

And Then, He Folds His Patterned Rug:  
Repressive Reality and the Eternal Soul in Vladimir Nabokov

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## Introduction:

Ever since he skyrocketed to literary infamy with the publication of *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov has stood as one of the most intriguing authorial figures of the postmodern era--publishing prose, poetry, and non-fiction in English, Russian, and French, translating literature into multiple languages (his own work as well as others', the most famous being his years-long labor over Pushkin's *Onegin*), and conducting interviews (almost entirely through correspondence) in a manner both irascible and charming. Sadly, the charges against *Lolita* as pornography, and Nabokov's audacity in giving Humbert Humbert such a slippery, poetically-appealing veneer, have overshadowed the theme of his entire oeuvre: how to reconcile horror and hope, when superficial reality offers both ineffable beauty and senseless cruelty.

Nabokov's oeuvre confounds and divides critics for much the same reason as the troublesome union of spirit and flesh divides men into philosophies and creeds. An eternal soul is housed in cell and bone without intrinsically being those things, but the soul is burdened when the body is burdened, and leaps when the body leaps—as John did in his mother's womb. Similarly, Nabokov's writing brews an ineffable mixture of grief and wonder, frivolity and burden; like men confronting the mysterious alchemy of life, critics read Nabokov's characters, individuals living and moving in a mysterious texture of reality that is parallel to the critics' own, and respond with pleasure or disgust—reacting as they would to the whole weave of human history. A fictional setting is not a “real” setting (no matter how closely Shade's university resembles Cornell), but being submerged in the world of another, whether that person exists in reality or not, creates understanding, which, in its turn, creates pity and love.

However, with his fierce humor and keen eye for the ridiculous, Nabokov frequently strikes his critics as being both cruel and impenetrable. But as Nabokov tells an interviewer, “I

am actually quite a mild old man . . . these are just gargoyles outside” (*Strong Opinions* 19). Instead of being an author who delights in his characters’ failures or the confusion of his readers, Nabokov is more like a magician, playing tricks with scarves and cards to provide the unexpected delight of a story cleverly and movingly told—here is truth, now, disappearing into his sleeve, but unexpectedly present again, only in your suit pocket. However, this playfulness should not be confused with flippancy. Nabokov’s interest is in finding redemption, or a pattern of meaning within the crudely ordered material world. Human dignity is no less dignified for searching, as Nabokov writes, for coincidences of pattern, or “asides of the spirit” while crashing to impending and obvious death on the cobblestone courtyard below (*Lectures on Literature* 374). Like Alice, or Don Quixote, both characters in an alien world, Nabokov and his characters search reality like strangers would search; honestly (thus, cruelly, to many minds), and earnestly, attempting to decipher some meaning from the inexplicable, or catch a glimpse of eternity’s hem. Nabokov is not cruel, but he does privilege the quest to slip beyond the limitations of selfhood and the temporal world over his readers’ ease of understanding. As the “witty, magical, and altogether wise Pierre Delalande” (an author of Nabokov’s own invention) writes, “I know (*je connais*) a few (*quelques*) readers who will jump up, ruffling their hair” (*Invitation* 8).

In this thesis, I will investigate how Nabokov uncovers these patterns of meaning in three different books: *Pale Fire* (1962), *Speak, Memory* (1966), and *Invitation to a Beheading* (translated in 1959).<sup>1</sup> To avoid offending Nabokov’s ghost and suffering his spook’s revenge

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<sup>1</sup> All three books were published later in Nabokov’s career (although *Invitation* was originally published serially in Russian, in 1935). While *Lolita* is Nabokov’s most famous and critically analyzed work, it does not suit my time frame, nor do I want such a vastly controversial work to overshadow the others in my argument. *Lolita* is a complex and beautiful work, and its themes suit the themes of my argument; however, to write lengthily about the book, without devoting extensive space to defend it from charges of cruelty, pornography, or even from being a purely

until the day of my death, I will use narrative theory, rather than, say, psychoanalytic, as my critical frame for seeing how Nabokov plots transcendence and hope for an otherworld into his writing, however obliquely. Each of the books in this thesis represent a variation on how to constellate hope in the otherworld<sup>2</sup> (being, as Vera wrote, her husband's main concern). In each work, Nabokov attempts to bring the frail, absurd, and marginalized to healing, and a permanent place in the pattern of eternity. Each of the books I address in this thesis represent an artistic variation, or a new mode with which to experience Nabokov's attempt to express hope in a place after the death--the otherworld--wherein all the frail, absurd, and marginalized characters are bound back into a pattern of eternity, like the frayed threads of an ornate rug.

Nabokov's desire to upend the traditional interpretation of time and space by denying the former's existence and the latter's relevance, in combination with his fierce determination to represent characters either evil, grotesque, or pathetically comic, suggests, not inscrutability for inscrutability's sake, but his desire to untangle the complicated threads of existence. Instead of denying the snarled knots' presence in the first place, he carefully tugs the plotlines until they come loose from the impenetrable mess of history. Being inscrutable and being concerned with the strange and complicated are far different; Nabokov sees the world as a work of art that has fallen to shambles, or been overwhelmed by the chimeras of generalized existence: death, time, and space.

As he writes in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov sees reality as a "very subjective affair" with endless false bottoms and unreachable layers (10). Being inscrutable and being concerned with the strange and complicated are far different. When Nabokov writes that reality requires

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amoral work, would be to privilege a controversy over my purpose: to reveal how Nabokov searches out patterns of transcendence, healing, and immortality in the absurdity of reality.

<sup>2</sup> As his wife, Véra, stated after her husband's death, her husband's main literary theme was the search for *potustoronnost*.

specialization, arguing that a lily becomes more real to a botanist, and even more real to a botanist specializing in lilies (*Strong Opinions* 10-11), his work reflects this: his novels are complicated works of artistry, and thus each work, by imitating and analyzing the intertwined nature of transcendence and tragedy, makes Nabokov more of an expert in the business of life. Imitating Visible Nature, the consummate artist, he is able to move deeper into the complicated layers of existence. As his mother said, the temporal world will seem unreal in comparison to the next; by investigating art, Nabokov becomes more of an expert, and the art that he believes makes meaning of the earthly world becomes more real to him. Like Shade, Nabokov can write his way to “some faint hope” (63).

For most of his life, Nabokov was already well-acquainted with the complicated reality of transience, marginalization, and displacement. Similarly, marginalization and loss are substantially real to most of his characters; the danger of the plot often centers on whether or not the characters can become experts in the signs of eternity. In Nabokov’s own life, patterning eternity and meaning usually meant finding moments of delight, or the “coincidence of pattern” (*Speak, Memory* 157). Even in the midst of fleeing Russia, mourning the loss of his first love, and the death of his father and brother, or even later—as Nabokov fled the Nazis with his wife and child—he continued studying butterflies and writing literature with unflagging dedication. In both these realms, he found “coincidence of pattern” in literature and perfectly artistic mimicry in butterflies—two activities that were, in contrast to the movements that threatened him, devoid of any clear utilitarian merit, and also vastly anti-Darwinian.

Although Nabokov frequently claimed separation from any political movements of established religious creeds (*Strong Opinions* 18), he believed the world was too artistically and purposefully arranged for Darwinian evolution to explain its beginning and continued existence.

Because he sensed the presence of an artistic pattern that an as-yet incomplete plot behind human history, Nabokov believed in a creator (or creators) that, while distant and inscrutable to those on earth, wove existence into an intricate, artistic purpose. The cruel nature of his characters' environments is only the medium in which Nabokov's mysterious puzzle of meaning is set; once free from limited time and space, the reader finds either an answer to the world's absurdity, or the promise that one is eventually forthcoming.

As evidenced by his refusal to systematize his own theology, or publicly affiliate, even tentatively, with the theology of any established religion, Nabokov directs his search for objective truth through the subjective experience. Like Shade, who sees a marble fountain in the brief heart-skipping beat of a momentary death, Nabokov aims for a subjective revelation about the afterworld. His work reacts against the generalized experience of Darwinism, in which the individual is swept along unconsciously during life, a hapless creation of his culture and context, and then erased upon death. Part of Nabokov's seeming arrogance in claiming to be "uninfluenced" by any other authors or creeds is due to his desire to affirm the dignity of the individual.<sup>3</sup> (Nabokov was famously, and fantastically, anti-Freudian; his hatred for all generalizations and scientific formulas to replace the individual spirit extended beyond Darwinian evolution, bleeding into Freudian psychology and most literary theories and theorists.) Nabokov refuses, and his characters John Shade and Cincinnatus refuse in his footsteps, to accept a system of truth in which his past experiences and the themes of his life and art are subservient to the orders of the masses.

In *Pale Fire*, two marginalized people dominate the text—Charles Kinbote, a

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<sup>3</sup> Because Nabokov's philosophy is reactionary rather than systematic, and because its foremost mode of expression is through his novels, he occasionally contradicts his most common theme (seeking reassurance in the soul's immortality); however, his affirmations are greater in number and power than the expressions of his anxiety.

homosexual Russian professor who is offensive, pathetic, and ridiculous by turns, and his colleague, the famous poet John Shade's dead daughter, Hazel, an unpleasant, unattractive girl who commits suicide before the novel begins. Kinbote and Shade enact two ways of trying to find a pattern of transcendence in tragedy. Because Shade mourns both his daughter's death and her tragically disappointing life, he molds this pity into a monument of art, constructing a poem to escape hopelessness, and grasp at a faint faith in his daughter's continuation after death. Kinbote, however, only pities himself, and instead of growing more clear, his attempt at artistry (the Foreword, Commentary, and Index to Shade's poem) slides further and further into a self-vaunting realm of fantasy. Because Shade possesses the imagination to see beyond the limits of his own desires, he successfully peels back layers of time and absurdity. When shot by a madman at the novel's end, Shade had finished his work, and groped his way to "some faint hope" (63). Kinbote, however, mires himself in an entirely internal world. With nothing valuable outside of himself to redeem, he cannot find, or even begin to find, a pattern of meaning in his life, and finally, without friends or kin, escapes his narrow existence through suicide. Because Kinbote does not control the pattern on his existence, the novel indicates that he will still find his self whole and healed after death; however, his despair mires him in solipsism, so that he cannot see the watermarks and secret stamps that Visible Nature, the great magician, offers as both hope and delight.

My second chapter concerns Nabokov's memoir, and proves more difficult in terms of locating Nabokov's sense of hopefulness. In *Speak, Memory*, the search for meaning and "coincidence of pattern"<sup>4</sup> has higher stakes, as the stories Nabokov tries to pattern are his own.

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<sup>4</sup> Nabokov uses art frequently to mean something that is beautifully and intentionally arranged. Hence, he frequently describes Lepidoptera as artistic, and as revealing of artistry. As a creator in an "unsullied ivory tower," Nabokov sees the art of arranging a story in literature as a diminutive

As he writes, he frequently expresses an anxiety in the future, the soul's immortality, and the afterlife that is rare in his other work; however, this anxiety is a natural reflection of the astonishing height to which his book aspires: if Nabokov fails to find a meaningful pattern, or any hints of immortality and beauty in the lives and deaths of his family and loved ones, his failure reflects either his own limited, solipsistic vision, or the absence of purpose in an absurdly material, absurdly spiritless world. This theme of a subjective recognition of objective truth (for Nabokov, discovering a fragment of an artistic pattern that suggests life's purposed construction, and the eternally-minded artist plotting scenes and orchestrating movements from backstage) emerges most forcefully in this chapter. To help structure my argument, I use Kierkegaard's writing—with a special emphasis on his idea that we need a subjective experience to graft our hearts into the divine.<sup>5</sup>

By resurrecting errant memories, then constellating the coincidence of pattern, Nabokov binds back all his life to its nucleus—his love for wife, Vera, and son, Dmitri. Moving from the beginning of his life to his journey to America, and from his anxiety over absurdity and later hope in transcendence, Nabokov creates a spiraling narrative that, by winding a path through time, denies the temporal's power. His stories move forward, then back, and then press farther forward than before, so that Nabokov's promise to connect his love to "the most distant reaches of the universe" can be fulfilled. He rejects the helpless cycling of Eastern religions; his life's end is not swallowed by the beginning: "A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see

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representation of the world's creator and creation. Although Nabokov was not a Christian, he frequently alludes to the presence of a being (or beings) who, like an illusive chessplayer of magician, guides history's progress towards its final, glorious climax. (Of course, it is also worth noting the "magician" and "chessplayer" are two metaphors Nabokov lent to authorship as well as his unknown god.)

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov's yearning for a subjective call to believe in objective truth, however, is not limited to *Speak, Memory*—although he does express this longing most explicitly while trying to constellate meaning from his own life.

my own life: (275). By creating a narrative that spirals through time, making general movements forward, but still dipping backwards, Nabokov avoids the trap of madness and reincarnation. as well as the relentless forward-march of a Darwinian world—linear, implacable, and devoid of any nostalgia for the devoured things of its past.

Of the three different books, *Invitation to a Beheading* is, at least upon the first reading, the most difficult to reconcile with Nabokov's attempt to salvage meaning from all history, as opposed to invalidating its details. Whereas reality in *Pale Fire* and *Speak, Memory* is an incongruous blend of absurdity and dignity, Cincinnatus's world is a sham in its entirety, and all his relationships with other characters have been equally devoid of merit. While all three of the books I address in this thesis have distinctly spiritual concerns, *Invitation To A Beheading* explicitly addresses a soul's fate in an evil world, whereas *Pale Fire* and *Speak, Memory* address a survivor's concern with finding hope for dead loved ones and seemingly inaccessible memory. Hence, the latter swim in a medium of disrupted time and space, which allows Nabokov the artistic freedom to plumb meaning from the vast chasms of "fore and aftertime" as he wills. In contrast, *Invitation's* concern is more with resisting the evil of the world, rather than rescuing the good.<sup>6</sup> By the novel's end, Cincinnatus finds that there can be no meaning about objective truth in his external world. When he finally believes in his own subjective knowledge—namely, the immortality and immutability of his selfhood—then the entire world falls away, and all problems of materiality vanish with it.

While truth and eternity are usually terms associated with universal laws, for Nabokov, the most beautiful and important truths were contained within individual memories, whether

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<sup>6</sup> These two outcomes are intrinsically linked, through the plot leans more towards the former rather than the latter—when the main character, Cincinnatus, resists evil, he is also able to rescue the good, although his immediate purposes were focused towards the former.

those memories are of finding a rare butterfly or watching his son search for shells on a foreign beach. Instead of suffering his memories to devolve, Nabokov forges literary symbols from partial images and small particles of his life, fashioning and reshaping what he loved so those loves could actively participate in the transcendence of his literature. Nabokov wrote prolifically—criticism and literature—and all beneath Mnemosyne's careful but capricious eyes, plotting truth to heal an unraveled past and redeem eternal souls from the absurdity of their finite environment. Instead of heedlessly preserving the whole, Nabokov presents his memories and plots to the forge for their dross to be burned away so the truth can be purified and reclaimed. Whether the purging occurs at any specific moment in the text, or is simply presented in the future, as the book's covers finally slap closed in resolution, Nabokov writes into eternal existence the aches, griefs, and startling, sudden, unaccountable flights of human joy and grace of personhood.

## Chapter One

### The Loud Amusement Park Outside of Your Window

While *Lolita*, that perennially sour, perennially enchanting child, remains Nabokov's most frequently analyzed work, *Pale Fire* boasts a similar popularity with literary critics<sup>7</sup>--a popularity in part due to the book's surprising structure. The novel is split between two narrators: John Shade, a professor of literature at Wordsmith University<sup>8</sup> who, almost immediately after finishing a new work of poetry, is killed by the stray bullet of an escaped madman; and Charles Kinbote, Shade's slightly deranged co-worker who wiles away the lonely hours of his life by stalking Shade (with remarkable diligence) and constructing a wild, fantastical history in which he stars as the deposed monarch of an imaginary country called Zembla. Shade comes to realize that art can help men transcend their limitations of space and time to access truth, and it seems that Kinbote has some similar, albeit foggy understanding of this same idea; however, while both men disrupt typical space/time formulas in their narrative, Shade's poem weaves patterns from past, present, and future in order to reclaim hope for his daughter's continued life after death, whereas Kinbote only tries to escape his troubles into a personal, but irrelevant utopia of self-indulgence and sameness.<sup>9</sup> The book's structure encourages this disruption of space and time, as

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<sup>7</sup> This fact is, of course, fairly wonderful to all who appreciate that a novel about an insane critic and annotator would be analyzed with a near-equal frenzy of annotation.

<sup>8</sup> Wordsmith College is a thinly-veiled Cornell, and New Wye, Shade's small university town, a thinly-veiled Ithaca. Nabokov taught at Cornell, and although *Lolita*'s success afforded him the wealth to retire from teaching, his fondness for the institution manifested itself in other novels as well.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Booth describes the impossibility of separating primary experience from the mediation of narration, and notes that narratives add "life upon life" for their narrator (14); however, while Shade may consciously remake the most simplistic, cliché narratives of his life in order to find its meaning, Kinbote narrates, not based upon primary experience, but according to his own solipsism. As Booth writes, "Many of us . . . [live] so much of our lives in stories that we must wonder what to call primary, the plowing and planting or the stories about plowing and planting."

the latter three sections are so liberally endowed with cross-references that an obedient reader will need to leap constantly forward and backward through the text.

The text's four sections include the Foreword, in which Kinbote weakly attempts to justify his theft and subsequent literary violations of Shade's last manuscript; "Pale Fire," Shade's actual poem (although whether or not Kinbote has made inappropriate changes to this as well might be disputed); the Commentary, in which Kinbote, through the infrastructure of pseudo-annotation, spins imaginary connections between lines or words from Shade's poem to his concocted memories; and, lastly, the Index, in which Kinbote cross-references and offers definitions for Shade's poetry with notes that are frequently hilarious, occasionally heartbreaking, and almost always irrelevant to the poem itself. The core of the novel is Shade's poem, "Pale Fire," which Kinbote seized after Shade's accidental assassination and promptly whisked away to edit in freedom from the pesky supervision of Shade's widow, publishers, or lawyers. For a reader to ferret out strands of truth from the different story fractals requires him or her to change habits and, instead of receiving the story, to help the author plot it; essentially, the reader must wrestle *not* to read the novel with the same sloppy egoism that leads Kinbote to misread his world.

Within the novel's craggy structures lurk seemingly infinite literary allusions and layers of meaning; however, *Pale Fire* is more than just a playful romp through the Western canon, or, a mere exercise in misreading, but also a poet's honest, loving, and occasionally brutal tribute to a dead daughter, and a solipsistic madman's imagined, but still fascinating tale of kingly isolation and isolated exile. These facets of a rich design show "infinity in finiteness" (Jansc  71). Both Shade and Kinbote hope to reinvent the painful, absurd reality of death and alienation

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And when we go too far along that line, or when we embrace certain kinds of destructive 'realities,' we are rightly declared deranged" (15).

by basting their memories to the hems of eternity; however, Shade aims to reclaim his daughter Hazel, alongside all good and true memories of existence, and Kinbote aims to create a new self—one glorified in the temporal world, admired as royalty by a nation of loyal subjects, and gleaming with the “borrowed fire” of Shade’s genius. Through art, Shade is able to pattern his memories into redemption; through pity, he slips into the shared emotional space of all men (even egoists like Kinbote), and through death, he transcends the banality of limited space and time, thus stretching healthily and infinitely into eternity, with the hint that all good and true memories have been, as he hoped, salvaged, not dissolved. While Kinbote also attempts to redeem a past, his efforts are impotent, no matter how strenuous his exertions to impart a veneer of art’s eternal veneer to a solipsistic hall of mirrors, because his pity is almost entirely self-directed.<sup>10</sup> Pity is a regenerating outward gaze that can also illuminate a man’s inner self, but cannot regenerate the non-existent; Kinbote grieves, purposelessly, for his own imaginary glory.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Even though Kinbote’s pity and love are self-directed, he still does not, as Kierkegaard writes, love himself as his own self, but rather as a fanciful projection of who he would like to be—he imposes the selfish requirements to be pleasing upon himself, just as all men burdened with self-love do upon others. Kierkegaard goes on to say that “[w]hoever has any knowledge of people will certainly admit that just as he has often wished to be able to move them to relinquish self-love, he has also had to wish that it were possible to teach them to love themselves. . . . When the depressed person desires to be rid of his life, indeed, of himself, is this not because he is unwilling to learn earnestly and rigorously to love himself? . . . And if, alas, a person presumptuously lays violent hands upon himself, is not his sin precisely this, that he does not rightly love himself in the sense in which a person *ought* to love himself?” (283).

