Nabokov and his Books

Between Late Modernism and the Literary Marketplace

DUNCAN WHITE

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102-word excerpt of letter from James Laughlin to Vladimir Nabokov dated 2 July 1941, copyright © 2016 by New Directions Ownership Trust. Used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

The final section of Chapter 4 appeared, in a slightly different form, as ‘Dyeing Lolita: Nymphet in the Paratext’ in Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl (2013), edited by John Bertram and Yuri Leving. It is included here with the permission of the editors.
A Note on the Text

This book makes reference to Russian names, publications, and literary works, using the transliteration system of the Library of Congress. The only exceptions are the omission of diacritics and the use of anglicized versions of names that have become well established (such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy).

The Modern Language Association style is used for citations, as outlined in the eighth edition of *The MLA Handbook* (2009). Again, there are exceptions: due to the frequency with which this book makes reference to works by and about Nabokov (including unpublished archival sources), a list of abbreviations is included. These abbreviations appear within parenthetical citations in the text. Full publication details of these texts are included in the Works Cited section.
**List of Abbreviations**


**AY**  *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* by Brian Boyd.

**Berg**  The Vladimir Nabokov Archives at The Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

**BS**  *Bend Sinister* (1947) by Vladimir Nabokov.

**CE**  *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) by Vladimir Nabokov.

**D**  *Despair* (1937, revised 1966) translation of *Onchaianie* (1934).

**EO**  *Eugene Onegin* by Alexandr Pushkin, translated with a commentary by Vladimir Nabokov.

**Eye**  *The Eye* (1965) translation of *Sogliadatai* (1930) by Vladimir Nabokov.


**Gl**  *Glory* (1971) translation of *Podvig* (1932) by Vladimir Nabokov.


**KQK**  *King, Queen, Knave* (1968) translation of *Korol, dama, valet* (1928) by Vladimir Nabokov.

**LAR**  Excerpts from *Lolita* in *Anchor Review* (1957) by Vladimir Nabokov.


**LDQ**  *Lectures on Don Quixote* by Vladimir Nabokov.

**LiD**  *Laughter in the Dark* (1938) translation of *Kamera obskura* (1932) by Vladimir Nabokov.

**LL**  *Lectures on Literature* by Vladimir Nabokov.

**LRL**  *Lectures on Russian Literature* by Vladimir Nabokov.

**LV**  *Letters to Véra* by Vladimir Nabokov.

**NB**  *Nabokov’s Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings* by Vladimir Nabokov.

**NG**  *Nikolai Gogol* (1944) by Vladimir Nabokov.


**OI**  ‘On Inspiration’ (1973) by Vladimir Nabokov.

**PA**  Penguin Archives in the Special Collections of Bristol University library.

**PF**  *Pale Fire* (1962) by Vladimir Nabokov.

**Pn**  *Pnin* (1957) by Vladimir Nabokov.

List of Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<td>‘Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible’ (1988) translation of ‘Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable’ (1937)</td>
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<td>PW</td>
<td>‘Prof. Woodbridge in an Essay on Nature Postulates the Reality of the World’ (1940)</td>
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<td>RLSK</td>
<td>The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941)</td>
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<td>RY</td>
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<td>Strong Opinions (1973)</td>
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<td>TT</td>
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Introduction

Coarse Print, Durable Pigments

Cui dono lepidum novum libellum
Arida modo pumice expolitum?
(Catullus 1)

LASCAUX I & II

‘Literature was born,’ Vladimir Nabokov told his students at Cornell in the 1950s, ‘not the day when a boy crying “wolf, wolf” came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying “wolf, wolf” and there was no wolf behind him’ (LL 5). What, then, of the boy who cried aurochs? In September 1940, just three months after Paris fell to the Germans, Marcel Ravidat, an 18-year-old apprentice mechanic, and three of his friends were out walking in the wooded hills of the Dordogne valley. Suddenly Marcel’s dog, Robot, chasing a rabbit, disappeared from sight. Following Robot’s barks, the boys discovered that the dog had fallen into a long-hidden cave, whose entrance had been exposed by a landslide. As the boys explored the tunnels, they discovered the walls were covered with hundreds of paintings of prehistoric hunting scenes, depicting bison, ibex, lions, mammoths, wolves, and the ox-like aurochs. When Marcel and his friends returned home to Montignac to tell their tall story, it turned out to be true: they had disappeared down a rabbit hole and uncovered the very origins of art.1 It is a decidedly Nabokovian story; the unexpected felicity

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1 With the process of carbon dating not invented until 1949, the age of these paintings was initially hard to establish. In his 10 September 1950 review of Fernand Windels’s The Lascaux Cave Paintings, The New York Times journalist Stuart Preston reflected the common opinion that the paintings were ‘between twenty and forty thousand years old’. It is estimated that they are in fact 17,300 years old, from roughly the same period as the
of play, the Alice-like portal, the bizarrely named dog, and, crucially, that it might not be wholly true. *The New York Times*, in their 5 March 1995 obituary of Ravidat, offered an alternative tale in which the boys found the cave while ‘searching for a fabled underground passage to a nearby chateau’. In another, more prosaic, account the boys had been sent to search for caves by a local schoolteacher (no Robot, no rabbit). Even the story of the discovery of art’s origins has its contesting origin myths.

Fifteen years later the aurochs appeared in another disputed story. In the last three apostrophic sentences of *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert explains his motivation in murdering Clare Quilty:

One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. 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. (AL 309)

Humbert is disclosing the true purpose of his prison memoir: despite what he might have led us to believe, this was never really about his ethical exoneration but about the preservation of Lolita—*his* Lolita—for posterity. Humbert’s use of expedient initials suggests he knows he is dying (impending ‘coronary thrombosis’) and is hurryng to finish his manuscript, the record of his twofold pursuit of Lolita, a manuscript that he insists will only be published once Dolores Haze (once Humbert’s Lolita but now Dolly Schiller) is also dead. As we learn from John Ray Jr.’s foreword it is not a long wait: Dolores, who had been heavily pregnant when Humbert had last seen her, dies giving birth to her stillborn child. What survives is the book, a material expression of Humbert’s desire to preserve his Lolita from the erosion of time, a desire paradoxically intensified by its being necessarily transitory. In these closing lines, Humbert hopes that his attempts to defy time have found their refuge in art, that his Lolita (and his desire for her) will be at least granted a vicarious existence as text. Like the aurochs daubed on the wall of the prehistoric cave or the angel on the cathedral fresco, Lolita will ‘live in the minds of future generations’.

Humbert’s peroration might not be a prophetic sonnet but his confidence in what he has written anticipated the ‘immortality’ of both Lolita and *Lolita*. It was a confidence Nabokov did not necessarily share: he had previously abandoned a Russian prototype version of this novel (written in cave paintings of Altamira (discovered in 1880), and significantly younger than those at the Chauvet caves in the Ardèche (discovered in 1994) and at El Castillo in Spain (discovered in 1903).
1939 and published posthumously as *The Enchanter*) and, on his account, had only been prevented from incinerating his *Lolita* manuscript by the intercession of his wife, Véra. Nabokov was not naïve and he knew that his novel’s controversial content might stir up some scandal; he did his best to prevent the manuscript circulating beyond specific editors and, in trying to convince one publisher to take it on, referred to it as a ‘timebomb’ (*SL* 144). Yet no matter how much these editors seemed to admire the novel, he could not find one prepared to take the risk of being prosecuted for obscenity if it were published in the United States and, anyway, he felt it offered less promising prospects than his memoir, *Conclusive Evidence*, which he had been serializing in *The New Yorker* between 1948 and 1950.

When *Lolita* finally arrived in bookstores in the United States in 1958, three years after first being published by the Olympia Press in Paris, it did so on the back of scandal, threats of censorship, and critical adulation, a perfect cocktail for inducing sales. Publishers previously nervous about publishing the novel now wanted it desperately. The success of *Lolita* not only made Nabokov wealthy but it assured his novel the security in posterity that Humbert had sought for his Lolita. The pigments had proved durable.

In the winter of 1951, while in the thick of researching and writing *Lolita*, Nabokov sought out a book about the Lascaux paintings (*AY* 210). Most likely this book was *The Lascaux Cave Paintings* by Fernand Windels, published by Viking the previous year, in which the hunting scenes from the walls of the cave, including that of the aurochs, had been photographically reproduced. The Windels book had been widely reviewed, not least in Stuart Preston’s two-page illustrated article in the 10 September 1950 edition of *The New York Times Book Review* (which Nabokov diligently read and to which he contributed reviews of his own). Here was a perfect image with which to close the novel Nabokov was writing: the aurochs, long extinct, has attained a version of immortality through its transfiguration into art. Furthermore, the paintings depict a hunting scene, with the aurochs as quarry ‘fixed’ by the art of this prehistoric hunter, an apt image for Humbert the predatory rapist of the Enchanted Hunters hotel. It was also fitting that Ravidat and his friends had discovered this durable art at the moment when Nabokov’s own literary legacy was imperilled. Having finally managed to secure visas, Nabokov had got out of Paris in May 1940, a month before it fell to the Nazis, sailing to America aboard the *SS Champlain* (which was sunk by the
combined efforts of a German mine and U-boat on her return to France). At the end of that summer Ravidat discovered the Lascaux caves. Here, amid the destructive ravages of the Second World War, was a remarkable story of the capacity of art to endure just as the prospects of Nabokov’s own art surviving seemed to have been drastically attenuated.

Nabokov’s life in Russia and Europe is shaped by loss. As an aristocrat he was forced to flee the Russian Revolution in 1917 and as the husband of a Jewish wife and a father of a Jewish son, he had been forced to flee Germany twenty years later. He lost his homeland, his wealth, and his closest friend to the revolution; his father was killed trying to protect a political rival from assassination in 1922; he lost fellow Russian writers to the Soviet secret police and the gulag; he lost the Berlin and Paris émigré culture in which he had established himself to the rise of National Socialism and the outbreak of the Second World War; he lost his brother, Sergey, and many friends to the concentration camps. Ever since leaving St Petersburg for the Crimea in 1917, Nabokov had been in search of a refuge, one that he sought to create in his art, confident that while all else was subject to the twentieth century’s brutal contingencies, his writing would endure. Under the pen name Sirin, he had published nine novels, three collections of poetry, and one collection of short stories to establish himself as the foremost writer of the younger generation of émigré Russians but by 1940 the security of his artistic posterity had been scattered to the wind. Russia and Germany, the countries in which he had spent the majority of his life, had declared war on books. The first meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934 had announced that socialist realism was to be the state aesthetic, bringing the censorship that already precluded the aristocratic and decadent Nabokov to a new pitch of intensity. Books were destroyed and writers ‘disappeared’. Living in Berlin offered little comfort: in May 1933 Joseph Goebbels orchestrated a nationwide campaign of book burning, with 25,000 books thrown on the biggest pyre in the German capital. Véra Nabokov, who had lost her

3 In *Bend Sinister* (1947), Nabokov satirized this totalitarian attitude toward books in a speech given by one of the Ekwilist Apparatchiks who run the Soviet-Nazi hybrid regime: ‘We must now educate the ignorant, the moody, the wicked—but educate them in a new way. Just think of all the trash we used to be taught… Think of the millions of unnecessary books accumulating in libraries. The books they print! You know—you will never believe me—but I have been told by a reliable person that in one bookshop there actually is a book of at least a hundred pages which is wholly devoted to the anatomy of bedbugs. Or things in foreign languages which nobody can read […] Less books and more common sense—that’s my motto.’ (BS 28). The choice of ‘the anatomy of bedbugs’ is pointed. Vladimir Mayakovsky, who had in many ways been the darling of post-revolutionary Soviet literature, expressed his growing disillusionment with Soviet philistinism in his 1929 play ‘The Bedbug’, and shot himself the following year.
secretarial job when the Jewish law firm she worked for was closed down, witnessed one of these burnings as she hurried home one evening (RY 401). The Russian emigration in Berlin had already disintegrated around Nabokov—in 1923 there were 500,000 Russians in Berlin, by 1933 just 10,000—as most relocated to Paris (Grayson, ‘Illustrated Lives’, 67). The culture of the Parisian emigration was in turn destroyed by the war as émigré journals and publishing houses were abandoned in the shadow of the German advance.

In fleeing to the United States, Nabokov lost not just his established pathways to publication but his readership itself. He felt it necessary if he were to survive as a novelist and poet to write in English and made the decision to abandon the composition of Russian prose. The literary ambitions of the Russian emigration appeared to have founndered and from New York City he wrote the poem ‘Opredeniya’, a ‘lofty epitaph for the entire emigration’ (AY 13). Material copies of the books he had written were lost and destroyed and the papers he had stored in the Parisian basement of his friend and editor Ilya Fondaminsky were scattered in the streets by the ransacking Nazis (Fondaminsky died in Auschwitz in 1942). His last completed novel before his flight, *The Gift*, had not found a publisher willing to bring it out as a book and the serialization of the novel in the journal *Sovremennye zapiski* had redacted the whole of the fourth chapter (of five overall), leaving what Nabokov considered his most important work in a suspended state. His next novel in Russian, *Solus Rex*, was stalled after two chapters and remained so. Despite the reputation he had made for himself in the emigration, in moving to the United States he had, in the words of his biographer Brian Boyd, ‘become an utter unknown’ (AY 16). It is little wonder that so much of his work

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4 As Stephen Blackwell makes clear in ‘Nabokov and his Industry’ the decline in Berlin was part of a larger pattern: ‘Although there were briefly perhaps as many as ten million Russian expatriates following the revolution, that number soon dwindled for a variety of reasons. By the time Nabokov was publishing novels, there were probably less than one million Russian speakers among the Europe emigration, many of whom probably could not afford the luxury of purchasing books (in addition to the fact that many were of military, rather than intellectual, backgrounds)’ (p. 231).

5 There is an irony in Nabokov writing the epitaph to the emigration in New York City as it had a thriving émigré community—Nabokov was interviewed by the Russian daily *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* on his arrival—and became the hub of the Russian emigration in the decades after the Second World War.

6 The courage of Fondaminsky’s niece helped preserve work that would otherwise have been lost. Boyd tells us that she ‘managed to retrieve most of the papers, and after years lying in a coal cellar they reached the Nabokovs in America in 1950’ (RY 522).

7 *The Gift* was belatedly published in full in 1952 by the New York-based Chekhov Publishing House.

8 Some of Nabokov’s work had been translated into English and French but that had done little for his standing in the United States. The English publisher Hutchinson & Co.
over the next decade was engaged with the idea of artistic posterity and its material vulnerability.

From 1935, Nabokov had already begun the experiment of writing in English, in anticipation of a move to Britain or America. The first things he composed were autobiographical sketches that, over the next fifteen years, would take shape as *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), the first version of the memoir that he would revise in the mid-1960s under its better-known title, *Speak, Memory*. In recounting his childhood, Nabokov is resigned to the absolute material loss of the objects he evokes, page after page. The books of his childhood, housed in his father’s library, are, however, charged with a durability that allows them to return to Nabokov in later life:

When the increasing savagery of Lenin’s regime made it imperative for us to leave St Petersburg, that library disintegrated, but queer little remnants of it kept cropping up abroad. Some twelve years later, in Berlin, I picked up from a bookstall one such waif, bearing my father’s *ex libris*. Very fittingly, it turned out to be *The War of the Worlds* by Wells. And after another decade had elapsed, I discovered one day in the New York Public Library, indexed under my father’s name, a copy of the neat catalogue he had had privately printed when the phantom books listed therein still stood, ruddy and sleek, on his shelves. (CE 126)

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov would amplify this passage by inserting, in the preceding section, an account of Nabokov’s widowed mother being sent her husband’s inscribed copy of *Madame Bovary* by a friend from his had brought out *Camera Obscura* (1936) and *Despair* (1937) through their John Long imprint. So few of these survive that, as of January 2013, online booksellers were asking $17,500 for them as a pair. Pascale Casanova argues that Nabokov enjoyed a better standing in French letters because of André Levinson’s review of *Zashchita luzhina* (*The Defense*) in *Les nouvelles littéraires* of 15 February 1930: ‘Recognition in France allowed him to cross the Rhine without leaving Berlin and at the same time to escape the anathema of Russian critical opinion’ (p. 139). It is true that this review led to a French translation of the novel being published as *La course du fou* (1934) but Casanova overstates this anathema to Nabokov’s work in the emigration: while Nabokov polarized émigré critics he was celebrated by many, including the highly influential poet and critic Vladislav Khodasevich. In fact, the moment in which he gained the most distinct visibility outside of the emigration was an unwelcome one, when Jean-Paul Sartre dismissively reviewed *La Méprise*, the French translation of *Despair*, in 1939: ‘Where is the novel? It has dissolved in its own venom; it is merely an example of what I call bookish literature. The hero of “Despair” confesses to us that, from the end of 1914 to the middle of 1919, he read exactly one thousand and eighteen books. I am afraid that Mr Nabokov, like his hero, has read too much’ (p. 66).

9 The 1951 British edition of *Conclusive Evidence* was called *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov then revised the memoir in translating it into Russian in 1954, under the title *Drugie Berega* (*Other Shores*). A revised English edition was published in the US and UK in 1967 as *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*.

10 Vyra, the summerhouse that is the site of many of Nabokov’s reminiscences, was destroyed in 1944 and all that remains are the stone foundations.
student days in 1890s Germany (SM 135–6). To write about the felicitous survival of books at a time when his own material legacy was imperilled is an act of faith on Nabokov’s part: in the foreword to Speak, Memory he wrote that the title of the original version had been selected because the book was to stand as ‘conclusive evidence of my having existed’ (SM 8). The reason Nabokov calls the return of the copy of The War of the Worlds fitting is because of Wells’s friendship with Nabokov’s father, to whose newspaper (Rul) Wells contributed. Furthermore, Nabokov finding the Wells book also rescued it from possible future destruction: this was 1929 in Berlin and four years later Wells’s works were on the list of books the Nazis decided to burn.

With these concerns about the material durability of his legacy and uncertainty about what his future offered, Nabokov must have drawn encouragement from what the discovery of the Lascaux cave paintings represented. The publication of Lolita, with its resonant closing image from the walls of Lascaux, guaranteed Nabokov’s artistic survival. The extraordinary popularity of both these cultural artefacts in the late 1950s was not without its unintended consequences, however. When it was published in the United States in 1958 Lolita soon moved to the top of the bestseller list where it remained for six months. By September 1959, after spending more than a year on the list, it had sold 236,700 copies in bookshops and a further 50,000 through book clubs. Sales were further bolstered by the Stanley Kubrick film adaptation of 1962 and Boyd tells us that the novel had ‘sold fourteen million copies around the world by the mid-1980s’ (AY 387). Another Hollywood film, directed by Adrian Lyne in 1997, brought another surge to what were already consistently strong sales and in 2003 Ellen Piñer estimated that Lolita had sold ‘more than fifty million copies around the world’ (Introduction, 14). When Nabokov arrived on Ellis Island in 1940, in flight from the Nazi advance in France, he was a Russian writer facing anonymity; after the publication of Lolita he became arguably the most famous literary novelist in the world.

