

"Plexed Artistry": Nabokov's Narrative Personae

"PLEXED ARTISTRY": A STUDY OF THE NARRATIVE PERSONA
IN SELECTED WORKS OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV

By

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The light of personal truth is hard to perceive in the light of an imaginary nature, but what is still harder to understand is the amazing fact that a man writing of things which he really felt at the time of writing could have had the power to create simultaneously -- and out of the very things which distressed his mind -- a fictitious and faintly absurd character.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV,
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the development of a narrative persona in selected works of Vladimir Nabokov. Lolita, Invitation to a Beheading and Pale Fire are novels which seem particularly well-suited to a study of this nature because of the remarkable self-consciousness and vitality of their respective narrators. A chapter has been devoted to each of these novels, and within each chapter the implied relationships between the narrator and those who act upon or react to his presence -- author, other characters and reader -- have been considered.

Preface

A prolific writer, Nabokov. In a career that spanned over a half-century, he produced seventeen novels (the first nine written in his native Russian, the remainder in his adopted English), seven Russian plays, several collections of short stories and poems, countless critical and scholarly works, a memoir, and an impressive number of articles on lepidoptera. This comprises only a sketchy outline of the man's achievements. Nabokov's oeuvre is so extensive that a thorough bibliography would run on for many pages, and a compilation of his complete works would fill "between thirty and thirty-five ample volumes", according to one critic's conservative estimate.¹

The amplitude of Nabokov's creative output alone is staggering, and inhibits any comprehensive study of his work. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the development of a narrative persona in selected works of Nabokov. Wayne Booth has observed in The Rhetoric of Fiction that:

In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical.²

The implicit relationships between the narrator and those who act upon or react to his presence have been used as the

structural dogma for each chapter of this thesis.

While almost any of Nabokov's novels would lend themselves to a study of this nature, I have selected Lolita, Pnin and Pale Fire³ as the works best suited to an examination of the author's methods of creating a narrative voice. In Nabokov's earlier fiction there is a tendency to "press matters of design in a fashion that restrictively flattens the characters".⁴ The narrators of these earlier works -- when they are dramatized, and often they are not -- lack the vitality and human complexity of some of Nabokov's later raconteurs. In the works that mark the beginning of the "mature" period of Nabokov's art, which in Andrew Field's opinion includes Lolita, Pnin and Pale Fire,⁵ complexity of characterization becomes a consideration as important as, though never quite separate from, the concerns of form and obtrusive artifice which are ever-present in Nabokov's fiction. The dramatized narrators of Lolita, Pnin and Pale Fire are multi-dimensional personalities whose capricious and highly self-conscious methods of telling a story heighten the stylized artistry of the novels in which they appear. They are artifice personified, as indeed many of Nabokov's narrators are, but they are also intensely 'alive' characters whose art is an appropriate expression of their existence, not just a convenient or self-indulgent authorial contrivance.

Nabokov's mature art does not end with Pale Fire, of course, and it is perhaps necessary to account for the exclusion of Ada, Transparent Things and Look at the Harlequins from this study. Although each of these novels provides fertile ground for an examination of narrative techniques, we re-encounter in them the earlier problem of characterization-flattened-by-design that renders their separate narrative personae comparatively lifeless. Character and craft, the narrator and the narrative, do not fuse as effectively in these novels as in the preceding three.

Another, less rational explanation lurks behind my selection of works for this thesis: Lolita, Invitation to a Beheading and Pale Fire are personal favourites. It may not be considered sound scholarship to admit that one has chosen to write about those novels for which one senses a sometimes inexplicable attraction, but as Nabokov himself has put it: "...you read an artist's book not with your heart (the heart is a remarkably stupid reader), and not with your brain alone, but with your brain and spine".⁶

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Table of Contents

Preface	Page	v
Note on References and Abbreviations		ix
Chapter		
One	"A Really Fascinating Lecturer"	1
Two	"The Refuge of Art"	25
Three	"Plexed Artistry"	57
Afterword		86
Footnotes		88
Bibliography		94

Note on References and Abbreviations

Quotations in the text from Lolita, Pnin and Pale Fire are followed by an abbreviation of the title and the page number within parentheses. The following abbreviations have been used throughout the thesis:

Lolita: LO

Pnin: PN

Pale Fire: PF

Full bibliographical information is provided in the appropriate section.

Chapter One -- "A Really Fascinating Lecturer"

Pnin is less enigmatic and perhaps more readable than those notoriously inscrutable novels which have gained Nabokov the reputation of being a 'difficult' writer. There is in Pnin, as in all of Nabokov's fiction, a concern with artifice --strategic word-play, a maze of private allusions, and the use of a variety of provocative narrative techniques -- all of which require careful reading and deciphering; but interpretative problems are to some extent mitigated in Pnin since the narrative design is not additionally complicated by the use of an unsound mind as reflector. Pnin's story is told by a reasonable, if not entirely impartial, narrator, a narrator who is in fact the author's fictional equivalent.

Pnin's biographer, by self-definition a "littérateur" and a "really fascinating lecturer", is, in terms of background and sensibility, a fair copy of Nabokov. While the possibility of detecting a concomitant relationship between author and narrator becomes progressively slimmer with Humbert, whose esoteric compulsions preclude complete identification with Nabokov, and with Kinbote, whose outright madness removes him even further from the author's point of view, the comparatively lucid narrator of Pnin is not an unlikely author-surrogate. He is, for the most part, a clear-eyed observer whose vision is not blurred by any chronic obsession, Humbert-style, or hopelessly obscured by a Kinbotish, deranged mind. But because he is a dramatized narrator, a character in the

novel rather than a transparent mediator, the narrative persona in Pnin is not a bland or totally objective commentator either. He emerges as a colourful character in his own right, and one whose personal opinions and stylistic eccentricities match, with surprising accuracy and consistency, the author's.

Although Nabokov always ensures that his presence in his art will be noticed, he rarely asserts that presence by identifying himself too readily with a dramatized narrator. In Pnin, however, Nabokov's well-publicized views on pet subjects -- psychoanalysis, current taste in literature, and the study of lepidoptery -- are faithfully echoed by the narrator, who denounces the teachings of Freud, condemns literary departments for "labor[ing] under the impression that Stendhal, Galsworthy, Dreiser, and Mann were great writers" (PN, p. 467), and delights in the pursuit of rare species of butterflies. While it is not unusual for Nabokov to donate parts of himself to even his most outrageous characters, the extent to which the identities of author and narrator are blurred in Pnin is worth noting. The most tantalizing clue to their equivalence is found in the interest in butterflies common to both of them. Nabokov is named directly in Chapter 5 of the novel, where Professor Chateau, observing a pageant of small butterflies, remarks to Pnin: "Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here... He would have told us all about these enchanting insects" (PN, p. 460). In the all-important concluding chapter of the

novel, where "the vectors are removed and the fact of the fiction is underscored",¹ the narrator reveals his own fascination with butterflies as he begins one reminiscence:

One afternoon, as in concentrated ecstasy I was spreading, underside up, an exceptionally rare aberration of the Paphia Fritillary, in which the silver stripes ornamenting the lower surface of its hindwings had fused into an even expanse of metallic gloss... (PN, p. 460)

It is more than a casual coincidence that the 'absent' Vladimir Vladimirovich of Chapter 5 and the unmasked narrator of Chapter 7 enjoy a mutual passion for butterflies. Similarity is intended to suggest relationship: the narrator 'equals' Vladimir Vladimirovich, and both 'equal' the author who has been posing as himself.

The equivalent relationship between author and narrator in Pnin requires some qualification, though. The narrator may act as the author's second self, but that does not mean that he is the author, a distinction that may initially sound like mere tautology. The narrator is only Nabokov's fictional counterpart, participating in and recounting a fictional set of events. He speaks for Nabokov, and certainly like Nabokov, yet he does not speak as Nabokov. Only in autobiography is it permissible to assume that the narrative "I" speaks both for and as the author. In fiction, though, a distance, however small or imperceptible, exists between author and narrator, the real self and the projected self. Certainly Pnin contains many startling instances of "auto-

plagiarism" (Nabokov's term for the re-working of an element of his personal life into art),² but the totality of his fictional double's experience remains just that: fictional.

The narrative persona enjoys a position of unusual privilege in Pnin. As the ostensible author of Pnin's story, he is the all-seeing, all-knowing deity who perceives and records events in a way that mirrors the real author's creative process. But the narrator is not only a marginal omniscient presence in the novel; he is also a participant in the action who descends with increasing frequency and insistence into its core. The narrator's significance as a character in the novel is not initially apparent, nor does it really become so until the final stage of the story when he is fully materialized. When the extent of the narrator's involvement in Pnin's life is revealed, he becomes not the "unimportant figure" that Page Stegner perfunctorily dismisses,³ but a crucial presence in the novel whose relationship to Pnin is finally as important as the very existence of the central character.

The narrator plays a cat-and-mouse game with reader throughout most of the novel. Occasionally he will break the smooth, seemingly impartial flow of his narrative with an unexpected (and often uncalled for) personal reference. While describing Pnin's sordid preparations for journeying to America, for instance, the narrator briefly mentions "the kind Russian lady (a relative of mine) who was so help-

ful at the American Consulate" (PN, p. 394). A relative of whom? The narrator makes a similar surprise appearance at a later point in the novel when he offhandedly remarks that "This was the first time Pnin was coming to The Pines but I had been there before" (PN, p. 451). Again we wonder whom the "I" refers to, and can only surmise from these and countless other personal intrusions that the narrator is a friend of Pnin, although the nature of their acquaintance remains mysteriously unexplained.

When the moment of revelation eventually arrives at the end of the novel, we discover that the narrator and Pnin had met on a couple of occasions during their Russian youth, that the narrator had later had a brief affair with Liza which ended in her precipitate marriage to Pnin, and that it is the narrator who regretfully deposes Pnin from his position as "assistant professor emeritus" at Waindell College. This information permits us to fill in all the blanks of the preceding narrative. A re-reading of earlier passages in the novel, such as the one in which the narrator slyly alludes to a third party in Pnin's courtship of Liza, can now prove illuminating:

Pnin wrote her a tremendous love letter -- now safe in a private collection -- and she read it with tears of self-pity while recovering from a pharmacopoeial attempt at suicide because of a rather silly affair with a litterateur who is now -- But no matter. (PN, p. 392)

Although the narrator's critical involvement in Pnin's

life gives him access to some knowledge of his protagonist's history, the bulk of his information about Pnin is gained indirectly, either through hearsay or 'deus ex machinations'. Andrew Field has suggested that the narrator's chief informant for the first source is Professor Cockerell,⁴ whose imitations of Pnin have become "the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule" (PN, p. 509). But the Pninian lore supplied by Cockerell and other mutual acquaintances accounts for only a very small and external part of the narrator's extensive knowledge of the central character. Whatever else he knows about Pnin stems from his privileged position of omniscience which allows him to describe scenes from which he admits he has been absent. In a typical narrative 'slip', the speaker recounts Pnin's Cremona train ride in great detail but hastens to add:

Thus he might have appeared to a fellow passenger; but except for a soldier at one end and two women absorbed in a baby at the other, Pnin had the coach to himself. (PN, p. 363)

Another indication of the narrator's omniscient presence occurs later when he comments:

Presently all were asleep again. It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags.
(PN, pp. 445-6)

For Krug in Bend Sinister, a similar little puddle "vaguely

evokes in him [Nabokov's] link with him".⁵ In a somewhat different manner, the puddle to which none of the characters in Pnin bear witness evokes a link between narrator and reader. We come to understand that Pnin's story is, in effect, the narrator's story, and that artistic license permits him a certain ubiquity.

Another way in which the narrator exercises his authorial freedom is by assuming an intimacy with Pnin to which he would otherwise not be entitled, since circumstances suggest that he and Pnin are actually on less than friendly terms. Nevertheless, the dauntless narrator repeatedly refers to his compatriot as "my friend" and plays the part of self-appointed confidant to unsuspecting Pnin. The narrator demonstrates more than just a healthy concern for his biographical subject; he attempts to share in Pnin's every thought and sensation. After Pnin's first heart seizure, for example, the narrator moves in beside Pnin to puzzle over the nature of this ominous paroxysm:

Was it a mysterious disease that none
of his doctors had yet detected? My
friend wondered and I wonder too. (PN, p. 372)

The speaker's interest in his hero is so overwhelming at times that he seems to take possession of Pnin. In the narrator's inescapable grip, Pnin becomes an appurtenance to which the speaker claims exclusive title. Pnin 'belongs' to the narrator in the sense that any character is the

private property of his creator. Thus, the narrator, who is responsible for Pnin's existence in art, can be anything and everything to "my poor Pnin", including physician:

Was his seizure a heart attack? I doubt it. For the nonce I am his physician, and let me repeat, I doubt it. (PN, p. 373)

The narrator therefore takes hold of his patient, body and soul, and does not relinquish that hold until the end of the novel when Pnin is finally set free.

Despite the narrative persona's proclaimed friendship and sympathy for Pnin, he is not as thoroughly indulgent of his protagonist as he purports to be. The narrator is often unsparing in revealing Pnin to us as comic or pathetic. His hypothetical description of Pnin sporting a beard is a case in point: "... (today only white bristles would sprout if he did not shave -- poor Pnin, poor albino porcupine!)" (PN, p. 392). A more subtle brand of humour is employed in the passage recounting Pnin's circuitous journey to The Pines:

At times it might seem, to a less sympathetic observer, that this pale blue, egg-shaped two-door sedan, of uncertain age and in mediocre condition, was manned by an idiot. Actually its driver was Professor Timofey Pnin, of Waindell College. (PN, p. 447)

By adopting an alternative stance, that of "a less sympathetic observer", the speaker exonerates himself from possible charges of condescension towards his hero. The narrator thus manages to expose the preposterous side of Pnin's character

while supposedly commiserating with his hero.

