Nabokov’s Critics: a Review Article

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Several insights should by now be clear to all students of Nabokov who have assimilated the critical literature of the past twenty years: that he is a Romantic who views this world as a parody of the otherworld, causing his works to abound in doublings, mirrorings, and inversions; that the glimmerings of another existence beyond our own may occasionally be discerned in nature, in fate’s workings, in art; and that the puzzles and rich referentiality of Nabokov’s texts to other literature are designed to send the reader on a quest for the transcendent.

Early critics of Nabokov’s work mistakenly viewed his fictional worlds as hermetic, as arcane self-referential systems designed as metaliterary manifestos; Page Stegner’s *Escape into Aesthetics* is a frequently reviled pure example, but Alfred Appel’s pioneering work, focused as it was on modernism, erred in the metaliterary direction as well.1 After Ellen Pifer dared to show us Nabokov’s concern with universal human issues, Brian Boyd’s book on *Ada* also stressed the humanity of Nabokov’s


characters, demonstrating how Van and Ada’s love affair hurts Lucette, causing her suicide.²

While some have regretted the tendency of Nabokovians to annotate, interpretation founded on annotation can show the way out of a hermetic reading to the world beyond the text, to specific instances of the world’s miraculous ordering; hence, annotation is an essential component of literary scholarship. Nabokov points to a widening spiral, not a narrowing vortex, through intertextuality, which has itself been misread as a closed system. Appel’s Annotated Lolita, Carl Proffer’s Keys to Lolita, and Gennadi Barabtaro’s Phantom of Fact are themselves great advances in Nabokov research and make possible future discoveries.³ Studies that fail to trace Nabokov’s system of references often remain trapped among truisms about patterning, fate, and the otherworld.

1985 was an important year for Nabokov scholarship. Besides the publication of Boyd’s Ada, Pekka Tammi published Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics, a study of his narrative devices.⁴ Tammi’s foreword contains an efficient, comprehensive, and astute survey of the criticism to date as well as a lucid, cross-referenced compendium of Nabokov’s themes. Together with D. Barton Johnson’s fine Worlds in Regression and his earlier article, “Belyj and Nabokov: A Comparative Overview,” Tammi’s book should serve as a point of departure for all future scholars.⁵ Unfortunately, some have been reinventing the wheel without improving its design.

Vladimir Alexandrov’s Nabokov’s Otherworld suffers from this and other problems. In one of his frequent uses of the Straw Critic ploy, Alexandrov states his intention to rebut “those who consider Nabokov merely a brilliant but shallow stylist and gamesman” (p. 6) by demonstrating Nabokov’s “faith in the apparent existence of a transcendent, non-material, timeless, and beneficent ordering and ordered realm of being that seems to provide for personal immortality, and that affects everything that exists in the mundane world” (p. 5). Alexandrov then examines seven works for signs of the “occult” by tracing motifs through the individual works and supporting his observations with references to

⁴ Pekka Tammi, Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics: A Narratological Analysis (Helsinki, 1985).
Nabokov’s discursive writings. This has long been a fruitful method of literary analysis, particularly when applied to Nabokov’s work. However, Alexandrov suddenly justifies his method on page 181 because Nabokov cautioned against symbol hunting. In Alexandrov’s handling, the analyses of chains of motifs sometimes yield insights, but often long paragraphs of murky academic language obscure just where the chain is designed to lead. The ends of the paragraphs and chapters, instead of reaching some clarifying conclusion at last, trickle into the rug like Humbert’s bullet. Alexandrov’s final chapter cursorily surveys five artists of the symbolist-acmeist period to show what Nabokov shared with them, reaching a climax of inconclusiveness.

In itself, the book’s argument is perfectly reasonable. Alexandrov follows Vera Nabokov’s famous precedent in her introduction to Nabokov’s poems, marshaling citations from the fiction to show that Nabokov’s characters are preoccupied with death and the hereafter and that patterning in the novels signals these concerns. But the focus on an otherworldly presence, by which Alexandrov purports to shift focus from the metaliterary to the metaphysical (e.g., p. 174), has long been accepted and propounded by several other critics; he overstates his claim to originality while obscuring the work of his colleagues. Nor is compensation made by way of a new reading of any one of the books discussed, or a new perspective on the otherworld when viewed across seven books, or a critique of his predecessors’ work. One new idea seems to be the possibility that Hazel Shade is a lesbian although no such bald statement is made by Alexandrov. He lists the connections between Hazel and Kinbote—the cane motif, the seance, and homosexuality—but avoids spelling out the implications (lest Nabokov shriek from the grave) and omits explaining how Hazel’s (latent?) proclivities might affect our understanding of Pale Fire (pp. 207–8).