The success of Lolita enabled Nabokov to give up teaching and to become a full-time writer, an ambition he had long sought to realize. It was a moment of unexpected professionalization and it brought his high modernist aesthetics into a new, ambiguous relationship with the literary marketplace. In 1947, the year Nabokov had written to Edmund Wilson to tell him he had started ‘a short novel about a man who liked little girls’, the La Rochefoucauld family, who owned the property on which the Lascaux caves had been discovered, gave permission for work to begin to make the caves accessible to tourists—the entrance was widened, the floor cemented, the water running through diverted—and soon visitors were flooding there in large numbers (NWL 188). Pablo Picasso reportedly
emerged from his visit to breathlessly claim that modern artists ‘have invented nothing’. More work was done in 1957 to accommodate the growing interest and, according to contemporaneous newspaper reports, between 1,200 and 1,800 tourists visited the site per day during the late 1950s. In 1960 a ‘green biofilm’ was noticed forming on the paintings and fearing that ‘la maladie verte’ would inflict irreparable damage to the art, the caves were shut in 1963. The main factor in the change of the cave’s environment was the exhalation of the visitors’ breath: the cave art of Lascaux was imperilled by its own reception (Madden, 295). The caves have never reopened to the public and microbiologists and conservationists are fighting a running battle with different forms of threatening fungus. In 1983, six years after Nabokov’s death, a painstakingly constructed replica of the cave was opened, known as Lascaux II, which draws some 250,000 visitors a year, while Lascaux III opened in Bordeaux in 2012 and will go on tour as an exhibition around the world. The durable pigments of Lascaux can only be experienced through these simulacra while the originals are bathed in chemicals and conditioned air to preserve them from the existential threat presented by their encounter with their own popularity. For Jean Baudrillard, the construction of the second Lascaux offered an example of a specifically postmodern act of artificial duplication. It also offers, however, an analogy to the subject of this book: the problematic relationship of late modernist ideas of authenticity and autonomy with the pressures of the literary marketplace.

BIBLIOPOETICS

This book is about Nabokov’s late modernist aesthetics, what happened to these aesthetics when confronted by the American literary marketplace, and what the consequences of this confrontation were for his literary production. As such I am interested in Nabokov’s art as a materially specific production, which is a rather grand way of saying I am interested in his books. Nabokov was a champion of aesthetic autonomy but the book is a kind of determinist technology and for all the remarkable ways he sought to resist its constraints Nabokov’s fiction was ultimately subject to them. Books may differ in length, size, shape but the demands of

11 This oft-quoted statement, like so much about Lascaux, might well be apocryphal. See Paul G. Bahn’s chapter on ‘The Picasso Myth’ in Prehistoric Rock Art: Polemics and Progress (2010).
12 For a scientific account of what happened at Lascaux, see F. Bastian et al., ‘The Microbiology of Lascaux Cave’.
making and selling them ultimately asserts certain normative boundaries. Nabokov wanted to write books that tested these boundaries but he also wanted to be a professional writer who made his living from advances and royalties. The book was a site in which this conflict played out, where Nabokov’s late modernism came into conflict with the literary marketplace. Nabokov was fond of quoting Pushkin’s epigram, ‘I write for myself and publish for money’ (quoted in Binyon, 171). The truth is both more complicated and more interesting than that, and what I have sought to achieve in this study is a socio-historical approach to Nabokov’s work as a professional writer that does not dilute the richness of the texts.

To understand the way Nabokov conceived artistic creativity and the way he sought to decouple it from any kind of materialist interpretation, one must begin by exploring a different type of cave to those found at Lascaux. In his 1966 interview with Alfred Appel, his former student, Nabokov explained why he found the use of index cards especially felicitous to his compositional process:

> Since I always have at the very start a curiously clear preview of the entire novel before me or above me, I find cards especially convenient when not following the logical sequence of chapters but preparing instead this or that passage at any point of the novel and filling in the gaps in no special order. I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato, whom I do not care for, but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able. (SO 69)

Nabokov feared getting ‘mixed up with Plato’ because of the philosopher’s attitude toward poetry, going on to say that he would not ‘survive very long under his Germanic regime of militarism and music’ (SO 70). Still, his conceptualization of the book as an ideal form, which the inspired writer seeks to copy, is unambiguously Platonic. What makes it distinct from other Romantic theorizations of inspiration is the bibliopoetic imperative: Nabokov is granted a vision of the book as an integrated form. Contained within this ephemeral moment of abstracted creativity is the idea of the work of art’s eventual embodiment in the form of a book.

Whether or not Nabokov actually experienced inspiration in this transcendent manner is not the subject of this (avowedly secular) study; what is more interesting for my purpose is the formulation and dissemination of this conceptualization of inspiration in an interview. Studies of Nabokov can sometimes go a little weak at the knees for his more mystical pronouncements—‘I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known
more’—but hesitate to pursue them to their logical—or often theological—conclusion (SO 45). That Nabokov was concerned with metaphysical issues is beyond doubt and his fictions demonstrate a fascination with the supernatural, from ghosts to gnostic otherworlds. In this book Nabokov’s metaphysics are treated with scepticism, analysed not for any insight into the enigmatic workings of artistic creativity—or other possible realms of existence—but for the way they allowed him to constitute an authorial persona with certain specific artistic strategies in mind.

Nabokov’s conceptualization of inspiration is a way of thinking about art as occupying an existence outside of a conventional understanding of time. For a writer whose work had been existentially threatened this was a way of asserting an artistic permanence that was not dependent on the material durability of paper, ink, and binding. As he formulates it in writing about inspiration, the Nabokovian book is in some way pre-existing in a transcendent realm, there to be channelled by the Romantic genius. This is a phenomenological fantasy, in which an object can exist without relation to anything else, another way of saying, as he did in the foreword to the 1959 translation of *Invitation to a Beheading*, that the literary work of art is a ‘violin in a void’ (p. 9). The ideal book, and with it the source of the work of art, is placed beyond the grubby reach of determinism, be it biological, historical, psychological, or sociological.

This decoupling of a work from its material production, and with it the socio-historical context of its making, has been met with firm resistance from scholars of book history. Don McKenzie, in his seminal essay on the works of William Congreve, argues that literary criticism is too often guilty of an ‘almost Platonic distinction between idea or essence on the one hand and its deforming, material embodiment on the other’ (p. 202). McKenzie insists that it is quite impossible [...] to divorce the substance of the text on the one hand from the physical form of its presentation on the other. The book itself is an expressive means. To the eye its pages offer an aggregation of meanings both verbal and typographic for translation to the ear; but we must learn to see that its shape in the hand also speaks to us from the past. (p. 200)

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13 Martin Hägglund has argued that ‘Nabokov scholarship [...] is dominated by the thesis that his writing is driven by a desire to transcend the condition of time’ (p. 84). He counters this with a thesis that the nostalgia for lost time is itself conditioned by its existence within time and that in the act of writing (and writing about writing) Nabokov’s fiction understands its own logic in terms of what Hägglund calls ‘chronolibido’. For Hägglund, ‘writing is here not limited to the physical act of writing but is a figure for the chronolibidinal investment in living on that resists the negativity of time while being bound to it’ (p. 84).
Every book is marked by its own making or, as Jerome McGann puts it, ‘all texts implicitly record a cultural history of their artefactuality’ (p. 1). It is, by this argument, a weakness of a conventional poetics that it does not take into consideration literary art’s material expression: something that is ironically evident from the case of Aristotle’s *Poetics* itself. In the introduction to his 1996 translation, Malcolm Heath notes that the *Poetics* was not among the books that Aristotle ‘prepared and polished for publication’ (all of which have been lost) but rather a fragmentary assembly of notes made for Aristotle’s own use, perhaps in teaching (p. vii). This defining work of literary criticism was in all likelihood never intended for publication—certainly not in the form in which it has descended to us—and as Heath explains the process by which they took their present form is unclear; in some cases there are signs of editorial activity (either by Aristotle himself or by a later hand); so different versions may have been spliced together, and what is presented as a single continuous text may in fact juxtapose different stages in the development of Aristotle’s thinking. (p. vii)

The critical creation of what McKenzie calls the Platonic ‘idea or essence’ of a literary text is the counterpart to Nabokov’s evocation of an ideal book: the work of art taken out of its material context.

This study seeks to place Nabokov’s work back into that material context. In doing so I have drawn on the unpublished archive of correspondence with publishers and other intermediaries in the publication process, members of what the book historian Robert Darnton calls the ‘communications circuit’ (p. 111). Furthermore, I have taken seriously Nabokov works that have previously been ignored or considered peripheral to his oeuvre, such as his journalism of the early 1940s, his early American essay ‘The Creative Writer’ (1942), his lectures on Don Quixote from the early 1950s, and interviews from the 1960s not collected in *Strong Opinions*. By moving outside the Nabokov canon, we can approach his work afresh and place him into a more nuanced historical context. This does not mean ignoring the canonical novels but in reading these works I am always conscious of the ways in which Nabokov, his readers, and the larger culture fashioned this canonicity.

In seeking to historicize Nabokov’s work in this way, this study participates in the recent emphasis on re-contextualizing Nabokov’s work. Important studies by Stephen Blackwell (science), Siggy Frank (theatricality), Dana Dragunoiu (liberalism), Thomas Karshan (the aesthetics of play), and Will Norman (time and history) have demonstrated how enmeshed Nabokov’s work is in larger intellectual and historical debates. In another author this would hardly be revelatory but Nabokov’s
aesthetics, and his public dissemination of them, were heavily invested in a denial of the action of historical forces upon his work. In a 1968 interview with Martin Esslin he made this position clear:

What I feel to be the real modern world is the world the artist creates, his own mirage, which becomes a new mir (‘world’ in Russian) by the very act of his shedding, as it were, the age he lives in. My mirage is produced in my private desert, an arid but ardent place, with the sign No Caravans Allowed on the trunk of a lone palm. (SO 112)

Nabokov was absolutely consistent in rejecting history in this way throughout his career, and this consistency is itself interesting as it encompasses Nabokov’s living under the totalitarian regimes that shaped the suffering of the European twentieth century. To deny history from a leafy campus could be considered a posture; to assert aesthetic autonomy in the eye of the storm is a commitment. It is also, as we shall see, a refutation of history with its own history and a refutation of politics with its own politics.

The embodied—or ‘embooked’—artwork complicates Nabokovian claims to autonomy, as the object itself becomes the site of cultural and economic exchange. Nabokov is occupied with retaining authorial control over his own art (hence the fierce opposition to influence or determinism) and over the reception of that art, and the process of publication is in an important way an abdication of that control. For Nabokov, as with so many authors, writing was a way of defying time, of preserving a vicarious existence in what Hägglund calls ‘technological memory’ (p. 98).

14 Nabokov gives a nuanced version of his argument against history in a 1969 interview with Philip Oakes of The Sunday Times: ‘We should define, should we not, what we mean by “history.” If “history” means a “written account of events” (and that is about all Clio can claim), then let us inquire who actually—what scribes, what secretaries—took it down and how qualified they were for the job. I am inclined to guess that a big part of “history” (the unnatural history of man—not the naive testimony of rocks) has been modified by mediocre writers and prejudiced observers. We know that police states (e.g., the Soviets) have actually snipped out and destroyed such past events in old books as did not conform to the falsehoods of the present. But even the most talented and conscientious historian may err. In other words, I do not believe that “history” exists apart from the historian. If I try to select a keeper of records, I think it safer (for my comfort, at least) to choose my own self. But nothing recorded or thought up by myself can create any special “problems” in the sense you suggest’ (SO 38).

15 Poets have been obsessed with the idea that their work guarantees immortality, that creating literature is a means of, in Claire Rosenfield’s phrase, ‘eternalizing the self’ (p. 76). As Andrew Bennett observes: ‘Writers, artists and other manufacturers of cultural artefacts have a perennial fascination with the immortality effect, the ability of a poem, novel, statue, painting, photography, symphony to survive beyond the death of the artist’ (p. 1). For Georges Poulet books are ‘a means by which an author actually preserves his ideas, his feelings, his modes of dreaming and living. It is his means of saving his identity from death’ (p. 46).
composing his fiction, Nabokov sought to exercise absolute authorial control—‘I am the perfect dictator in that private world’—not just over the iconographic arrangement of the words on the page but also, as much as he could, over the reception of those words (SO 69). His novels are patterned and layered with complex levels of allusion and ludic puzzles, creating an over-determined text in which the author is always one step ahead of the reader (or at least gives that impression). Furthermore, these texts are presented as autotelic creations: Nabokov destroyed early drafts of manuscripts and wanted unfinished work, including The Original of Laura, to be destroyed in the event of his death.16 Yet, as Michael Wood has argued, for all this effort to retain control, the very act of writing involves its abdication:

Reading is a material act, a retracing of a moment of writing, the author’s influence is inescapable: we don’t make a move without him or her. But the sheets of paper are also currency, forms of social behaviour, and their reach and effect will often go beyond anything we can call influence. Once words are in motion they cannot be revoked and won’t always mean what we thought they meant, or wanted them to mean. (The Magician’s Doubts, 17)

Even an author as textually ‘present’ as Nabokov is necessarily absent in the work’s reception: the material book is the site of this tension.

In 1950 Nabokov composed a sixteenth chapter for Conclusive Evidence that he eventually decided against publishing, which takes the form of a review of the preceding book. In it he writes that

one is inclined to think that his true purpose here is to project himself, or at least his most treasured self, into the picture he paints. One is reminded of those problems of ‘objectivity’ that the philosophy of science brings up. An observer makes a detailed picture of the whole universe but when he has finished he realizes that it still lacks something: his own self. So he puts himself in it too. But again a ‘self’ remains outside and so forth, in an endless sequence of projections, like those advertisements which depict a girl holding

16 Persuaded by the offer of tax concessions, Nabokov deposited papers, including manuscripts for The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Pale Fire, at the Library of Congress between 1959 and 1963. These he demanded be sealed for fifty years. As Boyd notes, it was the sales of Lolita that ended up saving these papers for future scholars: ‘the success of Lolita not only earned Nabokov a reprieve from teaching but also saved his papers from the ashcan. Suddenly faced with much more to pay in income tax than ever before, he was approached by the Library of Congress to donate some of his personal papers in return for a tax concession. Despite his abstract convictions, Nabokov readily agreed and continued to donate more material over the next ten years until the tax laws changed. And from the Library of Congress’s first approach he began to hoard assiduously his notes, his manuscripts, his galleys and his page proofs, sometimes in duplicate or triplicate. So much for destroying everything’ (‘The Nabokov Biography’, 28).
a picture of herself holding a picture of herself holding a picture that only coarse printing prevents one’s eye from making out. (‘Chapter Sixteen’, 254)

The necessary impossibility of ever truly inscribing the self into a work of art is, in typically Nabokovian fashion, elucidated by the methods of its telling: this is Nabokov impersonating a reviewer writing about Nabokov’s writing about Sirin, the ‘loneliest and most arrogant writer of the emigration’, who is never explicitly acknowledged within the memoir as being Nabokov’s alter ego. What is pertinent about the analogy of the recursive painting is that ultimately it is its materiality—coarse printing—that sets the final limit. In the way Nabokov conceives of inspiration, the materiality of the book-in-the-world means that it can only be an approximation of the book-as-idea. The material book may occupy a ‘fallen’ relation to the Platonic book but it is, of course, the only book that exists for readers. In many ways it is the disparity between these two books that is the subject of this study: the Lolita preserved for an imagined Parnassian posterity and the Lolita that exists materially in over 50 million places, as artefact, commodity, symbolic capital, and technology; durable pigments and coarse print.

A consequence of Nabokov’s aesthetic was a concern about the effect the proliferation of his books would have on their artistic ‘essence’; his contemplative, atemporal aesthetics are undermined by the book’s commodified, reproducible status as a diachronically consumable object. What he does in response is bring his totalizing approach to art into the realm of publication. Rather than remain aloof to this process, Nabokov adopts strategies that exploit the material book for his own ends. He sought to condition the reading of his work through, in Gérard Genette’s terms, the peritextual material of the book (forewords, blurbs, cover art) and through the epitextual persona he created in carefully scripted interviews. As we shall see, he was intensely engaged in how his books were made and sought contractual guarantees to ensure his control over the way they were packaged.

Nabokov was far-reaching in his ambition as he trespassed on territory that had previously been the preserve of the publisher; that he was allowed to do so was because the success of Lolita had given him a great deal of leverage. The ambition to make the material book reflect the Nabokovian ideal was, however, one that was unattainable, and his correspondence records his increasing frustration as his control over the publication process wanes. This tension, between authorial control and its loss, is not merely the history of Nabokovian battles with publishers but animates the very fictions themselves, in which manuscripts are revised, redacted, misread, purloined, and posthumously published. It is through this
material vulnerability that Nabokov’s idealist aesthetics is forced to confront its limits and it is in the fiction, rather than in the discursive prose, that Nabokov probes its implications. The Platonic book, Nabokov tells us, exists out of time, decoupled from context, but its material expression is everywhere marked by the history of its making and its making in history.

THE FALSE QUIXOTE

When Nabokov was consulting his book on the cave paintings of Lascaux in the winter of 1951, he was in the thick of one of the most professionally productive periods of his life. The previous summer he had taken a road trip to Telluride, Colorado, and had worked steadily on *Lolita* the whole time. Back in Ithaca, his work on the novel intensified. At the same time he began to prepare the lectures he would be delivering as a visiting professor at Harvard the following spring. While some of this work was reframing old lectures, he had to undertake the major project of composing a whole series on *Don Quixote*: Nabokov not only carefully reread a novel stretching to the best part of 1,000 pages, but also wrote out an exhaustive narrative summary complete with extended quotations, conducted a survey of the critical literature, compared the available translations as best he could (he did not have Spanish), drafted his lecture series, and then radically revised this draft. This work was so exhaustive and thorough that in the Nabokov archive, in addition to the six folders containing each of the lectures, there are 175 pages of notes relating to *Don Quixote*. These lectures have received scant attention in the critical literature about Nabokov, which is surprising considering the period in his career that they were written. What is striking about Nabokov’s reading of *Don Quixote* is the attention paid to the material durability and vulnerability of the work of literary art. While Nabokov bridled at critical comparisons between Cervantes and Shakespeare, he did concede that they ‘are equals in the matter of influence, of spiritual irrigation’ (*LDQ* 8). Yet not only does the novel dramatize the loss, destruction, distortion, and censorship of the written or printed word, but its very publishing history is an account of its own material vulnerability, something that, in a decidedly metafictional turn, Cervantes folds back into the second part of the novel itself.

Nabokov was invited to teach at Harvard for the spring semester of 1952 by his friends Mikhail Karpovich and Harry Levin. He took a leave of absence from his faculty position at Cornell to take up a post as Visiting Lecturer in the Slavic department, standing in for Karpovich (teaching
courses in Russian Modernism and Pushkin), and was then also invited to stand in for Levin to teach ‘Humanities 2: The Epic, The Novel’, part of Harvard’s general education programme (‘the epic’ was taught by the classicist John Finley in the fall semester). The course was prestigious: Thornton Wilder had taught it the year before and I. A. Richards had previously filled in for Levin. A position on the Harvard faculty placed Nabokov in the heart of Cambridge’s intellectual and cultural life. He socialized with Isaiah Berlin, Richard Ellmann, Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Arthur Schlesinger, and Richard Wilbur, and became friendly with William James, whose father’s work he greatly admired. As well as lecturing, Nabokov’s was invited to read in the Morris Gray poetry series, ‘in a season that had begun with William Carlos Williams and would end with Wallace Stevens’ (AY 216).

Nabokov initially intended to transplant his Cornell course to Harvard for the lectures on the novel, focusing on *Bleak House*, *Dead Souls*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Anna Karenina*. Nabokov was encouraged to add *Don Quixote* to this list to add some evolutionary continuity to the course and while, as Boyd tells us, he was ‘reluctant to undertake another major book, especially as he knew no Spanish’, he ‘eventually had to concede’ (AY 200). The lectures were delivered in the grand 1,000-seater Sanders Theatre in Memorial Hall, every Tuesday and Thursday between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. into what Nabokov later described as ‘an abyss of 500 students’ (quoted in AY 212). As Levin points out in his short essay on these lectures, Nabokov’s interest in *Don Quixote* was not entirely new as he ‘had been sufficiently interested in Cervantes’ novel to sketch a dramatic adaptation of it, which he proposed to the Michael Chekhov company shortly after arriving in the United States. Shades from this unrealized project may lurk in the background of his unexpected return to the subject’ (p. 226). Nabokov’s work in preparing his lectures was typically thorough: he wrote out a chapter-by-chapter narrative-commentary of both parts of the novel and, as Fredson Bowers notes in his editor’s preface, wrote out ‘a preliminary version of the lecture series’ along the theme of ‘Victories and Defeats’ (p. ix). He then changed his mind and rewrote his material into six thematically structured lectures, with the final one now taking on his original idea of keeping a scorecard assessing Don Quixote’s triumphs and failures in the manner of a tennis match. The narrative-commentary was so thorough that Nabokov was left with a great surplus of notes but he evidently wanted to ensure a superior working knowledge of the novel, as he not only knew his lectures would reach a large audience but also that his strong opinions about the book would attract a degree of controversy. As Boyd notes, ‘[u]psetting received opinion was always one of Nabokov’s great pleasures’ and Nabokov built
an impassioned case against *Don Quixote*, deriding it as ‘a veritable encyclopedia of cruelty’ and ‘one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned’ (*AY* 213–14; *LDQ* 52). Nabokov enjoyed startling his audience, and told Herbert Gold in 1966, for an interview in *The Paris Review*, that he still remembered ‘with delight tearing apart *Don Quixote*, a cruel and crude old book, before six hundred students in Memorial Hall, much to the horror and embarrassment of some of my more conservative colleagues’ (*SO* 103).

