luzhin Defense* to a particular kind of chess problem which requires of the solver "retrograde analysis", that is, the deduction of which moves must have preceded the position given.⁷⁰ Retrograde analysis offers a tempting analogy for the procedures of psychoanalysis, and it would be possible to construct a Freudian reading of the novel, focusing above all on why Luzhin suddenly and miraculously falls in love with a girl "who was so unexpected and so familiar, and who spoke in a voice that seemed to have been sounding mutely all his life" (98) – reminding him, perhaps, of the depressed mother who was not able to nurture him and whose death he did not mourn?

But the psychiatrist in the sanatorium asks Luzhin a question that is more Nabokovian than Freudian: "I'm interested in the way you occupied yourself in childhood, what you played with. You had some tin soldiers, I'm sure ..." (163) Luzhin does not answer this query, but *The Luzhin Defense* raises questions as to why Luzhin cannot play and what effect this has on him, questions which go beyond Freud to the emerging field of child psychoanalysis. Luzhin's story closely matches the theories of a later theorist of children's play, the British analyst D. W. Winnicott, who like Schiller and Nabokov saw in play a "third area" between the subjective and the objective, a middle ground in which creativity, art, and cultural experience are based.⁷¹ Winnicott thought that if parents did not provide a dependable environment, and if the mother was not able to tolerate the aggression often involved in play, the child's play-impulse might

⁷⁰ *TLD* 10. Nabokov's first published chess problem, from 1926, required retrograde analysis. For a reproduction and analysis of this problem, see Gezari, "Game Fiction", 102-3.

⁷¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 128-139.

wither. In play a child learns to relate to objects in such a way that they can serve at the same time as symbols for the external world and for internal life. Without play, the child will remain locked within the omnipotent but solitary world of infancy, unable to grow up, without a strong sense of internal or external reality. The first paragraphs of *The Luzhin Defense* are devoted to establishing the anxiety of Luzhin's parents (15), and later he turns away stubbornly from his mother's needy embraces (60). Luzhin's inability to play leads to just the life that Winnicott predicts. He remains a child, seems barely alive, reigns unopposed in the kingdom of his own consciousness, is only aware of the outside world when it fails him, and handles symbols so poorly that he can barely speak: the chess pieces he wields express the forces in his own mind but, unlike words, do not refer outwards into the external world.

And yet Luzhin is also an image of the artist, or at least of one artistic imperative, the instinct to create structures in which to hide oneself. Winnicott understood and defended this side of human nature from the psychoanalytic invasiveness that Nabokov and Luzhin also resist. He saw that "in the artist of all kinds", as in people more generally, there is always "the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found."⁷² Yet if in Luzhin Nabokov paid tribute to the self-concealing side of his nature, he also dramatised the difference between himself and Luzhin. Luzhin's defence is never played, because Réti does not play his opening, so the title of the novel alludes to the heroism of the immaterial and therefore pure work of art. Luzhin, once known for the brilliant sacrifices he had played (134), is sacrificed so that Nabokov can write *The Luzhin Defense*.

⁷² Winnicott, *The Maturation Process*, 185.

Chapter Four

A Praise of Idleness? Nabokov between Work and Play, 1925-1940

Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of ‘making a living’; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in the professions who might challenge it, has decreased rapidly. The only exception society is willing to grant is the artist [...] The same trend to level down all serious activities to the status of making a living is manifest in present-day labor theories, which almost unanimously define labor as the opposite of play. As a result, all serious activities, irrespective of their fruits, are called labor, and every activity which is not necessary either for the life of the individual or for the life-process of society is subsumed under playfulness.¹ (Hannah Arendt)

Two modes of his life question each other and the answer is his life itself, and that is the nearest one can ever approach a human truth.² (Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*)

Introduction

In a book review he published in 1941, soon after arriving in America, Nabokov would write of

the dual nature of nineteenth century England, the contrast between the nightmare filth of the old-fashioned factory town and the philosophy of highly cultured men whose devotion to the creed of self-help and freedom allowed social injustices to be freely done. ‘The poor’, as the author puts it, ‘were left to Vestries and Providence.’ A warlock-like race of deformed beings, black vermin rather than men, horribly toiled underground while independent scholars in secluded nooks read Plato with their feet on the fender.³

The division between culture and labour that Nabokov speaks of here is far older than the nineteenth century, as he hints when he mentions scholars reading Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato looks down on smiths and shoemakers as “the meaner sort of people” and insists that philosophy is not for those “whose souls are maimed and disfigured by their meannesses, as their bodies are by their trades and crafts.”⁴ Right up to the nineteenth century, artists and intellectuals were unwilling to describe themselves as workers – as if

¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 126-8.

² SK 113.

³ Nabokov, “One Hundred Years of England”, 32.

⁴ Plato quoted by Meakin in *Man and Work*, 2. For Aristotle’s contempt for manual labour as a form of slavery, see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 12-13.

writing poetry or engaging in politics had anything at all in common with ploughing a field or building a wall, activities held to be useful but not valuable, voluntary but not free. Pope calls his poems an “idle song”, a phrase the young Nabokov would also use to describe his own verse.⁵ Byron’s first book of poems was entitled *Hours of Idleness*. Pushkin referred to his inkwell as the “handmaid of idle thought”.⁶ It is no exaggeration to say that in Western literature before the nineteenth century there is scarcely a single convincing description of what it is like to do manual work. At most there are Virgil’s *Georgics* and the poetic tradition they inspired, in which stylised descriptions of agriculture allegorise moral and mythic ideals. Adorno and Horkheimer allegorise this absolute breach between culture and labour in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by the image of Odysseus bound to the mast and listening to the music of the sirens while his crew row past with their ears stopped up.⁷ It was left to the nineteenth century to write the critique that Nabokov paraphrased in his article, and to instigate what Simone Weil called the “particular mission”, or “vocation”, of the modern age: “the creation of a civilization founded on the spiritual nature of work.” Weil considered this vocation the only completely original thing about modern culture.⁸ Marxism is the best-remembered sect of this new gospel of work. But many other nineteenth-century thinkers and writers, from Carlyle and Ruskin, through Fourier and Marx, to Tolstoy, were also trying to close the gap between culture and labour, by making work more like art, and art more like work. Most of the best-known nineteenth century novelists, in Russia as abroad, were also engaged in this same project. George Eliot, Dickens, and Hardy, Zola, Gogol, and

⁵ In the “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot”, l. 28, in Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*. Nabokov used this phrase in an unpublished poem of November 1923, quoted by Schiff in *Véra*, 56.

⁶ *Pushkin: Selected Verse*, 7: “*Podruga dumy prazdnoi / Chernil’nitsa moia*”.

⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 34.

⁸ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 91-2.

Tolstoy himself all write scenes bringing labour into the realm of art, and satirising idleness, and their novels embody the new idea of art as work at a profound conceptual and formal level.

Nabokov might appear to have simply rejected the gospel of work. As a young man he defiantly lived out the untimely Pushkinian vision of the artist as idler. After he finished his degree at Cambridge, a job was found for him in a Berlin bank, but he lasted only a day there (*RY* 196). He made slightly less than a living from teaching tennis, boxing, English, and French, from doing odd translations, from the small income from his writing, and from occasional grants from the Russian Writers' Unions in Berlin and Paris. Despite his satirical comments in the 1941 article, in 1938 he had just finished *The Gift*, whose hero, Fyodor, shamelessly flaunts his idleness, lying on his bed all day writing poetry while the noises of work come in through his window and his girlfriend, Zina, does a miserable office job. In *Speak, Memory*, which he wrote in the late 1940s, he would develop this picture and apply it comprehensively to his own past. In the fifteenth chapter of *Speak, Memory* he suggests that poetry, consciousness, and civilisation begin not with toil and struggle but with idleness:

There is also a keen pleasure (and, after all, what else should the pursuit of science produce?) in meeting the riddle of the initial blossoming of man's mind by postulating a voluptuous pause in the growth of the rest of nature, a lolling and a loafing which allowed first of all the formation of *Homo poeticus* – without which *sapiens* could not have been evolved. 'Struggle for life' indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar, to the grunting beast's crazy obsession with the search for food. You and I have frequently remarked upon that maniacal glint in a housewife's scheming eye as it roves over food in a grocery or about the morgue of a butcher's shop. Toilers of the world, disband! Old books are wrong. The world was made on a Sunday. (228)

The view of art and life as play that Nabokov advanced in "Breitensträter – Paolino" and developed in all his novels would seem to express his determination to

ignore work and to put culture in the sphere of leisure as firmly as Pushkin had done. Yet in December 1925, the same month that he wrote “Breitensträter – Paolino”, Nabokov also wrote a short prose piece, “A Guide to Berlin”, dedicated to exploring the opposite proposition to “Breitensträter – Paolino”: that everything in the world, including art, nature, and civilisation, is not play, but work. This chapter will argue that this contrast between work and play was essential to Nabokov’s novels of the 1930s, and that he did not ignore the questions that the nineteenth century had raised about the work of the artist in society, but thought through them with great sophistication.

In this, as in much else, Nabokov was influenced by Aikhenvald, whose “Praise of Idleness” invokes the Schillerian ideal of play in a broader discussion of work and its relation to culture. The first section of this chapter discusses Aikhenvald’s comments on the theological ideas and economic necessities which fostered the work ethic, and its psychological consequences, good and bad. It also discusses the nineteenth century idealisation of labour in Marx, Tolstoy, and other writers, before going on to show that there is a praise of idleness comparable to Aikhenvald’s and Nabokov’s in many other writers of aestheticism and modernism.

The second section of the chapter shows that in “A Guide to Berlin”, Nabokov was developing what Aikhenvald had said, in “Praise of Idleness”, about the positive and negative dimensions of the vision of life and art as work. It also shows that in “A Guide to Berlin”, as in “Breitensträter – Paolino”, Nabokov was in dialogue not only with Aikhenvald and aestheticism but also with formalism, represented by Viktor Shklovsky, and especially by his 1917 essay “Art as a Device”. It aims to show that “A Guide to Berlin” is an extraordinarily precocious and profound examination of work. As Nabokov

said in his notes to the 1976 translation of “A Guide to Berlin”, “despite its simple appearance, this ‘Guide’ is one of my trickiest pieces.” (S 648) Nabokov treats work not as the name for a different set of activities from those designated by play, but as a metaphor for life and art which overlaps and competes with the metaphor of life and art as play advanced in “Breitensträter – Paolino”.

In the late 1920s, in *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Luzhin Defense* Nabokov largely set aside the vision of work he had explored in “A Guide to Berlin”, concentrating on exploring the vision of play he had set out in “Breitensträter – Paolino”. But in the 1930s, Nabokov, like most other Western writers, was concerned with questions about the place and value of the artist in society that had been made urgent by the economic depression and the rise of Fascism. The third section of this chapter shows how, in *Glory, Despair* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, written between 1930 and 1934, Nabokov addresses these issues. He does so subtly and indirectly, aiming to move beyond the antithesis of work and play that he had formulated, however provisionally, in 1925. He insists instead that work and play are intersecting perspectives on life, which cannot be divorced from one another, and that to divide life up into work and play is to submit to the assumptions of a utilitarianism which degrades life as well as art.

In 1933, Nabokov embarked on the research into Chernyshevsky, the 1860s radical, which would lead into *The Gift* and especially into Fyodor’s “The Life of Chernyshevski”, the fourth chapter of *The Gift*. Fyodor attacks Chernyshevsky as the ultimate source of Marxist-Leninism, mocking him for the utilitarianism which to Fyodor’s mind has led to the destruction of value, liberty and culture in Russia. But he also shows that this utilitarianism is only the logical expression of a vision of life as

work, which Chernyshevsky shares with the nineteenth century novelists, above all Gogol and Tolstoy, to whom Fyodor is heir. The fourth section of this chapter attempts to show that a coherent argument about nineteenth century Russian culture is implied by *The Gift*: that Pushkin's precious legacy was distorted once writers began to think of themselves as labouring rather than strolling, as workers not as idlers. For a time, the priority given to work produced great literature such as *Dead Souls* (1842) and *Anna Karenina*, but it also led to Chernyshevsky's utilitarianism, the destruction of art, and the Soviet régime. Only by exposing the internal contradictions in Chernyshevsky's views, and circling back to the Pushkinian idleness with which Russian literature began, can Fyodor, the protagonist of *The Gift*, re-establish art on a sound basis. Nabokov's view seems to have been that because art is essentially playful, it will be condemned as unreal if the standard of reality is work. Gogol and Tolstoy both abandoned writing novels in favour of writing religious tracts for this very reason. Nabokov is, then, looking for a way to write novels that is not implicated in labour. In *The Gift* one reviewer condemns Fyodor's "The Life of Chernyshevski" as "idle literature" (278). That is what the whole of *The Gift* is trying to be, and it does so by conducting a critique of Chernyshevsky's vision of work. *The Gift* is a praise of idleness, and in it Nabokov is attempting radically to refashion of the aesthetics of the modern novel, insofar as they had been first shaped by the vision of work.

The Gospel of Work and the Praise of Idleness

Aikhenvald's "Praise of Idleness" begins as a defence of the socialist demand that working hours be reduced to a maximum of eight hours a day:

The publicly burning issue of the eight hour working day has not only a professional and social interest: it has its roots in the very depth of human nature and it spurs [one] to think afresh about the significance of work in our working life. And however we practically assess this demand of the workers, it in any case touches upon primordial parts of our psychology.

The profound bible legend teaches us, that the first man did not work, did not strain himself, but lived without a care in the nurturing gardens of Eden, enjoying the hospitality of the universe; and only then, in punishment for the first sin, did he lose his happiness in idleness and was he condemned to work; and from this time forth he began to work in the sweat of his brow for his daily bread.

Is it not significant, therefore, that in the consciousness of human labour there is retribution, but [that this is] not a fundamental and natural condition of a rational creature?⁹

This passage expresses a traditional idea. Once there was a Golden Age in which there was no work. As Cervantes put it in a passage that Nabokov would later quote in his *Lectures on Don Quixote*: "In that blessed era all things were held in common, and to gain his daily sustenance no labor was required of any man save to reach forth his hand and take it from the sturdy oaks that stood liberally inviting him with their sweet and seasoned fruits." (*LDQ* 43) Then the Golden Age yielded to an Age of Iron and pain and labour came into the world.

Aikhenvald takes a dialectical approach to the gospel of work. On the one hand he represents it as a slave-philosophy, an aestheticisation of pain, a way of making a virtue out of the necessity of miserable labour:

we have got used to our station as labouring oxen, and have obediently harnessed ourselves to the yoke, and even glorify the beauty and greatness of labour, kissing the rod that beats us; and this is the result of our having been punished at the hand of God: a love of toil is not at all an indisputable virtue, but a mark of slavery, that

⁹ Aikhenvald, *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 5-6. Translations from *Praise of Idleness* mine.

has eaten deep into the corrupted heart of man over the long centuries of his forced labour. (6)

Only two pages later, however, Aikhenvald doubles back on himself. It may well be that at this deepest stratum of human nature there is a longing for Edenic idleness. Yet through the work which nature has demanded of fallen man, man has built civilisation as a second home for himself on earth, making all of the characteristics by which he now recognises himself as human. Here Aikhenvald's rhetoric becomes nearly Soviet:

Nature is inert, until culture takes it up. It is necessary to transubstantiate the matter, the materials of nature into organised forms, but for this we need concentrated labour. Culture is work [...] it has been humanity's lot to earn itself its bread in the sweat of the brow of countless generations, and all its property more generally, its biography and spiritual physiognomy. (8)

Aikhenvald rephrases Schiller's slogan in a revealing way. In place of "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays", Aikhenvald has it that "Man only begins when he ends work" (15). For between Schiller and Aikhenvald comes the nineteenth century and the gospel of work. Aikhenvald singles out Tolstoy: "Tolstoy, more than anyone, valued labour, and many pages of his work are so to speak consecrated by the breath of peasant toil [*strada*]" (6). The final word here, *strada*, signifies harvest work, and suggests the great mowing scene of *Anna Karenina*, in which Levin forgets his sense of futility in the "moments of oblivion" as he mows alongside his peasants.¹⁰ Levin is writing a book about the nature of the Russian labourer, and has a debate with his brothers about the nature of work. These moments reflect the profound artistic and psychological commitment to labour in *Anna Karenina*. Everything in the world of *Anna Karenina* has a job to do, even the sufferings endured by Levin's brother Nicholas: "His sufferings, regularly increasing, did

¹⁰ Translations from Tolstoy mine unless otherwise stated. "*minuty zabyt'ia*": Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina*, 254. See Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy*, 420-7 on the spiritual progression implied by the mowing scene.

their job and prepared him for death.”¹¹ There are scenes of play, such as Levin and Kitty ice-skating, or the tennis game at Anna and Vronsky’s estate, but the games at their estate are emblematic of their lack of occupation and the inauthenticity of their lives.¹² Work at a truly necessary task, whether it is Levin mowing, Dolly raising her children, or the painter Mikhaylov making his art in Rome, is absorbing and unselfconscious. The purposeful unconsciousness Levin finds in mowing corresponds to the unconscious artistic work going on in Mikhaylov as he gathers the material for his painting.

Levin’s feeling that simple labour is the essence of life was, increasingly, Tolstoy’s own, and it led him to repudiate the high “idle” art of his great novels in *A Confession* (1879), soon after he had finished writing *Anna Karenina*. In 1883, Tolstoy wrote in *What I Believe*: “we must go back to the idea, natural to all uncorrupted people, that a necessary condition of happiness is, not idleness, but work [...] Labour is the necessary condition of man’s existence, the source of all material good.”¹³ In *What Then Must We Do?* (1886), he took the argument to book length, insisting that the division of society into labouring and idle classes is spiritually destructive to both, and that each person should provide for their own material well-being by physical labour, the source of real knowledge of the world. The real work of the world is hidden, “All the most important things are done unnoticed, modestly, simply”.¹⁴ This is the starting point for Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* (1898). Tolstoy notices all of the hidden manual labour that goes on behind the scenes of an opera, and on which the fine appearances of high culture rest. Rejecting art for art’s sake, together with Kant and Schiller’s idea of art as play, Tolstoy

¹¹ Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina*, 500: “Stradaniia, ravnomerno uvelichivaiias’, delali svoe delo i prigotovliali ego k smerti.”

¹² See Morson, “Work and the Authentic Life in Tolstoy”.

¹³ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 174; 179.

¹⁴ Tolstoy, *What Then Must We Do?*, 335.

says that true art is an attempt to communicate the feelings that arise in the course of ordinary working life: “All human life is filled with works of art of every kind – from cradle-song, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, dress, and utensils, to church services, buildings, monuments, and triumphal processions.”¹⁵

Most prose writers of the latter part of the nineteenth century exalt work or satirise idleness. To give only a few Russian examples: at the end of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (1901), Irina echoes the Tolstoyan lesson of fulfilment in work: “I shall work, work, work”.¹⁶ In Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862), the nihilist Bazarov announces that “Nature’s not a temple but a workshop, and man’s the worker in it.”¹⁷ In the *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov carefully tracks such sentiments, allowing us to see how they naturally lead into the eroticisation of labour in Soviet fiction (*LRL* 10). Like Tolstoy, Gogol had abandoned his fiction, deciding, as Nabokov puts it, that writing was a “sinful game” (*LRL* 51). Gogol’s repudiation of the complex parodic artistry of his earlier work, and his shift into the preaching of *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (1848), is brightly illuminated by the scene Nabokov picks out: “Gather all your *mouzhiks* [peasants] and tell them that you make them labor because this is what God intended them to do – not at all because you need money for your pleasures; and at this point take out a banknote and in visual proof burn it before their eyes...” (47) What is valuable is agricultural labour itself, not the exchangeable goods, the paper money, it happens to produce. Next to the authenticity of physical labour, the sort of work that deals with paper and words seems futile. This is what makes Chichikov in *Dead Souls*

¹⁵ Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, 97; 124-5.

¹⁶ Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 237.

¹⁷ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 44. In *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 71, Nabokov calls *Fathers and Sons* “one of the most brilliant novels of the nineteenth century”, and proceeds to give a lengthy account of it.

and Bashmachkin in “The Overcoat” (1842) unreal. Chichikov buys and sells the paper rights to dead souls; Bashmachkin spends his life copying out screeds of paper.

In praising idleness and play, Aikhenvald and Nabokov were, then, working against cultural assumptions which had had nearly a hundred years to embed and which had formed nineteenth century fiction. Though Aikhenvald does not spell it out, they were also working against the more obvious adversary of Marxist-Leninism, and trying to subvert its premise that man is made for work. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx defined man as *homo faber*: whereas other animals only produce out of need, man works freely, and “in accordance with the laws of beauty.”¹⁸ The value of an object is the free, creative, living labour the worker has put into it, a fact that capitalism obscures by commodifying the created object and turning it into a unit of exchange value. Under the conditions of capitalism, however, the worker is alienated. He “is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object [...] The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object [...] External labour, labour in which man alienated himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification.”¹⁹

Marx thought that alienation gets written into language when the abstract concept “Labour” is extracted from all the various forms of work and turned into an empty economic category. It is in this sense that in *The German Ideology*, written in 1845-6, Marx says that “it is not a matter of freeing labour but of abolishing it.”²⁰ The French socialist writer Charles Fourier thought that in ideal social conditions work could become

¹⁸ Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 76.

¹⁹ Ibid., 72; 74.

²⁰ McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx*, 172.

uninhibitedly joyful, *travail attrayant*.²¹ In “Praise of Idleness”, Aikhenvald places himself in this utopian socialist tradition, citing with approval Marx’s son-in-law Paul Lafargue, who wrote a book called *The Right to be Lazy* (1883), condemning the “love of work” as a “delusion” responsible for all the “individual and social woes” of the working class.²² Marx himself resisted this utopianism, disapproving of Lafargue and writing in the *Grundrisse* (written 1857-8): “Labour cannot become play, as Fourier would like, though it remains his great contribution to have expressed the suspension not of distribution, but of the mode of production itself, in its ultimate form, as the ultimate object.”²³ Nevertheless, at the heart of Marxism is the hope of freeing work from the taints of pain and slavery, and endowing it with the dignity and creativity of aesthetic experience, if not of play.

Aikhenvald is therefore able to say that in praising idleness he is championing, not neglecting, the interests of the working class, and to imply that he is more true to Marx’s legacy than are Lenin and the Bolsheviki. Aikhenvald argues that machines will take over the irredeemably degrading work. “The development of technology should put everything in its proper place and assign to the machine the rough work [literally, the black work: *chërnuiu rabotu*], but to man, the bright development of the soul [...] For man is a creator, not a labourer.”²⁴ The remaining work can then be reconceptualised as play, if working conditions become better. “By play we shall understand labour with satisfaction, labour without laboriousness and strain, which may be so exciting and interesting that it is not even felt any more to fall at all under the category of labour.” (12)

²¹ Meakin, *Man and Work*, 38-41.

²² Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy*, 9; 13. *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 11.

²³ *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 290.

²⁴ *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 10.

Again, “it is possible to work more than eight hours, but then it will not be labour, but creation, not exertion, but play, not slavery, but freedom.” (16)

Wilde had made the same argument in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891): “Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine.”²⁵ Two of Wilde’s “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” (1894), have it that “industry is the root of all ugliness” and “the condition of perfection is idleness”.²⁶ In “The Critic as Artist”, which was originally titled “The True Function and Value of Criticism: With Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing”, Gilbert tells Ernest: “Yes, Ernest: the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming* – that is what the critical spirit can give us.”²⁷ After its subtler meditations on consciousness since the Fall, Aikhenvald’s “Praise of Idleness” comes down to this: “the most important thing is, that man must not only do.”²⁸ In *The Gift* Fyodor explodes with frustration at the assumption contained in the title of Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* (1863) – and of Tolstoy’s *What Then Must We Do?*, and Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) – that life is about doing: “What to do? Live, read, think. What to do? Work at one’s own development in order to achieve the aim of life, which is happiness.” (G 257)

There are a number of other predecessors to the praise of idleness in modernism. Nietzsche thought “the ‘blessing of work’ is an ennobling phrase for slaves.”²⁹ In his lecture on *Madame Bovary* (1856) Nabokov draws attention to “a famous scene of our

²⁵ Wilde, *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 1183.

²⁶ *Oscar Wilde: The Major Works*, 574.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 277. For Wilde’s popularity in Russia up to the revolution, see Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance*, 151-179.

²⁸ *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 14.

²⁹ Cited in Thomas, ed., *The Oxford Book of Work*, 560.

book when a hardworking old woman, getting a medal for having slaved for her farmer-boss, is confronted with a committee of relaxed bourgeois beaming at her”, and later picks out the phrase “‘Industry and the Fine Arts’” to “symbolise” the “farcical synthesis” between the rhetoric of labour on stage and the crass pseudo-poetry with which Rodolphe is seducing Emma at the same time.³⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, on whom Nabokov also lectured, and whom Fyodor is reading in *The Gift*, wrote an essay in 1888 entitled “An Apology for Idlers”: “idleness so called, which does not consist in doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognised in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class, has as good a right to state its position as industry itself. [...] Atlas was just a gentleman with a protracted nightmare!”³¹ Stevenson was one of the authors – others included Mark Twain and Oliver Wendell Holmes - published by Jerome K. Jerome, who edited *The Idler*.³² Jerome’s most famous book, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) is a gentle meandering encomium to leisure and might as well bear the title of Jerome’s essays, *The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* (1886). Perhaps because the pose of the idle clerk makes the best available mask for an artist of play, Sebastian Knight is glad to invoke Jerome K. Jerome when he tells a story about himself (SK 55).

But Lewis Carroll is the writer whose subversion of the Victorian gospel of work must have been most influential on Nabokov, at least after he translated *Alice in Wonderland* in 1922. In wonderland, and through the looking-glass, nonsense is made of the hymns to work and duty and foresight which Victorian children learned by heart. Carroll makes mischief with the words that come unbidden to Alice’s lips and the wisdom she lives by without ever having thought it, cultural assumptions so deep they

³⁰ LL 127; 160.

³¹ G 153. Stevenson, *Virginibus Puerisque*, 107-108; 126.

³² Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, xxi.

seem part of the language.³³ Isaac Watts's poem "Against Idleness and Mischief", "How doth the little busy bee / Improve his shining hour," becomes "How doth the little crocodile / Improve his shining tail". Robert Southey's paean to foresight, "The Old Man's Comforts", comes out as "You are old, father William". Watts's "The Sluggard", becomes "'Tis the voice of the Lobster". The white knight's song is a parody of Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence", with its lesson of perseverance.³⁴ Nabokov paid particularly close attention to the poems in *Alice in Wonderland*, seeking out Russian equivalents for the English poems Carroll was parodying.³⁵

Nabokov's favourite modernist novels all resist work. Nabokov wrote about Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) that:

The only professions we are shown in action, or in result, are artistic and scholarly ones. Proust's prismatic people have no jobs: their job is to amuse the author. They are as free to indulge in conversation and pleasure as those legendary ancients that we see so clearly reclining around fruit-laden tables or walking in high discourse over painted floors, but whom we never see in the countinghouse or the shipyard. (LL 208)

Stephen and Bloom in *Ulysses* (1922) both have jobs to which they give very little attention. In the "Nestor" and "Aeolus" chapters, where Stephen is teaching and Bloom is in the newspaper office, they are at work without being absorbed in work. They have the time and the psychological space to wander through Dublin and through a labyrinth of thoughts. The radicalism of rejecting the work ethic can easily be judged by the fact that Kafka, Joyce, and Nabokov all do so by comparing the artist to an insect – so deeply had the nineteenth century established its definition of man as *homo faber*. In *Metamorphosis*

³³ Dusinger, *From Alice to the Lighthouse*, 1: "By the time of Carroll's death in 1898 *Alice* had supplanted *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the popular imagination." The cultural implications of this shift are enormous.

³⁴ *The Annotated Alice*, 38; 69; 139; 307-313. Blake comments on this in *Play, Games, and Sport*, 94-104.

³⁵ Connolly in Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion*, 20-21.

(1913), Gregor Samsa can only avoid getting out of bed and going off to his miserable job by no longer being a human. As one critic has argued, Gregor's "metamorphosis is akin to a rebirth, to a childlike awakening, to self-absorbed games and play [...] This reacquisition of an originary freedom and innocence coincides with Gregor's *Kunsttrieb*, his impulse towards art and self-display."³⁶ Gregor's rocking motion on the bed is "not so much work as play [*Spiel*]"; he swings and plays with pure delight on the walls and ceiling ("blissful"); and he is attracted to his sister Grete's violin-playing [*Spiel*].³⁷ Joyce celebrated his own improvidence in one of the best-known sections of *Finnegans Wake*, the fable Shaun tells of "the Ondt and the Gracehoper", in which Joyce figures himself, as artist, as the ephemeral and impractical grasshopper, "always jigging ajog, hoppy on akkant of his joyicity", whose pure Kantian (akkant) song will last longer than the supposedly eternal work the ant is constructing as a home for himself, like a pharaoh constructing his pyramid.³⁸ John Shade in *Pale Fire* also uses this traditional fable to reassure himself that his art is immortal: "Lafontaine was wrong: / Dead is the mandible, alive the song." (ll.243-4) And in *The Gift*, Nabokov also inverts the fable of the ant and the grasshopper. Fyodor's father gives an account of the symbiotic relationship between the Blue butterfly and ants. While the butterfly is a caterpillar the ants offer it their own larvae as food, extracting a juice from the caterpillar in exchange. But one exotic species of Blue eats the ants ("those failures in the school of experience") and then turns into an impenetrable chrysalis. The butterfly then produces a glue in which the ants get caught

³⁶ Anderson, *Kafka's Clothes*, 138.

³⁷ Kafka, *Stories*, 96; 119; 136.

³⁸ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 414-419; 414.

and die, while the butterfly flies away (105).³⁹ It is a perfect fantasy for the triumph of the artist over the citizen, of improvidence over prudence, of play over work.

³⁹ This is the scene of the empty chrysalis and “gum-logged ant” John Shade sees in *Pale Fire*, ll.239-40.

“A Guide to Berlin”

Both “Breitensträter – Paolino” and “A Guide to Berlin” were addressed to Aikhenvald: “Breitensträter – Paolino” literally, since Nabokov delivered it as a lecture to Aikhenvald and his circle, and “A Guide to Berlin” by Nabokov writing him in. In the fifth section, “The Pub”, the narrator turns out to have been giving the preceding “Guide to Berlin” to a bored friend sitting beside him in a pub. The story is a peculiar guide to the mundane details of Berlin life, made up of five sections, each not more than a few paragraphs in length, each headed by a title: “The Pipes”, “The Streetcar”, “Work”, “Eden”, and “The Pub”. The narrator describes some pipes, as yet not laid beneath the pavement, a streetcar with its conductor, “the various kinds of work” he sees from the streetcar, the Berlin Zoo (Eden), until describing his drinking companion’s unimpressed response: ““That’s a very poor guide”” (S 159). But “A Guide to Berlin” is not a book that sets out to do a job, like a guidebook. Or rather – as is the prerogative of art – the job it performs is one it has invented for itself. It aims to show how the world works, and to depict that work before it has been completed and become hidden.

The key to “A Guide to Berlin” is its central section – in Nabokov’s translation, “Work”, but in his original Russian, *Raboty*, plural: not work, but works, or jobs (SS 1:178). “A young white-capped baker flashes by on his tricycle; there is something angelic about a lad dusted with flour. A van jingles past with cases on its roof containing rows of emerald-glittering empty bottles, collected from taverns.” (S 157-8) The work of keeping the world fed and refilled is beatified. Bread is not earned in the sweat of the brow, but rather, spirit and value are attributed to the flour-dusted angel and the emerald bottles. In the morning light, even the mass accumulation of inherited unhappiness,

suggested by the empty bottles drunk away the previous evening, is sublimated into the life-process and blessed with equanimity. A group of four workmen are pounding in an iron stake, and the “rhythmical succession” of their mallets reminds the narrator of “the four repeated notes of an iron carillon” (157). Music is being made out of work, and so is “A Guide to Berlin”.

Another comparison between work and music is made in the previous section, “The Streetcar”:

The Conductor who gives out tickets has very unusual hands. They work as nimbly as those of a pianist, but instead of being limp, sweaty, and soft-nailed, the ticketman’s hands are so coarse that when you are pouring change into his palm and happen to touch that palm, which seems to have developed a harsh chitinous crust, you feel a kind of moral discomfort. (156)

The narrator finds himself beguiled by the unconscious ease of the conductor and the way he keeps his balance in the swaying car. The crust built up over many years of handling change is an image for the sensuous immediacy of an art that understands itself as the product of a skill evolved by long practice, like playing the piano; an art that is fascinated by the process of habituation by which people humanise the world and learn to balance themselves in an unpredictable, swaying, environment. The knowledge embodied by this art is unconscious and invisible.

The image of the conductor is itself balanced – the tone of “A Guide to Berlin” is one of equilibrium and equanimity – by a description of a giant tortoise at the end of the fourth section, “Eden”: “with its thick, spongy tongue, suggesting somehow that of a cacological idiot slackly vomiting his monstrous speech.” (159) The tortoise, which carries its home on its back, escaped the exile from Eden suffered by man, and the curse of work that followed. Without that exile, and the need to build a new home, the labour of

history and the cultural evolution that enforced sense upon raw sounds, turning them into language, would never have been necessary. Culture is a product of work.

The narrator of “A Guide to Berlin” does not dream of escaping the burden of history. He has no patience for those who would try to revive Eden with the “topical utopias and other inanities that cripple us today” (158). He does not see art as the memory and promise of the Golden Age, that unalienated world prior to pain and labour and conflict. The narrator of “A Guide to Berlin” is too deeply accustomed to making a virtue out of necessity, by aestheticising labour, to need or want to remember paradise. So he is disgusted by the giant tortoise’s Edenic babble, but feels reverence for the tortoise’s shell: “But that dome above it – ah, that dome, that ageless, well-rubbed, dull bronze, that splendid burden of time.” (159)

The narrator cares about work as it is happening, before the job is done. He has woken up early, so as to see the bread before it is in the shops and the bottles before they are back in the pubs. He wants to see the coins in the hand of the conductor before the transaction has been completed and the ticket issued. He is interested in the city pipes that bring water and take away waste, ever since the Romans an emblem for the internal workings of civilisation. But he is interested in the pipes before they have been laid and gone to work, before they have become invisible: “the street’s iron entrails, still *idle*, not yet lowered into the ground, deep under the asphalt” (155).⁴⁰ Children have been playing on the pipes. Only that morning, someone has written a name, Otto, on the snow covering the pipes. The part of the world that is writable and legible is the world seen before it has become functional, while it can still be played with. The narrator is fascinated by work

⁴⁰ My italics.

that is being done but not by work that has been done. He is getting in the way of work, insofar as work aims at a conclusion that will make the work invisible.

Several scholars have persuasively argued that in “A Guide to Berlin” Nabokov was addressing the concept of estrangement or defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*) in Shklovsky’s “Art as a Device”.⁴¹ There Shklovsky quotes a passage from Tolstoy’s diary of 1897, where Tolstoy remarks on cleaning his room with movements “so habitual and unconscious” that he cannot remember them. “If, however, no one was looking, or looking only unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then”, writes Tolstoy, “such lives are as if they had never been.” Shklovsky comments:

And so life disappears, being reckoned as nothing. Habitualisation eats up [*s’edaet*] things, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war. [...] The goal of art is to give the feeling of a thing as seen rather than recognized; the device of art is the device of ‘making things strange’ and the device of complicating form which increases the difficulty and length of perception, for the process of perception in art is a goal to itself and should be prolonged; art is a means of living through the making of a thing, while that which is already made does not matter in art.⁴²

In his 1928 memorial to Aikhenvald, Nabokov would use the same idea that learning to recognise something or someone means making him or it. There he opens with the statement that “Recognising a person means creating a person”, and goes on to describe that act of creation as “labour”, and again as “stubborn, happy labour” (SS 2:667).⁴³

⁴¹ Shroyer, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*, 78-9; Ronen, “Puti Shklovskogo v ‘Putevoditele po Berline’”. Like Shroyer, Ronen treats the link in a fairly cursory fashion, merely pointing on page 169 to how “an alternation and interweaving of the motifs of ‘hiding’ and ‘revealing’, ‘packages’ and ‘goods’, forms and contents, set out in the episode about the pipes, become an important contrapuntal plot of the story.”

⁴² Shklovskii, *O teorii prozy*, 12-13. I have used Maxim Shroyer’s translation for the second part of this quotation. See his *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*, 79.

⁴³ My translation.

Despite his admiration for work, the narrator of “A Guide to Berlin” is interfering with the stubborn happy labour that makes the world recognisable, the labour that clothes and furnishes the world and turns it into a home. He is engaged in the formalist practice of *obnazhenie* or making naked. After the images of workmen making music with their mallets, the baker’s boy like an angel, and the emerald bottles from the pub, the scene changes to register the destructiveness of the narrator’s interest. “A long, black larch tree mysteriously travels by in a cart. The tree lies flat; its tip quivers gently, while the earth-covered roots, enveloped in sturdy burlap, form an enormous beige bomblike sphere at its base.” (158) The narrator’s dangerously radical and explosive (“bomblike”) vision literally uproots the work of time and turns upside down the world made by history, “that splendid burden of time”.

Next, “A postman, who has placed the mouth of a sack under a cobalt-colored mailbox, fastens it on from below, and secretly, invisibly, with a hurried rustling, the box empties and the postman claps shut the square jaws of the bag, now grown full and heavy.” (158) The image of a hungry animal is Shklovskyan. (“Habitualisation eats up things, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war.”) The postal system, like the pipes, allows life to circulate more and more efficiently, so that the world can be digested into information, the immediately recognisable liveable code that keeps the world clean, and keeps human secrets plumbed out of sight, clothed, behind furniture and shut doors. Disrupting this process is essential to modernism. The central metaphor of *Finnegans Wake* is the comparison Joyce makes between his book and an undelivered letter. Here, too, the narrator has positioned himself so as to interfere with the communications system, catching experience before it has been recognised and eaten up and made

invisible. Shklovsky says that in the “algebraic method of thought”, “we see the object as though it were packaged up” – *zapakovannoi*.⁴⁴ The narrator of “A Guide to Berlin” imagines the roots of the tree before they have been “enveloped” in their burlap sack. The Russian word – *zavernutye* – is a different one but the image is the same (SS 1:179). The writer’s job, a job only he can recognise, is to look beneath the envelope of experience and language, and to listen for the “hurried rustling” of letters, the overlaps of sound and meaning (such as the puns on “letters” and “enveloped”) through which the hidden meanings and the buried metaphors that make a particular culture can be dug up and forced into visibility. In his 1925 poem “Postbox”, published alongside “A Guide to Berlin” in *The Return of Chorb*, Nabokov describes himself pressing up to the slot of a postbox to “catch the thrilling din, / As if all the letters hidden there / Were seething melodiously.”⁴⁵ (SS 1:566)

“But perhaps fairest of all are the carcasses, chrome yellow, with pink blotches, and arabesques, piled on a truck, and the man in apron and leather hood with a long neck flap who heaves each carcass onto his back and, hunched over, carries it across the sidewalk into the butcher’s red shop.” (S 158) This is the last sentence of “Work”. Just before being sent into the man-made Eden of the Berlin Zoo, the reader is sharply reminded of the violent element of labour. We are killing and eating the world every day, and that violence is essential to all aspects of work, even to the work of recognition, the work of limiting the shock and adjusting for the sway of experience. Shklovsky speaks of how people are habituated to the fear of war. But Nabokov notices the paradox that violence is hidden by an act of violence. Animals have to be killed and cooked before

⁴⁴ *O teorii prozy*, 12.

