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The Art of Morality and the Morality of Art: Satire and Parody in Three Novels by Vladimir Nabokov

by

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Introduction
Nabokov's Strong Opinions

AA: Do you think Robbe-Grillet's novels are as free of "psychology" as he claims?

VN: Robbe-Grillet's claims are preposterous. […] His fiction is magnificently poetical and original, and the shifts of levels, the interpenetrations of successive impressions and so forth belong of course to psychology – psychology at its best.

– Vladimir Nabokov and Alfred Appel, Jr., Interview

Nabokov is an artist known for his "strong opinions." His thoughts on the ethics and aesthetics of literature and art are well documented and serve to elucidate certain aspects of his dense and often intimidating oeuvre. But they also serve to mystify his works, gently wrapping them in an almost imperceptible veil of deception. As Nabokov says, "art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex."[1] As someone who composed his autobiography as an aestheticized version of his life, blurring (if not erasing) the line between fiction and nonfiction, Nabokov reminds us to always be attentive to the element of art in everything he writes. Therefore, we must be attentive to the elusive element of deception as well. Nabokov is often quoted expressing his aversion to "literature of social intent," and scorns the application of that label to his own works: "I have neither the intent nor the temperament of a moral or social satirist."[2] And indeed, readers and critics alike often approach his novels with this attitude in mind. Taking Nabokov at his word, they read his worlds as void of morality but replete with aesthetics. While many beautiful readings have come from this view, Nabokov defined art as beauty *plus* pity. And it is

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[1] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage – Random House, 1990), 13.
[2] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 22.

this crucial element of pity that we miss out on if, like Humbert Humbert, we read only for aesthetic value.

Through an examination of the complex and nuanced interaction between parody and satire in three of Nabokov's novels, *Pnin, Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*, I argue that Nabokov's claims denying the presence of a moral element in his art are, themselves, "preposterous." There is nothing amoral about an amiable scholar being denied his humanity, a little girl suffering at the hands of a monster, or a desperately lonely man seeking a human connection. To the contrary, his works seem to demonstrate morality "at its best." Whereas Nabokov readily admits to the presence of parody, he denies the presence of satire. Satire, however, becomes necessary when we realize that the morality of Nabokov's novels transpires from the *tension* between parody and satire. This tension – this morality – becomes a crucial element that the reader "cannot unsee once it has been seen."[3] Nabokov's novels are abundantly "deceitful and complex," but this is precisely the reason why we must examine the details more closely, use our imaginations more forcefully, and read with much more empathy. To deny Nabokov's novels their morality is to deny ourselves an authentic experience of reading them. Nabokov speculated that, "one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel – and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride."[4] This work aims to be one piece of the ongoing reappraisal of Nabokov's literary oeuvre, arguing that, far from being

[3] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage - Random House, 1989) 310.
[4] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 193.

indifferent to his characters' fates, Nabokov ensures the reign of a just and moral order.

Before engaging in an analysis of individual novels, I must lay out the theoretical groundwork upon which I base my claims. First, I am going to briefly examine the nature of "the narrator" using concepts drawn from Gérard Genette. And second, I will outline a theory of satire and parody put forth by Ziva Ben-Porat, Seymour Chatman, and Linda Hutcheon. These three theorists have formed a sort of consensus regarding the definitions of parody and satire, which are often used colloquially and in passing, or attributed only vague and compounding definitions that fail to adequately differentiate one from the other.

Nabokov is famous (or perhaps infamous) for his narrative games, and the "narrator" game is among his favorites. Genette's concept of focalization can help us discover the nature of the narrator. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan notes, "Genette's treatment [of focalization] has the great advantage of dispelling the confusion between perspective and narration which often occurs when 'point of view' or similar terms are used."[5] Genette poses two questions in order to make this distinction: "who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative *perspective*?" and "who is the *narrator*?"[6] The role of focalizer corresponds to the first question. The role of narrator, the person who speaks, can either be the same character as the focalizer or a different one. If the narrator and focalizer are one in the same, we label this the "narrator-focalizer;" narratives with narrator-focalizers are focalized *externally*,

[5] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen, 1983) 71.
[6] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980) 10.

which is to say that the events of a story are focalized *on* a character rather than *through* one. When narratives are focalized through a character, the narrator and the focalizer are two different entities, and the narrating agent is called a "character-focalizer." Narratives that use a character-focalizer are focalized *internally*, or inside the represented events.

Genette introduces the terms diegetic and extradiegetic to clarify the difference between events occurring "inside" the narrative and those occurring "outside." The diegetic level is the level at which the main action of the narrative takes place; the extradiegetic level is the level at with the act of narrating takes place. Therefore, narrator-focalizers exist at the extradiegetic level and character-focalizers at the diegetic. This distinction is important because certain stipulations come with each type of narrator. One such stipulation is that narrator-focalizers have unlimited knowledge of the narrated world, whereas character-focalizers have limited knowledge, knowing only what they personally have access to.

Nabokov often manipulates these narrative conventions and thus toys with readers' expectations as well. He frequently presents a narrative in one way, only to reveal through the course of the novel that this is far from the case, prompting readers to reevaluate – and often reread – the entire novel. Alfred Appel describes the typical Nabokovian plot: "There are thus at least two 'plots' in all of Nabokov's fiction: the characters in the book, and the consciousness of the creator above it – the 'real plot' which is visible in the 'gaps' and 'holes' in the narrative."[7] Appel's use of the phrases "in the book" and "above it" corresponds to Genette's use of diegetic and extradiegetic respectively. These gaps and holes are clues that Nabokov gives readers,

with varying degrees of subtlety, to discover who is "in control" of the narrative: who decides what we see and how we see it.

The narrator of *Pnin* pretends to be a narrator-focalizer existing exclusively at the extradiegetic level, only to introduce himself into the diegetic level of the narrative at the end of the novel thus exposing his true nature as character-focalizer. When we realize that the narrator is in fact *in* the narrated world, we realize that he has something at stake, and readers are urged to reconsider the validity of all the information he presented as "true." In *Lolita*, Humbert exploits the discrepancy between the Humbert of the past through which the majority of the novel is focalized, and the Humbert of the present who narrates; he creates the *impression* that the narrating Humbert sincerely repents the crimes of the narrated Humbert in an attempt to encourage readers' sympathy and condonation of his horrible acts. In those two novels, the distance between narrator and narrative is deceptively minimized; in *Pale Fire*, however, this distance is deceptively exaggerated. There are two narrator-focalizers in *Pale Fire*: the author of a poem, who we are inclined to believe, and the author of the commentary, who dominates the narrative and of whom we are inclined to be skeptical. Through the gaps and holes of the narrative, however, we see that the discrepancy between these two narrator-focalizers is far less extreme than we had originally thought and, in fact, the two are quite closely aligned. The precise nature of the narrator is additionally important because, as I suggest, the parody of each novel is in the hands of the narrator.

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[7] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) xxvi.

Hutcheon suggests, "Overtly imitating art more than life, parody self-consciously and self-critically points us to its own nature."[8] This mirrors Appel's notion of the second level of the Nabokovian plot, at which the consciousness of the creator is visible. Hutcheon's suggestion of parody imitating art more than life introduces the key distinction she draws between parody and satire: parody is intramural, or within the boundaries of the text, while satire is extramural, or outside the boundaries of the text, entering into the realm of the social and moral. Both Hutcheon and Chatman draw on Ben-Porat's definitions of parody and satire:

> [Parody is] an alleged representation, usually comic, of a literary text or other artistic object – i.e. a representation of "modeled reality," which is itself already a particular representation of an original "reality." […]
>
> [Satire is] a critical representation, always comic and often caricatural, of "non-modeled reality," i.e., of the real objects (their reality may be mythical or hypothetical) which the receiver reconstructs as the referents of the message. The satirized original "reality" may include mores, attitudes, types, social structures, prejudices, and the like. [9]

Ben-Porat's phrase "modeled reality" corresponds to Hutcheon's notion of parody mimicking *art* more than life; and his use of "non-modeled reality" aligns with her idea of satire entering the realm of social and moral. In Nabokov's novels, the intramural nature of parody places it in the hands of the narrator, while the extramural satire is in the hands of the author. Therefore, the moral essence of each novel derives from Nabokov. Nabokov's own definitions of satire and parody echo that of the three

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[8] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 69.

theorists above: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game."[10] One of the three roles Nabokov assigns to writers is the teacher, to whom we turn "for a moral education," or a lesson.[11] And his works are replete with allusion ("inter-art discourse"[12]), and word games – both textually based characteristics.

Nabokov attributes a characteristic to Sebastian Knight that could equally be applied to him: "He used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion."[13] Nabokov suggests the inherent connection between parody and satire, a sentiment echoed by Ben-Porat: "Parody [is] the most effective tool by which to achieve satirical aims."[14] In its humor, parody brings to light – either through contrast or irony – the more serious realm of satire. It is a complex and meaningful interaction that necessitates the close and careful attention of readers. The parody of *Pnin* lies in the narrator V.V.'s portrayal of Pnin as a slapstick clown whose physical blunders are only exceeded by his verbal ones. However, V.V. also shows Pnin to be a person of remarkable emotional capability. The tension between these two versions of Pnin gives rise to the novel's satire: V.V. attempts to deny his ethical responsibility towards Pnin by reducing him to a caricature, but ironically endows him with reality and agency, allowing him to escape from clutches of V.V.'s fiction. The parody of *Lolita* lies in Humbert's extensive use of literary genres to

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[9] Ziva Ben-Porat, "Method in Madness: Notes on the Structure of Parody, Based on MAD TV Satires," *Poetics Today* 1:1/2 (Autumn 1979) *Duke University Press*, 4 April 2012 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772049> 247.
[10] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 75.
[11] "There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter." Nabokov emphasized the importance of the "enchanter" role, arguing that it was this role that predominated in the "major writer." *Lectures on Literature*, 15.
[12] One of the labels Hutcheon applied to parody: "Parody is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity; it is a form of inter-art discourse." *A Theory of Parody*, 2.
[13] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 91.
[14] Ben-Porat, 246.

create a fictional world through which he guides readers in an attempt to dictate our reactions and arouse our pity for him; the satire emerges through the "gaps and holes" of this world. Readers become aware that Humbert is attempting to solipsize Lolita. He represents her as his beautiful but *empty* creation and ignores her reality; when readers witness her reality – her pain and sadness, her pathos and compassion – we come to pity *her* and condemn Humbert. The parody of *Pale Fire* is in understanding Kinbote's commentary as a translation of Shade's poem that is simultaneously extreme *and* valid. Whereas in both *Pnin* and *Lolita* the satire emerged as a failure of the narrator's parody, the satire of *Pale Fire* results from the success of the parody: considering Kinbote's commentary as a translation opens our eyes to the subtle but significant parallels between the two works. Each novel asserts the ethical responsibility people have towards one another and the morality that is inherent in powerful and enduring art.

Nabokov asserts, "in first rate fiction 'the real clash' is between the author and the reader, rather than between the characters."[15] In denying the morality of his art, Nabokov is enacting this clash and posing a challenge to readers. For although Nabokov's morality is neither overt nor didactic, it remains ever-present. And like one of Nabokov's rare and beautiful butterflies, we must pursue this elusive morality: the "tingle in the spine"[16] fuels the chase, and we remain hopeful for the capture.

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[15] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 220.
[16] Nabokov urged his students to read not with their heart, but with their brain and spine: "The tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel." *Strong Opinions,* 41.

CHAPTER I

Pnin
A Paragon of Parody

While he was struggling to find a publisher who would leave *Lolita* intact, Nabokov needed some supplementary income – and in came Pnin. *Pnin* is Nabokov's second novel written in English, following *Lolita*, though the first published. It is composed of a series of stories about a maladroit Russian émigré scholar living in the world of American academia. These stories describe various misadventures of the protagonist, and together, form a sort of biography of Pnin told from the point of view of a "friend." Several chapters appeared originally in *The New Yorker* in 1953; in 1955, Nabokov compiled and edited them, adding several new chapters, and produced the charmingly comic, nostalgic, and tragic story of Pnin.

This distinct combination of comedy and tragedy can be explained through examining the nature of parody and satire in the novel. The parody of *Pnin* lies in the caricature of Pnin. V.V., the narrator, presents him as a comical creature characterized by his ideal baldness and spindly legs, whose English remains jarring and faulty despite having lived in America for over a decade. However, this is not the only side of Pnin that V.V. shows readers: Pnin also proves to be a remarkably compassionate man in spite of his tragic past. The satire emerges as a result of the tension between these two "Pnins," for V.V. can't quite decide how he wants to portray Pnin – either as someone who, shorn of his depth, has no human reality and therefore needs not be taken seriously, *or* as someone who is deeply, movingly humane and to whom V.V. has a moral responsibility. In addition to this complex

duality, Pnin is marked by his status as constant exile and outsider. In the novel's final chapter, however, Pnin victoriously appropriates that role and uses it as a means of escape from the vicious clutches of V.V.'s fiction.

Nabokov has often been asked about his creative process and he invariably gives the same answer: he does not start writing a novel until the entire story is developed in his head. It is interesting, then, that *Pnin* should have been written partially for economic reasons and not purely creative ones. It also seems unlikely that Nabokov envisioned the entirety of *Pnin* before writing as it was greatly altered between the time it was published in *The New Yorker* and then again as a novel.

When readers first meet Pnin, he is a professor in the Russian department at Waindell College. He is a respectable, though untenured, professor, and is well liked by the few students he has. Pnin's colleagues often define him by his faulty English and constant clashes with American life – he conducts a "passionate intrigue" with a washing machine and has to urgently return a book to the library for another academic who turns out to be himself. Among his compatriots, however, Pnin shines as an articulate scholar and graceful croquet player. He is still in love with his ex-wife, Liza Wind, though she was never truly in love with him. She was, however, deeply in love with an acquaintance of Pnin's whom we come to learn is the narrator. Despite all this, Pnin takes interest in her child, Victor, and develops a meaningful relationship with him. Pnin has never fully settled down, usually renting rooms in various houses near campus, but towards the end of the book he finds a place he wishes to buy. Unfortunately, the night of his house warming party, Pnin learns that his contract at Waindell is not to be renewed, and that he is to be replaced by a prominent Anglo-Russian writer. Again, this person turns out to be the narrator. After

refusing to take a position as an assistant to V.V., Pnin leaves – vanishing in the distance, "where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen."

Perhaps the most significant difference between the *New Yorker* version and the published novel is Nabokov's attitude towards Pnin. In a letter to a potential publisher in 1954, Nabokov explains, "Poor Pnin dies."[17] However, the book was published in 1957, and within that time period, Pnin became someone Nabokov greatly respected: "A man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and a staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love [, a man who] never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity."[18] Pnin changes from "not a very nice person" to someone Nabokov and readers alike come to care about. This alternation marks a crucial transformation, for Pnin is the moral center of the novel around which everything holds. As Pamela Hansford Johnson says in her review of the novel, "Without the sweetness, this book would be not much more than a first-class Third Programme comic strip. As it is, [Pnin is] a hero who is at one level absurd and is simultaneously endowed with dignity and moral grace."[19] Indeed, the distinct likeability and apparent simplicity of *Pnin* allowed several critics to label it the least Nabokovian of Nabokov's works.