The narrator's comic portrayal of Pnin is almost always tempered by an underlying sense of affection for his subject which finally enhances, rather than diminishes, Pnin's humanity. There is something of "Everyman" in Pnin which the narrator summons when, explaining the rationale behind Pnin's choice of dining spots, he describes The Egg and We as "a recently inaugurated and not very successful little restaurant which Pnin frequented from sheer sympathy with failure" (PN, p. 384). Although the narrator reduces Pnin to an abject Charlie Chaplin figure here, the portrait seems more poignant than cruel.

The narrator adopts an unambiguously serious tone when he relates Pnin's pain at being severed from his precious Russian past. Perhaps it is because he is himself an exile that the speaker can readily sympathize with Pnin's memories of "a brilliant cosmos that seemed all the fresher for having been abolished by one blow of history" (PN, p. 366). The narrator's solemn, almost reverential, regard for a kindred past is as genuine as his understanding of Pnin's vagrant existence in a new world. It is for this reason that the passages in the novel that concern Pnin's relationship with Victor contain little hint of mockery. The narrator allows Pnin the unqualified glory of acting as "water father" to Liza's child, who is homeless in a different

sense. Victor's affection for his adopted father allows Pnin to redeem the sense of self-worth which had dwindled to "nofing" after Liza's disenchanting visit. But the narrator permits Pnin one further moment of self-redemption and unequivocal triumph. Pnin's apotheosis during the croquet match at The Pines is clearly applauded by the narrator, who marvels with the onlookers at the hero's sudden transformation from addleheaded scholar to adept gamesman. His description of Pnin at this point is unquestionably glowing and sincere, albeit humorous:

As soon as the pegs were driven in and the game started, the man was transfigured. From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback. It seemed to be always his turn to play. (PN, p. 462)

There is a delicate blending of serious and comic tones in the novel which Andrew Field fails to appreciate fully when he develops the idea of "two distinct voices" in Pnin, one of them serious and the other "frivolous".⁶ A strict division of this sort does not allow for the subtle balance of tones which is one the novel's main virtues. The serious voice of the narrator is characteristically mingled with gentle humour, and his comic voice moderated by a deferential undertone.

When the compassionate attitude of the narrator combines with his comic view of Pnin, the resulting characterization can become grotesque. We react to Pnin with

mixed emotions when we read of his mournful parting with his teeth:

It surprised him to realize how fond he had been of his teeth. His tongue, a fat sleek seal, used to flop and slide so happily among the familiar rocks, checking the contours of a battered but still secure kingdom, plunging from cave to cove, climbing this jag, nuzzling that notch, finding a shred of sweet seaweed in the same old cleft; but now not a landmark remained, and all there existed was a dark wound, a terra incognita of gums which dread and disgust forbade one to investigate. (PN, p. 387)

This virtuoso description of toothless Pnin elicits simultaneously our pity and mild disdain for the sufferer, and it is this combination of two seemingly incongruous reactions that creates in Pnin a grotesque character. The fusion of attractive and repulsive elements is peculiar to the grotesque mode which involves "the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable".⁷ Pnin is conceived by the narrator and perceived by the reader as a divided figure, capable of engaging our sympathetic laughter and evoking at the same time a slight twinge of disgust.

The narrator's avowed feelings of friendship for Pnin are in no way reciprocated by his recalcitrant character. Puzzled by Pnin's refusal in the past to respond to his congenial overtures, the narrator illustrates Pnin's unsociable behaviour by relating an incident that took place one night at a Paris café:

It was the custom among emigré writers and artists to gather at the Three Fountains after recitals or lectures that were so popular among Russian expatriates; and it was on such an occasion that, still hoarse from my reading, I tried not only to remind Pnin of former meetings, but also to amuse him and other people around us with the unusual lucidity and strength of my memory. However, he denied everything. (PN, p. 502)

While the narrator explains Pnin's unwillingness to endorse his reminiscences as merely a reluctance to "recognize his own past", there is a more probable reason for Pnin's choosing to regard the speaker on this and one later occasion as "a dreadful inventor" (PN, p. 506). Pnin is never disinclined to remember his past, which he evokes continually in lectures, conversations, and moments of solitary contemplation; but he is, perhaps, wary of acknowledging any connection with the man who he knows or suspects was Liza's lover. Then, too, it is possible that the narrator is indeed "a dreadful inventor" whose reliability may seem questionable at this point.

In addition to the romantic rivalry which may have turned Pnin against the narrator in the past, there is now a more compelling reason for Pnin to consider the speaker an adversary, even though he may not be aware of it. By making Pnin the subject of his literary study, the narrator indulges in the same act of prying that Pnin finds so disturbing in the psychiatrist's 'dissection' of a patient:

'It is nothing but a microcosmos of communism -- all that psychiatry,' rumbled Pnin, in his answer to Chateau. 'Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?' (PN, p. 393)

Heedless of his character's plea for privacy and his own admission that "one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness....Death is divestment, death is communion." (PN, p. 372), the narrator violates every aspect of Pnin's personal sanctity with a thoroughness that far surpasses the transgressions of Liza or Eric Wind. It is this covert antagonism between Pnin and his relentless biographer that makes the narrative movement of the novel "the flight of a character from his author".⁸

The ubiquitous narrator is not easily escapable, though. Like the "hypothetical observer" in the watch tower mentioned in Chapter 5, the narrator commands a view of all the struggling creatures at ground level:

Our luckless car operator had by now lost himself too thoroughly to be able to go back to the highway,...his various indecisions and gropings took those bizarre visual forms that an observer on the lookout tower might have followed with a compassionate eye; but there was no living creature in that forlorn and listless upper region except for an ant who had his own troubles, having after hours of inept perseverance, somehow reached the upper platform of the balustrade (his autostrada) and was getting all bothered and baffled much in the same way as that preposterous toy car progressing below. (PN, p. 449)

Neither Pnin nor his 'fellow ant' can elude the omnipresent

narrator's gaze.

It is apparent that the narrator enjoys his position of supremacy, so much so that he often flaunts the superior knowledge it allows him. He seems to take a perverse delight in exhibiting his greater powers of observation to the reader. While Pnin is contentedly looking out the north window of the railway coach that he supposes will take him to Cremona, the narrator stops the action to impart a "secret" to the reader: "Professor Pnin was on the wrong train" (PN, p. 363). Another pointed distinction between Pnin's limited knowledge and the narrator's absolute knowledge occurs in the passage describing Pnin's attempts to make over his rented room at the Clements':

By now he had weeded out all trace of its former occupant; or so he thought, for he did not notice, and probably never would, a funny face scrawled on the wall just behind the headboard of the bed and some half-erased height-level marks penciled on the doorjamb, beginning from a four-foot altitude in 1940. (PN, p. 408)

The narrator's word is therefore definitive, unchallengeable; it is the assertion of an ultimate truth that his characters can only partially perceive.

It is not surprising that a narrator so aware of his status as primum mobile of the novel and so eager to display his powers should insist on figuring prominently in the narrative. The intrusive narrator of Pnin, not content to let the facts speak for themselves, will frequently inject

his own unabashed wisdom into the novel. His intrusions tend to take the form of subjective commentary which draws attention to the intricacies of his art. With unconventional candor, he will point out that:

Technically speaking, the narrator's art of integrating telephone conversations still lags far behind that of rendering dialogues conducted from room to room, or from window to window across some ancient town with water so precious, and the misery of donkeys, and rugs for sale, and minarets, and foreigners and melons, and the vibrant morning echoes. (PN, pp. 380-1)

The narrator blazes his authorial presence again when he reveals to the reader his aesthetic distaste for happy endings:

Some people -- and I am one of them -- hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam. The avalanche stopping in its tracks a few feet above the cowering village behaves not only unnaturally but unethically. Had I been reading about this mild old man, instead of writing about him, I would have preferred him to discover, upon his arrival to Cremona, that his lecture was not this Friday but the next. (PN, p. 377)

This passage contains an interesting mixture of subjectivity and spurious objectivity in that the narrator indicates that his personal preferences will not interfere with the accurate portrayal of events. What he fails to recognize, though, is that despite his ostensible faithfulness to the facts, the very act of intruding upon the narrative with contrary personal opinions causes it to lose some objectivity. In other words, he cannot be considered a totally objective reporter

if he insists on letting his subjective views be known. In the long run, however, we must accept the fact that the narrator is both a truthful and reliable observer whose biases do not seriously impair his ability to be either. That he allows Pnin's story to end happily, and more important, that he includes both versions of Pnin's Cremona lecture (wrong train, according to what he observes and wrong lecture, according to Cockerell) suggests that he "can be trusted when, as in this instance, he indicates that he is not to be trusted".⁹

It is sometimes difficult to determine where the narrator's 'helpful' intrusions end and where Pnin's thoughts begin. Distinctions between the narrator and his character can be blurred to the point where the two sensibilities seem to merge into one. This confusion arises after Pnin's interrupted account of Pushkin's death:

'But,' exclaimed Pnin in triumph, 'he died on quite, quite a different day! He died --' The chair back against which Pnin was vigorously leaning emitted an ominous crack, and the class resolved a pardonable tension in loud young laughter. (Sometime, somewhere -- Petersburg? Prague? -- one of the two musical clowns pulled out the piano stool from under the other, who remained, however, playing on, in a seated, though seatless, position, with his rhapsody unimpaired. Where? Circus Busch, Berlin!) (PN, pp. 411-12)

The parenthetical reverie could belong to either Pnin or the narrative persona, both of whose backgrounds might have

produced such a memory. A less ambiguous melding of Pnin's thoughts with the narrator's occurs while Pnin is relating his experiences in "wonderful America" to Victor over dinner. 'In the beginning I was greatly embarrassed --', Pnin starts to tell Victor; "In the beginning Pnin was greatly embarrassed by the ease with which first names were bandied about in America;..."(PN, p. 441), continues the narrator who proceeds to finish off Pnin's story in the third person. The convergence of two separate consciousnesses, the narrator's and Pnin's, emphasizes a certain affinity between them. The nature of that affinity is best explained in terms of the doubling motif of the novel.

Like most of Nabokov's fiction, Pnin is a novel in which nearly every character is a mirror image of some other character, or to borrow in a different context Paduk's statement in Bend Sinister, it is a novel in which all men are anagrams of one another. Although Pnin pairs off most obviously with Professors Wynn and Twynn, his indistinguishable colleagues, or Jack Cockerell, his all too successful imitator, it is also possible to detect an occasional resemblance between Pnin and the narrator. The narrative persona almost invites identification with Pnin when he comments in regard to this whole phenomenon of twin existences:

Pnin and I had long since accepted the disturbing but seldom discussed fact that on any given college staff one could find not only a person who was uncommonly like

one's dentist or the local postmaster,
but also a person who had a twin within
the same professional group. (PN, p. 476)

In the final analysis, though, the narrator is only a partial, and even then, imperfect reflection of his creation. He speaks for Pnin far more than he speaks like Pnin; and unlike Cockerell, he has not become so entangled in his subject's personality that he has unconsciously forfeited his own in the process of re-creating him. If the narrator has any double, then, it is not his creation but his creator.

Douglas Fowler describes the equivalent in Nabokov's fiction as:

...--a character who is a male genius, usually of European birth, and whose capabilities, humor and taste are such that, as A. C. Bradley pointed out of Prince Hamlet, he could have conceived and written not only the work in which he appears but the rest of the canon as well. In other words, Nabokov creates in his fiction a character who could have created his fiction.¹⁰

Certainly the narrator of Pnin is as careful and competent a literary craftsman as Nabokov, and he may very well have claimed authorship to more than the work he putatively writes; however, equating the narrator and Nabokov in terms of style raises a tricky question: to what extent can the narrator of a work of fiction be given credit for the literary gifts of the author? It is usually the author to whom mastery of craft is attributed, and it goes without saying that if an author writes in a particular fashion, then so must his nar-

rator. Thus, the way in which the narrator of Pnin composes the biography must necessarily duplicate the way in which Nabokov composes the novel.

In his critical study of Nikolai Gogol, Nabokov indicates that one of the features of Gogol's writing that he admires most is the "sudden slanting of a rational plane", an effect which is achieved through the combination of two movements: "a jerk and a glide". Nabokov explains this artistic phenomenon further by way of analogy:

Imagine a trap-door that opens under your feet with absurd suddenness and a lyrical gust that sweeps you up and then lets you fall with a bump into the next traphole.¹¹

It is typical of Nabokov to favour in other authors those qualities which are characteristic of his own writing style,¹² and it is therefore not surprising that this same jerk and glide movement is one that he has perfected in his own fiction. Even less surprising is the fact that the narrative persona in Pnin uses this trap-door effect with equal proficiency and regularity in his 'own' art.

In Pnin, the narrator's (and Nabokov's) ability to produce this jarring succession of movements usually depends on the sudden focal shift from reality to illusion. The rapid alternation of rational and irrational elements is apparent in the passages of the novel that deal with Victor's soporific fantasies. After hearing Joan Clements' shrill "warning yelp" at the end of Chapter 3, we enter the misty

interior regions of Victor's "mild fancies" in Chapter 4. For a short time we drift in a fairy-tale world where Victor's father is a king in a far-off revolutionary state which bears a striking resemblance to Kinbote's Zembla. Abruptly we are returned to reality when the narrator interrupts this reverie to comment:

Actually, Victor's father was a cranky refugee doctor, whom the lad had never much liked and had not seen now for almost two years. (PN, p. 424)

But jerk is again followed by glide as we slide immediately back into that distant kingdom in Victor's mind where his royal father

glanced at a desk photograph of a beautiful dead woman, at those great blue eyes, that carmine mouth (it was a colored photo, not fit for a king, but no matter). (PN, p. 425)

The inclusion of the last bit of realistic qualification shatters the illusion as thoroughly as the narrator's reminder that:

Of course, Victor's mother was not really dead; she had left his everyday father, Dr. Eric Wind (now in South America), and was about to be married to a man named Church. (PN, p. 425)

Under Nabokov's tutelage, the narrator deftly slants both rational and irrational planes so that we continually slide off one and fall onto the other, already tilting surface. But it is not only the reader who is jolted by this process; the characters, and especially Pnin, are also susceptible

to its effects. While Pnin is reviving the delicate memory of "a Baltic summer Resort, and the sounds, and the smells, and the sadness --" (PN, p. 448), his thoughts are crudely interrupted by the appearance of a "hairy-armed attendant" at his car window, whose perfunctory weather report, "Kind of muggy", dispels the charm of Pnin's romantic reflection. This grinding transformation from the exotic to the mundane, from old world to new, is typical of the narrator's use of the jerk and glide movement in Pnin.

