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Nabokov's Short Fiction

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The first comprehensive collection of Nabokov’s short fiction, containing sixty-five stories, was published eighteen years after his death. Nabokov had written the first fifty-five in Russian and later, together with his son Dmitri, translated them into English; he wrote the remaining ten in English after emigrating to America in 1940. Dmitri Nabokov compiled the 1995 volume from the four definitive English collections of thirteen stories each that appeared during his father’s lifetime, Nabokov’s Dozeny, A Russian Beauty and Other Stories, Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories, and Details of a Sunset and Other Stories, adding thirteen more, eleven of which had never before been translated into English. The unexpected discovery of an early story, “Easter Rain,” raised the total number of stories in the 1997 Vintage edition to sixty-six.

Nabokov wrote his first story, “The Wood-Sprite,” in 1921, when he was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge, and his last, “Lance,” in 1951, when he was teaching literature at Cornell. During that period Nabokov was an émigré writer in Berlin and Paris, a lepidopterist at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, and a professor of literature, first at Wellesley and later at Cornell. He composed nine novels in Russian; the first novel he wrote in English was The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941), and his greatest American novels were written after he abandoned the short story: Lolita (1955), Pnin (1957), Pale Fire (1962), and the Russian version of his memoir, Drugie berega (1954), that became Speak, Memory (1966) in its final English incarnation, appeared in the following decade.

Nabokov called the short story a “small Alpine form” of the novel; while the stories have greater unity of time and action than the longer works, the same themes and methods appear in both genres, reflecting the eras of his life through the prism of his art.

The Nabokov family had to flee Bolshevik Russia in 1919, leaving behind the family house in Petersburg as well as their beloved Vyra estate that is the setting for Nabokov’s earliest memories – of his parents, of the birth
of his passion for butterflies, of his first love and first poem, as described in *Speak, Memory*. The loss of his perfect childhood, his country and his Russian language was made even more agonizing when Nabokov’s father was killed trying to shield his friend Pavel Miliukov from an assassin’s bullet on March 28, 1922 at a lecture in Berlin. In the stories written and published in émigré journals during his early years in Berlin, Nabokov tries to turn that intense pain into art.

**Russia**

The earliest stories are variations on the theme of the loss of Russia. In “The Wood-Sprite” (1921) a figure from Russian mythology is forced into emigration because his forest is being cut down. The sprite comes to the writer of the story and reminds him of the “endless, irreplaceable happiness” they had romping together in the “old country.”: “It is we, Rus’, who were your inspiration, your unfathomable beauty, your agelong enchantment!” (5), the Sprite exclaims. The Russian for wood-sprite is “Leshii” ; in his Russian novel *The Gift* (1937–1938), Nabokov names the hero’s Vyra-like family estate “Leshino” – the loss of the enchantment of the estate’s natural universe and attendant spirits, the *leshii* and the *rusalka* (“water-nymph”), is a recurring theme in his work. The ancient folk spirits connect the Russian natural universe and Nabokov’s childhood experience of it to magic, enchantment, and the otherworld. These associations characterize the femme fatale Nina Rechnoi (meaning “of the river”) in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* who draws the writer hero back from his English world to his native Russian element at his death.

But Nabokov sees the danger of giving in to the constant longing for Russia. In “Russian Spoken Here” (1923), a family of émigrés in Berlin captures a Soviet police spy from the GPU (the earlier name of the KGB) in their apartment and decides to keep him locked in their bathroom. Their desire for revenge on the Communists who have turned their country into a prison turns them into prison wardens themselves, obsessed with their captive for the foreseeable future. In “Razor” (1926) another Russian émigré in Berlin wreaks revenge on the officer who had once ordered his execution during the Civil War by terrorizing him in his barber chair. For a moment Razor himself almost becomes an executioner but is content to have caused the officer the same anguish of a death sentence that he himself experienced.