Other critics, however, dismissed *Pnin* as an ill-composed series of loosely related stories. Howard Nemerov described it as "somewhat accidental,"[20] and Kingsley Amis spared no one in aligning it with a "tradition" of "limp, tasteless salad

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[17] Dmitri Nabokov, Matthew J. Bruccoli, eds. *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 143.
[18] Nabokov and Bruccoli, 182.
[19] Pamela Hansford Johnson, Rev. of *Pnin* by Vladimir Nabokov, *New Statesman*, 21 Sept. 1957. Reproduced in *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage,* Ed. Norman Page (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) 110.
[20] Howard Nemerov, Rev. of *Pnin* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Kenyon Review* Spring 1957. Reproduced in *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, Ed. Norman Page (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) 109.

of Joyce, Chaplin, Mary McCarthy, and of course Nabokov (who should have known better)."[21] But perhaps Nabokov did know better, and Kingsley Amis is unwittingly aligning *himself* with the tradition of Jack Cockerell, Laurence Blorenge, and V.V. in so readily dismissing our dear friend Pnin. Although composed *of* stores, *Pnin* is a cohesive novel whose formal unity is rooted in the tension between its parody and its satire.[22] Nabokov scoffed at the suggestion that *Pnin* was a mere series of stories: "All I know is that *Pnin* is not a collection of sketches. I do not write sketches."[23] If *Pnin* were solely a "collection of sketches," it is doubtful that readers would cultivate sympathy for Pnin, develop a sense of trust in the narrator, and ultimately care about Pnin's fate.

The parody of *Pnin* is located in Pnin as a character. Chatman describes parody as a product of the tension between "a known original" and "its parodic twin."[24] Pnin's "parodic twin" is the caricaturized version of him who is reduced to his clumsiness and faulty English. This picture of Pnin emerges *as* a caricature because readers also see his "original," who is a complex human being capable of love and forgiveness. However, that image of Pnin is shown only sporadically while the comical Pnin is repeatedly emphasized throughout. Pnin, then, is perceived like a stock character from a slapstick comedy who is a not only a parodic echo of himself, but also of the typical Russian, who speaks with heavily accented and error-laden

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[21] Kingsley Amis, Rev. of *Pnin* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Spectator*, 21 Sept. 1957. Reproduced in *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, Ed. Norman Page (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) 109, 111.
[22] The formal unity is also established through several recurring motifs. A well-established example of this is the squirrel, which makes appearances in Pnin's childhood bedroom, during his strange seizures, and at his house-warming party, among others. For a more in-depth analysis of the structural and thematic unity of *Pnin*, see Gennady Barabtarlo's article, "A Resolved Discord (*Pnin*)."
[23] Nabokov and Bruccoli, 179.

English, and the typical foreigner, who is constantly at war with the modern gadgets around him. Deprived of his interiority, Pnin appears like a clown who slips on banana peels and falls on tacks until the curtain is drawn and the show is over.

Pnin is introduced to readers as a veritable cartoon: "ideally bald" with an "apish upper lip, thick neck, and strong-man torso" supported by a "pair of spindly legs," which provide the platform for constant tripping, slipping, and falling. He nearly knocks over a game of Chinese checkers at the Clements'; is about to make a triumphant declaration in class when his chair falls out from beneath him; slips on black ice on his way to the library; and trips down the stairs when Victor visits, suffering back pain through the night. Despite the fact that V.V. does give us a head-to-toe picture of Pnin, we can only see a disjointed cartoon: not one complete individual, but rather a composition of choice parts. V.V. asserts that Pnin "epitomized the physique of old-fashioned intellectual Russia." It is precisely this non-individuality, this "epitomizing" description that marks Pnin *as* non-descript and thus a caricature. As Page Stegner points out, Pnin "is in certain respects an unquestionably comic character, a Chaplinesque recipient of custard pies who moves in jerks of indecision and confusion… he is a kind of pop-art cartoon."[25] He goes on to describe Pnin's daily life as "Quixotic-like attacks on the windmills of mechanization."[26] By turning to two well-known characters, first Chaplin and then Don Quixote, to characterize Pnin, Stegner reinforces the idea of Pnin's existence as a parodic echo of those before him. But more than in his body, the caricaturization of

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[24] Seymour Chatman, "Parody and Style," *Poetics Today* 22.1 (Spring 2001) *Duke University Press Online*, <http://poeticstoday.dukejournals.org/> 28.
[25] Page Stegner, *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: The Dial Press, 1966) 91.
[26] Stegner, 92.

Pnin is located in his mouth, which serves as a parody twice over: his physical tongue, teeth, etc. and his language.

Pnin's English is "a special danger area," and after quickly mastering a few colloquial phrases – "wishful thinking," "okey-dokey" – his progress drops off significantly. Physical descriptions of Pnin's mouth closely align his decaying teeth with his stunted English. His mouth is described as a veritable house of horrors, filled with "shocking teeth" and "an astonishing amount of pink upper-gum tissue [that] would suddenly pop out, as if a jack-in-the-box had been sprung" when he laughed. In an attempt to combat both his Russian teeth and his Russian idiom, Pnin swaps out his old teeth out for a set of bright and shiny American teeth. The haunted house is gutted and renovated into an "amphitheater" of dentures. Though more than an amphitheater, V.V. likens Pnin's mouth to three rings:

> The organs in the production of English speech sounds are the larynx, the velum, the lips, the tongue (that Punchinello in the troupe), and, last but not least, the lower jaw; mainly upon its overenergetic and somewhat ruminant motion did Pnin rely when translating in class passages in the Russian grammar or some poem by Pushkin. If his Russian was music, his English was murder.

A Punchinello is characterized by its clownishness, suggesting that both Pnin's mouth and his English are a circus act: a spectacle of slapstick, "Chaplinesque" comedy; a show that exists for the express purpose of being laughed at. And readers do readily laugh at Pnin's verbal blunders: pronouncing Joan as John, Mrs. Thayer as Mrs. Fire, whiskey and soda as viscous and sawdust, difficulty as "dzeefeecoolty," substituting "house heating soirée" for house warming party, and "shot" for fired. The list is long,

for V.V. harps on nothing more than Pnin's verbal vagaries. As Brian Boyd notes, Pnin's "every phrase in English is an unwitting joke."[27] To reinvoke the theatricality of the amphitheater, Pnin's mouth emerges as "a second little stage" upon which "a more refined tragicomedy occurs" that serves as a microcosm of Pnin's story as a whole: his inability to correctly speak English translates as an inability to correctly function as an American.[28]

With a few notable exceptions, Pnin's peers readily dismiss him based on his foreignness. When his job is in jeopardy, Hagen – Pnin's only ally at Waindell – tries desperately to secure a spot for him but can't even imagine someone else taking him on:

> Out of pure spite, Bodo was sure to lop off [the German Department, which employed Pnin], and Pnin, who had no life tenure at Waindell, would be forced to leave… The only departments that seemed flexible enough to [adopt him] were those of English and French. But Jack Cockerell…considered Pnin a joke.

Bodo, for no reason other than spite, would send him packing, and Cockerell doesn't need Pnin around to place him at the butt of every joke. Pnin is rendered useless to the French department *because* he speaks the language fluently, and Laurence Blorenge, the head of the department – who "disliked Literature and had no French" – felt that "Pnin was not fit even to loiter in the vicinity of an American college." He is probably the most qualified professor there for the job, but, as Hagen pithily observes, "The world wants a machine, not a Timofey."

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[27] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 275.
[28] Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts, "The Tongue, That Punchinello: A Commentary of Nabokov's *Pnin*," *Nabokov Studies* 8.1 (2004) 23.

The caricature of Pnin is epitomized in the novel's final chapter when Cockerell very literally parodies Pnin for V.V.: "Pnin teaching, Pnin eating, Pnin ogling a coed." Cockerell is *performing* Pnin, embodying him physically and linguistically, which, for him, is the totality of Pnin. And in some ways, this performance oddly parallels the novel as a whole, which can perhaps account for the criticism that *Pnin* is no more than a "series of sketches:" Pnin late for a lecture, Pnin renting a room, etc. Stephen Casmier articulates this sense of skepticism:

> The reader surmises that knowledge that the narrator has about Pnin must be second-hand and garnered through the mostly unreliable sources of Waindell. One of these is Jack Cockerell, a man who presents Pnin as both a freak and a caricature through an unending series of insidious imitations, a burlesque, less artful performance, perhaps, of the novel itself. Indeed, by the end of the novel, it becomes manifest that much of what the reader knows about Pnin could have been made up just so the narrator could flaunt his own, brilliant writing abilities. In essence, Pnin (the character) seems like a horrible translation, presented by a translator with a dubious relationship to his subject.[29]

The possibility that much of what we know *could* be made up is certainly disconcerting: there is no way of definitively knowing where to draw the line between the Pnin V.V. knows personally (for they *do* know each other) and the one he knows only through hearsay. But more important than actually drawing this line is the fact it's a difficult line to draw: the "freak" caricatured Pnin as presented through the "unreliable" window of Waindell is alarmingly similar to the Pnin that V.V. presents

to readers. V.V.'s method of narrating implies that he is an external narrator-focalizer, someone outside of the represented events, and so his perceptual window *should* be both reliable and easily distinguishable from that of internal characters. This difficulty, then, becomes problematic.

The satire emerges from the unexpected failure of the parody. In the final chapter of the novel, V.V. undoes himself in two ways: he admits to being a character within the novel *and* provides readers with the example of another character who parallels him in all the wrong ways. Importantly, Jack Cockerell does not provide a perfect parallel to V.V. because, unlike Cockerell, he has complicated feelings towards Pnin, including superiority but *also* guilt and admiration. By revealing his true status as character-focalizer, V.V. admits that he has a stake in the narrative. He is not passively and objectively observing Pnin but presenting us with a fragmented and often biased version of him. And by giving us the distasteful example of Jack Cockerell, he suggests the significant impact of his actions. Whereas Cockerell perpetuates the caricatured vision of Pnin to the people of Waindell, V.V. perpetuates this image to readers; and whereas Cockerell has no moral responsibility towards Pnin, V.V. *does*. But he manipulates his seemingly removed and authoritative position as narrator to dilute this responsibility.

An initial reading of *Pnin* creates the illusion that V.V. is an external narrator-focalizer. He manipulates narrative conventions and effectively convinces readers to read his narration as an objective account. The first page describes, in panoramic detail, a scene on a train in which readers are introduced to Pnin. The narrator gives us a piece of classified information: "Now a secret must be imparted. Professor Pnin

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[29] Stephen Casmier, "A Speck of Coal Dust: Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* and the Possibility of

was on the wrong train. He was unaware of it, and so was the conductor, already threading his way through the train to Pnin's coach." Our narrator has special access to Pnin's interiority: he knows that Pnin does not yet know he is on the wrong train. The additional information about the conductor suggests that our narrator can see multiple things happening simultaneously. V.V. creates the impression that he is outside of the represented events and therefore narrating at the extradiegetic level. He sprinkles in statements throughout the novel that suggest a certain surrender of control over the course of the narrative. He claims, "Had I been reading about this mild old man, instead of writing about him, I would have preferred him to discover, upon his arrival to Cremona, that his lecture was not this Friday but the next." He thus explicitly establishes himself as *observing* Pnin: the narrative is focalized *on* a character rather than *through* one.

As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan reminds us, when using the idea of focalization, the "purely visual sense" of the term point of view "has to be broadened to include cognitive, emotive and ideological orientation."[30] The perceptual facet of externally focalized narratives recognizes that the external focalizer has "at his disposal all the temporal dimensions of the story (past, present and future)."[31] Therefore, it doesn't seem odd for V.V. to have access to Pnin's past memories; especially intimate ones, such as the detailed account of young Timosha being cocooned by his mother after the first occurrence of his strange heart ailment. The psychological facet gives the narrator unrestricted knowledge; he is outside of the represented event, so again, it feels normal to readers for V.V. to indulge in scenes no one *inside* the world has

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Translation," *Nabokov Studies* 8.1 (2004) 72.
[30] Rimmon-Kenan, 71.
[31] Rimmon-Kenan, 78.

witnessed: "Presently all were asleep again. It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags." And finally, the emotive facet is associated with *objective* narration. Readers are inclined to believe what V.V. presents to them because we have learned to believe an external narrator-focalizer unless given very obvious reasons not to. And so all of the clues that *would* tip off readers to V.V.'s slippery narration – detailed scenes from Pnin's past that he couldn't possibly have witnessed, scenes in the narrated world that "nobody saw" – are rendered valid. But when V.V. describes his "first recollection of Timofey Pnin… on a spring Sunday in 1911," we may take pause: either *this* is a lie, or poor baby Timosha being cocooned by his mother is. If V.V. was *truly* a narrator-focalizer he couldn't have a "first recollection" of meeting Pnin at all because he would be *above* the fictional world, not in it. But he admits to this meeting, thus giving us the very obvious reasons to not trust him. When he literally arrives at Waindell in the novel's final chapter, a sort of reversal of circumstances occurs, bringing to surface the subtle yet poignant satire. V.V. has a real relationship with Pnin, but also tries to deny the moral implications of this relationship. He doesn't portray Pnin as *just* a caricature; he also shows readers a Pnin who is intelligent, sympathetic, and "real." Despite paralleling Jack Cockerell in his tendencies to bully Pnin, V.V. also provides a contrast to Cockerell in that he clearly has some level of respect for Pnin's humanity. But he chooses to make Pnin into a caricature regardless. Pnin's role as exile has been established many times over – from Russia, from his wife, from Waindell – and this caricaturization represents V.V.'s confused and half-hearted attempt to strip Pnin of his magnanimity and, in a sense, exile him from his own humanity.

Pnin's humanity, however, shines in his close relationships. Pnin is eternally faithful to his ex-wife Liza, allowing her to exploit this devotion countless times: "I offer you everything I have, to the last blood corpuscle, to the last tear, everything." He also fosters a relationship with Liza and her second-husband's son, Victor. And we are told about Pnin's first love, Mira Belochkin, who was killed in a concentration camp during World War II, and whose death causes Pnin to doubt humanity: "no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible." By including these examples of Pnin's emotional capacity, V.V. characterizes him as a warm soul who has suffered rejection and tragedy, but remains willing to forge human connections nonetheless. But there is also a hint of derision in this characterization. V.V. admits to being responsible for Liza's suicide attempt (only after which did she accept Pnin's marriage proposal): "In the result of emotions and in the course of events, the narration of which would be of no public interest whatsoever, Liza swallowed a handful of sleeping pills." He quickly moves on, noting that someone saved one of her "bad" poems from the ink she knocked over when losing consciousness. V.V.'s hasty and cruel narration suggests that he feels some guilt that he neither wants to dwell on nor share with readers. But it also seems to suggest an effort to distance of himself from Pnin. Whereas Pnin is emotionally vulnerable, V.V. is apathetic and *in*vulnerable. Pnin has close relationships, and V.V. scorns this intimacy. And here we feel the odd combination of admiration, guilt, and superiority V.V. feels for Pnin. Pnin is simultaneously the morally superior and the emotionally weaker being, someone who V.V. at some level wants to emulate but at another wants to reject.

Pnin notes, "whenever you were reduced to look something up in the English version, you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line that you remembered all your life from" the Russian version. Pnin seems to have suffered a similar fate: his grace, elegance, and personhood are all lost in translation. To echo Casmier, Pnin "seems like a horrible translation, presented by a translator with a dubious relationship to his subject." This dubiousness rises from the fact that V.V. is in a unique position in the novel to appreciate Pnin on both sides of this "translation:" Pnin as a Russian, who has a "verbal flow, teeming with idiomatic proverbs," and maneuvers gracefully on the croquet field; and Pnin as an American, whose English is "murder," and seems to fall down every staircase he encounters. In the Russian context, Pnin is neither the "typical Russian" nor the "typical foreigner," for both of those characterizations rely on the American context. As noted, Pnin is a respected figure among his compatriots, but in America, Pnin very literally fails to be understood.