<sup>11</sup> In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov hints that if a person is brave, honest in his vision of the world, and focused on appreciating others and bestowing them with grace and understanding, then that person’s soul will acquire “permanence.” Conversely, he seems to worry that his former tutor, Mademoiselle O, lacked the bravery to see the world as it truly was . . . like Kinbote, however, Mademoiselle has her moment of selfless, heart-rending glory when she pretends, for Nabokov’s only, that the hearing-device her former charge brought as a present renders a world of sounds—which she had been deaf to for many, many years—was suddenly brought into wondrous clarity and sharpness. The fact was, of course, that the hearing-trumpet had no effect whatsoever on restoring her world from total silence, but, as Nabokov writes, “she wanted me to leave pleased.”

Shade, while simultaneously asserting his agnosticism at the beginning of “Pale Fire,” also confesses that this work is an attempt to “grope [his] way to some . . . faint hope” (63) for his daughter, Hazel, who years before committed suicide after a short, bitter lifetime of being scorned for her appearance. He begins his work with the seemingly solid, impenetrable fortress of doubt of the sort that reveals, rather than demolishes, a unique type of faith: My God died young. Theolatriy I found / Degrading and its premises, unsound. / No free man needs a God; but was I free? / How fully I felt nature glued to me” (36). From his childhood, Shade thought of creeds and religions as impotent, due to their notions of the afterlife being insufficiently unlikely—the “ludicrous . . . efforts to translate / Into one’s private tongue a public fate!” (41). However, in the course of the poem, he writes himself from unbelief into a numinous, undefined faith in eternity. The layered richness and unexpected patterns of human existence help him recognize the “painted parchment papering our cage” (36), and he grows to believe that, if a shoddy imitation can exist, then there must be some existence infinitely more solid and perfect elsewhere, beyond the limitations of space and time. Rather than seeking the formula of popular opinion, matching his fountain to a magazine misprint, Shade realizes that meaning is not found in “text, but texture . . . Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense” (63) and, having patterned the links-and-bobolinks of his memories, he can hold faith in the “aloof, mute” *them* who organize the pattern of existence.

However, Shade—or any of his fellow men—can catch a brief glimpse of the pattern’s weave, the plexed artistry of Visible Nature, by escaping the tyranny of space and time. Shade writes, “Space is a swarming in the eyes; and time, / A singing in the ears” (40). Space and time are infamous murderers of truth and beauty; mere formulas of reality rather than immutable truths. Stretching men’s lives out in an arrow constantly moving in one direction is, as Shade

observes, more deadly than death itself. “For we die everyday; oblivion thrives / Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives / And our best yesterdays are now foul piles / Of crumpled names, phone numbers, and foxed files” (52). Men create and then name units of time, but then measure out their lives according to grains of sand or, perhaps even more mystifyingly, intangible slices of mathematical formulas. The entire world is geared to follow, and then be cruelly axed by what Shade describes as time’s succession, and succession’s change (54). Not to recognize the absurd helplessness of the situation is to submit blindly to the death of forgetfulness, and have no recourse for fighting against it.

In “Pale Fire,” Shade confesses how the comfortable, numbing danger of space and time allows him and his wife to slip, for several days at a time, into forgetting their daughter’s life and death. Time, as the killer of “young root and old rock,” requires that Shade constellate his memories through the poetry: an art that moves the reader through a time span that only resembles that of reality; swinging the artist and reader from one location to the next, or from future to past, with all the ease of teleporting. Shade writes that “timelessness is bound to disarrange / Schedules of sentiment” (54) when discussing his former involvement with IPH and their pharisaical, short-sighted questions about eternity. To find the truth of his own life, Shade must create a realm of timelessness in poetry; then, he can constellate his memories to reveal the web of sense, which, by the poem’s end, becomes also a tentative web of faith.

Both Shade and Kinbote, in some sense, negate time through imagination and art in their autobiographical<sup>12</sup> work; however, Shade’s work of self-revealing is ultimately selfless, as peeling back layers of time and misunderstandings brings him—and coaxes his readership, alongside him—to a better understanding of truth. In contrast, Kinbote’s self-constructing, self-

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<sup>12</sup> Or, in Kinbote’s case, pseudo-autobiographical.

contradicting work only mires him further into lunacy. Nabokov said that “negation of time could be part of an acute perception of eternity . . . a total and immediate perception of all instants in time” (qtd. in Mello 26), but what Kinbote lacks, and what Shade possesses in metaphorical spades, is the measured judgment of wisdom.<sup>13</sup> Shade achieves this distance of understanding through narrating his own death in poetry—and, in both his poetry and his relationships, through pity, which functions as a sort of death to one’s own self. Unlike Kinbote, who interprets all matters according to his own beliefs and whims, Shade’s concern is with constellating and salvaging his memories and love for others, rather than creating a more glorious version of his past self. He aims to redeem love and loss from the “foul piles” of oblivion, a theme that Mary McCarthy describes as the crux—“the burden”—of the entire book<sup>14</sup> (qtd. in Galef 436). He revels in “a feeling of fantastically planned, / Richly rhymed life” (68) and, immediately after, declares to understand “[e]xistence, or at least a minute part / Of my existence, only through my art . . . / I’m reasonably sure that we survive / And that my darling somewhere is alive” (69). Shade continues to say that his certainty is akin to the certainty that he

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<sup>13</sup> This wisdom is also a sort of dedication to investigate the world as it seems to be—plexed artistry pockmarked with the strange and dismal. For Shade, the arbitrarily fixed norms of loveable and unlovable have been displaced by his relationship with Hazel; his attempt to pattern meaning and reclaim his dead daughter is therefore more honest in its complexity than Kinbote’s attempt to rewrite his past to re-pin fixed norms wherever he desires, as opposed to analyzing their validity in the first place. For example, as a homosexual in New England, Kinbote cannot wholly belong to his community; however, instead of responding to an unjust marginalization, he builds into his world of Zembla the social understanding that desirable men desire men. Instead of investigating even his own complexity, he simply tries to build a new standard, in which he is wholly enmeshed in social confidence, while others—perhaps visions of those who mock him in reality—are marginalized.

<sup>14</sup> She writes that “[l]ove is the burden of Pale Fire, love and loss. Love is felt as a kind of homesickness, that yearning for union described by Plato, the pining for the other half of a once-whole body.” I would not disagree with her, as the search for truth is inspired by love, and love answers the search for truth. The entire novel, which so many critics have mistakenly (or jealously) called Nabokov’s malicious game with his readers has its different parts bound as tightly together as muscles and bones.

will awake the next morning; of course, as Kinbote reveals in the very first line of the Foreword's first page, Shade does *not* survive to the awake on the morning of the twenty-second. But as Brian Boyd hypothesizes, "At first Shade's affirmations appear to be negated by the terminal interruption of his murder, but then . . . he finds unfolding for him beyond death a deeper order than he expected, a series of radiant surprises" ("*Pale Fire*: The Vanessa atalanta" 80). The tentative web of faith that Shade spun in "*Pale Fire*" suggests that his literal death—as differentiated from his various other deaths, both fictional and temporary—is actually a paradoxical triumph.

For a reader to believe in Shade's safety and healing after death requires a process similar to how Shade, through the poetic creation of "*Pale Fire*," gathered up and bound together the strands of hope for his daughter's afterlife. *Pale Fire* is littered with tragic deaths and triumphant releases of various degrees of importance, and these scenes match absurdity with glory.<sup>15</sup> In Shade's case, the absurd, pointless horror of his death—a fat, harmless old poet killed by the bullet of an escaped madman—is mitigated, or perhaps even overcome, by the beauty of his piteous, ineffective attempts to haul Kinbote to safety. There is no absurdity in honor of love; in the world of *Pale Fire* an infrastructure of self-confident proof is less important than the texture of belief. As Nabokov said in a lecture to his students, iniquity is absurd, farcical—the product of an unimaginative mind:

[Goodness] becomes a solid and iridescent truth. . . . newspaper editors and other bright pessimists . . . may add that it is one thing to beam at one's private universe

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, many characters in the novel die with a "secret stamp" of triumph. For example, when young Charles Xavier discovers photographs of the death of his father, King Alfin the Vague, Kinbote describes the scene as such: "In some of those ghastly pictures one could make out the shoulders and leathern casque of the strangely unconcerned aviator, and in the penultimate one of the series, just before the white-blurred shattering crash, one distinctly saw him raise one arm in triumph and reassurance" (104).

in the snuggest nook of an unshelled and well-fed country and quite another to try and keep sane among crashing buildings in the roaring and whining night. But within the emphatically and unshakably illogical world which I am advertising as a home for the spirit, war gods are unreal not because they are conveniently remote in physical space from the reality of a reading lamp and the solidity of a fountain pen, but because I cannot imagine (and that is saying a good deal) such circumstances as might impinge upon the lovely and loveable world which quietly persists, whereas I can very well imagine that my fellow dreamers . . . keep to these same irrational and divine standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death. (373)

Shade's honor, that inexplicable act of beauty with full knowledge of death's savage wrenching of body from spirit, is greater than all powers of madness (a philosophy especially poignant when considering that Nabokov not only lost language and homeland, but also father, brother, mother, cousins, and many beloved figures of his past).<sup>16</sup>

Shade's triumph over death is not the sum of various themes, but rather, a belief gathered from *Pale Fire*'s thick texture of continued life after death. Because of the multiple deaths that Shade describes in his poem, he is able to create the layers of distance needed for understanding and, thus, help establish his reliability as a speaker of truth; but it is his final death that grants him release into eternity to see the whole pattern of his life. The waxwing, Shade's childhood self, Shade as lecturer at a conference about the afterlife—Shade's shades, in a sense—all die, and break through their limitations of space and time to enter another, freer world. When Shade dies

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<sup>16</sup> Another important note: if a person (or character) acts in grace or honor, whether or not that act was successful is immaterial. Again, one can consider Nabokov's *Mademoiselle O*—the beauty of her deception was not diminished because Nabokov saw through her ruse.

for the last time, there is no one to return and report his safety; however, the interconnected memories of death and release that “Pale Fire” weaves into a texture of transcendence and web of sense suggest that his death is the final, ultimate release into a world of truth.

Free from the ego-inducing, self-exalting cage of linear time and limited space, Shade is released to see the whole pattern of a triumphant life. As one critic observes, the book’s “metonymic chain flows in both directions, for there are no absolute beginning and ending points” (LeRoy-Frazier 316). Nabokov writes of non-existence and death as the oppressive flanks of temporal reality, but the latter is also that which releases into health and freedom “the miniscule unknown that had been the only real part of one’s temporary reality” (221). With the frequent deaths and mirrorings of death in the novel, Nabokov’s characters are able to dip in and out of temporal reality. Shade especially enters and reenters his narrative with disdain for linear time, choosing instead to fold the fabric of his life according to a pattern of truth or beauty, rather than the generalized formula of human existence. Whether he speaks as a “shadow of a waxwing slain” or a young boy with suns bursting inside his head, Shade’s personhood is molded as much by his departures from temporality as his actions within it.

Death, and the question of what happens after it, looms over and saturates the entire novel, from Boswell’s quote at the beginning (“No, no, Hodge shall not be shot”) to the first line of Shade’s poem, which is mirrored in the first sentence of Kinbote’s Foreword. Throughout the entire novel, Shade’s death (or, by proxy, the poem’s waxwing) is reported at least six times.<sup>17</sup> Each death is another layer removed from the parchment-papered cage and towards a reality of infinite feeling and perfect understanding. Because he has glimpsed “beyond” the veil and

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<sup>17</sup> Some of these deaths are separate events, and some are retellings of one particular death, but—by virtue of the time/space disruption in the story—I think my point is still valid, and it makes sense to describe each story of Shade’s death as a new story. For, if the story is in the details, then whenever the details are new, the story must be new also.

carried back the image of a fountain as his heart's souvenir, Shade's judgment of truth is more refined than that of other characters. The First Canto declares, "I am the shadow of the waxwing slain/ by the false azure in the windowpane/ I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky" (33).<sup>18</sup> By beginning his poem as a dead man (or rather, bird), Shade is closer to understanding the mystery of what happens after death than the founders of IPH, the Institute of Preparation For the Hereafter, could ever hope.<sup>19</sup>

The Institute attempts to advise the living about after-death etiquette: how to negotiate eternity with a first and second wife), how "not to panic when you're made a ghost" (551), or even the various precautions to take in case of "freak reincarnation" as a toad, bear cub, or some other unsavory creatures (560-565). However, all these questions ignore the greater concerns of love and honor. Shade's concerns, poignant and unanswerable as they may be, are far more honest (hence, broader in vision and more profound in depth):

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<sup>18</sup> Critics have written so much about these lines that all the collected pages could probably be used to build a giant statue of a dead waxwing, an idea both morbid and intriguing; however, by a narrow analysis I do not intend to slight their ideas. The most salient point for my argument is that Shade's death-by-waxwing establishes him as a prophet of sorts. Many other valid and useful arguments can be formed from these lines. They're simply not relevant here.

<sup>19</sup> As noted earlier in footnote 7, the honesty of a character's narrative is not bound up in its simplicity; in fact, Nabokov would argue quite the opposite. Shade recognizes that fixed social norms carry a burden of cruelty for all who—by nature and design—cannot fit within their boundaries, but the leaders of IPH only look to maintain in the afterlife the same fixed norms that have proven so cruel in the temporal world. As Booth writes, "Our difficulty in answering such questions about complex tales does not mean that fixed norms have disappeared; they have simply become less blatant. In whatever form we take the story, as long as it is intelligible to us we will have to see it in a matrix of its fixed norms. Not to do so, not to attempt to see how this tale works as an account of events in its world, would be to refuse the author's gambit, to deny the invitation. It would mean refusing to respond, either in sheer irresponsibility or in response to some other, 'higher' obligation" (149). Not only does this apply to our reading of *Pale Fire* as a work that can objectively be read the "right" or "wrong" way, but also to how Shade and IPH respond to the author of their created world. By engaging with reality as both real and sham, Shade attempts to wrestle through the chimeras and move deeper through the different layers of reality; IPH, however, ignores hints within the world, preferring instead a stable, albeit indefensible system, in which they refuse to respond to the "author's tale."

For as we know from dreams it is so hard  
 To speak to our dear dead! They disregard  
 Our apprehension, queasiness and shame  
 . . . . .

A wrench, a rift—that's all one can foresee. (lines 589-591, line 617).

This passage can be edified by its cousin in *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov writes that whenever he sees the dead in dreams, they always appear dreary and silent—"quite unlike their dear, bright selves." The disparity is so wide between the loved ones he knew and their ghostly presence in dreams that he says, surely, it is not in dreams, but "when one is wide awake" and in the highest moments of joy and achievement that a person can peer beyond mortality's limits (50). IPH focuses only on horizontal truths; Shade, seeking to conquer the totality of his doubt, suffers through the vertical-climb to stand on the Everest-high peak of artistic achievement, and peer beyond the limits of mortal reason.

As Shade discovers, reflections and hints of a different world may contain more truth than common reality, a realm that—in the world of Nabokov's novels—is more inherently deceitful than the half-sketched paradoxes of eternity. The eerie, shifting molecules that make up matter are, at first and thousandth glance, solid and trustworthy. This world of wobbling energy, full of disguised Platonic forms, easily coaxes the caged soul to accept its papered landscapes and clumsy, cardboard-painted murals as the only and, simultaneously, the most valuable existence. The waxwing leaves its frail body on the ground to fly in the reflected window, but the man who unconsciously accepts his present tense as the most important and relevant of all realities runs in the narrow circle of lunacy that Chesterton describes. The logician and the madman, by virtue of excluding the entire world's mystery, can create a wholly unambiguous, perfectly rational world.

Nabokov says that “[m]adness is but a diseased bit of commonsense, whereas genius is the greatest sanity of spirit” (*Lectures on Literature* 377). Common-sense, as Nabokov describes it, ignores the wonderful, irrational details of beauty, morality, and reality: “This capacity to wonder at trifles—no matter the imminent peril—these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest form of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good” (*Lectures on Literature* 374). If a man lives under the self-imposed dictatorship of common sense, he will suddenly find himself sandwiched by infinite foretime and infinite after-time, struck by the dark wings into an existence he never anticipated. In *Pale Fire*, this is the man who attends IPH conferences and create propositions on how to survive in the watered-down reality that he imagines it to be. Creating propositions for the unknown future of an afterlife, he is also one who will lose focus on “the mystery inborn” that helps Shade grope to truth.

In contrast, Kinbote is more concerned with creating external mystery of social trappings and pomp; despite his religious faith, he struggles to understand real transcendence, because he directs all conscious focus towards deceiving others and deluding himself about this past. Instead of trying to see through an illusion of material reality, Kinbote tries to replace it with another, even more self-aggrandizing illusion than the one that limited space and time naturally creates. Kinbote hopes that the crown jewels of his autobiography will be set in Shade’s poetry; he plots to preserve his luscious brown beard, youthful vigor, and worldly sophistication, but is not concerned with healing the tragedies and broken relationships that mar the pattern of being. One critic even describes him as “One critic even describes Kinbote as “all center and no circumference” (Haegert 416), a description that again calls back to a passage in *Orthodoxy*: the poet gets his head into the heaven, opening up a huge and wonderful world of experience, while

the madman splits his head from trying to cram an expansive world inside (22). Trapped within his own diseased person, Kinbote tries to fabricate infinity within himself, rather than discovering truth outside of himself. When he describes his relationship with Shade, he carelessly reveals his solipsism by saying “the calendar says I had known him only a few months, but there exist friendships which develop their own inner duration, their own eons of transparent time” (18). Kinbote suffers from an especially profound case of the superficial. Like the sick son in “Signs and Symbols,” Kinbote seems to look at the entire world—clouds, birds, sidewalk cracks—as an elaborate pattern with all arrows pointing back to himself.

Instead of searching for a pattern of truth to rescue those he loves, Kinbote prefers to create his own pattern from Shade’s poetry in an attempt to legitimize his fantasies. He abducts Shade’s manuscript, and, despite the protests and pleas of Shade’s publisher, friends, and widow, holes himself up like the Underground Man to write an absurd Forward, Commentary, and Index that almost utterly neglect to provide any critical information about the poem; instead, he furnishes and violates the poem with awkward, refashioned, ill-suited puzzle pieces to transform Shade’s portrait of transcendence, loss, and reclamation into a tale of Charles the Beloved, a former king of Zembla. The crowning glory of his solipsistic interpretation is when Kinbote writes that it was a straying bullet, actually aimed for Charles the Beloved, that struck and killed Shade instead.

Whereas Shade shows only minimal concern for pinning events to exact time/space coordinates,<sup>20</sup> Kinbote shows a mania for matching imagined events of the past to very specific instances in time. Through exactitudes, he attempts to create reality—a self-deceiving move reminiscent of IPH’s plotting guidelines for hypothetical errands in the hereafter. Even though

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<sup>20</sup> With the exception of Hazel’s death; however, he also writes that “here time forked.” For John and Sybil, their lives, in truth if not in fact, moved slower and more painfully than before.

dating days, naming locations, and counting seconds does not lend Kinbote's past any pale fire of Shade's credibility, it does help him construct a world that he himself finds believable.

Despite its totally theoretical nature, Kinbote's imagined past juxtaposes smoothly with the actual memories of his acquaintances and colleagues, and, even more startlingly, his concocted reality and self-baked memories change the events of Shade's *actual* life. Even Kinbote acts as a pawn in the silent chess game of the unnamed creators, and while Shade attempts to understand their plotting by constellating his life against linear time, Kinbote simply aims to replace one strand of reality with his own, composed of the same insulting stuff—arrogance, linear time, spatial and spiritual limitations. Even when the dates Kinbote parades are factually correct, such as in his Foreword when he begins tabulating his readership to distraction, they only serve to “present credentials”(20). Trubikhina's observation that “metaphysical mysteries cannot be explained or articulated,” and thus can only be known through “re-creation” of the creative gesture (56) describes how Shade's groping toward truth is revealing and beautiful, but also why Kinbote's work immediately conveys a sense of antagonism and anxiety. His reaction to reading about Shade's collapse after giving a lecture has the frank skepticism of one who weighs all moments to measure their worth: “[N]o emergency incision was performed; the heart was not compressed by hand; and if it stopped pumping at all, the pause must have been very brief and so to speak superficial” (250). If “mysticism is what keeps men sane” (Chesterton 32), then Kinbote's disappointment that a man's journey through eternity could take place in only a few units of time explains a large part of his lunacy. By waving a banner of collected dates and facts, Kinbote tries to overpower Shade's poem with his own biography by brute force.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> By a literal type of force also, such as how he keeps from Sybil from the rights to her late husband's poetry, and thus prompting Shade's former agent to write that “the contract must have been written “in some peculiar kind of red ink” (17).