⁴⁵ My translation.

they can be eaten, and society can only eat its meat so long as it can forget those raw facts. The leather hood makes the butcher seem like a traditional executioner, whose work society needs but cannot bear to acknowledge directly, and therefore needs to ceremonialise by the regalia of the black leather hood. Here the butcher makes another parallel with the artist. Both are untouchables, both deal in the raw unclean secrets which society wants to hide but also needs to have acknowledged, both are face-to-face with the violence needed for living. This is one reason why the narrator sees arabesques, the emblems of his own ludic art, in the brightly coloured guts of the dead animals.

The guts of the carcasses are defamiliarised as blotches of colour and arabesque forms. But the reader has been given them earlier in “A Guide to Berlin”, when the unlaidd pipes are described as “the street’s iron entrails”, a visual detail taken up by the enveloped tree-roots. This violent image of digging into the bowels of the earth is a traditional one for the condition of work after the Fall. In the passage of *Don Quixote* that Nabokov quotes in his lecture, Cervantes distinguishes the golden age from the age that followed it by saying that “all then was peace, all was concord and friendship; the crooked plowshare had not as yet grievously laid open and pried into the merciful bowels of our first mother” (*LDQ* 44).

“A Guide to Berlin” sets its happier images of labour, the workmen making music with their mallets and the angelic baker, against this reductively functionalist picture of the world as pipes and man as bowels. This is also a vision of work, but one specifically post-lapsarian, in which to be and to act is to work, and to work is to be reminded of God’s curse. The image of pipes as entrails suggests that the functionalist mode of thought is a product of human self-disgust. Aikhenvald had argued that even when it has

been aestheticised, the vision of work is still an expression of masochism, that when we “glorify the beauty and greatness of labour” we are “kissing the rod that beats us”.⁴⁶ In the image of the world as bowels Nabokov provided a starting point from which the aesthetic of labour studied in “A Guide to Berlin” can be subjected to a similar critique.

In “Breitensträter – Paolino”, the narrator could only see blood as a reflection of his own writing, as red ink. We were reminded that a world in which blood plays is one in which blood is not bloody. In “A Guide to Berlin”, a world in which the mallets of the workmen make music is one in which the guts spilling out of animal carcasses are only blotches of colour. The visions of work and play in “Breitensträter – Paolino” and “A Guide to Berlin” are presented to us as diametric opposites, but they both spiral around a central image of pain and mortality which resists being taken up and transformed into art and calls into question their bold contrast of work and play.

At the end of “A Guide to Berlin” the narrator seems to exit from his vision of work. He is back in the pub, a place of idleness. Perhaps it is the same pub as the one visited in “The Fight”. After all, the name someone had marked in the snow, Otto, is the same as that of the publican of the earlier story. He looks at a child, and imagines seeing the world through his eyes, not yet blinded to its strangeness by the habits of working life. “He is now looking our way. From there he can see the inside of the tavern – the green island of the billiard table, the ivory ball he is forbidden to touch, the metallic gloss of the bar, a pair of fat truckers at one table and the two of us at another.” This scene of play is what the child will remember in years to come. In the story’s final words, it is “somebody’s future recollection.” (160) The narrator leaves behind the philosophical profundities that he had laboriously delved in the main body of the story. In this shift to

⁴⁶ *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 6.

the child's point of view, and to a set of memories which have no meaning beyond the personal, there is a shift back to an aesthetic of play, as if, as the narrator of "The Fight" argues, "perhaps what matters is not the human pain or joy at all but, rather, the play of shadow and light on a live body, the harmony of trifles assembled on this particular day, at this particular moment, in a unique and inimitable way". (S 146)

Nabokov Between Work and Play, 1930-1934: *Glory, Despair and Invitation to a Beheading*

I

In a subtle passage of the introduction to the *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov describes it as a tragedy that in Russia an advanced culture

arrived too fast in a country famous for its misfortunes, famous for the misery of its numberless humble lives – but that is another story.

Or perhaps it is not. In the process of sketching a picture of the history of recent Russian literature, or more precisely in the process of defining the forces which struggled for possession of the artist's soul, I may, if I am lucky, tap the deep pathos that pertains to all authentic art because of the breach between its eternal values and the sufferings of a muddled world – this world, indeed, can hardly be blamed for regarding literature as a luxury or a toy unless it can be used as an up-to-date guidebook. (*LRL* 2)

This is the logic that in December 1925 had led Nabokov to frame his study of work as a guidebook, and to set that study against “Breitensträter – Paolino”, with whose trick structure the reader can play as if it were a toy. But Nabokov now contends that the antithesis of work and play, which he had handled so brilliantly in 1925, is in its origins a drab product of utilitarianism, and, in turn, of human suffering. Work is degraded to whatever is “useful”, in the sense of conducing to the reproduction of life, while all activities that do not pay or at least serve socially recognised needs, whether watching television or writing poetry, are grouped together as non-work and treated as a regression to childhood and play. Nabokov neatly sums up how the thought that joins work and play trivialises literature when he pictures Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading* working in a toy factory. Cincinnatus is making dolls of nineteenth century writers for schoolgirls to play with, limiting art to the sphere of what is female and childish, not serious, adult, and male:

In the shop he worked with intricate trifles and worked on rag dolls for schoolgirls; here there was little hairy Pushkin in a fur carrick, and ratlike Gogol in a flamboyant waistcoat, and old little Tolstoy with his fat nose, in a peasant's smock, and many others, as for example Dobrolyubov, in spectacles without lenses and all buttoned up. (24)

Nabokov might seem to have avoided writing guidebooks and socially improving tracts only by accepting the disparaging view of modern society that art is a toy. But ever since Schiller first theorised art as play, it has been part of the charm and power of this position that it allows its adherents to subvert society's condescension towards art, by revaluing play, and in the process not only vindicating art but also exposing the shaky logic of the utilitarianism on whose authority art had been deprecated. Any art that refuses to be trivialised as a toy – especially one that prides itself on being a serious toy – will subvert the contrast between work and play and the assumptions it encodes. Play and work can be interpreted as useless and useful activities, but the distinction can also be made between what is free or spontaneous and what is necessary and mechanical, and by this logic play may come to be considered more useful than work. Pushkin's Mozart joins together these two different senses of play – as the free and the useless – declaring, in Nabokov's 1941 translation of "Mozart and Salieri", that artists are:

the chosen ones, the happy idlers, we
who have no use for what is merely useful,
who worship only beauty⁴⁷

The play on "use" here is Nabokov's contribution to the lines. Pushkin's Russian does not repeat the word: "*Prenebregayushchikh prezrennoi pol'zoi*". In Nabokov's reading of Pushkin, the uses artists imagine call into question what is "merely useful". Mozart in Pushkin's drama merely ironises the logic that treats art as useless and artists as idlers,

⁴⁷ See Nabokov's translation in *Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev: Poems*, 34. The view of Mozart as an artist of play survived after Pushkin: the Swiss theologian Karl Barth was to say of Mozart that "he plays and does not cease to play". Quoted by Updike in *Hugging the Shore*, 826.

revelling in the seemingly derogatory position assigned to him. But Nabokov goes further, disturbing the contrast between use and art, work and play, by attending to the strangeness and inexplicability of art in a society of jobholders.

Is art work or play? Senselessly, artists waste all the time they ought to spend working. Instead they devote great ability and effort to an activity that is really a hobby, or an entertainment for children. They are trying to make a profession out of what is really play. Worse, some of them cannot even make a living by their art, because they refuse or are unable to supply any recognised public need. At least guidebooks help people to find their way around foreign cities, an obvious and recognised need. As a difficult activity art may, admittedly, make a claim to being work, since it is understood that work is exhausting and difficult. Sometimes art deals with serious matters, such as the ills of society, which some artists claim to be working to redress. Art is like work in this regard, because work is serious and fixes things. But art builds nothing and rarely pays. It makes nothing happen, but diverts people from producing food and shelter and making a better society. It makes complications where things had been functioning simply. It explores issues endlessly, like a child playing with plasticine but never making any recognisable shape out of the material. Given that an artist has come to no conclusion and achieved no goal, one might say that he has not worked and even that he has not *done* anything.

On this question Nabokov was ambivalent. He devoted his career to exploring the idea of art as a game, and he vigorously opposed the crude utilitarianism that often underwrites the view that art is work. But he also liked at times to insist that the creation of art was difficult work. In an interview from 1968 he said: "I work hard, I work long,

on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work in his turn – so much the better. Art is difficult. Easy art is what you see at modern exhibitions of things and doodles.” (SO 115) And in a letter of 1930 Nabokov told his brother Kirill, who was dabbling with writing poetry, that if “a poem is only a carefree game to you [...] then forget it, for you are wasting your time [...] one must first of all realize what a difficult, responsible job it is” (SL 10). Nabokov did not want to think of literature in either of the socially sanctioned ways, as a profession or as a hobby. In an interview conducted in 1964, he said: “Frankly, I never thought of letters as a career. Writing has always been for me a blend of dejection and high spirits, a torture and a pastime – but I never expected it to be a source of income.” (SO 46) But *The Gift* holds up to ridicule Shchyogolev, a businessman who fancies, “if only I had a tick or two, what a novel I’d whip off” (172), and the lawyer for whom Fyodor’s beloved Zina works, a man who writes “little books in German on French themes” in his spare time (176).

Several times in his novels of the twenties and thirties, Nabokov embodied the ambiguity of his own position as an artist by giving his characters jobs in which the distinction between work and play is somehow blurred. In *Invitation to a Beheading* Cincinnatus works in a toy factory. In *King, Queen, Knave*, Franz’s work is selling sports goods in Dreyer’s department store. In *Glory*, Martin supports himself by working as a tennis coach. Nabokov also allegorises the professionalisation of art in the fact that Luzhin is a professional chess player. John Updike has written that *The Luzhin Defense* is “a work-epic of chess (as *Moby-Dick* is a work-epic of whaling)”⁴⁸, but to say this too confidently is to erase one of the problems Nabokov has set in *The Luzhin Defense*: Luzhin’s state of mind cannot be understood conventionally as either work or play. Chess

⁴⁸ Afterword to *The Luzhin Defense*, 261.

satisfies Luzhin's deep aversion to spontaneity, and on that basis is the opposite of play. But that does not necessarily make it work. To a Soviet visitor it is incomprehensible that Luzhin should occupy his life with chess while "They're working at home, building." (210) Luzhin's future mother-in-law is appalled by her daughter's suitor and thinks that "Luzhin's profession was trivial, absurd [...] It seemed to her that in former times, in the Russia of her youth, a man occupying himself exclusively with chess would have been an unthinkable phenomenon." (111) Luzhin's wife is at a loss when asked what Luzhin does or is (211). Art is neither an action nor an identity. When she first meets him, she is prepared to consider him an enigmatic genius, like a poet or a musician, but she can only make sense of "genius" as an enormous capacity for work. "This work was beyond the powers of her imagination, since there was nothing definite to link it to, neither an easel nor a piano, and it was just such a definite emblem of art that her thoughts reached out for [...] she fancied the presence of a mighty fatigue after undivulged but surely miraculous labours."⁴⁹

II

Nabokov wrote *The Luzhin Defense* in 1929. The next year, after writing *The Eye* (1930), he returned, in *Glory*, to the irrationality of art in a culture of work and play. This time, however, he not only allegorised the riddle of art in modern society, but projected it onto his own early adult life. In *Glory* Nabokov wrote an account of his youth, focused on the years between 1919 and 1923, taking work and play as terms in which to analyse his own late adolescent search for an authentic form of existence, and finding both terms unsatisfactory. It is the only one of Nabokov's books written with a view to what he

⁴⁹ TLD 88; 90-91.

would later define as “the adolescent purpose” of literature, that is, of “learning to live” (LL 381).

In January 1923 Nabokov’s first fiancée, Svetlana Siewert, was forced by her parents to break off the engagement because of his poor financial prospects (RY 202). That summer, processing this loss and the death of his father, Nabokov chose to go as a fruit-picker in the south of France, the cure of work that Levin recommends in *Anna Karenina*.⁵⁰ *Glory* deals with this time in Nabokov’s life, as well as his time of sport at Cambridge. It resembles *Anna Karenina* in that it examines work and play as alternative modes of life, before leaving both behind in favour of an act of faith which, being unstatable, goes outside the scope of words, forcing the novel to an end. After a brief introduction, it follows its protagonist, Martin Edelweiss, from his emigration from Russia and his first love affair, through to his time at Cambridge, where he plays football and boxes. When he leaves Cambridge he moves to Germany and works as a tennis coach there, before working as a farm labourer in the south of France. Finally he decides to cross back into the Soviet Union, disappearing from the novel and possibly dying. This is Martin’s “exploit” – the most literal translation of *Podvig*, the title of the book in Russian. In his 1970 preface to the English translation Nabokov wrote about his earlier self as if about another man:

‘Fulfillment’ would have been, perhaps, an even better title for the novel: Nabokov cannot be unaware that the obvious translation of *podvig* is ‘exploit’, and indeed, it is under that title that his *Podvig* is listed by bibliographers; but if you once perceive in ‘exploit’ the verb ‘utilize’, gone is the *podvig*, the inutile deed of renown. (*Glory* 10)

⁵⁰ RY 208-9. See Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, 318, where Levin tells Koznyshev: “I am thinking of enriching Medicine with a new word: *Arbeitskur!*”

It is suggestive that there is no word for *podvig* in English, and that to approximate it Nabokov is forced to resort to off-the-peg cultural forms so inexact as to be nearly opposite – “the glory of personal pluck; the glory of a radiant martyr.” (10) Martin is trying to cross back into the Russia of his childhood, where a *podvig* might still mean something and be understood.

Nabokov tells us in his introduction that in Martin, he set out to create a character with “keen sensitivity” but without artistic talent (10). When Martin is writing to his mother,

Suddenly, in his mind, he saw the mailman walking across the snow; the snow crunched slightly, and blue footprints remained on it. He described it thus: ‘My letter will be brought by the mailman. It is raining here.’ He thought it over and crossed out the mailman, leaving only the rain. (74)

The presence of the mailman shows the reader why Martin is not an artist: he misses the moment that the narrator of “A Guide to Berlin” catches, of seeing experience before it has been delivered, registered, and filed away out of sight. Nevertheless Martin is driven to fulfil an element of aesthetic consciousness in himself that is somehow always being cancelled out and being made invisible. Although he cannot write it down, he tries to live it out, and this search leads to his inexplicable act of self-sacrifice. Across the border is not only the Soviet Union but the “Zoorland” of his imagination, “a land where ordinary mortals were not admitted” (138), the invisible transcendence drawn on by art. Grey and eventless though it seems, the whole novel, and not just the exploit at the end, reveals itself to a patient and sympathetic reading as the drama of Martin’s search for fulfilment.

Martin’s *podvig* is analogous to art as Nabokov sees it, because it has no use that his culture can recognise. While he is at Cambridge, Martin turns to two writers whose visions were non-utilitarian, though in opposite ways: Carlyle and Horace. Carlyle was a

prophet of work, but of work for its own sake, as self-sacrificial heroism, and he was a fierce critic of utilitarianism. Martin associates Horace with a life of leisured conversation.⁵¹ It is a mark of the sheer untimeliness of Martin's quest that he can only conceptualise it in terms of two such neglected authors, and two such antithetical visions. No one else can see what he is looking for. The girl he is courting, Sonia, says, "'You're nothing, just a travelling playboy.'" (136) His Uncle Henry puts pressure on Martin to take a job in Geneva and opposes his going back to Berlin: in a significant phrase, he says "'I can't see what you're going to do there'". Martin replies: "'Suppose I do nothing'" (124). Martin is so dedicated to a goal which even he cannot conceptualise that he is willing to violate his culture's idea of what counts as doing. The problem comes up again when he leaves Berlin and is on a train to Strasbourg. He falls into conversation with a Frenchman, who wants to know why Martin is travelling. Is he a commercial traveller, or an engineer, or working in the colonies, or on a scientific expedition? Martin can't explain it himself, and tries to present it as a mystery. The Frenchman finally concludes that Martin is an explorer and record-seeker, which he thinks is very English. Martin replies: "'Yes, you may have put your finger on it. And yet even that, even *le sport*, is not all. There are besides – how shall I say? – glory, love, tenderness for the soil, a thousand rather more mysterious feelings.'" (145)

In the real, hidden, plot of *Glory*, Martin moves from love through sport and work ("tenderness for the soil") towards glory, casting off each of these shapes of existence as old identities but never quite leaving any of them behind. Each of the paradigms segues into the next, so that each metamorphosis involves a moment of violence, and a moment of misrecognition. Martin cannot understand why he is always reminded of his first

⁵¹ *Glory* 65; 135.

sexual encounter by a statuette of “a soccer player dribbling a ball”, but both the football and the boxing scenes at Cambridge are coloured for him by his rivalry with his friend Darwin for the attention of Sonia, the girl whose interest they are both trying to win.⁵² The last sports scene, the boxing match, and the first work scene, where Martin is teaching tennis, are calculatedly ambiguous. Unlike the description of boxing in “Breitensträter – Paolino”, the scene of boxing is a dehumanising struggle for survival, as Darwin’s name suggests, with the two boys effectively fighting for a mate. On these grounds it might be classified under the vision of toil as Nabokov sets it out in *Speak, Memory*, which “leads man back to the boar”, and not as sport. There is a moment when Martin looks at Darwin and sees something that “had no human name at all, but had become simply a pink, slippery, rapidly moving mass that must be punched with every last bit of strength.” (118)

When Martin moves to Berlin he encounters a situation entirely unlike the idleness of Cambridge. It is 1923, “that year of monstrous inflation”. It is a mark of how different *Glory* is from the norm in Nabokov, that Martin is able to feel sympathy for the “tired, hungry working people” (128) (Germans, at that), whom he sees on the tram. He is proud to be able to make his money from coaching tennis, though “the labour was arduous”.

At first Martin would get so tired, his right shoulder would ache and his feet burn so badly, that as soon as he had earned his five or six dollars he would go to bed. His hair grew lighter and his skin darker from the sun, so that he seemed a negative of himself. His landlady, a major’s widow from whom he concealed his profession so as to seem more mysterious, supposed that the poor fellow – like many cultivated people, alas – was obliged to work as a laborer, lugging rocks, for instance (hence the suntan), and was embarrassed about it, as would be any refined person. (129)

⁵² *Glory* 44; 104-8; 114-9.

But she is mistaken. Martin does not want to seem more cultured than he is. He wants to seem more romantic than he is. The self-obliteration of his labour appeals to him as a foreshadowing of the heroic self-sacrifice he wants. His work turns him inside out, “so that he seemed a negative of himself”.

When Sonia turns Martin down again, he takes a train and gets off in pursuit of the promise seemingly offered by some lights in the distance, which he is told come from a town called Mognac. He signs on as a labourer on a farm. The pages that follow are a pure hymn to unalienated labour:

Far below him the lucerne rippled in the wind, from above the glowing blue pressed upon him, sliver-veined leaves rustled close to his cheek, and the oilcloth-lined basket suspended from a bough gradually acquired weight as it got filled with the glossy-black fruit Martin pulled off by its taut stems. After the cherries had been harvested came sun-steeped apricots, and precious peaches which had to be tenderly cradled in one's palm lest they get bruised. (151-2)

This is the “tenderness for the soil” Martin mentioned to the French man he met on the train. In Berlin rough labour was alienated, “black” labour, and turned him into a negative of himself, but here work is not exhausting and meets with no resistance from nature, which seems to participate in the labour and offers its fruits up with spontaneous generosity, as in the Golden Age. Martin is mixed with the earth, “his back already the hue of terra cotta” (152), and he finds satisfaction in coming to look like the other labourers. In this passage, unique in Nabokov, we seem to be getting the raw ideal of work that Nabokov deals with, more originally and paradoxically, in “A Guide to Berlin”.

Andrew Field says that “the first clear sign of Martin's intention [to return to Russia] is a Tolstoyan excursion to live and work in a French worker's community.”⁵³ In fact it is not a worker's community but an ordinary farm, though there is a certain amount

⁵³ Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 121.

of communist sentiment in Martin's delight in ordinary labour and fellowship with the other workers. But Martin sees this as an alternative to crossing the border into the Soviet Union: "And, indeed, would it not be better to dismiss the perilous, daredevil project, to renounce the desire to peer into the merciless Zoorland night, and to get settled with a young wife right here, on this wedge of fertile soil waiting for an industrious master?" (153) The scene is much more idyllic than Tolstoy's description of Levin mowing, and indeed it turns out to have been a delusion. Martin finds out that he was never at Molignac, leading us to conclude that he was not where he thought he was, psychologically as well as geographically. When he was losing himself in work, his happiness was a mirage cast by his passion for self-abnegation. But the ideal of work is not completely dismissed, only displaced deeper into consciousness. Where Martin had poured his stymied power of love into the soil, now he is driven back to Sonia, because "muffled work went on in the depths of his consciousness".⁵⁴ And when Martin sets off on his impossible, perilous attempt to cross the border, even then he lets it be thought that he is going off to be a factory worker outside Berlin (172). Zoorland is both the name for aesthetic transcendence and a parody of the workers' state of the Soviet Union and its rhetoric of equality (138-9). Martin's *podvig*, which appears in turns as an act of boyish adventure, martyrdom, love, sport, and work, is something more mysterious than all of these. Martin cannot name the invisible space he is moving towards, but a reader of Nabokov's other novels will recognise it as the otherworld of art, and see in *Glory* the first part of Nabokov's artistic autobiography, the story of how he had to find an authentic form of life before he could begin to become an artist. But the ambiguity at the end of *Glory* as to whether Martin has fulfilled his aesthetic ideal, or died, or gone over to

⁵⁴ *Glory*, 171; SS 3:234: "v glubine soznaniia proiskhodila glukhaia rabota".

the workers' state, is one that Nabokov would develop in his subsequent novels, especially *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, where the "eternal values" implied by art overlap uncomfortably with the utopianism of the Nazi and Soviet regimes.

III

In *Despair*, written in 1932, Nabokov is concerned almost exclusively with play. Hermann Hermann, a Russian businessman living in Berlin, seizes for himself a world not filled with play but poisonously glutted with images of play.⁵⁵ Coming across a tramp, Felix, whom he believes resembles him exactly, Hermann decides to dress Felix as himself and murder him, collecting the life insurance money. Not only will this game with someone else's life buy him his escape to a life of leisure and play; like Thomas De Quincey in his "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts" (1827), Hermann affects to believe that murder is itself a work of art.⁵⁶ Quoting loosely from Pushkin's poem, "'Tis time, my dear, 'tis time", Hermann says, "Long have I, weary slave, been planning my escape to the far land of art and the translucent grape." (D 111) Hermann believes that by virtue of his crime alone he will have passed into the land of art and the translucent grape. He is "a lawbreaker of genius", and his artistry was anticipated by the "queer games I played" in childhood, and his "thirst for falsehood" (49).

Hermann thinks he is the master of his game, whereas Nabokov's true artists, such as Fyodor and John Shade, understand that the play of the artist is part of the play of the world, and that every player is the toy in another, larger, game. In a particularly striking image, used twice, two girls are playing marbles. For a moment, Hermann

⁵⁵ D 64; 96; 100; 145; 153.

⁵⁶ See Davydov in Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion*, 91.

realises the full significance of the Nietzschean picture of the world as a child at play: that one cannot escape or master the game. For a moment, as he “stood looking at that concentrated, silent, and minute game, I somehow found myself thinking that Felix could not come for the simple reason that he was a product of my imagination” (66). But Hermann’s hubris wins out, and he is drawn fatally into the game played by his imagination, in which he is a toy.⁵⁷ Hermann thinks he is playing with death but “playful Death” (155) is playing with him. His belief that art is crime is of a piece with his assumption that God could not exist, because if he did he would hardly “restrict his game to the dreadfully trite laws of mechanics, chemistry, mathematics.” (90) Hermann does not understand that rules make the game; that without laws the world could not exist.

Nabokov positions Hermann at an ideological crossroads between play and work, aestheticism and Marxism. Like *Lolita*, *Despair* is about aestheticism. The essential plot idea of *Despair* refers to De Quincey, and Hermann explicitly links himself to Wilde and Swinburne.⁵⁸ Alexander Dolinin has argued that *Despair* parodies the “decadent Nietzschean writings of Russian Silver Age period with their concepts of an artist as an immoral demiurge projecting his ‘creative dreams’ upon malleable reality”.⁵⁹ But in addition to his decadent and aesthetic affiliations, Hermann is also a Marxist. He enthuses about the “new world, where all men will resemble one another as Hermann and Felix did; a world of Helixes and Fermanns; a world where the worker fallen dead at the feet of his machine will be at once replaced by his perfect double smiling the serene smile of perfect socialism.” (133)

⁵⁷ For Hermann’s mind as a play of thought, see *D* 17: “Whiffs of thoughts [...] played, as it were, on the outside of my mind”.

⁵⁸ *D* 49; 96.

⁵⁹ Dolinin, “Caning of Modernist Profaners”, 44.

In December 1931, Nabokov met a Soviet writer, Alexander Tarasov-Rodionov, who had been sent to Berlin to persuade émigré writers to return to the Soviet Union. Tarasov-Rodionov was the author of a novel, *Chocolate*, which, in Brian Boyd's description, "commends the Party's decision to kill a good Communist whom they know to be unjustly accused, in order – and here comes the stirring moral – to impress on the masses that the Revolution can afford to spare no one."⁶⁰ Nabokov seems to have seized on this as a way of suggesting that Soviet communism treated the lives of workers as consumable commodities, like chocolate, and worked it into *Despair*: Hermann Hermann is a manufacturer of chocolate.

Between 1930 and 1933 six million Germans, or a third of the labour force, lost their jobs.⁶¹ On January 2, 1932, on the front page of the Russian émigré journal *Poslednie novosti*, Nabokov wrote:

It takes a person idle, cold, and with an untenanted heart to turn from another's need or simply not notice it. Fortunately such people are few. It is impossible to imagine that in today's immeasurably difficult, hungry times anyone with a healthy conscience will refuse the utmost aid to the unemployed.⁶²

A dark joke behind *Despair* is that times are so bad that people are prepared to die for a job; the joke is made darker by the fact that Felix does not know he is going to die. On Marx's terms, this world is the apotheosis of alienated labour. Hermann points out that one's soul is one's property, and imagines Felix wanting to make a gift of his death.⁶³ Hermann is one of Nabokov's vulgarians or *poshlyaks*, those who, Nabokov says in *Nikolai Gogol*, "believe that the acme of human happiness is purchasable" (NG 67). The

⁶⁰ RY 375. Nabokov talked about the meeting in a 1966 interview: SO 98.

⁶¹ Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich*, 239.

⁶² Quoted in RY 376.

⁶³ D 107; 119.

world of the commodity is a world in which Hermann can play with the lives of dead workers, like Gogol's Chichikov buying and selling dead souls.

The twist in *Despair* is that only Hermann sees any resemblance between Felix and himself. What Hermann recognises in Felix, though he dares not see it, is the bedraggled image of his own despair, hidden beneath arabesques of vanity and self-congratulation. Murdering Felix is a displaced act of suicide. The soul turned into an exchangeable commodity is a human being deprived of his essence, and this is the liberation from his own self-disgust that Hermann craves. Hermann is like a man throwing a rope ladder up into the air, climbing up it, and then pulling it away after himself. By sacrificing and expending Felix, Hermann hopes to cut himself free from his previous workaday self, to lose all memory of himself.

In *The Eye*, Nabokov had already written a Dostoevskyan story about a man so unable to bear his self-image that he splits off from himself. This previous abandoned self is described in the third person as Smurov, this name suggesting the Russian word for ant, *muravei*. The I or eye which breaks free of that self is, implicitly, unantlike, able to move in three dimensions, a butterfly of play. In *Despair*, similarly, the old quotidian self that is abandoned is thought of as the part of the self that labours. When Hermann first proposes to Felix that he should pretend to be him, he compares it to the work of being an understudy for an actor on a film, as if Felix's labour will underwrite Hermann's capacity to play free of himself (79). Here it is worth recalling Nabokov's remark, in his obituary for Aikhenvald, that "Recognising a person means creating a person", an act of creation which is "stubborn, happy labour" (SS 2:667). Hermann's lack of self-knowledge and his

blindness to the world around him is a part of his doomed attempt to live out an absolute form of play cut completely free of work.

However Hermann is not altogether wrong to see an affinity between himself and Felix. Felix is suspicious of Hermann's commission so long as Hermann represents it as "child's play" (80) and as fun, but readily agrees once Hermann says "I babbled about movies only to test you [...] I am no actor whatsoever, but a shrewd, hard, businessman.'" (85) Although Hermann believes in play and Felix in work, their apparently opposite convictions rest on a shared set of assumptions. On the first page of *Despair* Hermann says that "philosophic speculation is the invention of the rich." (13) This turns out to be an aphorism stolen from Felix, who says the same thing sixty pages later – not only of philosophy but of religion and poetry too. "The chief thing is Nature. Politics, for instance, don't attract me. And generally speaking ... the world, you know, is *dirt*.'" (70) That is, reality is matter, and everything else is a lie. Hermann subscribes to this, believing that he is born to literature because he was a liar as a boy: "Not a day passed without my telling some lie. I lied as a nightingale sings, ecstatically, self-obliviously; revelling in the new life-harmony which I was creating." (47) It is precisely this logic that Nabokov is trying to dismantle when he claims in *Speak, Memory* that "The world was made on a Sunday." (228) To Nabokov, the "world" that matters is the world created by civilisation under conditions of leisure, and this world is no less real than dirt. Hermann and Felix are mirror images of one another, as far as their author is concerned, since they both believe that reality is dirt and art a lie. Hermann's idea of play is not Nabokov's. It is only the inversion of a labouring ethos that equates reality with matter. It is the shadow cast by a mound of earth.

The allusions in *Despair* to Pushkin's lyric "'Tis time, my dear, 'tis time" speak against Hermann's idea of play. The poem, which Nabokov translated in full in his 1965 introduction to the novel, so that non-Russian readers could catch the point, ends with a very surprising thought:

Long have I, weary slave, been contemplating flight
To a remote abode of work and pure delight.⁶⁴

The word that caught Nabokov's attention here was work (*trudov*), where one might have expected Pushkin to invoke play as the contrast to slavery and as the expression of his bold demand for freedom from the constraints of the rabble. "Work" is so surprising here that Hermann blocks it out. The first time he misquotes the poem he mentions "'the abode of pure delight' – as that Pushkin poem has it." (61) The second time, it is "Long have I, weary slave, been planning my escape to the far land of art and the translucent grape." (111) The third time, "I'm sick of everything and yearn for a remote land, where I'll devote myself to contemplation and poultry breeding." (120) Hermann's play is a gross and violent parody of Pushkinian play – and not least because it excludes work from its aspirations.

IV

In 1934 Nabokov, deep in his research on Chernyshevsky for *The Gift*, put that work aside to write *Invitation to a Beheading*. Like *Despair*, *Invitation to a Beheading* contains an allusion to a famous lyric of longing for the beyond: Baudelaire's "Invitation au Voyage". But whereas in *Despair* Hermann's wish for a utopian realm where desire would not be constrained by law is blocked, not least by the value Pushkin places on work, in *Invitation to a Beheading* Nabokov imagines that utopia. If Baudelaire's opiate

⁶⁴ Nabokov's translation, *D* 11.

vision of voluptuous ease, or even Chernyshevsky's Fourierist fantasy, were realised, Nabokov speculates, the result would be a sickly nightmare, a world of childish cruelty in which nothing and no-one would be reliable. Cincinnatus has been imprisoned and sentenced to death for the crime of being the only opaque person in a frictionless world of transparent people. Because there are no rules, his wife is perpetually unfaithful and one of his gaolers, Pierre, cheats him at chess. The novel itself imitates this absence of rule in its many factual inconsistencies: on one page Cincinnatus moves a table which, two pages later, is bolted to the floor.⁶⁵ Without rules neither a novel nor a world can hold together.

One of Fyodor's hidden poems in *The Gift* ends: "Oh, swear to me to put in dreams your trust, and to believe in fantasy alone, and never let your soul in prison rust, nor stretch your arm and say: a wall of stone." (G 164) So long as Cincinnatus believes in the world around him as a fixed reality, he is imprisoned by walls of stone, by complicity with the appropriately named Pierre, and the only way out is death. *Invitation to a Beheading* is structured as a series of unsuccessful escape attempts, all of which only lead back to the prison forged in his own mind. One of those false escape routes is a mythic past – whose sequel seems to be presented to him in the pages of an old magazine:

It was a bound magazine, published once upon a time, in a barely remembered age. [...] That was a remote world, where the simplest objects sparkled with youth and an inborn insolence, proceeding from the reverence that surrounded the labour devoted to their manufacture. Those were years of universal fluidity; well-oiled metals performed silent soundless acrobatics [...] Everything was lustrous and shimmering; everything gravitated passionately towards a kind of perfection whose definition was the absence of friction. [...] Yes, matter has grown old and weary, and little has survived of those legendary days. (43)

⁶⁵ IB 25; 27.

Cincinnatus tries to get his bearings by imagining that his frictionless world is the result of technological progress, the idea being Aikhenvald's hope that "Labour is overcome by labour".⁶⁶ But then Cincinnatus wonders whether he is "misattributing to the epoch the characteristics of its photographs. The wealth of shadows, the torrents of light ..." (40) Photographic realism is the dominant aesthetic mode of Cincinnatus's world, and he realises that the technological reproductions of photography and industry re-create as illusions the unique substantial presences they destroy in reality. To accept the history presented in these old magazines, which might have been forged by the new regime, would mean accepting this prison of substanceless spectres as inevitable.

Two alternative hopes of escape tantalise Cincinnatus for much of the book. One is that presented by Emmie, the prison director's young daughter, a figure of free play. She bounces a ball against a wall, a game without rules (64), and draws Cincinnatus a picture of her leading him out of prison (52). But the attraction she exerts on Cincinnatus is charged with a perverse sexual desire that anticipates *Lolita*, and she becomes cruel in her play, mockingly imitating a crippled boy (89). Meanwhile Cincinnatus sporadically hears noises that he hopes might be those of a tunnel being dug under his cell, which start up as if in answer to his cry, "'Will no one save me?'" (107) "Whoever it was he worked furiously and clattered shamelessly" (135). While Emmie symbolises the redemptive promise of play, the tunnel symbolises that of work, work understood as a struggle against resistant materials, literalising the classical image of post-lapsarian labour as a digging into the womb of mother nature: "yes, the night was impassive and stony – but within it, in its deep, dark womb, undermining its might, something was hacking its way through that was quite foreign to the night's substance and order." (118)

⁶⁶ *Pokhvala prazdnosti*, 9.

It turns out that Pierre and the prison director Rodrig Ivanovich had been digging the tunnel as a prank to mock Cincinnatus's hopes of escape. They emerge congratulating themselves on "all this work", which reflects the rhetoric of labour that Pierre has been articulating all along, speaking of sex as work. Pierre acclaims the "labourer of love": "The pleasure of love', said M'sieur Pierre, 'is achieved by means of the most beautiful and healthful of all known physical exercises. I said "achieved" but perhaps "extracted" would be even more apt, inasmuch as we are dealing precisely with a systematic and persistent extraction of pleasure buried in the very bowels of the belaboured creature." (129)

Immediately after the tunnel has been revealed as a false hope, Emmie takes Cincinnatus on an escape route that leads back into the prison director's dining room. Like work, play seems to promise escape from the prison of the world, but here it only re-imprisons. *Invitation to a Beheading* is a nightmare allegory not just of tyranny, but also of life itself as a prison, and in it Nabokov re-uses the pattern of *Glory*, exploring work and play as possible means of redemption, before rejecting both. Cincinnatus has to realise that only he can save himself, and that he can do so only by ceasing to fear death and by refusing to believe in the reality of the material world, that is, by declining the invitation to his own beheading. At the end of *Invitation to a Beheading* Cincinnatus, like Alice at the end of *Alice in Wonderland*, refuses to believe in his own execution, and "made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him." (191)

Yet it is part of the nightmare contradictoriness in *Invitation to a Beheading* that work and play are hardly distinguishable. M'Sieur Pierre lectures Cincinnatus on the

“labourer of love” (129) and flexes his muscles at him, but in most of the novel his gaolers have about them a childish callous playfulness that seems to be a distant echo of a feeble clowning, the parody of play, that Fyodor in *The Gift* detects in Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov. Cincinnatus is promised “a pal, to play and work with”, as if the two terms really were interchangeable (41). It is difficult to make a clear logic out of the ideas in *Invitation to a Beheading* and to dispel its nightmare. The text by its indeterminacy demands real, endless work from its reader, its game cannot be reduced to rule. As in a Piranesi prison, the lines will never meet.

Invitation to a Beheading does however gesture towards redemption in an ideal that dissolves the distinction between work and play. The most likely source for Cincinnatus’s name is Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, whose portrait of the nihilist Bazarov was closely linked to Chernyshevsky, and which Nabokov would have therefore re-read in 1933 or 1934, when he began his research on Chernyshevsky. In *Fathers and Sons*, Vasily Ivanovich says: “I am here, as you can see, like a kind of Cincinnatus, digging out a bed for some late turnips. The time has now come – and thank God it has! – for each one of us to obtain our means of survival with our own hands and not rely on others. One’s got to do one’s own work.”⁶⁷ The ideal of self-sufficient labour is encoded in Cincinnatus’s name, but by returning the Russian debate to the classical ideal of retirement evoked by the Roman general Cincinnatus, Nabokov points towards a form of unalienated labour scarcely distinguishable from leisure.

⁶⁷ *Fathers and Sons*, 122.

Nabokov's Critique of Work and Praise of Idleness, 1933-1940: *The Gift*

I

In a speech given in September 1933, Hitler said: "I ask you to bear in mind that we are living in an age which perceives its very essence in work itself; that we wish to build up a state which values work for its own sake and holds the worker in high regard because he is fulfilling a duty to the nation."⁶⁸ An important plank of the Nazi platform was the promise to create jobs and to restore the dignity of manual labour. "One of the best known propaganda images of the Third Reich" was the picture of Hitler shovelling earth.⁶⁹ "Subscribing to a labor theory of value as extreme as that of Marx, Hitler defined 'capital' (workshops, factories, and machines) as embodied labor [...] the real enemy responsible for the corruption and degradation of honorable toil was 'unproductive' loan and stock exchange capitalism, that is, 'Jewish' finance capital."⁷⁰

The common theme of modern anti-semitism, that Jews only exchange goods and do not make them, can be applied to artists if they are judged according to the assumption that only those activities which contribute to the life process are productive. The distinction between labour and writing can crystallise into the thought that because the writer makes nothing, he is a parasite and a forger. This is the idea of Nabokov's short story "The Leonardo", written in 1933, the year that Hitler became Chancellor. In "The Leonardo" two German thugs harass and finally murder a mysterious solitary Russian, Romantovski:

Now this is the way we'll arrange the world: every man shall sweat, every man shall eat. There will be work, there will be belly-cheer, there will be a clean, warm, sunny – [...]