This constant preoccupation with Russia eclipses one’s vision of the world. In “The Seaport” (1924), émigrés living in a town in southern France exist in their own Russian cocoon, and the hero mistakes a French prostitute for a Russian woman he knows, addressing her in the wrong language. In
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“Easter Rain” (1925), Josephine, a Swiss governess (drawn from Nabokov’s own, whose portrait he drew in “Mademoiselle O,”) who has worked for twelve years in Russia, dyes eggs and, although she is coming down with pneumonia, brings them to some émigré acquaintances on Russian Easter. They are only irritated by her sentimentality and unwilling to share their private loss with her; yet she too lives in a lost Russian past and is almost absorbed into the otherworld by her fever. In her delirium she imagines that the statue of Peter the Great leaps off his bronze steed (as he does in Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman* and Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg*) and kisses her three times in the Russian fashion. When she returns to consciousness at the end of the story, she sees her caretaker on the floor, retrieving the ball of black yarn that has rolled under the chest of drawers. The image of the ball rolling into and out of a confined space becomes an emblem of human existence, first entering the world we know from the otherworld and then returning to that otherworld. In the later novel, *The Gift*, the hero’s set of poems is framed by “The Lost Ball” and “The Found Ball”; in *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935–1936) a ball rolls into, around, and then, improbably, out the door of the hero’s prison cell. Josephine’s illness has temporarily taken her out of human existence, but returns her to life. Awakening to a beautiful spring rainfall to find her caretaker squirming on the floor under the chest of drawers, Josephine “broke out in peals of laughter . . . feeling that she was resurrected, that she had returned from faraway mists of happiness, wonder and Easter splendor” (648). She has returned refreshed and restored from a dream Russia where she cannot read the “wondrous news” in a dream newspaper, to life in her homeland, after a six-day visit to the Russian edition of the otherworld.

By 1926 Nabokov began to let go of the theme of the émigré’s obsession with a lost Russia but returned to it in a richer treatment years later in “The Visit to the Museum” (1939). The tale begins realistically and gradually becomes surreal; the hero of the story goes into a provincial museum in southern France in search of the portrait of his friend’s grandfather and, lost among the exhibits, takes a surreal journey through history that becomes increasingly terrifying as he “escape[s] from the museum’s maze” (284) into post-Revolutionary Petersburg, by then Leningrad: “Alas, it was not the Russia I remembered, but the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land” (285). The fantasy of return to Russia, accompanied by the fear of the real consequences for an émigré (who might not be able to get out again), haunts Nabokov’s art and takes on the significance of a journey to the otherworld. The hero of “The Visit to the Museum” sees himself as a “semiphantom in a light, foreign suit . . . desperate to protect my fragile, illegal life” and incapable of shedding
his “integument of exile” (285). For the émigré, a return to Russia can take place only in fantasy or in the otherworld; in Nabokov’s art the two spaces overlap and death can be envisioned in terms of a return to Russianness, as it is for Sebastian in the novel written at the same time, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.

In his progress through the museum, the hero of “The Visit to the Museum” goes through a long passage and enters a room full of musical instruments, in the center of which stands “a bronze Orpheus” (283). The Orpheus myth is an important emblem of Nabokov’s experience. Orpheus was the greatest musician and poet in Greek legend. Apollo gave him a lyre and the Muses taught him to play it so beautifully that he could make the trees dance, tame wild beasts, soothe quarrels, and drown out the songs of the Sirens. He marries Eurydice, who dies when, walking in a meadow, she steps on a viper. Orpheus descends to the Underworld to bring her back, and charms Charon so that he ferries him across the Styx. Hades agrees to let Eurydice return on condition that Orpheus not look back at her until she reaches the light of the sun. She follows him, guided by his music, but he looks back before she has reached the sunlight and so loses her forever.

In “The Visit to the Museum,” the hero is returning to the Underworld in returning to Russia; by the end of the tale he has managed to escape the Soviet version of it, but not to bring back anyone or thing that had he loved there.

Orpheus

In the earlier “The Return of Chorb” (1925), Nabokov had used the Orpheus myth to structure the entire tale. Chorb’s wife dies on their honeymoon in the south of France when she touches “the live wire of a storm-felled pole,” the “impact of an electric stream” playing the role of the viper that kills Eurydice (148). Chorb thought that “if he managed to gather all the little things they had noticed together – if he re-created thus the near past – her image would grow immortal and replace her forever” (140). He retraces their journey from southern France back to the room in a disreputable hotel in Berlin where they had spent a chaste wedding night. “Thus Chorb traveled back to the very source of his recollections, an agonizing yet blissful test now drawing to a close. All there remained was but a single night to be spent in that first chamber of their marriage, and by tomorrow the test would be passed and her image made perfect” (152). To relive that first night, Chorb requires a stand-in for his wife and hires a prostitute to play the role. He brings her to the hotel room and immediately goes to sleep. She looks out the window at a statue of “a stone Orpheus” and then also goes to sleep.
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“Her sleep lasted not more than an hour: a ghastly drawn-out howl roused her. It was Chorb screaming. He had woken up sometime after midnight, had turned on his side, and had seen his wife lying beside him. He screamed horribly, with visceral force. The white specter of a woman sprang out of bed . . . the ordeal was over” (153). Chorb has succeeded in leading his wife’s spirit back from the moment of her physical death to the beginning of their wedded life, succeeding where Orpheus failed because Chorb is not concerned with his wife’s mortal aspect. The story parodies mortal existence in the form of the prostitute whose province is only physical love, as well as in the description of the mundane vulgarity of Chorb’s wife’s parents, the Kellers, from whose offensive household the couple ran away on their wedding night. The Kellers appear as the prostitute runs out of the room and Chorb, sitting on a couch smiling a “meaningless smile,” is confronted with the irrelevant demands of mortal life. The parents will be devastated when they learn of their daughter’s death, but Chorb has immortalized her spirit and can commune with it in the otherworld.