While Shade, as the novel's primary prophet for truth, is not infallible in either word or deed, his probing is honest, and the results honestly appraised. While alive, Shade can never be anything more than flawed; however, just as Shade searches for meaning within a flawed reality, so readers search for the immutable truth within the reality that Shade presents. One critic notes that the essential distinction between Shade and Kinbote is that the former never pretends his work is not subjective, whereas the latter constantly tries to affirm his scholarship's infallibility (Farhadiba n.pag).<sup>22</sup> Instead of Kinbote-esque boasting, Shade textures his poetry with love, which leads him to understand that reality's structure is repressive, and the password to transcending that repression is in pity. Addressing his wife, Sybil, he writes, "And all the time, and all the time, my love, / you too are there, beneath the word, above / The syllable, to underscore and stress / the vital rhythm" (68). Both for his own and his wife's sake, he constellates (and attempts to retrieve) his daughter's life by pinning the corners of time here and there, revealing a pattern of transcendence. The infinity of emotion that he dreads losing ("and all the time . . . you are there") leads him to carefully examine different patches of his life's pattern, and, then, reveals the wonderful sanity of assurance.<sup>23</sup> Jancsó states, "For Shade, the intricacy of the design is sufficient evidence for the existence of an otherworld . . . the myriad of impressions -- viewed together -- give rise to the design of the beyond" (86). Shade loved his daughter, but knew the flaws that made her seem grotesque; he loved his wife, and saw her in the artistic minutia of life, such as reading through old postcards or participating in the mystery and

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<sup>22</sup> Farhadiba uses "subjectivity" in conjunction with the idea of megalomania—for both Kinbote and Shade. While strains of megalomania could probably be found in everyone, I think it is more important to grasp the salient truth of Farhadiba's observation, and still possible to believe that truth and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>23</sup> This reminds me of both Chesterton and O'Connor. The poetry that "floats easily in the infinite sea" (22) bears a surprising texture of kinship to O'Connor's peacocks, that cannot be coaxed, but will now and again spread out their feathers to reveal a multitude of iridescent worlds.

wonder of a Vanessa atalanta.

However, this constellating of truth—connecting the bright spots of life to reveal the archer and the longbow, present, but unobserved since the world’s beginning—cannot occur while Shade remains trapped in his own reality, wedged between the ego-inducing forces of space and time. To speak truth, he needs the distance of an infinite existence. Whether he looks down to weave or upward to constellate, Shade needs a vast and endless canvas to see and arrange the order of his and his family’s existence. This distance, first of all, can be accomplished through his art. As a poet, his realm is infinite, and the “dark wings” or forever-before and forever-after close on him in every act of creation. Through art, Shade can move from present to past to future, tugging at the threads of existence and revising them into his own pattern of meaning. Maaja A. Stewart writes that “[t]he ‘discovery’ of reality is for Nabokov an individual creation by an individual mind, ever alert to unforeseen concrete connections that will organize and vitalize the disparities of experience” (242). When Shade promises to “spy on beauty as none has,” he proceeds in a very literal fashion: describing his musings in the shower, and comparing the poshlust<sup>24</sup> nymphs of television commercials with his own morbid, moody Hazel. Sifting through and rearranging the stories of his life, Shade is able to create a world where Hazel’s various flaws do not dim what Kinbote might call her “intrinsic self.” Through poetry, Shade can achieve the distance necessary to reveal—not construct—his daughter’s inherent beauty.

Similarly to how Nabokov plots his memoir in *Speak, Memory*, Shade plots facets of his life—and not necessarily those which might be deemed most valuable—into his poetry. By

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<sup>24</sup> Nabokov’s coinage of the word “poshlust” is a designation for both the sensuous and the banal. He was particularly sensitive to the poshlust elements of advertisements—works whose visuals imitate art and whose slogans imitate literature, but are both cheap and gratifying, rather than artistic and meaningful.

naming his memories in the form of art, Shade (and Nabokov) can reclaim himself and the people who inhabit the past, but are lost—by death or distance—to the present and future.<sup>25</sup> As stones are cut and polished to reveal their beauty, so Shade encodes his precious memories into literature. He writes about memories of the dying as “. . . bits of colored light / Reaching his bed like dark hands from the past / Offering gems” (56). Even uncut and unpolished, a ruby has some mystical, intrinsic value—some essence of ruby-ness that makes it worthwhile, even when grubby with dirt and dull in its organic form. Similarly, for the poet (and his creator), memories have their own inherent, even infinite value, and only need craftsmanship to make them gleam and shine. When Shade’s constellates his memories in Popean rhymes, he makes something precious, but hitherto unnoticed, exist to others.<sup>26</sup> When Shade arranges his memories in the

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<sup>25</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan writes that “words ‘make things formerly overlooked—and hence invisible and nonexistent—visible and real’ (685). Tuan argues that words form perception, and therefore help “create” physical geography. However, his argument also can be expanded to also include the past—intuitively, it seems that the past *must* exist somewhere, but it has no location. Shade’s poetry can “create” his past again, and rescue—make existent—all that time and space seemed to have dissolved.

<sup>26</sup> While I do not intend to make the case that Shade was actually a missionary for beauty, he did write to be read, but—more importantly—an artist who creates from his own experiences brings them closer to the chance of eternity. This idea hearkens back to one of Elaine Scarry’s definitions for Beauty: a valuable work of art never really ceases to be, because it embeds itself into the gazer’s mind, and thus is echoed forever, changing one person’s vision, who then shifts the vision of another, and so on, ad infinitum—or the world’s end. Even staring is an act of replication (7). Nabokov, however, with his notorious loathing of doubling and symbols truth formulas in literature, would probably emphasize that the desire for replication is not amoeba-like; artistry cannot yield one exact genetic copy to the original. It is probably safe to assume that Shade would have felt similarly about this idea, as he is the character Nabokov described as “closest” to himself. Shade’s attempt to replicate his life through art is not an attempt to catalogue various exactitudes in hope of yielding an authentic new version, but Kinbote, in attempting to recapture a lost throne, does not seem to understand that the value of an “intrinsic self” is also what prohibits mitosis. Kinbote states that “all bearded Zemblans resemble on another” (265) and, when describing his escape from Zembla, he describes an entire countryside littered with impersonators. He writes, “They rigged themselves out to look like him in red sweaters and red caps, and popped up here and there, completely bewildering the revolutionary police” (99). Even Kinbote’s Zemblan language reveals this desire for exact copies and doublings; boastfully, he calls it “the tongue of the mirror” (242).

form of art, he burns the dross that obscured truth, and by taking authority over space and time, he can snatch his daughter up from an absurd and cruel past and bring her into a posthumous wealth of meaning and love. He reworks his memories like gems proffered from outstretched, otherworldly hands; he burnishes, cuts, and refashions his perceptions until he can move from absurd loss into meaning. This same revision that helps him come to terms with an infinite love for a lost daughter is also what helps him tolerate, albeit with frequent brusqueness, Kinbote's parasitic company.

Shade's own intrinsic self is, if not buried as deep as Hazel or Kinbote's, still not superficially apparent. Kinbote writes that "[Shade's] misshapen body, that gray mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers, the bags under his lusterless eyes, were only intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and chiseled his verse" (26). Despite, or perhaps because of, his unattractive physical appearance—plump, crippled, and frankly rather gross (picking his ears and subsequently eating the discovered substance found therein)—Shade is a prophet for beauty as well as truth. His eye for detail and constant observation of metaphysical patterns in "everyday reality" makes him, in addition to being a prodigious American talent, a profoundly gracious observer of other men. Whereas Charles Kinbote's egocentric lunacies and superior airs make him anathema to the other professors at Wordsmith College, Shade is well-versed in the habit of empathy: a skill undoubtedly refined by his daughter's tragic life and death. Emma Lieber spots a similar connection between Shade's ability to pity social outcasts and his daughter's short, uncomfortable life:

In many ways, and within all of its various stories, *Pale Fire* is about the problem of belonging and social acceptance, of the opposition between marginality and

inclusion. . . . But perhaps Shade's wisdom is that he senses this kinship of irrelevance not only between the extreme misfits Kinbote and Hazel, but also between Kinbote and his own "asthmatic, lame and fat" self—or rather that he senses that relevance itself, conventionally conceived, is a fiction. Indeed, the message of acceptance within a socially exclusive world seems to be written into the novel's architecture; for if *Pale Fire* realizes a universe of isolated, mutually misinterpreting selves, then it also models a world in which we are all equally mutually irrelevant . . . (n.pag)

Pity enables Shade to see past Kinbote's obsessive, self-vaunting manias for a lost (and imaginary) kingly realm and, perhaps even more kindly, beyond Kinbote's desperation to acquire a sheen of borrowed genius by stalking Shade's every move. Through pity, Shade is free to see Kinbote's ludicrousness *and* his essential humanity. Even though Kinbote notes the occasional bouts of testiness<sup>27</sup>, Shade still lets Kinbote invade his home and invites him on long meandering walks. When a partygoer tells Shade a story about an old man who "thought he was God and began redirecting trains," Shade simply laughs and declares him "a fellow poet" (238). What Shade recognizes throughout the poem, and what Kinbote slowly, at the end of his Commentary, begins to learn, is that every person contains a kernel of truth or potential—a "mystery inborn" that can lead him or her to faith.

In his Commentary, Kinbote expands on a line struck from the original draft. Shade had replaced the line "The madman's fate" with "The fate of beasts." True to form, however, Kinbote tussles with and expands upon the rejected line, oblivious and self-righteous, commenting that he

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<sup>27</sup> Kinbote writes, "Whatever was thought, whatever was said, I had my full reward in John's friendship. This friendship was the more precious for its tenderness being intentionally concealed, especially when we were not alone, by that gruffness which stems from what can be termed the dignity of the heart" (25).

had “never known any lunatics,” but still echoing one of Shade’s most profound realizations: each person contains within themselves a kernel of truth, an inborn mystery that endows even the most ridiculous with dignity<sup>28</sup>. When Shade claws and tugs at Kinbote, trying to draw him away from gunman Jack Grey, he is solemnly trying to protect a person, who, only incidentally, happens to believe himself a deposed king. Kinbote, who steadily grows more palatable as he nears his death, expands on Shade’s “mystery inborn” (albeit not deliberately):

The ultimate destiny of madmen’s souls has been probed by many Zemblan theologians who generally hold the view that even the most demented mind still contains within its diseased mass a sane basic particle that survives death and suddenly expands, bursts out as it were, in peals of healthy and triumphant laughter when the world of timorous fools and trim blockheads has fallen away far behind. (237)

This “secret stamp” and “mystery inborn” guide Shade in his fourth canto to a tentative belief in his daughter’s continued life and her healing after death. He writes:

I feel I understand  
Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight;  
And if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine

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<sup>28</sup> This can also be seen when Shade defends someone, probably Kinbote, during party gossip. Even one who “deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention” should not be called a madman (238). Perhaps a tender sense of one’s own failure in the face of an unknown, but richly inventive creator, might be enough to inspire a man to commit a suicide of personhood, and with a new past, hope to begin again.

Which I suspect is an iambic line.  
 I'm reasonably sure that we survive  
 And that my darling somewhere is alive,  
 As I am reasonably sure that I  
 Shall wake at six tomorrow, on July  
 The twenty-second, nineteen fifty-nine . . . (69)

Again, Nabokov presents a sudden, startling contradiction to this playful and mysteriously textured pattern. Shade did not “live” to see the twenty-second; Jacob Gray’s stray bullet killed him, and he flew on in the reflected sky.<sup>29</sup> But the memories that Shade cuts from their place in linear narrative, then lays out and weaves back together again, all combine to connect the moments of his life that were most worthy of preservation with the memories most demanding of healing or explanation.<sup>30</sup> By pairing the glorious with the banal, he manages to redeem them both and hint that his own sudden, tragic death will only catapult him into freedom.

When Kinbote describes Shade’s death, he observes, if not Shade’s new freedom, the bits of texture that suggest it. Immediately before Shade’s death, a Red Admirable, flitting so rapidly in the sun that “[o]ne’s eyes could not follow” and it “flashed and vanished, and flashed again, with an almost frightening imitation of conscious play” (290) before dissolving into the laurels.

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<sup>29</sup> Kinbote, after snatching the poem and stashing it in his rented house, describes Shade’s attitude of death; a pose both horrible and inspiring: “The poor poet had been turned over and lay with open dead eyes directed up at the sunny evening azure” (295).

<sup>30</sup> While problematic that everything we know about Shade is mediated by Kinbote, I think that Nabokov’s own personal testimony regarding Shade’s character provides immense justification for assuming that Kinbote never tampered with Shade’s actual poem. Nabokov described Shade as most like himself and most properly concerned with reconciling the beauties and absurdities of life with the horror of death, and Kinbote regularly bewails the lack of Zembla in Shade’s poetry. The vast gap between Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s imaginary past suggests that we can trust that the “Pale Fire” we read is wholly Shade’s, and reflects his exact intentions (as far as any poet can ever convey his exact intentions).

Most critics have counted the butterfly as a sign for either Hazel or Shade's happy afterlife. One scholar, instead of attempting to name the butterfly as the reincarnation of a specific character, instead connects another strand of *Pale Fire* to an illuminating allusion: "The butterfly is an ancient symbol of the soul which, after enduring the torments of the world, sheds its cocoon (i.e., the body) in order to ascend into heaven" (Smith 127).<sup>31</sup> Shade's death, when considered in light of his "twin theme of design and death" (English 81), the flitting butterfly, and azure sky, seems much more glorious, and much more coherent with a pattern of eternity, as his poetry and past suddenly and seamlessly interlock with the present. English continues: "the fact of mortality becomes bearable to him [Shade] only when perceived in terms of divine pattern, as a fragment of some supernal tapestry" (81). Because Kinbote has yet to search the external world for more than echoes of his own self, he does not have the ability to detect the edges of a divine impression. However, Shade's narration from doubt to faith in his own work provides the reader with the texture of transcendence—his death needs no formulaic answer, as the moments immediately before Jack Grey's shot are watermarked with the same artistry that led Shade to hope for his daughter's healing and survival after death.

Shade's stout belief in the value of memory makes it easier to ascribe an element of triumph to his death. Neither Nabokov nor Shade can conceive a universe in which the good and beautiful are both subsumed by eternity--preservation may be achieved through art, the afterlife,

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<sup>31</sup> Priscilla Meyer and Brian Boyd are probably the two most famous Nabokov scholars; however, their ruminations over the Red Admiral are more hypothetical than not. While both suggestions--Meyer's being that the butterfly is a herald from the rulers of destiny, and Boyd's being that the butterfly is a reincarnation of Hazel—are interesting, and perhaps plausible, both critics use the available text more as a springboard for an additional story rather than trying to uncover the story that Nabokov has given.

or both.<sup>32</sup> While human dignity is simply based upon being human, Shade's personhood is based upon what he changed and what changed him—essentially, his story is his shaping. Rather than achieve nirvana and lose the memories that make him, Shade asserts that he would rather be hideously reincarnated than lose his memories:

I'm ready to become a floweret  
 Or a fat fly, but never, to forget  
 And I'll turn down eternity unless  
 The melancholy and the tenderness  
 Of mortal life; the passion and the pain;  
 The claret taillight of that dwindling plane  
 Off Hesperus; your gesture of dismay  
 On running out of cigarettes [ . . . ]  
 Are found in Heaven by the newlydead  
 Stored in its strongholds through the years. (53)

Even the minutiae of life, if they are beautiful in and of themselves, must be preserved in eternity, or eternity is a place without stories, and therefore, a place without selves. As Leland de la Durantaye argues, all Nabokov's stories are inherently moral and valuable by the simple nature of their *being* stories, and any novel—or, in Shade's case, eternity—that disregards the details is both inherently inhuman and irrelevant. De la Durantaye writes that, "[f]or Nabokov, art that treats 'Ideas,' that concerns itself with generalities, was without importance or interest"

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<sup>32</sup> Ralph Ciancio makes an argument for the former, stating, "Language in Nabokov's fiction is the medium of life, a metaphor for the coincidental deceptive forms that comprise the material universe and the illusory patterns our time-bound consciousness imposes upon human existence" (530). Sadly, Kinbote—who confesses that he can only imitate style, rather than create it—longs for absorption after death. If Ciancio's argument applies, then perhaps Kinbote's inability to create a web of real memory also means he is unable to really live.

(30). Peggy Ward Corn also argues that in the world of *Pale Fire*, and all of Nabokov's work, "[c]oincidences are not accidents but emblems of design" (88). Someone without a pattern (or, to borrow Corn's term, design) of memory will have a personhood either stunted or nearly nonexistent. The self's most important attributes are those verified by stories.

Even when a person like Kinbote turns away from his or her former self, that veering from one path to another is part of the testimony. Even Sybil's dramatic attitudes—throwing up her hands after forgetting to buy more cigarettes—also need preservation, or a line of the story that defines her has been lost. The unknown creators that Shade says make "ornaments of accidents and possibilities" (63) are like authors, creating an "esthetic game, a web of sense" from the search for truth in the texture (O'Donnell 386). The texture of life—namely, details both observed and felt—make it possible to, as Stewart notes, concretize connections and "vitalize the disparities of experience" (242). With the place-making power of words, Shade weaves his memory and pain into a transcendent web, tracing elusive threads of truth until a pattern emerges—the pattern that whispers a sense of freedom into the convoluted snarl of Shade's accidental death.

The life Kinbote patterns is not actually *his* life, and, while writing out his imagined past, he brings others' pasts into question as well. His own pattern is mostly made by unweaving that of others, continuously undoing others' personhood without actually revealing his own. Instead of aiming to discover truth, he creates an atom bomb of words, obliterating his old memories to live in the narrow circle of self-absorption and artistic limitations. Many critics have compared Hazel and Kinbote, with Galef's scholarship the most relevant to Kinbote's narrow circle of thinking. He notes that art without "the vital connection" to the world outside "becomes bound up in death" (424), and that both Hazel and Kinbote saw the world as within themselves: "Where

Hazel's art is solipsistic, Kinbote's creation is megalomaniac. Hazel . . . shuns real mirrors, whereas Kinbote glories in them" (426). Kinbote even creates fragments of a language—"his" Zemblan tongue—betraying a god-life belief in his own significance, and forming a place for himself that exists wholly outside of incarnation.

When dwelling in a Zemblan fantasy, he lives in a utopia in the strictest sense—with no place, his story lacks the beautiful details that a Lewis-esque heaven would necessarily save, and he cannot develop any love beyond self-love that would prove his salvation after death. Only near the end of his commentary, as Kinbote's "words and self begin to peter out," does he begin to glimpse a world full of others.<sup>33</sup> Owen Barfield writes, "In our language alone, not to speak of its many companions, the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth lies embedded in the layers of its outer crust. . . . Language has preserved for us the inner, living history of our soul" (18). Instead of refining his own self, Kinbote undoes it; rather than ferreting out the truth in reality's illusion, he simply creates a parallel illusion of his own.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> While Kinbote presumably commits suicide after completing his Commentary and Index, the self that peters out is, also, the constructed self of his fantasy. He never sheds the story, but he does stretch it thin, and seem to recognize its feebleness; in those moments, Kinbote's inherent beauty and compassion seems to seep through the raveling costume.

<sup>34</sup> Again, Booth's notes about the ethics of narration offer an explanation as to how Shade's narrative can be meaningful and Kinbote's can be inherently flawed. "[S]ince the Enlightenment people have increasingly thought of their own essential natures not as something to be built, or built up, through experience with other characters but rather as something--a 'true self'--to be found by probing within. For complex reasons, much modern thought about the 'individual,' the un-dividable center, has stressed the search inward for the core of the real 'me,' the authentic self. In that search, one tends to peel off the inauthentic, insincere, alien influences that might deflect the self from its unique, individual destiny" (237). While this description applies perhaps to *all* of Nabokov's novels, and not simply Kinbote, I think it is worth observing that Nabokov, Shade, and Cincinnatus's desire is both for the anti-Darwinian—an eternity for the individual, nothingness for random, oppressive forces—and for the healing after death for the people whom they live. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes about the anxiety of having an "infinity" of love, and the concern that this infinity of emotion might be absurdly out of place in a totally material

In *Pale Fire*, as in his other books, Nabokov encodes pity as the key to transcendence and, hence, the escape from finite reality's absurdity. Although Michael Carasik does not articulate either pity or truth as the avenue to truth, he does argue for the theme that makes them necessary:

[T]he finality—indeed, the grotesqueness—of physical death makes life absurd.

But Nabokov sensed, by analogy with his own experience as a writer, the possibility of a transcendent realm that could somehow ennoble the illusion of life even as it exposed its comparative tawdriness. For it death was the central *problem* of his novels, their central *theme* was *potustoronnost*, literally 'over-to-that-side-ness': to the other side of mortality or reality. (427)

When one character pities another, regardless of how disgusting or ridiculous the other seems, the first wriggles a bit more free from the confinement of time and space; he (or she) can slip into the emotional space of another, experience sympathetically another's personhood, and, somehow, be released through the compassion of sharing someone else's incarnated story. This is another point of separation between Shade and Kinbote (at least, until the novel's very end, when Kinbote's fabrications, having not been "made true" through Shade's alchemy, begin to wear thin). Even Kinbote's gardener, "the Prince of Loam," who appears in the novel only occasionally, has a stronger urge to pity than his employer, sharing a drink of water with the confused Jack Grey, while Kinbote scuttles around in the house, hiding his stolen booty.