The narrauthor's¹³ skill at reproducing speech patterns makes for a very concise and effective characterization of Pnin. He will often clue the reader in to the peculiarities of Pnin's spoken English and then provide a brief example of the trait he describes. After informing us that "[Pnin] did not possess (nor was he aware of this lack) any long oo: all he could muster when called upon to utter 'noon' was the lax vowel of the German 'nun'", Pnin's voice is summoned to illustrate this deficiency: "(I have no classes in afternoon on Tuesday. Today is Tuesday.')" (PN, p. 410). The same format is used for describing Pnin's "trick of triplicating the simple negative ('May I give you a lift, Mr. Pnin?' 'No-no-no, I have only two paces from here.')" (PN, p. 410). But Pnin is as effectively characterized when he is allowed to speak for himself, without any preliminary gloss being provided. Pnin's tragic declaration to Joan Clements, "I

search for the viscous and sawdust" (PN, p. 445), or his "Russian 'okh-okh-okh' sigh" requires no narrative comment; Pnin characterizes himself with every utterance. Our ability to appreciate Pnin's unique charm may depend on our willingness to agree to some extent with Laurence Clements' belief that "his mispronunciations are mythopoeic. His slips of tongue are oracular" (PN, p. 491). Although Pnin is no prophet, his "verbal vagaries" do often reveal a very singular wisdom.

Pnin's uniqueness may be self-evident, but the narrator makes it even more apparent by labeling certain of his characteristics specifically "Pninian". When the speaker refers to "a special Pninian craving" or "a Pninian quandary" (PN, p. 369), the use of Pnin's name in adjective form to describe what Pnin senses is a pardonable redundancy, since it underscores the distinctiveness of his nature. Similarly, when the narrator describes his hero "Pninizing his new quarters" (PN, p. 384), the whole process of settling into the Clements home is made to seem as if Pnin is imposing his identity on an alien environment. The narrator, who is engaged in an act of 'Pninizing Pnin', transforms the central character into a one-of-a-kind curio, in one sense; in another sense, though, the narrator also manages to turn Pnin into an institution, a handy frame of reference to which both narrator and reader can relate. Thus, when the narrator alludes to things Pninian, he relies on a set of common associations to

disclose their meaning.

Throughout the novel, the narrator operates on the tacit assumption that the reader will recognize and respond to Pninian behaviour in the same way that the speaker comprehends this phenomenon. He clearly makes the reader a party to his judgment when he ponders with his audience over how "we" should "diagnose [Pnin's] sad case" (PN, p. 367) or what "our poor friend" is to do after missing his bus to Cremona. Granted, the use of the first person plural in these instances may only be a rhetorical touch, but even this rhetorical involvement of the reader in the narrative indicates the speaker's awareness of his audience.

Although the narrator seems generally content to regard the projected reader as his partner and partisan, he occasionally doubts the intelligence, and especially the cosmopolitanism, of his audience. Because the speaker does not trust the reader to come up with the correct mental pronunciation for the name of "the once famous revolutionary Umov", he adds for his edification that it rhymes with 'zoom-off' (PN, p. 374). The narrator's more solemn suspicion that the reader is being inattentive to important details is confirmed when he catches him forgetting Pnin's birthday. Well aware of the fact that "The author makes his readers, just as he makes his characters",¹⁴ the narrator of Pnin takes the occasional liberty of making his readership a compliant and careless bunch, easily led and easily fooled.

The projected reader's knowledge of what takes place in the novel is circumscribed by what the narrator wants him to know. By the same token, though, the narrator's knowledge is limited by the author's intentions. As far as both the fictional reader (that is, the reader imagined by the narrator) and the fictional narrator are concerned, then, Pnin's story ends when his blue sedan, "free at last", recedes into the distance where "there was simply no saying what miracle might happen" (PN, p. 511). But as the real reader and the real author are aware, Pnin has not totally disappeared from view. He is resurrected in Pale Fire as a full professor emeritus strolling through a new college campus, and he makes one more notable appearance in a letter to Alfred Appel where, in true Pninian form, he denounces the art of his creator:

No, esteamd Professeur Apple, I can not see what I can truely writ about my "friend" of who the Russian books I can not finnish them or his english understand.¹⁵

Chapter Two -- "The Refuge of Art"

It is not the artistic aptitudes
that are secondary sexual characters
as some shams and shamans have said,
it is the other way around: sex is
but the ancilla of art. (LO, p. 261)

Had more of Nabokov's censorious early readers looked far enough into Lolita (in terms of pages and profundity)¹ they would have realized that their outrage was unfounded, that this novel, considered unprintable in America and surreptitiously published in Paris, was not about "so-called sex", but about the infinitely more powerful seductions of art. Had those same literal-minded readers also been able to disentangle the inventive artist from his artistic invention, the sins and attendant traumas of Humbert Humbert might never have been conferred upon the author by prudish pedants, whom Nabokov later reminded that "there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with [Humbert]".²

While the distance between author and narrator in Pnin is slim, almost to the point of being unrecognizable, in Lolita that gap is appreciably wider. The creation of the narrative persona in Pnin is, in a sense, an act of artistic solipsism: Nabokov has only to impersonate himself in order to invent his fictional equivalent. But Nabokov must reach beyond the limits of his own identity and venture into unfamiliar mental ground in Lolita when he hazards an impersonation of a "demented diarist" and his appallingly sane commentator as well. Neither Humbert

Humbert nor "suave John Ray" can be considered stand-ins for the author in the same way that Pnin's anonymous biographer acted as an alter-Nabokov. Despite the occasional overlapping of sensibilities, the consciousnesses of Humbert and Ray remain essentially separate from that of the author, who, in this novel, becomes more divinely inaccessible than in the previously examined work.

In his article "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody", Alfred Appel has noted that:

Parody is in Lolita the major means by which Nabokov breaks the circuit of reader-character identification one associates with the conventional novel.³

It is parody, and an ingeniously subtle form of it, that should alert the reader to the clap-trap that underlies John Ray's glib Foreword to Humbert's memoir. Ray's introductory comments are a parodic version of those morally instructive prefaces that often accompany controversial works.⁴ As a scientist evaluating Lolita as "a tempest in a test tube" and a moralist who extracts from this document a valuable lesson for "parents, social workers, educators" to exercise greater caution in "the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world" (LO, p. 5), Ray is a laughable figure. Nabokov's intolerance for those who tamper with others' psyches and his contempt for commonplace morality (both grudges are clearly spelled in Nabokov's Afterword, "On a Book Entitled Lolita") mark the essential differences

between the author's viewpoint and that of the pompous Dr. Ray. In addition to "break[ing] the circuit of reader-character identification", then, parody also severs a possible connection between author and narrator.

Ray ceases to be a figure of fun when his clinical and moral aplomb is replaced by fleeting aesthetic insights. He speaks less like a psychologist and more like an artist (like Nabokov, in fact) when he scornfully satisfies the curiosity of the "old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the 'real' people beyond the 'true' story" (L0, p. 6) by filling in what eventually became of the surviving characters. Ray's contempt for the truth, hardly in keeping with the scientist's interest in facts, recalls Nabokov's statement that:

It is strange, the morbid inclination we have to derive satisfaction from the fact (generally false and always irrelevant) that a work of art is traceable to a 'true' story.⁵

Equally inconsistent is Ray's ability to appreciate the artistry of a madman whose morality he deplors:

He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tenderness, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author! (L0, p. 7)

This "gap in the texture of Ray's rhetoric reveals the voice of his maker",⁶ and suggests that even a pedagogue like Ray is capable of experiencing and expressing the state of "aesthetic bliss" where, according to Nabokov, "art (curio-

sity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm".⁷

Just as John Ray is a parody of the rational, public-minded man, so Humbert Humbert is a tongue-in-cheek version of a crazed criminal. Taking a closer look at the question of Humbert's insanity first, it is apparent that if he is indeed a madman (one wonders sometimes), he is an extraordinarily lucid and clever one, capable of recognizing and diagnosing his own symptoms as efficiently as any squinting psychologist. Whether one chooses to regard Humbert as an unconventional madman, or simply as an unconventional man, his insatiable cravings for nymphet flesh and his tendency to "merely los[e] contact with reality" certainly fall without the scope of prescribed normal behaviour, not to say outside the author's personal experience. Humbert's reactions to his criminal impulses -- contrition, self-loathing, fear -- fit the conventional moral codes more snugly, although they bring him no closer to the sensibility of his creator. Humbert is no psychopath; his definitions of right and wrong are as clear as his knowledge of having transgressed those boundaries. Yet Humbert's awareness of mores and morals is not necessarily Nabokov's, as one interviewer discovered when, in answer to his question about the author's evident sense of guilt about Humbert's illicit relationship with Lolita, he received a sharp reply:

No, it is not my sense of the immorality of the Humbert Humbert-Lolita relationship that is strong;

it is Humbert's sense. He cares,
I do not. I do not give a damn
for public morals in America, or
elsewhere.⁸

In the same way that Nabokov and John Ray find common ground in "aesthetic bliss", so the author and Humbert seem to merge mentally when art is the order of contemplation. When art rather than sex becomes Humbert's aphrodisiac, when "to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets" becomes more crucial than the physical attainment of Lolita or her coevals, then obsession is purified into an artistic abstraction which both author and narrator can comprehend. It is through articulate art, that "very local palliative", that the creator and the creation -- Humbert and Lolita, Nabokov and his Lolita -- are united in a quest for "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy", and perhaps above all, immortality.

While art draws the real author and the fictional one together in Lolita, artifice tends to divide them again. Nabokov is not one to let the reader forget that he is the grandmaster of his fiction, that his characters are "galley slaves"⁹ and that the novel as a whole is navigated by himself. Nabokov's divine touch is most conspicuous in "those dazzling coincidences that logicians loathe and poets love" (LO, p. 33). Dazzling, indeed, is the "coincidence" of finding Nabokov's name in anagrammatic form in the excerpt from Who's Who in the Limelight which Humbert dutifully

reproduces in his memoir. Although Humbert very astutely notices those fortuitous references to Clare Quilty, Lolita and the patterns of the past that are suggested in the repertoire of titles, he naturally fails to discern in the name Vivian Darkbloom his maker's watermark on the page. Nabokov also gains an authorial advantage over Humbert by allowing his unwitting narrator to make mistakes of which only the author can be aware. Several times during his narrative, Humbert carelessly observes the author's signature flitting across the page in the form of a butterfly. That Humbert is certainly no lepidopterist is apparent in his indifference to "some gaudy moth or butterfly still alive, safely pinned to the wall" of Camp Q's headquarters (L0, p. 112). Considering Humbert's "incapacity to differentiate between Rhopalocera and Heterocera",¹⁰ it is not surprising that he is later unable to identify those "creeping white flies" that swarm around yucca blossoms (L0, p. 158) as "the biologically fascinating little moths of the genus Pronuba",¹¹ or that he is ignorant of the fact that "the gray hummingbirds in the dusk, probing the throats of dim flowers" (L0, p. 159) are actually "Hawkmoths which do move exactly like hummingbirds (which are neither gray nor nocturnal)".¹²

Nabokov's assertion of the divine right of authorship supersedes, but does not totally efface, Humbert's assertion of that same right within his fictional limits. While

Nabokov is the author of the novel in its larger sense, Humbert is the putative author of the memoir, and as such, Humbert himself wields a certain attributed discretionary power in his writing. In a manner that often resembles the way the real author insinuates himself into the novel, then, Humbert overtly demonstrates his own control of the narrative through the use of artifice made manifest.

Because he is, like the author, "especially susceptible to the magic of games" (L0, p. 235), Humbert cannot resist the temptation to have some fun with his narrative. Given the necessity of 'changing the names to protect the innocent', Humbert carefully exercises his prerogative to choose pseudonyms. He may deny any attempt at verisimilitude by conferring upon a character or institution names which are functionally descriptive; thus, the old maid who lives across from the Haze home becomes Miss Opposite, and the school that Lolita is to attend in the fall is appropriately dubbed St. Algebra. The selection of the names Miss Lester and Miss Fabian for the cohabitant school teachers down the block is more suggestive, considering the effect of splicing together their respective first and last syllables. But Humbert is capable of using his nomenclatory privileges for malicious, as well as playful, purposes. After cataloguing the names of Lolita's girl friends, for instance, Humbert adds that "save one, all these names are approximations, of course" (L0, p. 192). Alfred Appel has noted that

the one 'real' name must be Mona Dahl, whose identity Humbert discloses out of revenge for her part in the Lolita-Quilty deceit.¹³ A decidedly Nabokovian gesture, this tangential meeting of an internal, fictional existence with an external 'reality'.