Some examples of scholarship that ought to have been digested and acknowledged by Alexandrov include:

1. Nomi Tamir-Ghez’s cogent article on Humbert’s rhetorical ploys, listed in Alexandrov’s bibliography but not footnoted in the chapter on Lolita apropos Humbert’s “cunning narrative strategies” (p. 162).

2. Anna Maria Salehar’s discussion of the origins of Zina Mertz’s name in MnemoSYNE MERTSanie and the relationship to the gods


implied by it,8 which would bolster Alexandrov’s timid conclusion that Fyodor’s and Zina’s “souls may indeed have been matched in a Pla-
tonic otherworld” (p. 130) and would provide essential grist for the
oft-visited mill of fate’s intervention in Fyodor’s life.

3. Christine Tekiner’s still-unrebutted case, based on Nabokov’s
careful system of dating, that all events in *Lolita* after Humbert
receives Lo’s letter are Humbert’s fantasy (cited in Alexandrov’s bibli-
ography but not otherwise utilized).9

4. Pekka Tammi’s elegant treatment of “cosmic synchronization” in
Nabokov’s novels is inadequately acknowledged and therefore re-
hashed; Alexandrov repeats Pifer, Boyd, and others in showing that
Nabokov was moral and that his metaphysics are connected to his aes-
thetics (pp. 50–57).

There are more flagrant examples. Johnson analyzed Nabokov’s
“two-world theory” in 1985, showing Nabokov’s philosophy to be
essentially platonic (by way of the Romantics).10 Alexandrov buries
Johnson’s work in a list of other references and omits the pages where
Johnson states more clearly than Alexandrov himself what should
have been the starting point of his own analysis (p. 235).

Critics have hesitated to discuss platonic ideas and the theme of the
Double because Nabokov said in an interview that he was “afraid to get
mixed up with Plato” and called *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* “tasteless, child-
ish, a superb Punch and Judy show.”11 Alexandrov braves these pro-
nouncements to conclude sensibly that Nabokov disliked Plato’s
politics but not “the Greek philosopher’s metaphysics” (p. 29). He
does, however, accept Nabokov’s stricture on the literature of the Dou-
ble, although Nabokov’s parodies of it (e.g., in *Despair* and *Lolita*), like
all his cautionary ridiculings, suggest that he meant to refine a gener-
alization: the good/evil opposition in popularized Romantic philoso-
phy that yielded the Jekyll/Hyde opposition was a corruption of a much
subtler duality that occupied Nabokov all his life. Though the Double
theme is integral to Alexandrov’s subject, he finds it “questionable” in
relation to Quilty (p. 177), reading *Lolita* so literally that he can speak
of Humbert’s “spiritual affinity with Annabel” (pp. 174–75) with no
suggestion that she originates in a well-known poem by Poe.12

8. Anna Maria Salehar, “Nabokov’s *Gift: An Apprenticeship in Creativity,*” in *A Book
12. Humbert calls Quilty “Punch” and himself “Mr. Hyde” (Appel, ed. [n. 1 above],
pp. 298, 208).
Alexandrov’s conclusion (which should have been his opening) seems to go out of the way to avoid using his scholarly antecedent. Johnson’s clear overview of the relation of Belyj’s work to Nabokov’s makes all Alexandrov’s points and more. It furthermore draws a comparison between Nabokov’s attitude to verbal art and Belyj’s *Glossolalia*, a book about the power of language to gain access to the ideal world. While Alexandrov does cite Johnson’s article in his bibliography, he never refers to it in the relevant chapter. Thus Alexandrov takes a step backward in Nabokov studies, wasting the reader’s patience with overlong and underresearched, amorphous nonanalysis.