Nabokov juxtaposes the “real” world to an otherworld throughout his work, rendering mortal life in various forms, as theater, as a house or prison from whose windows one can just glimpse the otherworld. The mortal world, associated with motifs of bodily life, like ham, furniture, teeth, is a parody of the unknowable but infinitely beautiful otherworld that lies just at the limit of our ken. Through art one can gain some intuition of that world, and Nabokov identifies with Orpheus in attempting to traverse the boundary between the two realms. Chorb screams when he reaches that boundary; his “meaningless smile” may mean either that he is now at peace or that the experience has rendered him mad, or both.

Nabokov’s early stories depict the loss of a beloved, either of a wife or a son, transformations of his own loss in which he finds relief through the pleasure of his artistic vision. In the early “Gods” (1923), a man is able to bear the loss of his infant son because he believes the son can hear his fable. “Words have no borders” (49). Words can reach the otherworld in the form of immortal art. While his wife goes to the cemetery, he waits in a vacant lot: “At my feet, a squashed tin glints rustily inside a funnel of sand . . . There is no death. The wind comes tumbling upon me from behind like a limp doll and tickles my neck with its downy paw. There can be no death . . . You and I shall have a new, golden son, a creation of your tears and my fables” (50).

For Nabokov the Orpheus myth unites the quest for the lost land and dead beloved with the idea that both can be reached through art. In the novel Pale Fire Nabokov’s theme of the quest for knowledge of the next world through art reaches its ideal state; the mad scholar Kinbote, who imagines he is the incognito King of Zembla, asks the poet John Shade to recreate his lost
kingdom in his poetry, to translate it into art. In 1939 Nabokov began writing what was to have been a novel, Solus Rex, but finished only two chapters of it, published as the stories “Ultima Thule” (originally chapter one) and “Solus Rex” (which would have been chapter two) that contain the elements of Pale Fire in an early stage of evolution. The two chapters/stories are the intermediate stage of the development of the ideas in “The Return of Chorb” into their brilliant realization in Pale Fire. Ultima Thule was the Greek name of the northernmost point of the known world. In that story, Sineusov’s wife has died, and he hopes to make contact with her in the otherworld, emblazoned by Ultima Thule. The story is couched as his letter to her, written in the hope that consciousness survives bodily death. He tells her that one night in his hotel room on the Riviera, his former tutor, Adam Falter, somehow suddenly solved the riddle of life and death, and began to scream “like a woman in the throes of infinitely painful childbirth” (506). When Falter confides his knowledge to his psychiatrist, it causes the doctor to die of a heart attack. Sineusov tries to get Falter to tell him the “essence of things” that has been revealed to him, but Falter refuses. Sineusov has told us that when his wife was dying, too weak to speak, she had written on a slate the things she loved most in life: “verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency” (510), and during their conversation, Falter slips in these words, speaking of “the poetry of a wildflower or the power of money” (515), and explaining “I act like a beggar, a versifier, who has received a million in foreign currency” (516). The story affirms the possibility of communication with the spirit of a beloved across the divide between life and death, the boundary Chorb and Falter attain around midnight in their hotel rooms. Falter denies Sineusov this access, so he is forced to resort to his art.

A “Swede, Dane – or Icelander” has commissioned Sineusov to illustrate his epic poem, Ultima Thule, written in a language unintelligible to him, about the political intrigues of some Northern king whose kingdom is on a remote island. Although the poet has never returned, and has left for America, Sineusov explains to his dead wife that he continues to illustrate the epic, hoping that “its spectral, intangible nature, the lack of aim or reward would lead me away to a realm akin to the one in which, for me, you exist, my ghostly goal” (511). Solus Rex is the tale of that distant Northern land, where Sineusov has become king in order to be reunited with his wife, now become Queen Belinda. Ultima Thule, like Charles Kinbote’s Zembla in Pale Fire, is at once kingdom, fantasy, and artistic creation, a parodic version of an otherworld that can bring solace to the bereft. In John Shade’s poem “Pale Fire,” Shade finds some “faint hope” that he may find his daughter Hazel in an otherworld, while his neighbor Kinbote hopes to find his own lost otherworld, Zembla, immortalized in Shade’s poem.
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Variations on the fate of the poet