Kinbote's theology of the madman's soul, in one of his rare moments of beauty and truth, reveals part of the pattern of existence that exposes, as Carasik writes, the tawdriness of reality,

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world. When the novel's end suggests Nabokov has "found what the sailor has hidden," this does not preclude his love for family; rather, they are journeying to an unknown shore together, and with the memory of all loved ones in tow.

while still preserving its beauty. However, Shade's artistry suggests that the soul need not wait for death to find the comfort of transcendence. Pity is the password to life, existence, to understanding how and why "the cradle rocks" between a twin abyss. Death completes Shade's patterning of truth, but pity was what permitted him to begin understanding in the first place.

## Chapter Two

### An Accumulation of Brilliant Convolutions; Remote, But Perfect

Even in 1951, when *Speak, Memory* was first published (under the misleading title *Conclusive Evidence*), Nabokov's memoir hovered delicately between the genres of autobiography and fiction. Revised, rewritten, and rearranged until 1966, *Speak, Memory* blurs the pseudo-sacred boundaries of fact and fiction—hardly a surprise to those familiar with Nabokov's literature or literary criticism, which frequently denounced slavish obedience to any creeds. Unsurprisingly then, Nabokov tinkers with genre as well—contributing to the difficulty of summarizing *Speak, Memory*. One critic describes the work as more a collection of images than anything else, and while this is not necessarily wrong, the description is unfortunately limiting: if *Speak, Memory* is a collection of images, these images have all been collected, arranged, and presented to reveal the pattern of artistry, and not simply as an arena for literary spectacle.

As memoir, and a Nabokovian memoir at that, *Speak, Memory* follows an artistic, rather than linear pattern. While individual chapters can sweep the audience along in the typical narrative of problem, climax, and resolution, the work as a whole focuses on the delights of intricacy and detail. Rather than simply transcribing memories, **Nabokov patterns them according to mood and coincidence, and abandons a linear timeline in favor of folding the fabric of his** rather than simply transcribing it, he does not follow a linear timeline for arranging his memories, and even confesses his delight in the freedom of wading at will through the “radiant and mobile medium of time” (21). He does, for the most part, limit himself to his life before immigrating to America, occasionally dipping into before and after time as the pattern may require, recalling moments from his idyllic childhood, romance-and-poetry ridden youth,

and the various places in which he either hunted butterflies or lived in exile. *Speak, Memory* evokes, rather than describes the aggregate of, Nabokov's childhood and youth, and Nabokov is more concerned that his readers feel enchanted by the brilliant magic of infinite details and experience—that through shimmering deception<sup>35</sup> they, also, feel the depth of love, shame, loss, and transcendence that Nabokov believed manifested itself through the perfection of imaginative details.<sup>36</sup>

While autobiographical works are often horizontal in nature, created with the sole purpose of offering a superficially reliable testimony of one person's life from birth to first edition, *Speak, Memory* is a complex and artistic work that requires its readers to mimic its creator's extended and thoughtful gaze. While Nabokov reported the creation of *Lolita* to be excruciatingly painful (his wife intervened and prevented him from throwing an early manuscript into a bonfire), his repeated revisions of *Speak, Memory* suggest a similarly difficult trial in bringing a particular artistic vision to bear. While Nabokov's characters may have been his galley slaves, *Speak, Memory* is a work that seeks to reclaim (or re-weave) Nabokov's loved ones into his art, protecting them from decay and oblivion. In a sense, Nabokov—only the slave driver in his fiction—must occupy both positions: the master of his work and memory and the

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<sup>35</sup> Nabokov claimed that “all art is deception” (*Strong Opinions* 12). While “deception” might seem to indicate cruelty, for Nabokov, the playfulness of imagination and a magician's delightful deceptions are akin, and the readers are delighted to find themselves deceived. Leland De la Durantaye writes, “Nabokov's repudiation of Darwinian morphological analysis is a structural element in the ivory tower in which Nabokov wished to protect art and its practitioners from the devotees of the useful laying siege to it. . . . The role of deception in Nabokov's vision is then twofold: he is both a creature in a deceptive creation, and a creator of deceptive creations” (156).

<sup>36</sup> Michael Wood states that “Nabokov wants to reconstruct the *flavour* of his childhood through particular, isolated moments. He is not interested in accuracy of fact but the accuracy of feeling” (193), and, in a similar vein, Blackwell writes, “Nabokov was inclined to view reality as something upheld exclusively by creative human cognition” (125). *Speak, Memory* is a transmutation of Nabokov's life into art, and readers are meant to sense the weave of transcendence through well-arranged details, despite the sweeping tragedies that appear to blight either their own or Nabokov's life.

slave to his loves. As Nabokov mentions, Mnemosyne is an inherently capricious goddess, prone to false starts and generalizations concerning the past, but careful attention can focus her gaze to revive the small details that art requires. By constellating his memories and directing his will to repairing the frayed edges of his life, Nabokov aims for redemption by plaiting recollected details with regenerated visions of beauty or pity. For a man whose life was so frequently and violently upended by wars, exiles, and the sweeping plans of political schemers, *Speak, Memory*'s multiple transformations stand as an appropriate memorial to its author: a man whose survival depended on even greater and more astonishing adaptations.

Nabokov's delight in literary development, as evidenced by his memoir's metamorphoses and the elaborate, layered mimicry of his Russian past, complements one of his most pervasive and artistic themes: that artistic deception—the house of cards to beautiful and believable that the reader is delighted to be fooled—is also a folding of the “magic carpet” of space and time to reveal a fragment of the unseen patterns of existence. Paul Valéry writes, “The analogy that Nabokov establishes between the two V.N.'s leads him to postulate that Nature, like art, is not governed by a principle of utility” (150). In the Foreword to *Speak, Memory*'s final incarnation, Nabokov describes the difficult task of “re-Englishing a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place” (13). A polyglot shuttling his past between the looms of different languages, Nabokov's translations act as a new image for Visible Nature. If a translation that indelicately maneuvers between the original linguistic environment and the new, then the “verbal magic” of a word's perfectly intertwined semiotic meaning and sensory side (sight and sound) (Valéry 145) will be lost and the art grotesquely disfigured. Instead of metamorphoses, or with each translation being a new incarnation of Nabokov's loves, the translations would represent the evolution that Nabokov hated—blind, purposeless change,

without regard to the enchanted viewer or the enchanting, secretive creator.

*Speak, Memory* is Nabokov's attempt to blend the details of his past with the "fairy-tale" newness of literature; leaving such carefully layered artistry to the incautious touch of an unknown translator must have seemed a horror to him (as evidenced by how he, his wife, and his son oversaw as many translations of his work as possible). While *Speak, Memory*'s inter-linguistic beauty reveals another aspect of how Nabokov extends the radii of his love as far throughout the universe as possible, but as a creator—and a self-claimed representative of Visible Nature, "the other V.N." (*Strong Opinions* 153), he would not allow artistic control or vision to be wrested from his grasp. The artistic deceit of imitating Russian memories in English, and the consequent conversions of each conversion reveals consummate artistry: that which extends far beyond the necessary or biological function to deceive short-sighted predators (or literary critics). Meyers writes that Nabokov views style as "an indivisibly monistic approach to the work of art. To express in art a morality other than prescriptive, and to signal the existence of a Creator, required a density and a complexity which became Nabokov's passion" (179). When Nabokov denies evolution on the basis of its inability to answer for precise mimicry, he also denies a vision of the past structured by the powers of force and generalizations. Instead of delight, love, or complexity, an evolutionary world offers to the self only an unexamined impulse to seek its own satisfaction.

Perched comfortably in his "much abused ivory tower," Nabokov describes his ideal audience as a crowd wearing a mask of his own face; mingling with the universal community is, he suggests, simply a professional maneuver to obtain more treasures of "observation, humor, and pity" (*Lectures on Literature* 371). Bad readers, however, consume art with the "infantile purpose" of spotting themselves in the characters, disrespecting the luxuries before them in favor

of a formula response, without ever noticing the book's delicious stamp of design. In *Speak, Memory*, this stamp is Nabokov's careful preservation of his Russian heart in the English language. He writes, "Neither in environment nor heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me . . . that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark" (25). Visible Nature and Vladimir Nabokov both express their artistry and oppose the utilitarian, anti-altruistic ethic of evolutionary force through a mimicry that extends far beyond what is required to deceive the near-sighted—like a dark spot on a butterfly's wing, perfectly resembling a caterpillar's bore on a young leaf. However, a person who "reads with his spine"<sup>37</sup> can, if not identify objectively, at least sense that each arduous rebirth of *Speak, Memory* has yielded some new depth or detail to Mnemosyne's vision. Even though the metaphor of translation and the mystically-developing artistry of Visible Nature is my own, Nabokov describes his various translations as having been "a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before" (13). By putting his past beneath a microscope, and counting the minutiae of theme like he would count the scales of butterfly wings, Nabokov hoped to marry precision and love—and thus overcome time and distance.

This partnership between scientific precision and devoted love separates Nabokov's writing from the solipsism displayed by many of his characters (Kinbote and Humbert Humbert

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<sup>37</sup> In an introductory lecture, Nabokov argues that the great write blends magic, story, and lesson, creating an "impression of unified and unique radiance" that has little bearing on the form of the novel, as the "magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story." He continues to say, "It seems to me that a good formula to test the quality of a novel is, in the long run, a merging of the precision of poetry and the intuiting of science. In order to bask in that magic a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof. . . . Then with a pleasure that is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass" (*Lectures on Literature* 6).

being particularly vivid examples).<sup>38</sup> Instead of trying to overwhelm someone else's story by piling together mountains of irrelevant data, Nabokov's careful attention to his family's corrections about the past—whether these corrections addressed dates, times, or even the emotional tenor of his recollections—reveals his effort to save his loved ones from an unpatterned, generalized wave of human history.

His cousin Yuri offers an especially vivid example—killed “fighting the Reds” in northern Crimea, vast political scheming effaced his life and death into one battlefield statistic. Nabokov, however, effaces the political scheme. From the very beginning, he describes Yuri as fascinated with tales of nobility and war. “From his earliest boyhood, he was absolutely fearless . . . He collected little soldiers of painted lead—these meant nothing to me but he knew their uniforms as well as I did different butterflies” (196). As Nabokov compresses Yuri's life, he also expands the moment of his death into an event that combines its horror with the plotted sense of rightness. In Nabokov's version, Yuri is barely even part of an army; rather, like their childhood hero, Captain Mayne Reid, he fights evil alone—a dashing and tragically brave hero. Nabokov's closing words about his cousin and best friend claim, not that any general evil had been strong enough to claim Yuri's life, but that Yuri had been strong and beautiful enough to claim his death. “Had I been competent to write his epitaph, I might have summed up matters by saying—in richer words than I can muster here—that all emotions, all thoughts, were governed in Yuri by

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<sup>38</sup> “Commonsense will . . . remark that a further intensification of such fancies may lead to stark madness. But this is only true when the morbid exaggeration of such fancies is not linked up with an artist's cool and deliberate work. . . . Madness is but a diseased bit of commonsense, whereas genius is the greatest sanity of spirit . . . Lunatics are lunatics just because they have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power—or have lost the power—to create a new one as harmonious as the old. The artist on the other hand disconnects what he chooses and while doing so he is aware that something in him is aware of the final result. When he examines his completed masterpiece he perceives that whatever unconscious outcome of a definite plan which had been contained in the initial shock, as the future development of a live creature is said to be contained in the genes of its germ cell” (*Lectures on Literature* 377).

one gift: a sense of honor equivalent, morally, to absolute pitch” (200). Instead of allowing the waves of history to control and efface his loved ones, Nabokov arranges their stories so life and death seem perfectly and artistically joined.

This yearning to perfect the fusion of spirit and fact manifests itself in *Speak, Memory*’s extensive revisions. In the Foreword, Nabokov justifies his changes, saying, “I . . . tried to do something about the amnesic defects of the original--blank spots, blurry areas, domains of dimness. I discovered that sometimes, by means of intense concentration, the neutral smudge might be forced to come into beautiful focus so that the sudden view could be identified, and the anonymous servant named” (13). He becomes the galley slave to his family’s story, which is also his, and allows the lives of others to dictate the raw materials for his art. In a lecture titled “Good Readers and Good Writers,” Nabokov says that to call a story true insults “both art and truth” (*Lectures on Literature* 5). Instead, he argues that a good reader will recognize art by experience—a tell-tale “shiver in the spine”—rather than reason or intellect.

To prioritize the subjective experience over the objective does not exclude the inclusion of facts or data, but is simply another expression of Nabokov’s famous poetics: artistry—the constellation of events, or the carefully arranged house of cards—takes precedent over slavish devotion. Had *Speak, Memory* included facts or data irrelevant to Nabokov’s purpose of redeeming a fragmented past, then it would have simply been one more contribution to the heavy burden of living in an unpatterned, unintended world. By carefully weaving memory and art together, Nabokov reveals a small vision of truth, or at least offer a tantalizing glimpse of it behind the Enchanter’s curtain. Nabokov creates a bridge of pity from one person to another, and facts that detract from *Speak, Memory*’s literary environment, or whispers the secret while a magician performs sleight of hand are, to Nabokov, chaff that must be burned away to reveal the

more perfect pattern. Capturing the sensation of truth and letting the audience revel in its essence is part of Nabokov's aim; recreating a past with sufficient biological costume to deceive a clumsy predator is for lesser writers who only aim for their audience to "find themselves" in the characters they create.<sup>39</sup>

To "grope for some faint hope" through patterned artistry requires Nabokov to mimic sensations of truth—to achieve the rarity of design that exceeds the simplistic purpose of "setting the record straight." "Coincidence of pattern," Nabokov writes, "is one of the wonders of nature" (157). *Speak, Memory* establishes this coincidence of pattern—correlating the ideas of narrative and love in order to oppose the absurd generalizations of evolution in history. Even the chapters that were originally published as fiction are organized and transformed into a narrative that leads the audience, not into the thickness of a plot, but towards the different shrines of Nabokov's past. While "Mademoiselle O" may have been originally called a short story, the real metamorphosis did not take place when Nabokov adjusted and revised this piece for his memoir, but rather when he achieved the transmutation of memory into art. If fiction is essentially the plotting of an imagined world, then Nabokov's creative dismemberment of time to plot his own story makes the distinction between his memoir and his novels fairly slim; while the purpose may still be to lead a willing reader into a perfectly constructed world, Nabokov's memoir seeks to prove that the evil of *his* life, rather than the evil affecting the lives of his characters, is an abstraction. Though the tangible consequences exist, oblivion still cannot subsume all the beauty and richness of a person's life. Many of Nabokov's characters have similar aims in their fiction, and discover, if not the whole pattern of the world, a small enough fragment to understand their lives

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<sup>39</sup> In "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov expands upon this idea, stating that the worst kind of reader is one who "identifies himself with a character in a book"—a person who employs a "lowly" imagination, instead of embracing each new work as its own world (*Lectures on Literature* 4).

are encoded with meaning instead of despair. Even if every minute aspect of *Speak, Memory* is factually true, the mimicked fictionality<sup>40</sup> of the work is still the most important, as the fluidity of time and space that art provides allows Nabokov, like his characters, to search the whole universe for the texture of redemption. This is Nabokov's "supremacy of the detail" over the general, and the rule of enchantment over commonsense.

By wrestling with his past, Nabokov can reclaim his history and the histories of his loved ones from their fates at the hands of unconcerned oblivion. Sergey, Nabokov's younger brother by only eleven months, died in a concentration camp, becoming an unseen digit of the Holocaust statistics. However, in *Speak, Memory*, it is Vladimir Nabokov, and on a more minor level, his family, who have done Sergey the greatest wrong—marginalizing him, teasing him for his stammer and quiet, unusual mannerisms, and betraying his secret homosexuality. In Sergey's chapter, Nabokov writes the most truly pathetic scene. Because Véra Nabokov, Vladimir's wife, was Jewish, their family needed to suddenly flee Germany, the place where older and younger brother enjoyed the friendliest, most brotherly stage of their relationship. However, Vladimir and his wife slipped away without telling Sergey, who later had to "stutter his astonishment to an indifferent concierge" (258). Nabokov describes Sergey as "one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem" (258). Nabokov would rather his brother's death be wrapped in the too-late apology and regrets of a loved one, rather than letting him be effaced by statistics. While the Nazis who sent Sergey to die in a concentration camp are not made chimerical or irrelevant, in the story Nabokov tells, they serve mostly as disembodied

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<sup>40</sup> This is a really enchanting aspect of the work: Nabokov has both fiction imitating memoir, and memoir imitating fiction, and storytelling imitating life. The mimicry is so multi-layered and complex that it is as if leaves have been created to flutter at a breeze like the green wings of a butterfly. Nabokov turns the hierarchy of imitations on its head.

abstractions only to prop up Sergey's nobility. Not only for Sergey, but for his other family members as well, Nabokov patterns tragedies so that their causes, not their victims, are effaced. He arranges the details so that evil's existence serves only as scaffolding for the revelation of a beloved father, mother, or lover's character. Through art, the madmen of history are converted from agents of causation to mere tools that, by virtue of their ugliness, and the flat, predictable animalism of their desires, make Nabokov's loved ones seem even brighter in comparison. One critic notes that Nabokov uses "the incidental, the apparently inconsequential detail or image and, by careful arrangement with others of its kind, deploys it in a kind of guerilla sortie against the mechanized onslaught of history" (Norman 82). Even by mourning the butterfly collection that was destroyed in the war while almost entirely neglecting to mention his lost fortune or aristocratic rank, Nabokov opposes both mechanized history and the socially-prescribed hierarchy of human desire.

Frustrated with how limited time and space efface individualism, Nabokov upends dictated hierarchies of perspective and history to disempower the random, non-emotive force of a wholly material world. A natural consequence of Nabokov's concern with limited time and space is his desire to upend dictated hierarchies of perspective and history. What appears to be Nabokov's disordering of established patterns has influenced some critics to dismiss his treatment of reality and other people as either cruel, frivolous, or both. Andrew Field writes that Nabokov does not search out the past as much as he carefully selects moments from it, arranging them so that they are "poetically fixed" (34) and Nabokov himself argues that when creating a biography, "even the purest scholar becomes involved in composing a novel almost without knowing it, and the literary lie comes to be diffused as thoroughly in this work of a conscientious scholar as in that of an unrestrained compiler" (qtd. in Field 14). Instead of attempting to compile

or recreate his past under a superficial mask of deceit, Nabokov writes *Speak, Memory* with an artistic freedom that reveals and releases his readers from biography's power to deceive the unwitting. Granting himself the artistic freedom to move fluidly through space and time, Nabokov reveals, not his cruelty, but imposed standards of reality. Artistry, in addition to helping him slip outside the confines of the everyday, also allows Nabokov to reveal a different pattern of existence<sup>41</sup>—one that speaks subjectively and emotionally to its creator, rather than simply requiring each person to play his or her unconscious role in an obscure, generalized world.