Humbert's style, his artifice, is never more plainly the product of his creator than when he is indulging in the only pastime left to him. "Oh my Lolita, I have only words to play with" (LO, p. 341), Humbert moans at one point, lamenting his past losses and present confinement; but it is through words that Humbert can recreate that earlier time and bend the bars of his prison cell. Words being an infinitely precious commodity to Humbert, he uses them to the fullest advantage of his art. Sound patterns, improbable juxtapositions, intrigue him:

'...However -- would there be a spare cot in 49, Mr. Swine?'
'I think it went to the Swoons,' said Swine, the initial old clown. (LO, p. 120)

Word variations, especially plays on Lolita's chameleon name, are used inventively by Humbert, who describes his nymphet as "my dolorous and hazy darling" (LO, p. 55), and later comes up with such 'cutesy' phrases as "summer haze hung about my little Haze" (LO, p. 61) or "There was no Lo to behold" (LO, p. 225). The occasional portmanteau also enlivens Humbert's narrative: by crossing "honeymoon" with "monsoon", he begets "honeymonsoon", a coinage which adds an extra twist to his description of John Farlow's romantic

sojourn in India with his young Spanish bride. (LO, p. 268). The deftness with which Humbert telescopes two words into one matches his skill for splitting a single word into two. It is the latter talent which Humbert demonstrates when he observes that the psychotherapist and the rapist possess the same wisdom in diagnosing a case of "backfisch foolery" (LO, p. 115). The rarefication process which Humbert uses to discern the "rapist" in "psychotherapist" is, according to Appel, reminiscent of Nabokov's breakdown of "semantic constituents in Despair, when he poses a sensible question: "What is the jest in majesty? This ass in passion?"¹⁴

It is to be expected, of course, that Humbert's facility with words will match the author's. If Lolita is the record of Nabokov's love affair with the English language,¹⁵ then Humbert's memoir must bear out this same "elegant formula". Oddly enough, though, Humbert's stylistic affections are not always an accurate reflection of the way in which Nabokov, speaking as Nabokov, would express himself. In fact, Nabokov has invested Humbert with a style distinctly his own, a preciosity that exceeds even Nabokov's somewhat pretentious prose. When Nabokov began a written complaint to the editor of Playboy magazine with: "I am extremely distrain (as Humbert Humbert would have put it in his affected manner)...",¹⁶ he assumed the artificial inflections of his character while clearly attempting to deny the likeness between them. Nabokov's implied disavowal

of any stylistic correspondence between himself and Humbert is not entirely convincing, however. There is an appreciable distinction between them, but it is one of degree rather than kind.

What one notices immediately about Humbert's style is its 'baroque' quality. Highly ornamental and crammed with nonutilitarian flourishes, Humbert's old-world rhetoric seems particularly overdone in comparison to Lolita's clipped American dialect. "Speak English", Lolita impatiently tells Humbert at one point when, ironically, he is taking pains to "speak Lolita's tongue" (LO, p. 151). But Humbert's poetic pretensions will not often permit him to express in a few simple words what could be said eloquently using many. Humbert's description of his pre-bedtime rambles at the Enchanted Hunters reveals this tendency to speak, as well as prowl, circuitously:

I wandered through various public rooms, glory below, gloom above: for the look of lust always is gloomy; lust is never quite sure -- even when the velvety victim is locked up in one's dungeon -- that some rival devil or influential god may still not abolish one's prepared triumph. In common parlance, I needed a drink; but there was no barroom in that venerable place full of perspiring philistines and period objects. (LO, p. 127)

Humbert will often undercut his own eloquence by offering the reader a 'translation' of what he is saying, by reverting to "common parlance", as he has in the above passage.

But his awareness of his inflated style is expressed more directly when his strong sense of self-irony comes into play. In the middle of delivering his polished opening remarks to the jury, for example, Humbert bluntly interrupts himself to comment: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (LO, p. 11). A similar act of sudden self-denigration occurs again when Humbert is whimsically describing his background:

My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three, and, save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory, over which, if you can still stand my style (I am writing under observation), the sun of my infancy had set:... (LO, p. 12)

Humbert's recognition of his stylistic extravagance in these instances indicates that he is a highly self-conscious narrator who scrutinizes his own motives and mannerisms as carefully as any hanging judge would.

Humbert's acute self-consciousness, prompted by his awareness that his memoir will be read and possibly used to incriminate him, results in his assiduous attempts to act as a reliable narrator. Realizing that the writing of a memoir is apt to be a rather subjective process, Humbert very deliberately tries to restrict himself to the objective facts -- with questionable success. That he prides himself on presenting a truthful, plausible version of his story is apparent when he remarks:

'The orange blossom would have scarcely withered on the grave,' as a poet might have said. But I am no poet. I am only a very conscientious recorder. (LO, p. 74)

It is difficult to believe Humbert's assertion that he is strictly a "conscientious recorder", especially in view of the rather odd fact that he has just demonstrated that he is a poet, albeit of questionable talent. Humbert's attempts to appear conscientious also back-fire when, after informing the reader that "My lawyer has suggested I give a clear, frank account of the itinerary we [he and Lolita] followed" (LO, p. 155), he admits shortly afterwards that he is "exaggerating a little" in his description of the wilds of America. (LO, p. 170) He also concedes to being uncertain about the facts when outlining his travels with Rita:

I have somehow mixed up two events, my visit with Rita to Briceland on our way to Cantrip, and our passing through Briceland on our way back to New York, but such suffusions of swimming colors are not to be disdained by the artist in recollection. (LO, p. 265)

But by admitting the fallibility of memory, Humbert, like the narrator of Pnin "indicates that he can be trusted when, as in this instance, he indicates that he is not to be trusted".¹⁷

Humbert's acute awareness of what is expected of him as a narrator -- reliability, for one thing -- allows him to mock the story-telling conventions which he uses so brilliantly. His story takes the parodic form of a racy eighteenth-

century novel or Gothic romance, which fails to live up to some of its titillative expectations. It begins with the inevitable recounting of the hero's background, his ideally happy childhood and his ill-fated romance with "innocent, elegant Annabel", in consequence of which he finds himself eternally enchanted with nymphets. Having provided the necessary rationale for his present affliction, and in so doing, fulfilled the reader's expectation of an explanation for 'how it all happened', Humbert then directs his efforts to frustrating the reader's hopes. He tempts us into believing that events will conform to a probable pattern whereby his lecherous impulses will lead him to murder the mother of his child-love, seduce the helpless orphan and eventually shoot his unfaithful mistress. But Charlotte manages to get herself clumsily killed by a car swerving to miss a dog, Lolita winds up playing the vamp to 'innocent' Humbert, and the victim of Humbert's murderous revenge at the end of the novel is not Lolita ("as some have thought") but Quilty. Perhaps the biggest disappointment of all for some readers is the absence of stark sexual scenes in the novel. After waiting with growing impatience for the crucial moment when Humbert will acquire his nymphet prize, we are cruelly surprised to find that Humbert chooses "not to bore [his] learned readers with a detailed account of Lolita's presumption" (L0, p. 135).

It is characteristic of Humbert's perverse style to

foster false impressions, to trip up his reader. This tendency is perhaps best described by Humbert himself when he remarks:

As greater authors than I have put it: 'Let the reader imagine' etc. On second thought, I may as well give those imaginations a kick in the pants. (LO, p. 67)

Imagination receives yet another kind of "kick in the pants" with Humbert's unveiling of the mechanics which move his narrative. Humbert does not shy away from revealing the methods that go into the making of his art; quite the contrary, he will graciously impart to the reader what he is doing and why. Towards the end of the novel, when it is discovered that Quilty was Lolita's elusive lover, Humbert informs the reader:

Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment; yes, with the express and perverse purpose of rendering -- [Lolita] was talking but I sat melting in my golden peace -- of rendering that golden and monstrous peace through the satisfaction of logical recognition, which my most inimical reader should experience now. (LO, p. 274)

Humbert's ability to provide explanations of his narrative techniques within the narrative indicates that he has achieved a certain critical distance from his work. There are two Humberts, one existing in the past tense and

the other writing in the present about his earlier self. It is Humbert, the author of the memoir, who recognizes retrospectively what Humbert, the character acting out the original set of events, can not. As the superior version of himself, Humbert the author is capable of disengaging himself sufficiently from his autobiographical counterpart to write about him, and the whole process of enmeshing him in art, with detachment.

It is a stunningly dispassionate Humbert who puts artistic concerns before emotional ones when describing Charlotte's timely death. Humbert's pre-eminent concern over how to render the scene of the accident most effectively inspires the following passage:

I have to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words; their physical accumulation in the page impairs the actual flash, the sharp unity of impression: Rug-heap, car, old mandoll, Miss O.'s nurse running with a rustle, a half-empty tumbler in her hand,... (LO, p. 99)

Humbert is chiefly preoccupied here with ensuring that the scene be properly visualized. The effect is cinematic rather than novelistic. The page is converted into a movie screen upon which Humbert projects his mental images. Humbert's cinematic perception and projection of his past is made possible by the detachment that retrospective self-description permits him. Given the temporal distance between Humbert past and Humbert present, what the latter is

doing, in effect, is replaying earlier scenes, and attempting to reproduce in these the impact of not only "instantaneous vision" but immediate vision. This is Humbert's explicit objective when he prefaces one such 'showing' with:

I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, 'impartial sympathy.' So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me. (L0, p. 59)

By simulating a cinematic replay of that incriminating Sunday morning he spent alone with Lolita, Humbert provides visual proof (albeit spurious) of his probity. The 'film' is introduced as evidence into the imaginary courtroom where he is being tried.

While Humbert's projection-room antics are used in some instances to verify the past, they also anticipate the future conversion of his book into film form. Ambitious Humbert, in addition to writing this "portentous volume", is also composing a screen play. The latter concern is apparent when Humbert, describing himself examining the "rogues gallery" of posters on the wall of the post office, advises a prospective script-writer: "If you want to make a movie out of my book, have one of these faces gently melt into my own while I look" (L0, p. 224). Ironically, of course, a film version of Lolita was produced in 1960; but Humbert's suggestion was apparently ignored by the author of the script.¹⁸

The Humbert who calmly moderates the movements of his fumbling earlier self does not always maintain his detached composure. There are occasions when his authorial aplomb dissolves and the jubilant or suffering individual who lurks behind the suave writer is revealed. The vividness with which Humbert depicts episodes of past pleasure can revive in him the same ecstasy which attended the original experience. (Indeed, his motive for writing the memoir may be in part retrospective voyeurism). When a particularly provocative scene is being portrayed, Humbert may temporarily lose control of the narrative, allowing it to trail off into speechless rapture. Describing "the honey of a spasm" he secretly steals from unsuspecting Lolita, he concludes: "My heart seemed everywhere at once. Never in my life -- not even when fondling my child-love in France -- never --" (LO, p. 46). But the process of recollection can restore anguish, as well as ambrosia, to Humbert. Supposedly overcome by the strain of writing the memoir, Humbert experiences a breakdown in Chapter 26:

This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don't think I can go on. Heart, head -- everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer. (LO, p. 111)

Despite the somehow studied quality of Humbert's stirring

outbursts, it seems that when the narrative reaches the peak points of pleasure and pain, the distance between the two Humberts, narrator and character, decreases, and the two are emotionally unified.

Humbert's perception of himself as a character is just as ambiguous as the reader's perception of him as a narrator. Humbert reacts to himself with the same grotesque mixture of delight and disgust that is likely to characterize the reader's response to him. His remarkable candor and self-awareness are never more obvious than when he is pointing out, for the reader's convenience as well as his own grim satisfaction, certain inconsistencies about his make-up. He prides himself on being a physically handsome man:

I have all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder. Moreover, I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush. (LO, p. 45)

Yet only a page later we find him despising his "movie-land male" appearance for the fiendish inner life it conceals:

...I am lanky, big-boned, wooly-chested Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent, and a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile. (LO, p. 46)

Humbert also obligingly points out that he is "an artist, and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in [his] loins" (LO, p. 19). The

lurid exaggeration in these passages becomes self-indulgent, and we begin to suspect that Humbert thoroughly enjoys the pen-lashing he gives himself.

There is also a strong element of self-dramatization in the names Humbert bestows upon himself when he drops into his third-person narrative voice. He sympathizes with "Humbert le Bel" having his picture snapped by a doting Charlotte, or "Humbert the Humble" who "beat[s] a gloomy retreat" after being spurned by Lolita, and he is indulgent of "Jean-Jacques Humbert" with his "old-fashioned, old-world way". But he is hyperbolically disdainful of scheming and dreaming "Humbert the Cubus" and "Humbert, the popular butcher" of girl-children wearing "prim cotton pyjamas in popular butcher-boy style" (LO, p. 110).

The way in which Humbert sees himself in relation to other characters also tends towards ambiguity. His European refinements, his "inherent sense of the comme il faut" (LO, p. 249) give him a certain advantage over mundane middle-class America -- or so he thinks. One is inclined to agree with Humbert's tasteful assessment of the poshlust¹⁹ rampant in the ultra-bourgeois Haze home. Charlotte's dubious decorating talents, and Humbert's initial horror at the prospect of settling among such depressing surroundings are revealed when Humbert comments in the middle of his household tour:

But there was no question of my settling

there. I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called 'functional modern furniture' and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps. I was led upstairs, and to the left -- into 'my' room. I inspected it through the mist of my utter rejection of it; but I did discern above 'my' bed Rene Prinet's 'Kreutzer Sonata.' (LO, pp. 39-40)

Somewhat less offensive to Humbert's haut goût is the plebianism of little Haze. But while vulgarity is an essential part of the nymphet's sexual charms, its unattractive side does not go unnoticed by Humbert when he remarks:

[Lolita] it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. And she attempted -- unsuccessfully -- to patronize only those restaurants where the holy spirit of Hunca Dines had descended upon the cute paper napkins and cottage-cheese crested salads. (LO, p. 150)

As desirable as Lolita may be in some respects, then, Humbert must admit that "Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl" (LO, p. 150).

Humbert may shine in matters of taste and breeding, but his moral conduct leaves him open to self-reproach. He comes to regret very deeply his earlier insensitivity to Lolita "and her sobs in the night -- every night, every night -- the moment [he] feigned sleep" (LO, p. 178). What also humbles him with hindsight is the realization that "it was always [his] habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting [his] own base self" (LO, p. 289).