In his stories, Nabokov considers variations on the themes of the fate of the émigré, the artist, the bereft mate or parent, the lepidopterist. As an experiment, an exercise in gratitude, he bestows one of his own blessings on an otherwise limited character. In “The Aurelian” (1930) the elderly German shopkeeper Pilgrum, a wurst and potatoes man, is, contrary to type, a dreamer with a secret passion for butterflies. Like Nabokov, he became infatuated with butterflies as a boy, but unlike Nabokov, he is “churlish,” unkind to his wife, and “ignorant of the world” (250). Mentally, Pilgrum visits the great lepidopteral sites and longs to travel. His chance finally comes when a rich amateur collector pays him 950 marks for a rare specimen that Pilgrum has on commission from a lepidopterist’s widow. Pilgrum gives her 50 marks, buys a ticket to Spain, and leaves his wife a note: “Off to Spain . . . Feed the lizards.” But he stops in his shop to pick up some change, where “eyed wings stared at him from all the sides, and Pilgrum perceived something almost appalling in the huge happiness that was leaning toward him like a mountain” (257). He drops his money pot, and dies of a heart attack when he stoops to pick up the coins. “Yes, Pilgrum had gone far, very far. Most probably he visited Granada and Murcia and Albarracin, and then traveled further to Surinam and Taprobane . . . So, in a certain sense, it is quite irrelevant that some time later . . . Eleanor saw . . . her husband, sprawling on the floor with his back to the counter, among scattered coins, his livid face knocked out of shape by death” (258). Even an unkind mundane chiseler can be a passionate lepidopterist and achieve his dream in the world of the imagination that grades immediately (in his case) into the otherworld, leaving his mortal remains on the floor of his little shop.

A similar thematic principle obtains in “Torpid Smoke” (1935). An unappealing nineteen-year-old Russian émigré in Berlin, Grisha, shares Nabokov’s passion for reading and writing Russian poetry and has one of Nabokov’s novels, The Defense, on his shelf along with Gumilev’s and Pasternak’s verse. Unlike Nabokov, he lives with his unaffectionate, lackluster family; his mother is dead and his father has made him study political economy. Grisha goes to his father in the dining room to ask for cigarettes; the event of the story is Grisha’s sudden realization that this sad moment of failed communication will become not only a painful memory but part of his creative process: “With terrifying clarity, as if my soul were lit up by a noiseless explosion, I glimpsed a future recollection; it dawned upon me that exactly as I recalled such images of the past as the way my dead mother had of making a weepy face . . . when mealtime squabbles became too loud, so one day I would have to recall, with merciless, irreparable sharpness, the hurt look of my father’s
shoulders as he leaned over . . . morose, wearing his warm indoor jacket powdered with ashes and dandruff; and all this mingled creatively with the recent vision of blue smoke clinging to dead leaves on a wet roof” (400).

And Grisha returns to lie on his couch in his room, enlivened by the arrival of a new metrical line involving “a farther ‘shore’” and classic northern chill, knowing that he is writing “puerile, perishable poems,” but no matter, “I trust the ravishing promises of the still breathing, still revolving verse, my face is wet with tears, my heart is bursting with happiness, and I know that this happiness is the greatest thing existing on earth” (400). Despite the unhappy circumstances of family and exile, Grisha’s art infuses him with joy. In the dining-room scene the narration moves from third person to first person: the duality of narrative voice conveys both Grisha’s experience and his story about the experience, as it does in Nabokov’s later novel, The Gift. He feels dissociation from his physical self in the beginning of the story: “He perceived himself (the pince-nez, the thin, dark mustache, the bad skin on the forehead) with that utter revulsion he always experienced on coming back to his body out of the languorous mist” (398). By the end of the story the feeling is put to creative use. Even such an unattractive character as Grisha may experience the bliss of artistic creation. The hero of The Gift, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, is a far more attractive variant of this young Russian émigré poet in the throes of composition in his room in Berlin, closer to Nabokov himself: he has a loving mother with whom he grieves for his lost father. Grisha is designed as Fyodor’s opposite – his life is even sadder, bereft of warmth and sympathetic genius, and yet his creative power can bestow absolute happiness.