Perhaps because of the way he appeared to dismiss *Don Quixote*, the work he did in preparing these lectures has rarely been considered as context for his novels.17 In his 1975 book *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre*, Robert Alter placed *Don Quixote* at the beginning of an alternative tradition of the novel, a tradition of which Nabokov represented, for Alter, the most recent incarnation. Alter’s argument was that self-conscious fiction had not been taken sufficiently seriously in the critical discourse on the genealogy of the novel; he was rebelling against the realist fetters of the narrow Leavisite tradition and the ‘monocular vision’ of Marxist critics who insisted the novel be the epic of bourgeois life. Early in his study, Alter paid particular attention to the way changing material conditions of publication impacted on literary practice:

The artist, with new means of dissemination and new media of implementation at his disposal, could imagine enormous new possibilities of power in the exercise of his art. At the same time, the conditions of mechanical reproduction made it necessary for the individual artist to swim against a vast floodtide of trash out of all proportion to anything that had existed before in cultural history; and the reproduced art object itself, in its universal accessibility, could be cheapened, trivialized, deprived of its uniqueness, stripped of any claims it might have to be a model of value or a source of truth. (Alter, 1–2)

*Don Quixote* records its own anxieties about its material fate; as Alter puts it, the world of the novel is ‘flooded with manuscripts and printed matter’ (p. 5).

*Don Quixote* opens with Cervantes denying his paternity—‘though I seem to be the father, I am the stepfather of *Don Quixote*’—and introducing the trope of the found manuscript (p. 3). The text stages its own material vulnerability within this fictionalized account of its own

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17 Among those who have sought to trace the influence of Cervantes’s novel on Nabokov’s work is Guy Davenport, in the foreword to the lectures, and Harry Levin, in a short essay for the *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*; both draw analogies between *Don Quixote* and *Lolita*. Boyd sees the influence rather in *Pnin*, where he argues the treatment of cruelty is, at least in part, Nabokov’s ‘reply to Cervantes’ (*AY* 272).
making and, in the eighth chapter, ironically imperils itself. The action is left frozen in mid-battle, with the ‘second author’ revealing that the ‘first author’ had not found any further sources for the life of Quixote. This second author ‘did not want to believe that so curious a history would be subjected to the laws of oblivion’ so continued to search around (p. 64). He duly discovers further material on Quixote in the Alcaná market in Toledo, where,

a boy came by to sell some notebooks and old papers to a silk merchant; as I am very fond of reading, even torn papers in the streets, I was moved by my natural inclinations to pick up one of the volumes the boy was selling, and I saw that it was written in characters I knew to be Arabic. (p. 67)

He finds a Morisco to help him translate the Arabic and is delighted to discover that the manuscript is the history of Don Quixote as recorded by Cide Hamete Benengeli (all this is further complicated by allusions to marginal notes in this new manuscript and warnings about Benengeli’s unreliability). Throughout the first part of the novel, books and letters are lost, burned, and misread while Cervantes has much metafictional fun, even inserting himself into the narrative as the prisoner Saavedra (p. 334). The first part ends with the narrative ‘interrupted’ again; no account of Quixote’s ‘third sally’ can be found. The only remaining documents are some parchments found in a lead box, containing epitaphs to the characters. Where the papers were too ‘worm-eaten’ to be read they were given to ‘an academician to be deciphered,’ with the hope that they might contain accounts of the adventures of the third sally (p. 449). In playing these self-conscious games, Cervantes was parodying the found manuscript convention of Chivalric literature, even as he was encoding his larger theme of ‘an erosion of the belief in the authority of the written word’ (Alter, 3). The vulnerability of the material book resonates throughout: one of the most substantial interpolated stories is Cardenio, which is the presumed source of a lost play The History of Cardenio, a collaboration between John Fletcher and William Shakespeare.

What Cervantes did not anticipate was the way his own work would be made vulnerable by its exposure to the literary marketplace. Having published the first part in 1605, he was at work on the second part when, in September 1614, a ‘false’ sequel—the Quixote apócrifo—was published under the pseudonym Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. Cervantes was infuriated by the theft of his story, which he addressed in his foreword to part two of Don Quixote and within the fiction itself. In the
fictional world of the second part of *Don Quixote*, the first part has been published and is in circulation (despite the issues this presents for narrative plausibility). One of the characters, the Bachelor Sansón Carrasco claims there

are more than twelve thousand copies of this history in print today; if you do not think so, let Portugal, Barcelona, and Valencia tell you so, for they were printed there; there is even a rumor that it is being printed in Antwerp and it is evident to me that every nation or language will have its translation of the book. (pp. 474–5)

By chapter 16 we are up to thirty thousand copies in print. By chapter 59, Cervantes has Quixote overhear other characters reading the false sequel to each other. Quixote flips through it himself, pronounces it riddled with errors, and resolves to go to Zaragoza, so as to ‘proclaim the lies of this modern historian to the world’ (p. 849). He ends up instead in Barcelona where he finds a printing shop correcting another edition of the false Quixote, to which he says he ‘thought it had already been burned and turned to ashes for its insolence’ and insists, ‘its day of reckoning will come, as it does to every pig’ (p. 875). This promise is fulfilled when a story is recounted of devils playing *pelota* with the book and eventually casting it into hell (pp. 915–16). On his deathbed Quixote demands of his executors that, if they meet Avellaneda, to ask his forgiveness for giving him the occasion ‘to write so many and such great absurdities’ (p. 938).

Nabokov was clearly interested in the subject of the false Quixote; he addressed it in detail in his fifth lecture of the series and the archives show that he found an English translation of the apocryphal *Quixote*, published in 1745, which he read carefully and about which he made fifteen pages of notes (which are not included in the posthumously published edition of the lectures). He also read and made notes on Paul Groussac’s 1903 study of the subject, *Une énigme littéraire: le ‘Don Quichotte’ d’Avellaneda* (and, as Bowers points out, at one point paraphrases him) (*LDQ* 111).19 Nabokov told his students at Harvard that just as Cervantes had invented Benengeli,

So-called ‘real life’ produced an arrogant Aragonese who stole our knight-errant. […] The author of this spurious continuation signed it with the bounds of modesty, knowing that one must not add afflictions to the afflicted, and the affliction of this gentleman is undoubtedly very great, for he does not dare to appear openly in the light of day but hides his name and conceals his birthplace, as if he had committed some terrible act of treason against the crown’ (p. 456).

19 This material is available for consultation in Box 930550 of the Nabokov Archive at the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.
name ‘Alonso Fernandez de Avellaneda,’ almost certainly a pseudonym, and
the problem of his identity remains unsolved. What Cervantes says of him in
the preface to his own second part and elsewhere in it, and also internal
evidence, tends to show that the person was a middle-aged Aragonese (born
at Tordesillas), a professional writer, with more intimate knowledge of
church matters (especially pertaining to the Dominican order) than Cer-
vantes had, as well as being a fervent and jealous admirer of playwright Lope
de Vega (who had disapproved of Don Quixote before it had been officially
published), at whom Cervantes had taken one or two vicious digs in his first
part. (LDQ 79)

In the notes he made to the false Quixote, Nabokov paid particular
attention to the way Avellaneda staged criticisms of the first part of Don
Quixote within the narrative. In the lectures, Nabokov found credible the
theory that Cervantes himself had been the author of the false sequel:

Let me drop the dark hint that a great-grandmother of Cervantes was called
Juana Avellaneda, and that some have contended that the fake Don Quixote
was composed by Cervantes himself for the express purpose of having at
hand a new device in the second part that he signed—his own people
meeting people belonging to the Avellaneda book. (LDQ 79)

Nabokov goes on to argue that, if Cervantes had indeed staged the
Avellaneda episode, he had not gone far enough:

How splendid it would have been if instead of that hasty and vague last
encounter with the disguised Carrasco, who tumbles our knight in a jiffy, the
real Don Quixote had fought his crucial battle with the false Don Quixote!
In that imagined battle who would have been the victor—the fantastic,
loveable madman of genius, or the fraud, the symbol of robust mediocrity?
My money’s on Avellaneda’s man, because the beauty of it is that, in life,
mediocrity is more fortunate than genius. In life it is the fraud that unhorses
true valor. And since I am daydreaming, let me add that I bear a grudge to
the fate of books; writing under another name a pretended, a spurious,
continuation in order to intrigue the reader of the authentic one would
have been a little moonburst of artistic technique. Avellaneda should have
turned out to be, in a disguise of mirrors, Cervantes. (LDQ 81)

It is telling that Nabokov’s solution to the problem of Avellaneda’s
identity is one that re-asserts authorial agency. Nabokov does, however,
acknowledge that it is ‘daydreaming’ to ascribe to the ‘fate of books’ the
echoes and patterns of one of his novels. The fate of books and the
violation of authority would come into focus for Nabokov in the next
decade, both in his fiction and in ‘real life’. In Pale Fire he would write a
novel that dramatized a story with strong resonances of the Avellaneda
episode; Kinbote, after all, steals John Shade’s poem and writes a ‘false
continuation’ of it (and the novel becomes a forum for exactly the kind of authorial doubling that Nabokov had wanted to find in *Don Quixote*). Just like Cervantes, Nabokov would also find the control of his work—his case *Lolita*—subverted by its own popularity in the market, and like Cervantes these pressures would be encoded, explicitly and implicitly, in the fiction he wrote thereafter. In the autumn of 1951, reading *Don Quixote* and studying the cave paintings of Lascaux, Nabokov was a writer with his fragile artistic legacy at the forefront of his mind. The novel he was working on at that time would secure his work for posterity, although ubiquity would present as much of a challenge as obscurity.
Nabokov occupies a complicated position in literary history. In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, for example, Fredric Jameson makes only a single glancing reference to Nabokov, at the point when he is making a case for modernism coming in four waves. The first two waves can be broadly understood as symbolism and futurism. ‘To these,’ Jameson writes, ‘should be added the modernism of the isolated “genius,” organized [...] around the great Work, the Book of the World—secular scripture, sacred text, ultimate ritual mass (Mallarmé’s Livre) for an unimaginable new social order.’ Added to these three modernisms is a fourth category, developed out of the writings of the architectural critic Charles Jencks: late modernism. For Jameson late modernists ‘are those who persist into postmodernism’ and a consideration in literary terms ‘throws up names like Borges and Nabokov, Beckett, poets like Olson or Zukovsky, and composers like Milton Babbitt, who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms’ (p. 305). Jameson’s act of classification is part of his own argument: the position of these figures on the periphery is reinforced by a critic as influential as Jameson placing them there. Nabokov, as part of this itinerant group, is not included in the bigger picture, reduced, in Will Norman’s phrase, to an ‘untimely left over’ (*Nabokov, Time and History*, 64). Jameson is not alone in finding Nabokov a slippery proposition and in accounts of literary history Nabokov is repeatedly figured as being out of season or, to switch metaphors, lost in the no-man’s-land between modernism and postmodernism.

In the concluding paragraphs of *Vladimir Nabokov: A Literary Life*, David Rampton cites Jameson’s cursory handling of Nabokov before demonstrating Nabokov’s peripheral place in recent critical approaches to literary study. Rampton lists ‘the twenty five most frequently cited theorists in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, excluding those, like Adorno and Heidegger who died before Nabokov’, making the point that only two of
this list, Richard Rorty and Julia Kristeva, have actually written about Nabokov’s work. For Rampton, the study of Nabokov’s work is placed in opposition to the culture of critique:

Nabokov’s professional readers are ‘all in’, when it comes to betting against critics like Jameson, in their conviction that there is such a thing as genius, that their guy is one, and that his novels are what they are because an extraordinarily gifted person set his readers such difficult and rewarding tasks. Whatever one thinks about the constitutive powers of intelligent design in the known universe—and it has to be said that the evidence for it does not look good—it is absolutely central for an understanding and appreciation of Nabokov’s elaborately verbal one. (p. 190)

Rampton is of course right: if one believes Nabokov is a genius—dismissed by Jameson as a ‘quaint Romantic value’—then logic requires the postulation of a transcendent metaphysics. What we are left with is either a Nabokov who is irrelevant or a Nabokov who is everything. Rampton seems resigned to Nabokov’s irrelevance to academic literary criticism (if not to ‘professional readers’) but places his faith in the long game. ‘At least one thing is sure,’ he writes, ‘whatever the fate of the novel, a discipline that dismisses as a sentimental archaism the sense of wonder generated by writers as gifted as Nabokov is ultimately doomed to endorse its own irrelevance’ (p. 192). That Nabokov remains popular to a wider reading public is easily confirmed by walking into any bookshop (and some of those readers surely feel ‘a sense of wonder’ when they read him).\(^1\) In the context of critical discourse, though, Nabokov has a relevance problem. For Rampton it is a case of hunkering down and waiting it out; for Jameson it is a case of pushing him to the margins. He is either exceptional or peripheral.

One of the difficulties in situating Nabokov is that he was jarred out of the national narratives of literary history by the Second World War and as such he is caught between languages, American, Russian, and European literary traditions, and the conventions of academic periodization. The very war that forced him out of the Russian emigration is responsible for his being understood as ‘unseasonable’; Jameson’s implication is that to write seasonably after 1945 is to be postmodern. Categorizing Nabokov like this is problematic because it ignores his literary production in the inter-war Russian emigration, a significant body of work that is decidedly modernist. While he was more than a decade younger than Eliot, Pound, and the ‘Men of 1914’, he was born in the same year as Ernest Hemingway, was three years younger than F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos

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\(^1\) For an example of what a book about this ‘sense of wonder’ might look like, see Lila Azam Zanganeh’s *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness*. 
Passos, and two years younger than William Faulkner. His poetry was first published in Vestnik Evropy, one of the leading Russian intellectual journals of the time, as early as 1916. He published his first mature collection of poetry, Grozd, in 1923, the year after James Joyce published Ulysses and T. S. Eliot published The Waste Land. When Faulkner published Absalom! Absalom! in 1936, Nabokov was the author of seven novels, three collections of poetry, and a collection of short stories.

The challenge to thinking of Nabokov as a modernist is not that he was writing in Russian but that he was writing in the Russian emigration. It is ironic that so many modernists chose self-imposed exile in order to enable the full capacities of their experimental art while Nabokov, forced into exile, was actually part of a cultural milieu that was more conservative and traditional than that back in Russia.\(^2\) If there was a prominent strain in modernism that sought to fragment and re-invent, the literary culture of the emigration was understandably more interested in the importance of preservation. Russian modernism, then, is often understood as exclusively happening in Russia (or with artists sympathetic to the revolution), where artistic experimentation went hand in hand with revolutionary politics before it was eventually extinguished by the installation of socialist realism at the first Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934.\(^3\) Writers like Nabokov, censored by the Soviet Union, can only occupy an oblique relationship to this story; for example, in Victor Erlich’s influential Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition (1994), Nabokov does not figure once. Nabokov’s work was intricately engaged with European and Russian modernism but European and Russian modernism was not substantially engaged with Nabokov’s work.\(^4\)

By the time Nabokov published his first novel in English, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight in 1941, the moment of high modernist literary production was receding, if not already passed. This makes him a difficult figure to place into the larger narrative of American literary history and it is not just Jameson who has understood him as a liminal or transitional

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\(^2\) It is worth noting, however, that the rich Russian tradition of the poet-in-exile, dating back to Pushkin’s banishment to the Caucasuses, was something that Nabokov could exploit in his art. Bethea and Frank argue that Nabokov uses exile as ‘an opportunity, an enabling condition which grants him an elevated position’ (‘Exile and Literature’, 206).

\(^3\) It is no coincidence that Nabokov started writing The Gift the following year as it is the novel that most explicitly engages with the Russian literary tradition. One way to read The Gift is as a safe repository for this tradition at the very time in which it was being mutilated by Soviet censorship and purges.

\(^4\) For a comprehensive reading of Nabokov’s use of modernist allusions in his work see John Burt Foster’s Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism (1993) and ‘Nabokov and Modernism’ (2005).
figure. In John Barth’s 1967 essay ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ (collected in The Friday Book) Nabokov is understood, alongside Borges and Beckett, as being a ‘technically up-to-date artist’ as opposed to a technically old-fashioned artist or technically up-to-date non-artist (p. 66). Nabokov’s being up-to-date is not all it seems, however, as, for Barth, this is a period in which fiction is in the state of exhaustion his title advertises. Pale Fire is paradigmatic of this exhausted literature, composed, writes Barth, in the ‘felt ultimacy’ of the moment (p. 67). In 1980 Barth issued a corrective essay, entitled ‘The Literature of Replenishment’, in which Nabokov is once again figured in a transitional role. Barth clarifies that the exhaustion he felt back in the 1960s was with the aesthetic of high modernism and in trying to understand what is meant by literary postmodernism argues that ‘Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges and the late Vladimir Nabokov’ are the ‘engendering spirits of the “movement”’ (p. 195). According to Barth, the work of these writers needs to be transcended however as the postmodernist ‘aspire to a fiction more democratic in its appeal than such late-modernist marvels (by my definition) as Beckett’s Texts for Nothing or Nabokov’s Pale Fire’ (p. 203). For Jameson, Nabokov is belated, for Barth he is the bridge between categories.

This argument—that Nabokov inspired, but was not fully part of, literary postmodernism—is one that has become well established, even conventional, in periodizing studies of American literary history. In 1971, Tony Tanner argued in City of Words: American Fiction 1950–70 that Nabokov was a founding father of American postmodern literature, exerting, alongside Borges, ‘a strong influence’ on a self-reflexive generation of writers (p. 21). The very title of Tanner’s book was inspired by a passage in Pale Fire. In Postmodernist Fiction (1987), Brian McHale placed Nabokov among a group of writers ‘who in the course of their careers travel the entire trajectory from modernist to postmodernist poetics’ (p. 11). For McHale, Lolita is a classic modernist take on unreliable narration, an unreliability that is pushed to its boundaries in Pale Fire, a work he calls ‘perhaps the paradigmatic limit-modernist novel’ (p. 19).