I will risk the role of the fairy not invited to the christening by pointing out among Alexandrov’s omissions that his twenty-five pages on *Pale Fire* contain no mention of the recent (and only) monograph on that novel, my *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden*. Alexandrov fails to acknowledge that my book discusses both Nabokov’s view of the interpenetration of this world and another and the problem of discerning fate in the patterning discoverable in the work of the Creator—although these topics are the stuff of Alexandrov’s book. Worse, Alexandrov does not assimilate the novel’s material either, thus slighting a delightful dimension of his own argument, the omnipresence of Faery in Nabokov’s work. Alexandrov seems unaware of these implications, even when his evidence begs for their inclusion—as when he traces the mermaid motif in *Lolita* but makes no use of the fairy tale provenance of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Little Mermaid* or the siren role of the Russian *rusalka* (p. 180), both of which topics involve an “otherworld,” an eternal life above and below the sea. A discussion of the otherworld ought at least to mention the magical and the mystical and how they inform great art, for these realms surface repeatedly in Nabokov’s work (witness Pnin’s research on folklore and its mermaid tails). Alexandrov does not discover this kind of material because he does not look beyond the confines of the text. He spends two pages convincing us that Sebastian Knight’s fictional novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, is about the afterlife (p. 141) without knowing, apparently, that the asphodel was the flower of the dead covering the meadows of Hades in Greek mythology. Annotation would have helped him out of his hermeneutical fairy circle.

Like Alexandrov’s study, Leona Toker’s *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* also purports to redress an imbalance in Nabokov criticism that rarely “deal[s] with the combination of formal refine-

ment and poignant humanism in Nabokov's fiction” (p. ix) and to do so by exploring the “moral/aesthetic phenomenon called Vladimir Nabokov” (p. x). In this vein, her discussion of the effect of the Nazi setting of *King, Queen, Knave* is illuminating; Franz is seen as “a Nazi in the making” (p. 50) whose smell may be traced to Nabokov's statement that “average reality begins to rot and stink” if not animated by individual creativity.

The introduction suggests that her book will answer the question, What was Nabokov’s metaphysics? (p. 4) by exploring his relationship to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. This might have led to a fruitful application of the real/Ideal, two-world cosmology. But Toker calls her readings “broodings” rather than closely argued interpretations, and the chapters do not fulfill the introduction’s promise. As J. E. Rivers remarks in “Nabokov for the Nineties,” Toker’s concepts of mystery and of structure, like her language, unfortunately remain opaque.15

Barabtarlo eschews interpretation in favor of annotation. In *Phantom of Fact* he provides a superb do-it-yourself *Pnin* kit: 210 pages of annotations, five appendices, a bibliography, and thirty pages of densely packed introductory notes. Since Nabokov’s novels are designed to lead the reader on a process of discovery, this is an ideal format for research that can introduce the willing student at any level to the pleasures of Nabokov’s texts. Barabtarlo condenses a vast amount of knowledge into minimal and well-indexed space, allowing us to note patternings within the text, identify references and sources, and follow Nabokov’s editorial changes.

The introduction is divided into four parts: the history of the text, a chronology, *Pnin*’s cast of over three hundred characters, and “Structure, Thematic Lines, Theory.” Part 4 frames the annotations, raising the central question of the contradictory views of Pnin and the narrator N-. Barabtarlo concludes that from an aerial view of the novel’s labyrinth, “all contradictions will cohere” (p. 38). The notes to *Pnin* do suggest interesting ways to view the problems posed by the novel, which the commentator has translated into Russian, but solutions remain fluid—no stillicide has been committed. The study of Nabokov’s novels, especially *Ada*, would profit from a great deal more of this kind of work, preferably by scholars as multilingual and attuned to Nabokov as Barabtarlo is.

Brian Boyd’s two-volume biography is a landmark in Nabokov studies. Extremely valuable for its thoroughness and reliability, it now provides the single most complete reference on Nabokov’s life. This

biography combines scrupulously accumulated facts with careful readings of Nabokov's works, gathering for the first time in one account most of the previously available information about Nabokov's life and works and adding many interesting details.