Humbert's smug sense of intellectual superiority to Lolita would not allow him to consider, with any seriousness, the mind of his gum-chewing, nose-picking concubine. But after overhearing Lolita comment to a friend that "what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own", Humbert is struck by the thought that:

...I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile cliches, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate -- dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions...
(LO, p. 286)

Despising himself for his insensitivity to Lolita, for his moral sins against her and for those intellectual pretensions that caused him to speak condescendingly to her in "an artificial tone of voice that set [his] teeth on edge" (LO, p. 286), Humbert can only conclude that he is far less worthy of Lolita than is her unkempt, uncouth husband:

He was a lamb. He had cupped her Florentine breasts. His fingernails were black and broken, but the phalanges, the whole carpus, the strong shapely wrist were far, far finer than mine: I have hurt too much too many bodies with my twisted poor hands to be proud of them. French epithets, a Dorset yokel's knuckles, an Austrian tailor's flat finger tips -- that's Humbert Humbert.
(LO, p. 276)

It is not only in relation to unrefined Dick Schiller that Humbert senses his own inferiority; plagued by what he himself terms a "persecution mania", Humbert sees himself

throughout the novel as a victim, embroiled in the obscure designs of "gnarled McFate", or Gustave Trapp or Clare Quilty (the three become almost indistinguishable in Humbert's muddled mind). Initially, fate is a pleasant abstraction, a "synchronizing phantom", that conveniently disposes of Charlotte and makes possible Humbert's subsequent arrangement with Lolita. But as Humbert becomes more deeply entangled in McFate's web, he begins to feel the influence of "a kind of secondary fate (McFate's inept secretary, so to speak) pettily interfering with the boss's generous magnificent plan" (LO, p. 118). This "secondary fate" eventually materializes as Clare Quilty, Humbert's fiendish counterpart who "succeed[s] in thoroughly enmeshing [Humbert] and [his] thrashing anguish in his demoniacal game" (LO, p. 251). Quilty also succeeds in spiriting away Humbert's nymphaean prize, leaving the underdog utterly defeated in this contest staged by fate.

There are a number of instances in Lolita when Humbert's relationship to his co-characters shifts so that he is writing directly to them, rather than about them. His predilection for addressing the other characters as an audience is evident in the occasional parenthetical 'asides' that crop up in his narrative. After relating Jean Farlow's parting words to a newly-widowed Humbert, in which she reveals her furtive attraction to him, he adds: "(Jean, whatever, wherever you are, in minus space-time or plus soul-

time, forgive me all this, parenthesis included)" (LO, p. 106). While Humbert is appropriately sober when addressing certain deceased parties, his tone becomes playful when he acknowledges the presence of those characters who will be future readers of the memoir. Humbert is transformed into a gregarious showman when he shouts a cheerful greeting to the kind doctor who treated Lolita for bronchitis:

Around Christmas she caught a bad chill
and was examined by a friend of Miss
Lester, a Dr. Ilse Tristramson (hi, Ilse,
you were a dear, uninquisitive soul, and
you touched my dove very gently). (LO, p. 200)

Humbert later waves a similar fond hello to Rita, his post-Lolita fling:

There is no earthly reason why I should
dally with her in the margin of this
sinister memoir, but let me say (hi, Rita
-- wherever you are, drunk or hangoverish,
Rita, hi!) that she was the most soothing,
the most comprehending companion that I
ever had, and certainly saved me from the
madhouse. (LO, p. 261)

Humbert's awareness of his audience, his creation of that audience in fact, is almost immediately evident in the novel. A conversation between himself and his supposed reader is simulated when he adopts a question-and-answer format early in his confession:

Did she have a precursor? She did,
indeed she did. In point of fact,
there might have been no Lolita at
all had I not loved, one summer, a
certain initial girl-child. In a
princedom by the sea. Oh when? About
as many years before Lolita was born
as my age was that summer. (LO, p. 11)

Humbert then proceeds to draw the reader physically into his narrative by handing him some pictures to peruse: "I am going to pass around in a minute some lovely gloss-blue picture postcards" (LO, p. 11).²⁰

Conversation becomes cross-examination when Humbert's various legal interrogators are introduced into his narrative. At times, he envisions himself as "Humbert Humbert sweating in the fierce white light, and howled at, and trodden upon by sweating policemen" (LO, p. 72). Humbert's sense of being hounded by a relentless team of detectives is also evident in a later passage:

Sometimes...Come on, how often exactly, Bert? Can you recall four, five, more such occasions? Or would no human heart have survived two or three? Sometimes (I have nothing to say in reply to your question)... (LO, p. 194)

Having possibly experienced a version of this gruelling inquisition after being apprehended by the police, Humbert inserts these scenes to represent impressionistic flashbacks to the recent past.

At the time of writing his confession, Humbert has not yet appeared before the court; all references to his indomitable jury are therefore flash-forwards to a notional future. Although Humbert tells us at the end of the novel that he had decided in mid-composition against using his notes as part of his legal defense, remarks directed to judge and jurymen remain intact throughout the narrative.

It serves Humbert's rhetorical style well to plead his case before a hypothetical panel of jurists. His confession is made to acquire a sense of urgency when he appeals to his inflexible listeners: "Gentlemen of the jury! Bear with me! Allow me to take just a tiny bit of your precious time" (L0, p. 125). The suspect truths he relates seem more credible somehow when he is able to anticipate the temperaments and doubts of his judges:

Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thoughts that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me. (L0, p. 134)

Realizing that it is the "frigid gentlewomen" in the audience who are least likely to understand or believe this scandalous statement, he directs his remarks specifically to them, not so much to solicit their favour, perhaps, as to shock them. Humbert is, after all, something of an exhibitionist, who writes this memoir to flaunt, as well as atone for, his past sins.

In preparing his defense, Humbert considers not only the presumed reactions of those who sit in judgment on him, but the advice of the lawyer who assists his cause. Aware that his notes will be checked over scrupulously by his attorney ("Clarence Choate Clark, Esq., now of the District of Columbia bar", John Ray kindly informs us), Humbert

directs him not to alter a fortuitous error in the manuscript: "(I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence)" (LO, p. 34). Humbert later apologizes to Clarence for any inaccuracies in his account of the route he and Lolita followed during their grand tour of America:

(this is not too clear I am afraid, Clarence, but I did not keep any notes, and have at my disposal only an atrociously crippled tour book in three volumes, almost a symbol of my torn and tattered past, in which to check these recollections)... (LO, p. 156)

Apparently, Humbert is attempting to be "a very conscientious recorder" to benefit his position at trial.

That Humbert is concerned with vindicating, or at least lessening, his guilt as a sexual offender is clear. Citing a few pertinent precedents, he reminds us that:

After all, Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girlie, painted and lovely, and bejeweled, in a crimson frock, and this was in 1274, in Florence, at a private feast in the merry month of May. And when Petrarch fell madly in love with his Laureen, she was a fair-haired nymph of twelve running in the wind, in the pollen and dust, a flower in flight, in the beautiful plain as described from the hills of Vaucluse. (LO, p. 21)

Unfortunately for Humbert, he has managed to mingle fact with wishful thinking in his account of these two immortal love affairs: there was no romance between the nine year-old Dante and Beatrice, age eight; and Petrarch was twenty-

three when he met Laura, whose age has never been determined.²¹ Humbert's tendency to alter the historical, and even geographical, facts to favour his own position is also apparent in his trumped-up account of the 'laws', ancient and recent, which support his innocence:

The stipulation of the Roman law, according to which a girl may marry at twelve, was adopted by the Church, and is still preserved, rather tacitly, in some of the United States. And fifteen is lawful everywhere. There is nothing wrong, say both hemispheres, when a brute of forty, blessed by the local priest and bloated with drink, sheds his sweat-drenched finery and thrusts himself up to the hilt into his youthful bride. 'In such stimulating temperate climates [says an old magazine in this prison library] as St. Louis, Chicago and Cincinnati, girls mature about the end of their twelfth year.' Dolores Haze was born less than three hundred miles from stimulating Cincinnati. I have but followed nature. (LO, p. 137)

Humbert arrives at his conclusion, that he has "but followed nature", by what is for him a typical route: he begins with fact, moves on to lascivious fancy and then indulges in some syllogistic reasoning that leaves neither the reader nor likely himself convinced that he has behaved admirably.

Whether Humbert could manage to sway a stodgy jury is doubtful; he finds a more receptive audience, however, in his ideal reader, whom he prefers to visualize as a "blond-bearded scholar with rosy lips sucking la pomme de sa canne as he quaffs my manuscript!" (LO, p. 223). The "patient reader whose meek temper Lolita ought to have

copied" (LO, p. 141) will indeed be willing to sympathize with Humbert's situation. It is mainly this compliant audience that Humbert addresses with great show of familiarity when he comments:

The reader will regret to learn that soon after my return to civilization I had another bout with insanity (if to melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression that cruel term must be applied). (LO, p. 36)

or:

The reader knows what importance I attached to having a bevy of page girls, consolation prize nymphets, around my Lolita. (LO, p. 192)

or:

Imagine me, reader, with my shyness, my distaste for ostentation, my inherent sense of the comme il faut, imagine me masking the frenzy of my grief with a trembling ingratiating smile while devising some casual pretext to flip through the hotel register... (LO, pp. 249-50)

But Humbert realizes that not all his readers will be as appreciative of his predicament as he would hope. There is bound to be a portion of his audience who will bear a greater resemblance to the "learned reader (whose eyebrows, I suspect, have by now traveled all the way to the back of his bald head)" (LO, p. 50) than to the "blond-bearded scholar". The censorious reader is the one who will be more inclined to "sizzle [Humbert] to death" than understand his whims or nod in agreement when Humbert claims to have a "distaste for ostentation".

While Humbert is usually attuned to those aspects of his confession which are apt to shock some of his observers, occasionally he will grossly misinterpret his reader's response to an incident he relates, and unwittingly hang himself in the process. In the course of describing how it was his practice to bribe Lolita for sexual favours and later wrench the coins she had earned from her clenched fist, he remarks:

O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches; and in the margin of that leaping epilepsy she would firmly clutch a handful of coins in her little fist, which, anyway, I used to pry open afterwards unless she gave me the slip, scrambling away to hide her loot. (LO, p. 186)

Laugh! Little does Humbert realize here that we are more inclined to loathe him than laugh at him. It might also disconcert the reader to hear Humbert blithely voice his anxiety over Lolita's welfare:

'My chère Dolorès! I want to protect you, dear, from all the horrors that happen to little girls in coal sheds and alley ways, and, alas, comme vous le savez trop bien, ma gentille, in the blue-berry woods during the bluest of summers. (LO, p. 151)

For the conventional "prudent papa", this concern for the safety of his child would be approvable; for Humbert Humbert, daughter-debaucher, the sentiment is overdone to the point of self-parody. Humbert is flogging himself with the irony

that he has done more prolonged damage to Lolita than any one incident in a coal shed or alley way could inflict, and he fairly invites the reader's disapproval by making such sanctimonious statements.

In the final analysis, the reader (at least this reader) of Humbert's story will not be so repelled by its "demented diarist" that he cannot feel some pity for him as well. Although Nabokov considers Humbert "a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching'",²² the assessment seems overly harsh. Throughout most of the novel Humbert is as nasty as Nabokov claims; yet we cannot help feeling the occasional twinge of genuine sympathy for "Humbert the Hound, the sad-eyed degenerate cur clasping the boot that would presently kick him away" (LO, p. 62). Humbert's canine devotion to an insouciant Lolita is truly touching. When Lolita is hospitalized in Elphinstone, his insistence that he be allowed "to spend the night on a 'welcome' mat in a corner of their damn hospital" (LO, p. 242) indicates the extent of his devotion to his mistress. "Who can say what heartbreaks are caused in a dog by discontinuing a romp?" (LO, p. 240), Humbert wonders after Lolita abandons a playful pup in mid-frolic. Perhaps no one is in a better position than Humbert to answer that question after Lolita deserts him in similar fashion.

It is in the final pages of Lolita that our wavering compassion for Humbert is solidified. Before Humbert de-

scribes how he takes his long-awaited revenge on Quilty he undergoes an extended moment of truth in which his serious voice finally manages to override his derisive one. His inglorious epiphany amounts to his confessing both to himself and the reader the disquieting knowledge that he had previously glossed over: that Lolita's "dreamy-sweet radiance" which he cherished so highly was never directed towards him, that she had never considered him a person at all, but "just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn" (LO, p. 285). What intensifies Humbert's anguish is the fact that despite Lolita's utter indifference to him in the past, and her now "ruined looks and adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits" (LO, p. 279), Humbert is yet able to say with absolute certainty that "I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else" (LO, p. 279). These crucial and painful admissions represent Humbert's confession-within-a-confession. With no archness, no irony, no defenses whatsoever separating Humbert from the reader, he becomes wholly pitiable.

The highest tribute the reader can offer Humbert is not pity, not forgiveness, but immortality. This is precisely what Humbert offers Lolita when he concludes:

I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (LO, p. 311)

All we need do to ensure Humbert's continued existence in "the refuge of art" is comply with a request made implicitly by any character in a work of fiction: "Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me" (LO, p. 131).

Chapter Three -- "Plexed Artistry"

...this centaur-work of Nabokov, half poem, half prose, this merman of the deep, is a creature of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth. Pretending to be a curio, it cannot disguise the fact that it is one of the very great works of art of this century, the modern novel that everyone thought dead and that was only playing possum.¹

This is how Mary McCarthy appraised Nabokov's controversial fourteenth novel in an early article on Pale Fire. Her extravagant claims for the novel were not endorsed by other reviewers, though. Nabokov's more astringent critics tended to express qualified disfavour for the book or, as in Dwight Macdonald's case, flatly denounce it as "high-class doodling ...as boring as any exhibition of virtuosity disconnected from feeling and thought".² Divisions of opinion over the literary merits of Pale Fire persist; too esoteric to achieve a consensus of greatness and far too ingenious ever to be shelved and forgotten, Pale Fire continues to please some readers, pique others, and inspire a seesaw combination of both reactions in an irresolute many.