Nabokov does not fit comfortably with the different ways literary postmodernism has been defined. His well-wrought work is incompatible with Jean-François Lyotard’s claim, made in The Postmodern Condition, that postmodernism ‘denies itself the solace of good forms’ (p. 81). Steven Connor has recently argued that in the modernism enshrined by the New Critics, all literary work, even the most voluminous novels, aspired to the status of the aesthetically autonomous poem and that one ‘can name as “postmodernist” the dissatisfaction with this atemporal temper, along with the disposition to attend to that which registers the passage of and exposure to time rather than its gathering up’ (p. 63). This aversion to
the contextual also precludes Nabokov’s work from being defined as historiographic metafiction, the term Linda Hutcheon uses to theorize postmodernism in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). Hutcheon’s single reference to Nabokov is even more fleeting than that made by Jameson, simply stating that *Pale Fire* is a ‘modernist text’ (p. 51).5

In the most influential recent revision of the post-war period, *The Program Era*, Mark McGurl has examined the way the creative writing program and the university as host institution have shaped the making of literature. Again, Nabokov figures as a foundational influence but, crucially, not as part of the story itself. McGurl is interested in Nabokov as a writer who ‘missed a date with institutional destiny’ by being so heavily involved with universities but never teaching on a creative writing program (p. 5). Even though Nabokov ‘remained mostly an outsider to the new institutional arrangements of the Program Era’, McGurl argues that the ‘programmatic self-expression’ one finds in his work (what Nabokov would call his ‘serial-selves’) is ‘emblematic of something central to the institution of creative writing, and of the ends to which its technologies are put’ (p. 11). McGurl’s title is modelled on Hugh Kenner’s definitive account of high modernism, *The Pound Era* (1971), a study that has no place for Nabokov or his version of modernist aesthetics. This was not just a matter of period; in another of his works, *A Homemade World*, Kenner argued that there was a lack of seriousness, a virtuosic frivolousness in the writing of the metafictive heirs of modernism, who had taken the idea of close critical reading and ‘made it a vehicle for erudite humor’. Kenner finds *Pale Fire* the best (or indeed worst) example of this tendency, condemning it as ‘a mirthless hoax’ and arguing that it and *Ada* were merely ‘ingenious ships-in-bottles riding plastic seas to the awe of teaching assistants’ (*A Homemade World*, 211). To Kenner’s temper Nabokov’s work is a debased and decadent modernism. Nabokov is out of joint: too late for the Pound era, too early for the Program era. Over and again, Nabokov is reduced to a paratextual presence in the book of literary history, whether playing the role of foundational foreword or overwrought afterword.

As much as Nabokov would have recoiled at his Marxist-influenced account of literary history, one suspects he would not have been entirely displeased by Jameson’s description of his spinning his forms in ‘a time capsule of isolation or exile’. Indeed, the idea that Nabokov’s work was somehow out of season is ironically congruent with the way he has been

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5 Hutcheon argues that Gordon Crosse’s use of *Pale Fire* as ‘structural inspiration’ for his Second Violin Concerto is an example of cross-media continuity between modernist and postmodernist texts (p. 51).
read by many of what Rampton called his ‘professional readers’ and what we might call Nabokovians; both approaches isolate Nabokov from his socio-historical context, even if they come at his work from different directions. In an important way, however, these ‘professional readers’ represent Nabokov’s ideal readers. With the collapse of the emigration Nabokov lost a close community of readers who understood his work’s contexts and cultural nuances. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms this was a ‘field of restricted production’ in which Nabokov was writing for other artists and a relatively small public. In the United States his work, after the publication of Lolita, was participating in the ‘field of large-scale production’ in which culture is made for the ‘general public’ (Bourdieu, 115). One way of understanding the Nabokovian project is by reading his overdetermined texts of the American and Swiss periods, with their games, riddles, and submerged plots, as seeking to re-create that lost readership through inviting an ahistorical exegetical criticism. By drawing readers into a restricted a group that reads communally, Nabokov’s work invites the re-creation of a readership analogous to the one it had lost. On this analysis, the project has enjoyed great success, with an established community of Nabokovian scholars who have produced remarkable ‘deep’ readings of his fiction. This scholarship has sustained Nabokov’s idea of artistic durability outside the context of literary movements or sociological phenomena, such as the very acts of periodization just described.

In isolating Nabokov from contexts, though, his relevance to a wider scholarly discussion is placed at risk. If one swallows whole Nabokov’s claim, from his lecture on Madame Bovary, that, ‘the isms go; the ist dies; art remains’ then, as a scholar, one is left with little option but to pursue intentional formalist approaches to his work (LL 147). In this way Nabokov studies can become complicit in the marginalizing of Nabokov’s work in academic discourse. There is a mutually reinforcing mechanism in place between the literary historian and the Nabokovian that insists on Nabokov being ‘unseasonable’, even if they understand that word in different ways. Even a scant perusal of the cultural history of the post-war period, however, tells us that Nabokov was emphatically of his season, that he enjoyed vast critical and commercial success, that he was firmly embedded in the literary institutions of his time, and that he accrued a wealth of symbolic capital to match the wealth that came his way with the success of Lolita. What seems necessary if we are to develop a more nuanced understanding of Nabokov in his context, is not just a more historicist approach to Nabokov grounded in the material production of his work but also a need to rethink the idea of period in the post-war moment, a way of better understanding the messy space between the end of high modernism and the advent of postmodernism. What we need is not to
think of late modernism, as Jameson does, as merely a formal belatedness but rather to think of late modernism as a complex but clearly demarcated literary field.

**LATE MODERNISM**

There have been three substantive efforts to address the idea of literary late modernism in recent years, all of which conflict with each other: Tyrus Miller’s *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts Between the World Wars* (1999), Anthony Mellors’s *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (2005), and Robert Genter’s *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (2010). Miller’s late modernism is constructed in response to what he believes is a bias in canonical criticism toward the genealogy of the modernist movement; Michael Levenson, Marjorie Perloff, and Hugh Kenner are some of the critics he has in mind. There has, Miller argues, been an excessive focus on Cubism and Futurism in the 1910s and the development of those concepts into the avant-garde movements of the 1920s. Miller seeks to turn the ‘historiographic teleoscope the other way round’ and consider modernism from the perspective of what he considers its ‘end’ (p. 5). This is where Miller’s argument becomes problematic: he understands this end to be the advent of the Second World War and considers the literary production of Djuna Barnes, Wyndham Lewis, Samuel Beckett, and Mina Loy in the 1930s to be representative of late modernism. Miller’s stated goal in focusing on these writers is to ‘elevate their status in the canons of twentieth century history’ which is simply an accretive replication of the modernist protocols that excluded these writers from ‘canons’ in the first place (although how excluded Barnes and Lewis are from conventional accounts of modernism is something with which one might take issue) (p. 6).

Mellors gives Miller’s late modernism short shrift in his study, calling his title a ‘misnomer’ and arguing that Miller’s modernism ‘was dissolving almost before it began’ (p. 3). For Mellors, late modernism opens up into the second half of the twentieth century, with the understanding that late modernist works ‘remain true to the modernist imperative that eclecticism and difficulty form a hermeneutic basis for cultural renewal, but their belatedness involves a disavowal of the unifying and totalising gestures of modernist aesthetics’ (pp. 2–3). Focusing on the deployment of poetic myth in the ‘hermetic’ Pound tradition (Prynne and Olson in particular), Mellors’s argument is necessarily narrow and becomes enmeshed in distinguishing late modernism from what he argues are ‘nebulous’ definitions of postmodernism (p. 3). What we have is a convincing argument for a set
of formal relations, but not a description of a categorical term that is helpful beyond the examples given.

The most ambitious attempt to define late modernism is that of Genter, who argues that in the post-war period there were three categories of modernism: an enduring high modernism, a romantic modernism closely associated with the Beat movement, and a late modernism that ‘offered an entirely new way of thinking about the nature of the modernist form, one that refused to shy away from the notion that art at its essence was a form of rhetoric, persuasion, and social communication’ (p. 12). Genter’s command of the period is impressive, and aspects of his argument resonate with the one I am making here, but I push back against his tendency to make modernism too broad a church. Would not the Beats better be described as neo-Romantics? And are Genter’s late modernists (Baldwin, Brown, Burke, Ellison, Goffman, Riesman, and Wright Mills), with their (generally) more liberal cultural politics and their concern for the social, not breaking with essential tenets of modernism? Are Genter’s high modernists not sufficiently shaped by their historical context (post-war, post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima) to require a new categorization?

To define late modernism as something more than a cluster of formal practices, it is helpful to consider the account of modernism found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The appeal of Bourdieu’s model is that it allows us to explore modernism as a whole, and late modernism in particular, without subjecting it to either strictly formalist definition (certain experimental technical practices), or an inflexible historical definition (work published between 1910 and 1939). Bourdieu instead considers modernism as a cultural field, that is ‘a veritable social universe where, in accordance with its particular laws, there accumulates a particular form of capital and where relations of force of a particular type are exerted’. What is at stake in this social universe, for Bourdieu, is deciding ‘who is a real [artist] and who is not’ (163–4). The advent of modernism is fundamental to Bourdieu’s argument as it inaugurates a literary field discrete from fields in which other forms of social, economic, and political capital dominate. The rules of the game are inverted in the literary field, where symbolic capital accrues to those who defy traditional paths to success (wealth, celebrity, honours). The pioneer modernists—Baudelaire, Flaubert, Mallarmé—are

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6 During the writing of Nabokov and his Books, Yuri Leving and Frederick H. White published Marketing Literature and Posthumous Legacies: The Symbolic Capital of Leonid Andreev and Vladimir Nabokov, which draws on Bourdieu’s sociology of literature to explain how Andreev and Nabokov marketed their work. In Leving’s reading, Nabokov was a canny operator in the literary marketplace who ‘played the role of protective literary agent’ to his own books and successfully built his ‘brand’ (p. 12). Leving also explores Nabokov’s fascinating legacy as a writer in post-Soviet Russia.
the heroes of this account, wresting autonomy from economic and political domination. Once the modernist literary field has become established and begun to regulate itself, its oppositional power becomes diluted and begins to come into alignment with the larger social order. This, by Bourdieu’s argument, is what we see in the 1930s, when Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Stein’s *Alice B. Toklas* appear on the bestseller list, and the gap between symbolic and deferred economic capital shrinks dramatically. In the early days of the modernist moment, the anti-political politics of Emile Zola or Marcel Proust can be brought to bear on the Dreyfus Affair (their very autonomy lending them authority); in the 1930s, we find certain aspects of modernism being co-opted by a nascent fascism. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova gives Bourdieu’s approach a global application, theorizing Paris as the capital of this expanded literary field. For Casanova, the erosion of autonomy in the modernist literary field in the second half of the twentieth century is explained by the shift from ‘internationalism to globalization’ embodied in the rise of New York as a rival to Paris as literary hub (p. 171).

So by drawing on Bourdieu we can define late modernism as the literary production of modernist work in a period when the field’s oppositional power—the specific autonomy of the literary field—has been diluted through its increasing alignment with the fields of social and political power it had initially sought to reject. This can be most clearly seen in the way the institutions of late modernism, and particularly the publishing industry, become more concerned with commercial imperatives. The shift away from Paris and toward New York as symbolic capital of the literary field is, in generalized terms, the shift from the restricted market of inter-war coterie modernism, to the large-scale market of a modernism that not only reached the top of the bestseller list but also made for profitable movie adaptation. It is in this deeply problematic environment that the late modernist operates, seeking to disassociate her pursuit of symbolic capital from its increasing entanglement with economic capital while simultaneously entering an ambiguous relationship with state ideology. Nabokov is fascinating in this context because he lived through the transition from high to late modernism: not only did he move from Paris to New York but he also went from writing for a restricted field in the emigration to finding his books bestsellers in the larger field of the American literary marketplace.

Late modernism can be understood as being constituted by three interrelated elements. The first is a commitment to reasserting a high modernist aesthetic autonomy purged of the dubious politics of Pound and Lewis. One might consider the work of William Gaddis, William H. Gass, or Malcolm Lowry as exemplary in this regard. As Genter writes,
‘[u]nlike the originators of high modernism in the 1920s, those who wrote after the experience of World War II jettisoned the connection between aesthetic hierarchies and political ones that had led many modernists in the 1930s to turn to Fascism to realize their social visions’ (p. 13). In the post-war period it was no longer politics that appeared to threaten the hierarchies of high modernism but the rising tide of mass culture. The inter-war modernist had of course resisted the idea of commercialization of art but during the long boom in America the scale of the ‘problem’ was of a different order. From paperback pulp fiction and comics to network television and Hollywood, the late modernist felt her aesthetic autonomy under threat, and that threat was always the corrosive influence of the marketplace.

The second element of late modernism is that the very disavowal of politics inherent in the credo of aesthetic autonomy itself constituted a politics. One of the arguments frequently expressed in defence of modernist autonomy—from Adorno to Nabokov—was that it constituted a bulwark against the totalitarian aspects of mass culture. The most influential version of this argument, at least in the United States, was that made by Clement Greenberg in ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, published in Partisan Review in 1939. In the essay, Greenberg warned against the dangers of commercial pressures on artists:

Kitsch’s enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself, and its members have not always resisted this temptation. Ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to it entirely. (p. 13)

This succumbing to the profits of kitsch, Greenberg goes on to argue, does not simply have baleful aesthetic consequences but is the means by which society becomes exposed to the cultural imposition of tyranny:

The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects. Since these regimes cannot raise the cultural level of the masses—even if they wanted to—by anything short of a surrender to international socialism, they will flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level. (p. 10)

In this way, to borrow Louis Menand’s words, Greenberg ‘elegantly squared the magazine’s apparently asymmetrical allegiances to Marxism and modernism’ and justified Partisan Review’s distinctly modernist cultural elitism (Introduction, p. viii). The assertion of aesthetic autonomy was, by this argument, both anti-market and anti-totalitarian. As a consequence, late modernism’s politics—while ostensibly resisting capitalist hegemony—was fundamentally anti-communist.
The third and final element constituting late modernism is that the late modernist writer was creating art that was—pace claims to absolute autonomy—validated by the state, by various institutions and by the marketplace, and that this validation was, as we shall see, intimately bound up with the Cold War. Late modernist literature was not avant-garde or radical in the way it was published; it was not circulated in little magazines but was at the cultural centre of the field. In the American post-war literary marketplace writers like Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, William Styron, James Jones, Saul Bellow, Mary McCarthy, James Baldwin, Gore Vidal, Ralph Ellison, J. D. Salinger, and Thomas Pynchon wrote serious, modernist-inflected fiction that made the bestseller list. The publishers of modernist books used the very idea that these writers were somehow above the demands of the marketplace as a means of selling their books. This practice had its roots in inter-war modernist publishing, as scholars such as Mark Morrisson, Lawrence Rainey, Catherine Turner, and Jennifer Wicke have demonstrated, but, when it came to the strategies used to package and sell works of late modernism, it was on a different scale, underpinned by modernism’s emergence as the aesthetic orthodoxy of high school and university education.

NABOKOV AS LATE MODERNIST

From his arrival in New York in 1940 to the publication of *Lolita* in the United States in 1958, Nabokov established himself in the social network of American late modernism. His entrance to this world was facilitated by arguably its most influential gatekeeper: Edmund Wilson, the critical doyen of American high modernism. His 1931 book, *Axel’s Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature 1870–1930*, had introduced an American audience to the influence of Symbolism on a generation of writers who would later be classed as modernists, including Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, and Stein. Nabokov’s cousin, the composer Nicolas Nabokov, was a holiday home neighbour of Wilson’s on Cape Cod and facilitated an introduction. Nabokov and Wilson began a lively correspondence and Wilson worked his considerable connections on his new friend’s behalf. Nabokov could not have hoped for a better guide to the American literary scene: Wilson was as powerful an advocate as the best literary agents in New York City and, even better, did not charge commission. Wilson arranged for Nabokov to write reviews for his former employer, *The New Republic*, giving him nitty-gritty advice on subject matter and word counts (*NWL* 37). As back-up for any pieces *The New Republic* did not want, Wilson put Nabokov in touch with Klaus Mann at *Decision*. To help him
place his short stories, Wilson introduced Nabokov to Edward Weeks, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and recommended the magazine publish the short story ‘Cloud, Castle, Lake’ (which they did, in their June 1941 edition). He also offered introductions to the editors at *Harper’s Bazaar, Kenyon Review, Partisan Review*, and *The New Yorker* (*NWL* 42, 63, 64). To help find a publisher for Nabokov’s novels, Wilson recommended his friend to James Laughlin of New Directions and, when the firm brought out *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, wrote an admiring blurb. In March 1943, Nabokov secured a Guggenheim Fellowship largely due to Wilson’s advocacy and in June of the following year Wilson helped secure Nabokov a first-reading contract with *The New Yorker*, worth an initial $500 (this figure would increase in line with Nabokov’s reputation over the next three decades) (*AY* 73). Wilson read drafts, offered suggestions and corrections, and suggested strategies on how to approach editors and publishers to maximize fees. In one letter he even advised Nabokov on how much he should charge as anthology fee for the use of one of his poems ($10) (*NWL* 99). In a grateful letter to Wilson, Nabokov described these remarkable efforts on his behalf as ‘the great Push’ (*NWL* 44). In turn, Wilson took pride in having ‘discovered’ a fully-fledged modernist writer at a time when there were anxieties about the direction of post-war letters. Fitzgerald had died in 1940, Joyce and Woolf in 1941, and the best work of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Dos Passos was behind them. Pound was disgraced and locked away in St Elizabeth’s hospital while Eliot was an increasingly conservative figure. A perceived dissatisfaction with the state of contemporary literature was reflected in the perceived need for these writers to be given their full, belated due.

Modernist literature was consecrated in influential new editions, such as Malcolm Cowley’s *Viking Portable Edition of Faulkner* (1944), while James Laughlin’s *New Directions*, founded in 1936, was committed to bringing out modernist books regardless of their viability in the marketplace. Pound won the Bollingen Prize in poetry in 1949, an example of the lengths to which certain sections of the literary community were prepared to go to separate an author’s work from his life and politics. The National Book Award was also instituted in 1950 as a move to confer prestige on modernist and experimental writing, with Faulkner winning twice in the first five years. Nabokov never won the National Book Award but was a finalist six times, including for *Pnin* (1958), *Lolita* (1959), and *Pale Fire* (1963). This was an era in which prestige culture was instrumental in validating modernist aesthetics: Eliot won the Nobel Prize in 1948, Faulkner in 1949, and Hemingway in 1954.

Modernism was also championed in academia, a process in which Nabokov participated through his work at Wellesley College and Cornell
University. There was a huge growth in higher education in the United States after the Second World War and in literature departments this coincided with the ascendancy of the New Criticism, under the influence of which modernist literature was given primacy on English department syllabi. In their earlier iteration as the Fugitive–Agrarian poets, the New Critics had seen their ideas repeatedly rejected in the early 1930s, even in places where many of them clustered, like Vanderbilt University. Having been cast as outsiders for so long, it is perhaps understandable why they were so determined to establish their rigorous new orthodoxy in the university classroom. As Gerald Graff points out in *Professing Literature*, the New Critics were so successful that at the leading universities across America, ‘the general education program and the New Critical program gradually merged’ (p. 171). For the New Critic, high modernism was the zenith of literary achievement. Cleanth Brooks’s influential *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) argued for Eliot’s account of the literary tradition, which, in Graff’s words, was ‘a story of a more or less uninterrupted decline from the unified sensibility of the Renaissance into the long interregnum of dissociation, only recently reversing itself in the symbolists and the poets of Eliot’s own generation’ (p. 204). While Nabokov professed to dislike Eliot’s poetry, his conception of how the literary tradition evolved was in many ways very similar. Nabokov himself contributed to modernism’s rising status in the literature classroom; as a professor at Cornell he lectured on Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Proust. What truly made Nabokov an important fellow traveller to the New Critical project was his shared commitment to aesthetic autonomy. In a New Critical pedagogy, Graff argues, ‘instructors needed to decontextualize literature as much as possible’ (p. 191). This stripping away of what was perceived as extrinsic to the literary work of art echoed the way Nabokov was teaching at Cornell, where the ‘university lecture hall was one place where a novel or poem could still command center stage as an object of reverent scrutiny’ (McGurl, 8).