Just as art allows Nabokov a temporary or partial vision beyond limited space and time, it also releases him from the fanaticism of common sense that limited space and time creates. In an attempt to shed light on Nabokov's admittedly (and purposefully) slippery terms of metaphysics, Barabtarlo says that "space, time, and matter in his art are—not defined as (for definitions delimit), and are not understood as (for these notions surpass understanding), but *given* to us as, respectively, infinity, eternity, and immortality, and it is to these three, and to their alliance, that Nabokov devoted his art" (qtd. in Kuzmanovich 15). By denying time in his memoir, Nabokov tests Mnemosyne's powers (infinity, eternity, and immortality) against the powers of violence (destruction, oblivion, and the mental decay of one's past). But even though Nabokov denies time, he still acknowledges that he is in time's power until death:

That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my

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<sup>41</sup> When Nabokov disorders the typical linear narrative of biography by spiraling through the different periods of his life, each swirl of past, present, and future presents his readers with his ideal, holistic vision of literature. In the closing lecture for a group of students, Nabokov said that the only real way to read literature is to re-read; only upon the second reading, he argued, can a reader engage with the entirety of a novel, lingering over the texture and technique like a museum visitor over a painting. He concluded the lecture by stating, "Time and sequence cannot exist in the author's mind because no time element and no space element had ruled the initial vision. . . . [I]f a book could be read in the same way as a painting is taken in by the eye, that is without . . . the absurdity of beginnings and ends, this would be the ideal way of appreciating a novel, for thus the author saw it at the moment of its conception" (*Lectures on Literature* 380).

bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. I have journeyed back in thought—with thought hopelessly tapering off as I went—to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exists. Short of suicide, I have tried everything. (20)

Nabokov frequently claimed that his inspiration for *Lolita* came from reading a newspaper article about a gorilla who, being taught to draw by his human keepers, first sketched the bars of his cage. Of course, dedicated biographers and fact-finders have declared that no official record of this article exists, and it is more than likely to be another of Nabokov's fabrications—an objection that seems irrelevant to me, as Nabokov's statement elaborates on a theme woven through most of his works: if a being recognizes his cage, then he also gains the opportunity to see beyond it. The common sense that causes one person to declare his or her particular patch of time as the most important or relevant is a destroyer of human consciousness. Nabokov calls the "free world of timelessness" (20) the natural environment of humanity, and narrates how the opposite, a life inaccessible to either the infinity before or after time, leads to anxiety and despair. He describes a young chronophobiac who, having seen home movies of his parents' life only a few weeks before his birth, experiences horror at the realization that the entire world was unaffected by his absence: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between the eternities of darkness" (19), but Nabokov cites his intentions to overpower the absurdity of a human spirit being wedged between two inaccessible voids. He writes, "I rebel against this state of affairs. I feel the urge to take my rebellion outside and picket nature. Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life"

(20). Nabokov connects triumph over time with triumph over death—death being a state (or non-state) that, if not for “personal glimmers” of hope, would be the crowning absurdity of an unmeant, undesigned life.

Whenever in my dreams I see the dead, they always appear silent, bothered, strangely depressed, quite unlike their dear, bright selves. I am aware of them, without any astonishment, in surroundings they never visited during their earthly existence, in the house of some friend of mine they never knew. They sit apart, frowning at the floor, as if death were a dark taint, a shameful family secret. It is certainly not then—not in dreams—but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast,<sup>42</sup> from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction. (50)

Instead of bowing to the common idea that one should discover secrets from the afterlife by rooting about in the similarly mysterious, unknowable medium of dreams, Nabokov subverts this common sense as another inherently deceitful, absurd imposition on human consciousness. He writes that only when the wide-awake individual sits “on the highest terrace of consciousness,” the self can “peer beyond its own limits” to sense an answer of eternity (50). The

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<sup>42</sup> This idea correlates neatly with the last two pages of *Speak, Memory*, in which Nabokov describes an idyllic time spent in the gardens of St. Nazaire with Véra and Dmitri. “[N]o doubt I could easily fill in with [the garden] with the colors of plausible flowers, if I were careless enough to break the hush of pure memory that . . . I have left undisturbed, and humbly listened to from the beginning. . . . [From there] it was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship’s funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—Find What the Sailor Has Hidden—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen.” (310)

common sense that claims the unconscious, undirected world of dreams as the richest medium for revelation is, for Nabokov, the foolish fancy of a “Viennese witch doctor” or a wildly superficial mind.

Nabokov subverts the habits of common existence through both literary form and content; by upending these assumptions, Nabokov is also able to reframe his world so that weak and strong are predicated by the forces of love, rather than the non-emotive, force and generalizations of existence. The order of common sense declares that triumph belongs to force: death rips soul from body, a man murders another and claims power over life, and, as Nabokov himself experienced, a political fanatic can tear apart the world and exile a man from country, lover, and language. For common sense, immediate consequence is all the evidence to be considered, and a lack of evidence is what excludes transcendence. In “Pale Fire,” Shade sets up his common sense—disbelief—against the longing to retrieve a sense of security or hope for his dead daughter. As he writes and revises what was to be his last work, Shade tries to stitch back together the gash death made in the pattern of his existence. Similarly, Nabokov narrates his memoir to weave a triumph of the spirit back into his disrupted and abused past. In a lecture he tried to convince his students that “we are all crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns on the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles—no matter the imminent peril—these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest form of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good.” (374) It is through the use of these “iridescent details” that Nabokov can reclaim the nobility of life that evil and limited space and time had threatened to efface.

Nabokov says that some details of memory are irretrievably lost to him after being woven into fiction—like a white crayon he transferred from his nursery to the plump hand of a minor character. However, in *Speak Memory*, Nabokov wrestles with his ghosts as his own, trying to give, if not peace, at least a belated pity. By claiming his memories as his own instead of giving them to the world of a story, Nabokov can seal them safely in art—like the love letters, wholly intact and perfectly preserved, that he would secretly slip into a story. To slip something concrete or “real” into art, thus preserving and transforming the initially inconsequential object is a concept that Nabokov also plays with in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote describes a portrait of a man whose fingers “rested lightly on an embossed and emblazoned box whose side facing the spectator consisted of an inset oblong made of real bronze, while upon the shaded top of the box, drawn in perspective, the artist had pictured a plate with the beautifully executed, twin-lobed, brainlike, halved kernel of a walnut” (130). Of course, the real-life box, just like the real-life love letter, must serve art and not itself in the end: the revolutionaries who overthrew Kinbote’s reign break apart the painting and the real metal box embedded in it only to discover the “broken bits of nutshell” (131). The gaze of pity that Nabokov directs to his past and the ghosts who drift sadly through it is what also enables him to escape the limits of space and time. Nabokov writes that his friend, “Vivian Bloodmark,”<sup>43</sup> considers the poet to be a person who can sense everything that happens at one point in time (218). Magnifying the small in order to see extraordinary details and connecting separate visions to the same web of story is how Nabokov reveals coincidence of pattern—the “supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it

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<sup>43</sup> An anagram of Vladimir Nabokov, only one of the many he employed (for example, “Vivian Darkbloom” in *Lolita*). If enjoying art requires “finding what the sailor has hidden,” then Nabokov presents his readers many different layers of play to discover: only one of being his penchant for anagramming his name, similar to a giggling practical joke, created only for the delight of being found out.

makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past” (170). Instead of seeking an objective answer or a bullet-pointed system to understanding life, death, and eternity, Nabokov, like Kierkegaard, tries to graft himself into the divine through subjective truth. As Véra stated after her husband’s death, the main theme of Nabokov’s work is how men in a temporal existence can sense, although never fully identify, the presence of the “otherworld.” Even though limited space and time obscure truth, Nabokov’s artistry suggests *potustoronnost*, the otherworld, or “over-to-the-sideness”—a peripheral glimpse of an elusive creator. For Nabokov, tracing the coincidences and interwoven themes of life suggests that it is the discovery of subjective meaning, and not the objective, that provides the narrator a reassuring peek of a world that is, despite any iniquities claiming the contrary, as carefully and intentionally structured as a novel.

While *Speak, Memory* could be called a collection of images from Nabokov’s past, this description more aptly suits autobiographies or memoirs in general than Nabokov’s singularly unusual work; *Speak, Memory* produces all the thrills of well-arranged art that literature requires. As Nabokov weaves the past into the present and future and vice-versa, each new image of his past informs the others, whether he is seen burning newspapers in Cambridge, trying to stay awake in order to study the Russian he feared to lose, or slipping between the images of life in Germany and arrival to America. Nabokov’s statement that the book is “conclusive evidence of my having existed”<sup>44</sup> is both charming and self-deprecating; it may be more fair to say that the

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<sup>44</sup> He later develops this idea of artistry as orientation, while dovetailing language’s powers to help an author pattern his life by simultaneously creating and upending a stable sense of place and memory with the scientific precision that real art requires. While I develop this point regarding intentionality and precision elsewhere, Nabokov’s pairs different disciplines with the mode of experience (either subjective or objective) that is least expected. For orientation, he creates a subjective world in his fiction and his memoir—one that communicates to others while also creating an impermeable barrier—impermeable meaning that he uses language to construct a

book is conclusive evidence of his having loved, and deeply. The book spirals inward, from the more distant loves until, at the end, he is closest to his heart with his wife Véra and young son Dmitri. “Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points in the universe” (296). Shields writes that “Nabokov’s autobiographical impulse is to transform himself, his family, and his friends into medium-level angels. His mother and father, his grandparents, his tutors, his uncles and aunts and cousins, his governesses, his brothers and sisters, his lovers, his wife, all of these people Nabokov treats with exquisite sympathy” (48). At *Speak, Memory*’s end, Nabokov describes his son’s delight in discovering pottery fragments on the beach in Majorca. This scene transforms from a tender recollection to become Nabokov’s supreme checkmate, conquering space and time in a sort of “fair chess.” The moving image of Dmitri running from shore to father, bearing literal fragments from the past, becomes the final flourish of Nabokov’s plotting isolation into the pattern of eternity. Nabokov declares:

I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our

child there was one whose border of scrollwork fitted exactly and continued the pattern of

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place for his memories in which their stability cannot be compromised by outsiders and literary critics. When discussing the science of artistry, he treats style, word choice, and plotting with so much attention that he subverts the common belief that science’s objective standards can only be achieved by rote, dull experimentation, rather than imaginatively fastidious observation. In a passage that implicitly combines both these ideas, he states that “[t]he kind of poem I produced [in my youth] was hardly anything more than a sign I made of being alive, of passing or having passed, or hoping to pass, through certain intense human emotions. It was a phenomenon of orientation rather than of art, thus comparable to stripes of paint on a roadside rock or to a pillared heap of stones marking a mountain trail. But then, in a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one’s position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness is an immemorial urge” (217-218). Whether some vision of the world can be achieved through objective or subjective experience is, in some sense, an immaterial concern for Nabokov. Like Tuan, Nabokov’s work inherently contains a justification of how language makes place through naming, and thus creates a visible world from an unseen, and hence invisible, landscape.

a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tailed with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by *her* mother a hundred years ago—and so on, until this assortment of parts . . . might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl . . . now mended by *these* rivets of bronze. (308-309)

Imagination empowers Nabokov to see a chip of pottery as more than just intriguing rubbish; indeed, someone so stoutly anti-utilitarian as Nabokov would probably argue alongside Owen Barfield that only through imagination can the world be known (*Poetic Diction* 28). For a person to consider any other being or entity either intriguing or pitiable is, as Boyd calls it, to slip beyond the “bars of selfhood and time” through careful attention and kindness (10). An evolutionary gaze can only indifferently consider the past, at the most identifying a series of formulas and answers set into motion with no regard to dignity to either body or spirit, rather than empathizing with the conscious beings who either were actors in the force of history or were acted upon.

One of the unexpected wonders of *Speak, Memory* is how Nabokov, as he would in his fiction, creates this attention and kindness on behalf of others. Dmitri would never meet most of his father’s family, so Nabokov uses imagination to bind him to them. The “Majorca chip” becomes a kernel to pin love to. He writes, “There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic” (167). When Nabokov rejects the flawed vision offered by the temporal world, he replaces it with one more perfect—a vision that imaginatively (and thus, metaphysically) transforms loss after loss into part of one pattern. In an early poem entitled “Siriania,” Nabokov writes:

Dying nightly, I am glad  
 to rise again at the appointed hour.  
 The next day is a dewdrop of paradise  
 and the day past, a diamond. (qtd. in Boyd 88)

Nabokov revised so extensively because when he began writing in America, he felt himself “handicapped by an almost complete lack of data in regard to family history” and could not check only his own memory when details seemed foggy (11). While this might seem overly finical to some, as Nabokov’s concern with details mirrors his description of good literature as that which merges “the precision of poetry with the intuition of science” (*Lectures on Literature* 6). Through extensive revision, Nabokov was able to make “the arbitrary spectacles” of Mnemosyne, capricious goddess of memory, recall the richest, most perfectly-patterned details of his life and the lives of those who loved him.<sup>45</sup> “I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past” (170). In his struggle to arrange a hazy past, Nabokov senses the eternity found in the heights of consciousness.

In a sense, his memoir is an attempt to redeem and repossess his memories of a happy childhood from the sudden and tragic losses that signaled their end.<sup>46</sup> The loss of his country, his

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<sup>45</sup> He writes, “[A]n object, which had been a mere dummy chosen at random and of no factual significance in the account of an important event, kept bothering me every time I reread that passage in the course of correcting the proofs of various editions, until finally I made a great effort, and the arbitrary spectacles (which Mnemosyne must have needed more than anybody else) were metamorphosed into a clearly recalled oystershell-shaped cigarette case, gleaming in the wet grass at the foot of an aspen on the Chemin du Pendu, where I found on that June day in 1907 a hawkmoth rarely met with so far west, and where a quarter of a century earlier, my father had netted a Peacock butterfly very scarce in our northern woodlands.” (12)

<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard writes, “For me nothing is more dangerous than to recollect [*erindre*]. . . . It is said that absence makes the heart grow fonder. That is very true, but it becomes fonder in a purely poetic way. To live in recollection is more richly satisfying than all actuality, and it has a

language, his first love, and, eventually, his father were all ruptures that served to hurtle the precocious poet and lepidopterist into his future as a writer of some of the world's greatest novels. He uses those same techniques of style and arrangement to plot the structure of his life and trace the veins of transcendence in prose. Through writing, Nabokov turns the numinous—an abstract notion of eternal significance and infinity's participation in one's everyday life—into the tangible: a book of prose, weighty and textured, a material representation of immaterial truths. Kuzmanovich describes how Nabokov, by encoding a pattern of transcendence into text, simultaneously reveals the tragically limited space and time system in which we live:

[T]he necessity of the otherworld's beneficent ordering must be premised not just as a continuation or distillation of what we love in this world, but as a needed corrective to the unmet needs, frustrating limits, and horrors of this one. It seems logical to expect that great artists like Nabokov cannot give us ecstatic visions without also *giving* us this experience of earthly limits. The artist of the ecstatic paradoxically obliges himself to encode the sensations of horror, absence, rupture, and nothingness no less richly than those of allied infinity, eternity, and immortality. (16)

By plotting his memories into a literary structure, Nabokov can shift his family into the “special reality” of art; essentially, he reorganizes the sensory world so that human consciousness is grander than the cosmos (24). By diminishing the world, Nabokov enlarges that which he loves.

The environment of *Speak, Memory* is one that permits Nabokov to shape the pattern of his loved one's lives, just as he would shape the lives of his characters so that their suffering or joy will actively participate in the artist's sculpted world. With this memoir's “special reality,”

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security that no actuality possesses. A recollected life relationship has already passed into eternity and has no temporal interest anymore” (42).

Nabokov reveals a new vision of his family in which they are also revealed or, perhaps, transformed, from effaced and ineffective victims to participants with undiminished volition. Kuzmanovich notes, "Whether we read or act, we must imagine the humanity of others fully, must imagine them to be as fully human as we are, not merely cellophane figures or muddled prefaces to some unwritten, otherworldly books, which means being ready to acknowledge them as contiguous universes which must be embraced by consciousness" (41). The superficially Darwinian system of temporal existence can impose on the flesh, but the body's hobble of space and time is also what offers the spirit freedom to ascend, through the use of imagination and pity, to the greatest heights of consciousness. While Rosengrant argues that Nabokov wrote *Speak, Memory* to prove that his past is stronger than the words used to describe it (n.pag), it is unlikely that Nabokov would try to set a robust past into a too-thin frame. Art is the new environment Nabokov gives his past, and if his purpose was to prove words to be an insufficient medium for memory, he would not have devoted so many years to reinvent and refine this particular work.<sup>47</sup> Intentional, poetic language functions as connective tissue, binding up disparate time-space experiences into a whole. Any attempt to understand real-life experiences without narrative entangles those seeking a dichotomy and enraptures those who, like Nabokov, war against all attempts to prioritize matter over style, or vice versa.<sup>48</sup> Imagination, which Nabokov considered

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<sup>47</sup> As noted several times throughout *Speak, Memory*, art is a form of orienting the self. Words do not capture, efface, or blunt Nabokov's past, but rather help him actualize it:

"Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points in the universe. . . . I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence" (297).

<sup>48</sup> Booth describes this view when he writes that "[e]ven the life we think of as primary experience—that is, events like birth, copulation, death, plowing and planting, getting and spending—is rarely experienced without some sort of mediation in narrative. . . . [N]arratives

the “height of human consciousness,” is inherently a narrative function, an idea that Barfield expands upon when he writes that the imagination creates perception, establishing both primary “thinghood” and then ascribing or restoring meaning to the primary (yet still imaginatively perceived) things (31). It is the poetic imagination that, as Tuan argues, makes the invisible visible, and perceives sensory data in order to bind up narrative and experience—a synthesis that is for Nabokov, the height of consciousness. As Boyd notes, “Nabokov ‘dreaded the loss of consciousness as the foulest of his most fearful nightmares’ (129). To develop a sense of consciousness that can move, however feebly, beyond its body’s parameters and empathize with those whose extrinsic existence causes them to be, others to Nabokov’s intrinsic self reflects a startlingly stalwart faith in the powers of empathy and language to create and redeem a place for human dignity in a seemingly non-emotive, evolutionary world.

Instead of ascribing to any organized creed or religion, Nabokov sought transcendence by rifling through the personal. In *Strong Opinions*, he says that creating art from memory is “all a matter of love: the more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it is” (12). Turning memories into plotted literature is a gesture of his faith, not in an objective knowledge of a creator and afterlife, but that we can subjectively sense that existence is more profound than it would seem to the “average ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye” (*Pale Fire* 130). Being that *Speak, Memory* reads somewhat akin to a quasi-travelogue devoted to transcendence, it is a work that also simultaneously cloaks and reveals Nabokov’s biography. Kinbote-esque attempts to sift through literature and shake particles of fact loose from Nabokov’s “eye-thirsty scenes”

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make and remark what in realist views are considered more primary experiences—and thus make and remake ourselves. The transition from what we think of as more primary (because ‘real’) to the experience of stories about it is so automatic and frequent that we risk losing our sense of just how astonishing our story worlds are, in their power to add ‘life’ upon ‘life’—for good or ill” (*The Company We Keep* 14).

(Barabtarlo qtd. in Kuzmanovich 15) suggest a reader's failure to appreciate the beauty of details and the "coincidences of pattern" that hint to strands of transcendence in the human narrative. Whether or not a critic can point to any one anecdote and conclusively declare it to be either fact or fiction is immaterial—and Nabokov's careful patterning is best appreciated as such.

Nabokov aims to redeem his past from destruction, and never attempts to hide that we read his life through his interpretation—a strategy of memoir undoubtedly more honest than haphazardly arranging facts while pretending to give full disclosure. In *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov argues that to use literature as a means to discover more facts, rather than to enjoy a book for its texture and deceptive magic is an affront to artistry, as well as a sign of trivial reading: "The good reader is aware that the quest for real life, real people, and so forth is a meaningless process when speaking of books. . . . An original author always invents an original world, and if a character or an action fits into the pattern of that world, then we experience the pleasurable shock of artistic truth" (10). Nabokov orders his memories to uncover the artistry and pattern from the absurdity that limited space and time impose upon the human spirit.

Like his character, John Shade, Nabokov tries to constellate his past from the rattling jumble of unevaluated reality. The artist works against the obscuring powers of madness or evil, denying the limitations that space and time impose on the individual. By resisting time, Nabokov can preserve the texture of his past when he preserves (and also redeems) the people he loves. However, this redemption is frequently incomplete or uncertain, as in the case of Mademoiselle O, or Nabokov's brother, Sergey. But even when Nabokov cannot be sure that he has been able to atone for his childish cruelty towards his brother, or the hidden graciousness of his governess, his work acts almost like a testimony or a plea to the unknown powers governing the world—a plea to prove that these people were, and they were good, noble, and strong, even when suffering

ignoble exile or torture at the hands of general evil.

In fact, Nabokov's memoir seems much more about other people than it is about himself. His is a tight-knit weave of love and regret for his family, his butterflies, and Russia. While most of Nabokov's characters shudder under the burden of anxiety, only to shunt it off at the end in an ecstatic affirmation of transcendence, even though the memoir follows that same pattern of his fiction, Nabokov's personal anxiety seems more horrible somehow, because the characters that populate *Speak, Memory* bear the burden of "real life" and thus "real tragedy." This burden makes the uncertain redemption of Mademoiselle O's soul, or the pity Nabokov extends as an apology to his brother and the peasant girl he used to admire like a thread cast out but unable to anchor to its object. Geographical distance and death, while he denies the former and tries to see meaning in the latter, imbue his apologetic art with a desperate melancholy. He alternates between seeming to despair of his artistic efforts towards restitution and the humble sensitivity that his regret, when patterned into art, must somehow link his loves to the most distant points in the universe. *Speak, Memory* begins with these distant points; the work spirals moves inward, starting with the outer rind of his past—stories and anecdotes about acquaintances—and then adds intricacy and depth to the pattern of his past, as each new spiral of story peels back another layer of emotional distance. This layering creates a protective world for Nabokov's most intimate and tender memories, for by the time Nabokov narrates his father and brother's death, he has already spun them inside a chrysalis of established pattern. Nabokov's movement from the peripheral to the more sensitive or intimate memories can be seen in the comparison of Chapter Five, first published as the short story "Mademoiselle O" in a French magazine, and Chapter Thirteen, which addresses Nabokov's complicated relationship with his younger brother, Sergey.