The novel is composed of four unequal parts: a 999-line poem by the beloved American poet-scholar John Shade and, enclosing and engulfing this unfinished magnum opus, a foreword, commentary, and index by Shade's crackpot colleague Charles Kinbote. This is both the method and the matter of Pale Fire. The way in which the novel is structured, an academic ratio of one part Shade to three parts Kinbote, denotes

the concept of exegetical thievery which is the ground-level theme of Pale Fire. The novel is a tour de farce version of a frenetic, self-indulgent editor's supererogatory performance of his duties. In a characteristically Nabokovian inversion of the commonplace, the creative artist loses his place in the spotlight to his parasitic annotator in this simulated edition of a prodigious literary work and its contentious commentary.

It has been suggested by Page Stegner that the in-subordinate Dr. Kinbote dominates the novel even more than is readily apparent; Kinbote has authored "Pale Fire" as well as its surrounding text, submits Stegner.³ Refuting this theory and reversing it, Andrew Field proposes that it is John Shade who has written both the poem and the gloss, and that:

Positing Kinbote as the prime author (in addition to the fact that it contradicts all the many secret notes left throughout the novel) is, in a sense, just as confusing as the apparently obvious idea that Kinbote and Shade are quite separate.⁴

Both hypotheses are unprovable and unnecessary. Stegner's belief that a sane, sensible poem like "Pale Fire" could have sprung from the warped mind of an institutionalized Kinbote seems especially ludicrous; a lunatic could not have sustained the 999 lines-worth of lucidity that went into the composition of this poem, nor could he have consistently misinterpreted his own creation in the accompanying commentary. Field's

idea is slightly more workable in that, as he himself points out, it is easier to conceive of a mentally balanced person inventing an imbalanced persona.⁵ (Indeed, Nabokov has engineered precisely this feat in Lolita and the novel at hand.) Yet there is insufficient evidence to support Field's notion that Kinbote and his commentary are Shade's fabrications. Had Nabokov intended such a subterfuge, he would have supplied clearly marked signposts to aid in the detection of the 'true' author, as he does in Transparent Things, a detective novel of sorts in which the reader is required to determine the identity of the elusive narrator on the basis of strategic, but ultimately obvious clues. Although Field states that there are "secret notes" scattered throughout Pale Fire which verify Shade's prime authorship, he does not elaborate on where these are to be found, and without his help, these seem too well-hidden to be detected. The "apparently obvious idea" may very well ring truest since, as Robert Alter points out:

This novel is not a Jamesian experiment in reliability of narrative point-of-view, and there is no reason to doubt the existence of the basic fictional data -- the Poem and its author, on the one hand, and the mad Commentary and its perpetrator on the other, inverted left hand.⁶

Nabokov casually experimented with the concept of double narration in Lolita, where he first employed a commentary-versus-text format. The relationship between John Ray Jr. and Humbert Humbert was not of major importance to Lolita, although it did serve as an interesting sidelight. In Pale

Fire, however, the interconnection between the commentary and the text proves far more essential to the narrative design, partly because the role-balance between the two narrators has been significantly altered. The commentator's role in Pale Fire is expanded considerably and the creative artist's status reduced to accommodate the resulting encroachment on his territory. Rather than merely supplying explanatory notes to the main text, as duty-bound John Ray did, Kinbote factitiously becomes an integral part of that text. Another type of shift in balance is also worth noting: the combination of stolidly sane commentator and madman artist produced in Lolita is up-ended in Pale Fire where a madman commentator and a sane (but not stolid) artist are jarringly juxtaposed.

When asked in an interview for BBC Television where he exists in his fiction, Nabokov replied:

...I think I'm always there; there's no difficulty about that. Of course, there is a certain type of critic who when reviewing a work of fiction keeps dotting all the i's with the author's head. Recently one anonymous clown, writing on Pale Fire in a New York book review, mistook all the declarations of my invented commentator in the book for my own. It is also true that some of my responsible characters are given some of my own ideas. There is John Shade in Pale Fire, the poet. He does borrow some of my own opinions. There is one passage of his poem which is part of the book, where he says something I think I can endorse...: 'I loathe such things as jazz, the white-hosed moron torturing a black bull, rayed with red, abstractist bric-a-brac, primitivist folk-masks, progressive schools, music in supermarkets, swimming pools, brutes, bores, class-conscious philistines, Freud,

Marx, fake thinkers, puffed-up poets,
 frauds and sharks'.⁷

Nabokov's remarks confirm what is probably self-evident: there is an observable affinity between himself and his more "responsible" narrator. Exactly what Nabokov means by "responsible" involves some guess-work. Sound of mind, perhaps. Of Nabokov's turn of mind, more likely.

It is unusual for Nabokov to choose as his *raisonneur* a homely native American poet. Nabokov more commonly implants his wit and wisdom in suave emigré types like the narrator of *Invitation to a Beheading*, whose background corresponds more closely to his own. But John Shade is the son of ornithologists, a life-long resident of New Wye, Appalachia, and an aging poet who is often likened to Robert Frost, and whose works, like Frost's, are read by all the school children of America. Given this brief dossier of Shade's private life and public image, it is debatable whether he could come up with such cosmopolitan statements as:

'I have never acknowledged printed praise though sometimes I longed to embrace the glowing image of this or that paragon of discernment; and I have never bothered to lean out of my window and empty my storamias on some poor hack's pate. I regard both the demolition and the rave with like detachment.' (PF, p. 111)

Shade's improbable urbanity is apparent also in his conversation with Kinbote on "the subject of teaching Shakespeare at college level":

'First of all, dismiss ideas, and social

background and train the freshman to shiver, to get drunk on the poetry of Hamlet or Lear, to read with his spine and not with his skull.' Kinbote: 'You appreciate particularly the purple passages?' Shade: 'Yes, my dear Charles, I roll upon them as a grateful mongrel on a spot of turf fouled by a Great Dane.' (PF, p. 112)

It is possible that Kinbote has touched up Shade's language in these passages which appear in the commentary; if so, the failure to fuse voice with character is understandable. In Shade's poem, which supposedly has not suffered directly from Dr. Kinbote's editorial tampering, the level of diction is simpler, more colloquial, and therefore more suited to the speaker.

While Nabokov expressly confers most of his own ideas on the distinguished poet, John Shade, he does toss an occasional bone to his ignominious commentator as well. Kinbote speaks for his creator when he expresses his belief in

...the basic fact that "reality" is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with average "reality" perceived by the communal eye. (PF, p. 94)

This is something that Nabokov could have, and in fact has, endorsed.³ Similarly, the concept of the artist as conjuror which Kinbote invokes when he comments that "Shade's poem is, indeed, that sudden flourish of magic: my gray-haired friend, my beloved old conjuror, put a pack of index cards into his hat -- and shook out a poem" (PF, p. 13) is reminiscent of

Nabokov's familiar image of himself as a "native-illusionist, frac-tails flying".⁹ In his more lucid moments, Kinbote makes a far more plausible *raisonneur* than does John Shade. Nabokov's words seem more adaptable to this Zemblan psychopomp whose foreign swank and florid elocution bring him closer to Nabokov's sensibility than the esteemed author would probably have cared to admit.

Kinbote is a madman, though, an obsessive paranoiac, a fancier of faunlets, and a campus joke. Add to this list of disagreeable features the fact that Kinbote has bad breath and you have a character whose ludicrousness precludes serious identification with Nabokov.

As if Nabokov's existence in his art were not conspicuous enough, the author inserts a few of "those dazzling coincidences that logicians loathe and poets love"¹⁰ to point directly to his presence beyond the fiction. Nabokov's puppeteer strings suddenly become visible when a pregnant reference to "Hurricane Lolita" appears in Shade's Poem (ll. 679-80). A provocative name for a tempest, the full force of which is not felt by Shade, who benignly goes on to report that "Mars glowed. Shahs married. Gloomy Russians spied" (l. 681). Nabokov's espionage is poorly concealed, and deliberately so. He clearly invites detection when he has Shade exclaim a curious endearment to his wife: "My dark Vanessa, crimson-barred, my blest/ My Admirable Butterfly" (ll. 270-1). It has already been noted in the discussions

of Phin and Lolita that the mere mention of a butterfly in Nabokov's art works like a magic wand tapped against a table-top: the author instantly appears through a puff of smoke.

A more important consideration than the narrators' relationship with the author in Pale Fire is the connection between the narrators themselves. A key to the nature of their consociation can be found by consulting the source from which Shade borrowed the title "Pale Fire". The relevant passage appears in Timon of Athens, Act IV, Scene 3:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun.

These lines can be related directly to Kinbote's literal and academic appropriation of Shade's manuscript. The co-presence of a daylight radiance and its lunar reflection, this "dazzling synthesis of sun and star" in John Shade's prophetic words, is an appropriate paradigm for the Shade-Kinbote relationship. Kinbote's obliviousness to the posthumous wrong he has committed against Shade is emphasized by the commentator's fruitless efforts to find any mention of "pale fire" in his Uncle Conmal's Lemblan translation of Shakespeare which Kinbote re-translates into English:

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea
and robs it. The moon is a thief:
he steals his silvery light from the sun.
The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon.
(PF, p. 58)

It is more than likely that even with the passage properly displayed before him, Kinbote would not have appreciated its

ulterior significance.

Supremely Blest, the title of Shade's critical study of the works of Alexander Pope, derives from a passage in An Essay on Man which also has direct bearing on the relationship between poet and paraphrast in Pale Fire:

See the beggar dance, the cripple sing,
The sot a hero, lunatic a king;
The starving chemist in his golden views
Supremely blest, the poet in his Muse.
(2:267-70)

The combination of lunatic king and supremely blest poet is, of course, the structural basis of the novel. It should be noted, however, and it already has been by Robert Alter, that what unites the two thematically is a reference to the alchemist, who persistently attempts to change base metals into gold. Alter suggest that what this represents in terms of Pale Fire is the poet who "deludes himself by imagining he can transform the death-sodden mire of existence into a pellucid artifice of eternity".¹¹ Put another way, the alchemist's pursuits are a metaphor for Kinbote's efforts to enhance the fundamental product of Shade's creativity by giving it greater personal value.

The opening lines of "Pale Fire" place an additional construction on the relationship between Shade and Kinbote: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/ By the false azure in the windowpane" (ll. 1-2). Critics have already expended a great deal of exegetical energy on the significance of this couplet, in which are found the scenario and circumstances

of Pale Fire. It conjures up a mental picture of John Shade creating his verse autobiography (his shadow) and Kinbote surreptitiously watching the process through the windowpane which reflects and distorts Shade's activities into a 'resemblance' of Kinbote's fabulous past. This is the second level of interpretation in Pale Fire, the piano nobile according to Mary McCarthy.¹² What Kinbote perceives in "the false azure of the windowpane" is his private reality, a far more exotic reality than life in New Wye can offer him. He fancies himself the exiled King of Zembla (significantly "the land of mirrors") who is being pursued half-way around the world by an inept political assassin. Convinced that this thrilling personal history which he has related many times over to Shade is the inspiration for the poet's present project, Kinbote manages to synchronize the events of the poem with what is transpiring in his own mental cosmos. "Pale Fire" has precious little to do with Zemblan affairs, of course,¹³ and Kinbote's attempts to attach his highly individualized meanings to this otherwise straightforward poem fail when considered in terms of the "'reality' perceived by the communal eye". Like the crystal of snow that settles on the crystal of Shade's watch, Kinbote's fragile fantasies dissolve after prolonged contact with the more durable reality of Shade's poem (PF, p. 14).

What the poem and its antithetical commentary are 'really' about is "Man's life as a commentary to abstruse/

unfinished poem" -- the relationship between life and art, in other words (PF, p. 48). The implications of this "Note for further use" are later developed more fully by Shade as he draws the poem to a climactic conclusion:

But all at once it dawned on me that this
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
 Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
 But topsy-turvical coincidence,
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
 Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
 Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
 of correlated pattern in the game,
 Plexed artistry, and something of the same
 Pleasure in it as they who played it found.
 (ll. 806-15)

Ostensibly, Shade has cracked the code of his existence in this passage; but he exercised greater powers of insight than he can appreciate, for he has also revealed the complex mechanism of the entire novel. With Nabokov's help, Shade has mapped out here the precise meeting point of two planets in this "game of worlds": Zembla and New Wye.

The oracular messages that Nabokov has distributed throughout Shade's portion of the narrative inform the reader of what has happened or is about to happen in Pale Fire (the verb tense can be varied to suit the reading order: poem followed by commentary if we proceed according to habit; commentary first, if we follow Kinbote's instructions). Kinbote's more than ample share of the narrative represents the obscurum per obscurius device in the novel. His commentary reads like an extended dramatic monologue, and like Robert Browning's more memorable personae, Kinbote is a psycholo-

gically complex character who reveals himself indirectly, ironically, through his own words.¹⁴ What he says cannot be taken at face value, nor can his descant be dismissed as the nonsensical ravings of a 'mere' madman. It is left largely to the reader to weigh Kinbote's words, to sift fact from fable and to understand the artful interweaving of the two.

The narrative design of Pale Fire can be described as "the flight of an author from his editor".¹⁵ John Shade's "flight", unlike Pnin's, is really quite passive since he is "most artistically caged" by an unscrupulous commentator who has taken advantage of his death and his widow's grief first to steal and later to pervert his manuscript. Nevertheless, it is apparent that even before Shade's death, Kinbote was in hot pursuit of his reticent subject, with whom he assumed a greater intimacy than that subject was willing to reciprocate. Kinbote prides himself on having been Shade's "discreet companion" and "an intimate friend of his" in the same way that the narrator of Pnin falsely represented himself as being a fast friend of his demurring hero.