Nabokov’s love of lepidoptery and verse composition are given to inferior, limited characters in “The Aurelian” and “Torpid Smoke”; in “The Circle” (1936) a refraction of the blissful life on the family estate is shared by another “inferior”: Innokenti, the son of the village schoolmaster, had viewed the aristocratic Godunov-Cherdyntsev family at Leshino with class-conscious indignation. The story is constructed as a circle, beginning “In the second place . . .” (375), which by the final sentence is revealed to be part of a list of the reasons Innokenti felt uneasy having met the Godunovs again in Paris after several years in exile. The first is that the daughter Tanya remained enchanting and invulnerable, the second that “he was possessed by a sudden, mad hankering after Russia” (375), and the third because he regretted the resentment and uncouthness of his youth. He recalls Tanya’s sixteenth birthday party at which he sat at the non-aristocratic distant end of the table, and her indirect confession of love when she leaves for the Crimea. Written in the third person ostensibly from Innokenti’s point of view, the story nonetheless conveys Nabokov’s vision of life at Vyra as described in
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_Speak, Memory_ and refracted through _The Gift_, a glorious life Innokenty is shut out of and, by his own admission, too envious or self-conscious to join in when invited.

**Thugs**

In Berlin Nabokov, forced into exile by the Bolsheviks and lamenting the establishment of a totalitarian regime in Russia, found himself surrounded by the increasing tyranny of Nazi Germany. Although he scorned the idea that any true artist was responding to social conditions, the horrors of the period nonetheless are echoed in his stories of the late 1930s. The theme of the artistic personality hounded by thugs appears in “The Leonardo” (1933), “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1937), “Tyrants Destroyed” (1938), “Lik” (1939), and “The Assistant Producer” (1943). In the first, Gustav, a furniture mover, and his unemployed brother Anton are irritated by Romantovski, a new lodger in their building, because he is different – he buys books, keeps odd hours, is unsociable. They bully him and finally kill him, knifing him in a street scuffle. They are amused to find out from the police that their victim was “a leonardo,” a counterfeiter. The narrator of the tale who had assembled the scenery at the beginning laments: “My poor Romantovski! And I who believed with them that you were indeed someone exceptional, that you were a remarkable poet whom poverty obliged to dwell in that sinister district. I believed, on the strength of certain indices, that every night, by working on a line of verse or nursing a growing idea, you celebrated an invulnerable victory over the brothers.” Then the set that the narrator assembled dissolves. “Everything floats away. Harmony and meaning vanish. The world irks me again with its variegated void” (367). The forces of mere materiality have killed the unique individual, an artistic type, however criminal. Gustav has been saving money to “marry Anna, acquire a sideboard, a carpet” (359). The details are part of the theme of life as a stage set, in which furniture is a sign of its temporary nature; the theme appears in Nabokov’s novel, _Invitation to a Beheading_, when the hero is visited in his prison cell by members of his family who bring all their furniture with them for the brief visit. In further characterization of the thug as existing exclusively in the material world, Gustav has a face “the color of Westphalian ham” (366). The ham motif appears in several of the stories as an emblem of tawdry everyday life until it is given a starring role in _Pale Fire_, where it temporarily disrupts the approach of the assassin Gradus. Ham is the opposite of eternity in the mortal/immortal pairing because of the sound play in Russian of _vetchina_ and _vechnost_, ham and eternity. The thugs have their ham, the artists – their eternity.
“Cloud, Castle, Lake” tells a similar tale of the individual hounded by a group of German tourists. A Russian émigré wins a trip in a lottery and accepts reluctantly, hoping that this trip “would bring him some wonderful, tremulous happiness. This happiness would have something in common with his childhood, and with the excitement aroused in him by Russian lyrical poetry, and with some evening skyline once seen in a dream, and with that lady, another man’s wife, whom he had hopelessly loved for seven years” (431). Although he is harassed on the train trip by the German tour group, who throw out his cucumber in favor of their own sausage, Vasiliy Ivanovich does find his happiness: the view, “in the inexpressible and unique harmoniousness of its three principal parts . . . was something so unique, and so familiar, and so long-promised, and it so understood the beholder that Vasiliy Ivanovich even pressed his hand to his heart, as if to see whether his heart was there in order to give it away” (435). He wants to stay there permanently, but the leader of the trip refuses to let him, tries to entice him with beer, but ends by taking him onto the train by force where “they began to beat him – they beat him for a long time, and with a good deal of inventiveness. It occurred to them, among other things, to use a corkscrew on his palms. The post-office clerk, who had been to Russia, fashioned a knout out of a stick and a belt, and began to use it with devilish dexterity . . . All had a wonderful time” (437). Again the foreign artistic sensibility is victimized by the German (and implied Russian) thugs, whose brutal group mentality is hostile to any individual, and immune to beauty.