Cockerell fails to understand Pnin more than anyone, but still V.V. assures us that he "impersonated Pnin to perfection." V.V. describes his impressions as "of course" centering on "the Pninian gesture and the Pninian wild English" (and, of course, these are also the two aspects of Pnin upon which V.V. bases his own parody). But after an entire evening of this entertainment, V.V. grows weary, wondering "if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule." And indeed, readers may extend this fate to V.V. After his long night of "laughs," V.V. seems to be haunted by the grotesque parodied Pnins floating around in his consciousness. He wakes up in the middle of the night with a "gasp"

from a nightmare in which he was "facing a firing squad," perhaps in a guilty dream reverberation of his arrival in Waindell marking Pnin's being "fired."

V.V. tries to deny Pnin his humanity by presenting him as a caricature, but he can't quite limit himself to this paltry portrait. He clearly feels some ethical responsibility towards Pnin, as demonstrated by his rapid and guilty confession regarding Liza and his inclusion of Pnin's tragic past, yet he tries to minimize this aspect at the same time by only mentioning it in passing and only revealing at the *end* of the novel that he actually knows Pnin. V.V. conveniently times his entrance into the novel at the exact moment of Pnin's departure in what seems like a guilty avoidance of him. The conflicted nature of his feelings towards Pnin manifests itself in a complex pairing of Pnins: Pnin the caricature is Pnin the exile – someone who is without depth and feeling, and therefore someone to whom V.V. has no moral duty; Pnin the real person is the Pnin that readers come to care about, and the one on whose behalf we protest when V.V. tries to deny him his humanity and exile him from the novel.

One thing V.V. can't exile Pnin from, however, is his pain, a sentiment that Pnin echoes to his friend Dr. Chateau: "Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?" Indeed, several critics have focused on the nature of pain in *Pnin*: Boyd suggests it is not coincidental that "Pnin" is only one letter shy of "pain;" Casmier characterizes Pnin as "a man in unrelenting, unforgettable and often unexpressed pain;"[32] and Stegner crowns the "greatest achievement" of *Pnin* as its "portrait of an unself-pitying victim whose victimization *matters*."[33] Pain is everywhere in Pnin. The pain caused by his physical blunders serves as a reminder of

[32] Casmier, 77.

the constant emotional pain that Pnin suffers as a constant exile. As Casmier explains, pain "comes attached to a body and resists control, abstraction, alienation, and expropriation."[34] Ironically, by attempting to reduce Pnin to someone whose entire nature is bodily – a slapstick clown – V.V. endows Pnin with an undeniable physicality, which in turn implies an undeniable sense of reality. At the same time, V.V.'s bodiless omnipresence and refusal to feel emotional pain denies *him* this very same reality. Indeed, Pnin emerges as by far the more "real" character. As Casmier also notes, "pain is fundamentally resistant to language."[35] Pnin's pain, then, makes *him* resistant to V.V.'s language. By subjecting him to so much painful humor, V.V. essentially gives Pnin agency to deny the authority of *his* words and to escape from his fictitious world.

It is known that concurrently with writing *Pnin*, Nabokov was teaching *Don Quixote*, another novel curiously occupied with the question of pain. Nabokov chastised Cervantes for treating his protagonist poorly, for his "collusion against and betrayal of his own character."[36] Interestingly, Nabokov seems to have almost fallen victim to a similar fate. As noted above, one of the most significant changes made between the *New Yorker* version of *Pnin* and the final published version was Nabokov's attitude towards Pnin. Though originally condemned to death, Pnin emerges as one of Nabokov's beautiful butterflies: "When I began writing *Pnin*, I had before me a definite artistic purpose: to create a character, comic, physically unattractive – grotesque, if you like – but then have him emerge, in juxtaposition to the so-called 'normal' individuals, as by far the more human, the more important,

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[33] Stegner, 97.
[34] Casmier, 76.
[35] Casmier, 72.

and, on a moral plane, the more attractive one."[37] Though it seems clear that Nabokov did not have this artistic purpose when he *began* writing *Pnin*, it did materialize through the course of writing. Nabokov, like readers, had to discover Pnin – to adjust his eyes to the darkness of Waindell and see Pnin's subtle but ever-present glow.

Nabokov also notes, "Don Quixote survives all effort to diminish and undo (in effect to translate) him into nothingness." Pnin, too, seems to survive all of V.V.'s efforts to relegate him to the realm of inconsequence; his attempt to "translate" Pnin as a joke unwittingly endows him with both reality and authority to defy *him*. Pnin thus emerges as the shining beacon of morality that the novel almost lacked when placed in V.V.'s slippery hands. Victor dreams Pnin as "his father, the King," boldly refusing to surrender the throne. "Abdication!" the King cries, "The answer is no. I prefer the unknown quantity of exile."[38] Pnin emerges as this *Solus Rex*, the King who would rather be exiled than surrender his dignity. Pnin's refusal of V.V.'s offer to be his assistant marks his *choice* of exile. Pnin ultimately defies V.V.'s status as controller of the narrated world and victoriously escapes from the clutches of his fiction into the distance, "where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen." V.V., on the other hand, is condemned to a static existence at Waindell, as suggested by the novel's nearly circular structure. The novel begins with Pnin on a train to lecture at the Cremona Women's Club with the right lecture, and ends with Jack Cockerell doing an impression of Pnin at the Cremona Women's Club discovering that he had brought the wrong lecture. This slight misalignment of stories

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[36] Fredson Bowers, ed. *Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Don Quixote* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 74.
[37] Nabokov and Bruccoli, 178.
[38] Though written two years before even the idea of *Pale Fire* came to Nabokov, this dream sequence seems to telepathically predict several elements of its plot.

suggests Waindell as a centrifuge of sorts, retaining what is dull, average, and cruel, and exiling all that is just, moral, and exceptional.

Perhaps one reason accounting for the assessment of *Pnin* as the least Nabokovian of Nabokov's works is that in many ways, Nabokov seems to offer this novel as a response to Cervantes, whom he admired as an artist, but deplored for his morality. In his lectures on *Don Quixote*, Nabokov went so far as to say, "The art of a book is not necessarily affected by its ethics."[39] In Nabokov's works, however, art and ethics are inseparable from one another. Pnin's escape at the end of the novel parallels Don Quixote's: "a literary hero losing gradually contact with the book that bore him… leaving his creator's desk and roaming space."[40] Nabokov offers the literary canon a protagonist who suffers at the hands of a cruel narrator, but who is loved and cared for by his author. Pnin "stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish, and gallant," indeed, "the parody has become a paragon."[41]

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[39] Bowers, *Lectures on Don Quixote,* 111.
[40] Bowers, *Lectures on Don Quixote,* 112.
[41] Bowers, *Lectures on Don Quixote,* 112.

CHAPTER II

Lolita
Mirror Games and Moral Games

Though published first, *Pnin* was written after *Lolita*, while Nabokov was still searching for a publisher. Therefore, Nabokov still had Humbert very much on the mind at the time of writing. Critics have observed that Pnin and Humbert seem to be variations of the same character: the émigré scholar. Whereas Pnin is warm soul who is rejected for his faulty English and grotesque appearance, Humbert is a cruel man whose movie star looks and impeccable turn of phrase earn him easy acceptance in America. And this odd choice of protagonist explains to a great extent the reason why it was so difficult for Nabokov to find a publisher: *Lolita* treats a character with extremely dubious morality. But Nabokov's own morality was called into question as well, for his failure to overtly condemn Humbert suggested, to many easily inflamed readers, a rather shady and lurking element of autobiography. Indeed, *Lolita* was both the novel whose subject matter Nabokov had to most ardently defend and whose "moral message" he had to most forcefully deny.

In the afterward to *Lolita*, Nabokov provides a rare comment in response to his critics, telling them to not judge *Lolita* as "didactic fiction," to not accept John Ray, Jr.'s "general lesson" to "apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world." He insists that *Lolita* has "no moral in tow," a sentiment which comports with his oft-quoted expressions of disdain for literature of social intent. From his point of view, the only thing enduring and important about literature is its *art*. Yet just after insisting upon the lack of a moral in the novel, Nabokov goes on to define his literary art in terms that suggest

that ethics are not so easily dismissed: "For me, a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm." By this definition, art and morality are hardly mutually exclusive; to the contrary, they are quite strongly implicated in one another. As Frederick Whiting points out, "[the first] three are qualities that, insofar as they are necessary to recognize oneself as part of a larger collective, regulate the ability to occupy a moral perspective at all."[42] And indeed, *Lolita* encourages readers to occupy this moral perspective.

Humbert parodically imitates several well established literary genres in order to both guide our reading of his text and to aid him in fabricating an abstract version of Lolita; however, his reliance on these genres betrays the weakness of his imagination. Through the "gaps and holes" of Humbert's fragile world, readers can see the radical disjointedness between Humbert's idealized "Lolita" and the real girl Dolores Haze. This tension gives rise to the novel's satire; Nabokov allows readers to see the difference between Humbert's "bad" art which rejects all ethical responsibility, and good art, which embraces humanity and morality.

In his preface to the "Annotated Lolita," Alfred Appel claims "many readers are more troubled by Humbert Humbert's use of language and lore than by his abuse of Lolita and law."[43] But, as I argue, the use of language and the abuse of Lolita are hardly extricable from one another. Humbert authors a world, and in the inverse of *Pnin*'s narrator V.V., he pretends to be part of his narrated world and mask his role at

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[42] Frederick Whiting, "'The Strange Particularity of the Lover's Preference': Pedophelia, Pornography, and the Anatomy of Monstrosity in *Lolita*," *American Literature* 70:4 (Dec. 1998) *Duke University Press Online*, 20 Mar. 2012 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2902393> 854-55.
[43] Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, xi.

the extradiegetic level of the narrative. Humbert would have us believe that he is writing a personal and true account of his story; however, it is a highly constructed account that guides readers through a calculated reading of him and his situation. The reversal of circumstances is therefore different for each narrator, but both entail consequences that counter their intentions.

The reversal of circumstances for Humbert is not as explicit as it is for V.V., as his is a much subtler manipulation of our expectations. Both "authors" use parody to construct a specific vision of their protagonist for readers: V.V. reduces Pnin to several caricatured characteristics and exaggerates them to provoke our laughter, and Humbert reduces Lolita to her nymphet characteristics and solipsizes her to induce our sympathy for *him*. Humbert never denies being the "author" of the text, but he presents it as an emotional recording more than as a narrative composed with the specific intention of making readers see *only* his side of the story. Whereas V.V. pretended to have nothing at stake, Humbert pretends to have *everything* at stake – Lolita, his love, his life.

But there are times at which Humbert's parodic narrative scheme seems to get away from him; having to rely on well-defined genres suggests a fundamental lack of imagination, which in turn implies a weak and fallible narrative structure. In these weak spots, Nabokov reminds us that *he* is Humbert's author, and uses the moral art of satire to expose Humbert's world *as* constructed and fictionalized. Nabokov invites us to see the real Lolita that Humbert's parody only partially covers. In the process, we see the real Humbert as well, who admits to disliking the real Lolita and to committing a series of awful crimes against her, for which he seems to have little, if any, remorse. All of this counters readers' own perceptions – Lolita proves both

likeable and pitiable – and this strikes a tension in the narrative. Nabokov offers readers a portrait of Lolita, replete with genuine art that captures more than just her physical beauty and seductiveness, to put Humbert's vision of her in stark relief. This contrast spurs a sense of skepticism of Humbert's vision; his solipsistic portrayal of Lolita fails to "transcend the page," and ultimately unsettles readers with its harsh incongruity from the picture we see of her.[44] Nabokov gives readers the opportunity to understand the difference between genuine art, and "bad" art, and ultimately to reach a condemnation of Humbert that extends beyond the one Humbert configures for us. As in *Pnin*, *Lolita'*s "moral" is not so much learned as a lesson, as it is experienced aesthetically. By invoking our own feelings of curiosity, kindness, and above all, tenderness for Lolita through his satire, Nabokov cannot be said to truly abandon the sphere of morality. Instead, by confronting the reader with a work of art whose full comprehension entails moving beyond Humbert's narrative aims, the reader arrives at a moral epiphany.

The inclusion of morality, then, may strike readers as an example of Nabokov contradicting himself. But a contradiction for Nabokov is often no more than two distorted mirror views of the same thing. On their first night together at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, Humbert finds himself in a veritable hall of mirrors: "There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bedtables, a double bed." Nabokov places Humbert in a world in which illusion, reflection, and reality are difficult to

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[44] Jessica J. Goddard, "Realizing and Imagining 'Aesthetic Bliss' In Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*," *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* 23:2 (2001) 22 Mar. 2012 < http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9209s0gd> 30.

discern from one another. Appel identifies "the attempt to transcend solipsism" as one of Nabokov's main themes.[45] For Humbert, this proves impossible; but for readers, who at times find themselves in a similar hall of mirrors, this transcendence is necessary. *Lolita* is most certainly a series of mirrors reflecting and refracting images countless times over, but Nabokov also provides us with the *key*, denoting which image is real and which is a distorted reflection. Nabokov describes *Lolita* as, "the composition of a beautiful puzzle – its composition and solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look."[46] And depending on the way readers look, we can find either the illusion of Lolita that Humbert provides, or the original of the reflected image, Dolores Haze. As Michael Wood argues, "she is what a reading finds, and I would say needs to find, in order to see the range of what the book can do."[47] And part of what the book can do is evoke a state of being for readers in which "art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm." When we discover the real Lolita through Nabokov's satire, we discover the both art of morality and the morality of art.

Nabokov began writing *Lolita* in 1950, and did not complete the novel until 1955, when it was published by Olympia Press of Paris, a company known for publishing both avant-garde and erotic literature. He had first turned to American publishers to publish this American saga, but the allegedly pornographic content caused them to somewhat nervously decline. Until 1958, *Lolita* could only be found in America passed hand-to-hand from those who had traveled abroad and brought

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[45] Alfred Appel, Jr., "*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8.2 (1967), JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207102> 205.
[46] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 21.

back copies of their own. Through a combination of controversy, critical acclaim, and popular praise and condemnation, the novel proved astonishingly successful when it was finally published in the US.

Lolita is a first person novel told in a number of styles and genres. The narrator, Humbert Humbert, is a middle-aged European scholarly man living in America and writing from prison; the text is allegedly to be presented to the jury, "not to save my head, of course, but my soul." Humbert introduces himself as a sufferer of "nympholepsy," or someone who is attracted to a special type of young girl he labels "nymphets." Lolita is one of these nymphets, and *Lolita* is the story of Humbert's obsessive and possessive "love" for her.

He moves to America where he is a lodger at Lolita's house. Humbert eventually marries Lolita's mother, Charlotte, in hopes of remaining close to Lolita, but Charlotte soon dies in a freak accident, and Humbert takes on the role of Lolita's official guardian. Soon after, he also takes on the role of her lover after a night at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, during which (according to Humbert) Lolita seduces him. The two then embark on a cross-country tour of America. After a year of drifting from one tourist site to the next, the two settle down in Beardsley, a college town where Humbert takes a job as a professor and Lolita attends a girls' school. She lands the lead in a play, *The Enchanted Hunters*, but the night before it opens, she tells Humbert she wants to take another road trip, only this time she gets to be the navigator. Humbert jumps at the opportunity to relive his "first circle of paradise." However, he quickly becomes convinced that he is being followed by a "Detective

[47] Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the risks of fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994) 117.