⁶⁸ Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich*, 240.

⁶⁹ Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 239.

⁷⁰ Campbell, *Joy in Work, German Work*, 315.

Repeat: the world shall be sweaty and well fed. Idlers, parasites, and musicians are not admitted. While one's heart pumps blood one should *live*, damn it! [...]

This cannot go on. He poisons the life of honest folks.⁷¹

Nabokov tells us in the notes that he wrote for the 1973 collection in which "The Leonardo" appeared, that "Hitler's grotesque and ferocious shadow was falling on Germany at the time I imagined those brutes and my poor Romantovski." (S 653) In a speech of July 15 1932 Hitler had promised "a Reich of honor and freedom – work and bread."⁷² In "The Leonardo" two elements of this rhetoric are brought into a conjunction that defamiliarises both. If mental activity is work, and if work is a matter of struggle and sweat, of eating and belly-cheer, of digesting the world, then there is a brutal impeccable logic in the description of the two thugs "with fecal matter replacing the human brain" (S 361).

Nabokov began the research on Chernyshevsky that would lead to *The Gift* in 1933, the same year that he wrote "The Leonardo". The initial trigger for Nabokov's meditations on nineteenth century culture in *The Gift* and *Invitation to a Beheading* seems, then, to have been not only the situation in Russia but Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933, an event that Nabokov, living in Berlin, witnessed at close quarters. *The Gift* is set in Berlin, and it merges Chernyshevsky's vision of work together with that of the Germans, with their alleged "cult of the office" (G 79). Although *The Gift* is set in the 1920s, Nabokov said in his 1962 foreword that Fyodor's hostility to the Germans is "influenced by the rise of a nauseous dictatorship belonging to the period when the novel was written and not to the one it patchily reflects." (8) In *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov says it is a "fact that there is no real difference between what the Western

⁷¹ S 358-367; 359; 363.

⁷² Quoted in Campbell, *Joy in Work, German Work*, 315.

Fascists wanted of literature and what the Bolsheviks want.” (7) At least two decades before the Cold War would make it politically convenient to lump Stalinism and Nazism together under the title of totalitarianism, Nabokov was already effectively doing so.

II

The Gift is constructed as a history of Russian literature in the nineteenth century, with Fyodor serving a literary apprenticeship that takes him through album verse in Chapter One, Pushkin in Chapter Two, Gogol in Chapter Three, and Chernyshevsky in Chapter Four, before discovering his own gift in Chapter Five. In *The Gift* as in the *Lectures on Russian Literature*, the explicit view that utilitarianism destroyed Russian literature and led to Soviet despotism sits upon a more unexpected perception, shown rather than stated, that this utilitarianism itself expressed the vision of work. *The Gift* pins that vision of work on Gogol and Tolstoy, suggesting that, while Chernyshevsky was the herald of the Soviet workers’ state, his utilitarianism was also a logical corollary of the celebration of manual labour in nineteenth century Russian literature.

Reading a Soviet chess magazine, Fyodor is struck by the dull laboriousness of the problems, which he finds typical. “The conscientious student exercises of the young Soviet composers were not so much ‘problems as tasks’ [...] the shoving and jostling pieces did their clumsy work with proletarian seriousness” (161). The Soviet ideology of labour is in the strictest sense totalitarian: not even chess problems, which Fyodor values so highly for the good example of their “sterility” (158), are exempt. Nabokov made the same point more explicit in his introduction to *Poems and Problems* (1970), where he wrote of his hatred for “so-called ‘task’ problems (mechanically committed to achieve a

Stakhanovite maximum of related patterns)” (15), Stakhanovism being the Soviet cult of the overproductive worker.

By coincidence, the magazine contains an article on “Chernyshevski and Chess” in a Soviet chess magazine. Fyodor knows nearly nothing about Chernyshevsky, but comes to see that in this revered figure of the 1860’s he will find the answer to the question the chess problems inspired in him: “why had everything in Russia become so shoddy, so crabbed and grey, how could she have become so befooled and befuddled?” (G 162) The answer will be found by analysing Chernyshevsky’s utilitarianism and exposing its sources in his perverse idea of work. One of Fyodor’s acquaintances describes Chernyshevsky’s utilitarianism as the “negation of art” (182). In the *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov says about the radical critics: “What they demanded of an author was a social message and no nonsense, and from their point of view a book was good only insofar as it was of practical use to the welfare of the people.” (5) Nabokov thinks that the art of a book is everything that is not its message. Further, he thinks that although the radical critics courageously opposed the tyranny of the Tsar, they were themselves just as tyrannical in the demands they made on artists, so that their superficial idea of freedom laid the ideological basis for the oppressiveness as well as the philistinism of the Soviet regime. Fyodor asks: ““Had the old urge ‘toward the light’ concealed a fatal flaw, which in the course of progress toward the objective had grown more and more evident, until it was revealed that this ‘light’ was burning in the window of a prison overseer, and that was all?”” (G 162)

Georges Bataille writes that: “The human mind formed by work would usually attribute to action a usefulness analogous to that of work.”⁷³ Fyodor’s portrait of Chernyshevsky is built on a similar idea. Chernyshevsky’s “capacity for work was monstrous, as was, for that matter, that of most Russian critics of the last century” (228), and he writes with a machine-like industry that excludes creativity and invention. By contrast, Fyodor spends all day sitting in his room smoking and trying to compose a poem, waiting for inspiration, while the noises of men at work drift in through his window. For him, the “complex, happy devout work” of writing is “energetic idleness (everything is here in this combination)” (145) and “lofty truancy” (81). Nabokov closes his introduction to the *Lectures on Russian Literature* by translating a poem in which Pushkin pledges that “My spirit fights / for deeper Liberty, for better rights”, and insists that the greatest blessing and right is “to stroll / in one’s own wake” (12). *The Gift* is built on the contrast between Chernyshevsky, who thinks of literature and life as work, and Pushkin, who thinks of the writer as someone who strolls rather than labours, whose more profound understanding of freedom is really more useful to the people, and whose legacy Fyodor is trying to reclaim.

Chernyshevsky’s writing is full of the rhetoric of work. Chernyshevsky illustrates his slogan that “beauty is life” by the ruddy bloom on a peasant girl’s cheeks, a product of toil, and says that “the peasant’s concept of life always contains the concept – work.”⁷⁴ In *What Is To Be Done?*, Véra Pavlovna has a dream about work, in which one character says that:

‘the principal element of life is labor, and consequently the principal element of reality is labor, and the characteristic by which it can be most surely recognised is

⁷³ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 115.

⁷⁴ Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, 292; 287.

activity' [...] 'absence of motion is absence of labor', said Alexey Pétrovich, 'for labor appears in anthropological analysis as the fundamental form of motion'.⁷⁵

In "The Life of Chernyshevski", Fyodor pursues this thought. He sees in the labour of Chernyshevsky's life the enactment of a deeper obsession with perpetual motion, embodied in the perpetual motion machine Chernyshevsky wanted to build as a young man (*G* 199). Fyodor writes: "Chernyshevsky's ethical structures are in their own way an attempt to construct the same old 'perpetual motion' machine, where matter moves other matter." (257) Chernyshevsky may descant on "the world of Fourier, the harmony of the twelve passions, the bliss of collective living, the rose-garlanded workmen" (226), but his vision, which was transmitted to Lenin and the Soviet state, is much more accurately illustrated by "Chernyshevski's feverish work on huge masses of Weber (which turned his brain into a forced labour factory and represented in fact the greatest mockery of human thought)" (272).

In spite of his famous doctrine that "beauty is life", Chernyshevsky is nearsighted and sees life through the spectacles of books (197). Although he claims to be a materialist, Chernyshevsky is not interested in the complex particularity of the world, "did not know the difference between a plough and the wooden *soha*" (223). He applies his method "merely to the relation between objects, to the void between objects and not to the objects themselves", and the result is "a terrible abstraction" (222-3). His thought may be animated by the concept of work, the abstraction of labour that Marx viewed as an ideological construct, but he is not interested in the jobs people actually do. This is what lies behind his dismissive response to a proposal for communal literary work (that might have resulted in something like "A Guide to Berlin"): "'Let's organise', he [an

⁷⁵ Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?*, 145-6.

associate of Chernyshevski's] said, 'a society of writer-labourers for investigating various aspects of our social life, such as: beggars, haberdashers, lamplighters, firemen – and pool in a special magazine all the material we get.' Chernyshevski derided him" (242). The metaphor of mental work that drives him has such uncanny power precisely because it is a ghostly abstraction divorced from real work. "His head thinks about the problems of humanity ... while his hand carries out unskilled labour, he wrote of his 'socially conscious workman'" (226).

Fyodor presents Chernyshevsky's theoretical separation of headwork and handwork as the unwitting admission of a psychological flaw. Only twenty-five pages earlier he had written of Chernyshevsky that "his blind, white hands move on a different plane from his faulty but obstinate and muscular mind." If Chernyshevsky conceptualises labour abstractly, it may be to compensate for his inability to make anything:

Everything that he touches falls to pieces. It is sad to read in his diary about the appliances of which he tries to make use – scale-arms, bobs, corks, basins – and nothing revolves, or if it does according to unwelcome laws, in the reverse direction of what he wants: an eternal motor going in reverse – why, this is an absolute nightmare, the abstraction to end all abstractions, infinity with a minus sign, plus a broken jug into the bargain. (200)

He does not understand what Fyodor as an artist understands, that a thing is made out of details, mobilised into a small world or device with its own internal principles and laws. "Details were for him merely the aristocratic element in the nation of our general ideas." (226) Chernyshevsky's restless energy is not, properly, a capacity for work. Instead Chernyshevsky makes holes in poems (206-7) and is interested in the void between objects. Chernyshevsky is a blind destructive force driving at nothingness, infinity with a minus sign, like the nihilist Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 53: "'We smash things because we're a force,' remarked Arkady."

If Chernyshevskyan utilitarianism has had the effect of destroying Russian literature and civil society, it is because of that deeper incomprehension of how things – jugs, poems, or societies – get made and stay made. Fyodor wants to win his battle against Chernyshevsky by convincing us that the ideology that presents itself as promoting work turns out to have been based on an incomprehension of work. The separation in Chernyshevsky between work in the head and work in the hand gives rise to “one of those fatal inner contradictions that are revealed all along our hero’s path”, the “dualism” between form and content (219). Chernyshevsky’s hostility to Pushkin is fuelled when he discovers the quantity of Pushkin’s drafts:

One can understand some ‘polishing’ in a fair copy but this was the rough work [*chërnaia rabota*] itself. It should have flowed effortlessly, since common sense speaks its mind immediately, for it *knows* what it wants to say. Moreover, as a person ridiculously alien to artistic creation, he supposed that ‘polishing’ took place on paper while the ‘real work’ – i.e., ‘the task of forming the general plan’ – occurred ‘in the mind’ – another sign of that dangerous dualism, that crack in his ‘materialism’, whence more than one snake was to slither and bite him during his life. (G 234; SS 5:433)

Chernyshevsky is putting work in the wrong place, in the head and not on the page. It is revealing that Chernyshevsky’s scorn for manual labour – rough or “black” work, *chërnaia rabota* – should betray itself when he is speaking about literature. Fyodor’s criticism of Chernyshevsky implies, by contrast, that Pushkin’s grace and ease, like the movements of the streetcar conductor in “A Guide to Berlin”, are the product of a practiced habituation to language as a material medium, and that the knowledge which a critic draws out and makes explicit is the knowledge embodied in a learned skill or craft, and not an abstract knowledge. Later, taking on Chernyshevsky for his hostility to the binary foot in Russian prosody, Fyodor alludes to Pushkin’s poem “The Cobbler”, in which the artist Apelles dismisses the criticisms of a cobbler who dares to comment on

not only the shoe but also the face in Apelles's painting: "I am afraid that the cobbler who visited Apelles' studio and criticized what he did not understand was a mediocre cobbler."⁷⁷ In doing so he rewrites Pushkin's poem so that it no longer contrasts the worker with the artist.

Fyodor wants to take the moral authority of labour away from Chernyshevsky, claiming it instead as the license for his own complicated criss-crossing art, which does not simply "*know* what it wants to say" but speaks in many different voices and from many different perspectives, communicating by contrasts and absences, not by simple propositional statements, and embodying the dense contradictoriness and specificity of the material world. Nabokov, through Fyodor, refuses to accept either that an ethic of labour must give rise to a simple-minded didactic realism, or that his own intricate parodic art is necessarily the expression of a privileged world of leisure and play.

III

But Fyodor's problem would be a simple one if his only opponents were Chernyshevsky and Lenin. The greater problem is that the novelists he most admires, Gogol and Tolstoy, shared Chernyshevsky's reverence for work and abandoned fiction because they came to think it idle; still worse, their greatest works are based on their reverence for simple labour. If Fyodor had been willing to ignore this, and ignore the course of Russian culture, he could have stayed in Chapter One with Pushkin. Instead, the narrative of *The Gift* is Fyodor's struggle to reshape the Russian novel so as to return it to Pushkin's vision, and in order to do this Fyodor engages subtly with Tolstoy and Gogol's

⁷⁷ G 222. Davydov points out the allusion to Pushkin in Davydov, "The Gift: Nabokov's Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevskii", 366-7.

aesthetic of labour, so as to show that what they thought of as work could also be thought of as idleness, and vice versa.

A moment in *Anna Karenina* encapsulates the link Tolstoy makes between art and work.⁷⁸ Anna and Vronsky have gone to visit the painter Mikhaylov at his studio in Rome. Revealingly, the picture they want to buy is not the *magnum opus* Mikhaylov has been working on for three years, *Pilate's Admonition*, but an earlier slighter painting, set aside and forgotten, of two boys fishing under a willow tree, one of them absorbed in his task, the other lost in a reverie. The picture reflects Anna and Vronsky's own state of idleness, and as they look at this picture, Mikhaylov, and Tolstoy with him, think of their interest as "idle" – *prazdny*.⁷⁹ As John Bayley says, "the introduction of the theme of art at this moment in the lovers' relation has a special significance, because their lives are no longer given but chosen; no longer taken up with involuntary emotion and event. They have, in a sense, stopped living, and so have leisure for art."⁸⁰ Vronsky briefly takes up painting as a hobby and then lets it go. Once again life is boring, and he and Anna have to move on from Rome. For Mikhaylov, however, art is not a hobby to be taken up and put down. It is his life, and he is always working at it, even when he is away from his easel and just looking at the world. He is trying to get right the chin of a figure in his painting. When Vronsky comes in, Mikhaylov looks at his chin; "his artistic feeling never stopped working, collecting materials."⁸¹ Just that morning he had been working on the problem:

⁷⁸ My attention was drawn to this scene by Morson in "Work and the Authentic Life in Tolstoy".

⁷⁹ Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina*, 473: "*on boialsia i ne liubil etogo prazdnogo chuvstva k proshedshemu*": he feared and did not like their idle feeling for his past work.

⁸⁰ Bayley, *Tolstoy and the Novel*, 234.

⁸¹ Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina*, 468-9: "*ego khudozhestvennoe chuvstvo ne perestavaia rabotalo, sobiraia sebe material*".

“suddenly remembering the energetic pose and prominent chin of a shopman from whom he had bought cigars, he gave the figure that man’s face and chin.”⁸²

This is the unnoticed idle detail that Nabokov reworks right at the beginning of *The Gift*. The first thing Fyodor does in *The Gift* is to go into a shop to buy cigarettes:

This shop did not carry the Russian tipped cigarettes that he preferred, and he would have left empty-handed if it had not been for the tobacconist’s speckled vest with mother-of-pearl buttons and his pumpkin-coloured bald spot. Yes, all my life I shall be getting that extra little payment in kind to compensate my regular overpayment for merchandise foisted on me. (13)

The scene is nearly the same, and Nabokov and Tolstoy are in agreement that being an artist involves a special kind of looking that involves one at all times; creativity does not begin only when the pen or brush gets picked up.⁸³ But they draw different lessons from this. Mikhaylov makes a purchase, Fyodor does not. Tolstoy’s artist is always working. Nabokov’s artist is an idler.

Gogol presented Nabokov with a still more complex case. In “The Overcoat”, Gogol had expressed his own fear that the work of writing was not real, purposeful work, but merely futile copying, a business of moving letters around. Yet Gogol also shows that in his alienated literary labour Bashmachkin creates for himself a wonderful world in which he can live, to compensate himself for the sensuous world of which writing has deprived him. As Gogol writes: “One would be hard put to find a man anywhere who so lived for his work. To say he worked with zeal would be an understatement: no, he worked with love. In that copying of his he glimpsed a whole varied and pleasant world of his own.”⁸⁴ This private world, constructed in writing, is what Nabokov lovingly describes as Gogol’s world, a “Concertina Universe” in which “two and two make five.”

⁸² Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louis and Aylmer Maude, 575.

⁸³ Morson, “Work and the Authentic Life in Tolstoy”, 37.

⁸⁴ Gogol, *Diary of a Madman*, 74.

(*LRL* 58) Its illogic “excludes everything that might destroy it”, and so “there can be no moral lesson in such a world.” (*LRL* 57) Gogol set out to satirise Bashmachkin and finished by celebrating him. It is Bashmachkin’s futility which makes him the type of the artist. As Nabokov wrote, “fancy is fertile only when it is futile.” (*NG* 76) No wonder that Fyodor casts Chernyshevski as Bashmachkin, and compares him to Flaubert’s copy-clerks, Bouvard and Pécuchet (209). Like another nineteenth century copyist, Melville’s *Bartleby*, Chernyshevsky “lived in the ‘office’” (261).

The attempt to turn literature into work, paradoxically, exposes its futility and opens up the possibility for literary play. That this is a precarious and self-contradictory basis for literature is what attracted Nabokov to it. Any satirist must want to destroy the materials of his art, the people he includes and invents and condemns. So long as he was writing *Dead Souls* and “The Overcoat”, and satirising paper labour, Gogol was like the squire burning the banknote, whom Nabokov describes as a magician, his usual figure for the artist: “The image is pleasing: the squire standing on his porch and demonstrating a crisp, delicately tinted banknote with the deliberate gestures of a professional magician ... the banknote turns into a butterfly of fire; the conjuror lightly and briskly rubs his hands” (*LRL* 47). Gogol’s satire on writing both foreshadows a terminus in nineteenth century Russian literature and offers a possible departure point for Nabokov’s own mode of writing. It therefore corresponds to the logic of the *Lectures on Russian Literature* that in *The Gift* the chapter on Chernyshevsky and the destruction of Russian literature follows the chapter on Gogol, and precedes the chapter in which Fyodor comes into his gift. After the dead letter of the copy office literature as work cannot survive; it must become either political propaganda or modernism.

Chernyshevsky stands at the end of one path out of Gogol, while Fyodor stands at the end of another. Still, Fyodor recognises the affinity between them, beneath his surface mockery, and expresses it by inventing an imaginary scholar, Strannolyubski, or “strange love” in Russian. Fyodor begins with an affectionate delight in the “ineptitude” of Chernyshevsky’s writing, in “the seriousness, the limpness, the honesty, the poverty”, and honesty and poverty are Fyodor’s own virtues. He sincerely admires Chernyshevsky’s courage and independence, and his opposition to capital punishment.⁸⁵ They share a preference for books over food and are penniless. Both Fyodor’s last name, Godunov-Cherdyntsev, and Chernyshevsky’s, suggest the Russian word *chernila*, or ink, which is their “natural element”, and both get holes in their shoes (*G* 207).⁸⁶ The cracks in Chernyshevsky’s and Fyodor’s trousers and shoes are variations on the hole in Bashmachkin’s overcoat. Both Fyodor and Chernyshevsky are creatures of ink and paper, the materials that Gogol considered insubstantial and made an art out of satirising.

Shortly after having bought new shoes, Fyodor has an imaginary literary conversation with the writer Koncheyev, in which he speaks admiringly of Tolstoy and “the bliss of stepping barefoot with the rooks upon the rich dark soil of ploughed fields” (72), and regrets having bought the shoes. It had been “in his feet that he had the feeling of Russia, that he could touch and recognize all of her with his soles” (64). This grounding in the Russian earth and in agricultural labour is the standard according to which Tolstoy and Gogol eventually condemn the intricacies of self-sufficient art, and, in the literary scheme of *The Gift* and *Lectures on Russian Literature*, usher in Chernyshevsky and the Soviets. Pushkin teaches Fyodor how to escape that chthonic

⁸⁵ *G* 180; 187.

⁸⁶ As Davydov points out in “The Gift: Nabokov’s *Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevskii*.”

ethos. Fyodor comes to realise that the pinching new shoes “do seem all right after all – for an agonizing beginning” (65).⁸⁷ The poem he writes at the end of the chapter about crossing the Styx, which is inspired by the sight of his feet in an x-ray machine at the shoe shop, marks the shift towards Pushkin in Chapter Two, and the revival of his dead father. Stepping into Pushkin’s shoes, as he imitates Pushkin’s style in that chapter, writing about his father’s travels in the mould of Pushkin’s *Journey to Arzrum*, Fyodor will begin to learn how to be an artist in exile, making it a virtue that he cannot touch Russia’s soil with his feet, and learning from Pushkin how not to equate truth with earth and substance, but to value the x-ray other world of aesthetic play – “the play of light as if in paradise” of the rainbow that opens Chapter Two (76). The epigraph to *The Gift* offers a series of apparently analytic necessary truths from a Russian grammar textbook: “*An oak is a tree. A rose is a flower. A deer is an animal. A sparrow is a bird. Russia is our fatherland. Death is inevitable.*” (11) Fyodor will learn to take it as a gift that Russia is no longer his fatherland. The artist in exile is free of the earth. Death is no longer inevitable.

IV

In his 1971 essay “From Work to Text”, Roland Barthes distinguished between the work, “a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books”, “normally the object of a consumption”, and the text, which “decants the work (the work permitting) from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice. This means that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least diminish) the distance between writing and reading.”⁸⁸ In Barthes’ terms *The Gift* is a Text. Nabokov resists the

⁸⁷ G 65.

⁸⁸ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 156-7; 161-2.

tendency, natural to those writers who want to think of themselves as workers or craftsmen, to imagine the novel or poem as a work, a made object, such as a wooden statuette or a table or – the most popular nineteenth century image for a novel – a house.⁸⁹ Chernyshevsky is abused at his execution by a group of builders on a house under construction (*G* 256). The image of the unfinished house is an image of *The Gift*, which declines to pride itself on being firmly and solidly constructed: at one point Zina's movements in her house, going through the hall on her way from the dining-room to her bedroom, are "a topographical enigma since a door from the dining-room led straight into her room. But we are reading and shall keep on reading." (267) The point of this joke may be that Zina is placing herself in Fyodor's earshot so as to catch his attention, but the joke also suggests that Zina's movements are as illogical as those of characters in ill-constructed novels whose authors have not bothered to take care over the topography of their imagined worlds. We are to think it a miracle that *The Gift*, with its apparent formlessness, stays upright or holds together, like the speeding bicycle in Fyodor's early poem:

And support as in dreamland is lacking
And trusting in this dream simplicity,
The bicycle does not collapse. (31)

When Fyodor imagines the reader of his poems, he asks: "As he read them, did he read them not only as words but as chinks between words, as one should do when reading poetry?" (33) Fyodor's poetry is not made out of finite objects, even words, but out of

⁸⁹ So for instance D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* offers a Gothic cathedral and Will Brangwen's wood-carving of Adam and Eve as two images for itself: *The Rainbow*, 187; 330. In "The Thermal Stair" W.S. Graham defines the poet's "job" as "Love/ Imagined into words or paint to make/ An object that will stand and will not move." *Selected Poems*, 51. Martin Amis has a jab at the pretension of this in the figure of Gwen Barry in *The Information*: "He told someone that writing was like carpentry so he thought he'd better get some carpentry stuff in case people asked if he did carpentry, and then he did a bit of carpentry just in case." *The Information*, 198.

absences and in-between spaces, into which the imagination of the reader can enter, and from which the poems can open out onto the infinity of potential existences. Here Fyodor abandons his strategic alliance with black work. Of all the crayon pencils, he and Zina always preferred the white one, which remained the longest because “it didn’t do much work” and embodied “*L’ inutile beauté*”: “Precisely because it drew the invisible and one could imagine lots of things. In general there await us unlimited possibilities.” (178) *The Gift* offers the materials for the novel that Fyodor wants to write at the conclusion, but there are unlimited possibilities to the ways in which we can write that novel in our imaginations, just as there are many ways in which we can arrange the jumble of materials in “The Life of Chernyshevski” into a critique of Chernyshevsky and work. Chapter Four is not, quite, “The Life of Chernyshevski”, but an unstable whirl of Fyodor’s and other readers’ mumbled voice-overs beside what seems to be a reading of the developing text: “Here the author remarked” (197); “the motifs of Chernyshevski’s life are now obedient to me – I have tamed its themes” (217); “Sorry, sorry, we’ve mixed everything up” (236) and so on. In this respect, Chapter Four telescopes the elusiveness of *The Gift*.

Fyodor’s capacity for existing on the dream support of doubt puts him in a paradise of infinite possibilities. He is delighted when he finds in the writings of the radical critics apprehensions of the incomplete, such as Belinski’s “pearl of realistic thought”, secreted in the darkness from which he averts his eyes: “In nature everything is beautiful, excepting only those ugly phenomena which nature herself has left unfinished and hidden in the darkness of the earth or water (molluscs, worms, infusoria, and so on).” (185) As a child Zina “didn’t like drawing anything that didn’t finish, so I

didn't draw fences because they don't finish on paper; you can't imagine a fence that finishes, but I always did something complete, a pyramid, or a house on a hill.'" A pyramid is a house of death. Fyodor, defying death, liked drawing horizons and the setting sun, which can never be complete (177-8). *The Gift* itself is full of incomplete fragments of Fyodor's and other people's writings. As Wilde wrote in "The Critic as Artist":

It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone [...] the aesthetic critic rejects those obvious works of art which have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true and no interpretation final.⁹⁰

There is an image of the whole of *The Gift* in "Fyodor's idea of composing his biography in the shape of a ring, closed with the clasp of an apocryphal sonnet (so that the result would be not the form of a book, which by its finiteness is opposed to the circular nature of everything in existence, but a continuously curving, and thus infinite, sentence)" (188). In his 1973 note to his translation of "The Circle", Nabokov compares the circular structure of "The Life of Chernyshevski" to *Finnegans Wake*, the most famous modernist attempt at bending the linearity of profane time round into a sacred circle (S 653). Nabokov had been reading *Finnegans Wake* as it came out in instalments over the 1930s. In it he would find a model for the novel that would entirely leave behind the aesthetic of the nineteenth century. In *The Gift*, already, he had begun to explore that model. In the great novels of the American years Nabokov would go much further.

⁹⁰ Wilde, *Major Works*, 265-6.

Chapter Five

Free Play and Childhood from *The Gift to Ada*

Life is free play fundamentally and would like to be free play altogether.¹ (George Santayana)

Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits.² (Michel Foucault)

Introduction

The Gift ends with Fyodor finding artistic direction and happiness with Zina. But by 1937, shortly before finishing *The Gift*, Nabokov had entered a period of personal and artistic crisis. In the years between 1937 and 1940, when he was living in Paris, his mother died, he had an affair, considered leaving his wife, and contemplated suicide. He experienced near-starvation levels of poverty, searched desperately for a source of income, and feared that he and his Jewish wife and son would come under Nazi rule. He experimented with becoming first a French and then an English writer, tried his hand at drama, and began and aborted two novels, before moving to America and making the shift, nearly unparalleled in modern literature, from being a great writer in one language to being a great writer in another.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov dramatised this shift by treating it as the death of Sirin, the pen name under which he had written his Russian works: “Across the dark sky of exile, Sirin passed [...] like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness.” (220-1) In *Look at the Harlequins!*, Nabokov’s distorted autobiography, Vadim says that in the period after writing *The Gift*, “I began to experience the pangs of a strange transformation. I did not wake up one Central European

¹ Santayana, *Soliloquies in England*, 141.

² Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 102.

morning as a great scarab with more legs than any beetle can have, but certain excruciating tearings of secret tissues did take place in me.” (99)

The writer who emerged from behind the discarded mask of Sirin was a writer profoundly if subtly altered, and not only by his passage from Russian into English. Over the 1930s Nabokov’s writing had been moving towards free play, but over the course of his American novels, from *Bend Sinister* in 1947 through *Lolita* in 1955 to *Ada* in 1969, this movement would become progressively more extreme, resulting in very disturbing ambiguities. Nabokov spoke of what he called “indeterminism” in his 1942 essay “The Creative Writer” (later reworked as “The Art of Literature and Commonsense”). In the world of indeterminism, “two and two no longer make four, because it is no longer necessary for them to make four”.³ This essay is the nearest he would come to giving an English-speaking audience the sort of literary manifesto he had produced in “Breitensträter – Paolino”, and it sets the programme for Nabokov’s American novels, which exhibit “indeterminism” at conceptual, moral, structural, sexual, and minutely verbal levels. It is a mode of writing whose extreme limit is Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, a book to which Nabokov’s novels of the post-war period frequently refer.

In Nabokov’s American novels, free play is closely linked to childhood. Over the 1930s and 1940s, Nabokov was watching his young son Dmitri growing up, and studying his play. Nabokov fears the free play of the child, especially when imitated by adults, but he also wants to defend it from constraint, and his novels move towards it as their aesthetic ideal. For Nabokov, as for the French post-structuralists, free play is the

³ Nabokov, “The Creative Writer”, 23.

condition of literature after the death of the author.⁴ In the American novels it emerges as a result of an ever-worsening failure of authority, of father, writer, and God. Alone among all the works of this period, and of Nabokov's whole oeuvre, *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory*, his autobiography and semi-autobiography, stand out for the picture they offer of the world as Nabokov would like it to be, and it is telling that these two books begin with depictions of early childhood play in which the potentially terrifying elements of free play are contained by a fatherly presence.

In 1918-9, in "Childhood", Nabokov remembered watching his infant brother at play, and not being able to imagine what game he was playing.

And at that moment everything, that later I loved,
Everything, that I came to know, insults and successes,
Everything grew misty in the quiet, light laughter
In the infant years rising up before me. (SS 1:512-3)

It is tempting to see in this visionary moment of infantile play the seed of all Nabokov's later thinking about play. But in his Russian novels, Nabokov did not dwell on children or on childhood play, and although he always kept in view the prospect of play without rules, he maintained a wary distance from the indeterminacy such play embodies. The sand-castle which children are building at the end of *King, Queen, Knave* (KQK 259), is the Nietzschean image of free play, but the book insists that play without rules is impossible and the desire for it disastrous. *The Luzhin Defense*, conversely, begins with chess and law and shows that the attempt to eliminate play from life leads to madness and suicide. But this Pushkinian lesson stops some way short of claiming that play should be allowed to overwhelm the rules of the game. Artistically, too, Nabokov resists free play

⁴ Compare Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 50: "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as the limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence."

in these novels. The play of thought is restricted by the fact that they have a clear moral or rule, which is that life and art require both freedom and law, play and game.

Despair is a little more ambiguous. Hermann's belief that crime and art are one succinctly formulates the idea that art must be free of law. Nabokov requires his reader to comprehend the paradox that true art is free yet law-governed. But once that paradox is assimilated, Hermann can be safely dismissed as a parody of the true artist, and Nabokov's moral can be drawn: that neither the world nor an artwork could hold together without rules. The scene Hermann twice witnesses of two girls playing marbles illustrates the point. The rules of the game may not be written down, and the field on which marbles are played may not be marked in chalk: but there are rules, and boundaries, and the appearance of free play is superficial.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov went a step further towards free play. Nabokov does not show the reader of *Despair* the world of pure play that Hermann fantasises. But in *Invitation*, he realises it, in the entire atmosphere of the novel, the prison created by the cheating of M'Sieur Pierre and the other gaolers, the world in which no rules are observed and nothing fits together. Emmie is the embodiment of free play in the novel, and her taboo sexual charge tempts Cincinnatus with an escape route that only returns him to the prison. At the end of the novel, however, Cincinnatus finally makes his escape by seeing that his prison does not make sense and refusing to believe in it, and the reader is also given directions for how to get out of the nightmare, by following Cincinnatus's lead and asserting the power of the poet to seize control of language and consciousness to create a world of his own choosing. Still, the difference between *Despair* and *Invitation to a Beheading* is summed up by the games in the two novels.

Where the game of marbles in *Despair* has a definite if invisible set of rules, in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Emmie is repeatedly seen bouncing a ball against a wall, a form of play that is not a game and has no rules. In *Invitation*, Nabokov positioned himself on the very brink of free play.

In *The Gift* Nabokov seems to pull back from that brink. The moral of *The Gift* appears to be much clearer than that of *Invitation to a Beheading*, the satire more clearly directed and specific. Fyodor may be drifting, and *The Gift* may be structureless, but we have a strong sense of an underlying order and direction governed by Fyodor's father's authority. "Our whole daily life was permeated with stories about Father" (101), to whom the second chapter is devoted. "'My father,' wrote Fyodor, recalling that time, 'not only taught me a great deal but also trained my very thoughts, as a voice or hand is trained, according to the rules of his school.'" (121) Yet Fyodor's attack on Chernyshevsky is hedged by his "strange love" expressed by the figure of Strannolyubski, and the moral rules of *The Gift* may not be as clear as they initially seemed. At the end Fyodor is transformed, having rejected the paternal authority which had guided him and *The Gift*: "The search for God: the longing of any hound for a master; give me a boss and I shall kneel at his enormous feet. All this is earthly. Father, headmaster, rector, president of the board, tsar, God." (283)

By *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov had crossed the brink into an aesthetic world of free play unconstrained by authority. At the end of the novel, Nabokov reveals the "Author", only to show that he is as contradictory as the God mankind posits as the author of both torture and salvation. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus is unproblematically the hero, but in *Bend Sinister*, Krug, though supposedly the hero of the book, turns out to

have secret affinities with Paduk, the tyrant. He fails to save his son David from being tortured to death. Whereas in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Emmie's play has no rules, in *Bend Sinister*, David is tortured to death in a series of "release games" which not only have no rules but are specifically an opportunity for every moral rule to be violated. In *Invitation* Cincinnatus is able to save himself from the rule-less nightmare by an artistic effort of consciousness, but *Bend Sinister* proposes no such escape route from the horrors it portrays.

In *Lolita*, worse, Humbert is both the father and the person who harms the child. He is also the artist who, like Nabokov, loves the child at play, makes art out of her play, desires her, and destroys her. The indeterminism of *Lolita* also poses the reader with greater problems than in *Bend Sinister*, because whereas *Bend Sinister* is told in the third person, Humbert narrates *Lolita* and shares many of Nabokov's opinions, and it is difficult to disentangle his ideas and aesthetic play from Nabokov's.

Nabokov went still further in *Ada*. At least in *Lolita* Humbert is clearly held up as an object for the reader's disapproval, and the eroticisation of the child is presented in the context of paedophilia, where the reader need not doubt that it is wrong. In *Ada*, however, the reader is given every signal to admire the libertinism of Van and Ada's brother-sister incest, and to relish the erotic descriptions of Ada as a young girl, notwithstanding the embarrassing syrupy prose they exist in, their preening selfishness, and the realisation at the end that, as Ada says, they teased Lucette to death.⁵ We want to know whether we should approve or disapprove of Van and Ada, but Nabokov makes any such clear

⁵ A 459. In one interview of 1969 collected in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov declared that: "I loathe Van Veen" (SO 120), yet in another of the same year telegraphed the real ambiguities when he called Van "the charming villain of my book" (143).

unified attitude impossible, and he even makes it difficult to tell whether he thinks his own prose is good, or is a parody of bad writing.

In these novels, Nabokov frequently makes vivid the freedom and unpredictability of childhood play by comparing it to the play of light. So in *The Enchanter*, the early version of *Lolita* that Nabokov wrote in 1939, the protagonist first sees the “violet-clad girl of twelve” (*E* 26) on whom his desire fixes when she approaches on roller-skates, and when she leaves he says that “she took off at full tilt, swinging her liberated arms, flashing in and out of sight, mingling with a kindred play of light beneath the violet-and-green trees.” (28) In *Lolita*, Humbert and Dolly come across an open-air play in which “seven bemused pubescent girls in colored gauze [...] were supposed to represent a living rainbow” (*L* 221). In *Ada*, as a girl Ada teaches Van a game played with droplets of light on the forest-floor (*A* 46).

It seems to have been the birth of Dmitri on May 10, 1934 that renewed Nabokov’s interest in the subject of early childhood play. In August 1936, just after Dmitri turned two, Nabokov began writing Chapter One of *The Gift*, in which he reflects on Fyodor’s earliest childhood games, treating them as the seed-bed of his later art. Nabokov would rewrite this chapter in the opening pages of *Speak, Memory*, this time acknowledging those early games as his own. In a letter to Véra of 15 April, 1937, Nabokov wrote: “*My love, my love*, how long it’s been since you stood before me, and God, how many new things there will be about my little one, and how many births I will have missed (of words, of games, of all sorts of things).” (*SL* 23) Dmitri recalls that his father wrote *The Enchanter* in between “generous periods of play” (*E* 102) with his five-year-old son. Such games evidently became part of the Nabokov family’s memory of

itself: in an odd mock-journal published in 1988, Dmitri recalls the mental games he played at the age of three and himself playing with toy cars at the age of four.⁶ The novels Nabokov would write in America track Dmitri's maturation, the harmed children in them corresponding roughly to Dmitri's age at the time of writing: in *Bend Sinister*, begun around 1943, David is eight; in *Lolita*, conceived in earnest in 1947, Lolita is twelve years old, a year younger than Dmitri; in *Pnin*, written between 1953 and 1955, Victor is in his middle teens; and in *Pale Fire*, written between 1960 and 1961, Nabokov created in Hazel Shade a college-age girl unable to progress into adulthood. His letters to his sister Elena form an eloquent record of how proudly he doted on Dmitri and how minutely he studied him as he grew up.⁷

Nabokov feared free play, but the American novels all express Nabokov's hostility to the institutionalisation of childhood in post-war America, to the psychological testing of children and the school psychologists whose attempts to impose interpretations on childhood play he feared as threatening the freedom and individuality of the child. For the artist in Nabokov, such free play was an irresistible image of aesthetic freedom. He found the perfect illustration of this conflict between his feelings as a father, wanting to protect the child, and as an artist, wanting to liberate the child into play, in Goethe's haunting lyric, the "Erlkönig", or "Elf-King". This poem, which in the *Onegin* commentary Nabokov calls "hallucinatory" (*EO* 2:235), and to which he refers in *The Event*, *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*, deals, as Kinbote says, with "the erlking, hoary enchanter of the elf-haunted alderwood, who falls in love with the delicate little

⁶ Dmitri Nabokov, "Close Calls and Fulfilled Dreams", 300.