In *The Russian Years* Boyd does a remarkable job of conveying the history and atmosphere of Russia in the decades before the revolution as a background for Nabokov's father's career. He also integrates and correlates vast amounts of documentation—Nabokov's letters; interviews about or with Nabokov; reviews of Nabokov's work; Nabokov's poetry, short stories, plays, novels, and reviews.

But "a serious biography is not adorned by good stories!" as Nabokov reportedly told Andrew Field, and Brian Boyd has acquiesced to his subject's requirements. He has had access to Nabokov's correspondence and has interviewed Nabokov's widow, but he avoids anything that might seem an invasion of the Nabokovs' privacy. Thus this monumental biography adds little about the author's life that would be of interest to the general reader. By the end of *The American Years* Nabokov's little black book is the main source of a catalog of who visited him when, which hotels the Nabokovs stayed in when away from Montreux, and whether it rained too hard to hunt butterflies that day.

Particularly in *The Russian Years*, however, Boyd does provide new detail that will interest those familiar with Nabokov's works and methods. For readers of *Speak, Memory*: Nabokov's great-grandfather did not in fact discover the Nabokov River in Novaja Zemlja. Rather, it was named for him by his friend Count Lutke (p. 17); Nabokov's English governess, Miss Norcott, was dismissed because it was discovered that she was a lesbian (p. 52); the real-life names of "Colette" and "Lensky" are Claude Desprès and Filip Zelenskij. That Nabokov's relationship with Valentina Shulgina provided the prototype for "Tamara" had already been Fielded, but that five of her actual letters were incorporated into *Mary* is new (p. 146). It is interesting that at age eleven Nabokov translated Mayne Reid's *The Headless Horseman* from English into French alexandrines, and that he chose not to report this in discussing his reading of it in *Speak, Memory*. Boyd does not speculate on Nabokov's motive here, probably because the question of cultural mirroring as a structuring principle of Nabokov's art is, regrettably, not taken up in the biography. (I would remark that, since Nabokov establishes the Russian and the Anglo-American traditions as twins in his work, for him to cite this English-French translation as his first, or even to mention translating Heine's texts for Schubert and Schumann lieder at age nineteen [p. 145], would have marred the symmetry

crafted throughout his oeuvre.) Boyd also provides new information about *Invitation to a Beheading*, confirming Field’s supposition (not mentioned) that Nabokov must have read Zamjatin’s *We* (p. 415), but the confirmation comes only in the course of denying Kafka’s effect on the novel. Boyd tries to undercut speculation about a possible relationship between Zamjatin’s anti-utopia and Nabokov’s novel by referring to the generic utopian novel (*Erewhon*) and to Shakespeare (*The Tempest*). Apparently a contemporary writer should not be considered to have affected Nabokov’s work.

Boyd’s interesting new material in *The American Years* includes Nabokov’s satisfyingly detailed account of his ham poisoning in a Cambridge *Wursthaus* on D-Day (pp. 73–76) that augments our appreciation of Gradus’s gastrointestinal agonies and shows life imitating the art of Nabokov’s pun on ‘vetchina i vechnost’ (ham and eternity) in his story “Ultima Thule” two years earlier. Among the reviews of Nabokov’s work that Boyd surveys, the high point is Groucho Marx’s comment: “I’ve put off reading *Lolita* for six years, until she’s 18” (p. 376).

Boyd’s readings of Nabokov’s works in *The Russian Years* are excellent and well-balanced. There are a few curious omissions—for example, the all-determining theme of lust in *Laughter in the Dark* is for some reason avoided. The Berlin stories might better be treated as a group than interspersed chronologically with the life, because the (unnoted) unifying theme—Berlin as a parody of the other world into which the émigré has “died”—is obscured and Boyd’s narrative flow interrupted. Boyd reads the works as a progression toward Nabokov’s masterpieces, *The Gift, Lolita, Pale Fire,* and *Ada,* evaluating them in part by how well the shared themes are developed. He makes an excellent central point that is insufficiently understood in other criticism: that Nabokov will treat a theme in both its positive and negative variations. This insight is crucial for understanding Nabokov’s oeuvre as a totality. While the word ‘metatext’ has been bandied about, no one has yet realized that Nabokov designed his total oeuvre as a Hegelian dialectical spiral, as shown by modifications he made in translating his Russian works into English and his English works into Russian. The mirroring halves of Nabokov’s literary career are implied by Boyd’s two volumes, but this central theme is nowhere developed, remaining a subject for some future monumental study.