Things become more complicated in the case of the concept of the ‘intentional fallacy’, a term coined by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley in a 1946 article for *The Sewanee Review*. In both formal and paratextual ways, Nabokov sought to direct the way his work was read and, as a consequence, his work has invited much intentionalist analysis. This does

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7 Eliot’s idea of a ‘simultaneous order’ of literature and Nabokov’s conception of a literary tradition are related in the way both of their conceptions of a literary tradition evolve through new formal developments. As Norman argues, ‘Nabokov’s model of artistic evolution is both temporal and yet in some sense independent of time as we conventionally understand it’ (*Nabokov, History*, 11).
not mean he was out of sympathy with the intentional fallacy, however. As Graff explains, the concept was not so much about attacking the idea of authorial intention but a certain form of contextual reading:

What Wimsatt and Beardsley were chiefly attacking was not the practice of looking for authorial intention, but the practice of determining that intention only from biographical information, hypothetical constructions of the Zeitgeist such as ‘the Elizabethan world picture,’ or extratextual statements by the author about what he or she ‘had really meant,’ without ever asking whether the interpretations prompted by these forms of evidence squared with ones that could be inferred from the text without them. (p. 191)

Where Nabokov was distinct from the New Critics was in his insistence on the primacy of sensory aesthetic pleasure in reading (‘the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades’; ‘That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained’) rather than the New Critical emphasis on an intellectual appreciation of the technical integrity of the work (LL 64).8

The New Critics were also key players in the dissemination of modernist literature and aesthetics through the vibrant American journal culture of the 1940s and 1950s. The Southern Review was founded by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks in 1935 and The Kenyon Review by John Crowe Ransom in 1939. By 1944 Allen Tate, who had been at Vanderbilt University with Warren and Ransom, was made editor of The Sewanee Review (Tate also served on the panel that awarded Pound that controversial Bollingen prize). Nabokov met and befriended Ransom at a writers’ conference in Salt Lake City in 1949, expressing admiration for his verse (AY 141). More significantly, Tate was Nabokov’s editor at Henry Holt for the publication of Bend Sinister in 1947, with Tate fighting Nabokov’s corner to get that difficult, and distinctively modernist, novel published. Wilson, who was more of a New Critical fellow traveller, remained highly influential at The New Republic.

The other collective champions of modernism in this period were the New York Intellectuals, who were mostly closely associated with Partisan Review. As Hugh Wilford argues, this group’s disenchantment with Communism in the late 1930s and 1940s meant that their political vanguardism was replaced by a cultural vanguardism: ‘[t]heir main duty, they now believed, was to imitate the avant-garde by cutting the ties

8 This also distinguished him from the Russian Formalists, whose work he knew well and who anticipated the New Critical desire to formulate a more scientific approach to literary criticism. For Nabokov’s engagement with Russian formalism see Alexander Dolinin, ‘Nabokov as a Russian Writer’ and Michael Glynn, Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influence in His Novels (2007).
that bound them to society and, having thus achieved a state of perfect independence, protect and cultivate Modernist culture’ (p. 61). Despite the Marxist politics of Partisan Review (the magazine was the most important on the anti-communist left) Nabokov published two chapters of his autobiography (‘First Poem’ in 1949 and ‘Exile’ in 1951) and the essay ‘Problems of Translation: “Onegin” in English’ (1955) with the journal. Philip Rahv, one of the editors at Partisan Review, even contemplated publishing an excerpt of Lolita but, as Boyd explains, when Nabokov insisted on anonymity the legal ramifications proved insurmountable (AY 264). The journal supported Nabokov during the Lolita scandal by commissioning John Hollander to write the first review of the novel in their autumn 1956 number. When Anchor Review published a substantial excerpt of Lolita the following year, they accompanied it with an admiring essay by F. W. Dupee, a former editor on Partisan Review; the idea was to lend the scandalous novel cultural gravitas. When Lolita was eventually published in the United States in 1958, it was included in the Reader’s Subscription book club, which, in the words of one of its founders, Jacques Barzun, had been created in 1951 in order to build ‘an audience for books that the other clubs considered to be too far above the public taste’ (Quoted in Krystal, p. x). The editorial board of the book club was Barzun, W. H. Auden, and Lionel Trilling, the latter the most influential literary critic among the New York Intellectuals. As part of publication in the series, one of these three wrote an essay about the book in question for The Griffin, the subscriber’s pamphlet. For Lolita, Trilling wrote his influential essay ‘The Last Lover’ which was published in the August 1958 edition of The Griffin. Inclusion in this series was another stamp of modernist consecration.

There were further links with the New York intellectuals. As we have seen, Greenberg published ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ in Partisan Review the year before Nabokov arrived in the United States, and Nabokov soon formulated a similar link between American mass culture and totalitarianism.9 In Nikolai Gogol, published in 1944, Nabokov had equated advertising with poshlust, a coinage not dissimilar to Greenberg’s Kitsch.

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9 As Norman has shown, this also placed Nabokov in alignment with Theodor Adorno’s stance on the culture industry. For an analysis of this unlikely overlap see Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time, 94–8. It is also worth noting that Adorno had links to the New Critics, publishing ‘A Social Critique of Radio Music’ in John Crowe Ransom’s Kenyon Review in 1945. Andreas Huyssen argues that Adorno and Clement Greenberg shared the ‘political impulse’ to ‘save the dignity and autonomy of the artwork from the totalitarian pressures of fascist mass spectacles, socialist realism, and an ever more degraded commercial mass culture in the West’ (p. ix).
In unpacking the clichés of magazine advertisements, Nabokov warned against the corrosive effects of commodification:

The rich poshust emanating from the advertisements of this kind is due not to their exaggerating (or inventing) the glory of this or that serviceable article but to suggesting that the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser. \(\text{(NG 66–7)}\)

In the two years after publishing *Nikolai Gogol*, Nabokov was at work on *Bend Sinister*, the first novel he had written since arriving in America (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* had been published by New Directions in 1941 but had been written in Paris). Norman has shown how in Nabokov’s dystopian vision of a totalitarian regime, Nazi and Soviet ideology is aligned with American mass culture: ‘Despite the fact that, in every other aspect, Paduk’s nation appears unquestionably European, it is important that the popular culture complicit with the maintaining of this power has a distinctly American flavour’ (Nabokov, *History*, 90). At one stage a thinly disguised list of books is associated with the regime, all of which had enjoyed success on the American bestseller list and many of which had been adapted for Hollywood (including Somerset Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* and Franz Werfel’s *The Song of Bernadette*). The Ekwilist thug who carries out the abduction of Krug’s son David is an import ‘from the world of American cinema’ while the Ekwilist cartoon strip, Mr Etermon, ‘evokes the American consumerist drive of the 1940s’ (Norman, *Nabokov, History*, 91, 90).10 *Bend Sinister* received decidedly mixed reviews on its publication, with critics like Frank Kermode and V. S. Naipaul impatient with its ostentatious difficulty. With its sustained allusions to Joyce and Mallarmé, however, the novel’s very modernist difficulty appears to be part of its anti-totalitarian strategy, using the ‘intellectual rigor’ and ‘challenging style’ of ‘European modernism [as] defences instigated directly against totalitarian ideology’ (Norman, *Nabokov, History*, 85).

**NABOKOV AND THE COLD WAR**

It is one of the many ironies of the post-war period that late modernism’s insistence on its aesthetic autonomy was the fundamental reason for it

10 In ‘Nabokov and his Industry’, Blackwell also picks up on the association of the perceived excesses of American capitalism with totalitarianism, citing a 1950 letter from Nabokov to John Fischer, of Harper & Brothers, the publishers of *Conclusive Evidence*. In the letter, Nabokov urges Fischer to ensure they promote the book for the Christmas sales, as ‘Santa Claus is putting on his jackboots’. This, writes Blackwell, is a ‘telling phrase, considering Nabokov’s consistent association of jackboots with tyrannical regimes’ (p. 233).
being deployed as a weapon in the cultural Cold War. Modernist art and literature was proscribed in the Soviet Union and there became a powerful symbol of the freedom of expression of the West. On 19 October 1954, Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered ‘Freedom of the Arts’, a short speech at the 25th anniversary celebrations of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In it, he delivered a ‘reminder to us all of an important principle that we should ever keep in mind’:

This principle is that freedom of the arts is a basic freedom, one of the pillars of liberty in our land. For our Republic to stay free, those among us with a rare gift of artistry must be able freely to use their talent. Likewise, our people must have unimpaired opportunity to see, to understand, to profit from our artists’ work. As long as artists are at liberty to feel with high personal intensity, as long as our artists are free to create with sincerity and conviction, there will be healthy controversy and progress in art. Only thus can there be opportunity for a genius to conceive and to produce a masterpiece for all mankind.

That this speech was delivered at MOMA, that it celebrated ‘healthy controversy’ in the arts, and that it championed the artistic production of the autonomous ‘genius’ ensured that Eisenhower’s speech was received as an unambiguous validation of modernism. In case the subtlety of his point about artistic freedom had been missed, Eisenhower went on: ‘my friends, how different it is in tyranny. When artists are made the slaves and the tools of the state; when artists become the chief propagandists of a cause, progress is arrested and creation and genius are destroyed’ (p. 3).

This was a public statement of what had already been incorporated into covert practice. From its inception in 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had established what Frances Stonor Saunders calls a ‘cultural front’ in the Cold War (p. 2). It was not until Ramparts exposed the CIA’s sponsorship of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), and with it a raft of intellectual magazines including the London-based Encounter, in April 1967 that the scale of this covert propaganda war became public knowledge. Funded by ‘counterpart payments’ from the Marshall Plan, the CIA had poured money into a CCF that, at its peak, had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over twenty prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned a news and features

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11 Eisenhower’s attitude toward modernism was much more accommodating than had been Harry Truman’s. As Menand writes, ‘Eisenhower had more patience than Truman did with modernism; he thought of cultural diplomacy as a branch of psychological warfare, and his Administration was the first to provide systematic funding for international arts exhibitions’ (‘Unpopular Front’, 176).

12 The CCF also funded, for example, Tempo Presente in Italy, Preuves in France, and Der Monat in Germany.
service, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances. (Saunders, 1)

The logic behind setting up the CCF and related organizations was for the United States to seduce European intellectuals away from Communism through their commitment to artistic freedom. The idea, as Louis Menand explains, was not to preach to the choir but to win over the sceptics:

The target audience for cultural propaganda in the Cold War was foreign élites—in particular, left-wing intellectuals and avant-garde writers and artists who might still have some attachment, sincere, sentimental, or opportunistic, to Communism and the Soviet Union. The essence of the courtship was: it’s possible to be left-wing, avant-garde, and anti-communist. Look at these American artists and intellectuals, happily criticizing bourgeois capitalism and shocking mainstream tastes, all safely protected by the laws of a free society. In Russia, these people would be in the Lubyanka, or somewhere north of the Arctic Circle. (‘Unpopular Front’, 174)

For this reason, the CCF began to support modernist art and literature despite those artists’ opposition to the very capitalist system upon which US Cold War ideology was built. This co-option of modernism is, by Andreas Huyssen’s account, an explanation for the adversarial spirit of the 1960s, which was in ‘revolt against that version of modernism which had been domesticated in the 1950s, become part of the liberal conservative consensus of the times, and which had even been turned into a propaganda weapon in the cultural-political arsenal of Cold War anti-communism’ (p. 190).

For very obvious reasons Nabokov was stridently anti-communist. In March 1968, Nabokov was approached by Lauren Leighton, a Slavic scholar working as an intermediary for dissidents in the Soviet Union who wanted to open a channel of communication with him. In a cautious response, Véra Nabokov argued that there was no need to establish communication, as ‘every book by VN is a blow against tyranny, every form of tyranny’ (SL 431).\(^{13}\) As she handled so much of Nabokov’s correspondence and worked with him so closely, it is certainly not a stretch to assume this was also Nabokov’s position. When asked about his politics in an interview with The New York Times, he said:

\(^{13}\) In 1971, Leighton got in touch with Nabokov to show him appreciations of his work by dissidents; Nabokov pronounced himself ‘full of admiration’ for the ‘daring authors’ (SL 490). Nabokov became less cautious about the authenticity of dissident writers when Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Soviet Union (he had previously suspected Solzhenitsyn of being published with KGB complicity) and in 1974 offered his public support to Vladimir Bukovsky and Vladimir Maramzin (see AY 647–9).
I am aware of a central core of spirit in me that flashes and jeers at the brutal farce of totalitarian states, such as Russia, and her embarrassing tumors, such as China. A feature of my inner prospect is the absolute abyss yawning between the barbed-wire tangle of police states and the spacious freedom of thought we enjoy in America and Western Europe. (SO 113)\textsuperscript{14}

This interview was published in May 1968, when students were rioting on the streets of Paris and France seemed on the cusp of a radical shift to the left. Radical and New Left movements were making their presence known all over Western Europe and the United States. D. Barton Johnson and Norman both argue that the United States of the 1960s, especially on campus, was one that profoundly unsettled the staunchly anti-communist Nabokov and it is telling that in listing the virtues of Switzerland in a 1971 interview with Bayerischer Rundfunk he began with: ‘Exquisite postal service. No bothersome demonstrations, no spiteful strikes’ (SO 192).\textsuperscript{15} Little wonder then that McGurl identifies Nabokov as ‘a militant Cold War individualist’ (p. 8).

Nabokov’s status as a cold warrior could have been more explicit had he beaten his cousin, the composer Nicolas Nabokov, to a job heading up the Russian content for the Voice of America in 1946. Despite a ‘resounding letter for reference’ from Wilson, Nabokov lost out to Nicolas, whose connections with George Kennan and Charles ‘Chip’ Bohlen proved decisive (AY 113). Nicolas Nabokov went on to become, in Saunders’s

\textsuperscript{14} In Strong Opinions, many of the questions are excised, the interview being presented mostly as a rolling transcript.

\textsuperscript{15} Robert Roper contends that Nabokov’s deep-seated anti-Bolshevism ‘came to resemble garden-varietey American anti-Communism, with, in the fifties, a bemused fondness for Joe McCarthy, and in the sixties outright disgust with long-haired American students protesting the war in Vietnam’ (p. 43). Norman also points out that Nabokov’s anti-Communism was found not only in his ‘unflinching support for the Vietnam War’ but also in ‘a boycott of French goods during de Gaulle’s period of hostility to the United States, and full support for Nixon in 1972’ (Nabokov, History, 134). In 1965, Nabokov had written to Lyndon Johnson to wish him well after a gall-bladder operation and ‘a speedy return to the admirable work you are accomplishing’, which included the bombing of North Vietnam (SL 378). In a 1969 interview with Philip Oakes of The Sunday Times, Nabokov said that, ‘[r]owdies are never revolutionary, they are always reactionary. It is among the young that the greatest conformists and Philistines are found, e.g., the hippies with their group beards and group protests. Demonstrators at American universities care as little about education as football fans who smash up subway stations in England care about soccer. All belong to the same family of goofy hoodlums—with a sprinkling of clever rogues among them’ (SO 139). Norman also relates an anecdote in which James Mason, the actor who played Humbert Humbert in the Stanley Kubrick film adaptation of Lolita, bought Nabokov a tie with a pretty unambiguous message written on it: ‘Fuck Communism’ (Nabokov, History, 134). D. Barton Johnson speculates that Nabokov’s perception of the social chaos of the United States in this period may have been the reason he never returned from Switzerland: ‘America no longer looked like the country that had provided Nabokov shelter and stability for the first time in his adult life’ (‘Nabokov and the Sixties’, 147).
words, the ‘impresario of the cultural Cold War’ as the secretary general of the CCF. He held the position from 1951 until it was dissolved in 1967 when the CIA’s involvement was made public (Saunders, 100).

Nabokov’s books, however, were exploited in the propaganda war. In 1952, the CIA indirectly funded the first extant publication of Nabokov’s most important Russian novel, *The Gift*. Nabokov had sent the manuscript of his novel to the Chekhov Publishing House (CPH) in New York in mid-September of the previous year, before the CPH had even been formally established. Nabokov had been told to try ‘the Ford people’ by fellow émigré novelist Mark Aldanov (NWL 269). As Brian Boyd notes in his biography of Nabokov, the CPH ‘could afford to pay advances that were larger and to sell copies at prices that were lower than émigré books could otherwise expect in America’ because of the financial support of the Ford Foundation (AY 204). The Ford Foundation was not acting out of philanthropic concern for Russian letters. As Saunders explains, it had been ‘officially engaged as one of those organizations the CIA was able to mobilize for political warfare against Communism’ (p. 142). The Ford Foundation was responsible for bankrolling the East European Fund (EEF), which was ‘a CIA front in which George Kennan played a prominent role’. The EEF forged a close relationship with the CPH and some $523,000 of Ford Foundation money was channelled into the CPH ‘for the purchase of proscribed Russian works, and translation into Russian of Western classics’ (Saunders, 142). The idea behind the CPH was to publish not only Russian émigrés banned in the Soviet Union, like Nabokov, but also the Russian dissidents who had been silenced, imprisoned, or murdered by the Soviet regime. For a new publishing venture, bringing out books in a foreign language, the CPH was incredibly productive: it published over 150 titles before closing in 1956. As well as *The Gift* they brought out the Russian translation of Nabokov’s memoir, *Drugie Berega* (*Other Shores*), in 1955, and a collection of stories, *Vesna v Fialte* (*Spring in Fialta*) in 1956. Nabokov also contributed the foreword to a collection of Gogol stories (*AY* 211). The CPH’s generosity was warmly received: for the translation of his memoir into a Russian edition that, ostensibly, would

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16 Nicolas Nabokov had become involved in the Cold War through his intelligence work in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War in Berlin. After initially working on the ‘de-Nazification’ of German culture with Michael Josselson, an Estonian émigré whom he had known in Berlin in the 1920s, Nicolas Nabokov soon became instrumental in the cultural conflict with Soviet Russia. For a detailed account of his role with American intelligence see Saunders’s *The Cultural Cold War*. In a letter to Wilson, Nabokov seemed rather amazed (and amused) at his cousin being ‘sent on a mission to Germany in the rank of Colonel’ (NWL 154).
circulate only amid the émigré community in the United States, Nabokov was paid an advance of $1,500.\textsuperscript{17}

The publication of *The Gift* and the agreement to bring out *Drugie Berega* happened in 1952, three years before he published *Lolita* in Paris with the Olympia Press.\textsuperscript{18} Nabokov had begun to establish his reputation through publishing short stories with *The Atlantic Monthly* and then chapters of what became *Conclusive Evidence* in *The New Yorker* and *Partisan Review* but he was a long way from being the literary celebrity he would become in the late 1950s. The decision to publish *The Gift* was not about exploiting Nabokov’s American profile, it was to make a point about the conditions of creative freedom available to Russian writers in the United States. Nabokov’s novel, written seventeen years previously, was deployed as a weapon in the cultural Cold War.

THE LITERARY MARKETPLACE

To understand the difference between the literary marketplace during the period of inter-war high modernism and post-war late modernism, it is revealing to consider the similarities and differences between the publication history of *Ulysses* and *Lolita*. Like *Lolita*, *Ulysses* created a great deal of controversy when it was first published, initially in serial form in *The Little Review* (1918–20) before being published as a book by Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Company in Paris in 1922. Here was a novel composed by a writer-in-exile, whose controversial content forced him to seek its publication in Paris, a novel dogged by charges of obscenity once it was finally printed, yet one that met with critical adulation. The similarities with the

\textsuperscript{17} If Nabokov was unaware of the CIA’s indirect patronage of the CPH, he was well aware, in 1968, that Radio Liberty were using one of his books as a cultural weapon in the Cold War. *Priglashenie na kazn’* (*Invitation to a Beheading*) was published in Paris by Editions Victor in 1968 for covert distribution in the Soviet Union (AY 504). He also told Edmund Wilson he had been corresponding with the US military in 1948 about a German edition of *Bend Sinister* (NWL 205).