⁷ Sikorski, ed., *Perepiska s sestroi*.

boy of a belated traveller.”⁸ (*PF* 189) A father rides at night through the storm, clutching his child. The elf-king with his crown and robe whispers to the child, urging him to come to him to a world of perpetual play and sexual delight: ““You, sweet child, come, come with me! We shall play lovely games together [...] My daughters shall be your lovely attendants”.⁹ The son hides his face, but the father, who can hear only the rustling of the leaves and see only the grey of the willows, cannot protect him. The elf-king loves the child and seizes him by force. All the father knows is that when they arrive at the farmhouse the child is dead in his arms. It may be that the boy is destroyed because the elf-king lures him away from healthy maturity towards an unhealthy never-never land of eternal childhood and play. Yet the poem also implies that the child dies because the father will not let go. The boy is torn between the world to which he is bound by familial love and the world of the elf-king, a world that is invisible to the eyes of the father, clouded over by maturity, but is full of magic and play and eroticism: the world to which the poem with its unearthly rhythms itself belongs. And it may be that the boy is only dead to the father and his principle of reality, but lives on with the elf-king and his daughters.

The father in Nabokov offers us plenty of opportunities to moralise *Lolita* and the other American novels, to tell ourselves sternly that Humbert Humbert is, like Skimpole in Nabokov’s reading of *Bleak House*, “the false child betraying the real one.” (*LL* 91) Humbert plays with Lolita in the sense that he merely uses her, and this, we want to say, is really false play, just as Humbert is a false child. But the artist in Nabokov writes

⁸ In *The Event*, Lyubov tells Troshcheykin, “You are exactly like the child in *Erlkönig*.” *USSR* 230 In *Lolita*, Humbert takes the ill Lolita to Elphinstone hospital “with a heterosexual Erlkönig in pursuit”: *L* 240, casting himself as father and Quilty as the erlking. In *Bend Sinister* Krug mockingly says that Paduk is the *Erlkönig* and he is the child: *BS* 126.

⁹ Goethe, *Selected Verse*, 81.

against the lessons of the father, or rather, writes on in spite of them, deriving his art from the world of childhood and play, and obscuring any distinction between the true child and the false child, good and bad play, art and cruelty. The reader of the American novels no longer knows quite what attitude Nabokov has to his central characters. The narrator of *Pnin*, Humbert, Kinbote, and Van Veen are all talented writers, and it is not possible to write any simple set of directions for where they have gone astray from the unity of art and ethics.

So, too, the erotic pleasure in words and images that readers enjoy in *Ada* and even in *Lolita* demonstrably develops out of a vision that *Bend Sinister* establishes as one of political sickness. Nabokov's attitude to punning and word-play was one of fascinated disgust. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, those around Cincinnatus speak in a tone of childishly bright, facetious levity, a conscienceless language in which atrocities can be spoken of without embarrassment. Speech only obscures and diminishes reality. Weak puns are a part of "this atmosphere of joviality, this pail of milk of human kindness with a dead rat at the bottom", as Nabokov described it to Edmund Wilson.¹⁰ In *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov develops this diagnosis of the corruption of language. In his introduction, he says that: "Paronomasia is a kind of verbal plague, a contagious sickness in the world of words; no wonder they are monstrously and ineptly distorted in Padukgrad, where everybody is merely an anagram of everybody else." (BS 8) This plague of word-play is the medium of *Lolita* and of *Ada*, where Nabokov provides an image for it in Van and Ada's games of scrabble.

The passage from *Bend Sinister* through *Lolita* to *Ada* suggests how the word-play that Nabokov once feared became his guilty medium. This ambivalence is that of his

¹⁰ IB 89; NWL 38.

complex relation to *Finnegans Wake*, which he called a “petrified superpun” (LL 122). Nabokov met Joyce in Paris in 1939, and Joyce gave Nabokov the *Haveth Childers Everywhere* section of *Finnegans Wake* (RY 504). Nabokov thought *Ulysses* was the greatest work of modern literature and lectured on it every year at Cornell, but repeatedly expressed his dislike for *Finnegans Wake*, calling it “a formless and dull mass of phony folklore, a cold pudding of a book, a persistent snore in the next room” (SO 71). Yet on his own account he eventually read it all the way through, a considerable investment of time (SO 74). In America, Nabokov had the benefit of having as two of his closest friends the two best early interpreters of the *Wake*, Edmund Wilson and Harry Levin. Nabokov enjoyed Wilson’s *The Wound and the Bow*, which contains an essay on *Finnegans Wake*, and also read Levin’s *James Joyce*, to which he refers in his lecture on Joyce (NWL 54; LL 286). He had read published extracts of *Finnegans Wake* as early as February 1936, when he wrote to Véra about it, commenting on “the abstract puns, the verbal masquerade, the shadows of words, the diseases of words ... in the end wit sinks behind reason, and, while it is setting, the sky is ravishing, but then there is night.” (RY 425) This compares interestingly with Nabokov’s slyly paradoxical description of *Finnegans Wake* as “one of the greatest failures in literature” (LL 349). As it asymptotically approaches the limit of nonsense, its wit sinking beneath the horizon of reason, *Finnegans Wake* makes it harder to reason apart its vices from its virtues, greatness from failure, what one likes and believes in from what one hates and fears.

All of Nabokov’s American novels except *Pnin* contain references to *Finnegans Wake*. Most of these are to the most famous section, “Anna Livia Plurabelle”, but the most specific reference comes in *Lolita*, when Humbert and Dolly in Wace come across

the open-air play in which the seven girls represent a rainbow, and Humbert reflects that “this idea of children-colors had been lifted by authors Clare Quilty and Vivian Darkbloom from a passage by James Joyce”.¹¹ This is a reference to the section immediately after “Anna Livia Plurabelle”, “The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies”, which deals with children’s games, the children forming the colours of a rainbow. It is also, like the rest of *Finnegans Wake*, a dream, that is, a play put on by the unconscious in the theatre of the sleeping mind, in “childream’s hours”.¹² The conceit that Joyce is using here of dreams as stage-plays is one that Nabokov often used in the 1940s, discussing it at length in his lecture on *Anna Karenina*, realising it in *Bend Sinister* where Krug dreams of play, and reversing it in *Nikolai Gogol* where he calls *Hamlet* and *King Lear* “dream-plays”.¹³ The nearer Nabokov’s writing comes to the limit of indeterminacy that Nabokov thinks of as free play, the more dream-like play seems. Dream is the metaphor that Joyce most often used to describe *Finnegans Wake* in his public pronouncements, but it is only one of the metaphors that *Finnegans Wake* offers for itself.¹⁴ “The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies” gives us the metaphor of indeterminacy as play; but *Finnegans Wake* also presents its essential indeterminacy as a joke and as a slip of the tongue, a mistake, an expression of illicit, especially incestuous, desire: all of Freud’s “royal roads” to the unconscious.

But the most fundamental image *Finnegans Wake* offers for itself is an undelivered letter. This was also one of Nabokov’s favourite images for literature; the main story of *Lolita* takes place between one letter going undelivered and another

¹¹ BS 101; L 221; PF 63; A 48. There is also a reference in “The Vane Sisters” (S 626). For Alfred Appel’s remarks on Nabokov and *Finnegans Wake*, see L 413-4.

¹² *Finnegans Wake*, 219.

¹³ LL 176; BS 60; NG 54. See also SK 157.

¹⁴ Attridge, “Finnegans Wake, or the Dream of Interpretation.”

arriving: it only begins in earnest when Charlotte is run over on her way to post a letter probably condemning Humbert, and draws to a conclusion when Humbert gets a letter from Lolita asking him for money. Humbert's name echoes that of the father, Humphrey, "Mr Humhum" in *Finnegans Wake*, and suggests the din or hum underneath language, the hum of ambiguity that "Humbert the Hummer's" (*L* 57) word-play and perversion draw on.¹⁵

Joyce and Nabokov had both discovered the same new territory of modern writing, the space of the undelivered letter. The central feature of this *terra incognita* is incest, the barely concealed theme of *Lolita* and *Ada*, and the guilty secret cloaked by the obscurity of *Finnegans Wake*. "The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies" deals with courtship games between brother and sisters, Mick and Nick competing to guess the colour of the girls' underwear. In "Anna Livia Plurabelle", two washerwomen inspect the stains on Humphrey's underwear and read off them the evidence of his sexual misdeeds, specifically his desire for young girls, even more specifically, for his daughter Issy, a longing which *Finnegans Wake* brings into shameful intimacy with Joyce's own relations with his daughter Lucia. "I so love those beautiful young girls" is Humphrey's cry, disguised by being turned into Danish.¹⁶ Nabokov gestures towards this in *Bend Sinister* when he calls the author of *Finnegans Wake* "another rivermaid's father" (101).

It is a mode of writing which works its way back to the moment before civilisation. It even works its way back to the moment before maturity. In it artistic play has an infantile quality. Shem the Penman writes with his own faeces on his own body.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Finnegans Wake*, 193.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 185,

If, as Harry Levin said, *Finnegans Wake* is “a wonderful game”,¹⁸ it is a game in the sense that the writer plays with words as a small infant plays with its own excrement. The book is infantile in the literal sense of being *in-fans* or unspeaking, coming before proper language, and the language of *Finnegans Wake* is meant to reproduce or at least send its reader back to the babble of babyhood. As Freud argued, “Dreaming is a piece of infantile mental life that has been superseded.”¹⁹ The polymorphous perversity of the book can also be regarded as a part of its infantility, “childhood’s age being aye the shameleast” for Joyce. Shem is the appropriately named hero of a book which is shameless, shameful, which unashamedly challenges its reader to experience again everything in his or her mental life that the adult culture of shame had persuaded them to censor out and disown, “to make his private linen public”.²⁰ Nabokov would not go as far as Joyce in trying to reproduce the shameless and shameful babble of infantile play. But it is the horizon towards which all his American novels are moving, and which he comes closest to in *Ada*.

¹⁸ Levin, *James Joyce*, 125.

¹⁹ Quoted by Bishop, *Joyce’s Book of the Dark*, 317-8.

²⁰ *Finnegans Wake*, 227; 196. My discussion of shame in *Finnegans Wake* has benefited from Adam Piette’s unpublished essay, “*Finnegans Wake* and Familial Memory”.

Early Childhood Play: *The Gift and Speak, Memory*

In “The Paris Poem” (1943), Nabokov declares that there could be “no greater joy” than to “fold” the “magnificent carpet” of life, “to make the design of today coincide with the past, with a former pattern”:

[...] by finding congruences with the remote,
to revisit my fountainhead,
to bend and discover in my own childhood
the end of my tangled-up thread.

And carefully then to unravel myself
As a gift, as a marvel unfurled (*PP* 123)

This is the project of *The Gift and Speak, Memory*, in whose opening pages Nabokov gives his two main descriptions of early childhood, and especially of early childhood play.

At the beginning of *The Gift*, Fyodor has just published a book of poems “all devoted to a single theme: childhood.” (16) Through the favourable review of the poems that he imagines, we are given Nabokov’s most protracted description of early childhood, one mostly devoted to games and toys. Fyodor describes how for the sake of his readers he “poetized the memory of two precious, and, I think, ancient toys” (18), a mechanical nightingale and a wind-up clown. These are emblems of his poetry. He tells us explicitly that the clown suggests how “the spirit of parody always goes along with genuine poetry” (19). The songbird’s mechanism has broken and it only sings when it has been forgotten. Leona Toker argues that this suggests how inspiration comes to Fyodor only when he does not court it. It may also hint at how works of art come back to life in appropriate cultural circumstances, as *The Gift* stages the renaissance of Pushkin in the Russian Silver Age. The games with a toy gun that Fyodor remembers himself playing with his sister

may look towards his biography of Chernyshevsky, described as “shooting practice”.²¹ And when he is sick, Fyodor hallucinates his mother going out and buying him “a Faber pencil a yard long and of corresponding thickness: a display giant that had hung horizontally in the window as an advertisement” (29), and she turns out to have really done so. This giant pencil is Fyodor’s initiation into writing, but, like the sword of Theseus, an object of initiation that he will not have the strength to wield until he is older. Because it cannot be used, it is, as Nabokov comments in his reworking of the scene in *Speak, Memory*, “a perfect case of art for art’s sake” (*SM* 32).

In “The Philosophy of Toys” (1853), one of the essays later collected in *Romantic Art*, Baudelaire wrote that “the toy is the child’s earliest initiation to art”.²² Like Nabokov, Baudelaire discusses playing at war and wooden toys, and this essay may be a source for the early pages of *The Gift*. Baudelaire is most interested in how children play without playthings, in how play is an act by which the imagination gratifies itself, seizing upon any external object as its expression: a few chairs, a cardboard cut-out, or a live rat.²³ This is crucial in Nabokov’s treatment of play. Fyodor and his sister Tanya “were fastidious when it came to toys”, rejecting the pre-packaged toys with covers illustrating kitsch (*poshly*) scenes of happiness. Such toys prefigure advertisements, not art, and Fyodor cannot bring himself to write a poem about them, perhaps because they leave no space for his imagination (20). This rejection prefigures the satirical side of Fyodor’s writing that will emerge in “The Life of Chernyshevski”. The most significant playthings

²¹ Toker, *Nabokov*, 164-5.

²² Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 200. Perhaps echoing this, at the end of his 1928 essay on “Toys and Play”, Walter Benjamin asks: “But when a modern poet says that everyone has a picture for which he would be willing to give the whole world, how many people would not look for it in an old box of toys?” Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2:120.

²³ *The Painter of Modern Life*, 202.

for Fyodor are the most immaterial, and as Nabokov moves from play with toys to Fyodor and Tanya's metaphysical games with time and space, with knowledge, and with death, he does so with a very light touch that makes the element of play nearly invisible. Fyodor's game with time is initiated by his poem about "a courteous old man" who comes in to wind up the clocks in the house, which segues into a description of Fyodor's resistance to going to sleep.²⁴

Fyodor and Tanya also play with words and knowledge, asking each other riddles:

*Mon premier est un metal précieux
Mon second est un habitant des cieux,
Et mon tout est un fruit délicieux* (22)

(The answer is "orange", made up of "or" and "ange".) When Tanya has fallen asleep Fyodor buries himself in the covers and imagines he is in a cave, or that he is a horse being torn apart by shamans. Fyodor's game, at first so pleasant and inviting, draws him in and then reveals itself as a nightmare. These primitive moments of play border on dream. This contiguity is made explicit in the poem Fyodor writes about bicycling:

And support as in dreamland is lacking,
And trusting in this dream simplicity,
The bicycle does not collapse.²⁵

For Fyodor, remembering early childhood, "my probing thought often turns towards that original source, that reverse nothingness" before existence, and "the nebulous state of the infant always seems to me to be slow convalescence after a dreadful

²⁴ When in 1961 he returned to the text for his English translation, Nabokov seems to have felt that the point was too obscure, so he added the phrase "play for time": "At the beginning of the agonizing night I could still play for time by subsisting on conversations with Tanya" (22). Compare SS 4:203: "v nachale muchenicheskoi nochi ia eshchë probavlialsia tem, chto peregovarivalsia s Taneï".

²⁵ G 31. It is interesting to compare Fyodor's poem about bicycling with Nabokov's own poem "Bicyclist", in *The Empyrean Path*, which is dated 13 September 1918. It is possible that this poem pre-dates "Childhood", but it cannot really be called a poem about play, despite the title: the bicycle is merely the vehicle for a poem about speed and landscape. But Nabokov placed "Bicyclist" late in *The Empyrean Path*, violating the chronology of composition the book loosely observes, and just after "Lawn Tennis" and "Babochka" or "Butterfly". By doing he perhaps put it under the rubric of play. See SS 1:543-544.

illness” (18). Death, absence, and loss are shadows at the edges of Fyodor’s remembered childhood, but his play is designed to master them and keep them out. His *Poems* begins with “A Lost Ball”, a poem about a ball rolling early in Fyodor’s childhood under a sofa, not to be recovered until at the very end of his childhood, “something happened” – the Revolution, perhaps – and the furniture was moved and the ball emerged, “Alive, and incredibly dear” (33). Such games played with presence and absence are common among young children. When he read Freud in the late 1920s, Nabokov may well have come across the description of such a game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), where Freud observes his one and a half year old grandson throwing his toys under the bed and then retrieving them. Freud concludes that the child, coping with the anxieties of his mother going away, has “compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach.”²⁶ Similarly, Fyodor needed to lose the ball to find it again, the pleasures of memory depend on the fact that the details of the past have disappeared.

The opening pages of *Speak, Memory*, which deal with Nabokov’s earliest life, are a distillation of the section on games at the beginning of *The Gift*. Having eliminated Fyodor’s preamble, Nabokov starts straight in with the reverse nothingness the mind encounters when it imagines the world prior to birth: “The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.” (17) Having established that abyss in the first section, Nabokov moves on in the second to the games he played with that abyss, games with the possibility of non-existence: “It was the primordial cave (and not what Freudian mystics might suppose) that lay behind the games I played when I was four.” (20) There is the

²⁶ *The Freud Reader*, 600.

game with the bedclothes described in *The Gift* and also another “cave game” played by shifting the divan to form a tunnel:

I then had the fantastic pleasure of creeping through that pitch-dark tunnel, where I lingered a little to listen to the singing in my ears – that lonesome vibration so familiar to small boys in dusty hiding places – and then, in a burst of delicious panic, on rapidly thudding hands and knees I would reach the tunnel’s far end, push its cushions away, and be welcomed by a mesh of sunshine on the parquet under the canework of a Viennese chair and two gamesome flies settling by turns. (20)

Play allows him the pleasure of experiencing and surviving his fear of non-existence, safely transforming it into the play of light and shadow, the “gamesome flies” and the play of imagination. This is a small death anticipating future non-existence, like the festive anticipation of death in the scene at the end of the first chapter, with Nabokov’s father being thrown aloft by his peasants, disappearing out of sight, and seeming to hang in the air like a painted figure on the ceiling of a church above an open coffin.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov reworks the Faber pencil episode from *The Gift*, but surrounds it with other images of how a child at play turns its seemingly limited materials into universal signs. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov at seven is given coloured alphabet blocks, appropriate since he sees letters as colours anyway, and he uses them “to build a tower” (30), rather as in “Childhood” he used his dictionary as a bridge. General Kuropatkin shows him a trick with matches. “He [...] placed ten of them end to end to make a horizontal line, and said, ‘This is the sea in calm weather.’ Then he tipped up each pair so as to turn the straight line into a zigzag – and that was ‘a stormy sea’.” (23) *Speak, Memory* ends on just such an image of symbolic play, in which the child is able to see in the small a make-believe token of the large. Nabokov remembers walking through a park with his wife and young son towards the ship that would take them from occupied

France to safety in America, “the ungenuinely gigantic, the unrealistically real prototype of the various toy vessels he had doddled about in his bath.” (227) A bridge, a tower, a transatlantic steamer taking the child and his family to safety: such play, like art, adds the element of the symbolic to the restricted elements of an individual life and by doing escapes beyond them.

For Nabokov and Véra, spotting the ship as they walked with Dmitri:

It was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roof and walls, a splendid ship’s funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture – Find What the Sailor has Hidden – that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen. (237)

These are the final words of *Speak, Memory*, and they mark the summation of its essential theme, which is that of a riddle. Nabokov emphasises this in Chapter Sixteen, the mock-review of the book which he decided eventually not to publish:

riddles of various kinds, but all tending to their chess apotheosis form, in fact, a theme reappearing in every chapter [...] The unravelling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind. [...] Thus toward the end of the book, the theme of mimicry, of the ‘cryptic disguise’ studied by Nabokov in his entomological pursuits, comes to a punctual rendezvous with the ‘riddle’ theme (*SM* 240)

Here Nabokov is referring to the passage in the previous chapter where he remembers studying his infant son’s eyes for the first signs of recognition and dawning consciousness:

the newly established nexus between eye and reachable object [...] It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind’s birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realised that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvellously disguised insect or bird. (228)

The riddles of *Speak, Memory* are designed to elicit from the reader this moment of recognition, repeating the first birth of consciousness in the infant mind. They also serve

to illustrate Nabokov's memory straining to remember what he has previously forgotten. There are many such scenes, as when, fifteen years after having shown the young Nabokov his trick with matches, General Kuropatkin ran across Nabokov's father as they both escaped the Bolsheviks in St Petersburg: "He asked my father for a light. The next moment each recognized each other." (23) Play anticipates the future, in a process which memory reverses, and Nabokov argues that "the following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography." (23) Or, as he puts his aim in his mock-review: "to plan his book according to the way his life had been planned by unknown players of games" (241).

Nabokov had this meticulous intertwining of theme upon theme in mind when he considered calling the book "*The Anthemion* which is the name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters" (8). He provides another image of *Speak, Memory*'s intricate design at the end of the fourteenth chapter in the "beautiful, complex and sterile art" (221) of chess problem composition. This passage is carefully placed at the end of the fourteenth chapter, just after the death of Sirin. If *Speak, Memory* had ended there, it would have had as many chapters as the lines of a sonnet, and traced Nabokov's evolution from birth to the death of Sirin, all in a pattern as complex, perfect, and sterile as a sonnet or a chess problem. But Nabokov's final problem, stamped by the French emigration bureau, is won by "making instead a modest dilatory move" (225) in the corner of the board. That small unexpected move is Dmitri, to whose childhood the supernumerary fifteenth chapter is devoted. So the book forms not a sterile circle but an expanding spiral, "a spiritualized circle" which will take Nabokov into a new emigration, across another artistic border (211). The last chapter of

Speak, Memory returns to the scenes of early infancy with which the first chapter opened. The birth of Nabokov out of Sirin is linked to the birth of Dmitri, and the possibility of an autobiography with the childhood Nabokov could relive through his son.

The aesthetic of *Speak, Memory* is governed by Nabokov's desire to protect childhood and innocence. In the fifteenth chapter, Nabokov remembers a young girl leading a live butterfly on a thread, and the nasty "sullen sport" of this makes him turn to Véra and say:

You and I did our best to encompass the trustful tenderness of our child but were inevitably confronted by the fact that the filth left by hoodlums in a sandbox was the least serious of possible offenses, and that the horrors which former generations had mentally dismissed as anachronisms or things occurring only in remote khanates and mandarinales, were all around us. (234)

By its intricate pattern *Speak, Memory* attempts to create "the harmonious world of a perfect childhood" (21), and its tone comes from within the safety of a family circle. In it Nabokov sounds like a father speaking to his child, tenderly simplifying the world to protect his child, but also like a child still confident in the absolute power of his consciousness to choose its world: "I confess I do not believe in time." (109) Behind this lies Nabokov's memory of childhood, the "sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth" in which "Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die." (62) This statement ends its chapter so blankly as to transform the petulance it echoes into a metaphysical credo. *Speak, Memory* is the safe place in which it need not even occur to the writer that such essential wishes might be defended by sophistication, complexity, and play. In "The Creative Writer", Nabokov proposes "the irrational belief in the goodness of man" as the basis for

the emphatically and unshakably illogical world which I am advertising as a home for the spirit. Messerschmidts are unreal not because they are conveniently remote

in physical space from the reality of a reading lamp and the solidity of a fountain-pen but because I cannot imagine (and that is saying a great deal) such circumstances as might impinge upon the lovely and lovable world which quietly persists [...] ²⁷

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov aimed to create such a home for the spirit. Within its perimeter, the sandbox is clear of filth. And the little girl who in her innocent cruelty has tied a butterfly to a thread is not, here at least, allowed to bring the frightening ambiguities of art and play too far into the picture.

²⁷ Nabokov, "The Creative Writer", 22.

Free Play from *The Gift* to *Bend Sinister*

Nearly all of *The Gift*'s critics have bowed to Fyodor's authority, accepting his high opinion of himself and his father. But *The Gift* is more ambiguous than it appears.

Michael Long has offered a dissent:

Everything in *The Gift* is mined from within and eaten through with rottenness. This apparent greenwood will snap at the slightest pressure. The hero is a modish, narcissistic, cruel, and withdrawn youth; his poetry is risible; his biography of the wretched Chernyshevski is as humanly impoverished as it is far from pure; his heroic father has feet of clay [...] What kind of an ideal loving husband is this who hardly spends any time with his wife and who dismisses her with cruel humiliation ('You go home') when once she dares to seek him out on his travels?²⁸

This reading of *The Gift* is supported by the sequel that Nabokov began late in 1939, probably in September (RY 516). In this aborted novel, whose fragments are preserved in the Library of Congress, Nabokov was going to bring to the fore the negative view of Fyodor that in *The Gift* he had kept obscure. In the last chapter of *The Gift*, Fyodor had seen Nazi and Communist flags hung out merely as splashes of colour, and airily reflected:

Oh, let everything pass and be forgotten – and again in two hundred years time an ambitious failure will vent his frustration on the simpletons dreaming of a good life (that is, if there does not come *my* kingdom, where everybody keeps to himself and there is no equality and no authorities – but if you don't want it, I don't insist and don't care). (326)

Now fifteen years have passed and Fyodor's political insouciance has come to look ugly and selfish. In an early scene of the sequel, a young Russian called Kostritskii is visiting the flat and is subjecting Zina (Jewish, as was Véra) to Nazi rhetoric. Fyodor, arriving home, is too caught up in his writing to do anything to help Zina, and instead of confronting the problem is rude to her and walks out, leaving her with Kostritskii. The

²⁸ Long, *Marvell, Nabokov*, 92.

narrative emphasises the unpleasant impression he makes. In another extract, Fyodor goes to Yvonne, a prostitute in Paris. In the final chapter of this sequel Fyodor has lost Zina, not because of his infidelity but because she has died in an accident. The whole of the projected sequel to *The Gift* reflects Nabokov's affair with Irina Guadanini, by its atmosphere of self-disgust, its sense of the damaging and uncontrollable nature of sexual desire, and the fear it projects of losing Véra. It also describes the crisis in Nabokov's writing at the end of the 1930s. In Jane Grayson's words, Fyodor's writing has "lost its direction. If in *Dar* [*The Gift*] he could speak confidently of the novel he would write one day, here we see Fyodor continuing to write, but in bits and pieces and with no sureness of purpose."²⁹

The aborted sequel of *The Gift* contains shadows and reflections of the two plays that Nabokov wrote in the late 1930s. *The Event*, a play that Nabokov composed in November and December 1937, takes up the accusation that the artist's passivity makes him a coward which Nabokov had implicitly brought against Fyodor. The main character, Troshcheykin, lives in fear that his wife's violent former lover, Barbashin, will return to make good his threat to kill him. Troshcheykin assumes that Barbashin will return, yet this determinism turns out to be the philosophical by-product of Troshcheykin's timidity.³⁰ The most interesting aspect of *The Event* is an idea that Nabokov derives from this. At the beginning of the play the stage is set with "*a nearly finished portrait of a boy in blue, with five round blank spaces (future balls) arranged in a half circle at his feet.*" (USSR 127) A child's ball rolls across the stage, followed by Troshcheykin. After his last sitting, the boy who was modelling for the picture started playing with the balls and three

²⁹ Grayson, "Washington's Gift", 28ff; 45. I have not seen this manuscript and rely on Grayson's account.

³⁰ On this point see Boyd, *Russian Years*, 484-5.

have gone missing. At first, Troshcheykin is unwilling to simply paint the balls in without the boy being present. Eventually the boy breaks a mirror in the front hall while playing with the balls, and Troshcheykin, seeming to give up, paints the balls in. Troshcheykin cannot accept that life is unpredictable, and his timid determinism keeps him from finding an adequate depiction of children's play. Nabokov, on the other hand, will now try to represent childhood and play courageously enough to do justice to its freedom, unpredictability, and destructiveness. The child smashing the mirror signals that this effort will require Nabokov to move further than ever away from verisimilitude.

The stage directions to Act One of *The Event* describe Troshcheykin as “infantile” (127). Nabokov would develop this idea of the infantile artist in his other Russian play of the late thirties, *The Waltz Invention*, which he wrote in September 1938. Waltz is a shady figure who has invented a bomb that is capable of blowing up the entire world. In exchange for not using it, he demands of the government that all of his wishes be met – wishes that turn out to be as childish as they are impossible and extravagant. Waltz imagines that his destruction of the world will lead to “the happiness of mankind” (*TWI* 101). The play is about the childishness of the tyrannical and utopian impulses. In one respect it is Waltz's dream. His factotum is even called “Son”, dream in Russian. But in another respect, as Nabokov emphasises in his introduction, the play is a projection forwards of the fantasies of omnipotence that the young Waltz once enjoyed as he played with his toys. At certain moments, Nabokov says, “there occurs now and then a sudden thinning of the texture, a rubbed spot in the bright fabric, allowing the nether life to glimmer through.” (9) So, at one moment, Waltz glimpses on a table the little red toy car that he had as a boy (95). Here, as in *Finnegans Wake*, dream and play are

interchangeable as figures for an absolutely free world of “desires unlimited” (*TWI* 145). Words, cut free from the resistant weight of reality, can be juggled at will. Waltz has “two factories and a tenement house in Old Chestnut Street, Punnington” (23), and the characters are homonyms of one another, with names such as Plump, Gump, Bump, Lump, Rump and Stump. Yet here, as also in *Finnegans Wake*, the fantasies of omnipotence and babble of infantile desire are not merely the butt of satire. Waltz is described in the cast list as “a fellow author” (13).

In *The Event* and *The Waltz Invention*, Nabokov mocks the author, treating him as an infant, a coward, and a tyrant. In the sequel to *The Gift* he turns his face against Fyodor. In all this we can see the death-throes of Sirin. Indeed, in the late 1930s and 1940s, Nabokov often wrote about the death or disappearance of authors. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* ends with the death of the author Sebastian Knight. In “The Paris Poem”, written in 1943 but dealing with the critical years spent in Paris at the end of the 1930s, Nabokov imagines how “now and then / one’s heart starts clamouring: Author! Author!”, only to receive the reply, “He is not in the house, gentlemen.” (*PP* 121) In the 1939 story “Vasiliy Shishkov”, Nabokov imagines meeting an author who wants to compose “*A Survey of Pain and Vulgarly*”, but who vanishes having left a manuscript in Nabokov’s hands (*S* 499). In the accompanying poem, “The Poets”, signed Vasiliy Shishkov, the Russian poets announce their departure from the world: “into a region – name it as you please: / wilderness, death, disavowal of language, / or maybe simpler: the silence of love” (*PP* 95). The death of the author is here one link in a chain of metaphors, a point Nabokov would develop at the end of *Bend Sinister*, where the author, having saved Krug, concedes that “the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a

slippery sophism, a play upon words”, adding, “but the very last lap of his life has been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style.” (200)

“The Author” is Nabokov’s term for the safely detached viewpoint that Nabokov refers to in “The Creative Writer” as “the much abused ivory tower”, which he recommends “not as a writer’s prison, but merely as a fixed address” (21). Four and a half years later, in a letter that Nabokov wrote to his sister Elena on June 15, 1946, he would partly withdraw this recommendation. Nabokov begins by boasting about a prize Dmitri has just won in Latin, but this bright image of a protected childhood immediately casts a shadow into his thoughts:

Mityushenka [Dmitri] has been a marvellous student this year, he won a prize in Latin. My dear, however one wants to hide in one’s ivory tower, there are things which wound one too deeply, for instance German atrocities, the burning of children in ovens, – children, who are just as ravishingly entertaining and beloved as our children. I retreat into myself, but I find there such hatred for the German, for the concentr. camp, for every tyrant, that as a refuge *ce n’est pas grand chose*. Did I write to you, that by a funny coincidence I was reading ‘Le Grand Meaulnes’, just when you were reading it – and enjoyed it very, very much.³¹

By choosing Cincinnatus as the name for the hero of *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov had signalled his commitment to the Roman ideal of retirement from political life. But the thought of Latin now prompts Nabokov to acknowledge that such a retreat is no longer possible for him, since so many children have not been protected. Nabokov had reflected on this traditional identification of fatherhood and authority in his 1944 poem “On Rulers”: “Since when the concept / of authority has been equated / with the seminal notion of patria?” (PP 129) In this letter Nabokov seems able to recover himself only by thinking of Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913), a novel, like *Speak, Memory*, about a childhood idyll lost but recreated in memory and art.

³¹ Sikorski, ed., *Perepiska s sestroi*, 41. My translation.

This letter gives us the inner logic of *Bend Sinister*, which Nabokov was finishing in June 1946. By choosing *Bend Sinister* as the title for his first American novel in the new style, Nabokov was using the heraldic insignia generally associated with bastardy, that is, with paternity put in question.³² In *Bend Sinister*, the philosopher Krug's independence is compromised when he fails to protect his son David from Paduk's tyranny, having already agreed to collaborate with Paduk in an attempt to save David. When David is in any case killed, this failure of paternal and divine authority is matched by the Author splitting into two contradictory forces. At the end of the novel, after Krug's obstinate independence has led to the torture and death of his son, David, Krug is on the point of death, when the author steps in to save him by lifting him out of the novel. Unlike Cincinnatus, Krug cannot save himself. In a summary of the novel he sent to Doubleday publishers, Nabokov wrote: "This singular apotheosis (a device never yet attempted in literature) is, if you like, a kind of symbol of the Divine power. I, the Author, take Krug to my bosom and the horrors of the life he has been experiencing turn out to be the artistic invention of the Author." (SL 50) The fundamental ambiguity of an author who first tortures and then later saves his character makes it impossible to read the book by inferring the author's purpose.³³ *Bend Sinister* is a disowned, illegitimate, or orphaned text, that is, a text whose ambiguities the reader cannot resolve by any appeal to the paternal authority of the author.

³² In his introduction to *Bend Sinister* (5), Nabokov says that the term is "popularly, but incorrectly, supposed to denote bastardy", but that the title "was an attempt to suggest an outline broken by refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being, a wrong turn taken by life, a sinister and sinistral world." But there were many other images Nabokov could have used for distortion. When an author picks as his title a phrase whose main connotation is bastardy, the reader need not, and cannot, suppress that idea on the strength of an authorial diktat.

³³ As Fowler points out in *Reading Nabokov*, 54-5.

This doubling of the author is met by a parallel ambiguity in Krug, whose apparently heroic role in the novel is complicated by his unattractively cold and ruthless personality. Krug is the heir to Fyodor in his conceit, his aestheticism, and his passivity. Told by his friend Maximov that ““you are one of the very few celebrities our country has produced””, he asks ““who are the other stars in this mysterious constellation?”” (82) He tells Maximov that “the word ‘loyalty’ phonetically and visually reminded him of a golden fork lying in the sun on a smooth spread of pale silk” (79). The significance of this emerges at the end of the novel when Krug declines to save his friend from execution.³⁴ As a philosopher, Krug is entirely destructive. “With enormous success he had taken apart the systems of others” (145) without building anything on the space he had emptied. In *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov also hints at a covert reciprocity between the tyrant and his opponent. Krug went to school with the tyrant Paduk, regularly bullying him, and *Bend Sinister* seems quietly to suggest that Krug and Paduk are shadows or twins of one another, alike in their bullying tendencies and single-minded egotism (*BS* 51). The hourglass-shaped puddle about to divide into two at the beginning of the book may be taken as an image of this twinning. Nabokov thought of calling *Bend Sinister* *The Person from Porlock* (*SL* 48), referring to the man whom Coleridge claimed had interrupted him writing “Kubla Khan” (1798). “Kubla Khan” takes its reader into the potential violence and tyranny of the artistic imagination when it leaves the mind and seeks to make a world for itself. For Nabokov to allude to it in his title would have exposed the secret complicities between author, hero, and tyrant which *Bend Sinister* investigates.

³⁴ As Toker argues in *Nabokov*, 184.

Another of the titles that Nabokov considered was *Game to Gunm*, the label on a volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* whose entries ran from “Game to Gunmetal”.³⁵ *Bend Sinister* deals again with the violence in play that Nabokov had been thinking about for the past twenty years. In playtimes, Krug sat on Paduk’s face every day. At the end of the book, David is tortured in a series of “release games” arranged by psychiatrists, in which criminals are sent into an enclosure with orphans and encouraged to torture them to death so as “to enjoy the possibility of venting in full their repressed yearnings” (181-2). These scenes recall the anarchic games of football that Krug used to play at school in the “inner court”, in which a rubber ball would be kicked to pieces, beginning pure and white, then a “dirty grey adult with grains of gravel adhering to its weather-beaten cheek; then a flabby and formless corpse” (62-3). These grains of gravel anticipate the pebble that one of the criminals spits into a child’s open mouth (183). The “release games” illustrate the nature of *Bend Sinister*, which moves decisively into the anarchy of free play left by the vacuum of legitimate authority. *Bend Sinister* develops the atmosphere of cheating from *Invitation to a Beheading*, the sexual license because of which paternity is always in doubt (169), the facile irresponsible language (173), and the sickly childishness. At one point Krug is walking across a bridge with a grocer when “his little companion expressed his delirious joy by running in circles around Krug, he ran in widening circles around Krug and imitated a railway engine [...] Parody of a child – *my* child.” (26) This parody of childhood is typical of a political state whose idea of the ideal man comes from “a cartoon sequence depicting the home life of Mr and Mrs Etermon (Everyman).” (72) *Bend Sinister* presents a world whose conception was interrupted and

³⁵ NWL 152. It was Johnson who in *Worlds in Regression*, 203-6, first traced the title *Game to Gunm* to the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

disturbed, and one aspect of this is that the correct relations between childhood and adulthood have been disturbed, so that the maturational process is failing and adults act like children.

Like *Invitation*, *Bend Sinister* has the ill-made inconsistent air of something put together without regard for consistency. But it is even shoddier than its predecessor. Whereas Cincinnatus was writing his way towards unifying his voices into a real self, and the gaolers had definite if hidden intentions, in *Bend Sinister* the tyranny is characterised by appalling mistakes and the narrative itself is a chaotic babble of voices and a disorienting swirl of inconsistent perspectives. *Bend Sinister* presents itself as an interrupted, half-baked, incomplete work, like “Kubla Khan”, a famous unfinished poem. There is a particularly egregious inconsistency in *Bend Sinister*’s ideas about the degradation of language. The “author” at the end acknowledges that “the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism, a play upon words” (200). But Paduk himself is always engaged in word-play, making anagrams of everyone’s name, in obedience to the principle that “all men consist of the same twenty-five letters variously mixed.” (64) In the introduction, Nabokov tells us that there is “a contagious sickness in the world of words” in Padukgrad (8). Because *Bend Sinister* is an in-between work, caught like Krug on the middle of a bridge, between Russian and English, Sirin and Nabokov, it expresses with particular clarity the ambivalence of Nabokov’s attitude to word-play.