In *The American Years*, Boyd’s discussion of the works becomes eccentric in a desire to come up with a radical new interpretation. His

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17. Ibid., p. 148.
strangely literal reading of *Lolita* removes the carefully structured ambiguity that surrounds Quilty, Humbert’s version of a German Romantic double in the tradition of Poe. Boyd castigates Lionel Trilling for “assign[ing] the murder [only] eight words” (p. 231)—perhaps we should prosecute William Wilson. Boyd’s reading of *Pale Fire* is even more set upon reducing the shimmer of ambiguity. In a draft for the foreword to the revised *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov had noted concerning his index, “as John Shade says somewhere” (p. 445). Boyd claims this “proves conclusively that Nabokov had Shade in mind as the author of foreword, poem, commentary and index”—that is, Shade has written the whole book. Shade “kills himself off,” according to Boyd, in order to “project himself out into the mirror world” and live on “as his mirror-image, Kinbote”: an act of “liberation of the personality that may be possible beyond death” by which “he wants to try to enter another soul, the soul of someone as remote from himself as possible” (pp. 447, 446). Shade’s and Kinbote’s simultaneous existence remains unaccounted for.

On an early index card of the manuscript of *Pale Fire* which Boyd does not quote (why not?), in one of the first glimmerings of the novel from 1957, Nabokov describes a variety of childishly absurd versions of the hereafter. Kinbote’s Zembla is one variation on that theme, as Shade’s Boschian “porcupines and things” is another (p. 21). Is there an advantage to having the two characters cancel each other out? What we really want to know is whether, as it seems, Nabokov had some species of supernatural experience. I hope that he recorded it somewhere and that, after we are all dead, future scholars will have the thrill of finding out about it directly from him.

Secondary sources frequently cited by Boyd are Andrew Field’s *Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Part* and *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*.19 But Boyd rebukes Field for “sheer bluster” and for a “preposterous error made possible only through Field’s ignorance of” etc. (*The Russian Years*, pp. 539, 540). Negative evaluations—familiar from Boyd’s book on *Ada*20—also accompany several of the very few references to other secondary sources. Thus Tammi’s “comprehensive, sensitive, astute” study is deemed “ponderously scholiastic” (*The Russian Years*, p. 566) and Mary McCarthy is praised for excitement in her “remarkable and influential” “Bolt from the Blue” but accused of having become “overintoxicated in tracking down the novel’s literary allusions” so that she “soon short-circuited sense” (*The American Years*,

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On the whole, much scholarship from which Boyd has benefited over the years goes unacknowledged. This omission is a symptom of a peculiar identification with his subject that unfortunately limits the value of Boyd’s biography. Nabokov’s power as a writer creates passionate partisans among his readers. Boyd’s devotion manifests itself in exaggerated claims for Nabokov’s art: “with a surer skill than almost any artist,” “to a degree no one before him had even imagined possible,” “his style is psychology at its finest” (The Russian Years, pp. 298, 299, 302). Boyd enthusiastically embraces what he considers to be Nabokov’s views: “Nabokov finds his true way, not borrowing from the panoply of old creeds” (The Russian Years, p. 251), while the entire genre of tragedy pales for Boyd before Nabokov’s art: Nabokov “takes care not to build plots in which coincidences are chained to one another with the phonily inexorable logic of tragedy” (The Russian Years, p. 299).

As a corollary of Boyd’s partisanship, the biographer frequently takes the subject’s side in his affairs without providing the whole story. A case in point is Boyd’s biased treatment of Nabokov’s relationship with Roman Jakobson. Boyd mentions that Nabokov asked Jakobson for assistance in finding employment in 1950 (p. 167), but not that as late as 1953 Jakobson was trying to get Nabokov a job at Brandeis (letter of June 8). Also omitted are other requests made to Jakobson: in January 1952 Nabokov asked for a suitable course for Dmitri, then a Harvard freshman fluent in Russian but with “appalling” grammar; in May 1953 he asked Bollinger for an advance for the Slovo publication and duly received $500, while his collaborators Jakobson and Szeftel received $250 each, presumably on Jakobson’s recommendation (which may also explain why Nabokov was not asked to return the advance when he withdrew from the project). Boyd reports Nabokov’s delight at this turn of events with no indication of Jakobson’s involvement (p. 311).