Nabokov examines the mentality of these thugs in “Tyrants Destroyed” and takes revenge. The story’s narrator examines the anatomy of a tyrant, the ruler of the fictional Zoorlandia, beginning from his early years, describing how a “limited, coarse, little-educated man . . . a pig-headed, brutal vulgarian full of morbid ambition . . . dresses up in godly garb” (440) and transforms his “wildflowery country into a vast kitchen garden” (441), “penetrating everywhere, infecting with his presence the way of thinking and the everyday life of every person, so that his mediocrity, his tediousness, his grey habitue were becoming the very life of my country” (442). The narrator considers killing him, but Hamlet-like, delays – “I don’t know how to go about killing him” (454) – until he realizes that “[b]y killing myself I would kill him, as he was totally inside me” (457). Preparing for self-destruction, he is suddenly overwhelmed by the festivities taking place in honor of the tyrant’s fiftieth birthday and undergoes “a strange, almost alchemic metamorphosis,” understands his “sin against our great and merciful Master” (458), and repents his apostasy. But he is saved from this madness by laughter. “Having experienced all the degrees of hatred and despair, I achieved those heights from which one obtains a bird’s eye view of the ludicrous . . . in
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my efforts to make him terrifying, I have only made him ridiculous, thereby destroying him . . . This is an incantation, an exorcism, so that henceforth any man can exorcize bondage. I believe in miracles” (459).

Nabokov later effected this same exorcism, there of the dictator Paduk, in his novel Bend Sinister (1947), again incorporating the analogy with Hamlet and also allowing that hero relief in madness. The imagery of the colored lights at the birthday celebration repeats that found in Invitation to a Beheading, an earlier, more stylized and philosophical vision of a modern tyranny. In The Gift Nabokov looks back to the origins of this “giftless” type in his biography of N. G. Chernyshevski (1828–1889), emphasizing the critic’s blind materialism, limitedness, and lack of hygiene, in order to work out a “secret remedy against future tyrants” (460). In Pale Fire Nabokov distills his mockery of the type of thug-assassin into Kinbote’s portrait of Gradus.

Ambiguity

Despite the potent forces provoking Nabokov to destroy the tyrant through artistic means, he was nonetheless simultaneously able to write playful and elegant stories full of ambiguity. In “The Admiralty Spire” (1933), the narrator addresses an indignant letter to a lady writer whom he accuses of having “kidnapped my past” (349). Her novel about the love affair between Olga and Leonid, written under a male pen name and taking its title – “The Admiralty Spire” – from Pushkin’s Bronze Horseman, tells the tale of the narrator’s romance with Katya in what he claims to be a terrible distortion of it. He deplores the inexactitude of detail, the inclusion of political discussions of revolutionary events, and conventional descriptions, especially of himself (“I shall leave on your conscience his Lermontovian lustreless eyes and aristocratic profile” [350]). He replies to her novel with his own memories of their love: “what bliss it was, without rising, still picking berries, to clasp Katya’s warm shoulder and hear her soft laughter and little grunts of greed and the crunch of her joints as she rummaged under the leaves” (353). He concludes his tirade, “In spite of everything you were beautiful . . . so adorable that I could cry, ignoring your myopic soul, and the triviality of your opinions, and a thousand minor betrayals; while I, with my overambitious verse . . . and my breathless, stuttering speech . . . must have been contemptible and repulsive” (356). Then he drops his verbal disguise and addresses Katya directly, incensed by her version of their last meeting: “What a disgusting, senseless fabrication!” Both the reported tale and the narrator’s memories are ludicrous; the reader is left to decide whose rendition is the more accurate, the lady novelist’s or the poet-memoirist’s. The implicit discussion of
literary criteria mocks the idea that literary fiction must, or even can, mirror life, and by the end the very title of Nabokov’s story has acquired three sets of quotation marks – Pushkin’s, Katya’s, and Nabokov’s.