Such intellectual contradictions are too extreme for us to call them the play of ideas. Not that *Bend Sinister* aims to argue a particular case: Nabokov disclaims the “hollow profundity” of such “serious literature” in his introduction (6). Still, the play of

ideas in a work of literature needs to obey some underlying logic or unbroken rule. Blatant contradictions such as those in *Bend Sinister* take us beyond play into the absolute incoherence we can only recognise as that of a dream. *Bend Sinister* is full of Krug's dreams, and even in the supposedly realistic passages, his dream-life leaks in. At one point in an interview he imagines with Paduk, "a fat grey parrot with a note in its beak walked in." (126) By a dream-logic, Krug's dead wife Olga becomes Ophelia, as if he were responsible for her death (101). In place of Olga, Krug now lusts after his housemaid Mariette, whom he feels somehow he has seen before, as "Cinderella, the little slattern, moving and dusting in a dream" (120). The contradictions of this incompletely censored text rip a hole in the membrane of the unconscious, and Mariette, with her "attractively childish face" (120), becomes the receptacle of Krug's love both for his dead wife and living son. A shameful dream-logic mixes his two loves together, and "on the night of the twelfth, he dreamt that he was surreptitiously enjoying Mariette while she sat, wincing a little, in his lap during the rehearsal of a play in which she was supposed to be his daughter." (148) With "pity and shame" Krug dreams of Olga undressing like a "stripteaser" and then dismantling her body (76). The scene recalls Jonathan Swift's poem "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" (1731), where a woman is watched undressing and then taking her body apart.³⁶ Olga is the victim of Krug's dissecting rationality. Krug's dream foreshadows the scene in which David is actually dismembered. "When the dream-self is dead for the ten thousandth time, [...] the day-self inherits for the ten thousandth time those dusty trifles, those debts, those bundles of illegible letters" (61). *Bend Sinister*, like Nabokov's later novels and *Finnegans Wake*, is written in those illegible letters.

³⁶ *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 538-40.

But *Bend Sinister* does not identify itself as a dream. Such certainty would not be dream-like. The contradictions and confusions of Nabokov's text could also be seen as characteristic of infantile consciousness, whose indeterminacy adults cannot recover, and can therefore only recognise under the rubric of dream.³⁷ In its longest dream-sequence, Chapter Five, Krug dreams about childhood and play. Just as at David's kindergarten the main activity is crawling through "an intricate set of padded tunnels" (137), so in Krug's dream he enters the courtyard in which he will play football through a tunnel, which he imagines as the organ of an animal (61). Here, as in the tunnel-games at the beginning of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov is thinking of the early play of children with their own bodies and the fear of non-existence, but in *Bend Sinister* the abyss is not contained and made safe.

³⁷ See Piaget, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*, 87.

Lolita

In “The Creative Writer”, Nabokov imagines a caveman dismissing as “magic” the “indeterminism” belied by the arithmetic he had invented to impose order onto the world (23). A page earlier he discusses the magic that gave birth to morality: “Commonsense is fundamentally immoral, for the natural morals of mankind are as irrational as the magic rites that they evolved since the immemorial dimness of time.” (22) Somehow the magic that must be kept at bay for the sake of order and civilisation nonetheless also creates morality. The artist is a shaman who stands on the border of civilisation, attacking and defending it. Two years before “The Creative Writer”, Nabokov had in *The Enchanter* called his paedophile a magician. Yet in “Good Readers and Good Writers”, he would also define the writer as an enchanter: “it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer.” (LL 5) The cult of the child that the post-Romantic artist fosters protects children by making them lovable but places them in danger by making them too lovable, that is, sexually desirable.³⁸ This ambiguity is painfully evident in Dostoevsky, for whom causing the suffering of a child is the worst of all sins, yet in whose writing we find the obsession with paedophilia that probably inspired Nabokov’s.³⁹

In *Lolita*, Nabokov produced a more explicit statement of his ideas about play and their philosophical sources than in any novel since *King, Queen, Knave*. Perhaps because Schiller’s ideas are little known in the English-speaking world, Nabokov felt able to allude to them more explicitly in *Lolita* than he had done in *King, Queen, Knave*. At the end of the novel Lolita has married and become “DOLLY (MRS RICHARD F.

³⁸ See Fiedler, “The Eye of Innocence”, and Kincaid, *Child-Loving*.

³⁹ On Dostoevsky and paedophilia, see Guerard, *The Triumph of the Novel*, 88-109.

SCHILLER)” (266). Like *King, Queen, Knave, Lolita* tests Schiller’s ideas about humanity and aesthetic play, and explores the destructiveness and cruelty of play, an exploitativeness suggested by “DOLLY”. Unlike *King, Queen, Knave*, however, *Lolita* also does justice to Schiller’s idealisation of play. It is unique amongst Nabokov’s novels in offering, at one point, a pure ideal of play.

Scholars have tried to bring moral order to *Lolita* by detaching Nabokov’s play as sharply as possible from Humbert’s. One way of doing this is to argue, with Schiller, that man can play and indulge semblance with unrestricted freedom “if he but observes the demarcation separating his territory from the actual existence of things”, that is, so long as one does not play with real people.⁴⁰ This argument has particular force because of *Bend Sinister*: Humbert, one can say, is like Paduk, a tyrant who tries to imprison another person in his dream, and Lolita’s mistreatment recalls the scene in *Bend Sinister* in which David is tortured to death. Yet Schiller’s distinction between the aesthetic sphere and the actual existence of things is difficult to sustain in a novel, where imagination *is* act, and Nabokov tantalises us with the similarities between himself and Humbert. After the early scene in which Humbert and Lolita first have sexual contact, with him masturbating while she sits in his lap, Humbert declares that “the child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark.” (62) Though this is comically grotesque, it makes the same defence of the freedom of the imagination that Nabokov would have to offer for *Lolita*. When Charlotte finds the diary to which Humbert has confided his desires, Humbert tries to defend it as “fragments of a novel” (96).

⁴⁰ *Aesthetic Education*, 197.

Nabokov was aware, as Schiller had not been, that the utopia to which aesthetic consciousness aspires can transpose with dangerous ease into a dystopia imposed on an unwilling second party: in *Glory*, Zoorland is both the aesthetic otherworld Martin imagines and the Soviet Union across whose border he suicidally crosses at the end of the novel. Humbert offers tyranny together with playful aesthetic transcendence, as if the two were inextricable. *Lolita* tempts and threatens its readers with an implicit equation between the actions it condemns and its own art, in whose pleasures we have participated. “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with” (32), cries Humbert, and Nabokov is shamefully drawn in and spoken for. Through Humbert Nabokov could allow himself a criminal extravagance of style, a delirious babble, and a perversely erotic imagery, literary play taken to the extreme limit of taste and subjected there to the same indictment of irresponsibility that Humbert faces.

Nabokov can condemn Humbert, but it is Nabokov who has created his images of paedophiliac desire. Late on, Humbert reports that “I feel my slippery self eluding me, gliding into deeper and darker waters than I care to probe” (308), and in the final lines of the novel his voice merges with Nabokov’s, when he speaks of “the refuge of art” as “the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.” (309) Humbert feels trapped in Quilty’s play, which is Nabokov’s play: *Lolita*, like all novels, can be thought of as a play in which the author acts every part. Nabokov could write as V. does at the end of *Sebastian Knight*: “Sebastian’s mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are part of someone whom neither of us knows.” (SK 173) Humbert is part of his author, as Macbeth or Iago are parts of Shakespeare, though they also expand and recreate Shakespeare. If *Lolita* is a

game, it is like rollercoaster rides and bull-fights, games which, as Roger Caillois says, are “based on the pursuit of vertigo and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind.”⁴¹

Another way of trying to detach Humbert from Nabokov is to emphasise that *Lolita* is a satire on Humbert’s vanity which encourages us to see through his self-deception, and to use against him the marginal details he lets slip, such as the moment when a woman asks Lolita whether she has been scratched by a cat (164). This reading requires that we imagine Humbert has carelessly mentioned such details without realising how they will be read, as if a writer in other ways so clever is in this respect very stupid. When we are shocked, we can emphasise that Humbert is the author, and *Lolita* the record of his depravity and narcissism. But when we enjoy the writing, we can forget about Humbert, and concentrate on Nabokov as its author. This was the position first taken by John Ray Jr., the impossible compound of worthiness and Humbertness who writes the mock-foreword: “A desperate honesty that throbs through the confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!” (5)

Humbert’s predecessor, Hermann Hermann in *Despair*, is so blind to how he appears that he believes Felix, a random tramp, to be his double, and thinks he is impressing the reader while all the time we and Nabokov are laughing at him behind his back. This is like Dostoevsky’s *The Double* (1846), where Golyadkin, by refusing to see his colleague’s humiliating perceptions of him, loses his identity. But Humbert is not blind in this way. Instead, as in *Notes from the Underground* (1864), Dostoevsky’s more

⁴¹ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 23.

sophisticated revision of *The Double*, he is always anticipating our reactions, and he carefully constructs a Dostoevskyan narrative of sin and repentance. This is what Nabokov disdainfully referred to in Dostoevsky as “this trick his characters have of ‘sinning their way to Jesus’” (*LRL* 104).

Yet Humbert’s designs on us may be much more perverse and insoluble than this. Michael Wood argues that Humbert is not always unreliable: on the embarrassing story of his first marriage, for instance, where “the joke is so thoroughly on him that it’s hard to see why he would tell it if it weren’t pretty close to the (fictional) facts”.⁴² “As he turns his conscience inside out and rips out its innermost lining” (*L* 70), however, we should hold open the possibility that Humbert wants shame as well as sympathy from us, and may be fantasising or courting his humiliations, as Dostoevsky’s underground man does. The underground man’s unnameable crime may be as trivial as the episodes he recounts in Part Two, but it could be paedophilia, like Stavrogin’s in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* (1861); a film called *Possessed* is showing in *Lolita* (262). Either way, the real pleasure comes from the guilt, a “secret, abnormal, base pleasure”, “some kind of shameful, accursed sweetness”; “the sensuousness is indeed composed of all this consciousness and disgrace”, in the “pleasure in the actual kind of self-humiliation”. For the sake of this pleasure the underground man “thought up adventures for myself”. “Somehow all my life I’ve been so attracted by this sort of game-playing that by the end I was no longer in control of myself.”⁴³ In Part Two the underground man drafts a young prostitute called

⁴² *The Magician’s Doubts*, 117.

⁴³ *Notes from the Underground*, 11; 17; 18; 19. No wonder that Joyce, writing *Finnegans Wake*, said that Dostoevsky was “the man more than any other who has created modern prose.” Power, *Conversations with James Joyce*, 58.

Liza into a narcissistic drama which he four times calls his game.⁴⁴ He persuades her of his sympathy, urges her to repent, but when she takes the bait he claims he had only been laughing at her, and he expels her from the game he had constructed to humiliate her; he tells Liza that “I only play with words, fill my head with dreams, and in reality do you know what I want? For you to disappear, that’s what!”⁴⁵ This is the line that Humbert is echoing when he says, “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with” (*L* 32). Recognising the source in Dostoevsky should put us on guard against being treated like Liza, and make us realise that *Lolita* is a perverse game in which Humbert is trying to enlist us.

Lance Olsen calls *Lolita* a “Janus-text”, arguing that it “challenges its readers to judge Humbert, only to subvert or severely complicate the act of judgement by building sympathy for him as he slowly gains awareness of himself and his deeds”.⁴⁶ But this is to fall prey to Humbert’s Dostoevskyan games with the narrative of self-knowledge and repentance. What Humbert does is obviously, uninterestingly, wicked, though he thinks it very interesting, and he needs neither our sympathy nor condemnation, though, perversely, he wants both. It is Lolita, or Dolores, or the nameless girl whose identity may be buried beneath those pseudonyms, who needs, or seems to need, our care, and the real duality of *Lolita* is between our sympathy for her and the Dostoevskyan (and Joycean) erotics of shame and longing in which Humbert involves us. A young girl is in such pain that she is named after it: Dolores means pain in Spanish and the name also alludes to Swinburne’s decadent 1866 poem “Dolores”, with its refrain “Dolores, / Our

⁴⁴ *Notes from the Underground*, 19; 90; 99; 115

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁶ Olsen, *Lolita*, 87.

Lady of Pain”.⁴⁷ So, too, Nabokov would in his next novel deal with how easily and conveniently pain can be overlooked: only a single letter needs to be changed to disguise pain as Pnin. Yet *Lolita*, especially in its early pages, is a brilliantly erotic novel, and not least because its subject, however luridly and grotesquely, insinuates itself as a defamiliarised image for the forbidden, shameful and unquenchable dimension of all sexual desire, as it comes up against the obstacles of custom and law, and elaborates itself in and around them.

Only French critics, Maurice Couturier and Christine Raguet-Bouvard, have been willing to acknowledge this erotic dimension of *Lolita*, which goes back, via *The Enchanter* and its Dali-esque images of a watch without hands, to French surrealism and Nabokov’s time in Paris, when he became acquainted with Henri Michaux and other writers linked with surrealism (RY 437): Nabokov gave these contacts to Humbert Humbert, who tells us that he “sat with uranists in the Deux Magots” (L 16) and is supposed to be writing a history of French poetry. Describing the “omnipotence of desire” as surrealism’s sole act of faith, Breton had aimed to free love from religious or familial abstractions, and to give expression to the most shameful sexual desires; he wrote specifically about the magical “child-woman”.⁴⁸ *Lolita* makes her way onto Humbert’s lap while showing him an image from a magazine of “a surrealist painter relaxing, supine, on a beach, and near him, likewise supine, a plaster replica of the Venus de Milo, half-buried in sand.” (58) Couturier argues that this is probably a Magritte painting, and that the scene of *Lolita* on Humbert’s lap recalls another of Magritte’s image, *Violette Nozière* (1933), in which a middle-aged man strokes under her dress a

⁴⁷ Swinburne, “Dolores”, in *Selected Poems*, 63-75.

⁴⁸ Mundy, ed., *Surrealism*, 24; 33; 50.

young girl sitting on his lap, while another man, resembling Freud, holds a briefcase and looks on disapprovingly.⁴⁹ The conscience or superego is massively present but also external and unable to intervene. The telephone has been ringing for ages, but Humbert only notices it after he has had his orgasm. Through its imagery, *Lolita* conducts a surrealist liberation of desire from the (telephone) call or letter of law (as Charlotte is run over just when she is to post her letter condemning Humbert). “The conjurer”, says Humbert, “had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady’s new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact.” (62) This startling and oddly pure erotic image reminds one of such surrealist objects as Meret Oppenheim’s furry tea-cup.⁵⁰ They both disclose the libidinous energies with which mundane life is secretly invested, but also see the erotic with a clarity that is possible only by deflecting it away from the energies of physical excitement. The artist as conjurer or enchanter stands on the border of desire and taboo, and this is itself the erotic system in which Nabokov, like Joyce, is working. As Roland Barthes writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*: “Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so. [...] Whence, perhaps, a means of evaluating the works of our modernity: their value would proceed from their duplicity.”⁵¹

This duplicity is also the contradiction in Humbert’s position. To the outside world, Humbert is a tyrannical father, confining Lolita in an imaginary prison he evokes for her across the vast spaces they traverse. The phantasmal order Humbert projects is imaged in the rigid rules and lines of the games he likes, chess and tennis. Several critics

⁴⁹ Couturier, *Nabokov*, 314-5.

⁵⁰ Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, 144.

⁵¹ Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 7.

have followed Humbert's lead and urged us to think of *Lolita* as a chess-game.⁵² When Humbert is playing chess with Gaston Godin, he claims that "I saw the board as a square pool of limpid water with rare shells and stratagems rosily visible upon the smooth tessellated bottom, while to my confused adversary all was ooze and squid-cloud." (233) If the image of *Lolita* as a chess-board appeals, however, it is surely because it promises to bring clarity to a novel which one actually experiences as ooze and squid-cloud. That is to say, here Nabokov has, as in *The Luzhin-Defense*, followed the pattern of Bely's *Petersburg*, establishing a surface order of game that is belied by underlying depths of free play.

In a crucial scene of *Lolita*, Humbert describes Lolita playing tennis. She has perfect form, but doesn't hit the ball very hard, and is easily beaten. "Her form was, indeed, an absolutely perfect imitation of top-notch tennis – without any utilitarian results." (231) Her tennis is, like art in Kantian aesthetics, purposive without purpose. It produces in Humbert "the teasing delirious feeling of teetering on the very brink of unearthly order and splendor." (230) That is, it provides a glimpse of the ghostly noumenal realm on whose possibility beauty and morality are staked. Humbert is, just for a moment, able to admire Lolita dispassionately, disinterestedly, without desiring something from it. "On that particular day, in the pure air of Champion, Colorado, on that admirable court at the foot of steep stone stairs leading up to the Champion Hotel where we had spent the night, I felt I could rest from the nightmare of unknown betrayals within the innocence of her style, of her soul, of her essential grace." (233) Time is stopped, desire postponed or forgotten, and gravity momentarily cancelled in an image of

⁵² Most influentially, Appel in his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, L lxxv-lxxvii. See also Karl, *American Fictions*, 225.

suspension so surprisingly perfect that it seems to arrive as magically as the ball finding its way to the centre of Lolita's racket, bringing with it a glimpse of a world in which art is natural and effortless, sheltered from guilt or ambivalence:

My Lolita had a way of raising her bent left knee at the ample and springy start of the service cycle when there would develop and hang in the sun for a second a vital web of balance between toed foot, pristine armpit, burnished arm and far back-flung racket, as she smiled up with gleaming teeth at the small globe suspended so high in the zenith of the powerful and graceful cosmos she had created for the express purpose of falling upon it with a clean resounding crack of her golden whip. (231-2)

This sentence, with its various centres of gravity intricately co-ordinated into a minutely balanced system, recreates the autonomous world or cosmos that Lolita makes in her game. As in the croquet game in *Pnin*, where Pnin is momentarily restored to his true stature and agility, so here in her tennis game Lolita, who to Humbert "was so cruel and crafty in everyday life, revealed an innocence, a frankness, a kindness of ball-placing" (232). A window is cut through onto that idyllic world which Nabokov advertised as a home for the spirit in "The Creative Writer" and which he substantiated in *Speak, Memory*. At the end of the novel Humbert overhears that world of protected childhood in the voices of children at play rising up from a mining town: "What I heard was but the melody of children at play [...] and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord."⁵³ (308)

If Humbert likes games, Lolita prefers free play, and the novel is fundamentally shaped by her spirit, not his: its title, after all, is *Lolita*, not *Humbert*. "She preferred acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis" (232). "To our games, oddly enough, she

⁵³ The inspiration for this scene seems to have been a moment in September 1951, when Nabokov hiked out of Telluride, Colorado. In a letter to Edmund Wilson he describes how "all you hear are the voices of children playing in the streets – delightful!" *NWL* 294.

preferred – at least, before we reached California – formless patball approximations – more ball hunting than actual play – with a wispy, weak, wonderfully pretty in an *ange gauche* way coeval.” (162) Whereas in *The Enchanter* the young girl is first glimpsed on roller-skates, in *Lolita* Nabokov went further towards free play, and in one of the early scenes Lolita plays a bizarre game of her own invention, a form of free play without rules, free from any recognisable model: “After a while she sat down next to me on the lower step of the back porch and began to pick up the pebbles between her feet – pebbles, my God, then a curled bit of milk-bottle glass resembling a snarling lip – and chuck them at a can.” (41) Lolita is so desirable just because she slips out of the games in which Humbert tries to enclose her, just because the rules of her games are so indefinite. When they first kiss after he picks her up from camp, he remarks with a warm thrill of apprehension that “the limits of such girlish games are fluid, or at least too childishly subtle for the senior partner to grasp” (113). Just after the tennis-game in which Humbert has framed her image to his satisfaction, the telephone rings, as after the scene of her on his lap, and when he comes back she is gone. The loss is delicious, enriching him with “a wealth of anxiety, passion and pain” (236). When he sees her again, “she was playing with a dog, not me”, bouncing a ball for it with such enthusiasm that “even the dog seemed puzzled by the extravagance of her reactions.” Then Humbert sees or thinks he sees that she is only pretending to play to attract the attention of a man in the swimming-pool (236-7). Humbert had called her tennis “the highest point to which I can imagine a young creature bringing the art of make-believe” (231), but this is not what he had in mind. Unfaithfully playing at play, Lolita transgresses the limits of her games and obscures the relation between player and plaything, becoming, for Humbert, dog-like: “as

she made for the ball and missed it, she fell on her back, with her obscene young legs madly pedalling in the air” (237).

The first sign of Lolita is “an old gray tennis ball that lay on an oak chest” (37). Later, after Lolita has covered Humbert’s eyes with her hands, she throws the same tennis ball at him (55). Here Lolita is the infant Eros, whose apple has been wittily transformed into a tennis ball. In a shimmering metamorphosis characteristic of the novel, the tennis ball turns back into an apple that Lolita plays with before tumbling onto Humbert’s lap (58). As the semi-mythological apple suggests, Nabokov is working in a classical vein of erotic writing, in which sexual desire is imagined as childish play.⁵⁴ Humbert frequently talks about his sexual wishes as play. One fantasy is: “A shipwreck. An atoll. Alone with a drowned passenger’s shivering child. Darling, this is only a game.” (20) Thirty pages later, after fantasising another natural disaster, Humbert has begun to contemplate playing with her in the real world outside his imagination: “A brave Humbert would have played with her most disgustingly” (53). Humbert revels in the laughing cynicism with which he plays on or with the ambiguity of the phrase “play with”, which can suggest that the two are playing consensually with one another or that Humbert is playing exploitatively with her. This is the self-knowingness that rips out the innermost lining of conscience. Humbert’s moral sense is perfectly vivid, but he does not act on it. He watches it, and his self-disgust arouses him.

Humbert is able to exploit the fact that Lolita also thinks about sex as play, speaking of “the kissing game” (120) and of the “game she and Charlie had played at camp” (133). She seems to have picked this phrase up from the jargon of progressive

⁵⁴ There is a Robert Herrick poem called “Love’s Play at Push-Pin” which is a good example of this. *Works of Robert Herrick*, 1:19.

education: later, to please the headmistress Miss Pratt, Humbert ventures the phrase “sex play” and is congratulated for his “civilised terminology” (196). In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov had said of his childhood that “our innocence seems to me now almost monstrous, in the light of various ‘sexual confessions’ (to be found in Havelock Ellis and elsewhere), which involve tiny tots mating like mad.” (158) In his 1931 article, “What Should Everyone Know?” he had mocked Freud for supposedly claiming that “All children’s games [...] are based on eroticism” (SS 3:699). But Humbert, who calls himself “King Sigmund the Second” (125), presides with Miss Pratt over a post-Freudian world in which the sexuality of children and their games is taken for granted.

The ideal of free play which Humbert, despite himself, finds so erotic, is one that Nabokov also wants to defend against the Miss Pratts of the world, and which he embodied in Lolita the girl and also in *Lolita* the book. Nabokov’s American novels vaunt their freedom in the face of the crudely utilitarian “life-adjustment movement” current in America in the 1950s, whose anti-intellectual, pseudo-scientific, and conformist tendencies Nabokov had hated in Dmitri’s schooling.⁵⁵ As Miss Pratt puts it: “We think, Dr. Humburg, in organismal and organizational terms.” (177) Nabokov was writing *Lolita* in the midst of what was known at the time as the “great debate” over American education, which ran roughly from 1949 and 1957. *Lolita* is one out of many attacks on progressive education in the 1950s, and also on the newly mainstream disciplines of psychology and psychoanalysis. Miss Pratt talks of how Lolita is “still shuttling [...] between the anal and genital zones of development” (194), and threatens to have her treated by Dr Cutler, the Beardsley College psychoanalyst (197). Popular

⁵⁵ On the corruption of progressive education into “life-adjustment”, see Ravitch, *Troubled Crusade*, 46. On Nabokov’s reaction to Dmitri’s experience of progressive education, see Dmitri Nabokov, “Close Calls and Fulfilled Dreams”, 304.

books with titles like *Know Your Child* and *Know Your Child Through His Play* were being published in the late 1940s, and Charlotte is reading *A Guide to Your Child's Development*, “that Know-Your-Child book”, as Humbert later calls it.⁵⁶ Psychological testing, including “projective tests” using drawing and playing, was becoming common in American schools.⁵⁷ Nabokov satirises all this in *Pnin*, in the tests to which Pnin's ex-wife and her husband submit their son Victor (the names are very like those of the real tests of the time). These tests recall the release-games in *Bend Sinister* and make an image for the way the narrator plays with Pnin like a doll:

There is the charming Bièvre Interest-Attitude Game (a blessing on rainy afternoons), in which little Sam or Ruby is asked to put a little mark in front of the things about which he or she feels sort of fearful [...] there is the Augusta Angst Abstract Test, in which the little one (*das Kleine*) is made to express a list of terms ('groaning', 'pleasure', 'darkness') by means of unlifted lines. And there is, of course, Doll Play, in which Patrick or Patricia is given two identical rubber dolls and a cute little bit of clay [...] and you may be as mean as you like and do anything you want to Papa doll if you think he is beating Mama doll when they put out the lights in the bedroom. (75-6)

But Victor is an artist and he resists such play, and the invasive interpretations foisted upon his own play:

But bad Victor would not play with Lou and Tina, ignored the dolls, struck out all the listed words (which was against the rules), and made drawings that had no subhuman significance whatever. [...] The Sterns reported that ‘unfortunately the psychic value of Victor's Mind Pictures and Word Associations is completely obscured by the boy's artistic inclinations.’ (P 76)

Victor paints a car by depicting the reflections in its surface; he draws his mother as the undulations of her shadow on the refrigerator.⁵⁸ Nabokov had defined this technique long ago in 1925 at the end of “The Fight”, calling it “the play of shadow and light” (S 146).

⁵⁶ L 81; 107. I owe the titles of 1940s child psychology books to Alfred Appel, who lists them at L 392; 397.

⁵⁷ Anastasi, *Psychological Testing*, 588-617.

⁵⁸ P 74; 81.

Now it becomes the style which defines art's freedom from interpretation and rule. This freedom is destroyed by fixed games, which is why Victor, though an artist, is not interested in sports. In *Pnin* this artistic freedom subtly undercuts the narrator's snide and captious treatment of Pnin, surrounding him with shadows and reflections which, like Victor's painting of a car, effect a "'naturalization' of man-made things" (81) and save Pnin from his polite tormentor. In *Lolita*, too, Humbert invites interpretations, but a force of free play, embodied in Lolita, resists them.

In adopting free play as his aesthetic ideal and in resisting attempts to standardise and interpret children's play, Nabokov was able to call for support on some modernist predecessors: Joyce, who in "The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies" had imitated the indeterminacy of early childhood play, but also Norman Douglas, whose *London Street Games* (1916) was Joyce's source for the children's games of "The Mime". Douglas was one of Nabokov's favourite writers in the 1920s and 1930s (SO 43), during which time *London Street Games* was reprinted. In *Lolita*, a picture of Douglas hangs on the wall of Gaston Godin, a homosexual pederast (Douglas was also an active and lifelong paedophile). Douglas thought that the freedom of children's play was being encroached on by prescribed games and ready-made toys, by definite rules and fenced-in playgrounds. "For the standardization of youth proceeds relentlessly".⁵⁹ He wanted to defend games against standardization and also against priggish attempts to bring intellectual order and rule to them. Before Douglas, the authority on children's games was the folklorist Alice Gomme, whose massive two-volume work of the 1890s is a classic of Victorian encyclopaedic pomp.⁶⁰ Gomme carefully defines the rules of each

⁵⁹ Douglas, *London Street Games*, ix.

⁶⁰ Gomme, *Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland*.

game and distinguishes them from one another with a precision that is factitious and implausible. By contrast Douglas's work is quintessentially modernist: it is brief, witty, formally experimental, and it revels in the uncertainties of its subject matter. Douglas laughs at Gomme ("Aunt Eliza"), with her solemn claim that "the song of *London Bridge is broken down* goes back to 'bloodthirsty rites of foundation sacrifice'".⁶¹ Douglas does not pretend that games mean so much, nor that they can be clearly defined by rules that are fixed or precise. Indeed, "their particular rules strike me as neither important, nor even interesting [...] My point, my whole point, was the inventiveness of children. That is why I piled up the games into a breathless catalogue".⁶² But what makes Douglas's book so fascinating is precisely how close it gets to the voices of the children whose games it records. The games merge into one another, one child-witness contradicts another, and the result is an exhilarating vision of childhood play as fetterless and wanton, resistant to definition and interpretation, and endlessly creative in its improvisations, like *Lolita*.

Nabokov points to the relation between *Lolita* and Joyce's "Mime" by making Quilty and Vivian Darkbloom the authors of a play about children-colours which is, as Humbert says, based on Joyce's piece (*L* 221). In Joyce's "The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies", children's play is also radically unknowable, and this is what eroticises it. It is a dream-play, in which a little boy, Shem (or Mick, or Glugg) is playing a riddle game, trying to guess the colour of his sisters' underwear (the answer is heliotrope). Shem shares with Humbert the perverse psychological and erotic system of exhibitionism and masochism. Failing the riddle and mocked by the girls, Shem is naked and aroused,

⁶¹ Douglas, *London Street Games*, 88. Compare Gomme, 2:346-7.

⁶² *London Street Games*, ix-x.

“he spoors loves from her heats”.⁶³ The riddles are solved in *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory*, creating an ideal and innocent world protected from doubt, suspicion, and perversity. In “The Mime”, on the other hand, each time Shem fails to answer the riddle he goes off into exile and writes another of Joyce’s doubt-inspired works. *Bend Sinister*, with its dream of Krug unable to find exam answers to Mallarmé (*BS* 75), also identifies itself as coming out of an unsolved riddle. So does *Lolita*. Although Humbert does finally solve the riddle of Quilty’s identity, until that point we are in a state of uncertainty only made murkier by Humbert’s false self-knowingness.

Failing at the riddle, Shem cannot keep away from his father’s guilt, a guilt which may be baseless but which includes the suggestion that Humphrey has been “offerings bloodonages with candid zuckers on Spinshesses Walk in presents to lilithe madinettes for at bloo his noose for him with pruriest pollygameous intentions” – that is, offering sweets to little maidens with the most prurient or polygamous intention of asking them to blow his nose for him and put him in the noose.⁶⁴ One can read these paedophile desires as evidence of a man still thinking he is a child, or one can see in the descriptions of childhood sexuality a man projecting his own adult or adulterated consciousness back onto the innocence of childhood.

At the end of “The Mime”, we watch syllables and letters on the tongue and in the mouth. So too in *Lolita*, word-play is scarcely distinguishable from erotic play. *Lolita*’s name suggests letters, *litterae* in Latin; she is the language with which Humbert is playing, the syllables that we watch in Humbert’s mouth, on his tongue and lips and teeth: “Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap at

⁶³ *Finnegans Wake*, 259; 251.

⁶⁴ *Finnegans Wake*, 241.

three, on the teeth.” (9) We are in a language lesson, like the ones Nabokov used to give to his Russian students at Wellesley: ““Please take out your mirrors, girls, and see what happens inside your mouths”” (AY 60). Communication, made self-conscious, is disabled, the letter goes undelivered, and word-play becomes erotic play. With Lolita in his lap, Humbert hums to Lo, their syllables mixing together: “The stars that sparkled, and the cars that parkled, and the bares, and the barmen, were presently taken over by her; her voice stole and corrected the tune I had been mutilating. She was musical and apple-sweet.” (59) Like Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1914) and Wedekind’s *Lulu* plays (1902), the sensual syllables of whose name are repeated in Lolita’s, *Lolita* is a work about an older man whose relations with a dangerously young girl are at once linguistic and sexual, for the young girl embodies the living spirit of a language on which the older man needs to feed, to revive himself, yet which he will never be able to possess. As Nike Wagner writes in an essay on *Lulu* and *Lolita*: “Language ‘belongs’ to the poet however just as little as the woman belongs to her lover, her nearness is distance, possession is impossible.”⁶⁵ *Lolita* is from beginning to end an Orphic address to a dead woman, made present in words that always attest to her absence.

Certainly, Humbert tries to possess Lolita, and language, and for some critics the vanity of this puts Nabokov’s novel beyond the pale. Adam Piette has argued that Humbert’s limitations are those of *Lolita*, referring to Humbert’s aphorism: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (L 9): “Something *is* murdered, though: any possible fine uses for imaginative movement in prose diction. [...] What comes out of *Lolita*, finally, is the portrait of an intelligence whose only joy is to treat

⁶⁵ Wagner, “Male Passions: Lulu and Lolita”. I owe the comparison with *Lulu* and *Pygmalion* to Wagner’s essay.

language as a kind of incarnate girl-child with whom he can play.”⁶⁶ One could make the same criticism of *Finnegans Wake*, which like *Lolita* plays with language irresponsibly and erotically, leaving behind the Miltonic ideal of an answerable style, that is, a style in which every intonation can be investigated for the echoes it carries of long-evolved and subtly unified thoughts and feelings. When Humbert says, “I began creeping up to her – ‘crippling’ up to her, as pantomimists say” (54), he is invoking Joyce – the pantomimist of “The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Maggies” – as the authority for the punning by which he revels in his own creepiness and turns his conscience inside out. When Humbert and Lolita kiss at the hotel, just before they first have sex, she whispers in his ear:

she put her mouth to my ear – but for quite a while my mind could not separate into words the hot thunder of her whisper, and she laughed, and brushed the hair off her face, and tried again, and gradually the sense of living in a brand new, mad new dream world, where everything was permissible, came over me as I realized what she was suggesting. (133)

The hot thunder of Lolita’s whisper recalls the thunderword which in Joyce’s scheme is the inarticulate source of *Finnegans Wake*’s dream-language. Behind Humbert stands Humphrey from *Finnegans Wake* and before them both a third Hum, Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking-Glass*, who says that ““When I use a word, [...] it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.””⁶⁷ This will to master the play of language is shattered along with Humpty Dumpty’s body, when he takes his fall at the end of Alice’s discussion with him.

It is a fortunate fall, and the nonsense or hum that results brings with it the anarchic pleasures of a dream world where everything is permissible, and words are released from the dull duty of gathering their referents up into the single licit meanings

⁶⁶ Piette, *Remembering and the Sound of Words*, 47-8.

⁶⁷ Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, 269.

that maintain the daylit world of civilisation. In an early review, Lionel Trilling insisted that “‘Lolita’ is about love”, and Humbert had maintained the same thing: “You see, I loved her.”⁶⁸ There are various reasonable responses to this. On Piette’s view, one could see it as more irresponsible word-play with no connection to any feeling at all. Or perhaps Humbert really loved Lolita all along, but could only realise it when he had lost her. Or perhaps he loved her, but only in a special sense that he attributes to love – like Humpty Dumpty thinking that he could make “Impenetrability” mean “we’ve had enough of that subject”.⁶⁹ But the will to linguistic mastery can never really dismiss all the indefinitely proliferating senses and associations that will keep crowding back into words. In his edition of *Eugene Onegin*, which he was working on at the same time as *Lolita*, Nabokov was trying to give English readers some idea of this polyvalency in Pushkin’s words. Humbert may think he is playing with words, and with Lolita, but she grows up and escapes the neologism *nymphet* in which he tried to catch her, and the words he uses, such as love, are subject to a play of language beyond his control. Playing “word-golf”, the game that Carroll had invented in *Doublets*, in which one word is incrementally transformed into another, Shade manages to make “hate-love in three” and “live-dead in five” (PF 206).

These are the spaces, between hate and love, and life and death, in which *Lolita* exists. Love no longer means love in the normative, plus-value sense of the word, of care for an other. As Freud comments in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), “the careless way in which language uses the word ‘love’ has its genetic justification”.⁷⁰ The ambiguity of love channels the potentially destructive forces of sexual desire into the

⁶⁸ Page, ed., *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, 95. L 270.

⁶⁹ *The Annotated Alice*, 269.

⁷⁰ *The Freud Reader*, 744.

work of civilisation. But that linguistic decay allows *Lolita* to restore to love its primitive sense, freed from the civilising imperative of family love: love as an erotic passion, pursued hopelessly, against every law and custom, beyond the survival of the self, to the point of death.

But Humbert's decadent writing, the work perhaps of the decadent-sounding Vivian Darkbloom, with whom Quilty collaborated on the play in imitation of Joyce, is only one side of the language of *Lolita*. In the gaps of Humbert's rhetoric another voice, spoken not written, replies – Lolita's. “‘You talk like a book, *Dad*.’” (114) Humbert is in love with Lolita's slang. “‘In former times, when I was still your dream male [The reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue], you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals [Lo: ‘Of my what? Speak English’].’” (149) Humbert's comedy consists in his swerves between the facetiously high and the bluntly low (Lo). Humbert's shocking comedy, shuttling between the high and low and aiming at the self-relieving humour of bathos, overshoots the mark, so that it comes to express his own desperation and Lolita's misery.

Humbert looks up out of the circle of himself and addresses the real world he longs for, embodied in Lolita, now dead, but brought back to life in words which bring her back but also blot her out, kill and immortalise. There are small echoes of this address elsewhere in *Lolita*: at first artificially, “O, Reader, My Reader” (154); and then with an odd parenthetical glance sideways, to a doctor who treated Lolita, “(hi, Ilse, you were a dear, uninquisitive soul, and you touched my dove very gently)” (198); and to Rita, the woman his own age whom Humbert takes up with for a bit after Lolita escapes: “(hi, Rita – wherever you are, drunk or hungoverish, Rita, hi!) (259). The rhythm of this is

compressed in the brief reply Lolita makes to Humbert when he comes to see her at the end of the book and begs her to come away with him: “‘No,’ she said. ‘No, honey, no.’” (279) Reading this, one feels that all of *Lolita* existed to make it possible. Not just, as Michael Wood says, that “For a moment Humbert seems to glimpse the attraction of the acceptable and the familiar, of the way other people daily talk and live – the realm of shared feeling which inhabits cliché, and which cliché serves.”⁷¹ Lolita’s voice breaks through the prose with a power of totally unexpected and undeserved sympathy that reminds us of the world beyond the prison Humbert has built out of his written words. It is a gift and therefore a vindication of freedom. *Lolita* follows the structure of *Invitation to a Beheading*, where Cincinnatus is caught in a prison of dead written words, until he can write himself to a true voice, determine his own world, and escape, in the final words of the novel, “in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him.” (IB 191) Unlike Cincinnatus, Lolita is not a writer. But in the strength of Lolita’s voice one immediately recognises that she has also grown up, found herself, and broken free of Humbert, and that the power of *Lolita* really lies not in Humbert’s control over words and Lolita, but in the way they escape him. Her “No” stops Humbert’s play.

In the final paragraph of his afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov, adapting a comment Harry Levin had made about *Finnegans Wake*, called *Lolita* the record of his love affair with the English language, before adding that:

My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and indefinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses – the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions – which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way.⁷²

⁷¹ *The Magician’s Doubts*, 142. Wood was the first to notice that this is *Lolita*’s emotional denouement.

⁷² L 317. Compare Levin, *James Joyce*, 136: “The real romance is between Joyce and the language.”

Lolita is the story of Nabokov's, as well as Humbert's, unchaste, impossible, perverse love for the English language.⁷³ It is a love that succeeds by making possession out of loss and success out of failure.

⁷³ Dolinin goes some way towards this view, without directly linking it to *Lolita*, in his essay on "Nabokov as a Russian Writer", 55.

Ada

After *Lolita*, Nabokov paused in his enquiry into free play. The humour of *Pnin* and *Pale Fire* is at least as disturbing as *Lolita*'s, but they are not erotic novels, and the children who are harmed in them are not harmed by play. Rather, in these novels Nabokov pursued the form of writing he had begun in the later sections of *Lolita*, where Humbert, having lost Lolita, tries to recover her and find his rival by searching through the names in motel registers, convinced that his rival has "succeeded in thoroughly enmeshing me and my thrashing anguish in his demoniacal game. With infinite skill, he swayed and staggered, and regained an impossible balance, always leaving me with the sportive hope [...] that he might give himself away next time." (249) This paper-chase looks towards the literary games of *Pnin* and, especially, *Pale Fire*. But in *Ada*, Nabokov rejoined the trajectory arcing through *Bend Sinister*, *Speak*, *Memory*, and *Lolita*, and took his treatment of free play to its limit.