Trapp." Lolita, as part of a plan with this man, escapes from Humbert, leaving him heartbroken and vengeful.

After several lost and lonely years, Humbert receives a letter from Lolita asking for money. Humbert arrives at her house to find a pregnant and married Dolly Schiller, who is trying to get out of debt and move to Alaska with her husband. Before giving her the money, Humbert asks for the name of the man who took her from him; she tells him it was Clare Quilty, the author of *The Enchanted Hunters*, a nympholept like Humbert, and above all, the man who Lolita actually loved. Humbert asks Lolita if she will leave her husband and come with him; she declines, he gives her the money and leaves by himself, intent on finding Quilty and exacting his revenge once and for all. He arrives at Quilty's house only to enact a comical murder scene, killing Quilty but leaving Humbert unsatisfied. He quickly winds up in jail, and soon after finishing *Lolita*, he dies, shortly followed by Lolita, who dies in childbirth in Alaska.

Contrary to the accusations thrown by volatile readers, Nabokov did not hesitate to label Humbert "a vain and cruel wretch who managed to appear 'touching.'"[48] Nor did he feign ambivalence towards Lolita: he ranked her second among the "people he admired most" (Pnin, another "courageous victim," was first).[49] Though Nabokov claims to have written *Lolita* solely "for the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty," he seems to have another motive: to release Lolita from the clutches of Humbert's fiction and embrace her in the "pleasurable afterglow" of his own.

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[48] Wood, 107.

Although the list of parodied forms is extensive in *Lolita*, we can isolate four that are most important for our purposes: the confessional, the diary, the detective narrative, and the romance.[50] Humbert uses the conventions of each of these genres to highlight a certain aspect of his narrative and to suggest certain reactions on the part of readers. He jauntily warns of us his "fancy prose style," but also often invokes our participation in the creation of the text in an attempt to implicate us in his crimes. Through mimicking traditional genres, Humbert creates a manuscript that is both familiar and foreign to readers; in an attempt to dictate our reactions, he provides us with a literary analysis of his own text contained within it.

On the first page of John Ray, Jr.'s "Preface" he informs readers of how he came to possess the manuscript of *Lolita*: "'*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male,'* such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it perambulates." Though *Lolita* was chosen, readers are told that an alternate title of the novel is a "Confession," giving readers their first clue on how to read *Lolita*. Confessionals typically reveal something hidden and shameful, and it is this revelatory quality upon which the authenticity and importance of the genre rests. Humbert "confesses" to readers his true nature as a sufferer of nympholepsy. He believes that no one but "a madman or an artist" could possibly understand his circumstances, yet attempts to describe them: "I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen

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[49] Boyd, 237.
[50] For a definition outlining the conventions of each genre, I have consulted the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets.'" Humbert uses a pseudo-scientific tone to present "nympholepsy" as an authentic affliction, thus rendering his "desires" not *normal*, but acceptable. He also abdicates responsibility. These nymphets "reveal themselves" to Humbert; he is just a passive victim. But he is also a victim of his past. Humbert "confesses" that there was a precursor to Lolita: "All I want to stress is that my discovery of [Lolita] was the fatal consequence of that 'princedom by the sea' in my tortured past." Humbert spends the first several chapters of his confessional describing Annabel, whose physical love he was cruelly thwarted from attaining when he was a young boy. He suggests that had there been no Annabel, there would never have been a Lolita.

After confessing his disease and thus implying that he has no choice but to love Lolita, he also confesses the alleged inner turmoil this caused him. Humbert tries to justify himself and convince readers that he did as much as he could to retain self-control. The night he and Lolita become lovers at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, Humbert drugs her so that he can (according to his logic) have his way with her without causing significant psychological damage: "I was still firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude. Restraint and reverence were still my motto." Though afflicted, though tempted beyond all reason, Humbert presents himself as a man of principle. He is compelled to commit these treacherous acts, but he will at least commit them with a set of rules and morals. Even while admitting to his guilt, he tries to convince us of his innocence: "The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonie of poets – *not* crime's prowling ground."

He invokes his role as poet and artist to deny the accusation of crime and to imbue his disturbing actions with the loftier purpose of art.

However, the very act of denying criminality strongly implicates Humbert's actions *as* criminal. Throughout the novel, Humbert constantly castigates himself as Humbert the Terrible, Humbert the Horrible, Humbert the Hound, "Idiot! Triple Idiot!" and beast, maniac, and pervert many times over. Humbert recalls devious threats he concocted to keep Lolita in submission "with the deepest moan of shame," but also admits that he *used* them to successfully "terrorize" her nonetheless. During a fight in Beardsley, Humbert grabs Lolita by the wrist forcefully: "It was a strident and hateful scene. I held her by her knobby wrists and she kept turning and twisting in this way and that, surreptitiously trying to find a weak point so as to wrench herself free at a favorable moment, but I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly for which I hope my heart may rot." Humbert describes his actions and claims to feel horribly about them, to regret *having* to act in such a way, and again shirks responsibility by bemoaning how ill tempered Lolita *forced* him to be such a wretch. Humbert berates himself to the point of provoking readers' sympathy. A common trope of *Lolita* criticism is articulated by Brian Boyd: "[Humbert] confesses frankly to unequivocally vile behavior, even castigates himself as a monster, yet somehow almost inveigles us into acquiescing in his deeds."[51] Humbert's attempt to lure readers in to complicity, to sympathizing with him, is not without some level of success. He punishes himself to an extent that makes our reproaches seem superfluous, and we may be inclined to bite our tongues. Humbert parodies the confessional, however, by providing himself with his own punishment, for what *he*

[51] Boyd, 227.

considers his crimes, before he is even through confessing and thus rendering readers' participation unnecessary. While repentance is merely the fictional goal of his manuscript, but Humbert presents it with such seeming vigor that we are inclined to believe him.

Another "claim to truth" is presented through the diary mode, the most personal literary form. Diaries can be "addressed to a reader other than the diarist, ranging from confidantes to the general public." Humbert conflates these two categories when he addresses readers: he calls us his "Bruder;" invokes our cooperation ("I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay"); and even confesses to his dependence on us ("Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me."). Through all these personal appeals, Humbert brings readers into the story and makes us feel close to him. Reading Humbert's "diary" enacts an intimate dialogue in which we are perhaps unwitting participants, and which in turn creates empathy. Humbert makes himself more understandable to readers, encouraging us to accept him as ultimately *human* rather than as a monster.

For although he committed these horrible acts, Humbert strategically inserts passages of remorse. The diary form can include long stretches of narrated past, which allow for the "reformed," narrat*ing* Humbert of the present to comment on the monster, narrat*ed* Humbert of the past. From time to time, Humbert tells readers how deeply he regretted this or that interaction with Lolita (such as the sleeping pills incident at the Enchanted Hunters), but we are still most often confronted with the Humbert of the narrated time, who *is* quite monstrous: "It was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's sates of mind while comforting my own base self." The contrast between the two is notable, and perhaps Humbert is trying to suggest the

extent to which he has changed and insist that he does truly regret that past self. Mimicking the diary form to make his writing appear as though void of intention, Humbert creates an atmosphere of spontaneity, telling us that he almost wrote "frinstance" instead of "for instance," and that he is "writing under observation." The diary form leads us to a reading of our relationship with Humbert as natural, personal, and intimate – perhaps on some level akin to the relationship between he and Lolita, suggesting to us that he *is* capable of closeness and humanity.

But, of course, he is also capable of murder. On the very first page, Humbert tells readers: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." We know the perpetrator, but are not clued in to the crime until the end of the story: the traditional "Whodunit?" plot is inverted. Humbert claims that "it is easy for [the reader] and me to decipher *now* a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues." *Lolita* is not an "honest mystery story" by any means. Throughout the novel, we play a game with Humbert trying to solve the mystery of who, exactly, is his victim. He toys with our expectations, leading us down several stray paths, one of which leads to Lolita herself. One of Humbert's many nicknames for Lolita is Carmen, of Mérimée's novel, who is killed by her lover. When he visits her as pregnant Dolly Schiller, toting his gun, Humbert tells readers, "I could not kill *her*, of course, as some have thought," and again, when saying his goodbye to her, "Then I pulled out my automatic – I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did." Indeed, we may have supposed that, considering the substantial amount of "clues" pointing towards that ending. And without a doubt, Lolita *is* Humbert's victim; but Humbert uses the detective plot line give that label to Quilty.

Humbert admits to being the perpetrator of a crime, but through an inversion of the traditional plot (a "detective trap"), he also casts *himself* in the role of detective and *Quilty* in that of criminal. The main action of a detective story revolves around the investigator's attempt to solve the crime and bring the criminal to justice; though Humbert claims to not believe in the death penalty, this is exactly what he imposes on Quilty. Humbert poses himself on both the receiving and giving end of justice, and in both cases, he is the arbiter. However, in the traditional detective story, "the final arbitration on moral issues thus belongs to the authors and readers." Readers are, once again, deeply involved. But, also once again, Humbert seems to dictate our responses to us. He tells readers, "had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges." This is probably not what readers would have given, but we hadn't really thought about sentencing him at all. And if Humbert's strategies are working, we will probably feel inclined to be lenient. Humbert's cleverly structured plot suggests that while he may be a criminal, he is a repentant one, which somehow makes it feel as though he isn't *so* bad. His criminality is also somewhat mitigated by the fact that Humbert seems to be motivated by love, perhaps the truest and most noble of pursuits.

The romance plot is the driving force of *Lolita*, "light of my life, fire of my loins." For Humbert, the idea of the "love conflict," central to the romance genre, takes on multiple meanings as he is actively in conflict with many forces: he has to appease Charlotte, deter and ultimately revenge Quilty, bear Lolita's capricious moods, overcome society's objections, and suffer through his own endless castigations as Humbert the Horrible, the Terrible. In some sense, the story of *Lolita* is the story of Humbert overcoming these forces and realizing his "true love" for

Lolita. For despite all these reasons to forget his love and move on, Humbert instead embraces it to the fullest and gets lost in his own paradise.

Like romances from every era, Humbert's story takes places in "idealized, imaginative and often mythical setting." Those moments at the Haze house in which Humbert and Lolita are together are often described as a sort of Eden; he first discovers her lounging in a lush garden, and Lolita innocently plays with an "Eden-red apple" while sitting on Humbert's lap, leading him to "the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known." Humbert and Lolita fully become lovers in the "pale palace of the Enchanted Hunters," and their road trip is set in a land of "Chateaubriandesque trees," of "those painted oilcloths which were imported from America in the old days to be hung above washstands in Central-European nurseries, and which fascinated a drowsy child at bed time with the rustic green views they depicted;" there might be "Claude Lorrain clouds inscribed remotely into misty azure," or a "stern El Greco horizon, pregnant with inky rain." Rather than root his descriptions in observation, he turns to great artists whose dramatic visions of reality correspond to his own. In his romanticized world, he is "*beyond happiness.*" Humbert presents himself as a true romantic, so rapturously in love that he is oblivious to all things outside of his dream world. Humbert, in essence, convinces readers that he truly loves Lolita.

At the end of the novel, he lays claim several times to the depth and purity of his love: "And I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. … I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed,

still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine." Humbert styles himself as the ultimate romantic, and many readers and critics alike respond to Lolita as first and foremost a love story. We should believe in the truth of his love by virtue of the trials he overcomes in order to pursue it, and the fact that, even after Lolita has married and is pregnant with another's child, he still stands by his love.

But the romance is, of course, a parody. A significant amount of the way readers interpret *Lolita* rests on whether we believe his "epiphany" of true love at the end of the novel to be genuine or contrived for the sake of convenience and believability. In my reading of *Lolita*, Humbert's epiphany is unfortunately of the latter category. He does not realize he loves Lolita, but merely realizes that he has truly lost her, and never really had her, which strikes a painful chord within him and causes him to protest. In this reflection, Humbert vainly attempts to exert his control over Lolita, perhaps one final time. He dwells on her characteristically nymphet qualities ("still auburn and almond") and emphasizes the continuity, the things about his Lolita that are "still" the same. Despite her dramatic and irrefutable departure from the "Lolita" of her past, Humbert seems to demand that the old Lolita still exist by evoking her in terms of her solipsized and immortal ideal. Even in claiming his "true" love, Humbert can't stray from harping on the same few possessive chords ("still Carmencita, still mine"). All his cries of change, of loving *this* Lolita quickly deteriorate into the repetitive and grating sounds of a broken record, which only reinforce his preference for *that* Lolita. But he also realizes that in order to obtain readers' acquiescence, we must believe that he truly loved her. And so Humbert plays the part of the romantic who is nostalgic for *love* rather than sooty-lashes.

The parody in *Lolita* is easily summarized as a "parody of literary forms," but this far from captures the intense effect it has on the experience of reading *Lolita*. Humbert mimics a number of well-established and essentially moral literary forms to construct a discursive text that presents as genuine but is actually steeped in intent. He takes advantage of the malleability and expectations of each form, creating a complicated text that counts on the assumptions of the learned reader. But what Humbert presents as truth is actually his slanted version of a two-sided story. Through the sheer literariness of Humbert's text, readers can see that Humbert's preoccupation with art *as* art is intense and exclusionary of other artistic principles. His "aesthetic bliss" is entirely devoid of morality and thus represents a sharp division from the bliss Nabokov envisions for himself and readers.

Another important suggestion put forth but the use of multiple literary genres is that Humbert fundamentally lacks imagination – the imagination necessary to create real and genuine art. Nabokov points out, "'badness' is in fact the lack of something rather than a noxious presence," and even goes on to specify, "Criminals are usually people lacking in imagination."[52] Humbert is indeed a criminal, and his "badness" results from his inability to perceive or acknowledge Lolita's reality. He must defer to common literary tropes and well-defined narrative arcs to create his vision of her. As a result, this vision is faulty and fragmentary. As in *Pnin*, the narrator's parodic games fail and expose a fundamental fissure in his world. Humbert manages despite himself to include snippets of Lolita's realness that lead readers to a judgment of her that differs significantly from his own, as someone who is both likeable and pitiable rather than spoiled and irrationally morose. We are reminded

that while Humbert is the author of the text, Nabokov is his author. Nabokov denies Humbert the last word on the real Lolita, and gives readers a chance to reach their own conclusions about Humbert and Lolita, which ultimately overturn those Humbert wants us to find.