In the fifth chapter, Nabokov relates how his French governess entered his life when he

was six years old to torment him by alternating between ridiculous and pretentious attitudes.

Later, when he was a young émigré, he visited her in Switzerland, only to discover that the grotesquely sensitive figure from his childhood was in both lamentable health and social circumstances.<sup>49</sup> Only then, however, as a young man, was he able to see the tragic beauty that he had not perceived as a child, hidden, as it were, within her “Buddha-like bulk” (105).<sup>50</sup>

Nabokov describes how, when he visited Mademoiselle in Switzerland for the second time, he brought with him a hearing appliance that he knew she needed. She had been mostly deaf even in his childhood, and years later, conversation with her was impossible. Nabokov writes, “I decided to bring her next day the appliance which we gathered she could not afford. She adjusted the clumsy thing improperly at first, but no sooner had she done so than she turned to me with a dazzled look of moist wonder and bliss in her eyes. She swore she could hear every word, every murmur of mine. She could not for, having my doubts, I had not spoken” (116). Their roles are reversed from his childhood when he might fake appreciation for her generally useless gifts; now he can only stand in awe and pity at the unexpected manifestation of love in her attempt to protect his feelings. Trying to reconcile the memories from his childhood with this exiled woman, a startling combination of graceless personality and gracious heart, with prompts an

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<sup>49</sup> Mademoiselle’s memories of her time spent with the Nabokovs also reveal an interesting artistic truth: that she loved them, and sincerely, despite her pretentious affectations and constant posturing during her life with their family. However, while the memories she so fondly reminisced over were far different from Nabokov’s own (and sometimes quite the opposite) they hint towards a tenderness in her that is, later in the chapter, heartbreakingly and openly revealed. Of course, Nabokov combines this tenderness with humor, and the passage juxtaposing Mademoiselle’s nostalgic monologue with Nabokov’s own thoughts and corrections is fairly hilarious. She is like Kinbote in many ways: a character who concocts a reality disconnected from truth, but with an innate sensitivity that can suddenly and brightly shine through the seemingly-impenetrable fortress of self-absorption.

<sup>50</sup> Much of *Speak, Memory* is dedicated to uncovering the hidden, whether the minutia of memory (the name of Colette’s little dog, Floss) or the real, solid beauty of meagerly talented person’s soul (Mademoiselle, the tutor Lenski, and his first painting tutor, the gentle and melancholy Mr. Cummings).

anxiety within him—one probably akin to that he felt as a child, when he tried to locate the slim and beautiful young lady in Mademoiselle’s old photograph with the gargantuan, infuriating woman of ‘reality.’ He investigates this sympathetic anxiety further, and describes his burden and sense of responsibility to reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable images:

She had spent her all her life in feeling miserable. . . . [A] sense of misery, and nothing else, is not enough to make a permanent soul. . . . Have I really salvaged her from fiction? Just before the rhythm I hear falters and fades, I catch myself wondering whether, during the years I knew her, I had not kept utterly missing something in her that was far more than her chins . . . something akin to that last glimpse of her, to the radiant deceit she used in order to have me depart pleased with my own kindness. (117)

Only by moving artistry and memory outside of Mademoiselle—by spinning a web between her and the natural world--can Nabokov discover an image to suit her combined wonder and ludicrousness, and he settles on that of an aging, dirty swan, all elegant neck and clumsy, futile attempts at flight. Not only does this understanding require an artistic distance, but Nabokov writes that he needed the distance of time as well, in order to pity Mademoiselle. Only after his childhood had been incinerated by the fires of revolution could he view her according to her own merit, and create a story significant enough to prove the “over-to-the-side” wonder of her existence. His anxiety could be termed as a natural expression of honesty; whether Mademoiselle’s real self might actually be salvageable, or even separable from the crude, constructed persona she lived inside for so many years. As one critic argues, the redemption Nabokov attempts for his past is a “textual act—an act of citation responding to a past under threat of effacement. We only discover this when it doesn’t work, as in this case, when the tone

of *Speak, Memory* unexpectedly deviates from its usual self-confidence and momentarily touches on despair” (Norman 85). Mademoiselle’s effacement is self-inflicted, but whether or not Nabokov can, as an artist, effectively burn away the dross of her “distorted personality” creates a tension that permeates this particular narrative, while also setting up a pattern for later, more intimate struggles of pity and redemption.

As *Speak, Memory* spirals from the most distant point of time to the most recent, the book also moves inward in intimacy, as if Nabokov reserves the stories closest to him for safekeeping in the book’s deepest layer.<sup>51</sup> The web of artistry and the architecture of Nabokov’s “life-view”<sup>52</sup> have been set, and are now strong enough to support his most emotionally hazardous narratives. For example, he makes tentative amends with Mademoiselle before writing about his first love, Tamara, and then his brother, Sergey. While the chapter about Tamara has been more popular among anthologists and casual readers, Nabokov’s chapter about his brother is reserved for the book’s most intimate depths; only after several other people from his past have been knit into the patterned haven of love, loss, and pity, can he support the anxiety of Sergey’s life and death in art. The comforting glimpse of a pattern has been set for his family, not only through Mademoiselle, but also with his former tutor, the sensitive and generous Lenski, his Uncle Rukka, and Polenka, the head coachman’s daughter.<sup>53</sup> Nabokov explicitly confesses this

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<sup>51</sup> Green supports this idea; in fact, he even uses the same vocabulary, stating that *Speak, Memory* “spirals inward” (92).

<sup>52</sup> Over one hundred years earlier, Kierkegaard described a similar need to “graft himself into the divine” through a subjective experience. He writes, “Of what use would it be for me to discover a so-called objective truth . . . if it had no deeper meaning *for me and for my life?* . . . Of what use would it be to me for truth to stand before me, cold and naked, not caring whether or not I acknowledged it, making me uneasy rather than trustingly receptive. I certainly do not deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge* and that through it men may be influenced, but *then it must come alive in me*, and *this* is what I recognize as the most important of all” (8).

<sup>53</sup> Nabokov writes that he had sensed Polenka’s “pitiful beauty” meant she was better left alone, and writes about how once he saw her after she had been married: “[A]t the same moment, she

emotional difficulty in writing about his younger brother, connecting it to his reason for locating Sergey so late in the book: “I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother. . . . Except for the two or three poor little adventures I have sketched in earlier chapters, his boyhood and mine seldom mingled. He is a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections” (258). While Nabokov never directly declares it, his brother Sergey was like his half-tolerated, half-scorned Uncle Rukka in both musical taste and sexual persuasion, as young Vladimir discovered by reading Sergey’s diary. For the Nabokovs, knowing of Sergey’s homosexuality “provided a retroactive clarification of certain oddities of behavior on his part” (258). Poor Sergey lived, not only in the shadow of Nabokov’s memory, but in the shadow of his older brother’s glory—all this clumsiness made even more painful by his stammer, his eccentricities, and his shyness. However, in spite of these superficial weaknesses, Nabokov declared him to be a “[a] frank and fearless man.” Anonymously denounced by a co-worker to the Nazis, Sergey died in a concentration camp in 1945. Nabokov writes, “It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem” (258). This is one of those moments when Nabokov seems to find pity’s power overwhelmed by despair—an attitude that contrasts with his generally optimistic, albeit rarely expressed opinions about the afterlife and a world outside of time.<sup>54</sup> While Nabokov seems to doubt his ability to save Sergey, just as he doubted his ability to save Mademoiselle O, his attempts reflect what one critic describes as his

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and another girl walked past me, heavily handkerchiefed, in huge felt boots and horrible, shapeless, long quilted jackets, with the stuffing showing at the torn spots of the coarse black cloth, and as she passed, Polenka, a bruise under her eye and a puffed-up lip (did her husband beat her on Saturdays?) remarked in wistful and melodious tones to nobody in particular: ‘*A barchuk-to menya ne priznal* [Look, the young master does not know me]—’ and that was the only time I ever heard her speak.” (212)

<sup>54</sup> Peterson describes Nabokov’s usual attitude as an “aesthetic intuition of a hovering and redemptive ‘otherworld’ beyond the measurements and confines of empirical reality” (66).

‘esthetic theology’ and essential faith in another world more suited for human consciousness and love,<sup>55</sup> a thought that David Shields obliquely acknowledges when he describes *Speak, Memory* as the result of Nabokov’s “impulse to transform” all the people that he loved and the people he never loved enough. He treats family, friends, tutors, governesses, and all else with “exquisite sympathy” (48). While fictional characters and fictional time all bend as galley slaves to Nabokov’s will, his memoir upends this hierarchy while still achieving the same heights of artistry.

While *Speak, Memory* is not structured in strict linear time, and avoids the typical cause-effect chain of most autobiographies, his dislocating the joints and rearranging the typical path of narrative is not accidental, but rather born of a desire to enrich the human details. Nabokov’s denial of time, his confession that he does not even believe in it, seems at first glance to have induced him to proceed telling a story that only disrupts linear time to leave it scattered in pieces on the floor. While one critic describes the novel as “unplotted” (Shields 50), Wood more aptly describes *Speak, Memory* when he says that readers will discover “a character in an autobiography who would like to get out of time, but cannot imagine his or anyone’s humanity without it” (169). Nabokov does not break down a system merely to break it, or from some lingering adolescent rage, but instead attempts to rebuild an unfeeling system so that it reflects love’s subjective truth. “Lunatics are lunatics just because they have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power—or have lost the power—to create a new one as harmonious as the old. The artist on the other hand disconnects what he chooses and while doing so he is aware of the final result” (*Lectures on Literature* 377). Leland de la Durantaye

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<sup>55</sup> In Sergej Davydov’s article analyzing *Invitation to a Beheading*, Davydov says, “The partaking of the mystery of creativity is a mortal’s only hope—but not a guarantee—of immortality. In Nabokov’s ‘esthetic theology,’ a work of genuine art is a sacred text” (199).

writes that the book is structured as a farewell to Europe, Russia, and all of Nabokov's life prior to exile (170). When the farewell draws to an end, Nabokov suddenly reveals that he has been, all along, writing to his wife, Véra. He has drawn connections from everything in his world and brought them back to his loves: his wife and his son. Although Nabokov calls the author happy who can preserve an untouched and unsullied love letter in a work of fiction, his joy at preserving, instead, an infinity of memory in a love letter to his wife must be boundless. Green argues that the novel's structure "is a diminishment of large things (politics, war, history) and an expansion of the 'small' (one life, one family, one set of special and particular detailed circumstances); it connects Nabokov's early recollections as a son to his later memories as a husband and father" (92). Nabokov always obeyed his own poetics, in which the details triumph over the general, and the great wonder of our existence is not that we are crashing to our deaths from a high tower, but that our spirits are light-hearted enough to discover patterns on the brick walls before our eyes (*Lectures on Literature* 374). Although Nabokov seems to deny the eternal soul, he later writes that only commonsense rules immortality out (*Lectures on Literature* 377), and describes the spiral as that which frees men from the circle, or the spherical prison of limited time.<sup>56</sup> By evading the cage of linearity and subverting the chain of causation in his life, and the lives of those he loves, Nabokov is able to reveal patterns of transcendence that the closeness of distance and the ruthlessness of generalizations obscure.

When Nabokov writes that "all art is deception," he engages his audience with a

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<sup>56</sup> When Nabokov writes about spirals and circles, it seems an eerie echo of Chesterton, a writer Nabokov deeply admired during his childhood. Nabokov writes, "The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. . . . A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life" (275). In a similar vein, Chesterton describes the circle as the domain of lunatics, and the cross, which "has at its heart a collision and a contradiction" as that which extends its four arms "for ever" and can "grow without changing," whereas "the circle returns upon itself and is bound" (*Orthodoxy* 13).

playfulness that, paradoxically, releases them from a cruder deception (the deceptively commonplace world of death and obscurity) into the faith of transcendence—all solidity, color, and love. He writes, “I . . . accept only one type of power: the power of art over trash, the triumph of magic over brute” (*Strong Opinions* 182). Whereas a linear world seems little more than a system of savagery, with evolution instead of metamorphoses, accident instead of art, and death instead of memory, the world of imagination and art is, for Nabokov, the most beautiful, and thus the most true. *Speak, Memory* is a book concerned with retaining the “patches of rainbow light flitting through memory” (*Strong Opinions* 186); it is Nabokov’s love letter to the metaphysical, and the optimistic, and his gesture of faith in the redemption of his path. Like his mother, he followed one simple rule of existence:

To love with all one’s soul and leave the rest to fate . . . ‘*Vot zapomni* [now remember,’ she would say in conspiratorial tones as she drew my attention to this or that loved thing in Vyra—a lark ascending the curds-and-whey sky of a dull spring day, heat lightening taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night, the palette of maple leaves on brown sand, a small bird’s cuneate footprints on new snow. . . She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past. Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum—the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate . . . (40)

Tangible objects can and, as evidenced by Nabokov’s past, will be destroyed, but the art—which Nabokov’s describes as an act of retention—escapes time to spread into the world of eternity. To revel in a material comfort brings pleasure, but to recollect that moment, and then pattern the memory into art—redeeming some small thing also redeem the people connected towards it—brings delight.

## Chapter Three

### Socrates Must Increase.

*Invitation to a Beheading*, published first in Russian in 1939, and then translated in 1959 by Nabokov and his son, Dmitri, investigates time and reality's oppression of the eternal soul. The story begins in a courtroom, where made-up lawyers, a painted audience, and an old, gaudy judge sentence Cincinnatus to death by beheading—the only possible recompense for his “unspeakable” crime of gnostical turpitude.<sup>57</sup> The rest of the novel details Cincinnatus's struggles in jail, and how his spectral oppressors alternately tease and torment him. As Cincinnatus wrestles with the secret knowledge of his self, he writes and struggles with the fear that time will run out before he finally manages to express himself and sustain life through language, “in defiance of all the world's muteness” (91). By the novel's end, even though he trembles while ascending the stage to be decapitated for the pleasure of a generalized, inhumane mob, Cincinnatus clings to his secret knowledge—his “final, indivisible, firm, radiant point” of I.

Despite the crowded stage of characters, Cincinnatus is the only real person in his world, and hence, the only material thing that incarnates eternity. While Cincinnatus has been “fashioned so painstakingly” (21), the rest of the cast wears shoddy costumes and spouts clichés, existing solely as leeches to Cincinnatus's “immutable I.” Rodion the jailer, Rodrig the prison director, and Roman the lawyer lack selfhood, and thus share, not only similar names, but also a similar appearances. Peterson writes, “[C]haracters are interchangeable and gross errors are erased from the record with no one held accountable. There is an analogy between a captive in

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<sup>57</sup> Part of this absurd scene is its inevitability. The defense and the prosecutor both favor death; no one ever argues, or even proposes to argue, that Cincinnatus might live. His death is inevitable, but the prosecuter, defense, and judge merely aim to agree on a manner of death that is mutually pleasing to all spectators. Hence, Cincinnatus “will be made to don the red top hat” (21), and have his mind severed from his body.

the clutches of an autocratic power and a character in the meshes of a fictive plot, and Nabokov's writing makes us feel the terror of being subject to an arbitrary revisions and reruns inside an announced plan of execution" (827). Throughout the novel, tracking the differences between Rodion, Roman, and Rodrig, especially, can be fairly difficult; however, when Roman and Rodrig merge into one small, croaking person at the novel's end, this blending of the vague and the sub-human further emphasizes the fulfillment of Cincinnatus's "realness."

Lacking their own secret selves, Roman and Rodrig have nothing but the strength of matter to keep them from bleeding into the other—and as the same basic elements compose all matter, only a spirit-infected body seems sensible to boundaries between beings. Because the plot of *Invitation to a Beheading* is so different from *Pale Fire* and the memories shared in *Speak, Memory*, the majority to this chapter will be analyzing the novel's themes of reality, time, space, and death's redemption on its own merits; however, this novel, despite being among Nabokov's first books, still strikingly illuminates Nabokov's major concerns (specifically, the absurd limitations of existence and the hints of transcendence in artistry and pattern). In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes that the precise mimicry is the hallmark of artistry; someone or something recognizes an object and replicates it with an attention to detail far beyond any pragmatic purpose. However, in *Invitation To A Beheading*, only the moth at the novel's end mimics Cincinnatus artfully. Every other character has a double, a sloppy imitation, or a thoughtless duplicate. The specters that haunt Cincinnatus all seem stamped from a factory, and even the features that suggest individuality are cheap costumes, like Rodion's thick red beard. Even Marthe, despite the powerful emotional role Cincinnatus allocates her character, resembles the cruel mechanical spider in his jail cell.

Cincinnatus, also, has a double—arguably one that is more wholly human than himself,

integrating the will and action more perfectly than the timid, imprisoned Cincinnatus. But Rodion, Rodrig, and Roman never see Cincinnatus's double, and attempt to provide him with one of their own choosing: thus, Pierre, is named Cincinnatus's "fate-mate," and becomes his prison neighbor, as well as his future executioner. If Cincinnatus's gangrel integrates a truly incarnated will, then Pierre as Cincinnatus's double reflects a sloppy, solipsistic version of how Cincinnatus reads the world. Like Nabokov's description of a bad reader in *Lectures On Literature*, Pierre looks outward at Cincinnatus and can see [only](#) himself--a sharp contrast to Cincinnatus's unique ability to see the world as it actually is; paradoxically, his selfhood permits him to allow selfhood in others. Pierre mistakenly believes he knows Cincinnatus's true feelings and can act upon them, when he really only sees the reflection of his own shallow nature. Pierre states, "Sometimes, in peaceful silence, we would sit side by side, almost with our arms about each other, each thinking his own twilight thoughts, and the thoughts of both of us would flow together like rivers when we opened our lips to speak . . . We grew to love each other, and the structure of Cincinnatus's soul is as well known to me as the structure of his neck" (175). However, an actual soul is unknowable to a copy. As Marthe tells Cincinnatus in a fit of rage, "every word of yours was impossible, unspeakable" (200).<sup>58</sup> While that is true for Roman, Rodrig, Rodion, and Pierre, Cincinnatus possesses, like a pearl ring embedded in a shark's gory fat, the eternal soul that also permits him the creativity to transcend—through words and will—the grotesque, inevitable fate of spiritless matter.

Because of the ephemeral, indistinct nature of all other characters, Cincinnatus's most

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<sup>58</sup> Before Cincinnatus recognizes his own power, he also finds his words "unspeakable." The book is riddled, especially at the beginning, with ellipses and gaps; ideas trail off, leaving the reader to infer Cincinnatus (and even the narrator's) unspoken secrets. In a sense, this makes the reader strive for his or her own improvement as a writer and artist. The novel's beginning is full of ruptures. Essentially, its pattern is broken, and the reader must also engage in an explicit act of creation (or restoration), weaving back trailing threads into the plot's web.

intricate relationship is not with his jailers, his wife, or any other specters, but with the narrator—an unidentified, omniscient voice with a distinct personhood. Some critics have proposed that the various references to Hamlet suggest he is actually Cincinnatus's ghost (Moudrov 14). While still a plausible theory, the suggestion is complicated by the passages in which the narrator playfully rearranges his language to rearrange Cincinnatus's textual reality.<sup>59</sup> Exploring the nuances of syntax, the narrator plays with how small changes in the storytelling structure shifts the meaning. For example, when Cincinnatus's lawyer, Roman Vissarionovich, loses his cuff link, the narrator states: "And with his eyes he [Roman] literally scoured the corners of the cell. it was plain that he was upset by the loss of that precious object. It was plain. The loss of the object upset him. The object was precious. he was upset by the loss of the object" (36). Whether or not the narrator is Nabokov or Cincinnatus,<sup>60</sup> he shares their concern with how language builds world and can construct a haven of memory from unpatterned impressions. Nabokov would probably say, as he did with *Shade*, that he shares similarities with the narrator's views about art, death, and folding the fabric of time to transcend absurdity. While not necessarily the same person as Cincinnatus, the narrator is, at least, one of the "beings akin to him" that Cincinnatus strides towards at the novel's end, free and wise, released from the Gnostic's prison of materiality.

Complicating the Gnostic theology that Cincinnatus embodies is Nabokov himself, and the rich body of work he left behind; over and over again, in almost all his novels and poetry, he

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<sup>59</sup> While Moudrov does not make this argument, this point could support his idea also, if he were to argue that Cincinnatus grows in linguistic power throughout the book, and the narrator's fluency and comfort with rearranging the structure of his story only reflects Cincinnatus as he always should have been all along, and how he was at the book's end—empowered to tug threads of memory from a meaningless, unnavigable snarl and into a coherent pattern.