\textsuperscript{18} When *The Anchor Review* published the first extracts of *Lolita* in the United States in 1957, the editor of that volume was Melvin Lasky, one of the key figures in the cultural Cold War. He had secured Marshall Plan funding to found and edit the anti-communist *Der Monat* and, the year after working on the *Lolita* extracts, would replace Irving Kristol as editor at *Encounter*. Saunders speculates that he was in fact working directly for the CIA, an allegation Lasky denied (p. 44). This is not to suggest that there was anything sinister going on in the publication of the *Lolita* extracts, just to show how close were the relations between those engaged in high modernist literary production and those fighting the cultural Cold War. In another example, Nabokov’s editor at *Playboy*, Robie Macauley, had worked for the CIA at the Congress for Cultural Freedom between 1953 and 1958.
publication history of *Lolita* are striking; Nabokov even approached Beach, whom he had known from his time in Paris, to publish his book (*AY* 265). Both also ended up as bestsellers once they had been belatedly published in America; the big difference was the scale of the market they entered. Beach’s edition of *Ulysses* had sold around 30,000 copies by the time Bennett Cerf acquired the rights and he had prepared a print run of 10,300 in anticipation of winning the 1933 court case that freed the novel from censorship. Catherine Turner also tells us that 25,000 people responded to a promotional advertisement in which *Ulysses* could be purchased for $3.50 and that the novel ‘surprised everyone by ending up on the bestsellers list’ (p. 210). *Lolita*, as we have already seen, sold nearly 300,000 in its first year of publication in the United States, staying on the bestseller list the whole time, and sales of paperbacks surged when the Hollywood movie came out in 1962 (the novel had been first published as a paperback in 1960). By the time Nabokov came to publish his novel, he was operating in a market that had been dramatically scaled up by changes in the publishing industry.

The accommodations American publishers had to make with the mass market in the decades after the war precipitated what historian John Tebbel describes as ‘the great change’ toward a corporate mentality in publishing from the 1960s onwards (p. 335). As Gordon Hutner has shown, this change had its seeds in the 1930s, when the industry began to organize itself and gain a better understanding of demand and how to meet it. He cites O. H. Cheyney’s *Economic Survey of the Book Industry 1930–31* (1931) as having the greatest impact, the results of this research being ‘crucial to the reshaping of the publishing business and the concomitant rise of the blockbuster’ (Hutner, 141). With R. L. Duffus’s *Books: Their Place in Democracy* (1930), Charles Compton’s *Who Reads What?* (1934), and Douglas Waples’s *People and Print* (1938) American publishing was gaining a greater understanding of itself in an economic depression that was changing the type of books people could afford to buy and read. Hutner explains that in the 1930s, ‘when two or three dollars, the price of a new novel, were hard to come by, pulp fiction flourished’ (p. 124). This demand for cheaper books and the early successes of Allen

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19 The dominance of the lending libraries, especially in the British model of publishing, had created its own pressures, especially in the demand for books to be of a certain length. In 1937 Denys Kilham Roberts, President of the Society of Authors, complained that ‘the unwritten law by which libraries require novels to be of a certain minimum length is a mark of a growing tendency to reduce literature to the level of canned foods’ (quoted in Nash, ‘The Production of the Novel’, 12). So in some ways, at least, the new market opportunities could be liberating for publishers.
Lane’s Penguin Books in the United Kingdom prompted Robert de Graff and Simon & Schuster to form Pocket Books in 1939, and when paper rationing ended after the war, paperbacking books began to have a substantial effect on the industry. Paperbacks themselves became hierarchically stratified so that Doubleday’s Anchor Books and Knopf’s Vintage would produce more expensive editions while the cheap reprints of Signet Books would range between pulp fiction and canonical classics.

As Evan Brier has shown, during the late 1940s and 1950s the publishing industry was discreetly maintaining convenient double standards, seeking to exploit as much as possible the new opportunities of cheap book technology and mass market demand—especially through movie tie-ins—while also advertising their aloofness from it, so that ‘announcing the novel’s distance from commerce and especially mass culture could quickly pay commercial dividends’ (p. 13). The formation of the American Book Publishers Council in 1946 brought much greater institutional coherence to American publishing and with it a firmer sense of communal purpose. The motivation was not exclusively financial; some publishers still saw themselves as essentially performing a public service. For the Cold Warriors in the publishing industry this included educating the population about the ideological struggle with Soviet Communism. This sense of the publishing industry having a larger social responsibility was, as Hutner explains, eroded throughout the 1950s:

What we can observe through the decade’s unfolding is how the realistic artefact meant to edify citizen-readers becomes a consumer item positioned to compete with TV and Hollywood […] the novel increasingly lives out the logic of its packaging over the preceding thirty years and becomes merely another consumable differentiated for a season; in this way, its packaging weighs heavily as part of its cultural worth. (p. 285)

Nabokov, arriving in the United States in 1940, the year after the founding of Pocket Books, published his books throughout this transitional period in American publishing, when old traditional houses like Doubleday and Macmillan were undergoing the change, with varying degrees of resistance, from family-run businesses to corporate entities. It is important to stress however, that this was a long way from blanket standardization and absolute market imperatives and that for many within the industry it still maintained some of its distinctive qualities; Jason Epstein, who published Nabokov at Doubleday, recalled ‘1950s book publishing [as] still the small-scale, highly personal industry it had been since the 1920s’ (p. 8).

Coming from the relative intimacy of Russian émigré journal culture—what Bourdieu would call ‘a field of restricted production’—Nabokov was highly suspicious of a literature that sought to appeal to a mass market
In 1937 Nabokov delivered a lecture about Pushkin to an audience in Paris and, in ‘Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable’, Nabokov cautioned against the over-exposure of literary art: ‘The greater the number of readers, the less a book is understood, the essence of its truth, as it spreads, seems to evaporate’ (PRP 41). This was an expression of what Aaron Jaffe calls the ‘ideology of scarcity’, the idea that modernism’s authenticity was fundamentally connected to its refusal to satisfy the needs of a larger marketplace (p. 65). Predictably, therefore, Nabokov had only contempt for the phenomenon of the bestseller. In one of the lectures on drama he gave at Stanford in the summer of 1941, Nabokov told his students that the ‘prime object of the playwright ought to be not to write a successful play but an immortal one’ (quoted in AY 30). In ‘The Proletarian Novel’, an unpublished lecture he gave at Wellesley in the autumn of 1941, he wrote that, ‘at the present moment this country is facing a grave danger: that danger is the bestseller’ (quoted in Norman, Nabokov, History, 88). In an interview with a magazine at Wellesley, Nabokov claimed that bestsellers represented ‘perhaps the worst form of propaganda, the propaganda of current ideas, easily digested brain food, fashionable worries’ (AY 101). As a writer who had exile and poverty forced upon him, Nabokov had little patience for the posturing of the alienated artist, yet he was clearly invested in distancing himself from the idea that commercial concerns could influence his work.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Nabokov’s cultural politics were clearly high modernist and anti-market, and therefore aligned with those of the ascendant New Critics. In his manifesto essay ‘Criticism Inc.’ (1937), Ransom argued against the view that,

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20 Robert Roper finds this expressed in Nabokov’s attitude to Altagracia de Jannelli, to whom Nabokov jokingly referred as his ‘anti-literary’ agent because of her efforts to make him write books with ‘attractive heroes and moral landscapes’ (p. 20). Roper points out that, until her early death in 1945, she worked ‘admirably hard’ for Nabokov, whose talent she recognized when many others did not, and that her faith in his commercial potential was eventually vindicated by his success with Lolita (p. 17). Furthermore, Roper argues that Nabokov came round, at least in part, to her way of thinking and cites Nabokov’s changing the plot of Pnin (so that Pnin does not die of a heart attack) at the request of Pascal Covici, his editor at Viking, as a concession to ‘Jannellian market wisdom’ (p. 193).

21 The shock of the American marketplace was also felt by those modernists who had cultivated their art in the major European cities, where ‘the split between the avant-garde and bourgeois was concretely undergirded by well-established cultural hierarchies and institutionally separated markets for art and literature. In the modern United States—with a much-less-established tradition of high culture and a far-more-developed mass cultural public sphere—many authors whose self-understanding was based in European models of restricted production found themselves having to adapt to the marketing strategies and audience sensibilities of large-scale production’ (Glass, 6).
art comes into being because the artist, or the employer behind him, has
designs upon the public, whether high moral designs or box-office ones. It is
an odious view in either case, because it denies the autonomy of the artist as
one who interests himself in the artistic object in its own right, and likewise
the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake. (p. 343)

An important story late modernism told itself was one of belated apprecia-
tion. The New Critics, by this way of thinking, arrived to appreciate modernist literature in a way that their contemporaries did not. This idea
of belated recognition demonstrated how little the demands of commerce
mattered to these writers: their judge was not the bestsellers list but posterity.
As Hutner notes in *What America Read*:

The implication is, generally, that these novelists were denied access to the
larger audience that they deserved, either because critics had not yet learned
to appreciate them or because general readers could not see their true value,
neither of which was all that true. (p. 277)

A more sceptical—and nuanced—analysis of inter-war relations between
modernism and the marketplace has been the subject of much recent
scholarship, tracing back to Huysen’s *After the Great Divide*, a seminal
study in which he argued that ‘Modernism constituted itself through a
conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other:
an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture’ (p. vii). Modernist
practitioners and critics operated on, in Douglas Mao’s words, the ‘deeply
embedded assumption that the elect will strive for a spirit of authenticity
purged of the age’s ignoble prostration before commerce’ (p. 4). Lawrence
Rainey, among others, has persuasively argued that modernist assertions of
autonomy from market forces only resulted in the creation of a different
kind of commercial dynamic:

modernism, among other things, is a strategy whereby the work of art invites
and solicits its commodification, but does so in such a way that it becomes a
commodity of a special sort, one that is temporarily exempted from the
exigencies of immediate consumption prevalent within the larger cultural econ-
omy, and instead is integrated into a different economic circuit of patronage,
collecting, speculation and investment—activities that precisely in this period
begin to encroach upon and merge into one another in unexpected ways (p. 3).

This is an argument that draws on Bourdieu’s account of the literary field
and this sociological approach has been developed and expanded by Loren
Glass, Jonathan Goldman, Aaron Jaffe, Adam McKible, Morrisson, and
Turner, who explore the role of advertising, marketing, and celebrity in
disseminating modernist work.22

22 For a comprehensive overview of these new directions in modernist studies see Mao
and Walkowitz, ‘Modernisms Bad and New’ and ‘The New Modernist Studies’. It is also
Nabokov’s literary production, and that of late modernism in general, has yet to be subjected to a similar level of scrutiny. As we have seen, Nabokov was as staunch a defender of aesthetic autonomy as any of the high modernist mandarins. In the interviews he edited and collected in *Strong Opinions* he claimed that: ‘no creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever’ (*SO* 3).\(^{23}\) To hold an anti-market position in the changing climate of the post-war literary marketplace became increasingly difficult, as the modernist double game was put under extreme pressure by the growing culture industry. With late modernism we can see an intensification of the issues at stake.

Nabokov arrived in America in 1940 with serious aesthetic and political concerns about the growth of mass culture and particularly about the ‘grave danger’ presented by the bestseller; by the end of the 1950s he was the author of one. Starting in 1950 he began to relax his opposition to the market. Nabokov was about to publish *Conclusive Evidence*, excerpts of which had been published in *The New Yorker*, and he wrote to Katharine White on 28 January 1950 to ask for ‘confidential advice’:

> I am determined to make some money with the book and think of enlisting the services of a good press agent—I wonder if you could assist me in finding out where and how one finds such people? Or perhaps you would advise me against any such move? All my previous books have been such dismal financial flops in this country that I don’t trust the pure fate of unaided books anymore. (*SL* 96)

Nabokov’s choice of adjective in the last sentence is interesting of itself: to dive into the market came at the cost of one’s purity, which, presumably, was one of the reasons he felt this was a ‘confidential’ subject. By the following November he was negotiating with Harper & Brothers about publicity budgets and whether the memoir was going to be distributed to book clubs (*SL* 107). In a letter to Wilson, written on 13 June 1951, Nabokov told his friend about his new attitude to the commercial fate of his books:

> I have decided to welcome all kind and manner of publicity from now on. I am sick of having my books muffled up in silence like gems in cotton wool. The letters from private individuals I get are, in their wild enthusiasms, ridiculously incommensurable with the lack of interest my inane and inept publishers take in my books […] The general result of my proud and

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\(^{23}\) In fact the interview from which this quote is taken appears to have been a ‘fake’ interview that never actually took place.
disinterested and even contemptuous attitude toward the \textit{fata} of my books has not resulted in valor and honesty’s obtaining the upper hand—in the long run—over mediocrity and cheapness. On the contrary, I am completely in the \textit{dèche}, am in miserable financial difficulties, see no way out of academic drudgery (ill-paid to boot) and so on. […] But from now on \textit{je vais me trémousser}, and be very practical and cunning, and send my book to critics, and put in special clauses into my contracts with publishers about the money they must spend on boosting my books. (\textit{NWL} 264)

The following week Nabokov wrote to his sister, Elena Sikorski, complaining that the publication of \textit{Conclusive Evidence} had garnered him ‘a lot of fame but little money’ (\textit{SL} 122). The subject was clearly on his mind; perhaps not coincidentally he was in the thick of writing \textit{Lolita}.

The problem with market forces is that they do not necessarily fall under an author’s control. The mainstream success of \textit{Lolita} in the late 1950s and early 1960s subjected Nabokov and his work to different financial and cultural pressures than those any of the high modernists had ever felt. In some respects his success allowed him access to new forms of authorial control, which he exploited in fascinating ways. The threats to Nabokov’s autonomy took on new guises, however, and ultimately defied his best efforts to remain in control of the production and reception of his art. This had formal ramifications for Nabokov’s art itself. So while this study is obviously interested in the historical and sociological contexts of Nabokov’s work, it also has a formal argument to make. Benjamin Widiss has recently made the salient point that while much of the recent work in modernist studies has caused us to ‘radically revise our understanding of the goals of the writing they address, they pay very little attention to that writing itself’ (p. 21). Nabokov’s fiction is marked in very specific ways by his efforts to assert his autonomy from the market. His densely patterned novels are dazzling assertions of authorial agency yet, as I hope to show in the coming chapters, also dramatize the abdication and erosion of authorial control that comes with the physical act of writing and publishing books.
Upon arriving in the alien environment of New York City in 1940, Nabokov took his first steps toward establishing himself in the world of American letters through book reviewing. With the support of Edmund Wilson he began writing reviews for *The New Republic* and *The New York Sun* in the autumn of that year and the books he reviewed ranged from a biography of Serge Diaghilev to a translation of *The Knight in Tiger’s Skin* by the twelfth-century Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli, and a new novel by John Masefield. Nabokov was forced to adapt to the life of a freelance journalist to help make ends meet and had to review what he was offered. Even within reviews written to deadline, however, Nabokov is carefully positioning himself in this new literary world. In the 21 January 1941 edition of *The New York Sun*, under the headline ‘Faint Rose, or the Life of an Artist Who Lived in an Ivory Tower’, he reviewed *The Life and Death of Conder*, John Rothenstein’s biography of the artist Charles Conder. What is so intriguing about this review is that it begins with a short meditation on the material durability of the work of art; Nabokov was writing this when the material legacy of his own books was insecure:

Some use marble or bronze—sheer weight versus the tide of time. I have heard of a lady who painted her sunsets on live spiderwebs. Others gloat over glass. Conder chose silk: a certain quality of one’s talent is perhaps naturally attracted by the quality of a certain stuff. (‘Faint Rose’, 11)

While Nabokov concedes that Conder is possessed of a ‘limp genius’ he also finds him typical of his milieu: ‘Conder’s life may be said to resemble that of any temperamental artist who lodges in an ivory tower with a wine shop just around the corner.’ While Conder had grown up in England and was trained as a painter in Australia, Nabokov argued that ‘what really mattered to him was Montmartre, the black puddle, the rusty rainpipe on the wall, the lump of sugar melting in the green liquor, Monet and Manet,
and the almond trees along the rural Seine’. No sooner has Nabokov conjured up the absinthe and decadence of fin-de-siècle Paris than he discloses his own proximity to it: ‘well do I remember [Édouard] Dujardin, a prosaic old roan, telling me of those distant nights and how hard I found to imagine the speaker as he was then—tophat, eyeglass, black beard, red lips—robbing Conder of his mistress or chumming with Mallarmé.’ Nabokov concludes that it is the artistic fecundity of this period that ultimately counts against Conder:

As a sneeze is always a sneeze, no matter the social position of the sneezer, so the intrinsic quality of art (which alone counts) does not change through the ages. The inspired caveman who pictured so beautifully an extinct species of deer, the Persian miniaturist, Leonardo, Picasso (I choose them at random) are closer kinsmen in time than the perfect citizens of a Perfect State may ever be in space, and if Conder does not quite survive, it is not because the world changes (or hosts and guests noisily change places), but merely because his art was too frail to compete with those of his prodigious contemporaries in France who went so much further than he along the same sun-dappled path under the same festive trees. (‘Faint Rose’, 11)

For true artists time is conflated so that Picasso and the artistic caveman are brought together by ‘the intrinsic quality of art’. That Nabokov uses the Conder biography to make this argument is consistent with the aesthetic positions he held in the emigration; what is striking is the context. On the same broadsheet page as this argument for art’s autonomous status are advertisements for all manner of goods: cough medicine, lounge chairs, Gossard corsets, and ‘bow-knot print knit rayon undies’. The department store Stern’s takes out two adverts on the page, one alerting the ‘Lady of Today’ that they have just launched ‘Navy dresses for young-minded women’, the other for ‘the fastest-selling Barbizon strip in America’. If these advertisements frame Nabokov’s review on the right, to the left is a news story headlined ‘Official Tokio [sic] Again Attacks U.S. Attitude’, in which it is reported that Japanese foreign minister Yosuke Matsuoka has again warned America to reflect ‘seriously on her attitude towards Japanese ambitions in the Pacific’. This is more than just political rhetoric: ten months later Japan launched the attack on Pearl Harbor that precipitated American entry into the Second World War. Nabokov’s review is a defence of the ivory tower but one framed by the market on one side, and history on the other. There is a further irony: Nabokov is making an argument about artistic durability on newspaper, which as a medium is about as disposable as it gets.

Two months later, on 24 March 1941, Nabokov reviewed Arthur Bryant’s Pageant of England, also in The New York Sun. Under the headline, ‘One Hundred Years of England in a Work Both Scholarly
and Timely’, Nabokov criticized the ‘dual nature’ of British society in the nineteenth century, with its economic hypocrisy and colonial exploitation, before working up a vicariously patriotic finale:

On the whole, his work, without condoning the many blunders committed by various governments in England, stresses the wonderful capacity of the British to make up for lost time and lost opportunities in the last split second before disaster. An inborn sense of freedom has always been the main quality of that lovable nation, and when one thinks of the moods and methods of some other European Powers, one is somehow inclined to forgive Kipling his sikhition [sic] and Rhodes his clay feet. On the roads from Mons to the Marne River, in the agony of Somme and Passchendaele, on Dunkirk beach and in the roaring starlight above the Channel the national character of the British proved more important than the best laws devised by the best men. (‘One Hundred Years’, 32)

Nabokov wrote this piece during the height of the Blitz, before the United States had joined the war and before Hitler had decided to invade Russia. Just two months previously Charles Lindbergh had testified to Congress recommending a neutrality pact with Germany and the Lend-Lease Act had yet to be signed. Nabokov started his review as follows: ‘Mr Bryant’s work cannot be accused of sacrificing scholarly retrospection to the purposes of current politics.’ The same cannot be said of Nabokov, who, writing for his new American audience, seized his opportunity to do his bit for the British cause, extolling the ‘inborn freedom’ of that ‘lovable nation’.

What do these two pieces of journalism tell us? First, and most obviously, that Nabokov was committed to an autonomous aesthetics before he arrived in the United States. Secondly, that the practical application of these high modernist principles of autonomy were messier and more complicated in a highly competitive literary marketplace. Nabokov might command space in the book pages to assert his high modernist credentials, but he had to do so alongside adverts for underwear. Secondly, even a writer as committed to aesthetic autonomy as Nabokov could not help being drawn into the historical moment, as his uncharacteristic jingoism in the Bryant review demonstrates, a review that makes no sense if we do not place it into its context.