As Michael Glynn suggests, "Our narrator's exuberant language does not so much reflect an existing reality as construct a recherché counter-reality."[53] Humbert presents a world to readers that is only tangentially related to the "real" world, only a distorted reflection of reality. The Lolita that Humbert presents exists exclusively in this distorted mirror, as the centerpiece of his solipsistic artwork, and ignores the real girl Dolores Haze almost entirely. In his counter-reality Humbert casts himself as a "madman and an artist." And it is this role of artist that he seems to take particularly seriously: his job is the creation of beauty. Humbert takes this to an extreme, to the point of prioritizing beauty over the morality inherently involved in his actions.[54]

Humbert suggests several times that he is responsible for Lolita's existence, that she is his own creation. On the very first page of Humbert's narrative, he speculates, "There may have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain girl-child." Not there would have been no Dolores Haze, but no Lolita, no obsessive dream refraction of Dolores Haze.[55] Humbert believes that this Lolita belongs to him: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, engulfing her,

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[52] Fresdson Bowers, ed. *Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 376.
[53] Michael Glynn, *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 100.
[54] Goddard, 6.
[55] Wood, 119.

floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own." Humbert suggests that "his" Lolita is not the same as "she," as Dolores Haze, and furthermore, that *his* is above ("floating somewhere between me and her") and beyond the other. Humbert has taken a real girl and turned her into an abstraction, to something that is empty ("having no will, no consciousness") save for what Humbert gives her: an existence via his art. Humbert acts the role of God in his world created by his own linguistic artfulness and attempts to deny Lolita the basic humanity that she deserves. He describes Lolita as "safely solipsized." Coining the verb, Humbert gives himself agency to take Lolita's away.

In a contemporary review, Joseph Gold argues, "Nabokov deliverately [*sic*] plays down Lolita – it is not her story. Lolita has no soul, no identity."[56] Here I would replace Nabokov with Humbert, and the first "Lolita" with Dolores Haze. Humbert tries desperately to play down the real girl, because the story he is writing is not *her* story. "Lolita has no soul, no identity," because Humbert has confined her existence to his fantasy world. Dolores Haze, of course, has both a soul and an identity, but Lolita is Humbert's selective and idealized version of that girl and she needs neither. Humbert acknowledges the odd and, for him, frustrating duality he imposes on Lolita: "I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew that she would not be forever Lolita. She would be thirteen on January 1… The word 'forever' referred only to my own passions, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood… *that* Lolita, *my* Lolita, poor Catullus would lose forever." Again, in this passage, "she" refers to Dolores Haze, and there is a certain ring of disdain accompanying the word; Humbert

[56] Joseph Gold, "The Morality of *Lolita*," *Bulletin*, *British Association for American Studies*, New Series, No. 1 (Sept. 1960) *JSTOR*, 10 Mar. 2012 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553489> 53.

can't even bring himself to address Dolores directly, but passes over her like one does a distasteful plate of food, heading straight for dessert instead. Humbert gorges his sweet tooth on the product of his own imagination and, as he suggests, of his own physical body, "the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood." Humbert negates Lolita's body by grounding her physicality in his own, leaving her essence to entwine with his and her image to float to the realm of idolatry.

The tragedy of *Lolita* lies in the fact that Lolita the symbol is imposed on Dolores the girl, and the reality of the latter is sacrificed for the beauty of the former. After spending several chapters describing the general attitude of hopelessness into which Lolita fell, Humbert dejectedly complains that Lolita would prefer a "Hamburger" to a "Humburger," and that she didn't get his "wistful joke" calling her "My Frigid Princess." Nonetheless, he maintains his perfect happiness:

> Oh, do not scowl at me, reader, I do not intend to convey the impression that I did not manage to be happy. Reader must understand that in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*. For there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet. It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity. […] I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise – a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flame – but still a paradise.

Humbert admits that his happiness has little to do with Lolita; rather, it comes from "fondling *a* nymphet." He does not even use the typically possessive "*my* nymphet," but leaves the role curiously open, perhaps implying that it *is* specifically Lolita who is responsible for the hell-flames. Her blatant unhappiness, the hell she lives in daily, is only a mere reflection in Humbert's paradisiacal sky. Framed in such a light, his

professions of love seem hollow. His "true love" for Lolita has more to do with his true love of nymphets than of her. By casting her in this empty role as mere place filler, Humbert denies any ethical responsibility to consider the real girl. But despite Humbert's wishes, a real Lolita does exist *outside* of his fantasy world. As Boyd points out, "All his adult life Humbert has prepared plans in which others play a passive role he assigns them – only to find that they are as real as he is, and have plans of their own."[57]

Lolita may be solipsized, but Dolores is not. And her reality proves distasteful to Humbert because the real Lolita has a problematic relationship with the aestheticized version of her. After Charlotte dies, and Humbert and Lolita spend their first night at the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert becomes both Lolita's lover *and* her parent. While Humbert relishes in fulfilling the former role, he despises the latter, for it makes him see Lolita in light comparable to that in which Charlotte saw her: a bratty and moody teenager.[58] During their first road trip, Humbert laments Lolita's need to stop at every novelty shop, at every gas station that advertises cold drinks: "Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth – these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things. … She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster." Of course, this description amounts to nothing more than a completely normal twelve year old, but Humbert finds himself disappointed when he sees this side of her: "Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat. I was not really quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement griping, her sprawling, droopy,

[57] Boyd, 250.

dopey-eyed styles, and what is called goofing off." Just as Humbert often credits himself with ennobling Lolita by his love, he credits Lolita ("when she chose") with lowering herself to the repelling level of average and commonplace. Humbert, though enthralled with his "abominably desirable" Lolita, is greatly disappointed by the real girl who he can't quite solipsize, who won't conform to the image he has created for her.

However, from the limited picture readers are given of the "real" Lolita, she appears to be quite likable. She has a "sharp and witty mind," calling the car "sort of purplish around the gills," supplying Humbert with the word "incest," and parodying his pretentious language: "Was the corroboration satisfactory?"[59] She is also a deeply thoughtful child as Humbert discovers when he overhears Lolita say to a friend, "You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own." Lolita, we are reminded, is a girl who has faced tragedy and has to deal with complicated thoughts and feelings about life and death completely on her own. She could never talk to Humbert about these things, both because that isn't the nature of their relationship and because he probably wouldn't listen anyways. Lolita is tragically alone for much of the novel. As Ellen Pifer points out, "One of the most poignant effects of the novel is that despite the relentless regularity with which Humbert thrusts himself, literally and figuratively, upon his 'nymphet' during their two-year cohabitation, he and Lolita remain virtual strangers – distant, mutually uncomprehending, and painfully isolated."[60] Humbert does not know Lolita outside of the carnal sense, and so his vision of her is limited to the physical. But the fact that

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[58] Boyd, 236.
[59] Boyd, 237.
[60] Ellen Pifer, "*Lolita*," *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov,* Ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995) 308-9.

Humbert can't see her does not mean that Nabokov and readers can't either; and in fact, beyond seeing her witty humor, we are offered several poignant glimpses of Lolita's emotional reality that provide a powerful contrast to the brat Humbert would have us see.

In several passages, Humbert retrospectively admits to witnessing several scenes in which Lolita's utter desolation and pain were all too apparent. He recalls "the day, during our first trip – our first circle of paradise – when in order to enjoy my phantasms in peace I firmly decided to ignore what I could not help perceiving, the fact that I was to her not a boy friend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn." Humbert is simultaneously self-deceptive and self-accusatory. He *knows* that he neglected Lolita in order to preserve his "first circle of paradise." He knows what a monster he was to her, and also knows that he made a conscious decision to *ignore* it. As much as Humbert tries to shun reality and live only in his fantasy world, he can't keep the two entirely separate: reality infiltrates his fiction. Humbert reminisces about another day when he "happened to glimpse from the bathroom, through a chance combination of mirror aslant and door ajar, a look on her face… that look I cannot exactly describe… an expression of helplessness so perfect that it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity." Humbert would never have looked, but a "chance combination" caught him unaware, and *made* him see Lolita's desperation. Humbert "cannot describe" the look because moral responsibility does not register with him, and he can't understand the ethical impetus of such a view. While we want to rush in and comfort Lolita, Humbert can only detachedly admire the exceptional beauty of Lolita's misery. He admits, "I catch myself thinking today… [of] her sobs in the night

– every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep." Humbert "catches" himself doing something wrong; he is admitting to the presence of a moral responsibility that he neglected to act upon. So caught up in his own aesthetic bliss, Humbert allows all sense of moral integrity to disintegrate into nothingness, to disappear from his view – but not quite from ours.

In his retrospection, Humbert is not remorseful of how horrifyingly wrong he treated Lolita, but how much pain *he* had to feel, and has to feel now in looking back. Humbert laments that he was not Lolita's "boy friend, not a glamour man." He admits, "there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller." He does not consider that it was hell to *live* it for Lolita, and we think again of his paradise, only slightly marred by hell-tinted skies. He seems to admit, on some level, to his rejection of the real girl by addressing this admission to Dolly Schiller. It was "she" who felt angry and helpless, not Lolita, for while Lolita was safely solipsized, Dolly Haze was left behind. But for the most part, Humbert still forcefully denies her reality. He has a pseudo-epiphany about his actions, but denies their implication for Lolita and focuses instead on his own pain:

> Unless it can be proven to me – to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction – that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven to me (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art.

Despite the fact that Humbert, as he is "now, today" acknowledges his crimes against Dolores Haze, he only wants it to "not matter" so that *his* misery can be treated. But, as he says, such a thing can't be proven because it absolutely does matter that he deprived Lolita of her childhood. And so Humbert is left with the treatment of "the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art." But rather than "palliative" and "articulate," Humbert's art is myopic, disjointed, and damning. His reasons for composing his manuscript are entirely self-indulgent. He does not do it to for vindication, as he would have it seem in his parody, but to heal his own wounds and to immortalize he and Lolita together; to relegate his own existence, along with Lolita's, into an abstract solipsistic realm devoid of moral consequence.

Despite Humbert and V.V.'s best efforts, readers become aware that the vision they are presenting to us and telling us as real, is actually selfishly motivated. But while V.V. admits to entering the narrative, Humbert inadvertently undoes himself. He presents Lolita as an empty vessel of beauty and attraction; when he openly admits to her reality, it is as a shallow and capricious child. Unknowingly, however, he also shows her to be surprisingly real, complex, and capable of remarkable pathos. Contrary to his intentions, Humbert enlists readers as Lolita's allies against him. When he visits her as Dolly Schiller, she tenderly calls Humbert "honey," and even apologizes: "Oh, don't cry, I'm so sorry I cheated so much, but that's the way things are." Lolita *had* to cheat to escape Humbert's game, and we are glad she did, for his game was vicious and cheating is the only chance she ever had at liberation. Unlike Pnin, Lolita does not have a victorious escape at the end of the novel, and her death in childbirth to a stillborn baby suggests that Humbert's cruelty extends beyond his

grave, that the destruction of Lolita's childhood has lasting repercussions. And so our condemnation of him is lasting as well.

During Humbert's frustrations with Detective Trapp, he reluctantly admits defeat: "In one thing he succeeded: he 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 supportive hope – if I may use such a term in speaking of fury, desolation, horror and hate – that he might give himself away next time." Perhaps one could attribute this infinite skill to Nabokov, who never betrays his presence in *Lolita*. Rather than directly insert himself into the narrative as he did in *Pnin*, Nabokov retains the position of "an anthropomorphic identity impersonated by me."[61] Ultimately, Nabokov doesn't do anything but allow Humbert to undo himself. Nabokov merely turns Humbert's own demoniacal game against him by reflecting the image Humbert projects back onto him and showing readers where the two don't quite line up; where reality and fantasy perhaps briefly meet, but don't correspond. Nabokov's mirror image exposes Humbert's attempt at an aesthetically blissful realm as essentially corrupt art, supplied its substance by "fury, desolation, horror and hate." Humbert manipulates and strips what is beautiful about art, its connective tissue *linking* imagination and reality, and leaves behind an empty and disturbing creation void of any humanity.

Nabokov ardently denies that *Lolita* has a "moral in tow" because he does not want to deny *Lolita* her totality like Humbert does. Nabokov wants readers to truly see her, to cipher all the mirrors, to follow the unraveling of each game, and not dictate our reading. Nabokov explained to an interviewer, "I can't find any so-called

[61] Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974) 11.

main ideas…in my novels, or at least none that would be expressed lucidly in less than the number of words I used for this or that book."[62] The morality of *Lolita* is the book itself, and one must read it to discover it. "Art is difficult," Nabokov said, "if the reader has to work in his turn – so much the better."[63]

[62] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 117.

CHAPTER III

Pale Fire
Pity is the Password in Textural Translation

Pale Fire, published in 1962, has been both praised as "the most perfect novel ever written," and rejected on the basis of its unreadability.[64] It is a most difficult novel, but, as many critics have pointed out, every effort proves fruitful. As one critic has eloquently argued, "'The human relationships within this world are far more tenderly imagined' than we have believed… and the world, far from being inscrutable and obscure, rewards our curiosity and our every investigatory effort. And we begin to understand the Nabokovian universe as bountiful and nurturing rather than chilly and unkind."[65] Though well known for his word games, illusion, and sleight of hand, Nabokov does not leave his readers empty handed with *Pale Fire*; he ensures the discovery of a marvelous poem, a magical world, and an unexpected harmony between the two.

Many critics see *Pale Fire* as a warning against the dangers of "bad criticism" and the over-eager scholarly mind. In this chapter, by contrast, I will argue that *Pale Fire* offers readers two versions of a unified human tale: the one, a realist poem, the other, a fanciful prose response. While many readers are quick to accuse Kinbote of stealing a "pale fire" from Shade's powerful sun, the novel ultimately demonstrates that each artist burns brightly in his own right. The apparent tension between Shade's "genuine" art and Kinbote's faulty academic pursuits pales in comparison to the subtle but powerful resonances between the two. Kinbote's seemingly unreliable

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[63] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 115.
[64] Boyd, 425.

commentary is legitimated by a theory of translation that underpins the text. Translation, then, emerges as an ethical mode that should be understood not as a form of appropriation, but as a form of amplification and communication. Together, the two parts of the novel represent a dialogue between artists on the nature of the human condition, which is marked by isolation and loneliness – the very conditions that bind Shade and Kinbote. Nabokov parodically subverts our expectations of the *apparatus criticus* and encourages us to dwell on what, precisely, a commentary should do and how it should relate to its "original."

Seymour Chatman reminds us that etymologically, the prefix para- means both "against" and "along side of," and it is in this sense that we can understand Kinbote's translation as a parody.[66] It simultaneously goes against our expectation of what a translation should be and adheres to legitimate theories. As translation imposes an ethical responsibility on the translator, Nabokov encourages us to see Kinbote's work as an ultimately just and moral translation. In reading and judging Kinbote's commentary, we too are translating his thoughts into our own, and therefore have an equally ethical responsibility to consider Kinbote's work before rejecting it, before becoming bad translators ourselves.[67] Whereas in both *Pnin* and *Lolita* the satire is a product of failed parody, the satire of *Pale Fire* stems from the success of Kinbote's commentary as parodic translation. Like Pnin, Kinbote is an exile; like Humbert, he attempts to use art to transcend reality. But crucially, it is not

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[65] Emma Lieber, "Having Faith in Nabokov's Pale Fire," *Nabokov Studies* 11.1 (2007/8) 151.
[66] Chatman, 33.
[67] Reader-response theories of translation suggest that the act of reading *is* translation, from "dead ink on a page" to "meaning and emotion;" Will Barnstone cites the well-known example of Borges' *Pierre Menard* to reinforce the notion that the act of translation is little more than the act of reading, but each reader and each context is different, therefore, each translation must also be different: it "is not a predictable, objective, and repeatable exercise but a venture into variations." *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 17.

solipsistic: both Shade and Kinbote's works are *about* solitude, but neither is self-consuming or disconnected. Rather, solitude is what forges a connection between Kinbote and Shade, it is where their individual sorrows overlap. These commonalities imply an overriding cohesion that Nabokov explicitly insists upon through his linking of the two works within one novel. By emphasizing the fluidity rather than the division, he highlights the possible continuities between and among reality, fiction, imagination, and art, which are commonly perceived to be as cleanly divided as poem and commentary.