<sup>60</sup> And like Cincinnatus, the narrator is able to see the world's shabby materialism, while still sensing subjectively the presence of an unknown creator. Describing Cincinnatus's jail cell, the narrator writes, "[it was] filled to the ceiling with the oils of twilight" (14).

returns to the theme of finding a meaningful pattern in the tumultuous, seemingly random history of life. However, while his theme of finding transcendence despite time, distance, and death remains constant in almost all his work, the expression, and the narrative system he uses, often shifts dramatically. As a man who lost country, language, and family to a senseless war—essentially, a system in which the individual is subsumed by forces outside his or her control—Nabokov understood the transient nature of the material from experience. However, how he attempts to salvage from absurdity a seemingly unsalvageable world<sup>61</sup> differs based on each book. In *Pale Fire*, Shade—a voice Nabokov claims kinship with—attempts to regain his dead daughter, Hazel, by manipulating time through art, in order to construct a web of hope in which she survives after death, and he can rest in her safety; in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov similarly attempts to redeem the people, places, and objects of his past by endowing all the pitiful, foolish, and weak with value, and thus provoking himself (and his readership) to engage in a sort of pity that, if not providing eternity for the pitied, at least earns them a place in the timelessness of art. Similarly, in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov explores the tragedy of loss in a material world, opposing the non-emotive Darwinian system of randomized death, mutation, and spiritual irrelevance by creating a world in which the material and the spiritual are polar opposites; for the latter to triumph over the absurdity and death of the former, the two must be totally distinct. Matter is not subsumed or dominated by the spirit, but rather obliterated.

Prior to the book's end, Cincinnatus sustains the entire sham world through his own belief, a faith expressed by his constant searching for meaning or salvation within the material.

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<sup>61</sup> All objects or people that Nabokov and his characters hope to salvage from the past are irretrievable for three different causes: the tragedy of degeneration or death, the tragedy of inaccessible time, and the tragedy of impassable distance.

However, both Cincinnatus and reader seem to recognize that his doom is impending;<sup>62</sup> searching for clues or hints of truth in the generalized, cardboard cutout world will only delay Cincinnatus from discovering that his spirit must have dominion over the will of his flesh. As Cincinnatus becomes more self-conscious and more aware of his own artistic powers, the stage props, also, become more clearly two-dimensional, and the characters in his world suffer deterioration and rips in their costumes. While Cincinnatus's sentence was for gnostical turpitude, his recognition of the dualistic world grows more and more profound after his imprisonment. Despite his opacity, Cincinnatus only really puts his faith in spiritual reality immediately before his death. Hence, his execution is ordered, not because of his Gnostic theology, which is both underdeveloped and reactionary, but for his very nature.

"By myself!" Cincinnatus cries, every time Rodrig and Roman try to touch or engage him (and through this engagement, direct his life-sustaining attention towards their existence). On the novel's last page, a trembling Cincinnatus stretches out on the chopping block, and his double—the one who says and does what Cincinnatus really wishes to say and do—reappears. As the first, fearful Cincinnatus counts to ten for his executioner, the second Cincinnatus is struck, not with the ax, but with the wonder of his own power.<sup>63</sup> "[W]ith a clarity he had never experienced before—at first almost painful, so suddenly did it come, but then suffusing him with joy, he reflected: why am I here? Why am I lying like this? And, having asked himself these simple questions, he answered them by getting up and looking around" (222). This single act, completed by Cincinnatus's desire to actually see his world, sets him free. The shoddy stage begins to collapse, and the beings who have haunted and oppressed Cincinnatus shrivel up and disappear

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<sup>62</sup> As Olga Hasty writes, "The thickness of the right-hand side of the book is thus a tangible indicator of how much life remains to Cincinnatus (6).

<sup>63</sup> This moment suggests Cincinnatus's transference of faith from meaning in the material world to meaning within himself.

among the torrent of flying debris. But, “amidst the dust, and the falling things, and the flapping scenery, Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him” (223). The clumsy papered *here* cannot withstand the power and solidity of a real human spirit; dignity is, for all the jack-booted dummies of Cincinnatus’s world, anathema.

Cincinnatus is oppressed by the dystopic mockery of a world (a more fully developed, yet less artfully executed vision of Shade’s “papered cage”), but the edges and patterns of intentionality still reveal themselves upon occasion, through the most beautiful asides of the spirit. Just as Nabokov wrote in *Lectures on Literature* that life’s beauty is found in its small, precious details, rather than sweeping reforms or generalized ideologies, so Cincinnatus proves his own rich wealth of imagination through these snatched asides. Nabokov says that we are all Alice in Wonderland, falling to our death, but still picking out patterns on the brick wall nearby; Cincinnatus, while waiting for his execution and suffering under the demeaning frivolities of his jailers, searches for coincidences of pattern between his inanimate world and human consciousness. After Cincinnatus reads *Quercus* for a while, then puts it aside to wonder about the author’s life and inevitable death, and, to better ignore the petulant Rodion, turns on his cot to face the wall, “for a long, long time [helping] patterns form on it, from tiny blobs of the glossy paint and their round little shadows; he would discover, for example, a diminutive profile with a large mouselike ear; then he would lose it and was unable to reconstruct it. . . . [Y]et his gaze still persisted in selecting and correlating the necessary little protuberances” (124). Despite his circumstances, and “the real, genuinely unquestionable . . . inevitability of the author’s physical death” (124), Cincinnatus is bound up in the human need to seek out, and also participate in, the patterns of existence.

Even though *Invitation* takes place in a different reality than our own, Nabokov describes

the how time, space, and an artless existence impose on the eternal soul in a manner that echoes both his memoir and *Pale Fire*. Cincinnatus, in a monologue similar to Kinbote's, writes, "Not only am I still alive, that is the sphere of my own self still limits and eclipses my being, but, like any other mortal, I do not know my mortal hour and can apply to myself a formula that holds for everyone" (89). For Nabokov, an individual unaware of his or her own consciousness cannot expand—with all prior joy, pity, and health—into eternity. However, for all of the book except the last page, Cincinnatus is physically (and thus spiritually) mired in a world of smoke, mirrors, and trivialities. As a Gnostic and a sort of unwilling prophet, Cincinnatus must assert the truth of his secret knowledge and the power of selfhood to triumph over a deceitful, shabby-shadowed reality.<sup>64</sup> Moynahan summarizes Gnosticism's relationship to *Invitation*:

Put simply and unhistorically, a Gnostic . . . believes that the visible world is stage-managed by invisible spiritual agencies which may occasionally manifest themselves, or reveal the perfect crystalline sphere they inhabit, through cracks and apertures of mundane reality. . . . But the signs mockingly refuse to yield their essential secret and he must wait for death to release him from the ambiguous play of matter and illusion. (14)

Because Cincinnatus is the only human, and thus the only true self in the novel (besides, perhaps, the narrator), he is the only person capable of seeing, or even expressing concern for the absurdity of material existence. Still, until Cincinnatus is able to see beyond the discord of limited space, linear time, and finite matter, he will continue to sustain this parasitic world by virtue of his own imagination. But as is common to Nabokov's other novels, triumph over the

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<sup>64</sup> Like Plato, Cincinnatus sees his world as nothing more than a poor copy of an original. All shades of beauty that he can find in the present only suggest something infinitely more soulful, and infinitely more incarnated in another realm.

tumultuous and tragic, and hope for safety and eternity after death, can only be found through the saving powers of pity and imagination. While alive, Cincinnatus is mired in a temporal fog, and cannot yet see the pattern of meaning that weaves him into eternity—one he shares with others, but is not consumed by. Reading and writing are both, essentially, acts of leisure, and subvert time, not only because the reader submerges himself in the textual world for strictly non-utilitarian reasons, but also because he or she enters into a time system that is, if not wildly inventive, different from that of the common world. When Cincinnatus learns to narrate his life, tying together the different threads that finally lead him to trust the strength of his own soul instead of the world, he uses pity and imagination to assert control over and see beyond his immediate environment, thus, the glimpsing the hem of an eternal pattern before actually entering eternity.

Cincinnatus's self is actualized through the imaginative process of writing—an expression of the self that suspends time and space for the reader, while allowing the writer control over those two mediums. Peterson makes a similar observation, stating that writing, as an artistic act unburned by “immediate time and space” can become “an actual vehicle of emancipation large enough to transport all us characters and prisoners *there (tam, lá)* where supple form is given to all the patterns it has been our pleasure vaguely to preconceive” (83). However, despite his loneliness, Cincinnatus knows that to write without hope of a reader is foolishness;<sup>65</sup> in fact, life and existence without the possibility of pity and understanding between two conscious beings would be cruel and useless. Even without knowing any other humans,

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<sup>65</sup> As Cincinnatus writes in his cell, he begs an unknown audience, scribbling desperately, “Save these jottings—I do not know whom I ask, but save these jottings—I assure you that such a law exists . . . and I ask you so earnestly—my last wish—how can you not grant it? I must have at least the theoretical possibility of having a reader, otherwise, really, I might as well tear it all up” (194).

Cincinnatus nourishes a faint hope—because the specters of his world feed like parasites on his imagination, he knows his existence cannot be contingent upon them; however, the simple fact that he does exist contingently means that, somewhere, beyond the reaches of his allocated slot of time, another being exists who can and will understand him.

While Cincinnatus writes to discover patterns and escape solipsism (an error that is more self-effacing than self-actualizing due to its blindness towards beauty and mystery), he also writes as part of his “gradual process of divestment” to reveal the eternal, immutable core of his self (90). Cincinnatus’s opacity--his own flesh and blood, and hence his actual incarnation of an eternal soul--must be concealed from the specters that seem to determine his existence, criminalizing him for the secret knowledge of his intrinsic self. As one critic notes, “In the metaphysics of Invitation, where Imagination takes the place of the Neoplatonic Good or God and where Cincinnatus possesses a portion of the divine substance, self-divestment becomes a metaphor for imaginative self-transcendence, for that capacity for spiritual release and loss of self that distinguishes Cincinnatus from his jailors and grants him a freedom even in incarceration” (Grossmith 76). When Cincinnatus first enters the fortress, he has paper and a pencil—“as long as the life of any man except Cincinnatus. . . an enlightened descendent of the index finger” (12). As Cincinnatus writes, he transcends the bodily cage that forces him to remain in the present; similarly, the pencil diminishes, and Cincinnatus grows in artistry and spiritual empowerment—at the book’s end, Cincinnatus’s only desire is more time to write, transcend, and connect.

Even though Cincinnatus spends a great majority of the novel being drawn back into belief in his material world, his advances can be perceived in the development of his authorial ability. The first words that Cincinnatus actually speaks reflect his disordered, unpatterned

surroundings: “Kind. You. Very.” (15), and he requires an “additional Cincinnatus” to clear his throat and rearrange the syntax to convey meaning. Not only does Cincinnatus participate, albeit shamefully, in his world’s disordered, absurd theatre by thanking his jailer (acting obediently his assigned role), but his clumsy use of language reflects his interior state: an inability to willfully arrange space and time, to fold the fabric of existence in such a way as to transcend the petty concerns and tacky spectacle of his surrounding specters. Nabokov’s emphasis on reading and writing in the novel is more than just a metafictional magic trick; Blackwell calls the relationship between Cincinnatus and written language a necessarily “heavy artistic burden” because these elements of author, reader, text, and world all “create a framework of concepts rich with metaphorical potential. . . . The image and activity of reading offer materials to construct artistic problems of elegant and unexpected complexity” (49). And, more than anything, Cincinnatus needs elegance and complexity in his world. Even chess, with all its intricacies, is subsumed by stupidity, as when Pierre forces Cincinnatus to play with him, while keeping up an inane stream of banal chatter.

This banality, the inane stream of information—none of it new, but all of it tiresome—continuously tests Cincinnatus’s belief in his second-rate world. Although Cincinnatus still struggles with believing in, and thus infecting his captors with truth (138), the longer he writes, the more skilled he becomes in peeling aside the superfluous layers of his world to reveal the pattern of his life. Writing is an activity that paradoxically undoes and rebuilds the self. Unless the writer sacrifices his ego, he cannot write well, but neither can he write without promoting his personal vision—even if it changes radically from beginning to end. Even though he cannot keep his body from trembling in fear, Cincinnatus achieves a rare depth of eloquence and perceptiveness, able to overcome the gaps of knowledge that had previously fragmented and

obscured the meaning of his narrative.<sup>66</sup>

As Cincinnatus's vision grows in clarity, and as he directs less attention his absurd surroundings, the "gnostical turpitude" he has been accused of begins to grow more apparent, driving a wedge between the soul's rich beauty and the irrational spectacle of existence. In the novel's beginning, Cincinnatus's secret knowledge and frail sense of self seem to belong as little more than a tool in Nabokov's surreal artistic system; however, "[m]atter grew weary" and "[t]ime gently dozed" (43), while Cincinnatus muses on his inexplicable, but ineffable knowledge that, elsewhere, he would find fully-fleshed, spirit-saturated life, instead of the thin copies that torment him in the present. He writes, "It exists, my dream world, it must exist, since surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy. . . *there* the freaks that are tortured here walk unmolested; *there* time takes shape according to one's pleasure, like a figured rug whose folds can be gathered in such a way that two designs will meet-and the rug is once again smoothed out, and you live on" (94). The *nonnons* that make up the entirety of his existence are, for Cincinnatus, the impetus to art—writing as a mirror to make the distorted whole—while also helping him grasp the vastness of the chasm between the rich, spiritual existence he desires and the limitations of reality that ensnare him.

While Nabokov's tendencies towards Gnosticism, or a privileging of the spiritual realm over the material, are at least a subdued theme in his other works, Cincinnatus, by the crime of his nature, allows Nabokov a much more explicit forum to investigate the mysterious nature of

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<sup>66</sup> Contrast the first and last passages from Cincinnatus's imprisonment, from when the pencil is new, long, and sharp, and when it is rubbed down almost to the end. "I am misinterpreting . . . Attributing to the epoch . . . This wealth . . . Torrents . . . Fluid transitions . . . And the world really never was . . . Just as . . ." (51) vs. this passage from his last entry: "Everything has duped me as it fell into place, everything. This is the dead end of this life, and I should not have sought salvation within its confines. It is strange that I should have sought salvation. Just like a man grieving because he has recently lost in his dreams some thing that he had never had in reality, or hoping that tomorrow he would dream that he found it again" (205).

incarnation, and the relationship between spirit and flesh. Many of Cincinnatus's observations about his surroundings reflect Gnostic texts, perhaps most clearly being the Book of Thomas—an appropriate allusion, considering Thomas doubted Christ's earthly resurrection, as Cincinnatus doubts his own power.<sup>67</sup> As one Gnostic gospel notes, “[H]e who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depth of all” (qtd. in Jackson 59). However, while Nabokov reveals fascinating Gnostic tendencies, he does not abandon the material realm with as hearty disdain as the Gnostics themselves would have chosen to do so. As evidenced by the richness of details in his work (details being the incarnation of story), his demanding love that the beautiful things of this world somehow be preserved in the next, and even his fierce defense of a pedantic,<sup>68</sup> as opposed to “inventive” or “idiomatic” translation suggest that Nabokov's Gnostic tendencies are more anti-Darwinian and pro-altruism,<sup>69</sup> rather than simply being an abandonment of all earthly

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<sup>67</sup> It's important to note that Gnostic theology focused heavily on the individual's ability to raise himself up spiritually, and how that relates to Cincinnatus, who repeatedly struggles to understand and act upon his knowledge that his salvation, as Rodion, in a veiled fashion, admits, right in his very own hands (38).

<sup>68</sup> In the Foreword, Nabokov writes about beginning the process of translating *Invitation to a Beheading*, stating that “[m]y Russian idiom, in 1935, had embodied a certain vision in the precise terms that fitted it . . . My son proved to be a marvelously congenial translator, and it was settled between us that fidelity to one's author comes first, no matter how bizarre the result. *Vive le pédant*, and down with the simpletons who think that all is well if the ‘spirit’ is rendered (while the words go away by themselves on a naïve and vulgar spree—in the suburbs of Moscow for instance—and Shakespeare is again reduced to play the king's ghost” (7).

<sup>69</sup> In *Pale Fire* and *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov's concern with locating and preserving the eternal does not manifest itself by abandoning the temporal; rather, he focuses more on the idea that all things of value will be perfected in the future. When Kinbote describes death and the afterlife, he says that the core of selfhood (described as a small, whole kernel, akin to Cincinnatus's pearl ring) enters eternity, it will expand infinitely, and all the diseases of spirit, or the blemishes of personality, will be obliterated. Instead of accepting the logic of linear time, which forces earthly history along without any concern for the frail, the misunderstood, or the beautiful, Shade (and Kinbote, albeit in a misguided fashion) attempts to fold and refold time's fabric in to uncover a pattern of meaning, as well as a hint of future salvation, from his daughter's suicide. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov redeems his past from obscurity while simultaneously binding all his past

wonders.

In a world dictated by evolutionary logic, the artistry of coincidence and perfect reduplication of patterns that Nabokov loves has been replaced by false doubles. John Kopper states that, “[i]n *Invitation to a Beheading*, the relentless combination of meaningless propositions and the apparently random speech of the characters leads to a nightmareish version of Darwinist radiation” (222). The pretence of sameness is so shoddily constructed in Cincinnatus’s world that wigs slip, chalked outlines smudge, and characters bleed together; lacking will and artistry, the characters could never synchronize perfectly, but this lack is also what keeps them from real distinction. Dragunoiu writes, “Nabokov inverts the traditional conceptions of spirit and matter. Matter, usually viewed as solid, stable, and continuous, is made transparent, unpredictable, and discontinuous. By contrast, spirit is shown to be more substantial than so-called ‘matter,’ even though its substantiality is not material” (59). In a sense, the ghouls who torment Cincinnatus, rattling their ghostly chains, reflect one miserable half of a literal dualism—what a Gnostic might find if his afterlife were really as he hoped it would be.

Despite their translucent appearance, the specters of Cincinnatus’s world are utterly incapable of new ideas, human emotion, or sincere expressions of dignity—as sub-human copies, devoid of any enlivening spirit, the life they present to Cincinnatus is that of a failed joke:

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memories into his love for wife and son; while he still focuses on folding the “fabric of time” according to his own purposes, he also uses pity to arrange the material details of his past—the descriptions of Mademoiselle, his brother, his father, and so on—so that the object in question is solid enough to be redeemed. If Cincinnatus were to love any of the cardboard cut-outs that surround him, and if the cut-out were a caricature because he or she actually possessed a soul, however, flickering, then, prompted by his pity, he would re-shape that figure until it was fit for eternity. This is how Nabokov artistically reshapes the more pathetic figures from his past in *Speak, Memory*; however, unlike in Cincinnatus’s dualistic world, where matter and spirit are totally divorced (with hints suggesting that this separation was not always so extreme), the worlds of *Speak, Memory* and *Pale Fire* beg for certain material details—the beauty of a frozen stillicide on Shade’s lawn, or a perfect butterfly cocoon found in the Russian woods—to be redeemed, and not discarded in favor of a wholly immaterial eternity.

everything is frivolous, but for a person hoping for both frivolity and meaning, the joke seems cruel or tragic; only Cincinnatus and the narrator seem aware that Pierre and the rest only display trappings of humor and irony. As purely material specters in a Darwinian-style farce, Pierre, Cincinnatus's jailers, and all the rest of society act out meaningless roles in a Dadaist reality—one in which the illogical and absurd do not startle, because the ability to measure the difference between truth and stupidity, or purpose and absurdity has been entirely lost.<sup>70</sup> As the only character with personhood, and therefore the only character capable of thinking of the soul without irony, Cincinnatus is thus the only person capable of real empathy. In contrast, the dummies in Cincinnatus's world are wholly mechanized and solipsistic. Soullessness makes them shadows only, and their existence is contingent upon someone else's consciousness.<sup>71</sup> Alone in this world of dummies, dolls, and werewolves, Cincinnatus can still receive echoes of "similar beings," a suspicion confirmed at the novel's end, when he wills the false theatre out of existence and enters the real *there* of his dreams.

Instead of spiritualizing matter or manipulating time, the other characters are immobile and powerless to affect their material surroundings. Rodion, for example, appears, disappears, and appears again, but all without any delight, or even recognition of his ability. As one theologian writes, "Gnostic 'salvation' is usually a repristination, in which the self returns to a timeless and pre-existent perfection . . . [T]he Gnostic *eschaton* is severed from the visible world

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<sup>70</sup> Twice, Pierre tells the same joke, only tweaking minor details.<sup>70</sup> At the pre-execution feast, Pierre repeats an old joke to the crowd about a woman's conversation with a gynecologist: "She says, 'I've got quite a serious illness and I'm afraid it'll be the death of me.' 'What are the symptoms?' asks the doctor. 'Oh doctor, my head shakes . . .'" and M'sieur Pierre, mumbling and shaking, mimicked the old woman" (184). The crowd roars, and only Cincinnatus (and, presumably, the narrator) is unmoved.