Ada contains Nabokov's most vivid image of free childhood play. During their first summer together, Ada tries to teach Van a game she has invented, a game played with sunlight and shadow:

The shadows of leaves on the sand were variously interrupted by roundlets of live light. The player chose his roundlet – the best, the brightest he could find – and firmly outlined it with the point of his stick; whereupon the yellow round light would appear to grow convex like the brimming surface of some golden dye. Then the player delicately scooped out the earth with his stick or fingers within the roundlet. The level of that gleaming *infusion de tilleul* would magically sink in its goblet of earth and finally dwindle to one precious drop. That player won who made the most goblets in, say, twenty minutes. (46)

Van tells Ada her games are boring, laughing at the way she talks like a rulebook ("Stop saying 'the player'. It is either you or me"), and Nabokov is also laughing at Ada's prim desire to define her games and, like Alice Gomme, to classify them – "The present series

belongs to the shadow-and-shine group””. These games, played with evanescent materials, make an image for the timeless Arcadian side of *Ada*. In old age, Ada says that Van’s 1924 *The Texture of Time*, “always reminded her, in some odd, delicate way, of the sun-and-shade games she used to play as a child in the secluded avenues of Ardis Park.”

(453) On a picnic, Van and Ada, wanting to make space to play incestuously together, get rid of Ada’s younger sister Lucette by tying her up:

Ada, after considering the situation for a moment, shut her book and said to Lucette, whom usually it was not hard to enchant, that she, Ada, felt she was quickly turning into a dragon, that the scales had begun to turn green, that now she *was* a dragon and that Lucette must be tied to a tree with the skipping rope so that Van might save her just in time. (115)

Years later, at the end of the novel, when Lucette has drowned herself out of longing for Van and a feeling of exclusion from his and Ada’s relationship, Ada will tell Van that “‘we *teased* her to death!’” (459) Lucette, drowned, is the “pretty plaything stranded among the forget-me-nots of a brook” (461) mentioned in the final paragraph of the novel.

In *Look at the Harlequins!*, Vadim goes to stay with a brother and sister who communicate in a sign language they have invented in childhood, and comments that “the whole affair [...] belonged to another life, to a world of vaguely incestuous games that I had not yet consciously invented.” (17) This is *Ada*. In it, Nabokov finally illustrated what he had meant nearly forty-five years earlier, in “Breitensträter – Paolino”, when he listed “domestic puns” alongside love, nature, and the arts, as expressions of play (SS 1:749). Reading *Ada* is like staying with a family whose jokes and references are so long-evolved and arcane, that they may not be willing or able to explain them. Marina says to Demon about Van and Ada, “‘Let’s not bother about their private jokes [...] I never can

understand their games and little secrets.’” (196) *Ada* is a novel of play in the root sense of the word, that is, of flickering movement and shadowy instability, of ambiguities of mood and meaning that cannot be caught and brought to rule. It is linguistically playful, but not with the ingenious intricacy and control of the word-games in *Pale Fire*: it is written with a lazy looseness foreign to any other work of Nabokov’s. *Ada* illustrates this free play of language in two scenes of scrabble. The real world (in the novel’s cosmology, earth or “Terra”) is excluded, so that Kremlin is not a possible word (178), just as later on Van, correcting a manuscript, finds among the typos “the meaningless ‘nuclear’ instead of ‘unclear’.” (283) Incest is the domestic pun at the centre of this self-generating, incestuous, linguistic Antiterra, and Ada plays with it in her word-games: “Insect, incest, nicest.” (210) The word-play is listlessly, nonclimactically, erotic. In the second game of Russian scrabble Lucette gets the letters LIKROT and, only eight, misses KLITOR (the Russian for clitoris) and innocently, or not, plays ROTIK, little mouth (297-8).

Ada says that “the most extraordinary word in the English language was ‘husked’, because it stood for opposite things, covered and uncovered, tightly husked but easily husked, meaning they peel off easily, you don’t have to tear the waistband, you brute.” (210) Whereas Joyce introduces such contradictions into all the words of *Finnegans Wake*, in *Ada* Nabokov tries to accommodate them in everyday language, only displaced slightly to create a woozy nightmare which incestuously joins together heaven and hell (*ad* in Russian). Van and Ada praise Joyce’s “poem about the two washerwomen” (48), the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” section of *Finnegans Wake*, and, as a number of critics have pointed out, *Ada* is the closest Nabokov comes to *Finnegans Wake*, laughing away

history, guilt and prohibition in a puerile frivolity, a farce which mixes comedy and tragedy together into an unbroken gravity-defying giggle, a “gig goggle of giguels”.⁷⁴ Like *Finnegans Wake*, *Ada* illustrates its indeterminacy by images of madness and dreams as well as of play. The sentences of *Ada* either tumble on too long in a vague incestuous way, losing attention or digressing midway and then catching up with themselves in flurries of self-congratulatory excitement, or droop languidly, indifferent to any need to interest or entertain. Like Van in his father’s presence, *Ada* is always “prone to lapse into a rather dismal sort of playfulness” (196), and Van finds the prospect of art as a game a miserable idea: “He wondered what really kept him alive on terrible Antiterra, with Terra a myth and all art a game.” (356) Though its sun-and-shade games appear to come out of the atemporal childhood ecstasy of *Speak, Memory*, *Ada* is really rooted in *Bend Sinister* and *The Waltz Invention*, with their tyrannies of gross and sickly infantile playfulness: Hitler has become “Athaulf Hindler” (454) and Freud “Dr Sig Heiler” (29).

In a 1972 essay on “Inspiration”, Nabokov gave as the seed of *Ada* a passage a parody of trash romance (*SO* 310). Like *Finnegans Wake*, *Ada* is a series of facetious parodies – of boy’s-own fiction, of *poshly* fantasies of aristocratic rakishness, and of the sort of soft-pornographic paperbacks that Van scans through on a carousel at an airport. (360) But *Ada* makes no clear distinction between its own values and those it satirises. Blissfully erotic writing merges imperceptibly into pornographic kitsch. It is as if Nabokov had let himself dissolve into self-indulgence, and then let the resulting puddle write *Ada*. One of Nabokov’s images for the style of *Ada* is a spill of peach-syrup, the colour of Lucette’s skin (156). The image goes back, via *Pale Fire*, to *Bend Sinister*,

⁷⁴ *Finnegans Wake*, 206. On *Ada* and *Finnegans Wake* see especially Long, *Marvell, Nabokov*, 110-112.

where it is traced to Goethe's *poshly* idea of Ophelia the actress and producer "like Goethe, imagine Ophelia in the guise of a canned peach: 'her whole being floats in sweet ripe passion'".⁷⁵ Another image is diarrhoea. The most grotesque image of *Ada* concerns a boy prostitute with dysentery in one of the Villa Venus Clubs (Playboy Clubs, thinly disguised) set up to realise the sexual fantasies of a fifteen-year-old boy (279). Kinbote had used such gross faecal images to attack Gradus in *Pale Fire* (PF 220). This looks back to Shem, writing *Finnegans Wake* with his own faeces, on his own body. Like *Finnegans Wake*, *Ada* is unreadable because it is embarrassing and disgusting, that is, because it makes discriminations of taste impossible, but it challenges us to embrace or at least accept the elements of experience customarily hidden by labels such as "taste". As Breton said in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930): "It is in fact from the disgusting cauldron of these meaningless mental images that the desire to proceed beyond the insufficient, the absurd, distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, true and false, good and evil, is born and sustained."⁷⁶ In *Ada*, Nabokov brought play to a point of freedom at which it loses its defining characteristics and returns to its origins in infantile experience.

⁷⁵ A 104. Compare PF 167, where Kinbote dreams of Disa by "a lake all peach syrup regularly rippled with blue".

⁷⁶ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 125.

Chapter Six *Pale Fire* and the Genre of the Literary Game

All the sacred games of art are only a remote imitation of the infinite game of the universe, the work of art which eternally creates itself anew.¹ (Friedrich Schlegel)

A great poet to whom life and library were one ² (Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin*)

Introduction

In *Ada* Nabokov came to the edge of free play, towards which he had been travelling for at least thirty years. In *Pale Fire*, however, published seven years earlier, in 1962, he moved towards the opposite pole of his writing, creating the most intricate game in all of literature. With its two-part structure, interlocking patterns of word-play, and intricate systems of metaphorical correspondence, *Pale Fire* asks to be treated not as a book to be read from cover to cover, but as a set of pieces to be rearranged as in a game. In it Nabokov gave free rein to the side of himself which he had depicted in Luzhin, which from the early 1920s on had composed anagrams, cryptic crossword puzzles and chess problems. *Pale Fire*'s puzzles reveal such perfect solutions that one comes to feel like Luzhin, preparing for the match against Turati and crediting his opponent with every possible counter-move, playing against his own shadow. In no other novel is Nabokov's power of intricate calculation so evident.

If in *Ada* Nabokov came close to the limit of artistic freedom and play marked by *Finnegans Wake*, in *Pale Fire* he created a work which has become one of the classics of postmodern game-literature. It takes its place alongside works by writers such as Raymond Queneau, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Italo Calvino and Georges Perec, who sought to devise texts according to certain artificial constraints, such as the exclusion of a single

¹ Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 89. For *Spiele* I have put "games" where the translators put "plays".

² *EO* 2:151.

letter or the pattern of a jigsaw, who delighted in formal and structural play, and embraced the idea of book as game.³ *Pale Fire* was composed in France in 1960-1961, shortly after Nabokov had expressed his admiration for Queneau and Robbe-Grillet and done an interview with Robbe-Grillet (AY 398). These writers returned Nabokov's admiration, talking about asking him to join their OuLiPo group, and writing homages to him in such works as Queneau's *Zazie in the Metro* (1959) and Perec's *Life A User's Manual* (1978).⁴

The first reviewers wrote of *Pale Fire* as a game. Mary McCarthy's 1962 review, which is now often printed as the introduction to Nabokov's book, begins: "*Pale Fire* is a Jack-in-the-box, a Fabergé gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself kit." (PF v)⁵ Academic critics have followed suit. Most of the essays on play in Nabokov deal with *Pale Fire*. These essays, which I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, comment on the word-games in *Pale Fire* and the games Nabokov starts between author and reader. But on the whole critics have failed to ask how *Pale Fire* itself asks to be thought of as a game, and tend to treat it as a puzzle with a solution.

This chapter argues that *Pale Fire* does ask to be read as a game, and in some very specific ways, but that it is not a soluble puzzle. More specifically it argues that its structural, textual, and intertextual play makes best sense if understood as elements of the genre to which *Pale Fire* belongs. *Pale Fire* is modelled on Pope's *Dunciad*, which

³ For the contrast in post-1945 modernism between the drives towards chance and necessity, see Butler, *After the Wake*.

⁴ For Perec's admiration for Nabokov, especially for *The Luzhin Defense*, and for how Nabokov's writing encouraged Perec to think of art as a game, see Bellos, *Georges Perec*, 344. For the OuLiPoeans considering inviting Nabokov to join them, see Bellos, *Georges Perec*, 359.

⁵ Comments criticising *Pale Fire* as a game were also made by Dwight Macdonald and George Steiner's reviews, reprinted in Page, ed., *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, 139; 140, and in Jack Handley's review, quoted by Gezari in *Game Fiction*, 143.

Nabokov learned about while researching his edition of *Eugene Onegin* over the 1940s and 1950s. Like the *Dunciad* it is a humanist game or *lusus* of the sort first theorised by Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly* (1511).

As Jay Levine made plain as long ago as 1966: “*Pale Fire* is a new *Dunciad*, with elements of [Jonathan Swift’s] *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Memoirs of Martin Scriblerus*”.⁶ Like *Pale Fire*, the *Dunciad* is a parody of a scholarly edition, with a poem obsessed with order and couched in rhyming couplets, chaotically digressive footnotes by egotistic scholars, and a joke index. John Shade, the poet, is an eighteenth century scholar and the author of a recently published scholarly work on “his favourite Pope” (*PF* 197), *Supremely Blest*. The book, according to Kinbote, “is concerned mainly with Pope’s technique but also contains pithy observations on ‘the stylized morals of the age.’” (155) Shade’s poem, “Pale Fire”, is, as Kinbote says, “written in neo-Popian prosodic style” (233). *Pale Fire* is liberally sprinkled with phrases, images, and reminiscences of *The Rape of the Lock* (1712; 1714).⁷ In one important moment of “Pale Fire”, Shade alludes to Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1733-4), as Kinbote points out (*PF* 161).

As he worked on his footnotes to *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov found in Pope a kindred spirit, another writer of play. Pope is a master of literary play, of ambiguities, ironies, hoaxes, and allusions – allusion being, etymologically, a form of play, a playing towards or *al-lusio*. Pope’s two major mock-epics are organised around games: the card-game Ombre in *The Rape of the Lock*, and the mock-Olympic games in Book Two of the *Dunciad* (1728-9; 1742-3), in which the dunces play infantile games with their own urine and faeces. At the centre of Pope’s philosophical poem *An Essay on Man* (1733-4),

⁶ Levine, “The Design of *A Tale of a Tub*”, 217. See also Lyons, “*Pale Fire* and the Art of Annotation”.

⁷ Zunshine, “Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”.

alongside a passage on folly which Nabokov scrutinises in *Pale Fire*, is a passage in which man's life is compared to a game. The games described in the poetry of the *Dunciad* are an image for the editorial games Pope plays in the mock-footnotes to the poem. Nabokov clearly saw that the *Dunciad* would make a perfect model for a work based on the experience of translating and editing *Eugene Onegin*.

Over the 1940s and 1950s Nabokov read through seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English and French literature to produce the three volumes of notes to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*. There are nineteen references to Pope in the edition, several of which compare Pushkin to Pope. In *Pale Fire* Nabokov weaves a web of intertextuality, with Pope at its centre, to match the web he had woven around Pushkin. In an interview, Nabokov described *Pale Fire* as a reflection of his recent work, saying that he was "retwisting my own experience when inventing Kinbote." (SO 77) In *Pale Fire* Nabokov dramatises the intertextual puzzles he faced as an editor, and means his readership to share in the challenge of searching for sources and origins, genres and conventions, reminiscences, coincidences, and parodies. Questions of source and influence are crucial. Is the world of Zembla merely a grotesque distortion of Kinbote's life at New Wye, so that stern Queen Disa is distantly rooted in Kinbote's resentment of Shade's wife Sybil? Does Kinbote name his fantasy kingdom Zembla because Shade happens to use the word in a throwaway moment of "Pale Fire", or does Shade mention "Zembla" because of Kinbote? Is each of them drawing independently on the same passage of *An Essay on Man*, in which Pope refers to Zembla? Or is it all just a coincidence? Has Shade invented Kinbote or Kinbote Shade? Or have they just influenced one another?

Pale Fire comes out of Nabokov's experience not only as a scholar but also as a teacher of literature. The literary game as first formulated by Erasmus was part of the humanist programme of promoting literacy, and *Pale Fire* is designed to exalt the act of reading by defamiliarising it. As Kinbote writes:

We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction, from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats. What if we awake one day, all of us, and find ourselves utterly unable to read? I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable (so I used to tell my students). (227)

Pale Fire is a reading game designed to illustrate and teach all of the lessons Nabokov urged on his students at Cornell. "In reading", he would say, "one should notice and fondle details", as one must in tracing back and forth the parallels between Shade and Kinbote. "One cannot *read* a book: one can only re-read it", he would tell his students, since the initial linear process of moving through a book from the first to the last page obstructs artistic appreciation – and *Pale Fire* is designed so that it can only be appreciated once it is re-read in this way. If this effort is made, Nabokov concludes, the reader and writer will be at harmony, and the reader will become a fellow-writer. "The sullen mood melts away, and for better or worse the reader enters into the spirit of the game."⁸

The first section of this chapter discusses the genre of the literary game to which *Pale Fire* belongs. This genre goes from Pope and Swift back to Erasmus and Thomas More, and forward to Sterne, Byron, and Lewis Carroll. In all of these writers, images of play serve as generic markers indicating that the works are to be read for their play of

⁸ LL 1; 3-4.

thought and multiple ironies, that is, as games, and not as “strong opinions” of the sort Nabokov handed down in his interviews. In this tradition play is a term nearly interchangeable with folly, and the hallmark of the tradition is its ironic oscillation between praising human folly as the precondition of happiness, and satirising it as madness, nonsense, and self-deception.

Like the *Dunciad*, *Pale Fire* is fundamentally concerned with the relation between books and man, word and world. In a crucial passage, John Shade has an epiphany, which sets out the fundamental assumptions of *Pale Fire* that the world is a book, and reading it a game. Shade expands these ideas into a metaphysical vision of gods “playing a game of worlds” (l. 819). In his footnote, Kinbote focuses it to a description of “word games” (206). *Pale Fire* is about the relation between world games and word-games. It is designed to foster reading as a game. That is, as Shade argues, one cannot hope to discover the final truth of the text. This game can lead either to Kinbote’s world, dominated by chance, nonsense, and madness, or to Shade’s, guided by the ideal of pattern, meaning, and happiness. The second section of the chapter shows how Shade’s epiphany provides the hermeneutics for *Pale Fire*. It argues that *Pale Fire* is carefully constructed to allow one either to see it as a game, in which everything has a meaning and belongs to a pattern, or as free play, dominated by chance. These two contrasting hermeneutics seem to be embodied by Shade’s sanity and Kinbote’s madness, but in fact there are subtle affinities between Shade and Kinbote.

In a 1966 interview, discussing *Pale Fire*, Nabokov said that “parody is a game.” (SO 75) The third section of the chapter argues that *Pale Fire* is a game of parody – an idea Nabokov derived from an essay of Shklovsky’s on *Eugene Onegin*. Shade and

Kinbote are, in Nabokov's special sense of the word, parodies of one another. This game of parody is modelled on Pope's in the *Dunciad*. Kinbote is the heir to Scriblerus, the critic Pope parodies in the footnotes to the *Dunciad*. But Shade is also the heir to the poet of the *Dunciad*, and he is more like Kinbote than at first appears, just as the poet of the *Dunciad*, though he satirises the dunces, secretly shares many of their vices.

The fourth section of this chapter discusses Nabokov's intertextual games with Pope's Erasmian ironies on the praise of folly in *An Essay on Man*. Nabokov shows that Shade misreads Pope by failing to follow the play of his ironies. Pope's ironies about folly can resolve either into the vision of folly as happiness which Pope celebrated in *The Rape of the Lock*, or into the vision of folly as madness in the nightmare of the *Dunciad*. Shade and Kinbote embody the two antithetical possibilities to be derived from the central irony, derived from Pope, of life as folly or play. Order and chaos are two sides of a single game.

Pale Fire is best known for its multiple textual and intertextual games. These reflect the scholarly footnotes Nabokov had researched for *Eugene Onegin* and his insistence on the very specific meanings of individual words in Pushkin's text against loose translation. This would result in the "correlative lexicon" he produced for his edition when he revised it in 1966. The word-games of *Pale Fire* closely relate to Pope's in the *Dunciad*. The fifth section of the chapter discusses what Kinbote calls the "lexical playfields" (205) of *Pale Fire*, specifically in terms of their intertextual relationship with Pope.

The “Sources” of *Pale Fire*: The Genre of the Literary Game

The genre of the literary game is little known, though it is related to “Menippean satire”, a term discussed by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929).⁹ Both authors trace Menippean satire back to the Ancient Greek Cynic Menippus, whose works do not survive, and the late Greek writer Lucian. Erasmus and More translated several of Lucian’s dialogues, and Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* and More’s *Utopia* (1516) belong to this tradition, as does Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1534-1552), which signals its generic affiliations by a chapter on children’s games. Swift and Pope revived the mode, especially in *A Tale of a Tub* (1697-1710), *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and *Dunciad*. All of these works contain important images of play. But a number of later works in which we do not find explicit images of play also carry forward many of the characteristics of the literary game and can be regarded as partial descendants of the mode. Though *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) contains few explicit images of actual toys and games, there is an enormous amount of intellectual and structural play, and it describes people who treat life as a game, such as Uncle Toby, who plays at war by creating a model of the siege of Namur.¹⁰ It invokes Lucian, Rabelais and Cervantes as sponsors, is studded with allusions to Pope and the *Dunciad*, and is inspired most of all by *A Tale of a Tub*.¹¹ Byron called *Don Juan* (1819-24) his “poetical *T[ristram] Shandy*” and it, too, bears some of the characteristics of the mode.¹² These two works were

⁹ Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 308-12. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 106-35.

¹⁰ On Sterne’s world of play, see Lanham, *Tristram Shandy*.

¹¹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 173. For Sterne’s reading of Lucianic and Scriblerian texts, see Ross, *Laurence Sterne: A Life*, 108.

¹² In a letter from Byron to Hobhouse of April 24, 1823. Quoted by Stabler in “Byron, postmodernism and intertextuality”, 267.

Pushkin's most important models for *Eugene Onegin*. Much later, in the *Alice* books, whose clear source is *Gulliver's Travels* and which borrow images from the *Dunciad*, Carroll revived the genre, restoring its images of play.¹³

When Nabokov came to America he had an opportunity to learn about the history of the literary game. Beginning in 1941, and for at least fifteen years afterwards, Nabokov was friends with Charles Kerby-Miller, a scholar of eighteenth-century literature at Wellesley.¹⁴ For a time they were in a car-pool together. Throughout the 1940s Kerby-Miller was working on a scholarly edition of *The Memoirs of Martin Scriblerus*, a satire on false learning produced by Pope, Swift, and other members of the Scriblerus club, and indebted to Lucian, Erasmus, and More, as Kerby-Miller's notes show. The *Memoirs* is a literary game, as it indicates by a chapter on play-things. In 1950, when Kerby-Miller's edition was published, Nabokov published a story, "Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster", which is based on an episode in the *Memoirs*.¹⁵ Between 1939 and 1961 the great multi-volume Twickenham edition of Pope was appearing in instalments. Its dense footnotes, tracing back the long genealogy of all Pope's ideas and images, are a model for what Nabokov would do in his *Eugene Onegin*. They detail Pope's debts to the tradition of literary play. Maynard Mack's edition of *An Essay on Man*, for example, shows Pope's allusions to the *Praise of Folly*, giving relevant parallels to the passages on folly with which Nabokov would play in *Pale Fire*.¹⁶

¹³ Frye points out the Menippean heritage of the *Alice* books in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 310.

¹⁴ AY 26; 294.

¹⁵ See Zunshine, "Origins of a Double Monster".

¹⁶ Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 85; 89. Subsequent references to *An Essay on Man* are often given in the body of the text. Numbers on their own refer to the page numbers and are used to refer to the editorial apparatus. Other numbers give the book number, followed by the line number.

The definitive statement of the idea of the *lusus* or literary game is the letter that Erasmus wrote to More about the *Praise of Folly*.¹⁷ Erasmus declares that he will “play at a praise of Folly [*Moriae encomion ludere*]”. He calls it “this game of wit of ours [*hunc ingenii nostri lusum*]”. Some might think that in writing the *Praise of Folly* it was as if he had been “playing a game of draughts for entertainment [*me latunculis interim animi causa lusisse*]”. But it is unfair to allow every other walk of life but study its relaxation or “*lusus*”. Anyway, men of wit have always enjoyed the liberty to “satirise [*luderent*]” – the common life of mankind. Those who protest only admit the accuracy of the satire. St. Jerome, for one, “played [...] freely and bitinglly in this mode [*lusit hoc in genere multo liberius ac mordacius*]”.¹⁸

Erasmus defends his right to play in the sense of offering serious satire. Yet he also chastises potential critics for taking his trivial little game too seriously. This contradiction is at the heart of the idea of the *serio-ludic*, the technique of serious play.¹⁹ The *Praise of Folly* is a game in that it means at least three completely contradictory things by folly, and leaves the reader to resolve the differences. The text falls into three sections. In the third, Folly speaks of the Pauline paradoxes of wise folly: that Christ and his followers reject the wisdom of the world as folly, and that the world considers them fools for doing so. In the second section, Folly launches a direct attack on the folly of Erasmus’s opponents, specifically the scholastic followers of Aquinas and Duns Scotus, satirised for their pride and vanity, for inventing unnecessary intellectual complications, engaging in mock-epic scholarly battles, and deadening ancient literature with their

¹⁷ For my comments about Erasmus and More and the *lusus* I am indebted to Douglas Duncan, whose *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition* is the only work I know to discuss the tradition of the literary game.

¹⁸ Erasmus, *Moriae Encomium*, 67-8.

¹⁹ For the elusive concept of the *serio-ludic*, see Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 221-36.

pedantry. Yet in the first section of the *Praise of Folly* Erasmus offers a defence of vanity, self-love, and pride: such folly is the precondition of human happiness, and the Stoic who tries to rid himself of such natural human affections destroys his own humanity and turns himself into an unfeeling statue. “Now I believe I can hear the philosophers protesting that it can only be misery to live in folly, illusion, deception, and ignorance. But it isn’t – it’s human.”²⁰ In Erasmus we already find many of the characteristics of the *lusus* that, via Pope, will reappear in *Pale Fire*: an elaborate play of allusion, a study of stoicism and scepticism, a mockery of false scholarship, and the central irony that happiness requires a level of self-deceit that can also be regarded as madness.

The *Praise of Folly* is also a *Praise of More*. Its original Latin title, *Encomium Moriae*, puns on More’s name. In *Utopia*, written five years later, More responded with a companion work, also a teasing Lucianic *lusus*. Where Erasmus playfully ironised the contradictions he faced as a theologian, between endorsing ordinary life and folly and satirising them, More ironised the contradictions he faced as a politician, between trying to envisage the ideal state, and having to practice the art of the possible in the existing power structure. Although the Stoic paradise of Utopia can and should never be realised, More plays with it within the rigorously defined borders of his elite discourse, and the reader is meant to participate in this educative game. *Utopia* offers an image for itself in one of the games played by the utopians, in which “the vices fight a battle against the virtues.”²¹

The great revival of the humanist game came in the early eighteenth century with Swift, Pope, and the Scriblerians. Swift and Pope liked to identify themselves with More

²⁰ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, 46; 50.

²¹ More, *Utopia*, 52.

and Erasmus. In Swift's *Battle of the Books* Erasmus is an emblem of true scholarship, to set against the monstrous goddess of Criticism, who lives in Nova Zembla.²² In *A Tale of a Tub* Swift set out to imitate and parody the *Praise of Folly*.²³ Supposedly an allegory defending Anglicanism against its Catholic and Dissenting opponents, the *Tale* is actually a satire on its own narrator, the Critic who embodies the qualities that Swift disliked in some literary and Biblical scholars of his day. Thus he renews Erasmus's attack on the pedantry of scholasticism. Like Erasmus, he makes a joke out of scholars who take apart words, adding or removing letters.²⁴ But Swift adds something new to Erasmus and More's example, by imitating the texts produced by the pedants whom he is satirising. The Critic is an egotist who rapidly loses interest in his supposed subject and strays into digressions. Proud of his editorial prowess, he removes supposed textual corruptions, leaving gaps in the text, stars marking the removed passages, and preposterous arrogant footnotes. The text contains a mock-dedication and several mock introductions. The Critic believes that he and others like him deserve credit for perfecting literature, and the actual author of the book on which he is commenting is dead. He is interested in little but himself, and in excluding the world comes to empty himself out. Yet, confusingly, Swift sometimes speaks through the Critic. Still more confusingly, the Critic unwittingly embodies some of the extremist qualities he thinks he is parodying, which makes Swift's game even more paradoxical and challenging than Erasmus's and More's. That the *Tale* is to be taken as a game is signalled by the title: the Critic says that he has named it after the custom of sailors, who throw overboard a tub with which whales can play who might otherwise destroy the ship. The *Tale* is such a tub, a diversion meant to distract dangerous

²² *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 386.

²³ See Traugott, "A Tale of a Tub", and Mezciems, "Swift's Praise of Gulliver".

²⁴ *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 307.

critics of society: “it was decreed, that in order to prevent these *Leviathans* from tossing and sporting with the *Commonwealth*, (which of itself is too apt to *fluctuate*) they should be diverted from that Game by a *Tale of a Tub*.”²⁵ With Swift, Erasmus’s satire on false scholarship is combined with his bewildering ironies, and the figure of Scriberus that results is the basis for Nabokov’s portrait of Kinbote, who though much mocked for his self-deceit also sometimes speaks important truths, and who says: “I notice a whiff of Swift in some of my notes.” (139)

From 1714 onwards, Swift was associated with Pope, with whom he collaborated on *The Memoirs of Martin Scriblerus*. Pope had from an early age loved Erasmus, and in *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), he had recounted how the Dark Ages were brought to an end by Erasmus and the other writers around the humanist Pope, Leo X.²⁶ Pope’s great innovation was to translate the humanist *lusus* from prose to verse, by drawing on Book Five of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the book of funeral games, which parodies the battles of epic and therefore forms an inset mock-epic.

Before Pope, the poem about games was already a sub-genre of mock-epic.²⁷ But he seems to have been the first person to see that this sub-genre could serve as the poetic vehicle for an Erasmian game. *The Rape of the Lock* was written to reconcile two aristocratic families who had been set at odds when a rakish gentleman cut a lock of hair from the head of a pretty young girl. *The Rape of the Lock* is a celebration of girlhood, with its whispers and its gossip, of creature comforts such as food and sunshine and a warm bed, and of the small concerns, which, though they can be made to seem petty, actually condition happiness and unhappiness in ordinary lives. A poem that ironically

²⁵ *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 284.

²⁶ Mack, *Alexander Pope*, 81-2.

²⁷ Broich, *The Eighteenth-Century Mock-Heroic Poem*, 86-7.

praises, only to seem to satirise, really is a praise of folly, and it is this triple irony which makes *The Rape of the Lock* a literary game, something Pope indicated by placing a carefully researched game of Ombre at the centre of the action. Like *A Tale of a Tub*, Pope's *Rape* is designed to divert and puzzle the impulse towards deep reading which might tear away the happy surfaces of life. Pope later wrote a mock *Key to the Lock* laughing at political interpretations, and the poem ends by celebrating misinterpretation, with Belinda's lock becoming a star, into which everyone will read what they will. This anticipates John Shade's revelation that to interpret the world is always to misinterpret it, and that one must revel in such a game of misinterpretation.

By the time of the *Dunciad*, first published in 1728, fourteen years after the *Rape*, Pope was in less of a mood to celebrate folly, and now satire predominates. The *Dunciad* develops Erasmus's mockery of false learning, as it indicates by the word "dunce", which derives etymologically from Duns Scotus, one of the targets of Erasmus's satire. Pope had been attacked for the amateurism of his edition of Shakespeare and his translations of Homer, and in the *Dunciad* he replied by making one of his opponents, the Shakespeare scholar Lewis Theobald, the hero of his satirical mock-epic, surrounding him with dozens of other hack writers, the "dunces". Pope conducts his attack on Theobald and the dunces both in the poem itself and in its mock editorial apparatus. The poem is pushed to the head of the page by a forest of footnotes, attributed to various parties: to Theobald, to Scriblerus, to Pope himself. Sometimes they are unsigned. Sometimes they are useful and relevant. At least as often, particularly in the notes attributed to Theobald and Scriblerus, they are as arrogant and irrelevant as the Critic's writing is in *A Tale of a Tub*, or Kinbote's in *Pale Fire*. But to complicate matters further, the poetry is not, as is usually

imagined, Pope's detached satire on his enemies. As in Swift's *Tale*, the poet of the *Dunciad* shares in the sins he castigates. Like the dunces, he is always digressing from the subject matter back to himself. He has their taste for outlandish metaphysical conceits comparing completely unlike things, which Pope had satirised in *Peri Bathous* (1728).²⁸ He has the same talent for bathos, the art of the trivial details which are the footnotes of life. Howard Erskine-Hill and Emrys Jones, linking the *Dunciad* to Lucian, Erasmus, and Renaissance humanism, have argued that, beneath the satire, Pope's dominant response to the dunces and their world is one of delight and gratification. The dunces, as they play Olympic games in their own excrement and urine, offer Pope an escape from mature rationality into a world of infantile play.²⁹ In this free world of wit, judgement is disabled, and the distinction between what one esteems and what one hates fades. All that matters is what the imagination finds vivid. Nabokov develops all of this in *Pale Fire*, in which much that seems ridiculous in Kinbote turns out on closer inspection to be admirable, while in Shade can be discerned all of Kinbote's supposed vices. As Kinbote reports, one of Shade's games of word-golf takes him from "hate-love in three" (206).

In the *Dunciad*, Pope emphasises much more savagely than he had done in *The Rape of the Lock* the price of degradation and self-deceit at which human happiness is bought. But once we have peeled away the surface praise of folly, and then the underlying satire, we still find a third layer of delight which corresponds to Folly's praise of illusion in the first part of Erasmus's work. This triple irony is what makes the *Dunciad* a literary game. In the penultimate word of his joke-index, Pope ingeniously hints that the *Dunciad* is a toy whose meanings are to be played with: "*Whirligigs*" (245)

²⁸ Pope, *Prose Works*, 2:192-3.

²⁹ See Erskine-Hill, "The 'New World' of Pope's *Dunciad*" and Emrys Jones, "Pope and Dulness".

– little toys that “Suck the thread in then yield it out again [...] All nonsense thus, of old or modern date, / Shall in thee centre, from thee circulate.” (A 3:49-52)³⁰

³⁰ References to the *Dunciad* are given in the body of the text. Unaccompanied numbers refer to page numbers of the edition and refer to prose portions. In line references, A refers to the 1729 *Dunciad* and B to the 1742 *Dunciad*.

World Games and Word-Games

One of the repeated images of play in the *Praise of Folly* tradition is of life as a game played by humans for the amusement of the gods. Attacking the scholastics, Erasmus wrote: “It’s hardly believable how much laughter, sport, and fun you poor mortals can provide the gods every day.”³¹ Shakespeare, who through his fools dramatised the Erasmian paradoxes of mad reason and wise folly, reproduced the idea in *King Lear*, when Gloucester says: “As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’ Gods; / They kill us for their sport.”³² This idea had an outing in 1757, when, in a famous review of a book by the now-forgotten Soame Jenyns, Samuel Johnson condemned Jenyns’ philosophical Optimism, which he saw that Jenyns had lifted from Pope’s *Essay on Man*. Johnson satirically expanded on Jenyns’s idea that human existence might be justified as a diversion or game for the entertainment of the gods.

As Frank Kermode saw in his 1962 review of *Pale Fire*, Johnson’s attack on Jenyns is the source for Shade’s epiphany about the gods “playing a game of worlds” (l. 819).³³ This epiphany comes when Shade, who has dedicated his life to exploring “the foul, the inadmissible abyss” (l.179) of death and the afterlife, has a near-death experience in which he sees a tall white fountain. Soon after, he reads a newspaper article describing one Mrs Z., who also had a near-death vision of a fountain. But his hopes of having discovered the truth about the afterlife are dashed when he discovers that it was a misprint, and that that Mrs Z. had reported seeing a mountain not a fountain. This crucial passage must be quoted at length:

Life Everlasting – based on a misprint!

³¹ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, 75.

³² Shakespeare, *King Lear*. 4.1.36-37.

³³ Page, ed., *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, 147.

I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
 And stop investigating my abyss?
 But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
 Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
 But topsy-turvical coincidence,
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
 Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
 Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
 Of correlated pattern in the game,
 Plexed artistry, and something of the same
 Pleasure in it as they who played it found.

It did not matter who they were. No sound,
 No furtive light came from their involute
 Abode, but there they were, aloof and mute,
 Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns
 To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns; (ll. 803-20)

In his footnote on “playing a game of worlds”, Kinbote, consciously or not, misses out a letter, turning world games into word-games, much as mountain had been turned into fountain in the article about Mrs Z:

My illustrious friend showed a childish predilection for all sorts of word-games and especially for so-called word golf. He would interrupt the flow of a prismatic conversation to indulge in this particular pastime, and naturally it would have been boorish of me to refuse playing with him. Some of my records are: hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five (with ‘lend’ in the middle). (206)

Various critics have used these examples of word-golf to determine what *Pale Fire* is about. For Mary McCarthy, “love is the burden of *Pale Fire*, love and loss.” (PF xvii) For Andrew Field, “life and death are at the centre of *Pale Fire*, with love and sex merely decoy of secondary motifs – poetic metaphors of the primary theme.”³⁴ But *Pale Fire* is also about the sometimes comforting, sometimes imprisoning, identity of world and word, and also the terrifying but also potentially liberating gap between them, the gap which an exile, caught between two or more languages, will necessarily inhabit.

³⁴ Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 313.

Shade's epiphany, once closely examined, turns out to add some surprising complications to the metaphor of world as book. Shade insists that all interpretation may be misinterpretation. Everything that has been written on *Pale Fire* in the last forty years demonstrates that Nabokov carefully designed his book to turn his readers into little Shades, as he says, "making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities" (ll. 829-30) they find in the book, without ever being sure they have arrived at any final truth about it. It is in this sense above all that *Pale Fire* is a game. Shade contends that we must abandon the "dream" of absolute and final truth, instead weaving a "web of sense" out of "topsy-turvical coincidence". To read playfully is the opposite of reading for definite truth. At the same time, the fact that there is no definite truth does not doom one to experiencing life as chaos. Games offer an image of self-enclosed order without reference to external truth. "It sufficed" to find "some kind of correlated pattern in the game".

Most critics of *Pale Fire* treat it as a puzzle to be solved. Usually the puzzle is the notorious critical debate over whether Kinbote might have invented Shade or Shade invented Kinbote.³⁵ Critics who subscribe to this approach usually invoke as their authority the passage in *Speak, Memory* in which Nabokov compares writing a novel to composing a chess-problem (SM 223). In *Nabokov's Pale Fire* Brian Boyd appeals to the metaphor of scientific discovery. One could also compare *Pale Fire* to a murder mystery, with the reader as detective: Shade mentions Sherlock Holmes at the beginning of "Pale Fire" (l. 28). But in his epiphany Shade argues against any reading which consists in searching for the "dream" of a definite solution. Similarly, when he describes two Russians searching for the Zemblan crown jewels by demolishing various parts of the palace, Kinbote remarks: "but you will never find our crown, necklace and sceptre. [...]"

³⁵ For a summary of the debate see Boyd, *Nabokov's "Pale Fire"*, 114-6.

All this is the rule of a supernal game, all this is the immutable fable of fate” (192). That is, the rule is that the treasure will never be found, the puzzle will never be solved, and this is what makes *Pale Fire* a game, not a puzzle, though it certainly contains many beautiful puzzles. If it were a soluble puzzle, its art would be exhausted once the puzzle was solved, and *Pale Fire* equates ending with death.