After *Lolita*, Nabokov was an extremely well known author, and, unlike with *Pnin* and *Lolita*, he did not have to defend his novel in order to get it published. Therefore there is surprisingly little published commentary by Nabokov about the novel, and so, in spite of the significant amount of critical attention it garnered, the great mystery of authorial intention still shrouds the novel. Véra Nabokov wrote to a publisher, "Nobody knows, nobody should know – even Kinbote hardly knows – if Zembla really exists."[68] But one thing that we do know is that concurrently with writing *Pale Fire*, Nabokov was also translating Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*. After working for nearly a decade, a four-volume set including an introduction, painstakingly literal translation, copious footnotes, and index, was published by Bollingen Press in 1964. While writing *Pale Fire*, then, Nabokov was deeply preoccupied with the problems of translation. In his lengthy introduction to *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov explains his opinions of what constitutes a valid and useful translation. As a staunch literalist, Nabokov believed that anything other than an

earnest attempt at one hundred percent accuracy was simply not translation: "The term 'literal translation' is tautological since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation or a parody."[69] Curiously, Nabokov's novel suggests a very different relationship between parody and translation. Kinbote's commentary is a parody, but it *also* proves to be a valid, albeit artful, translation.

Pale Fire presents itself as a 999-line poem composed by American poet and professor John Shade, along with a foreword, commentary, and index provided by Charles Kinbote, a self-proclaimed scholar of Shade's oeuvre. Kinbote is also a friend of Shade, a fellow professor at Wordsmith University, and (if we believe him) the exiled King of Zembla, Charles the Beloved, in hiding from Jacob Gradus, an assassin who is also known as Jacques D'Argus, Jack Grey, and several other pseudonyms. In one of the novel's very first reviews, Mary McCarthy labeled the plot of *Pale Fire* a Chinese Box and isolated different narrative levels to allow for an easier summary: the story, the real story, and the real, real story. The story, then, is that John Shade is a poet who, just before finishing his poem "Pale Fire," is murdered by an escaped convict, Jack Grey; Charles Kinbote is Shade's rather obsessive neighbor who has told him many stories of Zembla ("a distant northern land"), and who, moments after Shade's death, procures the manuscript of "Pale Fire" with the permission of Shade's wife, Sybil. The "real" story, according to Kinbote, is that he is the exiled King of Zembla, Charles II, who has assumed the guise of an academic in Appalachia as a means of hiding from the Shadows, Zembla's secret police; Jacob Gradus, a.k.a. Jack Grey, is one of these Shadows and accidentally kills Shade while

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[68] Pekka Tammi, "*Pale Fire*," *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, Ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995) 575.
[69] Vladimir Nabokov, "Problems of Translation," *The Translation Studies Reader*, Ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1955) 77.

aiming for Kinbote. Kinbote has told Shade his "secret" (i.e. King) and suspects that "Pale Fire" is actually *his* story and cannot be understood without his assistance. And finally, the "real, real" story is that Charles Kinbote is *actually* Professor V. Botkin of the Russian department at Wordsmith University, who is homosexual, paranoid, and delusional. He believes himself to be the King of Zembla, and his "secret" (i.e. homosexual, paranoid, and delusional) is known both to Shade (who pities and tolerates him) and to the campus population in general (who do not). Some readers and critics accept this level as final and "true," while others are less than satisfied: "Each plane or level in its shadow box proves to be a false bottom; there is an infinite perspective regression, for the book is a book of mirrors."[70]

In response to the teasing instability of the fictional world Nabokov created, several theories regarding the novel have developed: the Kinbotean theory posits that Kinbote is responsible for writing both poem and commentary; the Shadean theory posits the same for Shade; and the V. Botkin theory (to which I subscribe), that Shade wrote his poem, and Kinbote, the alter-ego of the mad Professor V. Botkin, wrote the commentary, which depicts the wildly imaginative and surprisingly real story of the Zemblan kingdom. Many critics also pose the two components of the novel – poem and commentary – as independent and unrelated, wherein lies much of the novel's humor. However, another vein of criticism has noted the more subtle connections between the two works, which prove much more significant than the differences:

> The contrast between certain perspective and beautiful lines in Shade's work and Kinbote's ridiculous reading of them constitutes in great measure the ironic comedy of the book. But the *more* ironical joke, it seems to me, is that

[70] Mary McCarthy, Review of *Pale Fire*, *New Republic,* 4 June 1962. Reproduced in *Nabokov: The*

> Kinbote, crazy as he may be, has actually *understood* Shade's poem, and has structured in his fantastic commentary a story that mirrors Shade's philosophical notion of a symmetrical fate.[71]

Beyond being comically and surprisingly divergent in sheer subject matter, the two works are intrinsically linked and, in many ways, represent an interesting and meaningful dialogue. As Kinbote says, "We are all, in a sense, poets." And much of the meaning and morality of *Pale Fire* can be found in that view: regarding each work as an individual piece of art, which, when connected within a single novel, encourage the reader to see the nuanced parallels pregnant with significance.

Pale Fire has always been noted for its parody. Its comic exaggeration of the academic method has left many scholars knowingly chuckling at the well-represented "dangers" of the *apparatus criticus*. Brian Boyd humorously, and accurately, characterizes the "perennial perversions of the critical mind:"

> The critics' desire to appropriate the text, to insinuate himself into it, to make it say what he would like it to say, to thrust himself between text and reader; his delusion that he is somehow responsible for all that is best in the work, or that it could have been better still if only his own prescription had been followed; his desire to spy on the artist at the moment of creation and to pry into his private life, as if that would explain the work; his sense that he is the one person in close harmony with the mind of genius; his desperate desire to achieve immorality by attaching himself to an immortal work.[72]

Critical Heritage, Ed. Norman Page (New York: Routledge & Regan Paul, 1982) 127.
[71] Stegner, 128.
[72] Boyd, 430.

This description, of course, seems to fit Kinbote to a tee. And while this aspect of parody has been well documented, and is a significant source of humor, this is as much the parody of *Pale Fire* as academia and tourist America are of *Pnin* and *Lolita* respectively; obviously and abundantly *there*, but not quite the crux of the matter. Rather, the parody of *Pale Fire* lies in the unexpected fidelity of Kinbote's commentary to Shade's poem, which emerges as a theoretically sound translation. Nabokov is parodying our expectations, suggesting that translation lurks where we least expect it. Despite the apparent differences between the two works, there are important thematic and imagistic parallels that imply a greater continuity than a simple parody of the academic method would suggest.

Numerous theories of translation have been proposed throughout the centuries, but three categories set down in a foundational work by John Dryden[73] have formed the basis of many: metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation. [74] Nabokov himself was an uncompromising literalist, but he gives Kinbote the art of imitation, which Dryden pointedly defines: "[In imitation] the translator (if he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases."[75] As much as Boyd's wariness of the dangerous critical mind applies to Kinbote, so does Dryden's definition of imitation. The relationship between Shade's work and Kinbote's is loose, connected

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[73] Perhaps not intended as a connection by Nabokov, but an interesting coincidence nonetheless, both Dryden *and* Pope are heavily associated with the use of heroic couplet, the form used by Shade (a Popean scholar) in "Pale Fire."

[74] Metaphrase is comparable to literalism: translation done word-by-word, line-by-line; paraphrastic translation does not stick so closely to the words, but maintains the "sense;" imitation maintains the words and the sense only when the translator sees fit, and freely diverges as well.

[75] John Dryden, "On Translation," *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, Ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 17.

by "general hints" and replete with "division," embodied most obviously by the binary structure of poem and commentary. Therefore, we should not look for exact correlations between the two works, but instead search for more nebulous links.

Kinbote's translation is still a parody though. Despite being supported by theory, it pushes the boundaries, and for many readers, Kinbote risks "losing the name" of translator. Dryden both acknowledges the potential benefits of imitation, and warns against the translator that takes too much liberty with a text that does not require it: "If Virgil, or Ovid, or any regular intelligible authors, be thus used, 'tis no longer to be called their work, when neither the thoughts nor words are drawn from the original; but instead of them there is something new produced, which is almost the creation of another hand."[76] Kinbote's translation does read like the creation of another hand, and though the words may be lost, Shade's thought *is* retained. But there are also translation theorists who argue that *every* translation is a new work, and that, in the most basic sense, the very act of translating creates difference.[77] As Will Barnstone wrote, "Translation… is not possible in an absolute sense yet is bountifully possible as an art form."[78] It is this artistic element on which Kinbote capitalizes. He insists that without his text, "Shade's text simply has no human reality at all," but also admits, "To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word." Those who judge it for the worse would call Kinbote's work a traducing of Shade's work; but those who

[76] Dryden, 20.
[77] According to Barnstone, "Perfect replication is of course possible only when there is no change, where there is simply repetition, when A = A. With any rewording, however, there can be no full symmetry. And translation, within or between languages, requires a change in language." He points to Borges' *Pierre Menard* as a parodic but telling example of this idea. *The Poetics of Translation,*16.
[78] Barnstone, 25.

judge it for the better would likely argue that "thought, if it be translated truly, cannot be lost."[79]

Nabokov would perhaps counter that it is not thought that is translated, but language. For him, to focus on the mere sense of a poem is to render a translation useless. Usefulness is a key component for Nabokov, who repeatedly encouraged his translation of Pushkin to be used as a crib. His intention was not to "translate" Pushkin's art – a task he thought impossible – but to make Pushkin's story available to non-Russian readers. Nabokov drew parallels between the literary work of translation and his other passion, lepidoptera: "Shorn of its primary verbal existence, the original text will not be able to soar and to sing; but it can be very nicely dissected and mounted, and scientifically studied in all its organic details."[80] But Nabokov also insists that "the boundary line between [a work of fiction and a work of science] is not as clear as is generally believed."[81] And so we must be willing to admit to a certain amount of fiction in any translation, no matter how scientific and exact it aims to be. A lot is held in the balance of what translators, readers, and critics think that translation *should* aim to be: whether it should emphasize meaning, style, "sense," etc. How we judge a translation – as "smooth" and "easily readable" or "clunky" and "wooden" – depends on these individual expectations. Lawrence Venuti uses the concepts of foreignizing and domesticating to introduce a fundamental sense of ethics into translation.[82] This ethical responsibility applies not only to the translator, but to

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[79] Dryden, 21.
[80] Nabokov, "Problems of Translation," 77.
[81] Bowers, *Lectures on Literature*, 3.
[82] Domesticating translations are those that bring the text to the reader, while foreignizing translations bring the reader to the text; the former is associated with more "readable" translations, while the latter with those that are labeled as clunky and difficult.

the critic and reader of translations as well.[83] Venuti notes that the culture of translation in America highly prioritizes meaning over style; works that hide the translator are praised while those that make the process of translation visible slip into oblivion. Kinbote's translation is easily rejected because of how far it strays from our common notion of "meaning," and how forcefully Kinbote asserts his presence. What many readers and critics alike fail to notice is Kinbote's apt translation of Shade's thought and emotion. Kinbote makes an observation regarding the differences between the Corrected Draft and the Fair Copy of Shade's poem that equally applies to the discrepancies between his commentary and Shade's poem: "Actually, it turns out to be beautifully accurate when you once make the plunge and compel yourself to open your eyes in the limpid depths under its confused surface."

Translation itself is a motif of the novel, and its various occurrences serve to differentiate between what is essential in translation and what is more malleable. Kinbote has an uncle, Duke Conmal, whose translations of Shakespeare appear in several places throughout the novel. The most shining example is, of course, his translation of *Timon of Athens* that Kinbote has with him perchance in his remote cabin. Despite the fact that Kinbote fails to realize that this is the Shakespeare work from which the poem's title is derived ("Help me Will! *Pale Fire*."), he manages to refer to the exact passage several times. Kinbote provides a rapid English translation of Conmal's Zemblan translation: ""The sun is a thief: she lures the sea / and robs it. The mood is a thief: / he steals his silvery light from the sun." Kinbote adds, "I hope

[83] Venuti uses the concept of invisibility to explain his position: the positive reactions of readers and critics alike to "easily readable" translations makes it necessary for the translator to become invisible *and* for the original work to become invisible as well; any stylistic peculiarities must be diminished in favor of plainer prose. This results from the "general tendency to read translations mainly for meaning" and not style. *The Translator's Invisibility: A history of translation*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1994).

[this passage] sufficiently approximates the text, or is at least faithful to its spirit." Kinbote's translation does, in fact, approximate the text and is faithful to its spirit, despite the fact that it fails Nabokov's back-translation standard.[84]

Kinbote then directs readers to the note to line 962 for a "prudent appraisal" of Conmal's work. Upon turning to that page (the note to the above cited line, "Help me Will!"), we learn that Conmal was "famed for the nobility of his work; few dared question its fidelity." One who did, however, was reprimanded with a sonnet written by Conmal in "colorful, if not quite correct, English:"

> I am not slave! Let be my critic slave.
>
> I cannot be. And Shakespeare would not want thus.
>
> Let drawing students copy the acanthus,
>
> I work with Master on the architrave!

According to Conmal, the translator should not confine himself to the author's expressions verbatim. While the students may "copy the acanthus," or attempt to reproduce the ornate workings of someone else, Conmal will collaborate in the creation of the architrave, a less glamorous though more critical and basic structure. He asserts that a translator is not below the original author, not his "slave," but his equal; he and Master work *together*. The great author of the original, Conmal suggests, wouldn't be interested in a bland reproduction of his own work, but would prefer the creation of a new work that he helped inspire. The role of submission is left for critics, who, unlike translators, are simultaneously bound to the original and forced to tiptoe around it.

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[84] One of Nabokov's strategies of translation, and of literalists in general, is to produce a translation of a work that, when translated *back* into the original language, would re-produce the original.

In contrast to Conmal's indignant rebukes, Shade's poem provides a playful example of self-conscious mistranslation in a stanza discussing various "disjointed notes" from the day his daughter dies:

That Englishman in Nice,

A proud and happy linguist: *je nourris*

Les pauvres cigales – meaning that he

Fed the poor sea gulls!

Shade points out the false cognate of sea gulls and *cigales*.[85] The fact that this is technically a mistranslation, however, does not make one think that Shade read the French incorrectly and failed to understand the text. He is evidently much too thorough and knowledgeable to make a carless mistake. Rather, he presents a witty alternate reading and perhaps opens our own eyes to another facet of the text, to another possibility of meaning.

But Shade also faces some more serious difficulties with translation. In contemplating the inscrutability of the hereafter, Shade finds himself at a loss: "How ludicrous these efforts to translate / Into one's private tongue a public fate!" Shade struggles with his ability to "translate" his private feelings and personal conflicts – to understand them, in essence – when death is such a universal concept, hardly subject to his individual ponderings. But despite "how ludicrous" Shade may deem the endeavor, he still makes the effort. Through his poem, Shade tries to make sense of his daughter's suicide and discover how his own personal experiences with near-death fit into the pattern. He attends the IPH (Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter) only to be offered cautiously unoptimistic advice ("I really could not tell /

[85] The correct translation of *cigale* is cicada.

The difference between this place and Hell"); tracks down a Mrs. Z whose near-death experience appeared in a magazine and corresponded to his own, contacts the reporter she spoke to, only to discover that there was a crucial misprint ("Life Everlasting – based on a misprint!"). This misprint leads Shade to an epiphany of sorts about life:

> 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
> Or correlated pattern in the game,
> Plexed artistry, and something of the same
> Pleasure in it as they who played it found.