In “That in Aleppo Once . . .” (1943), written in English ten years later, the ambiguity is richer and more subtle, while employing the same device of the conflicting reports of the narrating man and the absent woman. Again a desperate character turns to a writer, a fellow Russian émigré called V. who is already established in New York when the narrator arrives there, to “clarify things for me through the prism of your art” (568). In the “apocalyptic exodus” from France, fleeing “something monstrous and impalpable, a timeless mass of immemorial horror” (the German invasion of France), the narrator has lost his newly-wed wife; the train he had gotten off briefly is gone, with his wife on it, when he returns. When he at last finds her again in Nice, she tells him she has betrayed him with a man she met on the train. He torments her violently, forcing her to tell him all the agonizing details over the days they spend getting the papers necessary to leave France. Suddenly she denies the entire story. “Perhaps I live several lives at once . . . Perhaps this bench is a dream and we are in Saratov or on some star” (565). They finally get exit visas and he dashes to Marseille for boat tickets. When he returns there is nothing in their hotel room but a sugar pink rose in a glass on the table – his wife is gone. He goes to friends to find her and learns that she has told them an elaborate tale: “she had madly fallen in love with a young Frenchman, . . . had implored me for a divorce and I had refused; that in fact I had said I would rather shoot her and myself than sail to New York alone” (567) and “loads of other preposterous details” such as “her dog, that poor beast which you hanged with your own hands before leaving Paris.” On the train south, his wife had started sobbing over this dog: “I cannot forget the poor dog.” The honesty of her grief shocked me, as we had never had any dog. ‘I know,’ she said, ‘but I tried to imagine we had actually bought that setter . . .’ There had never been any talk of buying a setter” (562). He takes the boat to New York alone, but on board meets a doctor acquaintance who says he had seen her a few days before boarding and “she said that I would presently join her with bag and tickets” (567).

The reader must again resolve conflicting tales. The narrator says he is convinced that his wife never existed, yet describes the “tiny brown birthmark on her downy forearm” (561). The address of his wife’s uncle in New York proves nonexistent, but a reliable source says the uncle and his wife have moved to San Francisco. Is the narrator delusional, his wife mad, or is it all V.’s fiction? The narrator concludes his letter: “It may all end in Aleppo if I am not careful. Spare me, V.: you would load your dice with an unbearable implication if you took that for a title” (568). In Shakespeare’s
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Othello, after the Moor has realized his error in killing his wife for her suspected unfaithfulness, he says: “Set you down this; / And say besides, that in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turban’d Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduc’d the state, / I took by th’throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him – thus” (act 5, scene 2). That V. nonetheless does take the title for the story may mean that, like Othello, the narrator has killed himself, tormented by his own suspicion, his wife’s possible infidelity, the wrong he has done her. It could equally suggest that V. has made an elegant tale of his friend’s misfortune, relating it not only to Shakespeare, but aligning Othello, the Moor of Venice, with the great-grandson of the Moor of Peter the Great, Pushkin, who suspected his wife Natalie of infidelity and perished in a duel over insinuations about it. The narrator describes his wife as “not much younger than Natalie of the lovely bare shoulders and long earrings in relation to swarthy Pushkin,” and as a poet, “finds pleasure in imitating the destiny of a unique genius (down to the jealousy, down to the filth, down to the stab of seeing her almond-shaped eyes turn toward her blond Cassio behind her peacock-feathered fan) even if one cannot imitate his verse” (561). That “blonde Cassio” killed Russia’s greatest poet. Whatever solution the reader arrives at, Nabokov’s story creates a three-layered tale of a husband’s violent jealousy that destroys him: Othello’s, Pushkin’s and his narrator’s.

American gems

Nabokov’s greatest stories, “Signs and Symbols” (1948) and “The Vane Sisters” (1951), were written in English. “Signs and Symbols” employs the device of “That in Aleppo Once . . .”: the reader must make an interpretive decision, thereby participating in deciding the characters’ fate, which places him in the role of co-author of the story. An old Jewish couple tries to visit their son in a mental institution, but when the two get there they are not allowed to see their son because he has again attempted to take his life, and the parents go home without giving their son the “innocent” birthday present of a basket of ten different fruit jellies in ten different jars. The son suffers from “referential mania,” imagining that “everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and his existence . . . Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees” (599). While this is clearly insane, his mother’s selective reading of the world through the prism of her own grief is also a distortion of reality. On the parents’ way to the hospital “the underground
train lost its life current between two stations" (598). Waiting for the bus on the way home they see “a tiny half-dead unfledged bird . . . helplessly twitching in a puddle”; on the bus a girl is weeping on an older woman’s shoulder. The wife forgets to give her husband the keys while she shops and he is briefly locked out of their apartment. At home, the husband goes to sleep while the wife looks over her old photographs, and sees “Aunt Rose, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths – until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she worried about” (601). At midnight, the husband gets up and they decide they will bring their son home. “We must get him out of there quick. Otherwise we’ll be responsible. Responsible!” (602). With the decision their spirits rise. The telephone rings, terrifying the mother. A young girl asks for Charlie. They continue planning to move their son when the phone rings again, the same “toneless anxious young voice” asks for Charlie and the wife explains, “You have the incorrect number . . . you are turning the letter O instead of the zero” (602). They sit down to a festive midnight tea. The story concludes as the husband reads the labels of the jam jars: “apricot, grape, beech plum, quince. He got to crab apple when the telephone rang again” (603).