Shade rejects the inference that the absence of final authority need result in the free play of *Finnegans Wake* and *Ada*. There is some free play in *Pale Fire*, but unlike *Ada*, *Pale Fire* also moves in the direction of the rule-bound game. In a dialogue with Shade, Kinbote argues that without belief in a God man is exposed to the blind sovereignty of chance: “Poor Kinbote’s ghost, poor Shade’s shade, may have blundered, may have taken the wrong turn somewhere – oh, from sheer absent-mindedness, or simply through ignorance of a trivial rule in the preposterous game of nature – if there be any rules.” Shade’s strange answer is that “there are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance.” Kinbote then replies:

I had in mind diabolical rules likely to be broken by the other party as soon as we come to understand them. [...] Even if we temper Chance with Necessity and allow godless determinism, the mechanism of cause and effect, to provide our souls after death with the dubious solace of metastatistics, we still have to reckon with the individual mishap, the thousand and second highway accident of those scheduled for Independence Day in Hades. (179)

This dialogue between Shade and Kinbote encapsulates the two competing hermeneutics that *Pale Fire* sets against one another. As we follow through the puzzles of *Pale Fire*, we seem to be discovering its rules, which are autonomous and define the world of the novel without reference to external authority. Kinbote despairs of rules, but Shade retains hope that the death of the author – or God – need not leave the world to chance. The chess problem-maker may be absent, but the problem cannot be worked

without assuming that there are certain implicit rules. So, too, even after one has dispelled the illusion that meaning is confined to an author's intentions, the author will never really be dead. Certainly, one must kill him when one wants to enjoy what Shade calls "texture", the unintended aesthetic effects of a piece of writing, and to assert that this "texture" embodies a "web of sense" which is independent of the "text" of an author's conscious intentions. But one must always be effectively resurrecting him, because it is impossible to attribute pattern to aesthetic texture without presuming some idea of a patterning presence. So Shade, having insisted that the world is a mess of accidents, finds that he cannot make patterns out of those accidents and conceive of experience as a game without also supposing that there are game-players. He comes to entertain a make-believe fantasy of neo-classical gods "playing a game of worlds" only because his hermeneutic requires them. A confirmed atheist, Shade does not actually believe in these gods. For him, metaphysics is merely the correlate of metafiction.

Shade's epiphany is a vivid illustration of Kant's doctrine that in aesthetic perception there is purposiveness without purpose, that is, that we must suppose that our experience has been formed for our perceptions, and make-believe in a purposeful creator, while allowing ourselves to glimpse the prospect of the chaos underlying this presupposition. For Shade, as for Kant, the flickering of the mind between these intimations of radical order and disorder is play. *Pale Fire* is carefully designed to offer its reader a promise of complete underlying order at the same time as it threatens to dissolve into complete chaos. Like *The Luzhin Defense*, it creates "the semblance of a kind of monstrous game on a spectral, wobbly, and endlessly disintegrating board." (TLD 71)

If we read *Pale Fire* according to Shade's hermeneutic, we will remember that his example of a rule was "interdiction of dual solutions", and, like most critics of *Pale Fire*, argue either that Shade is the author of Kinbote or that Kinbote is the author of Shade, focusing on the extraordinary parallels between them, which seem to exceed the limits of probability. If we read it according to Kinbote's hermeneutic we may dismiss all such speculations as naïve: "Shade" and "Kinbote" do not exist, they are only words, variations in the linguistic "texture" of *Pale Fire*, bodies of rhetoric and style shifting in and out of one another. On this reading we will dismiss as "topsy-turvical coincidence" the parallels between Shade and Kinbote. Yet these two hermeneutics are not so distinct from one another as they may appear. Only the sense that there may be a possible solution to the puzzle of *Pale Fire* can inspire us to follow through its metaphors and word-games, and initiate in us the play of thought. Games require rules so as to make play possible, and play in turn evolves rules. Shade's epiphany marks not only the distinction but also the connection between Shade and Kinbote. Order and disorder are two opposite implications emerging from the single vision of the world as a game.

If we return once more to Shade's epiphany, we will see that it is more ambiguous than it seems. He insists that the world is "topsy-turvical coincidence", which can be woven into a "web of sense" – as if, somehow, if the world is only "topsy-turvical coincidence" it follows that it is "not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense." This conclusion is just as perverse as Shade's idea that he can make a consolatory system of life out of a misprint in the newspaper. As Shade weaves his way through various contradictions and paradoxes in pursuit of his dubiously consolatory conclusion, he enacts the logic of an enigmatic aphorism in *Pnin*, the novel Nabokov wrote before *Pale*

Fire. Lawrence Clements, whom Nabokov encourages us to admire, teaches a course: “which had opened and would close with the phrase destined to be over-quoted one day: The evolution of sense is, in a sense, the evolution of nonsense.” (P 27) Any interpretive system, as it evolves in complexity and scope, will increase the perception of disorder outside its borders, registering as chance all the details it cannot include into its patterns, as nonsense whatever does not fit into its sense of things. Shade’s epiphany contains both the perception of fundamental disorder or nonsense or madness which seems to govern Kinbote’s life, “topsy-turvical coincidence”, and the aspiration to fundamental order or sanity of Shade’s life, the “web of sense”. These two characters, who appear to be opposite develop out of the same logic, and are corollaries to one another. Each is, as Shade puts it in the opening line of his poem, “the shadow of the waxwing slain” (l. 1), each the potential double of the other. *Pale Fire* can be read either for its sense or its nonsense: like the *Dunciad* it is a whirligig, sucking in and sending out all the threads of sense and nonsense in the world.

Pale Fire and the Game of Parody

This interdependence of Kinbote and Shade would have been more obvious if Nabokov had followed through on his first intention of calling “Pale Fire” “The Brink” (AY 417). This would have made clear his interest in the brink over which something becomes its opposite. *Pale Fire* is about the brink between life and death. But it is also about the brinks between forms of life, perspectives and styles, and all the alternative selves an individual writer or person can potentially contain. Such brinksmanship is characteristic of eighteenth-century writing. Pope uses the word in well-known lines of his “Epistle to a Lady” (1735), when, having satirised various women, he then comments, “Yet ne’er so sure our passion to create, / As when she touch’d the brink of all we hate.”³⁶ In his “Life of Dryden” (1779) Johnson says of Dryden that “he delighted to tread upon the brink of meaning, where light and darkness begin to mingle; to approach the precipice of absurdity, and hover over the abyss of unideal vacancy.”³⁷ The brink on which Shade becomes Kinbote and Kinbote Shade is also the brink Johnson describes between sense and nonsense, and Pope’s brink between love and hatred. One recalls Shade’s word-games, which take him from “hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five” (206).

Nabokov also liked to speak of brinks in reference to Pushkin. In his 1959 essay, “The Servile Path”, he says that “Pushkin picks his flowers on the very brink of plagiarism”.³⁸ In a footnote in *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov speaks of how ennui, a literary cliché for several hundred years, drove “hypish Englishmen” to throw themselves off the precipices of Swiss mountains. He goes on: “a few examples have to be given to prove

³⁶ Pope, *Poems of Alexander Pope*, “Epistle to a Lady”, ll. 51-2.

³⁷ Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, 1:325.

³⁸ Nabokov, “The Servile Path”, 107.

that ennui was by 1820 a seasoned cliché of characterization that Pushkin could play with at leisure, on the flowered brink of parody” (*EO* 2:152). If Nabokov had called the poem in *Pale Fire* “The Brink”, this comment would be routinely cited as its source. In a rejected draft John Shade offers a variation on Nabokov’s thought: “I have a certain liking, I admit, / For parody, that last resort of wit;” (211). On that brink, or last resort, the long debated issue of whether Shade invented Kinbote, or Kinbote Shade, resolves into the sort of challenge that Nabokov faced as an editor, of making sense of surprising parallels between apparently dissimilar texts. But this is not to limit *Pale Fire* to a word-game of scholarship. Its word-games are world games. Shade and Kinbote are potential parodies or afterlives of one another.

Nabokov’s idea of parody as a game seems to have developed out of his thinking on Pushkin and *Eugene Onegin*. An inspiration appears to have been Shklovsky’s 1923 essay, “‘Eugene Onegin’: Pushkin and Sterne”. Few of Nabokov’s reading notes survive. It is significant that Nabokov’s fairly full notes on this essay do. He lavishes on it what for him is extravagant praise, calling it “an excellent (though somewhat abrupt and sketchy) little paper”.³⁹ Shklovsky argued that “*Eugene Onegin*, just like *Tristram Shandy*, is a parodic novel, in which are parodied not just the manners and characters of an epoch, but the very techniques of the novel, its structure.”⁴⁰ This is one of the five sentences which Nabokov copied out. The second is Shklovsky’s claim that “the true plot of *Eugene Onegin* is not the story of Onegin and Tatyana, but a game with that story [*istinnnyi siuzhet ‘Evgeniia Onegina’ eto ne istoriia Onegina i Tat’iany, a igra s etoi fabuloi*].” (211) The third describes this play of Pushkin’s with the narrative sequence, or

³⁹ Nabokov’s notes are kept in the Berg Collection in *Notes on Various Subjects*. Nabokov copied out Shklovsky’s Russian but here I supply my translations of the relevant passages.

⁴⁰ Shklovskii, “‘Evgenii Onegin’”, 206. Translations mine. Subsequent references in text.

rearrangement [*perestanovka*] of the story (207). The fourth is a comment on how “Pushkin, following Sterne, in all probability through the example of Byron, who elaborated the same device in poetry, extraordinarily complicated the novel with digressions.” (210) In the last sentence Nabokov copied out, Shklovsky draws attention to lines in which Pushkin begins a simile only to break it off, describing how champagne is “by its play and its foam / Similar to what you will” and comments that “this comparison without a comparison, it would seem, is a unique case in poetry” (217-8), to which Nabokov adds his own comment: “see however Byron”.

Shklovsky’s essay treats almost every dimension of *Eugene Onegin* as parodic play. Like *Tristram Shandy*, it has a parodic opening, whose context is only explained some way through the first chapter. It has a mock-dedication inset into the body of the narrative. It plays with the conflicting motivations of the characters and their misunderstandings. It is proto-cubist: “The main content of the novel is its internal structural forms, while the form of the plot is used as real objects are used in Picasso’s pictures.” (211) Like Sterne, Pushkin indulges in textual play, pretending that stanzas are missing. (In line with this controversial theory, Nabokov would print whole blank pages, like the blank page of *Tristram Shandy*, to mark in his translation of *Eugene Onegin* the places where Pushkin indicated omitted stanzas.) In “a quintessentially Sternian gesture” (211), Pushkin pretends to abandon his heroine. He pretends the book is unfinished, just as Sterne did with *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, in which Sterne even pretended he had died in the middle of writing the final sentence. Such play with death is characteristic of Sterne: in *Tristram Shandy* Tristram’s father treats the death of a son as an opportunity for an oration. To the question, “did Pushkin cry for Tatyana, or did he

laugh?” (214), Shklovsky answers that in *Eugene Onegin* we find simultaneously “sentimental play and play with sentiment [*sentimental'naia igra i igra s sentimental'nost'iu*].” (218). In short, *Eugene Onegin* is “full of parodic devices” (214). Shklovsky details its parodic metre, parodic vocabulary, parodic endnotes, parodic phrase construction, parodic names, parodic rhymes, and parodic similes.

Shklovsky's essay offers a manual for *Pale Fire*. Every one of the parodic devices Shklovsky identifies is to be found in *Pale Fire*, a poem-novel like *Eugene Onegin*. *Pale Fire* is designed to be rearranged like a jigsaw, making a game out of the story, and drawing attention to its “internal structural forms”. Kinbote's footnotes extraordinarily complicate the story with digressions. Nabokov plays intricate games with vocabulary and names. In one of Shade's discarded drafts, he offers a comparison like the one Shklovsky picked out in Pushkin:

There are events, strange happenings, that strike
The mind as emblematic. They are like
Lost similes adrift without a string,
Attached to nothing. [...] (81)

The event Shade has in mind is Kinbote's escape from Zembla – a parodic name that plays, here, on “emblematic”, and elsewhere on “semblance”. Kinbote is a lost simile, excluded from the sense and order of Shade's poem, and of his life. So too, Shade suggests the unhappiness and exclusion of his daughter Hazel, who ultimately committed suicide, by a combination of a play on rhyme and a play on apparent omission:

I think she always nursed a small mad hope.

I'd recently finished my book on Pope. (ll. 383-4)

In the ordered world of couplets Shade has composed on Pope's model and in praise of his ideal coupling with his wife Sybil there is no rhyme for Hazel's mad hope. Like

Pushkin, Shade here pretends to abandon his heroine. Such “play with sentiment” and with death is at the heart of *Pale Fire*. Nabokov simultaneously plays with and takes seriously the anguish of exile, the suicide of a child, and the death of Shade in circumstances much like those of Nabokov’s father, killed when he was mistaken for another man, as Shade is. He takes the ambivalence of laughter and tears that Shklovsky identified in Pushkin and divides it up, by crying over Hazel but laughing over Kinbote.

Play with death is an essential part of the game of parody. In a Sternean gesture, Nabokov, or Kinbote, asks us to believe that Shade died leaving “Pale Fire” without its final line. Shade’s first epiphany comes as a young boy:

A thread of subtle pain,
Tugged at by playful death, released again,
But always present, ran through me. One day,
When I’d just turned eleven, as I lay
Prone on the floor and watched a clockwork toy –
A tin wheelbarrow pushed by a tin boy –
Bypass chair legs and stray beneath the bed,
There was a sudden sunburst in my head. (ll. 139-146)

Shade is experiencing an intimation of his own mortality. At the end of *Pale Fire*, just before Gradus kills Shade, he sees Kinbote’s black gardener pushing an empty wheelbarrow. Shade ends his poem with this: “Some neighbor’s gardener, I guess – goes by / Trundling an empty barrow up the lane.” (ll. 998-9) The empty wheelbarrow is a figure for the poem’s completion, but the absence of a final line sends us back to the first line for the rhyme (“I was the shadow of the waxwing slain”), creating a circular structure like that of *Pale Fire* as a whole. The wheelbarrow signifies ending and death, both of which “Pale Fire” and *Pale Fire* avoid.

Death prompts the thought that life is only play. Shade plays with death, reducing it to a metaphor:

For we die every day; oblivion thrives
 Not on dry thighbones, but on blood-red lives,
 And our best yesterdays are now foul piles
 Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files. (ll. 519-22)

The puzzles of *Pale Fire* also transform death into a literary metaphor. Shade has an afterlife in his influence on Kinbote, as Kinbote may have an afterlife in his influence on Shade. Each, if one wishes to play the game this way, can be thought of as dying into the other's shadow, as Shade's opening line suggests. As Erasmus writes in the *Praise of Folly*, "all human affairs are like the figures of Silenus described by Alcibiades and have two completely opposite faces, so that what is death at first sight, as they say, is life if you look within, and vice versa, life is death." Life is a play in which people assume various parts; a beggar, Erasmus says, might play the part of a king.⁴¹ So Botkin remakes himself from beggar to King-bot. One's "life" is one's identity, a role to be played for a certain length of time and then exchanged for another mask. No wonder the tunnel through which Kinbote escapes from the palace runs into the public theatre: kingship, sovereign identity, one's life is something acted, or "played".

The most obvious link between *Pale Fire* and the tradition of literary play is Kinbote. Shklovsky points out that Pushkin's endnotes to *Eugene Onegin* are parodic. Nabokov knew that the parodic footnotes began with the Scriblerian footnotes in *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Dunciad*. Kinbote is partially modelled on Scriblerus. He digresses endlessly upon himself, congratulates himself, misses the point, and dwells pedantically and blindly on certain details. Like Scriblerus, he misses jokes because he does not know enough about the contemporary or American world, being an ancient rather than a modern, so that when Shade writes: "I never bounced a ball or swung a bat" (*PF* l. 130),

⁴¹ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, 43-44.

referring to basketball and baseball, Kinbote comments: “Frankly I too never excelled in soccer and cricket.” (96) Yet, like Pope and Swift, Nabokov qualifies his mockery. Kinbote sometimes speaks for Nabokov and says useful things, as Pope sometimes introduces useful material under the names of Scriblerus and Tibbald. Kinbote misquotes *Timon of Athens* and therefore fails to recognise that it is the source of the phrase “pale fire”, but it is still impressive that he has remembered a passage relevant to Shade’s lines. It seems ridiculous when he focuses on individual words such as “gradual” and “gray” and suggests that Shade has named his assassin Gradus (64), yet Nabokov had traced through Pushkin’s individual words and their cognates in a similar way, as if *Eugene Onegin* formed an idiolect in which each of Pushkin’s words had a specific meaning given by its place in the poem: this was the principle that inspired Nabokov to produce a “correlative lexicon” for *Eugene Onegin* when he revised it in 1966.

To many readers who have not looked at Nabokov’s own edition of *Eugene Onegin* the disproportion between Kinbote’s footnotes and the original Shade poem seems ridiculous. Yet in an essay of 1955, Nabokov had called for “translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity.”⁴² In “The Art of Literature and Common Sense” Nabokov wrote of “this capacity to wonder at trifles – no matter the imminent peril – these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good.” (LL 374) Kinbote may be a pedant, yet in Nabokov’s eyes every artist is a pedant in his love of detail. As Kinbote says in an important passage: “I do not

⁴² Nabokov, “Problems of Translation”, 512.

consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do – pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and weft of that web.” (227) That web is both Shade’s poem and the book as a whole. *Pale Fire* is a *Praise of Pedantry*, as the *Dunciad* is a *Praise of Dulness*. In the *Onegin* commentary Nabokov praises, as a “subtle defence” of pedantry, Hazlitt’s thought that: “He who is not in some measure a pedant, though he may be wise, cannot be a very happy man”. (EO 2:47) In Kinbote Nabokov offers both a parody and a defence of his own pedantry.

Nabokov and Pope play the same game of presenting an obvious satiric butt in the form of Kinbote and Scriblerus, while allowing the false assumption to be drawn that their counterparts – Shade, the poetic voice of the *Dunciad* – are the authors themselves, only for a trap door to open: Shade and the poet of the *Dunciad* are less recognisably but just as profoundly misguided as Kinbote and Scriblerus, and the Author himself is hidden from view and protected from attack. Kinbote is often righteously taken to task for his self-obsession, but Shade’s “Pale Fire” is itself a monument to the egotistical sublime. Kinbote sinks bathetically to the petty details of his own life. But Shade’s poem is also astonishingly trivial. At the beginning of the *Dunciad*, the poet tries out various possible epic openings before lapsing into a trivial and narcissistic discussion of the mechanics of writing. So, too, Shade falls into such discussions after beginning Cantos One and Three in the high heroic voice: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain” (l.1); or:

Now I shall spy on beauty as none has
Spied on it yet. Now I shall cry out as
None has cried out. Now I shall do what none
Has tried. Now I shall do what none has done.
And speaking of this wonderful machine:
I’m puzzled by the difference between

Two methods of composing: [...] (ll. 835-41)

The immediacy of Kinbote's writing attests to the conviction that, as the Author of *A Tale of a Tub* has it, "*Criticism*, contrary to all other Faculties of the Intellect, is ever held the truest and best, when it is the very *first* Result of the *Critick's* Mind".⁴³ Yet this is also true of Shade's "Pale Fire", which is just as wandering, unconnected, and digressive, as Kinbote's notes. Especially in its first and fourth Cantos, as in the first book of the *Dunciad*, the bonds linking thought to thought in "Pale Fire" are so weak as to suggest the mind hopping about from subject to subject in a preconscious state. Shade's poem is just as digressive as Kinbote's notes. Either Shade has unconsciously internalised Kinbote's identification of first thoughts with actual creation and true identity, or, in a highly sophisticated manner, he is playing at having done so.

Kinbote is mad enough to have invented a whole world to satisfy his need to see himself as important and to make sense of his unhappy situation. But Shade himself endorses an underlying affinity between himself as poet and Kinbote as madman. As Dryden put it, "Great wits are sure to madness near allied, / And thin partitions do their bounds divide".⁴⁴ Kinbote reports how at a party he overheard the tail-end of a conversation between Shade and Mrs H., a fellow guest who seems to have described him as insane. Mrs H. tries to extricate herself:

'You must help us, Mr Kinbote: I maintain that what's his name, old – the old man, you know, at the Exton railway station, who thought he was God, and began redirecting the trains, was technically a loony, but John calls him a fellow poet.'

'We all are, in a sense, poets, Madam', I replied. (188)

⁴³ *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 217.

⁴⁴ *John Dryden*, "Absalom and Achitophel", ll. 163-4.

Just as Kinbote creates his own world, so Shade makes in his poetry a world in which he can be happy, despite the suicide of his unhappy daughter Hazel. This is a world with its own language: “link-and-bobolink”, for instance, the phrase Shade uses for the provisional connections he will make in the world, is not a real phrase, but some family idiom concealing within it the sound of a child’s pain (a bobo). Shade’s world is one in which, protected by his wife, he can muse: “And so I pare my nails, and muse, and hear / Your steps upstairs, and all is right, my dear.” (ll. 245-6) “All is right”, as Nabokov points out in his *Onegin* commentary, is the refrain of the eighteenth-century Optimism that Voltaire mocks in *Candide* (1759), that Pope expresses in *An Essay on Man*, and that Pushkin puts into Lensky’s mouth in *Eugene Onegin* (EO 3:29-30). Nabokov had thought of calling *Pale Fire* “The Happy Atheist” (SL 212). He may have derived the idea of examining the response of an Optimist to his daughter’s death from Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759), in which a stoic philosopher’s much-vaunted “rational fortitude” collapses when this very tragedy befalls him.⁴⁵ In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov, like Erasmus in *Praise of Folly*, More in *Utopia*, and Johnson in *Rasselas*, is testing stoicism. Shade’s secret alcoholism suggests that his victory over unhappiness may be confined to art (21). If Shade has invented Kinbote it might be as a repository for the unhappiness which he cannot admit into the felicity of his poem.

In his *Onegin* commentary, Nabokov was able to trace Lensky’s Optimistic rhetoric back through Johnson and Voltaire to Pope’s *An Essay on Man*, and he embodies it in Shade. Yet in his commentary he also draws out another side of Pope, which he traces forward through Byron, and which Pushkin built into *Onegin* himself. He

⁴⁵ EO 3:402-3: Nabokov refers to “Samuel Johnson’s insipid tale, *The Prince of Abyssinia* or (in later editions) *The History of Rasselas*”. Johnson, *Samuel Johnson*, 366.

embodied this side of Pope in Kinbote. This is Pope's satire on the folly of existence, expressed in melancholy moments of *The Rape of the Lock* and *An Essay on Man*, and in the dyspepsia of the *Dunciad*. Thus, when commenting on the dialogue between poet and bookseller that was dropped in the final published version of *Eugene Onegin*, where the poet explicitly invokes Byron's disparagement of fame, Nabokov comments:

Byron went to Pope, and Pushkin went to Pichot [Byron's French translator]. Pope (*An Essay on Man*, ep. IV. 237-38) has:

‘What's Fame? A fancy'd life in others breath,
A thing beyond us, ev'n before our death.’ (*EO* 2:15)

Thus by tracing the roots of *Eugene Onegin* back to Pope, Nabokov is able to see a common source for Lensky and Onegin, though in Pushkin they are presented as opposites, and in *Pale Fire* he reproduces this in Shade and Kinbote. But he also indicates that within Shade's happiness there is potential for the madness and despair embodied by Kinbote, and vice versa.

Shade and Kinbote are parodies of one another in Nabokov's special sense: they develop possibilities in one another's style. Nabokov was also aware of the more usual use of parody to mean mockery or satire. Nabokov's statement that parody is a game came in a 1966 interview, in which, discussing *Pale Fire*, he insisted he was not a satirist: “Satire is a lesson. Parody is a game.” But he also acknowledged that “when the poet Cincinnatus C., in my dreamiest and most poetical novel, accuses (not quite fairly) his mother of being a parody, he uses the word in the familiar sense of ‘grotesque imitation.’” (*SO* 75) He understood that the delicate game of parody, which he and Pope played, could resolve into pure satire in one direction, if it amounted to treating people as parodies. Through Kinbote's hatred of Gradus the assassin, he exorcises that possibility.

Kinbote hates Gradus with a violent satirical force unrelieved by the play in Pope's mock-epics. Pope's suggestion in the dedicatory letter to *The Rape of the Lock* that "the human persons are as Fictitious as the Airy ones" glances with the gentlest irony at the frivolous unreality of the young ladies it satirises.⁴⁶ Even in the *Dunciad* the suggestion that the dunces do not really exist, since they are so impoverished of spirit, is handled with wit, and beneath his cruelty Pope imagines the miseries of grubstreet life with sympathy. Kinbote, however, flatly declares of Gradus: "Spiritually he did not exist. Morally he was a dummy pursuing another dummy." (218) Pope humiliates the dunces by making them fall and slip in faeces and urine; but they do so with zest, as a game. But when Kinbote flings shit at Gradus, gloating morbidly over Gradus's diarrhoea as it develops in stages into "the liquid hell inside him" (221), there is nothing playful about it. Kinbote's image is closer to the gross images in Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room" (1730) or Pope's *Epilogues to the Satires* (1738), both of which linger on excrement with fascinated disgust.

In Kinbote's invective against Gradus Nabokov parodies Augustan satire and shows how it was reproduced in the rhetoric of high modernist hatred. Kinbote describes Gradus as an ape (218), just as in *Gulliver's Travels* Gulliver comes to seem a Yahoo or monkey, but he also calls him a "clockwork man" (123), just as Gulliver, who comes to identify with the inhumanly rational Houyhnhnms, is a worshipper of the clock.⁴⁷ Attacking him as a "Puritan", Gradus distills Swift and Pope's polemics against Puritans, deists, and other moderns. Nabokov teaches the lesson of *Gulliver's Travels*, that man will descend into inhumanity and self-hatred if he identifies himself exclusively with

⁴⁶ Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 143.

⁴⁷ *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 18.

either his animal or his rational side. Kinbote's view of Gradus as both a robot and an animal reproduces a contradiction which runs through modernist views of the masses.⁴⁸ Like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* (1922), with both of which it is in dialogue, *Pale Fire* is a mock-epic, and as such it tests the ordinary details of modern life against a heroic precedent. This opens up complex ironies, which can be resolved by equating the epic model with reality and condemning modernity as unreal or dead, meaningless if judged by the standards of poetry. Kinbote is a devotee of T. S. Eliot (154), who in *The Waste Land* wrote: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many."⁴⁹ Kinbote thinks of Gradus as dead or as lacking reality: "The fact that his weapon was a real one, and his quarry a highly developed human being, this fact belonged to *our* world of events; in his, it had no meaning." (218) Like Joyce's Leopold Bloom, who read the magazine *Titbits* while sitting on the toilet, Gradus's mode of reading is to consume, digest, and excrete information.⁵⁰

Kinbote watches Gradus reading *The New York Times*, "his lips moving like wrestling worms", and we are given an undigested list of information in the paper, while Gradus eats "a large portion of pinkish pork with sauerkraut, a double helping of elastic French fries, and the half of an overripe melon." (215-6) To Kinbote, Gradus is a tube through which the world passes as information, unreal and meaningless himself because in him language is meaningless, understood so immediately that he never stops to consider the realities to which it refers. His revolutionary career started with his working in a glass factory, and he is kin to the transparent people who surround Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading*, who "understood each other at first word, since they had no

⁴⁸ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, 23-30.

⁴⁹ *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London, 1969). *The Waste Land*, 1.62-3.

⁵⁰ Compare Joyce, *Ulysses* 102.

words that would end in an unexpected way” (23). Because they speak in clichés they are unreal, or as Cincinnatus puts it, everyone is merely a “parody” (112). Gradus’s fellow revolutionaries search hopelessly for the crown jewels and in doing so destroy the palace. Like Gradus’s pursuit of the King, this serves as an allegory for the futile destructiveness of reading as if one were trying to find the solution to a puzzle. Pope parodied this tendency in the mock-keys he wrote to *The Rape of the Lock* and the *Dunciad*. Gradus provides a model of the passive and reductive reading that *Pale Fire* rejects. Gradus has an “immunity to classical allusion” (158). “In the vicinity of Lex he lost his way among steep tortuous lanes” – that is, he gets lost in its “lexical playfields”.⁵¹ He is always misreading signs and codes.⁵² Finally, when he gets to Wordsmith College he goes searching for the King in the library, where he gets completely lost.

[He] soon found himself among the bewitched hush of Rare Books. The room was beautiful and had no doors; in fact, some moments passed before he could discover the draped entrance he himself had just used [...] he dashed back – ran three steps down and nine steps up, and burst into a circular room where a baldheaded suntanned professor in a Hawaiian shirt sat at a round table reading with an ironic expression on his face a Russian book. (221)

Is it his maker, Nabokov? In *Peri Bathous* Martin Scriblerus says of the true poet of Bathos that “his design ought to be a labyrinth, out of which no body can get clear but himself.”⁵³ To read *Pale Fire* one should not want to get free of its allusive and lexical labyrinths. Like the *Dunciad*, *Pale Fire* is a humanist game designed to be read and re-read inexhaustibly.

⁵¹ *PF* 157; 205.

⁵² *PF* 144; 171.

⁵³ Pope, *Prose Works*, 2:192.

Sporting with Sources: Intertextual Games

In the “baldheaded suntanned professor [...] reading with an ironic expression on his face” (221), Gradus seems to glimpse Nabokov, doing the reading that allowed him to show that parallels could be found for practically every line of *Eugene Onegin*. The difficulty was in knowing what to make of them. As he wrote in “The Servile Path”:

The pursuit of reminiscences through an author’s work is, of course, a dangerous sport. There is no doubt that in many cases Pushkin picks his flowers on the very brink of plagiarism, but we have often to reckon with similarities due to the presence, backstage, as it were, of a common source, or to inevitable combinations within the comparatively narrow limits of an established genre. There is also plain coincidence.⁵⁴

This is the main point of the title *Pale Fire*, the source of which Kinbote only dimly remembers. It is *Timon of Athens*, one of Shakespeare’s most obscure plays. The context of “pale fire” is a speech about how everything in the world, and in literature, is indebted to something else:

The sun’s a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea; the moon’s an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
The sea’s a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears.
[.....]
.....] each thing’s a thief.⁵⁵

But the widespread references in *Pale Fire* to Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* also make relevant a remark Boswell quotes from Johnson: “Modern writers are the moons of literature; they shine with reflected light, with light borrowed from the ancients”, where Johnson is speaking about Pope.⁵⁶ Nabokov’s passion for the *trouvaille*, the detail overdetermined with desired implications, caught a perfect specimen in the image of

⁵⁴ Nabokov, “The Servile Path”, 107.
⁵⁵ Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, 4.3.429-35; 435.
⁵⁶ Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 860-861. This reference is identified by de Vries in “Pale Fire and the Life of Johnson”.

“pale fire”. It laid a trail for scholarly commentators better equipped than Kinbote, first to *Timon of Athens*, and then on to Johnson. Johnson’s point is that Pope’s poetry is not less admired, though it is less talked about, than it was in his lifetime, just as “Virgil is less talked of than Pope, and Homer is less talked of than Virgil; but they are not less admired.”⁵⁷ It is unclear whether Johnson means that Pope is still read and admired, but is less a subject of discussion, or whether his presence survives through the influence it exerts on the inferior modern writers who *are* read. Nor is it clear whether Johnson intends a conscious allusion to Timon’s speech, or is speaking under Shakespeare’s invisible influence on him. By choosing *pale fire* as his title and working in allusions to Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, Nabokov has arranged things so as to induce a footnote that will illustrate the potential limitlessness of intertextuality. Shade, who picks the title out of Shakespeare as if by chance, has happened upon a description of himself: he is one of Johnson’s modern writers, borrowing from past literature without acknowledging or making sense of his references. The image of theft is literalised in the fact that Kinbote has stolen the manuscript.

In the passage of “The Servile Path” quoted above, Nabokov spoke of the “pursuit of reminiscences” as a “dangerous sport.” He also spoke of misreadings as “sport”, and *Pale Fire* combines these two kinds of “sport”. It contains a system of misreadings, not only Kinbote’s, but also Shade’s, all sporting with reminiscences from Pope. Nabokov hinted at the game or “sport” of misreadings in *Pale Fire* in his 1966 polemic against Edmund Wilson and his criticisms of Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin*:

The mistakes and misstatements in it form an uninterrupted series so complete as to seem artistic in reverse, making one wonder if, perhaps, it had not been woven that way on purpose to be turned into something pertinent and coherent when

⁵⁷ Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 860.

reflected in a looking glass. I am unaware of any other such instance in the history of literature. It is a polemicist's dream come true, and one must be a poor sportsman to disdain what it offers. (SO 247)

This mocking description of Wilson's essay slyly suggests that he has fallen victim to just the kind of "sport" that Nabokov had prepared in *Pale Fire*. This backhanded description of its system of misreadings draws in turn on the account of "*nonnons*" in *Invitation to a Beheading*, toys which were "absolutely absurd objects, shapeless, mottled, pockmarked, knobbly things", sold with crazily distorted mirrors, in whose reflection the original misshapen object would become "a wonderful, sensible image" (115). For *Pale Fire*, that distorted mirror is Pope's oeuvre.

What evidently fascinated Nabokov about Pope was that a single writer could write such different works as *The Rape of the Lock*, *An Essay on Man*, and the *Dunciad*, yet that in Pope's ironies one could find the formulae for his metamorphoses. Nabokov located a passage of Pope which sits at the centre of his work, like the room at the centre of the labyrinthine library in which Gradus gets lost. This is a vision of life as folly. It comes close to the end of the Second Epistle of *An Essay on Man*, just before Pope switches the metaphor and describes life as a "play".⁵⁸ It is also the source for the phrase *supremely blest*, the title of Shade's book.⁵⁹ Pope's *Essay* repeatedly addresses man as a "fool" and defines him as such both in the sense that he cannot and should not see beyond the limitations of his own perspective and that he tries to do so, so that he is fated always to misread the world. In the passage from which Shade quotes, Pope, taking the perspective of Folly in Part One of the *Praise of Folly*, defends such self-deceit as the precondition for happiness. This passage, and the last 100 lines of the second epistle of

⁵⁸ Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 2:282.

⁵⁹ As Maynard Mack's notes in the Twickenham edition point out, these passages draw on Erasmus. Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 87; 89.

An Essay on Man, which switch back and forth between satirising and indulging folly, between viewing self-love from the inside and from without, come to look like the hinge for all the double perspectives of *Pale Fire*. Nabokov liked to mark mid-points, as he did in his commentary to *The Song Of Igor's Campaign*, where in a line all on its own a voice rises up between two scholarly comments to intone enigmatically, "We are now at the mid-point of The Song".⁶⁰ This passage, as the mid-point of *An Essay on Man* and therefore the pivot of Pope's oeuvre, explores the considerations involved in Pope's transformation from the happy society poet of *The Rape of the Lock* to the angry satirist of the *Dunciad*.

The passage runs as follows:

Whate'er the Passion, knowledge, fame, or pelf,
Not one will change his neighbour with himself.
The learn'd is happy nature to explore,
The fool is happy that he knows no more;
The rich is happy in the plenty giv'n,
The poor contents him with the care of Heav'n.
See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing.
The sot a hero, lunatic a king;
The starving chemist in his golden views
Supremely blest, the poet in his muse. (II. 261-70)

Shade quotes from this passage during a scene in which he and his wife are waiting in for Hazel to come back from her disastrous date when, as it turns out, rejected for being ugly, she will take her own life. Watching TV, they see an advertisement:

A nymph came pirouetting, under white
Rotating petals, in a vernal rite
To kneel before an altar in a wood
Where various articles of toilet stood.
I went upstairs and read a galley proof,
And heard the wind roll marbles on the roof.
'See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing'
Has unmistakably the vulgar ring

⁶⁰ Nabokov, *Song of Igor's Campaign*, 117

Of its preposterous age. [...] (ll. 413-21)

The opening image, presumably a cosmetics commercial, alludes to a passage of *The Rape of the Lock* in which Belinda is at the “Altar” of her make-up table, engaging in “the sacred Rites of Pride” of the substitute religion of beauty (l. 127-8). As Nabokov indicates in his commentary, Pushkin had already drawn on this image to describe Onegin at his dressing table. In itself it is significant that this is the only *image*, as opposed to phrase, structure, theme, or idea, from Pope included in *Pale Fire*, since this is a passage about *poshlost*’, the world of superficial images and advertisements that Nabokov mocks in *Nikolai Gogol* (66-7). This is what Shade calls the “prism / Of corporate desire” (l. 457) beamed in through the television, the culture of physical beauty that has made Hazel so unhappy. Although later in “Pale Fire” in his epiphany Shade will invest himself in Pope’s ornamental aesthetic, here it disgusts him, as he shows by describing the advertisement in terms that recall *The Rape of the Lock*. Going upstairs he reads in *An Essay on Man* the line ““See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing””, which seems to him to confirm that Pope has no sympathy for those who are poor, unattractive, mad, or ill-favoured, who in any way fail to conform harmoniously to the design of nature that Pope advocates so urgently in the *Essay*.

As Liza Zunshine comments, Shade appears to have misread the passage in Pope.⁶¹ Here he calls it “preposterous”, while in an earlier draft, quoted by Kinbote, he called it “heartless” (161). Shade takes Pope’s lines as a mockery of the weak and ill-favoured, a reading which certainly relates to Hazel’s suicide. If Shade hears heartlessness in the lines “See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing, / The sot a hero, lunatic a king;” he presumably understands them as mocking the grotesque behaviour of

⁶¹ Zunshine, “Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”, 181.

the unfortunate and mad. But Pope's argument in the passage is that self-love defends us from the ridicule our reason would bring against our weaknesses. Reason in the *Essay* is "A sharp accuser, but a helpless friend" (2:154), and what Pope calls "self-love" is there to defend us from reason's constant rebuke. *An Essay on Man* is dedicated to persuading its reader that the "blindness" of self-love is "kindly giv'n, / That each may fill the circle mark'd by heav'n" (1:85-6). Far from being unkind, Pope's lines make the familiar conservative claim that compassion begins with an unflinching acknowledgement of human weakness: "Painful pre-eminence! yourself to view / Above life's weakness, and its comforts too." (4:267-8)

Shade has compressed his source so completely as to make it all but impossible to appreciate Pope's thought. However grotesque other people appear, they are still happy, and the size of this discrepancy suggests how powerfully "self-love" can remedy the cold external eye of reason. Pope is inviting us to see the blind beggar and the cripple from the outside, but then to see into the minds of the sot and the lunatic, to see them as they see themselves, which in turn explains why the blind beggar can dance – *because* he is blind. Since Shade tends to conceive of beauty as an aspect of nature and an endorsement of something or someone's place in "life" – the life of society – he fostered in his daughter the impression that because she was unattractive she was unnecessary (ll. 318-27). Shade is unable to follow Pope in ignoring the grotesque appearance of his indigents and delighting in the bliss of their inward worlds. Despite Sybil's protests, Shade is inconsolable that his daughter is so homely. If Shade had been more of a satirist, had made any effort to stand outside the myth that a rich world of fantasy is open only to those whose beauty has bought them access, Hazel might not have killed herself.

In his footnote, Kinbote comments:

The draft yields an interesting variant:

417 I fled upstairs at the first squawk of jazz
 And read a galley proof: 'Such verses as
 "See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing,
 The sot a hero, lunatic a king"
 Smack of their heartless age.' Then came your call.