Shade discovers – as he needed to discover, it seems – some idea of sense inherent in the seeming senselessness of his daughter's death. He uses "plexed artistry" to make this sense, and neatly fits it into the "correlated pattern" of heroic couplets. From this epiphany, Shade derives "faint hope;" the wish and the ability to carry on, and a faith that beneath the apparent folly of life there is a deeper meaning. That deeper meaning is intimately bound up in the kinds of continuities that translation – even mistranslation – generates: an unsought vitality, a veiled but omnipresent "web of sense."

From Shade's "link-and-bobolink," he finds a cautious confidence in the hereafter, and hesitantly assures us that Hazel, like the waxwing, lives on: "I'm reasonably sure that we survive / And that my daughter somewhere is alive." He is also "reasonably sure" that he will wake tomorrow morning, but of course, he

doesn't. After writing these lines, Shade walks outside and is shot by Jack Grey, becoming the stunned waxwing slain. Boyd suggests that this an example of "life savagely negat[ing] all Shade's confidence in harmony beyond and behind it."[86] However, I would argue the opposite: Shade's death is quite timely, and the fact that his poem oddly predicts his own death reinforces the notion of a "web of sense," a complex pattern in life and art that simultaneously eludes us and is unconsciously perceived.

Unlike Shade, Kinbote has the utmost faith in God.[87] His ability to surrender to a higher power gives him a steadfast assurance that Shade is still in the process of solidifying. Whereas Shade's struggle isolates him from Hazel, Kinbote's supreme confidence allows him to understand her in a way that Shade never can:

> If I were a poet I would certainly make an ode to the sweet urge to close one's eyes and surrender utterly unto the perfect safety of wooed death. Ecstatically one forefeels the vastness of the Divine Embrace enfolding one's liberated spirit, the warm bath of physical dissolution, the universal unknown engulfing the miniscule unknown that had been the only real part of one's temporary personality.

Kinbote, perhaps unwittingly, makes a sort of prosaic ode to suicide in this note. Nabokov says that Kinbote does, in fact, follow in Hazel's footsteps and commits suicide after completing his commentary; Michael Wood argues that this is "authorial trespassing" and we need not pay attention to it.[88] Regardless of whether or not we choose to, there is ample evidence to allow this as a distinct possibility. Kinbote

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[86] Boyd, 428.

[87] Shade does not subscribe to any religion; the novel was originally titled "The Happy Atheist," but, as Nabokov explained to a publisher, "the book is much too poetical and romantic for that." Nabokov and Bruccoli, 212.

describes death as "wooed," and longs to become part of the communal, the "universal unknown," which will save him from his own solitary unknown. Kinbote's description of the "miniscule unknown" as "the only real part of one's temporary personality" suggests that there is some central piece of ourselves that eludes us. To him, it seems obvious that we can never truly connect with another human, wherein lies his affinity with Hazel. Shade, on the other hand, believes in the vast connectedness of all things, and is therefore incapable of understanding something that is cut off from everything else. Ironically, his faith in an encompassing web of sense isolates him.

Though he stands on tentative ground regarding death, Shade's conviction in life is constant. He has a fulfilling relationship with Sybil, and despite Hazel's premature death, she was still his "darling." He is a well-respected poet and scholar, a successful yet humble and generous man. In essence, his life is well lived. Kinbote, on the other hand, can't quite come to terms with his life. Rather than accept his unsatisfactory reality as Botkin (a man who is shunned by the community, rejected by his fellow scholars, and whose sole solace is found in the pity of a neighbor), he creates an amazing counter-reality in a distant kingdom that is far more real for him than Appalachia. This intense realism is captured most poignantly in his relationships with women.

Kinbote desperately tries to love his Zemblan wife Disa, but he simply cannot. He contrasts his loveless everyday life with his dream life, in which he conjures a "refutation of his not loving her:" "His dream love for her exceeded in emotional tone, in spiritual passion and depth, anything he had experienced in his surface

[88] Wood, 186.

existence. This love was like an endless wringing of hands, like a blundering of the soul through an infinite maze of hopelessness and remorse." Kinbote describes these feelings – ones twice removed from reality, that he only felt in the dreams of an imaginary existence – with clarity, intensity and pathos. But we see that even in Kinbote's imaginary life as Charles the Beloved, he has to rely on his dreams and imagination to supply what his "reality" lacks.

We are offered another image that depicts the relationship between Fleur, a young suitor, and Charles II as reflected in a mirror: "He awoke to find her standing with a comb in her hand before his – or rather, his grandfather's – cheval glass, a triptych bottomless light, a really fantastic mirror, signed with a diamond by its maker, Sudarg of Bokay. She turned about before it: a secret device of reflection gathered an infinite number of nudes in its depths." The mirror is fantastic both in the regular sense of the word and in its fabrication of fantasy.[89] This mirror image, though existing only instantaneously in real life, evokes infinity. But, of course, this mirror image doesn't actually exist at all "in real life." It is all in Kinbote's fantasy, in which Disa and Fleur oddly parallel Sybil and Hazel. Shade derives much of the meaning of his life from his relationships with these two women; as with most people, his human relationships are the most intensely real part of his existence. Kinbote, perhaps in an attempt to give his imagined life some meaning or substance, configures for himself a fake wife and a young suitor who he repeatedly characterizes as sisterly.[90] In his fantasy life, Kinbote tries to reproduce the reality of Shade's life for himself; but importantly, he shuns any emotional connection with these women

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[89] Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) 191.
[90] Another parallel between Fleur and Hazel is their dual association with the image of the triptych.

because even he – a great magician if we ever saw one – cannot conjure real feelings from nothing, he cannot falsify the genuine relationships between Shade, Sybil, and Hazel by paralleling them with an empty simulacrum of emotion. Kinbote is neither frightened nor perplexed by death because his life is as unreal, as intangible, as the hereafter. Shade has something to lose in death: "And I'll turn down eternity unless / The melancholy and the tenderness / Of mortal life; the passion and the pain / … Are found in Heaven by the newlydead." Kinbote, on the other hand, has nearly nothing.

In a novel replete with mirrors, the cheval glass is a microcosm of sorts of *Pale Fire*, which reflects an infinite number of realities in its depths. Though the question of which is real and which is not is hardly useful. In *Pale Fire,* reality, life and their counters, imagination and death, are all melded together; each reflects the next, but this succession doesn't create a hierarchy – with one being the original and everything else a mere reflection – but rather emphasizes the fluid boundaries of each category. Boyd proposes that, "perhaps a better way to suggest what might lie beyond would be to define the rigid limits of the human mind and to suggest that in death all these limits are reversed as easily as the images in a mirror."[91] In a similar vein, Kinbote quotes St. Augustine to Shade, "One can know what God is not; one cannot know what he is." In their independent yet parallel searches for the meaning of life and of death, both Kinbote and Shade envision something similar to their own life for their after-life. Shade envisions the continued flight into the reflection of his living room in the windowpane; Kinbote envisions it as a safe haven, a release, and indeed what is the life he mentally lives in but an escape from the reality he physically exists in. As Boyd and St. Augustine/Kinbote suggest, one can know what death is not: it is

[91] Boyd, 447.

not life. And one cannot know what death is. But in their search for answers, each peers deeply into the mirror of infinity, and sees the reflection of his own life as a potential solution to death's enigma.

And just as fluidly as life and death are connected, Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary are also connected. Kinbote reinterprets, which is to say *translates*, Shade's themes in his own critical framework, one dictated by *his* experiences; and contrary to how many readers view this framework, it is no less valid than Shade's. As Michael Glynn argues,

> The idea that Shade's autobiographical poem approximates more closely to "reality" than Kinbote's deluded commentary may be an erroneous one. Whereas Shade adumbrates a misty, ineffable other world, Kinbote's deluded commentary presents us with a refracted version of *this* world, replete with the "maddening details" that we know Nabokov himself valued so highly.[92]

Fundamentally, both Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary are works of art, reflecting and reflected in one another. The primacy of one over the other does not add meaning, and therefore is of little value; and I think one could reasonably argue that Kinbote sees in Shade's poem a translation of *his* Zemblan tale. It is an endless spiral, ascending to great heights of imagination, pathos, and humanity.

Pale Fire is a parody in its radical departure from our expectations of what the interaction between poem and commentary should be. But as is the case in many of Nabokov's works, this does not render it "wrong," but merely requires a perceptual readjustment. He presents us with two equally fictional stories, but plays on our preconceptions of "poem" and "commentary." Nabokov, like Shade, has a "childish

[92] Glynn, 93.

predilection for word games," and he combines this with a confidence in readers to produce a meaningful dialectic between fiction and reality; and he is perhaps suggesting that the two are merely different ways of expressing the same concept, of "translating" the same text. The parallels between the works of Shade and Kinbote are too fundamental to be ignored. The connection forged by the labels of poem and commentary is also not to be ignored, for by labeling them as such Nabokov insists on their unity – and it is precisely this palpable unity that Shade is seeking from life, and that Kinbote is desperately seeking from humanity.

The satire of *Pale Fire* encourages readers to discover the remarkable unity underlying a novel so saturated with superficial divisions. "You will mark Kafka's style. Its clarity, its precise and formal intonations in such striking contrast to the nightmare matter of his tale… The limpidity of his style stresses the dark richness of his fantasy. Contrast and unity, style and matter, manner and plot are most perfectly integrated."[93] Nabokov wrote this of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, but it suggests a duality that extends to *Pale Fire* as well: the limpidity of Shade's prose contrasts the richness of Kinbote's fantasy. Nabokov suggests that two different voices can be effectively integrated into a single novel, each highlighting a crucial element of the other.

An inversion assessment can also be applied to Kinbote individually: the wild and fantastical nature of his fantasy marks a striking contrast to the bleakness of his reality as Botkin. At the base of Kinbote's Zemblan tale, when we peer past the veil of his splendid and strange world, we see that Botkin is actually searching for a

[93] Bowers, *Lectures on Literature*, 283.

human connection. In many ways, Kinbote is synthesis of both Pnin and Humbert; like Pnin, he is an exile, and like Humbert, he uses art as a mode of escape, a means of creating an alternate world for himself to live in. Kinbote is an absurd person whose odd habits (such as spying on the Shade's) and lack of complete narratorial control ("and damn that music!") lead many readers to label him negatively and offer his selfishness and intrusiveness as starkly opposing Shade's generosity. However, Kinbote represents a departure from Humbert in that he is not to be rejected; he, like Pnin, embodies the necessity of acceptance. For at the moral center of *Pale Fire*, we see the struggle to cope with the isolation and loss that all humans face.

In both *Pnin* and *Lolita*, the satire results from the failure of the parody. In *Pale Fire,* however, the satire results from the success of the parody. Kinbote's translation is a parody because it is extreme and some would (reasonably) deny it that label; but it also supports a new way of thinking about the possibilities of translation. As outlined earlier, there are theories of translation that suggest that each translation is a new artistic creation in and of itself, and furthermore, that translation is a fundamentally ethical act. Through the pairing of Shade's poem and Kinbote's unconventional translation, Nabokov is inviting readers to see the range of what art can do. It is deceptive and honest at the same time; requires intelligence and imagination; and most of all, it represents a way of making sense of and extracting meaning from the world. As Robert Alter points out, "*Pale Fire* urges the idea of art as the sole way of coping with chaos – Shade, coolly and ironically, Kinbote, desperately – but the idea is sharply qualified with a philosophical realism by the steady awareness that any poetic invention is, after all, a farrago of words, a

delusional system, a form of madness."[94] In his poem Shade describes the beauty of nature around him, but also suggests that we are limited in life: "For we are most artistically caged." Art, then, is both the cage and the method of transcending that cage. For both Shade and Kinbote use imagination, the foundation of art, as a means of forging connections. But ironically, their sought-after kinships remain unconsummated in and of themselves: Shade remains separate from Hazel, Kinbote from everyone. However, Nabokov pairs these two in an unlikely friendship which swells into an unlikely symbiosis that remains opaque to them, but is beautifully appreciated by the careful reader.

As examined in the parody section, Shade remains cut off from Hazel and can't understand her plight. But Kinbote fundamentally identifies with her: "It is also true that Hazel resembled me in certain respects." Most notably, in her isolation and her rejection by her peers. In admitting to this, Kinbote also admits to a certain level of *awareness* of his isolation. Despite the fact that he has created a vast and magical alternate reality for himself, in which he is King and enjoys endless praise and affirmation, he is not blind to his perpetual role as the butt of the joke. During Kinbote's first meeting with Shade in the faculty lunchroom, he also meets several other "eminent" professors: "Another tormentor inquired if it was true that I had installed two ping-pong tables in my basement. I asked, was it a crime? No, he said, but why two? 'Is *that* a crime?' I countered, and they all laughed." As is correctly inferred by these Jack Cockerell-esque colleagues, Kinbote uses these ping-pong tables to entertain young male guests – a habit that would be accepted (even respected) in Zembla, but one that earns him the snide remarks of 1950s academia.

[94] Alter, 198.

And of course, they are not laughing *with* Kinbote, but very much at him. Either oblivious or intentionally ignoring this, Kinbote attempts to turn himself into the jokester and the others as victims of his wit. In another instance Kinbote assures readers that he "turn[ed] it all into a joke." But this reassurance is rather hollow. Despite Kinbote's wish for us to see *him* as the comic master, the humor actually lies in his misreading of the situation.[95] As James English points out in his analysis of humor in *Pale Fire*,

> Kinbote is doubly the object of this joke, for it is not only his failure to succeed as joker that makes him ridiculous but also his failure to recognize his failure. The joke is not simply that his attempt to make a joke is laughed at, but that he interprets the very laughter that signals his failure and exclusion as the sign of social success, as confirmation that he belongs.[96]

As we continue reading, and come across such comments as that which acknowledges the affinities between Kinbote and Hazel, it becomes clear that Kinbote is painfully aware of that fact that he – "a gay vegetarian immigrant from a Russia-like 'distant northern land'" – will never be accepted by his Wordsmith colleagues.[97] He is somewhat vindicated by the fact that these colleagues, like Jack Cockerell, become the victim of their own joke in exposing their immaturity, but this doesn't mitigate the harshness of their rejection. Shade emerges as a shining example of acceptance and tolerance, the pinnacle of humanity in contrast *not to Kinbote*, but to Professors H., C. and Emerald. Kinbote is not just a madman living in a dream world; he also exists in a disappointing and lonely reality, which his fantasy tempers but does not negate.

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[95] James F. English, "Modernist Joke-Work: 'Pale Fire' and the Mock Transcendence of Mockery," *Contemporary Literature* 33:1 (Spring 1992) 79.
[96] English, 79.
[97] English, 79.

Shade is the only person who seems to have any pity for Kinbote: "[Madness] is the wrong word… one should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention." Kinbote's awareness of his status as perennial outsider introduces this crucial element of deliberation.