While Kinbote is already overstating the closeness that existed between himself and Shade, he cannot help wishing that there had been more between them than simply friendship. In the recesses of untrammelled imagination, Kinbote conjures up scenes he would like to have acted out with Shade:

What would I not have given for the poet's
suffering another heart attack (see line

691 and note) leading to my being called over to their house, all windows ablaze, in the middle of the night, in a great warm burst of sympathy, coffee, telephone calls, Zemblan herbal receipts (they work wonders!), and a resurrected Shade weeping in my arms ("There, there, John"). But on those March nights their house was as black as a coffin. And when physical exhaustion and the sepulchral cold drove me at last upstairs to my solitary double bed, I would lie awake and breathless -- as if only now living consciously through those perilous nights in my country, where at any moment, a company of jittery revolutionists might enter and hustle me off to a moonlit wall. (PF, p. 70)

Kinbote's desire to enter the Shade home (a luxury often forbidden to him by the poet's "jealous" wife), and to hold Shade at a tender moment is indicative of his covetous urge to usurp Sybil's place in the poet's life. Denied this enchanting possibility, Kinbote, like a dutiful Freudian subject, retreats to his "solitary double bed" where he transfers his thwarted aspirations to the continuation of his more accessible fantasy life. A more blatant suggestion of Kinbote's homosexual interest in Shade occurs when Kinbote, after meeting Sybil on her way to town, proceeds to "nurse [d] some hopes for the evening", by which he means spend some time alone with John. "I grant you," Kinbote adds for the John Rays in the audience, "I very much resembled a lean wary lover taking advantage of a young husband's being alone in the house!" (PF, p. 203). But since Kinbote can not have his lover, he claims the product of their union instead: the

poem which he supposes he has inspired Shade to write. The realization that he has no real part in this manuscript, that in fact it is Sybil who figures prominently in this autobiography, does not prompt Kinbote to destroy it, Hedda Gabler fashion, but to comfortably distort it into a testimonial to the creative alliance between the poet and himself.

Because Kinbote considers himself the *raison d'être* for "Pale Fire" despite all evidence to the contrary, he must rationalize his apparent absence in the poem:

Although I realize only too clearly, alas, that the result, in its pale and diaphanous phase, cannot be regarded as a direct echo of my narrative (of which, incidentally, only a few fragments are given in my notes -- mainly to Canto One), one can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of the story acted as a catalytic agent upon the very process of the sustained creative effervescence that enabled Shade to produce a 1000-line poem in three weeks. (PF, p. 58)

Not content to let only the "sunset glow" of his story reside in the poem, and only an incidental part of himself dwell in Shade, Kinbote attempts to strengthen the connection between them. That Kinbote perceives himself as Shade's living counterpart, his double, becomes increasingly evident as he notices himself "unconsciously aping the prose style of his own [Shade's] critical essays" (PF, pp. 58-9) and sharing Shade's peculiar preoccupations:

My friend could not evoke the image of his father. Similarly the King, who also was not quite three when his father, King Alfin, died, was unable to recall his face... (PF, p. 73)

By pointing out that he and Shade are of a similar mental make-up, it is easier for Kinbote to pretend that he has the poet's implied benediction for whatever pronouncements he makes on the manuscript. Kinbote can confidently assume that:

...our poet would have understood his annotator's temptation to synchronize a certain fateful fact, the departure from Zembla of the would-be-regicide Gradus, with that date [when "Pale Fire" was begun]. (PF, pp. 53-4)

Kinbote's invocation of Shade's presence as a partisan to his judgment makes the poet seem like a collaborator in absentia to the commentary.

Kinbote is also aware that there are aspects of his commentary which would not meet Shade's approval:

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and its surrounding attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word. (PF, pp. 18-19)

As Kinbote observes with an implied shrug, it hardly matters whether Shade would dispute this point or any other; the situation is now entirely out of Shade's control. The realization that he has free rein with Shade's poem permits Kinbote a sense of power which he exercises to excess. He minimizes the significance of the primary text while placing in-

ordinate importance on his notes, which he advises the reader to consult first "and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture" (PF, p. 18). Kinbote not only does Shade's poem a disservice by effectively ignoring it, he also attempts to tarnish the sterling image of its celebrated author by pointing to his spiritual delinquency:

I am also obliged to observe that I strongly disapprove of the flippancy with which our poet treats, in this canto, certain aspects of spiritual hope which religion alone can fulfill (see also note to 549). (PF, p. 159)

The note to line 549 contains a dialogue between Shade and Kinbote, the agnostic versus the believer, in which Kinbote predictably humbles his irreverent colleague with a dazzling display of philosophical cant. Kinbote also subtly denigrates Shade on the basis of the latter's graceless physical appearance. Kinbote smugly recalls one of their peripatetic discussions in which Shade's "discreet companion kept trying in vain to adapt the swing of a long-limbed gait to the disheveled old poet's jerky shuffle" (PF, p. 8). Fascinated with the way "the harmonics hiving in the man" clashed with Shade's physical shortcomings, Kinbote comments:

His misshapen body, that gray mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers, the bags under his luster-

less 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. He was his own cancellation. (PF, p. 17)

Kinbote is also "his own cancellation" by the reverse token that he is physically well-assembled, but his mind is a collage of madness.

Before "Pale Fire" fell into Kinbote's hands by some trick of combinational fate, it was John Shade who had "the last word" and Kinbote who was powerless to dispute it. It was a far humbler Kinbote in those days who kept a stealthy watch over the progress of "his" poem. Before he adopted the swagger of a triumphant commentator, Kinbote was a skulking, shadowy figure who shamelessly prowled around the Shade home:

...the urge to find out what he was doing with all the live, glamorous, palpitating, shimmering material I had lavished upon him, the itching desire to see him at work (even if the fruit of his work was denied me), proved to be utterly agonizing and uncontrollable and led me to indulge in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop. (PF, p. 63)

Kinbote recalls how "hysterically, intensely, uncontrollably curious [he was] to know what portion exactly of the Zemblan King's adventures he [Shade] had completed..." (PF, p. 121). Having finally acquired the precious poem cruelly withheld from him, Kinbote makes it and Shade keep time to his own "weird rhythms".¹⁶

Kinbote manipulates the other characters in the novel in similar fashion. As Kinbote tells it, he is a likeable fellow whose winning personality impresses itself immediately upon his Wordsmith colleagues. Kinbote remembers how he 'charmed' his listeners the first time Shade invited him to lunch at the faculty club:

I was invited to join him and four or five other eminent professors at his usual table, under an enlarged photograph of Wordsmith College as it was, stunned and shabby, on a remarkably gloomy summer day in 1903. His laconic suggestion that I 'try the pork' amused me. I am a strict vegetarian, and I like to cook my own meals. Consuming something that had been handled by a fellow creature was, I explained to the rubicund convives, as repulsive to me as eating any creature, and that would include -- lowering my voice -- the pulpous pony-tailed girl student who served us and licked her pencil. Moreover, I had already finished the fruit brought with me in my briefcase, so I would content myself, I said, with a bottle of good college ale. My free and simple demeanor set everybody at ease. (PF, p. 13)

Kinbote admits that there were times when the academic community was less taken with his "free and simple demeanor": "Your snicker, my dear Mrs. C, did not escape our notice as I was helping the tired old poet to find his galoshes after that dreary get-together party at your house" (PF, p. 15). Kinbote attributes such unkindness to "the thick venom of envy [that] began squirting at me as soon as academic suburbia realized that John Shade valued my society above that of all other people" (PF, p. 15). Although Kinbote is surprisingly

impervious to the hostilities operating against him, he is dismayed to find himself the victim of "at least one evil practical joker":

Well did I know that among certain youthful instructors whose advances I had rejected there was at least one evil practical joker; I knew it ever since the time I came home from a very enjoyable and successful meeting of students and teachers (at which I had exuberantly thrown off my coat and shown several willing pupils a few of the amusing holds employed by Zemblan wrestlers) and found in my coat pocket a brutal anonymous note saying: 'You have hal...s real bad, chum,' meaning evidently 'hallucinations,' although a malevolent critic might infer from the insufficient number of dashes that little Mr. Anon, despite teaching Freshman English, could hardly spell. (PF, p. 71)

Kinbote is the most obviously self-conscious of Nabokov's narrators. To a greater extent than either Humbert or the narrator of Pnin, Kinbote is preoccupied with his creation of and participation in a work of art. He openly discusses the problems that plague a scrupulous commentator during the fulfilment of his duties: "It is not easy to describe lucidly in short notes to a poem the various approaches to a fortified castle", Kinbote reminds the reader (PF, p. 77). But having anticipated the present difficulty even while "Pale Fire" was being written, Kinbote provided for Shade "a handsomely drawn plan of the grounds of the Onhava Palace" which, if ever found, should be returned, "well-packed, marked 'not to be bent' on the wrapper, and by registered mail to [his] publisher for reproduction in later

editions of this work" (PF, pp. 77-8). Kinbote, in addition to coping with a lack of such vital resource work, is also obliged to handle a superfluity of non-essential material. Although he is reluctant to enter into tedious explanations of Hazel Shade's "psychokinetic" experiences, Kinbote does not avoid his responsibilities. Bracing himself for the tiresome task, Kinbote stoically recites his commentator's code of honour: "...a commentator's obligation cannot be shirked, however dull the information he must collect and convey. Hence this note" (PF, p. 118). Dedication to his duties proves to be a strain even when Kinbote's Zemblan super-plot is being minutely related. While tracing Gradus' westward progress through Europe, Kinbote halts himself in mid-note to announce: "I defy anybody to find in the annals of plot and counterplot anything more inept and boring than the scene that occupies the rest of this conscientious note" (PF, p. 127).

Kinbote complains of the constraints that a prudent commentator must cope with, yet he is privileged with the scope of an unfettered artist -- but an artist in the sense that Kinbote himself best describes:

I do not consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do -- pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and weft of that web. (PF, p. 204)

Like the narrator of Pnin, Kinbote enjoys the double situation

of being a character in the novel and an omniscient presence overlooking it. His knowledge of John Shade and family is acquired through channels accessible to a fellow character, especially one who puts to practical use the dictum that "Windows, as well known, have been the solace of first-person literature throughout the ages" (PF, p. 63). But for Kinbote to "accompany Gradus in constant thought as he makes his way from distant Zembla to green Appalachia" (PF, p. 56), and to synchronize the regicide's movements with his poet's labours, Kinbote must go from voyeur to visionary. It is the latter role that Kinbote relishes since it affords him more power, more amusement, than a mere commentator playing second string to a prominent poet could hope for. With an awareness of his omniscient capabilities that borders on self-parody, he remarks:

From my rented cloudlet I contemplate
[Gradus] with quiet surprise: here he
is, this creature ready to commit a
monstrous act -- and coarsely enjoying
a coarse meal! (PF, p. 194-5)

Kinbote presses his powers even further when he takes the reader on a guided tour of Gradus' grotesque physical interior:

We see, rather suddenly, his humid flesh.
We can even make out (as, head-on but quite
safely, phantom-like, we pass through him,
through the shimmering propeller of his
flying machine, through the delegates
waving and grinning at us) his magenta
and mulberry insides, and the strange, not
so good sea swell undulating in his en-
trails. (PF, p. 196)

Kinbote's knowledge of his subject is so complete that it becomes absurd -- and offensive. While the more conventional breed of omniscient narrators shies away from the indelicacy of entrails, Kinbote takes perverse pride in displaying his too-thorough acquaintance with his character.

It is typical of Nabokov's narrators to assume that they have the full support and admiration of their readers, and Kinbote is no exception. Kinbote is a showman, a braggadoccio, who entertains himself by presuming he entertains others. He keeps a wary eye on his audience, whose favour he attempts to enlist when he cordially remarks: "I trust the reader has enjoyed this note" (PF, p. 106) after describing the King's brilliant escape from the palace. Kinbote seems more insistent that the reader acknowledge his efforts when, after observing the resemblance between Sybil Shade (as she is "idealized and stylized" in "Pale Fire") and Queen Disa, he comments:

I trust the reader appreciates the strangeness of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all. (PF, p. 148)

Kinbote would have the reader believe that he is a reliable commentator whose opinions are worth trusting. He is therefore understandably indignant to find that one "professed Shadean" has made scurrilous attempts to denigrate Shade's poem "not so much to deplore the state in which a great poet's work was interrupted by death as to asperse the

competence, and perhaps honesty, of its present editor and commentator" (PF, p. 8). The discreditable charges that Kinbote manifests against himself, unjustifiable as he may find them, are actually a conservative evaluation of Kinbote's performance of his editorial functions. While Kinbote envisions himself as a model commentator -- well-informed, thorough, impartial -- his notes are crammed with blatant errors, indefensible oversights, and prejudicial truths. Despite his authoritative claim that there is a "vivid misprint" in line 98 of Shade's poem, there is in fact only a vivid misreading on Kinbote's part. The passage in question itemizes the trivia accumulated in Aunt Maud's room:

...the paperweight
 Of convex glass enclosing a lagoon,
 The verse book open at the Index (Moon,
 Moonrise, Moor, Moral), the forlorn guitar,
 The human skull; and from the local "Star"
 A curio: Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4
 "On Chapman's Homer", thumbtacked to the door.
 (ll. 91-8)

According to Kinbote's less than learned notes, the "reference to the title of Keats' famous sonnet (often quoted in America) ..., owing to a printer's absent-mindedness, has been drolly transposed, from some other article, into the account of a sports event" (PF, p. 84). Kinbote commits another "howler" when, in his notes to "My dark Vanessa", he announces:

It is so like the heart of a scholar
 in search of a fond name to pile a
 butterfly genus upon an orphic divinity
 on top of the inevitable allusion to

Vanhomrigh. Esther! (PF, p. 123)

Kinbote's original sin of misinterpretation or overinterpretation of what is better left alone is compounded by his failure to provide adequate comment on aspects of the poem which require explication. His inability to locate the title of Shade's poem in his bastardized version of Timon of Athens and to recall the Popean line from which Shade borrowed the title Supremely Blest are not strictly intentional oversights; it is the resources as well as the proper concern which are lacking. Kinbote does dodge his duties more deliberately, however, when he declines to comment on the reference to "a story in the magazine about Mrs. Z" (ll. 747-8) and offers only the skimpy rationalization that:

Anybody having access to a good library could, no doubt, easily trace that story to its source and find the name of the lady; but such humdrum potterings are beneath true scholarship. (PF, p. 131)

While it is certainly a commentator's prerogative to determine what aspects of his text deserve attention, Kinbote arrives at his decisions by overly subjective standards. He sees in Shade's poem only what he wants to see, what his personal preoccupations predispose him to observe. It is therefore possible, inevitable, for Kinbote to detect "the cloak-and-dagger hint-glint in 'svelte stilettos' and the shadow of regicide in the rhythm" of Shade's poem (PF, p. 57). Kinbote's extreme subjectivity jeopardizes his claims to honesty. As it becomes increasingly clear that Kinbote

cannot be trusted, we consider the possibility that the un-numbered lines that he finds in Shade's manuscript may have been contributed by the canny commentator rather than the rightful poet:

There are events, strange happenings, that strike
The mind as emblematic. They are like
Lost similes adrift without a string,
Attached to nothing. Thus that northern king,
Whose desperate escape from prison was
Brought off successfully only because
Some forty of his followers that night
Impersonated him and aped his flight -- (PF, p. 72)

It is not improbable that Kinbote could have written this passage and attributed it to Shade; Kinbote proves he is capable of such deceit when he later refers to an "admirable image in a recent poem by Edsel Ford", a familiar name, but not one that is commonly associated with poetry (PF, p. 166).