This is, of course, from Pope's *Essay on Man*. One knows not what to wonder at more: Pope's not finding a monosyllable to replace 'hero' (for example 'man') so as to accommodate the definite article before the next word, or Shade's replacing an admirable passage by the much flabbier final text. Or was he afraid of offending an authentic king? (161)

Kinbote's much more obvious error springs from the same deafness to Pope's ironies that leads to Shade's misreading. Kinbote expresses amazement at "Pope's not finding a monosyllable to replace 'hero' (for example 'man') so as to accommodate the definite article before the next word"; he evidently has also not understood that the sot is a hero to the extent that he believes himself one. Why does Kinbote want a definite article placed before "lunatic"? Pope's syntax allows the possibility of the king being a lunatic or the lunatic being a king, in the way that *Pale Fire* has generated the possibilities that Shade is really Kinbote, or that Kinbote is really Shade, which "the lunatic a king" would not do. He is willing to identify with Pope's "lunatic" so long as this involves a subsequent irreversible transmutation of that lunatic into a king. Kinbote must recognise himself in the description of lunatic as king, since he wishes that the line, like himself, had not been left out of "Pale Fire", though it is a self-recognition very different from self-knowledge. The recognition is static. It does not take him outside himself. It does not open up a sane perspective on his delusions.

Another puzzle is presented by Shade's use of Pope's phrase *supremely blest* as the title for his book on Pope. The phrase is deeply ambiguous, in a way that keeps mockery and admiration in view at the same time, like the sides of a diptych. It is not clear whether Shade recognises any of the ironies already present in these lines: that the poet's happiness consists in his self-deception; that his happiness may not extend beyond the bounds of his poem; and that poetry does not really achieve an alchemical transmutation of this world into a next, and misery into happiness. By the logic of Pope's lines, either the beggar and the poet are both happy, or neither of them are. It all depends on whether one accepts that happiness can still be genuine even if it is grounded in self-deception. It would have been difficult for Shade to miss both of Pope's ironies. If Shade is applying the line to Pope in earnest, then he must be crediting the poet with the happiness he is denying to the beggar. Perhaps he simply thinks poetry the only form of self-deception to stand any chance of succeeding. Kinbote claims that Shade's "whole being constituted a mask" and that "he was his own cancellation" (23). Yet one final irony of Pope's lines is that a satirist who can so coolly survey the road to happiness running through self-deception is himself debarred from taking the path to consolation, since he cannot will himself back into an illusion that he has seen through. Shade's happiness may be a mask which he needs an audience to fix onto his face, as it is for Smurov, who at the end of *The Eye* screams: "I am happy – yes, happy! What more can I do to prove it, how to proclaim that I am happy? Oh, to shout it so that all of you believe me at last, you cruel, smug people ..." (104)

Pale Fire is absorbed with the mystery of happiness, which Pope in the *Essay on Man* says is something "O'er-look'd, seen double, by the fool, and wise" (4:6), no sooner

found than lost, brought into definition by comparison of one's own lot with another's, but also potentially destroyed by that comparison. As Kinbote says, "happy is something extremely subjective. One of our sillier Zemblan proverbs says: *the lost glove is happy*." (16) Presumably it is free of comparison and emulation. Lost, and therefore free of any system, it can return to the first chaos of nature, the swarm of chance and coincidence which poetry organises into what Nabokov liked to call "felicity" (SO 40) – the harmony of a poem and aptness of its phrases, its happiness, but also, etymologically, its exploitation of chance, in the rhymes it uses and the figures of speech it strikes off.

Shade's epiphany about the game of worlds at the end of Epistle Three also, aptly, draws on a misreading of Pope, caused by the reader being deaf to Pope's ironies. This is the passage in Johnson's attack on Jenyns in which he speaks of a game of worlds. Johnson charges that Jenyns and Pope justify the evils and sufferings of humans in the world by referring them to some unknown design of providence, but that "This author and Pope perhaps never saw the miseries which they imagine thus easy to be borne." According to Johnson, to view suffering without sympathy, from the outside, is not to see it at all. Pope is mistaken to imagine that madmen are happy. Further, the theory of the great chain of being, whose analogies and "gradations just" supposedly justify suffering, leads logically to the most absurd inferences. In the *Essay* Pope had mocked humans: "Destroy all creatures for thy sport or gust, / Yet cry, if Man's unhappy, God's unjust." (1:117-8) Jenyns went further, blown along by a sudden gust of analogical reasoning. As Johnson says, "He imagines that as we have not only animals for food, but choose some for our diversion, the same privilege may be allowed to some beings above us, *who may deceive, torment, or destroy us for the ends only of their own pleasure or utility*."

Brilliantly parodying Jenyns's analogies, Johnson goes on: "He might have shown that these *hunters, whose game is man* have many sports analogous to our own. As we drown whelps and kittens, they amuse themselves now and then with sinking a ship, and stand round the fields of Blenheim, or the walls of Prague, as we encircle a cockpit." The cruel gods Shade imagines take pleasure, likewise, in "Kindling a long life here, extinguishing / A short one there; killing a Balkan king;" (ll. 821-2). Of the gods Jenyns has imagined, Johnson sarcastically imagines: "Many a merry bout have these frolic beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it is to see a man tumble with an epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why." Johnson caps his sport by fancying Jenyns himself the "plaything" of these gods, whose "sport" consists in watching his folly and pride.⁶²

Johnson constructs an ironic *reductio ad absurdum* whose logic Shade's argument reverses. Just as Shade plays with the world, assembling it into various patterns in which he need not believe, so too, he supposes, there may be gods who play with the world. Nabokov fixed on Johnson's piece because it shows how easily ideas of play can move from the metaphysical to the metafictional, enabling a play of analogies and contrasts between god, author, and man, each subject to one another's play in a triangle at whose points cruelty and consolation are held in potential balance. Yet Nabokov will have seen a further interest in the piece, that Johnson unknowingly falls victim to the literary sport of which he flatters himself he is in control. Johnson, like Shade, mistakes Pope by reading him as a sage and not as an ironist. The *Essay*, as we have seen, is as deeply conscious of poverty, madness, and misery as the *Dunciad*, and the lines which Shade and Johnson read as a palliation of suffering can, by a delicate irony, be read inversely, as

⁶² Johnson, *Samuel Johnson*, 522-43; 527; 528; 534-5.

an eloquent expression of senselessness and futility. The Shade and Kinbote portions of *Pale Fire* are the two sides of this irony. Johnson does not give due credit to the way in which Pope's *Essay* systematically undercuts its own vision of the universal design, since it argues that no man can see the world as a whole, and that to read the universe is, as Shade argues, inevitably to misread it. Man is simultaneously "Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd: / The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!" (2:18) Nabokov's study of misreading in *Pale Fire* is designed to teach that even Pope's *Essay*, which might appear as close as poetry can come to declarative thought, is wrongly read if it is read as a series of statements or "strong opinions". It is in the play of thought, the ironies and juxtapositions of tones, that its truths are to be found, flickering like light between mirrors.

Lexical Playfields: Textual Games

Nabokov used to tell his students that a good reader needed four things: imagination, memory, some artistic sense, and a dictionary (*LL* 3). He exercised great care about individual words in his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, and attacked previous translators who, thinking to preserve the “spirit” of the original text and its metre, had introduced filler phrases, changed figures of speech, and ignored all the particularities of the original text. Nabokov sought in dictionaries obscure or obsolete words to reproduce the full associations of Pushkin’s Russian. So, for instance, he explained that he had chosen “scrab”, as in “scrab up”, on the grounds that it combined “grab” and “scratch”, like Pushkin’s *tsaptsarap* (*SO* 254).

Many of Nabokov’s most brilliant games in *Pale Fire* also turn on obscure words and send the reader to a dictionary, and one of them illustrates his underlying premise. Early in the foreword, Kinbote complains about the “reticulation of deadly drafts” he had suffered in New Wye (18). A reticulation is a network. If we look up “reticulated”, the OED refers us on to Samuel Johnson, a frequent object of allusion in *Pale Fire*, and his attempt to define network in his 1755 *Dictionary*: “*Network*, any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections.” Students of lexicography often cite this definition, with its juggle of obscure Latinisms, as a comic illustration of how difficult it is to define words. What delighted Nabokov about it was surely that, like Johnson’s comments on Jenyns, it embodies the problem it names: a language is a network, and the full meaning of any word is a function of its place in the entire network of the language. No dictionary definition can capture it. The language of *Pale Fire* aims to embody the “plexed artistry” (l. 814) that Shade sees in the world. To

plex is to form a plexus. A plexus is an intricately interconnected network of fibres in the body (OED 1) or “any intertwined or interwoven mass” (OED 2).

Meanings depend on the relations of words to one another and ultimately on the network of the alphabet. In *Pale Fire*, the misprint of fountain for mountain makes the difference between life and death. The relation between world games and word-games, stated in Shade’s epiphany, is the difference of only a single letter, but it is a difference that testifies to how the details of language shape worlds. Nabokov had been playing on this point since 1947, when in *Nikolai Gogol* he wrote that “one likes to recall that the difference between the comic side of things, and their cosmic side, depends upon one sibilant.” (142) *Bend Sinister* ends with a word-play that makes the smallest something out of nothing by changing “nothing” to “mothing” (201).

Nabokov found such word-games in Pope, including games on the vast difference made by excluding a single letter. Pope sets out the subject of the *Dunciad* in the opening line, replacing the opening of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “arms and the man I sing”, with “Books and the Man I sing, the first who brings / The Smithfield muses to the Ear of Kings.” (A 1:1-2). The subject of the *Dunciad* is the relation between man and books, word and world. The first note, attributed to Theobald, and printed just below “Books and the man I sing”, is an excellent sample:

Ought it not rather to be spelled *Dunceiad* [...] Nor is the neglect of a *Single Letter* as trivial as to some it may appear; [...] I have a just value for the letter E [...] Wonderful is the stupidity of all the former Criticks and Commentators on this Poem! It breaks forth at the very first line.” (59)

The commentators’ desire to insert or subtract letters (the E into *Dunciad*) is reflected in the poetry, which pictures its grub-street hacks shivering in “The cave of Poverty and Poetry.” (A 1:32) A single inserted “v” impoverishes poetry. The poet sees the duncish

processions as: “(Pomps without guilt, of bloodless swords and maces, / Glad chains, warm furs, broad banner, and broad faces)” (A 1:85-6), where guilt replaces gilt, and glad replaces gold, against Scriblerus’s protests in his footnote, which draws attention to “glad” as a Latinism, *laetas* (69). Pope is playing in the space between languages, and in the space between the heroic or classical ideal and the bathetic human reality. Instead of gilt, he sees guilt, and instead of gold, a glad creaturely happiness, guiltless, repetitive (broad banners and broad faces) but warm. The dunces, seen in Book Three in the guise of teachers and university dons, give their students a merely verbal education, “And keep them in the pale of Words till death.” (B 1:160) That is, they impoverish the world by reducing it to words. Pope, as a humanist, aims to do the opposite. He is trying to allow words to speak, to live and create worlds – to move from poverty to poetry, as he does here, and from gold to guilt.

Pope also loves to play with names, as Erasmus had played on More’s name. Theobald becomes Tibbald, as if he were the cat Criticism in Swift’s *Battle of the Books*. Pope turns one of his enemies, James Moore Smyth, into the shadow-poet whom the dunces are pursuing, whom they call More. In his footnote, Scriblerus triumphantly seizes on Erasmus’s pun on More’s name to prove Moore fictitious.⁶³ It is as if the dunces were not people at all, but only echoes or phantoms or noise:

’Twas chatt’ring, grinning, mouthing, jabb’ring all,
And Noise and Norton, Brangling, and Breval,
Dennis and Dissonance; and captious Art, (A 2:229-31)

So too, by tracing London back to its ancient name, Lud (A 2:332), Pope is able to present the mirror image of the Dul Town over which Dulness presides by “ancient right” (A 1:9).

⁶³ Pope, *The Dunciad*, 103.

Nabokov also plays with names in *Pale Fire*, exploiting the web of associations which already exist around their syllables, making order out of the chance accidents he could find in language. A mirroring like that between Dul and Lud reigns over the relation between Kinbote's name and that of Botkin, the "American scholar of Russian descent" named in the index (240). That index entry refers us to the give-away conversation in which one Professor Pardon declares that he "was under the impression that you were born in Russian, and that your name was an anagram of Botkin or Botkine?" Is Kinbote "really" Botkin, a Russian scholar stripped of dignity by exile, like Pnin, whose name Americans find it as hard to pronounce as, say, Nabokov, and whose unpronounceable name is made much supposedly gentle fun of in the same conversation (210)? Shade interjects that Kinbote is "the author of a remarkable book of surnames", translated into English. In English Kinbote is a crucial letter g short of king, is just kin, subject to family resemblances and analogies. A "kinboot", sometimes spelled kinbot, is "a wergild or man-boot paid by a homicide to the kin of the person slain."⁶⁴ (OED) Kinbote claims that in Zemblan *kinbote* means regicide, "a king's destroyer" – "(longing to explain that a king who sinks his identity in the mirror of exile is in a sense just that)." (210) But Zemblan may just be a name for Kinbote's idiolect, the feelings he attaches to words. A name that in a different language might have sounded dignified, when set into the phonemic world of English loses its dignity and attracts humbling echoes. The index directs us to Kinbote's own derivation of Botkin, "one who makes bottekings, fancy footwear" (83) – that is, a mere foonote-filler, like one of Pope's dunces. In English, Kinbote/Botkin's name, once perhaps kingly, recalls that of Gogol's humble clerk

⁶⁴ As Boyd points out. *AY* 444.

Bashmachkin, which, the narrator of “The Overcoat” tells us, “all too plainly was at some time derived from *bashmak*”, shoe in Russian.⁶⁵

Nabokov quotes this passage as an epigraph to Chapter Five of *Nikolai Gogol*, “The Apotheosis of a Mask” (139). In *Nikolai Gogol*, too, Nabokov mentions the “bodkin” with which Hamlet considers killing himself in his famous “to be or not to be” speech (76). In November 1930, Nabokov had translated this speech into Russian, in a smooth translation of the sort that he would repudiate by the time he came to *Eugene Onegin* in the 1950s. Hamlet’s “bare bodkin” is simplified to a very ordinary “*kinzhalom tonkom*”, a sharp dagger (SS 3:677), a vulgarisation as bad as Conmal’s blurring “pale fire” to vague “silvery light”. Sharp is not thin. And a bodkin is not just a sharp dagger. “Kinbote” insists that the correct spelling of Hamlet’s bodkin is botkin (175). The OED tells us that “botken, botkin” is an obsolete spelling of bodkin – as Kinbote is obsolete; and the etymological origin of “bodkin” is obscure and disputed, like Kinbote. A single change of a letter allows Botkin to find an excuse for the suicide forbidden him by his faith: suicide is his destiny, it was written in his name from the first. One sense of “bodkin” is “an awl-like tool used to pick out letters in correcting set-up type.” (OED 5)

In *Hamlet* a bodkin is a weapon. It would become something very different over the course of the seventeenth century. Belinda wields a bodkin in *The Rape of the Lock* when she takes arms against the Baron who has raped her lock of hair. But Belinda’s bodkin is a blunt-pointed needle used as a hair-ornament. As Lisa Zunshine says, “at a certain hour in 1714 (the year of the first publication of *The Rape of the Lock*) tragic bare bodkins turned pretty hairpins.”⁶⁶ Nabokov therefore found summed up in a single word

⁶⁵ Gogol, *Diary of a Madman and other Stories*, 72.

⁶⁶ Zunshine, “Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”, 174.

the whole poetic of the mock-epic, which turns pointed weapons into safe ornaments. As with *pale fire*, this fragment also sums up Pope's relation to the universal source, Shakespeare, whom he had edited. The potential for tragedy has, while not disappearing, been controlled and contained by the structure of the mock-epic and the social follies it mimics. The bodkin which Belinda wields in her mock-epic battle was melted down from her grandsire's seal-rings, before becoming a whistle, bells, and a bodkin (5:88-96). It is an emblem of how poetry gradually sublimates meaning into innocent music and ornament. Falling asleep over the Twickenham edition of *The Rape of the Lock*, Nabokov (or Shade) would have been struck by Geoffrey Tillotson's footnote: "Pope plays on various meanings of *bodkin*: (1) here it means a blunt-pointed needle; (2) at iv 98 and v 95, a hair ornament; (3) at v 55 and 88 a dagger (with a pun on (2))."⁶⁷ Pope's word-play bridges the deadly and ornamental world games of mock-epic, just as Kinbote, beneath his innocuous appearance, may be deadly.

As if all this were not enough, it was an S. D. Botkin who replaced Nabokov's father as head of Russian émigré organisations in Berlin after he was killed by mistake, when the assassins were aiming at someone else (AY 456) – as Shade seems to be killed because he is mistaken for someone else, Kinbote or perhaps Judge Goldsworth. It may seem improbable that so many associations are relevant. Surely Nabokov could have had only one or two in mind? The name has the over-determination, that is, the surplus of causes, that Freud had argued was characteristic of dreams, in which "condensation" is one major part of the dream-work, and of the portmanteau words in *Finnegans Wake*.

While Kinbote's name has about it the quality of dream-condensation, Zembla, the land from which he supposedly comes, seems a product of dream-displacement, the

⁶⁷ Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 168.

function that Freud names as the second of the two main instruments of the dream-work. Much to Kinbote's disappointment, Shade only mentions Zembla once in "Pale Fire", and in a throwaway and offhand manner, to describe the reflection of his cheek as he is shaving it, an expanse of snow-white shaving cream with grey, wheat-like stubble poking through: "[...] And now I plough / Old Zembla's fields where my gray stubble grows. (ll. 936-7) In the margin of the same index card on which he composed these lines, however, Shade has – if Kinbote is to be believed – written the original line of *An Essay on Man*:

I am a weary and sad commentator today.

Parallel to the left-hand side of this card (his seventy-sixth) the poet has written, on the eve of his death, a line (from Pope's Second Epistle of the *Essay on Man*) that he may have intended to cite in a footnote:

At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where

So this is all treacherous old Shade could say about Zembla – *my Zembla* ?
While shaving his stubble off ? Strange, strange ..." (213-4)

By picking out "Zembla", an inconsequent little word passed over and perhaps barely read by generations of Pope's admirers, and by elevating it to a position of significance, Nabokov satisfied his commitment to those overlooked details too often pressed aside by generalities. But why should Shade make this sudden abstruse reference, while he is talking about shaving of all things? And, even more puzzlingly, why should he then have written the original line of Pope on the margins of his index card? "Pale Fire" presents itself, on the model perhaps of *Ulysses*, as a diary of one day's passing thoughts, so perhaps the point is merely that "Zembla" is a stray thought which happened to get caught in Shade's memory and emerges here. As for Pope "Zembla" merely signifies distance and absence, "Zembla" means nothing to Shade.

If “Zembla” is a stray irrelevance to Shade, why has he bothered to point the source, as if it were a fully motivated allusion? By the blatant irrelevance of Shade’s marginalium Nabokov may be making a joke about the futility of attempts to follow every step taken by a writer’s imagination between source and finished product. It seems best for us to take it that to Shade, or to the “Shade” part of the doppelganger writing *Pale Fire*, Zembla meant nothing. Sometimes, as Nabokov pointed out, an allusion may be pure chance, and completely meaningless, but Kinbote, who is trying to find order in accident, cannot accept this, and therefore forges Shade’s marginalium. To Kinbote, Shade’s *zemblable*, his *frère*, zembla means everything, far too much. Zembla is the impossible land of fancy and contradiction mentioned in the *Dunciad*. In Swift’s *Battle of the Books*, Zembla is the land from which mere critics, as opposed to artists, come. In *The Temple of Fame* (1711), Pope describes how critics are always forgotten, their names inscribed on the temple of fame for a generation, only to be erased – just as “Pale Suns” have no effect on “th’impassive ice” of “*Zembla’s Rocks*”.⁶⁸ These sources are all too painfully meaningful to Kinbote. Better for him to displace them by referring to the one passage in Pope in which Zembla is meaningless.

“At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where” is taken from the following passage of *An Essay on Man*, which comes just forty lines before that from which Shade quoted “*See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing*”:

But where th’Extreme of Vice, was ne’er agreed:
Ask where’s the North? at York, ’tis on the Tweed;
In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where:
No creature owns it in the first degree,
But thinks his neighbour further gone than he. (2:221-26)

⁶⁸ *The Temple of Fame* is contained in Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*. Lines 53-6. I owe this reference to Jay Levine in “The Design of *A Tale of a Tub*”, 223.

The passage offers an image for the networks of substitution in *Pale Fire* and for the way that the characters graduate into one another. Shade shades into Kinbote by a hundred fine gradations. Gradus, alias Jack Gray, alias Jacques Degree, graduates into his seeming opposite Shade, who writes: "All colors made me happy: even gray." (l. 30) *An Essay on Man* expounds the great chain of being, which links the "first degree" and subsequent degrees of the universe, ultimately bridging every possible extreme. In the First Epistle alone are the "gradations just" of the universe, the "rank" of Man, the "scale of sense", the "just gradation" in reason and instinct between man and the descending ranks of the lower creatures, and the "gradation" in which each system of the universe rolls.⁶⁹

In Zembla, the distant northern land at the end of the world and the end of the alphabet, the reader comes to the very brink of sense. It is possible to trace Zembla to a definite source in Pope, but in itself the word has little significance. In Shade, we have gone beyond the brink. "Shade" is one of the most common words in Pope, occurring, along with "shades", four hundred and three times in his poetry.⁷⁰ It is also one of the stock words of English poetry, as Nabokov suggests in "The Servile Path", where he discusses "the specious shade" and says that it is the exact equivalent of the Russian *ten'*, one of the most common words in his own Russian prose.⁷¹ It is impossible to trace Shade to any single source. He is the shadow cast by all of Western literature. He is, as Pushkin defined the poet, the echo of the whole universe.⁷² The reader, doing as Shade suggests and "making ornaments/ Of accidents and possibilities" (ll. 828-9), will find in the mirror of *Pale Fire* their own reflection and that of their favourite books. Passing

⁶⁹ Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 1:31; 48; 113; 229; 247.

⁷⁰ Bedford and Dilligan, eds., *A Concordance to the Works of Alexander Pope*, 2:280-2.

⁷¹ Nabokov, "The Servile Path", 103.

⁷² In "The Echo". *Pushkin: Selected Verse*, 72.

down the allusive avenues Nabokov indicates, and constructing the paths of footnotes he seems to have foreseen, the reader becomes what Nabokov thought any good reader should be, a co-author. One comes to feel that *Pale Fire* is not the words on the page but the shadows they cast, that its art really exists not as a material object but as a possible entity in the mind of the reader, and that its life is its infinite possible afterlives.

Pale Fire describes two such possible afterlives: the afterlife of Shade's "Pale Fire" in the mind of Kinbote, and of Kinbote's story of escaping from Zembla, in Shade's own poem. It quietly suggests another in the scene that inspires Shade's epiphany. Shade goes to see Mrs Z. because he thinks she has had the same near-death vision of a fountain as he has. She has actually seen a mountain. Shade seems not to realise that he is probably responsible, and that her view of the afterlife was probably the unconscious afterlife of a poem of Shade's that she remembers having read, "That one about Mon Blon" (l. 783). Shade's poem in turn could hardly have escaped the shadow of one of Shelley's most famous poems, "Mont Blanc" (1817), which, like Shade's "Pale Fire" and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, asks whether "the veil of life and death" is indeed an illusion "unfurled" by "some unknown omnipotence", and observes the mind, "which passively / Now renders and receives fast influencings", "Seeking among the shadows that pass by / Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee".⁷³ These lines are a succinct image of *Pale Fire*. Even the relation between life and death is a game of worlds dictated by the word-games of language and literature.

⁷³ Shelley's *Poetry and Prose*. "Mont Blanc", ll. 54-5; 37-8; 45-6.

Conclusion
Play and the Genesis of Secrecy

In 1880, Dostoevsky ended his memorial speech to Pushkin by saying that: “Pushkin died at the height of his powers and carried off some great secret with him to the grave. And now that he is no longer among us, we are seeking to divine this secret.”¹ Nabokov, too, often hinted a great secret. In “The Word”, a story published in January 1923, the narrator suddenly finds himself in paradise, where he hears an angel pronounce a single wonderful word that would save the world. But when he wakes up, he cannot remember the word.² Luzhin is tormented by his attempt to find “the secret move leading to victory.” (*TLD* 139) Cincinnatus leads a “secret life” (*IB* 63), and this “secret” (45) is the key to his artistic gift. In “Fame”, a poem of 1942, Nabokov wrote:

And I’m happy. I’m happy that Conscience, the pimp
of my sleepy reflections and projects,
did not get at my critical secret. Today
I am really remarkably happy.

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

Without body I’ve spread, without echo I thrive,
and with me all along is my secret. (*PP* 111)

This thesis has shown that Nabokov began his career by proposing play as the essence of art and the world, and that he wrote about play in all his novels. It has argued that Nabokov’s novels are playful in ways closely connected to the particular games each novel depicts. Play seems to be the key that links the subjects of Nabokov’s novels to their artistic styles and makes meaning out of this connection. Was play, then, Nabokov’s

¹ Dostoevsky, “Pushkin”, 88.

² “Slovo”, *SS* 1:32-5. Nabokov, “The Word”.

secret? And if so, why was he “remarkably happy” to keep it a secret, instead of helping his readers by explicitly stating his theme, perhaps by republishing “Breitensträter – Paolino” or at least drawing attention to its existence? And in gathering, focusing, and making “overexplicit” the images of play which Nabokov preferred to leave scattered, diffuse, and implicit, does this thesis change Nabokov’s novels in a way that he did not want them to be changed, and betray his secret?

In nearly all of Nabokov’s novels, there is a central character who wants to think of life and art as play. Defining the novels as play means submitting to that view. However, there is often another force within the novels which opposes their being characterised as play. Especially after the move to America, Nabokov’s novels contain characters who to some extent resist play, are excluded from it, or represent a principle alien to play. David Krug, Lolita, Pnin’s stepson Victor, Hazel Shade, Lucette are all drawn into games, not completely unwillingly, and they all show certain instincts which could be considered playful. But whether one does so consider them is a matter of choice. It is also possible to see in them, and the novels, a principle opposed to play.

In *Pale Fire*, for instance, John Shade’s memories of Hazel’s unhappiness begin with her being left out of games as a child: “At Christmas parties games were rough, no doubt, / And one shy little guest might be left out;” (*PF* ll. 307-8). Her unhappiness seems to make her crabbed and obsessive:

She twisted words: pot, top,
Spider, redips. And ‘powder’ was ‘red wop.’
She called you a didactic katydid.
She hardly ever smiled, and when she did,
It was a sign of pain. (ll. 347-51)

One might see Hazel's taste for anagrams and palindromes as a parallel and inspiration for her father's word-play and that of *Pale Fire*. But John Shade presents it here as a "sign of pain", and one may also see the systematic twisting of form and language in *Pale Fire* as an expression of pain, not of play. Like his daughter, John Shade did not play as a child: "Asthmatic, lame and fat, / I never bounced a ball or swung a bat." (ll. 129-30) But unlike his daughter, he was able as a child to escape into his imagination and his poetry: "In sleeping dreams I played with other chaps" (l. 135). Shade includes himself in the play of the world. But we can also wonder about other ways Shade might have interpreted his gift. He might have interpreted it as the expression or means of exile from society, and by doing so have linked himself to Kinbote. Or he might have seen it as a cry of pain, an interpretation that would have legitimated Hazel as his daughter, and as the true embodiment of his painful gift. Shade's first epiphany came when the "thread of subtle pain" which he says was "always present" in him was "tugged at by playful death" (ll 139-41). Kinbote isolates the question of whether Shade's art is an expression of play or of pain when he misunderstands the scene he glimpses of Shade reading to Sybil a draft from "Pale Fire", presumably the passage about Hazel's death. Like Nabokov, Shade composes on index cards:

He seemed to be slowly collecting and stacking scattered playing cards left after a game of patience. Sybil was alternatively huddle-shaking and blowing her nose: John's face was all blotchy and wet. Not being aware at the time of the exact type of writing paper my friend used, I could not help wondering what on earth could be so tear-provoking about the outcome of a game of cards. (74)

In "Breitensträter – Paolino", Nabokov had created a narrator who tries to deny that pain is part of play, only to undercut him. From the late 1930s onwards, he began to articulate pain as a distinct element. All of Nabokov's American novels fulfil the project

announced by the mysterious author Vasilii Shishkov, in Nabokov's 1939 story of the same name. Shishkov wants to compose "*A Survey of Pain and Vulgarly*", but leaves his manuscript in the author's hands and disappears (S 499). His disappearance is significant. The suffering and pain of David Krug, Dolores Haze, Pnin, and Hazel Shade form the material of the novels in which they appear, but not the dominant consciousness of the novels, not the attitude we sense and attribute to their implied author. This is why critics and readers routinely complain of Nabokov's cruelty towards his characters, even though it is he who has, with care and pity, described their sufferings.

From the late 1930s onwards, Nabokov developed the plan of presenting a parody of himself, a cold, game-playing character who is an author or narrator, while placing alongside this figure another character, hapless, seemingly inartistic, who may be the material or even the victim of the first character's play, who does not play, and who embodies a different approach to art. He first set out this scheme in 1938 in his short story "Spring in Fialta", and followed it in many short stories written during the Second World War, and then in the American novels. Victor, the narrator, who happens to be in Fialta, spots an old love of his, Nina, who is now married to Ferdinand, a "Franco-Hungarian writer":

Lean and arrogant, with some poisonous pun ever ready to fork out and quiver at you, and with a strange look of expectancy in his dull brown veiled eyes, this false wag had, I daresay, an irresistible effect on small rodents. Having mastered the art of verbal invention to perfection, he particularly prided himself on being a weaver of words, a title he valued higher than that of a writer; personally, I could never understand what was the good of thinking up books, of penning things that had not really happened in some way or other; and I remember once saying to him as I braved the mockery of his encouraging nods that, were I a writer, I should allow only my heart to have imagination, and for the rest rely upon memory, that long-drawn sunset shadow of one's personal truth. (S 420)

Nevertheless, it is Victor, not Ferdinand who narrates “Spring in Fialta”. But his heart, though at the centre (or heart) of the tale, would not have communicated itself so pitifully to the reader if it were not the intricate art through which it is presented. Victor manages to inspire sympathy all the more powerfully by ingeniously posing as a naïf while setting up Ferdinand as a hollow sophisticate on whom all the deceptive games of art can be blamed.

So, too, in *Pnin*, Nabokov subjected Pnin to a narrator whose mockery only intensifies our pity for Pnin. It seems as if there should be an easier way to express Pnin’s suffering than this. Pnin tries to do it in a universalising aphorism, the theme for a course of lectures: “The history of man is the history of pain.” (141) But saying this shows us nothing of Pnin’s heart and its suffering. *Pnin* presents the same intricate game as “Spring in Fialta”. Nabokov invents a false, cruel version of himself, an Anglo-Russian writer and American academic called Vladimir Vladimirovich, and makes him the narrator. By doing so he induces the reader to imagine Pnin’s heart, and communicates it through the play between Pnin’s perspective and that of the narrator, between play and pain. All of Nabokov’s novels offer the reader this same experience of oscillating between playful self-consciousness and an inarticulate feeling of pain.

Unfavourable views of Nabokov often seem to take him at his word and to identify his art with the cold idea of art as play that he parodies in such figures as Vladimir Vladimirovich, Ferdinand, Humbert Humbert, and the narrator of “Breitensträter – Paolino”. This thesis has emphasised the element of play in Nabokov’s writing, but I hope it has also shown how this play communicates pain, and how limited are views of Nabokov which treat his style as “mere play”, and do not see that it is the

rigorously controlled instrument of his enquiry into play, an enquiry which encompasses all of reality, given that it begins with the conceit that all of life is play.

Nevertheless, one cannot lightly dismiss Nabokov's insistence on keeping his ideas about play secret or at least inexplicit. He often wrote about the longing to define a style and also about the impossibility of fully doing so. In *The Gift* Fyodor is trying to define himself, and in doing so he looks for authority to the memory of his father:

In and around my father, around this clear and direct strength, there was something difficult to convey in words, a haze, a mystery, an enigmatic reserve which made itself felt sometimes more, sometimes less. [...] I cannot track down a name for his secret, but I only know that that was the source of that special – neither glad nor morose, having indeed no connection with the outward appearance of human emotions – solitude to which neither my mother nor all the entomologists of the world had any admittance. (109)

Fyodor adds that an old servant, “who frankly and with no fear or surprise considered that my father knew a thing or two that nobody else knew, was in his own way right.” (110) But the knowledge that Fyodor's father possesses is a secret not only because he has not told it, or because it is not tellable, but because he is not himself aware of it. It is the difference, not vaunted but maintained unselfconsciously, between his own way of being and doing and that of anyone else. From one point of view this difference is, as Fyodor says, a “strength”, from the opposite point of view a “reserve”. It is everything about a person of which they are not aware, and do not intend, but which is fundamental to how other people see them. A reader will naturally feel in these qualities the indefinable secret that he cherishes in an author, but Fyodor fails in his attempt to define his father, and there is a lesson in this for Nabokov's readers.

In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov dramatised this distinction in the contrast between Shade and Kinbote. Kinbote is a man with a secret, a very explicit and definite secret, which he

is only too keen to tell, though he likes to be coy about it: that he is really Charles Xavier, the last King of Zembla. Shade tells Kinbote that he “‘guessed your secret quite some time ago’” (226). But Shade also has a secret, which is his style, as he suggests when describing a dream from which he awoke to discover that he had left his shoe outside while sleepwalking: “My secret stamp, / The Shade impress, the mystery inborn. / Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn.” (ll. 884-6) Shade’s secret stamp is the unconscious force in his writing, unwilled, unremembered, and yet uniquely his, both a fingerprint and a dream. He finishes by jokily pretending to summarise his own style, with a crude parody of his jaunty metonyms and alliterative word-play (“Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn”), which misses the point every bit as much as similar parodies of Nabokov. The real point of this parody is to show that the “mystery inborn” of a style is impossible to capture. As Henry James wrote in “The Art of Fiction” (1884): “The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. [...] His manner is his secret, not necessarily a jealous one. He cannot disclose it as a general thing if he would; he would be at a loss to teach it to others.”³

Nabokov expressed the relation between play and secrecy in 1938, when he wrote to his literary agent that: “Literature will always remain a game for me, the secret rules of which preclude my following any aim foreign to its curiously divine nature.”⁴ As Kant argued, art must have rules, but those rules cannot be reduced to concepts.⁵ The laws of art are unstatable or, as Nabokov says, secret. For this reason the world will almost inevitably make the mistake of imagining that the game of art is lawless, and the artist

³ James, *Selected Literary Criticism*, 54.

⁴ Printed by Brian Boyd in “Welcome to the Block”, 149.

⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 186.

may prefer to preserve his freedom than to specify his rules. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus's secret gift is his "basic illegality" (27) for which he has been imprisoned – just as, in *The Gift*, Fyodor also speaks of his "gift" as an "illegal treasure" (79) – illegal because it cannot be defined.

Against this secret and unstatable insight *The Gift* offers as a contrast the comic scene in which Busch, a German playwright, reads out a pompous "philosophical tragedy". Four Ancient Greek prostitutes, whose clients are the pre-Socratic philosophers Thales, Anaximenes, Pythagoras and Heraclitus, report their clients' views, declaring in turn that "All is water", "All is air", "All is number", or "'All is fire'." (67) Later, Fyodor again meets Busch, who is now writing a novel which he describes as "the tragedy of a philosopher who has discovered the absolute formula", the "central atom", "the secret of the world". (193) If we return to "Breitensträter – Paolino", we can now see that its opening pronouncement, "Everything in the world plays" is also pre-Socratic in form, and we will be tempted to insert it into *The Gift*, and say: "for Nabokov, all is not water, air, number, or fire; all is play". But to invoke "Breitensträter – Paolino" would be to change *The Gift* by putting back play at its centre, from which Nabokov had very carefully removed it. *The Gift* is a novel with an empty centre.⁶ Or, to change the image, it is a novel without a key. *The Gift* begins and ends with Fyodor locked out of the house, having first taken the wrong keys and then having them stolen.⁷ Each loss prompts a poem. Art begins when one's desire for a key is frustrated, and Nabokov's writing is itself exile literature in this metaphysical sense: it expresses the experience of being locked out – not only from the homeland of Russia, but also from the transcendent realm

⁶ Similarly, Fyodor makes his "The Life of Chernyshevski" as a "ring", designed to imitate "the circular nature of everything in existence": *G* 188.

⁷ On the theme of keys in *The Gift*, see Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, 93-106.

of absolute truth. Not that it dismisses the longing for keys, absolute formulae, secrets, and conclusions. But it inspires this desire only to frustrate it, like Zina, whom Fyodor sees, “standing by the glass door, playing with the key” (169).

Shortly after *The Gift*, Nabokov would begin writing specifically about the emotional, and intellectual, dangers, of such final conclusions. For Busch, the “tragedy of the philosopher who had discovered the absolute formula” had been that “having made such a discovery, the human personality can no longer go on walking and talking.” (193) Nabokov developed this idea in “Ultima Thule”, the first chapter of the novel that he began and broke off in the winter of 1939-40, and which he would ultimately develop into *Pale Fire*. In “Ultima Thule” Nabokov came the closest to defining play as his secret, only to pull back. Falter has had a revelation of the true nature of the universe, a “bomb of truth that exploded in him” (S 500) and made him inhuman. Sineusov, the narrator, has lost his wife and wants to inveigle from Falter a glimpse of the world into which she has passed. Falter catches Sineusov up in an intricate Socratic dialogue, in the course of which he locates truth at the moment of surprise that accompanies discovery. It is an experience in time, not an eternal fact, and can never be stated. Sineusov’s very method of metaphysical enquiry is misguided. According to Falter, ““by the very act of your mentioning a given concept you placed your own self in the position of an enigma, as if the seeker himself were to hide. And by persisting in your question, you not only hide, but also believe that by sharing with the sought-for object the quality of ‘hiddenness’ you bring it closer to you.”” (517) That is, the idea of a secret is magnetic because it seems to promise absolute knowledge, but it only makes knowledge more distant. At the end of the conversation, Falter does however tell Sineusov that ““amid all

the piffle and prate I inadvertently gave myself away – only two or three words, but in them flashed a fringe of absolute insight – luckily, though, you paid no attention.’” (522)

We can look back through Falter’s comments and find the part where he says that “in a moment of playfulness [...] I kept combining various ideas, and finally found the right combination” (514). Yet a moment of playfulness is not the same thing as play, and if we equated the two we would be falling into the very mistake against which Falter warned Sineusov, that is, of conceiving “truth” as a thing rather than as an event.

Like so much else in Nabokov, the lesson of “Ultima Thule” is that of Pushkin’s “The Queen of Spades”, in which Hermann believes that he can find the secret to the game, and goes mad as a result. The influence of this story can be detected haunting Dostoevsky’s Hermann-like claim that Pushkin took with him to the grave “some great secret”. Pushkin’s story expresses a fundamental truth, which explains the widespread feeling that art, like jokes, should not be explained. Art provokes a play of thought by hinting at a solution, but this play of thought vanishes if one tries to resolve it. The paradox is that art inevitably produces the sense that it contains a secret. The reader of a work of literature sets the art in motion when he pursues its secret. But if he tries to possess it, he will destroy the game, and turn its secret into a mirage.

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