In much the same way that Kinbote attempts to peer through his window into the Shade's, Shade tries to peer into his daughter's soul. But he ultimately fails. As English notes, "the sense of being cut off from the unhappiness of one's own child defines the ethos of the canto."[98] It has been noted – and criticized – that Shade's poem focuses on his own pain and not his daughter's. In my opinion, this is not the strongest criticism since it is, of course, *his* poem and perhaps what he is trying to express is not Hazel's pain but his own. Shade muses about his daughter's unfortunate looks, "She might have been you, me, or some quaint blend: / Nature chose me so as to wrench and rend / Your heart and mine." When Hazel appears in the school play, she is cast as Mother Time, "a bent charwoman with slop pail and broom," "And," he continues, "like a fool I sobbed in the men's room." Readers witness Shade's heartbreak in response to the tragedies of his daughter. But he also calls himself a "fool" and conceals his heartbreak from others, hiding in the men's room. One of the more poignant points the poem makes is that sorrow is individual, both causing and caused by isolation. Shade mournfully recalls a typical evening the three might have passed together,

> The point is that the three
> Chambers, *then* bound by you and her and me,
> *Now* form a triptych or a three-act play

[98] English, 85.

In which portrayed events forever stay.

The triptych recalls Kinbote's cheval mirror, suggesting that this picture is reflected into diminishing infinity, and also reminding us that this image of his daughter is now nothing more than a far away dream, from which he is forever cut off. Much as the ampersand (a recurring image both thematically and structurally of *Pale Fire*) is cinched in the middle, Shade is both necessarily connected to and inevitably cut off from his daughter. And if Shade and Sybil are on one side, Hazel and Kinbote are on the other. As Michael Wood points out, the explicit remark connecting Hazel and Kinbote represents a "rare glimpse of Nabokov behind him, offering an usually broad clue to something he is anxious his readers should not miss."[99] Whereas Shade offers Kinbote the pity his life lacks, it seems as though Kinbote *could* have offered Hazel the pity her life lacked. This is perhaps what leads many readers to accuse Kinbote of selfishness: Shade offers him pity, and so he should offer Shade pity in return and not selfishly "steal" his poem. But Shade's life does not lack pity; he has Sybil to share his grief. Hazel, on the other hand, was entirely alone. Though Kinbote is too late to act as her empathetic companion, he can offer Shade the glimpse of her soul he so sincerely wants.

Both Shade and Kinbote have what the other wants: Shade, an understanding of his daughter and an untroubled confidence in the hereafter, and Kinbote, a human connection. Both are isolated by what they lack, leading readers to understand that, above all else, *Pale Fire* is about the fundamental condition of human life: solitude. Shade explains to Kinbote in a theological discussion that pity is the password. Pity, that ambivalent emotion, is what Michael Wood places at the center of the novel; and

[99] Wood, 196.

while he is repelled by the idea ("this is what I have called hell, where the demons are, the end of the emotional world"[100]) I find it to be rather moving. Humanity – like the ampersand, the lemniscate, and the infinity symbol – is irrefutably bound together, and I would suggest that it is precisely this communal pity that binds it: "Kinbote himself is the stranded spirit par excellence, but in his mental and social alienation he merely embodies an extreme instance of the role of isolate in which every human being is cast to some degree."[101] And so Shade and Kinbote are ultimately connected by a desire to assuage the feeling of exile from those around them, and by their remarkable (albeit unknown) ability to make up for what the other lacks. When combined, they surely form a cohesive whole.

This cohesive whole is physically embodied by *Pale Fire*. This connection compels us to consider Shade and Kinbote's works together, to look beyond the obvious differences and discover the intimate similarities: not text, but texture. This duality is echoed by Dryden's definition of imitative translation: not words, but sense. Imitative translations may depart significantly from the original, subject to the translator's whims, but they may also validly mark the creation of a new work. Kinbote does create a new work, but he also maintains Shade's sense. Sense, like texture, is ultimately subjective. Just as Shade was inspired by the misprinted "fountain," Kinbote is inspired by what he sees in Shade's poem; whether or not it adheres to direct Authortial word is not irrelevant, but it is not essential either. *Pale Fire* marks the collaborative effort between Kinbote and Shade, which is unique; no other two minds, when paired together, would produce the exact same interpretation. And here lies the beauty of imitative, artful translation.

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[100] Wood, 196.

But this is also where the difficulty of reading such translations lies. As much as it imitative, *Pale Fire* is also *foreignizing*. The ethics of translation, as Venuti uses the concept, does not deal with the translator's "debt" to the author – his responsibility to adhere to the author's meaning, his duty to render the author's work gracefully, etc.[102] Rather, he considers ethics as a *mode* of translation, and Kinbote embraces an ethics of foreignization. Foreignizing translations choose to translate "using a marginal discourse."[103] Although readers may consider Kinbote's Zemblan discourse excessively marginal, for him this discourse *is* his reality, it is his life. He makes the translator far more visible than our expectations allow, and in doing so "stage[s] an alien reading experience."[104] In effect, Kinbote stages an experience for readers that he lives everyday: as alien, as exile. Both imitation and foreignizing fall at the more *in*accessible ends of their respective spectrums, and combining the two together drastically compounds the complexity of the relationship between source text and target text.

This can perhaps explain why so many critics respond to Kinbote as a character closely allied with Humbert in his "evil" tendencies as a wild exploiter of the possessive capacities of art and a grotesque parasite. There is a presumption of malicious intent that urges readers to strongly object to Kinbote. And while it would be wrong to condone Kinbote's Zemblan tale as a "critical commentary," it is equally wrong to deny him any sense of authorship because he does not make reading the entirety of *Pale Fire* easy. His translation certainly takes extreme liberty, but it in no way traduces Shade. Indeed, the two authors are remarkably indebted to one another,

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[101] Alter, 198.
[102] For more on the idea of the translator's debt to the author, see the Dryden article cited in this chapter.
[103] Venuti, 16.

whether they know it or not, and manage to strike quite a balance. Translation emerges not so much as the act of creating difference, but of forging connective tissue between two works. Kinbote's commentary expresses the deep interwovenness of their two stories. And if Kinbote needs Shade's poem to tell his story, that is not wrong either. In some ways, by configuring his own death into the poem and then actually dying, Shade provides a quite literal interpretation of Barthes' "Death of the Author," and in effect *offers* his poem up for interpretation and alternate "authorship."[105] He, like Conmal's Shakespeare, would not to want to monopolize his work, but would rather embrace its contrapuntal possibilities.

Nabokov defines the good reader as one who "identifies himself not with the boy or girl in the book, but with the mind that conceived and composed that book."[106] Despite the fact that he urges attention to detail in translation, Nabokov also believes in connecting with the author's sense. He prizes the individual mind, and whereas style is individual, words are not. Kinbote identifies with Shade's mind rather than with his text and provides us with a reading of the undercurrent themes and images of the poem. Instead of a redundant copy of Shade's words, it opens up an entirely new world in which we can understand "Pale Fire." Kinbote expands and nuances our appreciation of Shade's work, which is ultimately what a commentary should do. And when readers translate Kinbote's commentary – "the act of reading involves

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[104] Venuti, 16.
[105] "Death of the Author" was written five years after *Pale Fire* in 1967, but there is an interesting sense of parallelism between the two works: "The explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his 'confidence.'" Barthes refutes the idea that the meaning of a work should be located in the biography of its author, and therefore would likely encourage a Kinbotean reading of Shade's poem: "The true locus of writing is reading… The unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination."
[106] Fredson Bowers, ed. *Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Russian Literature* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 11.

interpretive translation"[107] – we risk becoming the bad translator we may accuse Kinbote of being if we judge his work before giving it our fullest consideration and most open evaluation. Kinbote says, "for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word." When readers become commentators, as we invariably do, the burden of the last word falls on us, and we must reflect carefully before offering it.

"Any reader who refuses to take Kinbote's invention in earnest poses a threat not only to his status as the ruler of Zembla; the incredulous reader is also a menace to the status of art and imagination as purveyors of meaning in human life."[108] In *Pale Fire,* Nabokov provides readers with two examples of artists whose art helps them find and create meaning in their lives. Shade articulates his epiphany,

> I feel I understand
> Existence, or at least a minute part
> Of my existence, only through my art,
> In terms of combinational delight.

Shade's use of the word "only" carries substantial import: the meaning of existence eludes Shade in his existence proper. He must search beyond himself in order to discover the "web of sense." And perhaps some of that "beyond" involves Kinbote; his use of "combinational" emphasizes the collaborative and synergetic production of meaning in art. The process of translation is characterized as the meeting of two minds. For while translation is *not* appropriative, it does assert the presence of a new author who possesses a new creativity. It is a combinational effort and despite containing traces of individuality, translation is not individual. Shade feels he

[107] Barnstone, 21.

understands "a minute part" of his existence, or what Kinbote calls the "miniscule unknown." Both connect their private experiences with universal ones: Kinbote, to the "universal unknown," and Shade, his "private universe" to the "galaxies divine." Kinbote and Shade understand themselves as microcosms of something much greater than they, but they also realize that the tangible connection between the two is just outside their realm of perception. Neither can "translate into one's private tongue a public fate." And though combining their individual searches for transcendence does not produce a definitive answer, it does produce a partnership, the ultimate refutation of solitude.

Nabokov offers art as a remedy for the plights of human existence, and one that does not have to be solipsistic but can be communal. Art is "a subjective and specific affair," but its beauty seems to be in its universality.[109] Nabokov defines art as "beauty plus pity:" "Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual."[110] Beauty, therefore, is aligned with life, and pity perhaps with death. In *Pale Fire,* however, Nabokov seems to suggest the simultaneity of both beauty and pity, and the exalted state of existence that results from this. Neither Shade's nor Kinbote's search for meaning yields "conclusive evidence," but they both find beauty and pity which seems to be answer enough. And if either winds up "sans anything but his art," as Kinbote predicts, it is likely that would be all right, for art allows one to perform the "trick of changing the vista, of changing the prism and the viewpoint… through which you can see a greener grass, a fresher world."[111]

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[108] Tammi, 584.
[109] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 115.
[110] Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 251.
[111] Lectures on Literature, 289.

Conclusion

An Anthropomorphic Deity Impersonated by Nabokov

Thus, in the second paragraph of Chapter Five comes the first intimation that "someone is in the know" – a mysterious intruder who takes advantage of Krug's dream to convey his own peculiar coded message. The intruder… is an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me. In the last chapter of the book this deity experiences a pang of pity for his creature and hastens to take over. Krug, in a sudden moonburst of madness, understands that he is in good hands.

– *Vladimir Nabokov*, Introduction to Bend Sinister

Nabokov, an intensely private man, garnered a reputation as a somewhat surly scholar, a malevolent magician, an aloof author. Upon meeting him for the first time, interviewers often remark with surprise that he is quite friendly; they note the sparkle in his eye, the mischievous grin on his face; and perhaps, after the interview is over, they return to one of his novels and reconsider it. And in doing so, they are likely to discover an entirely new Nabokovian world, for our idea of who an author "is" strangely colors our perception of his work. Where they formerly found inscrutability, mockery, and arrogance, they are likely to now find warmth, imagination, and humanity, with a delightful miracle or two to boot. Though I do not claim to be anywhere as charming as Nabokov, I hope this discussion of his works inspires a similar change of heart in anyone who saw him only as a stylist and not a moralist.

Nabokov's literature is dense and it is intimidating. It overflows with allusion, sleight of hand, word play, game play, puns, pranks, tricks etc., and we may fear that in missing a punch line, we become the joke. And perhaps that fear will always linger (as I am "perhaps" avoiding expressing my own, still lingering intimidation of Nabokov's works by using the royal "we"), but what I have discovered, what "we"

should discover, is that those who read earnestly – for the humorous detail (Kinbote vengefully pointing out the absence of Prof. H and C from the index), the resonant image (Lo with chunky makeup and lipstick on her teeth, affecting the appearance of Humbert's "horror of horrors" – a college girl), or the touching moment (Pnin throwing his dish towel in the corner and crying at the sink) – will never become Jack Cockerell. To the contrary, we must have faith that we are "in good hands," take a deep breath, and dive in headfirst.

A dive into *Pnin*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*, yields many treasures and several themes: the lonely, rejected, exiled individual; courageous victims whose victimization matters; the duality inherent in people; the duality inherent in art; the moral necessity of embracing this duality as one cohesive and inseparable whole; people who emerge as beautiful butterflies despite the most devious attempts of those around them to confine them forever to a dark and desolate cocoon. And despite Nabokov's forceful denial of morality, it is his tenderness, his pathos, his "pang of pity," which allows for them to emerge as such. Nabokov subjects Pnin to the parody of V.V., Lolita to that of Humbert, and Kinbote to that of the pessimistic critic embodied by Professors H., C., and Emerald. But he also "hastens to take over" at the right moment, using a subtle but powerful satire to ensure the reign of "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy." As a benevolent anthropomorphic deity, Nabokov led Pnin to a glorious escape; Lolita to a tenderly imagined after-life; and Kinbote and Shade to a shared eternal life, ensuring that neither will ever be "the stranded spirit par excellence" again. None of his characters are truly lonely, rejected, or exiled because Nabokov is always there.

Indeed, Nabokov's denial of morality verges on ludicrous, as (hopefully) demonstrated by my analysis *of* this morality, which really amounts to little more than my holding up a mirror to Nabokov's compositions and witnessing the revelation of some surprising but undeniable solutions. Nabokov is a man who never spoke without a cue card, never risked a muddling of words or an imprecise statement. It is not farfetched, therefore, to suggest that his denial of social purpose, of moral message was *not* a denial of a greater, far more elusive sense of morality that is delicate, tender, and resistant to definition. Rather, what Nabokov *is* denying is precisely what he says he is: an intention to ameliorate society, a desire to mend the world, a willingness to hand his art over to the clamor of popular readers who read only to find, and then to be able to talk about, the latest social critique, the newest gag pulled on society. Instead, he welcomes impassioned and devoted readers, leaving them a barely perceptible but definitely tangible trail that guides us through a deluge of mirrors, bottomless realities, and effervescent, otherworldly worlds, to the deepest core of his art. And, when we finally discover both that trail and that art, we realize that our intimidation of Nabokov is merely a manifestation of deeply felt reverence.

Eric Naiman notes, "One of the most fascinating aspects of Nabokov scholarship is the way in which the author's penchant for chastisement and discipline has been maintained from beyond the grave."[112] Perhaps I am somewhat victim to this desire to please Nabokov, this propensity to readily agree with his own assessments of his work – that they are void of social intent, that we should ignore interpretations connecting his own tragedies of lost language, exile, the murder of his father, etc.

with those of his characters. But I believe that what Nabokov actually had a penchant for was something much more positive than the punishment of his readers, and something much more universal than his private woes. In fact, I believe that Nabokov truly regarded his audience as the "most gifted and varied in the world."[113] And his apparent chastisements strike me as encouragement, insistence even, that his readers strive to understand a work of literature more profoundly, feel it more intensely, and never settle for the banal pleasures that a single reading of a text provides. We must not only dive into his works, but dive into them time and time again. There will always be critics of Nabokov, new studies of his old oeuvre, but these studies ensure a dynamism that that keeps his works relevant. Indeed as Nabokov says (sorry, Naiman): "there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art."[114]

Nabokov is a man who created art, who wrote for himself, and for the chance reader who understands him. I suggest that we pair Nabokov's refusal of morality with his sparkling eye and his mischievous grin, and read it as his call to genuine readers to discover the vast and intricate possibilities of his worlds, in which he never gives us humor without humanity, art without imagination, reality without fiction, or games without a lesson.

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[112] Eric Naiman, "Perversion in *Pnin* (Reading Nabokov Preposterously)," *Nabokov Studies* 7.1 (2002/3), 91.
[113] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 283.
[114] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 33.

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