While he was trying to make his way as a journalist, and seeking a permanent teaching position at a university, Nabokov composed ‘The Creative Writer’ (1942), an essay detailing his defence of the autonomy of art and giving an account of his creative process. Nabokov had been thinking about this subject since the summer of 1939 when, at a meeting in London with Lovat Dickson (an editor who was reading The Real Life of Sebastian Knight for MacMillan), ‘[a] new theory of literary creation
flashed into my mind’. In an 8 June letter to Véra, he explained the nature of his revelation:

I had already somehow thought about this: we don’t look at a painting from left to right, but we take in everything at once; that’s the principle a novel should be built upon, but because of the peculiarities of a book (pages, lines, and so on), it is necessary to read it through twice, and the second time is the real one. (LV 433)

He began to develop this theory in ‘Technique of the Novel’, two lectures he gave at Wellesley College on 25 and 26 March 1941. Nabokov described the second of these lectures, an open lecture about ‘Vosstorg and Vdakhnovenia’ [sic], as ‘the most important’ and ‘very grand’ in a 26 March letter to Véra (LV 450). These lectures Nabokov developed into ‘The Creative Writer’.

In many ways, ‘The Creative Writer’ is paradigmatic of Late Modernism, a statement of Nabokov’s aesthetic credo composed during his first encounters with the market forces of a buoyant American capitalism and while writers were being subjected to the ideological pressures of working during wartime. In his defence of modernist aesthetic autonomy Nabokov’s argument is explicitly anti-totalitarian, a position he shared with Clement Greenberg’s ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, which had been published three years previously in 1939. Two years after Nabokov’s essay appeared, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer published an early version of Dialectics of Enlightenment in New York, another work that cautioned against the totalitarian threat contained within a culture shaped by the mass market. Greenberg and Adorno were working out of a Marxist tradition to which Nabokov was hostile and his defence of modernist autonomy in ‘The Creative Writer’ might, at first read, appear to be mere aestheticism. In this chapter, however, we will see that Nabokov’s understanding of autonomy was shaped by a complex web of overlapping influences. The ideas expressed in ‘The Creative Writer’, and which went on to shape the fiction, lectures, and discursive prose of Nabokov’s English-language writing, had their roots in the Russian aesthetic tradition, symbolist poetry, high modernism, liberalism, and vitalist philosophy. In unpacking this intellectual backstory, we will also uncover the antecedents for Nabokov’s conception of inspiration—first expressed in ‘The Creative Writer’—and how the work of literary art is conceived as a Platonic book.

THE CREATIVE WRITER

sandwiched between Henri C. Olinger’s ‘What Lies Ahead in Secondary Education for the Modern Foreign Languages’ and Chester M. Walch’s ‘The Hartford Experiment’. The previous autumn at Wellesley—before the attack on Pearl Harbor had even taken place—war measures were put in place on campus: ‘Heat-conservation measures and marathon knitting sessions on behalf of servicemen and refugees were now complemented by air-raid drills and war courses in first aid, home nursing, and canteen cookery’ (AY 40). At the turn of the year, Nabokov began writing his anti-totalitarian novel Bend Sinister and in February, the month after ‘The Creative Writer’ was published, he sat on a panel at Wellesley and argued the cause of Atlanticist democracy: ‘Morally,’ he said, ‘democracy is invincible’ (quoted in AY 41).

The advent of war had brought with it a polemical atmosphere in American letters, prompting, as Hutner explains, ‘an ongoing discussion of the responsibilities and prospects of novelists during time of war’ (p. 208). In books like Archibald MacLeish’s The Irresponsibles (1940) and Van Wyck Brooks’s On Literature Today (1941) and Opinions of Oliver Allston (1941) the problem with the American novel was diagnosed as the growing influence of modernist writers, whose ‘dissociation from the faith for living’ led them ‘into the sneering excesses of “coterie-literature” in which a truly self-critical sensibility has sagged into formalist snobbery’ (Hutner, 204). The argument that ‘American fiction has lost its grounding’ had a Nativist tenor, and was framed as a reaction to writers under the sway ‘of Chekhov, Joyce, and Proust’ and the American modernist expatriates (Hutner, 204). In 1942 Wallace Stegner, alarmed by the fall off in the number of novels being published by the end of the 1930s, published ‘Is the Novel Done For?’ in which he expressed the fear that a more sophisticated journalism was beginning to eclipse fiction, especially with the surge in demand for reportage prompted by the outbreak of war. In a letter to Wilson on 12 January 1942, Nabokov said his short story ‘Spring in Fialta’ was rejected by Harper’s because ‘it was not the sort of piece they could use right now, ie after Pearl Harbour [sic]’ (NWL 57). The arguments for the social utility of literature were now made in the cause of supporting the war effort: ‘Russell Crouse, president of the American Authors League, main tained that writers were combatants of sorts and exhorted the public to understand that the writer’s war effort meant more than publishing new novels to bolster morale’ (Hutner, 215). By 1944, the novelist Margaret Banning would be writing that, ‘Old or young, male or female, this war makes a writer impatient with any kind of ivory tower’ (quoted in Hutner, 213).1

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1 The following year Randall Jarrell published his influential essay ‘The End of the Line’ in which he argued that modernism was not a break with romanticism but ‘an end product
In ‘The Creative Writer’, Nabokov would recommend ‘the much abused ivory tower’ as ‘a fixed address’ (CW 21). He had first read the piece at the annual meeting of the New England Modern Language Association in Rhode Island in May 1941 before publishing it in The Bulletin some eight months later. If it was uncharacteristic of Nabokov to publish in such an explicitly academic volume, it can perhaps be explained by the fact that Ruth Clark, who was head of the French department at Wellesley, was president of the association that year. The sense that the world is in crisis runs through The Bulletin, with six of the seven essays explicitly addressing Nazi ideology and the onset of war, including Bennington College scholar Eva C. Wunderlich’s essay ‘Psychological Outlooks in Teaching Contemporary German Literature’, which warns that the ‘time when teachers of foreign languages and literature could permit themselves to sit in an ivory tower and to be smug about the value of their particular interests’ was over (p. 31). Nabokov’s essay was clearly going against the grain but his position was lent gravity by his being a war refugee himself.

That ‘The Creative Writer’ is framed by a wider debate about literature during the Second World War is something that has been overlooked in previous work on Nabokov, largely because this essay is more commonly read in its later incarnation as ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’, collected in Lectures on Literature, which was edited from Nabokov’s teaching notes by Fredson Bowers and published posthumously in 1980. Bowers seems not to have been aware of the existence of ‘The Creative Writer’ when putting together his edition; in an editorial note he tell us that there were pages missing from ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’ but the corresponding section in ‘The Creative Writer’ (on page 26) turns out to be the fourth paragraph of the lecture ‘Good

in which most of the tendencies of romanticism have been carried to their limits’ (p. 159). One of these ‘tendencies’ was the poet’s isolation ‘from the ordinary life of the time’: ‘the poet hangs out the window of the Ivory Tower making severe but obscure remarks about what is happening below’ (p. 163).

2 When applying for his job at Cornell, Nabokov sent a letter to Morris Bishop in which he wrote that he had ‘read at the Annual Meeting of the New England Modern Language Association an essay which was later published in the Bulletin of that organization under the title THE CREATIVE WRITER’ (SL 76). One must take Nabokov’s word on this, as his talk is not noted in the conference programme as reproduced in The Bulletin.

3 In defending the ivory tower Nabokov was adopting a public position in the argument over literature’s social relevance during wartime. After the end of the war Nabokov wrote to his sister, Sonia, about the difficulty in maintaining an aesthetically autonomous position when faced with the horrors of the Holocaust. In June 1946 he wrote: ‘Much as one might want to hide in one’s little ivory tower there are things that torment too deeply, e.g. the German vilenesses, the burning of children in ovens—children as funny and as strongly loved as our children’ (quoted in Toker, Nabokov: The Mystery, 177–8).
Readers and Good Writers’ in the Bowers edition of the Lectures on Literature (Foreword, 2). The papers from Nabokov’s lectures appear to have got mixed up in the editorial process.

There are crucial differences between ‘The Creative Writer’ and ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’ that turn on specific references to the Second World War. In ‘The Creative Writer’ Nabokov argues that for the writer casting off common sense, goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one’s world, which world at first seems hard to identify with the modern one of newspaper editors and other bright pessimists, who will tell you that it is, mildly speaking, illogical to applaud the supremacy of good at a time when something called Hitler is trying to turn the globe into five million square miles of blondness and boots. (CW 22)

In the ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’ this becomes

goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one’s world, which world at first seems hard to identify with the modern one of newspaper editors and other bright pessimists, who will tell you that it is, mildly speaking, illogical to applaud the supremacy of good at a time when something called the police state, or communism, is trying to turn the globe into five million square miles of terror, stupidity, and barbed wire. (LL 373).

Even back in the early 1940s Nabokov had insisted that there was little to distinguish between the totalitarian ideologies of Hitler and Stalin (he would create a hybrid regime of both ideologies in Bend Sinister), so reframing his argument in the context of the Cold War was an expedient way of working up the essay into a lecture for the 1950s classroom. In ‘The Creative Writer’ Nabokov goes on to argue that

it is one thing to beam at one’s private universe in the snuggest nook of an unshelled country and quite another to try and keep sane among crashing buildings in the roaring and whining night. But within the emphatically and unshakably illogical world which I am advertising as a home for the spirit, Messerschmitts are unreal not because they are conveniently remote in physical space from the reality of a reading lamp and the solidity of a fountain pen but because I cannot imagine (and that is saying a good deal) such circumstances as might impinge upon the lovely and loveable world which quietly persists, whereas I can very well imagine that my fellow-dreamers, thousands of whom roam the earth, keep to these same irrational standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain dust, death. (CW 22)

In ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’, the Messerschmitts are excised and replaced with ‘war gods’. Not only does the later version lose the immediacy of the context but also it rhetorically weakens Nabokov’s
argument by veering into the abstract (war gods) rather than the specific (Messerschmitts). In ignoring the textual history of the essay, the contexts that generated Nabokov’s argument about literature are lost.

‘The Creative Writer’ was published in a small academic journal and at the time Nabokov was an obscure figure seeking to establish himself in a new language and intellectual culture. This was as direct a piece of discursive prose as he would write in English about his creative process, written as an affirmation of that process at a time when its importance was in question. It was a staunch defence of an aesthetic autonomy that was at the core of an emergent late modernism. If we must be careful to understand the historical context of this essay’s making, it is also important to understand its position in literary history. In making his case, Nabokov was carefully invoking a tradition of autonomous literature stretching back to Alexander Pushkin, another exile who defended art on its own terms.

**PUSHKIN, INSPIRATION, AND RUSSIAN LITERARY AESTHETICS**

In October 1941, two months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Nabokov delivered a public lecture at Wellesley’s Pendleton Hall entitled ‘Pushkin as a West European Writer’ and the following year he was at work translating Pushkin for the *Three Russian Poets* collection, which was published by James Laughlin at New Directions. In styling Pushkin a ‘West European writer’, Nabokov was seeking to liberate the national poet from the post-revolutionary turn in Russian literary history. His various works of translation, including his epic project in translating and annotating *Eugene Onegin*, were an act of preservation, as Nabokov sought to sustain a literary tradition that he felt was being suppressed and distorted in Russia by the state-mandated aesthetic of socialist realism and the enforcement of that mandate by the secret police. Pushkin is the representative proponent of aesthetic autonomy in the Russian literary tradition, a position which he famously condensed in his claim that ‘poetry by virtue of its highest, freest property ought to have no goal outside itself’ (quoted in Kahn, 29). In his lyrics, Pushkin insisted on the poet’s separation from society and freedom from the pressures of both politics and the market. So when Nabokov explicitly models his theory of inspiration on that of Pushkin in ‘The Creative Writer’, he also takes a position on the defining argument of Russian literary history: the role of the writer in relation to society. It was an argument that had, in various forms, been running throughout the nineteenth century, the antagonists being
(to rather simplify) the aestheticists and the materialists. As Sergei Davydov has written, Nabokov would repeatedly return to Pushkin’s ‘aesthetic creed of pure art’ as a defence against, or even assault on, efforts to undermine the independence of creative consciousness and impose a doctrine of utility on literary art (‘Nabokov and Pushkin’, 482).

In the second half of ‘The Creative Writer’, Nabokov seeks to anatomize and analyse the ‘spiritual thrill which in English is very loosely termed inspiration’ (CW 27). Nabokov argues that in bringing together sensory impressions and the memory of these impressions, moments of inspiration rely on ‘the perfect fusion of the past and the present’. For the genius, however, there is a further ‘third ingredient’:

> It is the past and the present and the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the non-ego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open. (CW 28)

Nabokov nuances this account of artistic ecstasy by deploying Pushkin’s distinction between ‘two types of inspiration’, using the Russian abstract terms vostorg and vdokhnovenie, which he paraphrases as ‘rapture’ and ‘recapture’, the ‘first being hot and brief, the second cool and sustained’.4 In ‘The Creative Writer’, Nabokov does not acknowledge that these are Pushkin’s terms, but did so subsequently in the notes to his translation of Eugene Onegin (1964). In an entry detailing Pushkin’s relations with his former schoolmate, fellow poet, and ‘stern critic’ William Küchelbecker, Nabokov writes that ‘Pushkin left a MS note in which […] he accuses Küchelbecker of confusing vostorg (the initial rapture of creative perception) with vdokhnovenie (true inspiration, cool and continuous, “which is necessary in poetry as well as geometry”’) (EO II. i. 445).5 Vostorg operates with ‘no conscious purpose’ and it is in this moment that the work of art is conceived, while vdokhnovenie is the ‘serene and steady kind of inspiration’ that accompanies the actual process of composition. In the first the artist is passive, in the second active, although the work that is done is ‘reconstructive’. The literary work of art is brought into existence by that initial

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4 This is Nabokov translating poetically. While vostorg is normally translated as ‘delight or rapture’, vdokhnovenie is more conventionally translated as simply inspiration (this is certainly the word Pushkin used in this context). Oxford Russian Dictionary (2000).
5 I have preserved Nabokov’s transliteration of vdokhnovenie. Also, Tatiana Wolff points out that Pushkin’s comment that ‘Inspiration is as needed in poetry as in geometry’ is an adaptation of a phrase from d’Alembert (Pushkin on Literature, 169–70).
‘stellar explosion of the mind’, and while ‘the pages are still blank […] there is a kind of miraculous feeling of the words all being there, written in invisible ink and clamouring to become visible’ (CW 28–9). The book is initially disclosed in its Platonic ideal form and it is then the task of the writer to get as close to this ideal as possible. As such, the inspired artist is not subject to external deterministic influence (beyond his muse) but in another way denied agency, as he or she has to show passive faith in the ‘unconscious cerebration’ that creates the ‘masterpiece’.6

Artistic inspiration was one of the recurring subjects in Pushkin’s own work, which self-consciously dramatized the creative process. In such lyrics as ‘Conversation Between Bookseller and Poet’ (1824), ‘The Prophet’ (1826), ‘The Poet’ (1827), ‘The Poet and the Crowd’ (1828), ‘Autumn’ (1833), and ‘From Pindemonte’ (1836), Pushkin asserted the poet’s exceptional status.7 As such, the legacy of Pushkin’s aesthetics for nineteenth-century poetry was, in Bethea’s words, ‘a primarily aesthetic/private/meditative character as opposed to one that was ideological or socially activist’ (‘Literature’, 178). As we have seen, his making the distinction between the two types of inspiration was in riposte to Küchelbecker; in his notes from 1826, Pushkin writes that Küchelbecker’s arguments ‘served as a basis to all that has been said against Romantic literature in the last two years’ (quoted in Pushkin on Literature, 169).

From their origin, then, the terms vostorg and vdobokhvenie come loaded by their participation in a literary historical debate: these terms are part of an argument about how literature is created and what might be its purpose. By binding his creative process to that of Pushkin at such a formational level, Nabokov is also binding himself to one side in the unresolved dialectic running through the history of Russian literary aesthetics, one that, in Nabokov’s work, can be characterized as pitting Pushkin against Nikolai Chernyshevsky.

Nabokov had written The Gift between 1935 and 1937 and, as Boyd notes, he had spent ‘most of 1933 and 1934’ researching the novel’s inset biography of Chernyshevsky at the state library of Berlin, becoming

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6 In an interview with Alvin Toffler in 1964 Nabokov said that ‘[t]here comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished’ (SO 31–2).

7 Nabokov made use of Pushkin’s self-conscious poetry to reinforce his own position. As Davydov has pointed out, Nabokov inserts an inept review of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s ‘Life of Chernyshevski’ in the fifth chapter of The Gift in which the reviewer fails to recognize an embedded line from The Egyptian Nights (1837): ‘The poet himself chooses the subjects for his poems, the multitude [‘tolpa’] has no right to direct his inspiration’ (Nabokov and Pushkin’, 493). Fyodor’s—and Nabokov’s—elaborate allusive joke (The Egyptian Nights is an unfinished story that interrogates the source of poetic inspiration) makes Pushkin’s point for him.
familiar with the aesthetic debates of the nineteenth century (RY 399). Chernyshevsky was, in Gary Saul Morson’s figuration, the ‘patron saint’ of the radical intelligentsia of the 1860s and his novel What is to be Done?, published in the March, April, and May issues of The Contemporary in 1863, ‘was almost certainly the most widely read Russian literary work of the nineteenth century’ (Morson 141, 145). As Irina Paperno writes, the novel was a ‘direct response’ to Ivan Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons, published the previous year, and specifically to the way the new generation of intellectuals had been depicted in the character of the ‘nihilist’ Bazarov. What Chernyshevsky offered, Paperno argues, ‘was not a negatively defined image, but a coherent and all-encompassing positive program of behaviour, from important social actions to minor details of domestic arrangement’; the ‘new men’ of this novel were ‘deliberately designed’ to be ‘models for reproduction in real life’ (Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism, 15).

This approach placed Chernyshevsky in, to use Bethea’s phrase, the ‘Belinskian line’ of Russian literary aesthetics; Vissarion Belinsky had laid the foundations for a utilitarian approach to literary aesthetics with his insistence that the true artist expresses ‘the innermost thoughts of a whole society or epoch of Literature’ (Bethea, ‘Literature’, 171). Belinsky’s thought was coloured by Hegelian idealism and dualism, however, and his materialist heirs—Chernyshevsky, Nikolay Dobrolyubov, Dmitri Pisarev—espoused a rigorous positivism in an effort to purge Russian culture of the prevailing traces of Germanic idealism, most acutely expressed in the work of Schelling. This radical materialism, Bethea explains, would eventually be ‘worked into official dogma by the architects of socialist realism during the Soviet era’ (‘Literature’, 181). The particular influence of Chernyshevsky on the political course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Russia is profound; as Abbott Gleason contends, What is to be Done? ‘may have had a greater impact on the evolving Russian Revolution than any other book’ (p. 112). Lenin even took the title of the novel for his own famous pamphlet of 1902, and in 1928 the Soviets ‘celebrated with great fanfare’ the centennial of Chernyshevsky’s birth (RY 398). Nabokov planned his inset biography as a kind of anti-hagiography, seeking to subvert Chernyshevsky’s materialism and, in Boyd’s phrase, ‘revalue the Russian literary tradition’ (RY93). In doing

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8 The way in which Nabokov incorporated this research into the novel by ‘deforming’ the documentary material is explained in Irina Paperno’s ‘How Nabokov’s Gift is Made’.

9 This was a provocative move even within the context of the emigration, where Chernyshevsky’s standing, as a radical critic who had gone to prison for his beliefs, remained high. Just how high can be seen in the decision of the editorial board of Sovremennye zapiski not to publish the inset biography. According to Simon Karlinsky,
so he was participating in a long tradition; ever since publishing his master’s dissertation, *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*, in 1855, Chernyshevsky had been the subject of counter-polemics, perhaps most famously in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864), which, as Caryl Emerson tells us, ‘grew out of the intent to write a hostile review of Chernyshevsky’s *What is to be Done?*’ (p. 156).