Kinbote is a dangerously clever madman whose perceptivity is easily underestimated. He is not as obtusely unaware of what is going on in his commentary as he invites us to believe. The ironic truths that he obligingly uncovers indicate that there is in Kinbote at least a subliminal consciousness of his own chicanery. Early in his commentary, he provides a lengthy note on the "Goldsworth castle" and the banal history of its on-leave occupants, which he concludes:

But enough of this. Let us turn to our
poet's windows. I have no desire to twist
an unambiguous apparatus criticus into the
monstrous semblance of a novel. (PF, p. 62)

Now as the reader is well aware, and as Kinbote is perhaps only subconsciously aware, "a monstrous semblance of a novel"

is precisely what the conscientious commentator creates, using his own palace and sensational history for its framework. A more remarkable instance of ironic revelation occurs as Kinbote is wrapping up his commentary by envisioning future prospects for himself:

I may join forces with Odon in a new motion picture: "Escape from Zembla" (ball in the palace, bomb in the palace square). I may pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments. Oh, I may do many things! (PF, p. 212)

Kinbote's inadvertent summary of Pale Fire, if indeed it is inadvertent, is too effective a demonstration of the possibilities of dramatic irony to be believable. It is aesthetically more satisfying to regard Kinbote's remarks as an involuted confession that he has finally comprehended "the warp and weft" of the novel as it may appear to an artist who has indeed 'weaned himself abruptly from the habit of things'.

The demarcation between consciousness and unconsciousness can never be determined with any certainty and it is especially difficult in Kinbote's complicated case to come to any firm decision on this issue. Whether Kinbote is aware of the inconsistencies he presents, whether he deliberately raises these inconsistencies, is something we must

constantly question. He writes a tale of romance and intrigue which he posits as the 'true story' behind "Pale Fire"; yet he allows everyday reality to tear through the delicate weave of fantasy and destroy it. It is through Kinbote that the true story beyond the 'true story' is permitted to surface in fragments that can be pieced together puzzle-like: Kinbote is actually Professor Botkin, a member of Wordsmith's Russian Department who "happily...is not subordinated to that grotesque 'perfectionist'" Professor Pnin (PF, p. 112); Botkin's delusion that he is the ruler of "a wild, misty, almost legendary Zembla" (PF, p. 180) is common knowledge on the campus, but only John Shade displays any sympathy for this harmless character who "deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention" (PF, p. 169); and Shade's killer is Jack Grey, an escapee from the State Asylum who mistakes the poet for his look-alike Judge Goldsworth and shoots him out of revenge for the judge's having committed him to an institution for life. Botkin, alias Kinbote, supplies this last piece of information early in the novel when he notices in Goldsworth's photo collection of condemned men "the close-set merciless eyes of a homicidal maniac (somewhat resembling, I admit, the late Jacques d'Argus)" (PF, p. 60). There is a rational explanation for each facet of Kinbote's far-fetched inventions, and Kinbote has not ventured so far from everyday reality that he can not precognize how his glorious concoction will even-

tually be blasted:

I do not doubt that many of the statements made in this work will be brushed aside by the guilty parties when it is out. Mrs. Shade will not remember having been shown by her husband who 'showed her everything' one or two of the precious variants. The three students lying on the grass will turn out to be totally amnesic. The desk girl at the Library will not recall (will have been told not to recall) anybody asking for Dr. Kinbote on the day of the murder. And I am sure that Mr. Emerald will interrupt briefly his investigation of some mammate student's resilient charms to deny with the vigor of roused virility that he ever gave anybody a lift to my house that evening. In other words, everything will be done to cut off my person completely from my dear friend's fate. (PF, p. 210)

Like the cheval glass fashioned by Sudarg of Bokay (Jakob Gradus, if read in a "kindly mirror"), Pale Fire is a triptych of bottomless light, a really fantastic mirror" (PF, p. 81). It is made up of three reflecting surfaces, each of which represents a separate reality. There is life in New Wye as John Shade understands it, the pre-exile life of Charles the Beloved as Kinbote imagines it, and a more comprehensive reality grasped by the impartial reader who perceives a pedantic madman named Botkin inventing his kingly exploits and trying to pass them off as the prime matter of both Shade's poem and the novel.

The narrator of one of Nabokov's earlier novels once commented:

Remember that what you are told is really

threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale.¹⁷

Although this observation is particularly pertinent to the relative realities encountered in Pale Fire, it is generally applicable to any of Nabokov's novels. The prismatic interplay of multiple reflecting and refracting surfaces is peculiar to Nabokov's "plexed artistry". There is not definitive reality in Nabokov's art; reality is an unknown and unknowable quality which no one, not even the author himself, can ever adequately explain:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization...You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable.¹⁸

Afterword

Every character in a novel is to some degree an extension of his author. He is moulded out of his maker's experience, shaped by forces uniquely felt and translated into art by that maker. But in the creation of fiction, an author does not necessarily reproduce in his characters an exact or even impressionistic version of himself. While autobiography aims at the truthful reconstruction of an authorial self, the writing of fiction involves the apocryphal refraction of self into an invented, and in some cases, "faintly absurd character".

The absurdity of Nabokov's narrative persona may vary in accordance with the amount of author-narrator identification that is detectable in the fiction. The narrator of Pnin, despite his somewhat capricious methods of story-telling, is a reasonable raconteur who owes his sanity, in part, to the blurring of authorial and narrative voices in that novel. In Lolita, where the sensibilities of author and narrator are not so readily confused, Humbert's independent erotic and esoteric fixations are permitted to degenerate into a kind of madness. The contrapuntal narration of Pale Fire, then, completes the promised pattern¹ by conjoining John Shade, Nabokov's "responsible" raisonneur, and Charles Kinbote, his antithetical persona.

Despite the varying amount of self that Nabokov in-

vests in his narrative personae, the author's existence in his fiction is always patently clear. He speaks through his characters, he speaks for them, and he speaks beyond them -- and it is Nabokov's unique ability to permeate his art so thoroughly that makes him "the only artist of major stature who appears in Nabokov's work".²

Footnotes

Preface

¹Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967), p. 352.

²Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 155.

³These novels are listed here in chronological order. The chapters on each of these works, however, are not arranged according to chronology, but in terms of pattern. I have assumed, along with Andrew Field, that:

...an approach that is strictly chronological or according to genre or language is an unnatural way in which to view and understand any writer of stature. In practice the works of writers whom we know well do not reside in our minds in a neat and simple metal file cabinet, but tend rather to divide and seek affinities and patterns of their own in our remembrance of them.

This statement appears in Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 7.

⁴Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 181-2.

⁵Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 291. Field assigns Lolita, Pnin and Pale Fire to the "third period" of Nabokov's art. He also remarks that:

Lolita, Pnin, and Pale Fire are novels which are in many ways wholly new departures, having only thematic similarities -- it would be strange indeed if they did not -- with previous finished Nabokov works.

⁶Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 41. Nabokov continues: "Ladies and gentlemen, the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel".

Chapter One

¹Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 72. In this 1967 interview with Nabokov, Alfred Appel asked the author:

Ideally, how should a reader experience or react to "the end" of one of your novels, that moment when the vectors are removed and the fact of the fiction is underscored, the cast dismissed?

Nabokov, before answering the question, remarked that it was "charmingly phrased".

²Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 37.

³Page Stegner, Escape Into Aesthetics (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), p. 95.

⁴Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 133.

⁵Vladimir Nabokov, Bend Sinister (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 12.

⁶Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 135.

⁷Philip Thompson, The Grotesque (London: Methuen and Company Limited, 1972), p. 12.

⁸Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 132.

⁹Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁰Douglas Fowler, Reading Nabokov (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 14.

¹¹Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1944), p. 141.

¹²Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 42. Asked by Alvin Toffler what he thought of the works of Hemingway and Conrad, Nabokov replied: "In neither of those two writers can I find anything that I would care to have written myself". Later in the same interview (p. 44), Nabokov chose as his favorite writers Robbe-Grillet and Borges, both of whose art is far more comparable to Nabokov's own works.

¹³Jessie Thomas Lokrantz, The Underside of the Leave: Some Stylistic Devices Used by Vladimir Nabokov (Sweden:

Rotobekman, 1973), p. 21. Lokrantz uses this coinage to signify the melding of the narrator's and the author's voice in Pnin.

¹⁴Henry James quoted by Wayne Booth in the epigraph of The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

¹⁵Alfred Appel and Charles Newman, eds., Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 369.

Chapter Two

¹As Nabokov indicates in his Afterword, early readers and prospective publishers of Lolita either failed to finish the book, or pronounced it boring if they did manage to read it through. See "On a Book Entitled Lolita" in Alfred Appel, ed., The Annotated Lolita (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), p. 316.

²Ibid., p. 317.

³Alfred Appel, "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody", in L. S. Dembo, ed., Nabokov: The Man and His Work (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 117.

⁴See Russell Trainer, The Lolita Complex (New York: Paperback Library, Inc., 1966). This is a book-length study of "Lolitaism" -- "a current sexual problem for thousands of people, and [one which] will undoubtedly be, many therapists claim, a factor in society's total development". Trainer's real-life instructive commentary on this socio-psychological phenomenon of adult-male, child-female sexual love makes John Ray's fictional foreword to Lolita seem feebly parodic in comparison.

⁵Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol, p. 40.

⁶Appel, The Annotated Lolita, p. 371.

⁷Ibid., p. 317.

⁸Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 18.

⁹Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁰Appel, The Annotated Lolita, p. 371.

¹¹Ibid., p. 383.

¹²Ibid., p. 384.

¹³Ibid., p. 393.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 372.

¹⁵This is Nabokov's implied re-wording of an American critic's suggestion that "Lolita was the record of [Nabokov's] love affair with the romantic novel". See p. 318 of The Annotated Lolita where Nabokov remarks in the Afterword: "The substitution of 'English language' for 'romantic novel' would make this elegant formula more correct".

¹⁶Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 211.

¹⁷Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 135. Cf. Pnin chapter, p. 16.

¹⁸The screenplay of Lolita was written by Nabokov and published in 1974. The scene which Humbert suggests appears nowhere in the movie version.

¹⁹Nabokov explains poshlust in Nikolai Gogol when he remarks:

English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of poshlust, are for instance: "cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin', in bad taste." (p. 64)

²⁰This same ploy is used by Nabokov in his own memoir, Speak, Memory, where he too shows his almost tangible reader a few colourful photographs of his youth.

²¹Appel, The Annotated Lolita, p. 342.

²²Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 94.

Chapter Three

¹Mary McCarthy, "Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire", Encounter, XIX (October 1962), 84.

²Dwight Macdonald, "Virtuosity Rewarded or Dr. Dr. Kinbote's Revenge", Partisan Review, XXIX (Summer 1962), 439.

³Stegner, Escape Into Aesthetics, p. 129.

⁴Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 318.

⁵Ibid., p. 317.

⁶Alter, Partial Magic, p. 186.

⁷Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 18.

⁸Ibid., pp. 10-11.

⁹Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled Lolita", in Appel, ed., The Annotated Lolita, p. 319.

¹⁰Nabokov, Lolita, in Appel, ed., The Annotated Lolita, p. 33. Cf. Lolita chapter, p. 29.

¹¹Alter, Partial Magic, p. 199.

¹²McCarthy, "Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire", 74.

¹³Shade does mention Zembla once in "Pale Fire" but he is referring to Pope's Zembla in An Essay on Man:

Ask where's the North? at York tis on the Tweed,
In Scotland at the Orcades, and there
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.
(2:222-4)

This passage points to the relativity of perception, a concept which is central to the narrative method used in Pale Fire.

¹⁴Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 42. Nabokov indicates here that Browning was among the writers he read as a boy. For references to Browning in Pale Fire see p. 133 and p. 198. Also note p. 247 of Lolita.

¹⁵Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 132. The original phrase quoted in the Pain Chapter is "the flight of a character from his author".

¹⁶Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol, p. 34. Nabokov uses this phrase in a slightly different context here to denote the occasionally uneven quality of Gogol's writing. Something of this unevenness is apparent in Pale Fire, especially in Kinbote's erratic narrative.

¹⁷Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation,

1959), p. 52.

¹⁸Nabokov, Strong Opinions, pp. 10-11.

Afterword

¹See third footnote to Preface.

²Appel, The Annotated Lolita, p. lvi.

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