22. In The American Years Boyd circumvents acknowledging the same contributors as Alexandrov, especially Johnson, whom he credits with a minor discovery (p. 77n) while burying the major ones. At the least, Johnson should have been footnoted on pp. 444, 709, n. 4 (on Botkin), 507 (on the index to Speak, Memory), and 545 (on genealogy in Ada). Boyd, like Alexandrov, also writes twenty-five pages on Pale Fire without citing Find What the Sailor Has Hidden, even when he states its central hypothesis (p. 456). When Boyd mentions that Nabokov “noted down a reference to the Old Norse Kongs-skugg-sio” (p. 315), he does so in conscious (but invisible) dialogue with the Viking material in Sailor (Meyer [n. 12 above], pp. 41–52). One would like to know more—just what did Nabokov write down?
23. I am grateful to Stephen Rudy of New York University, the editor of Roman Jakobson’s collected works and author of a forthcoming biography of Jakobson, for this information.
Elsewhere, moreover, Boyd makes unfounded and unreferenced allegations, first about Jakobson’s famous “elephant-for-a-chair-in-zoology” rejection of Nabokov for a position at Harvard. Boyd calls Jakobson “the star performer in Harvard’s Slavic troupe” (revenge by circus metaphor?) and then charges that Jakobson, although a linguist, “staunchly opposed someone else who might take top billing” for a position as a literary scholar (p. 303). Regarding Nabokov’s break with Jakobson, Boyd first reports Nabokov as explaining this as an inability to “stomach your little trips to totalitarian countries” (at the least, an arguable position). But Boyd proceeds to tell us that Nabokov was “in fact convinced that Jakobson was a Communist agent” (p. 311), a preposterous allegation (my turn)—if it was ever made, for it is impossible to decipher from Boyd’s note which of several sources is supposed to be the authority—since Nabokov knew that Jakobson had been a Kadet during the revolution.

Throughout, Boyd adopts Nabokov’s point of view and adds his own scorn. Freudian theory figures as “archaic mythmaking and witchcraft” (The Russian Years, p. 91), “ill-fitting mythic masks,” and is characterized by “absurd and worthless ease” of explanation (The American Years, pp. 160, 434–35). Walter Arndt’s translation of Eugene Onegin is labeled “nonsense jingles,” while, because of Zinaida Shakhovskaja’s anti-Semitic attacks on Nabokov’s art, her brother is dismissed as “a rootless, alienated, spiritless decadent” (The American Years, pp. 327, 397).

Russian literature has always had a propensity to the polemical, and Nabokov, for all his subtlety, participated in that tradition. The same tendency, with considerably less motivation, mars Boyd’s narrative, where the reader (“some readers,” “some critics,” “most readers” [The Russian Years, p. 308]) as viewed by Boyd parodies the winged ladies and gentlemen of Humbert’s jury: Nabokov “did not believe, like the truck driver who tells you that transport makes the world go round, that . . . art . . . was a vocation more important than other human activities” (The Russian Years, p. 293). Boyd derides misreaders for various putative misprisions: “The dismissal of metaphysics is itself a metaphysical issue; its dismissers have themselves been dismissed; . . . [Nabokov] makes [these problems] seem worth facing afresh and injects into them an urgency only the numb would not feel” (The Russian Years, p. 295). Also elaborately dismissed are “those sentimentalists who opine, over their steak, over their claret from a vineyard drenched in . . .

24. The Nabokovian “preposterous” is a mark of the enchanted critic, of the defenders of the author against marauding commentators. Boyd uses “preposterous” four times in 159 pages.
insecticide, that collecting butterflies is a cruel pursuit” (The Russian Years, p. 74). This rhetoric mercifully abates in The American Years.