<sup>71</sup> Pierre ---- of Nabokov's Foreword writes the "discourse sur the shadows". Make that connection here; how does the epigraph and the mentions of Delalande (?) clarify or add nuance to the story?

of creation. There is no inherent end (*telos*) of the tangible universe that is realized in an afterlife” (Jackson 60). For Cincinnatus, this description is not an abstract aim, but rather a literal description of his life. As a child, his society attempted to prepare him and other children for “nonexistence” as soulless dummies (95). Then, despite being shunned by his authorities and peers, he had not developed the sophisticated means of disguising from himself and others his secret opacity; hence, how he was able to walk from a window sill onto solid air.

If a Gnostic sees salvation as repristination, then the various Christological allusions in Cincinnatus’s life suggest that he can achieve this cleansing by his own means. In conflict with his desire to be brought back to an Eden-type purity are Cincinnatus’s captors, who, by means of distractions and tricks, are able to taint Cincinnatus’s purity and perpetuate the struggle between Cincinnatus and his earnest gangrel. As a Gnostic-style Christ, Cincinnatus must try to return to an innocent state—he will have to ascend to god-likeness, rather than have a god descend to him.

<sup>72</sup> At one point, he describes his soul as “lazy and accustomed to its snug, swaddling clothes” (36); he is thirty at the time of his death, and, to the horror of everyone else, he can enact miracles, controlling matter in accordance to his will. Jackson notes that, for the Gnostics, salvation was primarily a personal affair, and hence “a gospel of personal escape” (48). Like Christ, Cincinnatus’s death is sacramental, even though his executioners consider it prime entertainment. Even in his greatest moments of frailty, Cincinnatus resembles Christ, if not in actual power, at least in potential. At the book’s beginning, immediately after being given his death sentence, Cincinnatus’s jailers lead him back to prison, helping to prop him up so he could walk: “[H]e planted his feet unsteadily, like a child who has just learned to walk, or as if he were

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<sup>72</sup> This again suits one of Jackson’s notes quite well: the Gnostics saw the transcendence of matter as an “ascent” to God, whereas the Christian orthodox see the good news of agape as “the descent of God” (49).

about to fall through like a man who has dreamt that he is walking on water only to have a sudden doubt: but is this possible?" (11). In various places throughout the novel, Cincinnatus overpowers the material realm by self-realization, with the novel's end—his sudden refusal to endow specters and ghouls with even the shoddiest spark of life, through his own imagination—being the ultimate expression of the power of his selfhood, and the realization of his own physical and spiritual salvation.

As the novel continues, the readers grow aware that Cincinnatus, in half-innocence and half-weakness, because he refuses to recognize and narrate the world as it truly is—a sham, filled with sub-human copies—is the one offering his jailers control over his own existence. While Cincinnatus frequently acknowledges that he is surrounded by soulless specters, he does not, until the novel's very end, choose to pattern his life, or the meaning of his death, as if this were true. Because of fear, Cincinnatus is unable to sever his faith in the whole absurd theatre's existence, and thus, like parasites, Marthe, Rodion, and all the rest, continue to feed off his eternity—his immutable "I," the core of selfhood, for which they despise and punish him.<sup>73</sup> Moudrov emphasizes this same point, arguing that *Invitation to a Beheading's* "central conflict . . . appears to be not between Cincinnatus and the prison-world in which he is entrapped, but between him and his sense of reality. His doubts, not his jailors, seem to keep him in prison" (12). If Cincinnatus can find the will to transcend his own belief in the material realm, then he will—and he does—free his soul from bondage, and can fulfill his own prophecies. He writes, "In spite of everything, I am comparatively. After all I had premonitions, had premonitions of

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<sup>73</sup> Nabokov writes, "[B]y evoking them—not believing in them, perhaps, but still evoking them—Cincinnatus allowed them the right to exist, supported them, nourished them with himself" (156).

this finale” (13).<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the novel is arranged in such a way that, upon a second or third reading, the readers can recognize how Cincinnatus’s forebodings and premonitions are layered throughout the text—small glimpses of a transcendent weave, or un-gathered threads, that he must tug together.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov was able to frame his opposition to the spiritual immobility and generalized randomness of evolutionary theory through pity—a force that does not explain the world’s evil, but does help diminish the distance between individuals’ perceptions that allows solipsism to thrive. As Thomas notes, while the Gnostic texts resist a systematic reading, they usually are much less concerned with the powers of love and pity, as the Gnostics hope to escape their world unscathed, rather than act in *agape* love within it (47). Still, Nabokov does not abandon the need for pity in this book; simply, there are no other humans, no matter how distorted their personality, for Cincinnatus to commune with. Even though Nabokov’s use of Gnostic allusions at first seems to efface pity’s presence in the text, in actuality, he emphasizes its necessity through absence. As an embodied vision of Gnostic imprisonment, Cincinnatus has no other being with whom to identify as a self.<sup>75</sup> Of all the absurd, platonic-shadows, only the moth at the end is endowed with intricacy, vision, and a poignant linguistic voice. But pity still maintains a distinct, meaning-constellating presence through both the narrator and the reader herself. Through pity and the inherently imaginative qualities of narration, these two entities, both of whom Nabokov dedicates extensive metaphorical power towards, can empathize with

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<sup>74</sup> At the novel’s end, Cincinnatus, by willing everyone else out of existence, is finally free—therefore, he *really* is. At this point, he still is “comparatively.” While Cincinnatus allows an entire world to feed off of his selfhood, he cannot be a whole, unqualified “I am.”

<sup>75</sup> In a very slight sense, the librarian could be considered an exception to this. While not human, he is “bound up in human skin,” and he offers Cincinnatus the same key to transcendence that Shade offered Kinbote: pity. As the caretaker of reading and writing, both of which offer powerful symbolic meaning to overcoming a meaningless existence, the librarian’s function in Cincinnatus’s world is more one of meaningful silence than unending babble.

Cincinnatus's struggles in his limited *here*, as both narrator and reader serve as actualized, conscious foils to his world's absurdity from an artistically plotted *there*.<sup>76</sup>

Even aside from providing proof of a sympathetic personhood, the book's mysterious narrator voices an important metaphor in a book already dense with author/reader metaphors. As Leland de la Durantaye notes, Nabokov frequently returns to the theme of "a character dimly aware of a creator, but powerless to gain a greater share of knowledge or control" (25). Although Cincinnatus cannot seem to grasp his full measure of control in the novel, the narrator can. He is able to reveal Cincinnatus's innermost thoughts, and, unlike all other characters, is able to see both Cincinnatus and his double. Whether or not the narrator is, as Moudrov suggests, simply Cincinnatus's ghost is immaterial. The Gnostic subtext makes it more than plausible that Cincinnatus could be godlike, although that does not guarantee Moudrov's claim that he narrates the novel after death. What does matter is that the narrator is capable of seeing both the spiritual and the material, and also possesses the distance and linguistic ability to plot Cincinnatus's seemingly meaningless suffering into a pattern of transcendence.

Although tracing patterns of pity is more difficult in a book wherein only the main character is clearly human, still Cincinnatus resists the Darwinian pressures of his environment to commune with the beautiful and the good. Even though *Quercus* is, judging by the initial description, a rather foolish-sounding story (the main character is a vaguely sentient oak tree), the process of reading that book and observing the movements of people throughout time affords Cincinnatus the opportunity to engage with narrative—an intensely human activity. Stephen

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<sup>76</sup> As Boothe notes, it is frankly impossible for the human mind to separate primary experience from narration. Without narrating, a skill that Cincinnatus hones even as his pencil shortens and his death draws nearer, a person lives in a crazy, meaningless world in which mysteries are as unrecognizable as signs and symbols, effects and causes. Without narration, the self can neither gain or seek understanding. Everyone in Cincinnatus's world, except for Cincinnatus, operates under some unknown playwright, and none deviate from their narrow, circular roles.

Blackwell writes that “a central part of [Cincinnatus’s] perceptiveness tells him that contact with art through reading may bring him closer to truth and authentic reality and protect him from the falsity and emptiness everywhere around him” (40). From the vantage point of the oak’s branches, Cincinnatus observes souls, regardless of their diaspora across time. Being, as Cincinnatus writes, hopelessly bound up in the *here*, rather than freed into the beautiful, ineffable fabric of *there*, reading and writing—the solitary activity of a man engaging in artistic language—affords him the artistry, as well as the distance to transcend space and time.<sup>77</sup> In some fragmented, incomplete way, reading and writing allow Cincinnatus a control over his own consciousness that suggests how he fits into the orchestrated fairy chess of some as-yet unknown creator.<sup>78</sup>

Fittingly, before his arrest, Cincinnatus finds solace in the library—a place literally isolated from the rest of society by a vast moat of water. In prison, as well, reading helps him to constellate his experience, offering hope that his life is being “read” (or observed) by someone sympathetic and powerful. Even the librarian, although only “bound in human skin,” seems to take on a sheen of his book’s comforting properties. Unlike his babbling peers, the librarian is almost always silent; when he does speak, he struggles to arrange words, like Cincinnatus does in the novel’s beginning. Despite being inhuman, he does not seem to be the same as Rodion or Pierre, and, as a protector of literary knowledge, is a vaguely prophetic figure. At the very least,

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<sup>77</sup> Again, Blackwell observes this ability to transcend an unmediated present into a more meaningful, mediated story: “Cincinnatus’s writing seems very closely connected to his reading. Since it has been primarily through reading that Cincinnatus has attempted to build a world for himself, writing seems to be an effort to pass through the boundary of reading to its other side, its otherworld—the world of writing” (42).

<sup>78</sup> Although Nabokov does write that Cincinnatus maintains the sham world through his own will, Cincinnatus is only god-like in this sense, rather than being a god. While the specters depend on his attention for their existence, Cincinnatus’s existence is contingent upon someone else.

he offers Cincinnatus an important key. When Cincinnatus expects to be executed, he offers the librarian the books he has not yet read, and attempts to explain that he neither finished *Quercus* nor had been able to read the other books that were brought “by mistake.” Apologizing, Cincinnatus states, “I hadn’t time to study the Oriental languages.” The librarian responds with a single word: “Pity” (179). When Rodion and Cincinnatus first meet, the former cruelly exclaims “Mercy!” as a response to Cincinnatus’s fear; however, Cincinnatus cannot bestow someone else’s mercy upon himself—but pity, rather than being received internally from an outside source, stems from the internal and moves to the external. The librarian himself does not offer this pity, but his conversation with Cincinnatus, and the books he brings, in conjunction with the messages Cincinnatus first finds scrawled on the prison walls<sup>79</sup> and the acorn that drops into his lap, all suggest that someone external to Cincinnatus is carefully watching, and pitying him profoundly.

This emphasis on eyes and seeing pervades the text in both malevolent and beneficial forms. Not only is Cincinnatus capable of seeing the world and responding to it with human emotion, but he actually begins to grow another eye on his neck—a swelling that Pierre notes, but dismisses as vertebra.<sup>80</sup> Like the moth that he meets at the story’s end, Cincinnatus grows in his literary sensitivity and skill, just as he grows in vision. In contrast, Rodion the jailer has pale, luminescent eyes, protruding and spying (that he only has two is emphasized)—making of him

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<sup>79</sup> “Nameless existence, intangible substance” reads one inscription; another states, “Measure me while I live—after it will be too late” (26).

<sup>80</sup> As Audrey Jaffe notes, “The scene of sympathy opens up a space between self and representation which gives way to a perception of the self as representation; imagining the self occupying another’s place is only a step away from merely occupying its own” (10). Cincinnatus, the narrator, and the moth at the novel’s end all see, and all occupy a place of selfhood in the text. The rest, however, do not even occupy their own place consciously. Only Cincinnatus knows (or cares) that the world is a sloppy painting, and that the spectators in the back of the crowd are the same carelessly duplicated faces, over and over again.

an especially eerie image, considering his mechanical, falsely made-up dummy flesh. Marthe's eyes are similarly emphasized, both in their round, hazel emptiness, and their similarity to that voracious devourer of beauty, the mechanical spider in Cincinnatus's cell.<sup>81</sup> If eyes are windows to the soul, and if windows are cut to reveal the world beyond one's walls, Cincinnatus's world is devoid of both expansive, revealing vistas and ensouled gazing (with the one exception of his mother, Cecilia C., whose gaze suggests a flicker of human kinship). Only Cincinnatus's eyes receive and reflect—Cincinnatus, and the eyes of the moth that Rodion attempts to feed to his mechanical spider.

While the threads that bind up absurd experiences into meaningful artistry are less visible to Cincinnatus, the echoes of transcendence that reach Cincinnatus suggest that his faith, however wavering, is justified. Cincinnatus is, while cut off from communication, still bound up in another world—one of love and purpose, led by a being or beings who care to see him triumph. He seemed “as if one side of his being slid into another dimension, as all the complexity of a tree's foliage passes from shade into radiance” (121). Even if he is unaware of how to access this otherworld, Nabokov hints that the portal, at least before one's death, is literature. As Hasty argues, the only hope Cincinnatus entertains that does not turn out to be part of his jailers' cruel, elaborate fraud is writing: “[it] has the power to focus creative energies and translate debilitating distractions into a coherent creative enterprise. As he writes, Cincinnatus transforms his cell from a waiting room for death into an eventful space, a locus of life” (11). Perhaps the most startling and beautiful example is when Cincinnatus, while reading *Quercus*, is suddenly

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<sup>81</sup> Besides the fact that both Marthe and the spider seem to be almost constantly devouring something, whether it be peaches or butterflies, they share another similarity: both see the world as having nothing of value beyond sating the flesh. Marthe is promiscuous and a glutton; the spider eats butterfly wings, and as Rodion's mechanized plaything, is never capable of observing the beauty and intricacy of its prey.

overwhelmed by despair. He begs an unknown someone for a sign, or aid, and holds out pauper's hands: "[t]he draft became a leafy breeze. From the dense shadows above there fell and bounced on the blanket a large dummy acorn, twice as large as life, splendidly painted a glossy buff, and fitting its cork cup as snugly as an egg" (126). Similarly, when Cecilia C. comes to speak with him, he cannot believe her stories about his transient father until a sudden, human spark in her gaze suggests to him an unquestionable truth. "[I]t was if something real, unquestionable (in this world, where everything was subject to question), had passed through, as if a corner of this horrible life had curled up, and there was a glimpse of the lining" (136).

This transformation in Cincinnatus's narrative ability is reflected in his appearance; after all, Cincinnatus looks dappled and strange. But like the secret knowledge of his selfhood, this change does not arise as much as Cincinnatus ceases to suppress it. Certainly, he views his body differently than others view their own—taking pains to conceal its opacity, and concerned with its safety. Even though Cincinnatus knows to privilege the spirit above the body, he still treats his actual flesh with a sort of paternal affection, or to shift his own metaphor, he treats his body with the kindness of a rider on a shivering horse. Even though Cincinnatus separates his spirit and flesh from the book's very beginning, by virtue of his selfhood and a tender love for his own soul, he is able to be aware of his own body (unlike, for example, Marthe who slavishly obeys her urges, but does not actually recognize or respect her body itself). Nabokov writes, "Folding the dressing gown over his heart so that it would not see—be quiet, it is nothing (as one says to a child at the moment of an incredible disaster)—covering his heart and raising himself slightly, Cincinnatus listened" (34). Of course, Cincinnatus is not in the wrong to care for his body—"And yet," he says, "I have been fashioned so painstakingly" (21). While everyone else embodies the shoddy, random duplications and mutations of a Darwinian world, Cincinnatus

recognizes that, despite its fragility, his body is something fairly wonderful—yet another broad hint to his own contingency (and similarity) to some other ensouled Being or beings he does not yet know. And, even though Cincinnatus transcends the material at the novel's end, the artistry that designed Cincinnatus is not wasted; unlike everyone else in his world, he does not shrivel away, but walks toward those souls who will embody understanding and community.<sup>82</sup>

In contrast, the guards, judges, jailers, and various specters of Cincinnatus's life all are oblivious to their own "bodies"—the translucent shells that give them a human costume. When the dark, beautiful moth lands on his arm, Rodion unguardedly seizes his own limb and throws it to the floor. But unlike how Cincinnatus purifies himself from the flesh that wants to subordinate the mind, Rodion and the other painted dummies cannot even be aware of the "weary matter" that composes their existence. Cincinnatus can peel away the layers of his body to "float in a secret medium," and he can find buried inside his body the pearl ring of his eternal self, but the rest are simply copies of matter sustained in the immaterial realm of Cincinnatus's mind. Without a soul, the body is in total disgrace; hence, it strikes no one as peculiar that these inhuman citizens—for as Barabtarlo points out, Nabokov scrupulously avoids calling them people (395)—would wear dog masks with their uniforms. If Cincinnatus's glory is to transcend his matter, then the shame of Rodion and his ilk is that they can walk into a room, disappear like holograms, and walk out again without noticing anything extraordinary.

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<sup>82</sup> One of the most pleasant aspects of Nabokov's writing is its complexity, and the author's willingness to intricately layer a fictional world in such a manner that the reader feels he or she has entered an endless, perfectly balanced house of cards. Adding another layer to his vast metaphor for reading and writing, Nabokov has Cincinnatus discover and read various prophetic messages when he first enters the jail cell. While these messages could feasibly be another part of the jailers' cruel jokes, it seems more likely that Cincinnatus is either discovering messages from his future self—"You cannot see anything. I tried it too" (29)—or simply these messages are the shadows of another, similar story. If the latter, then Cincinnatus's discovery of the messages suggests hope for his own future, and the importance of community, pity, and understanding between an author and his (at the very least, theoretical) readership.

As nothing more than embodied urges, or as Hasty calls them, “sub-humans,” Rodion, Pierre, and the rest set up Cincinnatus’s execution as an absurd sacrament. The whole village turns out to celebrate, and Pierre plays the part of a doting bridegroom. However, Nabokov employs a subtle paradox here: although Pierre parodies the marriage ceremony—two becoming one—in his celebration of a beheading—the divorcing of spirit and flesh, his pseudo-sacrament actually prophesies Cincinnatus’s triumphant end. Despite Pierre’s absurdly timed, ironically sacramental language, Cincinnatus actually does transcend the desires of his flesh to achieve sanctification. While the ax would separate his head from his body, for Cincinnatus the whole event proves the impetus for another type of cleaving: finally, he escapes, and is reunited with the reality who sought in dreams. As everything else falls apart, Cincinnatus, having achieved his own salvation, is made worthy to stand with “beings akin to him” (223).

## Conclusion

Although probably none other than Nabokov, his wife, and his son could claim a full understanding of Nabokov's work, the three works I have examined in this thesis all suggest, not only the presence of an otherworld after death, but slightly different means to seek its pattern in the temporal world. Writing to salvage human dignity from the absurdity of limited space and time, and the even greater offense of death, Nabokov amplifies the presence of the ridiculous in his work, and thus makes the texture of eternal things and infinite meaning more accessible (although not more clear).

As an artist who found himself and his loved ones swept along in the seeming "logic" of wars, political uprisings, and the still newly-minted evolutionary philosophy, Nabokov's preoccupation with seeking different ways to transcend space and time manifests itself in all his works. However, to assume that Nabokov's novels all function simply as a reflection to his own self would be to undermine his concern for redeeming others, including the foolish and strange as well as the noble and dashing. By defending his own self as an ensouled being, Nabokov also defended the selfhood of others he loved. By resisting the commonsense that rules mob mentality, he was also able to resist the mob.

As both an artist and a scientist, Nabokov resisted narrating stories, whether fictional or autobiographical, in mob force overpowers and effaces the individual spirit. In *Pale Fire*, Shade resists death (the ultimate generalizing force) by patterning personal memories and impressions into a web of artistry, just as Nabokov himself tries to fold the fabric of time in his memoir to glimpse a safe and healthy future for those he loves. However, as evidenced by his work in *Invitation To A Beheading*, death is a generalized sentence for individual spirits, but also offers the dead their opportunity to escape, once and for all, the absurdity of their diseased personalities

and revel in the pristine health of freedom and timelessness. As Pierre Delaland, the fictional author of the epigraph for *Invitation To A Beheading* notes, “Comme un fou se croit Dieu, nous nous croyons mortels”—or, as a madman believes himself to be God, we believe ourselves to be mortal. Fighting against the dull, non-emotive force of commonsense, Nabokov constructs his art so that the meaning which materiality effaces can be glimpsed, although not objectively located, in the faith that the subtle strains of coincidence and plot will be richly and fully embodied outside of space and time. In *Pale Fire*, *Speak, Memory*, and *Invitation To A Beheading*, Nabokov seeks to establish the hope for meaning—and immortality—after death.

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