Is the third call from the hospital, reporting that the son has finally succeeded in committing suicide? Have the images of dying things that fill the story been symbols of impending doom? Should we try to find meaning in the sequence of jam types to resolve the ambiguity? Should we associate the possibility of three Os with Nabokov’s motif of “all the nines turning to zeros,” signifying a transition from one world to another? Does the phrase “when the telephone rang” echo the moment when Nabokov learned that his father was killed, on “the night of March 28, 1922, around ten o’clock . . . when the telephone rang” (SM, 49 [ch. 2])? If we answer yes to these questions, we participate in both the son’s reading of the world as fraught with meanings referring to him and in the mother’s selection of heart-rending detail in her view of daily life; we read the dead underground line and the twitching fledgling as legitimate symbols of death and thereby condemn the son to suicide. The son is insane, and the mother’s flight from Russia and Nazi Germany give her all too legitimate reasons to understand life in terms of “the endless waves of pain that she and her husband had had to endure” (601). But Nabokov endorses neither the son’s nor the mother’s reading of the world; his stories are part of a struggle against a tragic view of life, an overcoming of the terrible cataclysms endured by so many, a refusal to give in to nostalgia and grief. Life cannot be read as if it were a work of fiction, and fiction should not consist of clumsy, determining symbols. And so we cannot know whether the phone call is from the young girl who has made a
third mistake, despite the mother’s careful explanation, or whether the son has finally “torn a hole in his world and escape[d]” (599).

“The Vane Sisters” answers the tragedies endured in “Signs and Symbols” with a joyful possibility: human consciousness survives death and continues to communicate with loved ones from beyond the grave. A professor of French describes a brilliant icy afternoon in the small hilly town where he teaches at a girls’ college. He notices “a family of brilliant icicles dripping from the eaves of a frame house” and how “[t]he lean ghost, the elongated umbra cast by a parking meter upon some damp snow, had a strange ruddy tinge” (620). Following these visual delights, he finds himself in an unaccustomed street where he encounters the young, brash, married professor D. who had formerly taught at the college. D. had an affair with an undergraduate, Sybil Vane, who committed suicide when he broke it off. D. casually mentions that Sybil’s sister Cynthia died the week before of heart failure.

The incident triggers the French professor’s memories of the Vane sisters. In a narrative which gradually reveals him to be a supercilious snob, he recalls how he had brought Sybil’s French exam containing her farewell to Cynthia, and “was impelled to point out to her the grammatical mistakes in it.” He describes the black hairs on Cynthia’s legs, her bitten, dirty fingernails, and her family with great condescension: “her mother’s first husband had been of Slav origin, but otherwise Cynthia Vane belonged to a good, respectable family” (623). The one thing he admires is her paintings, of metallic things, and of “a windshield partly covered with rime, with a brilliant trickle (from an imaginary car roof) across its transparent part” (624). But he is dismissive of her “theory of intervenient auras”: “For a few hours, or for several days in a row, and sometimes recurrently, in an irregular series, for months or years, anything that happened to Cynthia, after a given person had died, would be, she said, in the manner and mood of that person... The influence might be good or bad; the main thing was that its source could be identified. It was like walking through a person’s soul, she said” (625). The professor describes Cynthia’s experiments with spiritualism and her fondness for puns, logogriphs, and misshapen words. “And I wish I could recollect that novel or short story... in which, unknown to its author, the first letters of the words in the last paragraph formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message from his dead mother” (626). This is Nabokov’s instruction to look for the acrostic he has hidden in the last paragraph of “The Vane Sisters,” which goes unnoticed by the narrator. It reveals the source of his uncharacteristically vivid vision at the beginning of the story: “Icicles by Cynthia, meter from me, Sybil” (631). The narrator’s “raw awareness” of the “transparent stalactites backed by their blue silhouettes” (619) and
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the parking meter’s shadow was a gift from the generous sisters’ intervenient auras.

“The Vane Sisters” provides a counter to “Signs and Symbols.” Faith in the survival of human consciousness after death is the opposite of referential mania. The solipsistic madness where everything refers to self is a danger that Nabokov’s art persistently alerts us to; dwelling on one’s losses will blind us to the beauty of the universe and prevent our looking outwards for signs of tenderness from the beyond. The gift of artistic vision that the Vanes give the French professor is what spared Nabokov himself from feeling that he was at the center of a conspiracy – that took away his country, his father, his Russian language. The artist can reach beyond the boundaries of this life and both create and attain a world where “nobody will ever die” (SM, 77 [ch. 3]).

NOTE

1. Stories, 4. All further quotations from this collection will be indicated by a parenthetical reference containing the page number of the quotation.