Readers and critics have had difficulty distinguishing Nabokov’s person from his persona, leading his son Dmitri to insist in his foreword to his father’s Selected Letters that “in his real life... Nabokov was the warmest and most humorous of men.”25 Dmitri also maintains there that Boyd’s two-volume “thoroughbred” cannot be called an “authorized” biography, despite the family’s having provided access to all (?) Nabokov’s papers, and despite Boyd’s evident desire to consider their wishes in every way. Yet details peep through in those few instances (would that there were a great many more!) when Boyd allows us to read Nabokov’s mail and discover qualifications of Nabokov’s benignity. Nabokov is shown to have been “an incorrigible tease,” upsetting his “victims” (Nikolai Nabokov’s word) by asking them questions about the nonexistent life of an invented writer, king, or general, or moving George Hessen to bloody Nabokov’s nose in an exhibition boxing match (The Russian Years, pp. 277, 185, 267). Nabokov’s warmth did not apparently extend to his then nineteen-year-old brother Kirill, whose poems appeared in Volja Rossii in 1930: “Why this naive antithesis—there a star, here a factory, roses there, electricity here—how are factories worse than roses, might I ask? All this is parlor metaphysics and has not the least relation to life, to poetry—to real birds and real roses. On the other hand, though, all the poems I have read in Volja Rossii... are on the same level” (The Russian Years, p. 362). In the second volume, Boyd writes that Nabokov, “vexed that Sergey loved not only a man but a German-speaking one,” felt he had “spoken rather harshly of his brother” after Sergey had bravely died in a German concentration camp for speaking against Hitler and Germany (p. 89). Boyd otherwise entirely avoids the question of homosexuality in Nabokov’s family, although such discussion might provide insight into its frequent appearance in Nabokov’s art.

Field fell out with the Nabokovs for publishing the details of Nabokov’s romantic life. Boyd attempts to minimize the damage. He leaves out several ladies and describes the affair with Irina Guadanini in Paris in 1937 in such a fragmented way that it is possible not to realize that Nabokov had left his Jewish wife with a two-year-old son in Berlin from January to May of 1937 where she was expected to pack up their possessions and meet him in Prague. It is not the biographer’s job to pass judgment, of course, but we are told about the affair that “Nabokov was never a person who knew how to love lightly”

and asked to sympathize with Nabokov's psoriasis brought on by the "nervous tension of the affair" (The Russian Years, pp. 437, 434).

Boyd’s partisanship extends to Nabokov’s fiction. Because Boyd, like Alexandrov, identifies John Shade as a Nabokovian alter ego, he claims Shade’s “brilliant” poem is “tender, brave, wise and witty,” that it “works superbly on its own,” and that “English poetry has few things better” (The American Years, pp. 439–40). A comparison with Nabokov’s own sophisticated verse—for example, his two Onegin stanzas—would suggest that Nabokov here impersonates the mundane and chatty prose-in-verse form characteristic of a type of American academic poet (undershirt, chinos, loafers; student lover in black leotard) and thus carefully constructs Shade’s verse not to “scan right” (as Shade hopes; see line 977). To illustrate:

But certain words, chance words I hear or read,
Such as “bad heart” always to him refer,
And “cancer of the pancreas” to her.

[Lines 76–78]

Because Shade shares many of Nabokov's views (though he fails to recognize the presence of the spirit world), Boyd for some reason calls Hazel “brilliant” and takes sides against Kinbote, whom he faults for his cheap, nasty control over Gradus (The American Years, pp. 449, 451). In another display of partisanship, Boyd suggests that Kinbote should feel compassion for “the internal torment of [Gradus’s] incipient diarrhea” (p. 451), although Gradus is Kinbote’s embodiment of his own doom, even more clearly than Quilty is for Humbert.

Nabokov frequently stressed the enchantment of literature and embedded myth and fairy tale in his art. Discussing Pale Fire, Boyd mentions for no particular reason that “an artist called Lang” paints Sybil Shade’s portrait (p. 438), but misses the reference to Andrew Lang, the editor of the twelve multicolored volume fairy tale collections. Let us now bring more awareness of the magical to Nabokov studies, examine the miraculous metamorphoses distinctive to Nabokov’s recombinations of life and art, and try to (re)capture the spirit of wonder he provides us in his work.