Charles Moser has argued that 1855, when *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* was published, was the year that sparked the ‘controversy over art and literature which would rage for some fifteen years’, pitting the men of the sixties against the defenders of aesthetic autonomy (p. 1). If Chernyshevsky’s thesis unified and inspired the radicals, the aesthetic critics rallied around Pavel Annenkov’s publication of a first substantial collected edition of Pushkin’s works, and also a biography of the poet, which brought him ‘out of the relative obscurity he had fallen into after his death in 1837’ (Moser, 14). In the face of a wave of radical criticism, liberated by a laxity in censorship, Pushkin’s work was used by the aestheticist critics and writers to assert the ‘supremacy of art over reality, and of the artist over the common man’ (Moser, 14).

The philosophical battleground between the materialists and the aesthetices was that between a monist and dualist conception of the world. As Moser notes, ‘the intellectual power’ of Chernyshevsky’s essay was derived from its ‘monistic unitary approach’ and its rejection of ‘any notion of philosophical dualism’ (p. 6). In such an approach, the tenets of German idealism and the Romantic culture it influenced were rigorously rejected, and with it anything that resembled the Pushkinian concept of ecstatic inspiration. Indeed, for the radicals, literature as a whole was necessarily secondary as it ‘provides nothing more than a pale copy of reality, and they also suppressed a phrase in the novel that referred to Vissarion Belinsky as ‘an appealing ignoramus (simpatichnyi neuch)’ (p. 9).

10 Moser notes that in response to the valorizing of Pushkin by the aesthetic group, the radical critics ‘took Nikolai Gogol as their standard, viewing him as the creator of socially useful literature which at least implicitly called for a restructuring of society’ (p. 14). In this context Nabokov’s *Nikolai Gogol*, which he was working on throughout the early 1940s and which he published in 1944, can be read as an appropriation of Gogol for the aesthetic cause.

11 Pushkin styled himself an independent aristocrat, protected from the influence of the state through making writing his profession. The intimate relation between aesthetic autonomy and the independence granted by high social standing is also reflected in the paratext of *The Creative Writer*; in the blurb about Nabokov at the beginning of *The Bulletin*, he is described as ‘Resident Lecturer in Comparative Literature, Wellesley College; grandson of a Minister of Justice to Alexander II and Alexander III of Russia, son of a prominent statesman of the liberal group; holds a first class degree in Modern Languages from Cambridge University; poet, novelist, playwright; contributor to the ATLANTIC MONTHLY’ (p. 5). It is not clear how much input he had into this précis.
therefore is distinctly inferior to it’ (Moser, 10). The shift of emphasis toward ‘communal aspirations’ ‘gave rise to the assumption that artistic representation is a process of generalization, of the discernment of what is most generally valid amidst individual human needs and sufferings’ (West, 45). This argument was the antithesis of Nabokov’s understanding of art as expressed in The Gift. ‘The Creative Writer’, and throughout his oeuvre. If Nabokov’s modernist response to the materialist arguments of Chernyshevsky was underpinned by Pushkin’s Romanticism, then it was also fundamentally shaped by Symbolist aesthetics, whose own formation was a reaction against a literature governed by principles of social utility.

SYMBOLISM AND ACMEISM

In The Gift, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, the scourge of Chernyshevsky, outlines his aesthetic positions in imaginary conversations with the poet Koncheyev. In one of these conversations he tells of the formative influence of Symbolist poetry on his own work: ‘My mind in those days accepted ecstatically, gratefully, completely, without critical carpings, all of the five poets whose names began with “B”—the five senses of the new Russian poetry’ (G 73–4). Those five, one infers, were Konstantin Balmont, Valery Bryusov, of the so-called ‘first wave’ of Symbolist poets, Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely of the second wave, and then the incongruous figure of Ivan Bunin, Russia’s first Nobel laureate, whose poetry Nabokov valued but who was more widely respected for his prose. This was a poetic education Nabokov shared with his character; in a 1949 letter to Edmund Wilson he was uncharacteristically frank in conceding his debt to these poets. When Wilson suggested that Russian literature had suffered a decline between 1905 and 1917, Nabokov dismissed this as a ‘Soviet invention’ and declared that ‘Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff in those days [. . .] I am a product of that period, I was bred in that atmosphere’ (NWL 220).

That atmosphere was created in response to what Ruth Coates diagnoses as ‘ideological exhaustion’ in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, an exhaustion that ‘was felt and expressed most keenly in the arts’ (p. 170). This impatience with the rationalist tenor of public discourse provoked a

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12 The Tenishev School, where Nabokov was a student, played an important institutional role in the history of Russian Symbolism. In 1908, three years before Nabokov enrolled, Bely delivered a lecture at the school, with the programmatic title: ‘The Present and Future of Russian Literature’ (Pyman, 315). Influential figures in the movement, including Viacheslav Ivanov, attended the lecture.
move to aestheticism in the 1890s as, in Boris Gasparov’s words, the early incarnations of Symbolism ‘made the idea of “art for art’s sake” its profession of faith, maintaining it against populist tastes, utilitarianism, and (as part of the same “package”) conventional morality’ (p. 5). The chief weapon in the Symbolist armoury was the philosophy of Nietzsche, which had ‘a powerful liberating effect on Russia’s literary elite, since he gave them permission to slough off the burden of artistic responsibility for the people and pursue personal artistic goals’ (Coates, 187). As Coates has shown, Nietzsche’s work was ‘used in the attack on the utilitarianism, positivism and rationalism of radical intelligentsia ideology’ (p. 187). Freed from these strictures, the Symbolists would make ostentatious display of their independence from society: Avril Pyman recounts how, under the editorship of Bryusov, the journal Vesy published an admiring article about Japanese art during the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 (p. 250).

If the Romantics had gone back to nature, then these neo-Romantics sought their consolation in art, in an aestheticism that would mutate into mysticism, spiritualism, and an interest in ‘Oriental’ religion. As Symbolism developed and moved away from its aestheticist origins, it carried an increasingly apocalyptic tenor, with a growing strain of national messianism. The standard account of the two waves of Russian symbolism is that the first was strongly influenced by French poetry and the second shaped by German idealist philosophy.13 Engagement with these influences was manifested in translation and imitation; Dmitry Merezhkovsky translated Charles Baudelaire, Balmont went back through Baudelaire to Edgar Allan Poe, Fyodor Sologub translated Paul Verlaine, and Bryusov translated Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé. The metaphysics of much French symbolist poetry was transcendental, with its origins in Baudelaire’s reading of Swedenborg’s neo-Platonist ideas (Baudelaire’s concept of ‘correspondences’ is taken from Swedenborg). In ‘Further Notes on Edgar Poe’ (1857), Baudelaire wrote that the artistic imagination is ‘a virtually divine faculty that apprehends immediately, by means of lying outside of philosophical methods, the intimate and secret relation of things, the correspondences and analogies’ (p. 199). As Bethea notes, Russian Symbolism embraced this transcendental metaphysics, seeing in genuine art ‘the truth of dvoemirie, or the mythical correspondences between “this” and the “other” world’ (‘Literature’, 191).

13 In fact the boundaries between the two groups were far more fluid than this characterization, which also undersells the influence of Dostoevsky, Fet, and Tyutchev. In the 1910 essay ‘Testaments of Symbolism’, Ivanov argued that ‘all that is genuine and vital in Russian poetry of the last one and a half decades is deeply rooted in native soil’. Ivanov wrote that Tyutchev was ‘the true forefather of our true Symbolism’ (p. 43).
In his Baudelaire-influenced collection *Symbols* (1892), Merezhkovsky wrote about ‘the dark ocean lying beyond the limits of knowledge’, and argued that ‘words only define and limit, whereas symbols express the unlimited aspect of thought’ (quoted in Pyman, 8–9). Merezhkovsky’s neo-Platonism was echoed in the works of Bely, Balmont, and Sologub who believed ‘that the secret revealed by art is the bridge between the real and the divine or “supernatural” world’ (West, 113). For Bryusov art was ‘the understanding of the world by other, irrational means. Art is that which, in other spheres, we call revelation. The work of art is the opening of a door onto Eternity’ (quoted in Pyman, 177).

In ‘The Symbolics of Aesthetic Principles’ (first published in 1905), Viacheslav Ivanov argued that aesthetic experience was drawn from three principles, all of which involved a form of transcendence:

> Any aesthetic experience draws the spirit out of the limits of the personal. The ecstasy of ascent affirms the suprapersonal. Descent, as a principle of artistic inspiration (in Pushkin’s sense), turns the spirit toward what lies outside the personal. The chaotic is impersonal, as is revealed in the psychological category of frenzy. It completely abolishes all limits. (Ivanov, 11)

Ivanov uses the Nietzschean terms ‘ascent’ and ‘descent’ and yokes them to the Kantian distinction between the ‘sublime’ and ‘beauty’, although his positing of, in Robert Bird’s words, ‘a chaotic metaphysical basis for the earth’ is drawn from Schopenhauer (Ivanov, 232). For Ivanov, a trained classicist, Symbolism was poetry’s ‘recollection of its original, primordial tasks’, a calling charged with religious responsibility. In ‘The Testaments of Symbolism’ (1910), he argued against considering Pushkin as an advocate of pure aestheticism, instead reading Pushkin’s claim that ‘We are born for inspiration’, made in ‘The Poet and the Crowd’, to be an assertion of the essential divinity of art, and that the true poet was analogous to ‘the high priest’ (Ivanov, 41). At the end of the same year, after Tolstoy had died, Ivanov wrote ‘Lev Tolstoy and Culture’, in which he further clarified his position regarding the role of the artist:

> an artistic genius is called to reveal the noumenal in the clothing of the phenomenon. Moreover, the energy of artistic symbolism does not wish to leave intellectual essences of the spiritual world only incompletely incarnated, nor to push them beyond the limits of incarnation: instead it wishes to present them in a transfigured incarnation, as if in resurrected flesh that is at the same time the most real flesh and the actual essence itself. (Ivanov, 203)

Ivanov’s intellectual heft, his ability to synthesize classical philosophy with German idealism and his reading of Vladimir Solovyov and Nietzsche,
made him the most important theoretician of Symbolism. The poet’s task, as he delineated it, was a metaphysical one, and it was a task that the second wave of Symbolists, including Bely and Blok, took seriously.

The influence of this transcendent metaphysics was pervasive, as poets sought to break out of what Fet had called the ‘pale-blue prison’ of cognition to gain glimpses of a transcendent truth (Fet’s metaphor pre-occupied both Blok and Bely). At the turn of the century Blok became particularly immersed in Platonic philosophy, reading the dialogues in Solovyov’s translation (Pyman, 236). Vladimir Alexandrov has argued that the transcendental aspect of Symbolism was a powerful influence on Nabokov, especially as it was manifest in the works of Blok and Bely. With Bely, Alexandrov writes, Nabokov shares a Platonic conceptualization of inspiration, in which ‘the Absolute acts through the perceiver-artist when he focuses on something outside himself’ and that, by sourcing the work of art in a transcendent realm, this ‘saves individual perceptions from being mere projections’ (p. 219). Furthermore, Alexandrov claims that ‘the overarching theme Nabokov borrows from Blok is a variant of the Platonic idea that via love, which is the vehicle for regaining a transcendent unity of being, human souls strive to reunite with their mates from whom they were separated upon incarnation’ (p. 216).

While Nabokov retained a concern for idealist aesthetics in his work, there was much about Symbolism that he rejected, especially the apocalyptic mysticism, the obsession with ritual, and the engagement with radical politics in the decade leading up to the revolution. Bethea argues that the influence of Blok was especially strong on Nabokov’s early verse and that he had to initiate a ‘swerve’ away from Blok’s poetry in order to ‘find an authentic voice of his own’ (‘Nabokov and Blok’, 374). In doing so, he shared the concerns held by the Acmeists about Symbolism’s

14 Thomas Karshan argues that Nabokov paid particularly close attention to the work of Ivanov, whose poem ‘Infancy’ gave Nabokov the theme and prosodic scheme for “Childhood” (Art of Play, 43). Nabokov composed ‘Childhood’ in Yalta, in 1918, while under the influence of the Symbolist poet Voloshin, with whom he met regularly during his time there.

15 In Nabokov’s Otherworld, Vladimir Alexandrov also finds analogies between Nabokov’s conception of transcendent inspiration and Viacheslav Ivanov’s Symbolist aesthetics as expressed in Ivanov’s 1913 essay ‘O granitsakh iskusstva’ (p. 252).

16 Alexander Dolinin argues that Nabokov’s leaving behind of Symbolism is reflected in The Gift, in which Fyodor ‘begins his literary evolution under the influence of Symbolist poetry but very soon rejects it and tries to create his own neoclassical style that stresses visual ingenuity and derives mostly from Russian pre-modernist poetry and prose as well as Ivan Bunin’s colourful descriptive language’ (p. 59). Nabokov’s early poetry collections Gornii put (1923) and Grozd (1923) contain, in Bethea’s phrase, a ‘derivative Symbolist pathos’ and Nabokov would eventually reject much of what had infatuated him in his youth (‘Nabokov and Blok’, 374).
excessive immersion in abstraction. In contrast to the Dionysiac aspects of late Symbolism, Acmeism’s Apollonian ‘clarity, precision, restraint’ must have seemed a more fitting aesthetic in the aftermath of the revolution (Bethea, ‘Literature’, 193). Acmeist poetry offered art as anchor and consolation post-1917 in a way prelapsarian Symbolist poetry could not. As Bethea writes, the Acmeists understood ‘the poetic word/Logos as something physically palpable, living and breathing, unbidden and miraculous’; here was poetry ‘as a fire in the Acropolis that civilized man gathers around for warmth and protection in moments of historic crisis’ (‘Literature’, 193). If Symbolist neo-Platonism had influenced Nabokov’s understanding of the sources of artistic inspiration, then his conceptualization of the process seems to have been shaped by this Acmeist idea of the ‘poetic word’ being somehow physically palpable. Central to Nabokov’s figuring of inspiration is the importance in the creative process of the ‘realization’ of a physical book.

MONISM, DUALISM, AND LIBERALISM

Underpinning Symbolist aestheticism, and the ideas of aesthetic autonomy Nabokov developed in ‘The Creative Writer’, was Kant’s declaration in The Critique of Judgement that art had no end outside itself. As a fiction writer, Nabokov was interested in philosophy not in any kind of systematic way, but more as a means to understand artistic creativity. He was not so much concerned with ideas in the abstract but in the way they worked in specific contexts. In his extensive 1966 interview with Alfred Appel he said that ‘mediocrity thrives on “ideas”’, clarifying in a 1969 interview that ‘[b]y “ideas” I meant of course general ideas, the big, sincere ideas which permeate a so-called great novel, and which, in the inevitable long run, amount to bloated topicalities stranded like dead whales’ (SO 66, 121). In another interview of the same year he elaborated on the same theme: ‘In my memoirs, quotable ideas are merely passing visions, suggestions, mirages of the mind. They lose their colors or explode like football fish when lifted out of the context of their tropical sea’ (SO 147). There is some slipperiness here, an unwillingness to be pinned down—ideas are presented as provisional and functioning only within their specific context, a context that, for Nabokov, would inevitably have artistic, not philosophic, goals. Yet Nabokov was interested in philosophy, especially earlier in his career, and, like many modernists, he was especially interested in issues of ontology and how these issues related to the creation of literary art.

In the autumn of 1917, Nabokov was sent from St Petersburg to the Crimea for his own safety. On the train he had with him his books of
Symbolist poetry, and the following summer in Yalta he would come under the influence of the Symbolist poet Max Voloshin, who encouraged Nabokov’s fascination with the work of Bely (RY 135). That same summer, Nabokov exhibited a growing interest in philosophy; Thomas Karshan speculates that Voloshin may have been directly responsible for Nabokov’s reading of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* while in Yalta (*Art of Play*, 40). Any serious interest in Symbolism necessitated a concomitant engagement with German idealist thought and the responses to it. In *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* Karshan has shown the different ways that German aesthetics were disseminated in nineteenth-century Europe and into the work of those who directly influenced Nabokov, whether traced back to Madame de Staël’s *Of Germany* (1813), which Pushkin used in *Eugene Onegin*, or percolating through Coleridge, Poe, and Baudelaire to the Symbolist movement (*Art of Play*, 23–40). By the mid-1920s, having moved to Berlin and studied at Cambridge University, Nabokov was exhibiting an interest in ontological issues that were intimately related to the aesthetic debates on the Russian literary scene. It was at Cambridge in the previous two decades that Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore had attacked the British idealism of F. H. Bradley. Nabokov was clearly interested in the debates between realist and idealist (and monist and dualist), conceptions of ontology in this period, especially as they pertained to artistic creativity, and through the vitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson (and, as we shall see, Samuel Alexander) Nabokov could be found seeking ways to reconcile his monism with his belief in the transcendent power of art.

Ostensibly, Nabokov’s transcendent way of conceiving of inspiration should mark him out as a dualist, an assumption supported by Véra Nabokov in her foreword to *Stikhi*, an edition of Nabokov’s Russian poems published in 1979, two years after Nabokov’s death (this is Dmitri Nabokov’s translation):

17 For much of 1918, Nabokov began rigorously experimenting with Bely’s theories of prosody, as outlined in Bely’s 1910 collection of essays *Symbolism*. He may also have been reading the first version of Bely’s novel *Petersburg* which had been published in 1916; he told Khodasevich in a 1934 letter that he had read *Petersburg* four times (RY 151)

18 Dana Dragunoiu notes that during the Symbolist period ‘some of Russia’s most prominent intellectuals moved from positivism to idealism’ with Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergey Bulgakov, Semion Frank, and Peter Struve being the most influential philosophers to leave behind ‘legal Marxism’ and reinvent ‘themselves into Kantian neo-idealists’ (p. 8). It is also worth noting that Berdyaev, in *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (1916), understood creativity as being beyond deterministic influence: ‘Creativity is something which proceeds from within, out of immeasurable and inexplicable depths, not from without, not from the world’s necessity. The very desire to make the creative act understandable, to find a basis for it, is failure to comprehend it. To comprehend the creative act means to recognize that it is inexplicable and without foundation’ (p. 145).
I would like to call the reader’s attention to a key undercurrent in Nabokov’s work, which permeates all that he has written and characterizes it like a kind of watermark. I am speaking of a strange otherworldliness, the ‘hereafter’ (*potustoronnost*), as he himself called it in his last poem, ‘*Vlyublyonnost*’ (‘Being in Love’) [...]. He came closest to expressing it, however, in the poem ‘*Slava*’ (‘Fame’) where he defined it quite frankly as a secret that he carries within his soul that *must not* and *cannot* be revealed. (‘Translating with Nabokov’, 175)

Véra goes on to write that a reader would understand ‘even more precisely what is meant’ if they read the passage from *The Gift* where Fyodor explains his sense of his father being in possession of profound, inscrutable knowledge. Fyodor pursues a similar transcendent knowledge himself: ‘Definition is always finite, but I keep straining for the faraway. I search beyond the barricades (of words, of sense, of the world) for infinity, where all, all the lines meet’ (G 300). This was also a model for reading great literature. As Nabokov wrote in his analysis of *The Overcoat*, what he calls Gogol’s ‘transcendental anecdote’:

> the diver, the seeker of black pearls, the man who prefers the monsters of the deep to the sunshades of the beach, will find in *The Overcoat* shadows linking our state of existence to those other states and modes which we dimly apprehend in our rare moments of irrational perception. (NG 145)

In the short story ‘Ultima Thule’, originally the first chapter of the unfinished novel *Solus Rex*, Adam Falter has solved ‘the riddle of the universe’ but revealing his secret causes instant death to the listener (S 509). Withheld revelation is a recurring motif in Nabokov’s fiction, and, when asked if he believed in God, he, perhaps playfully, played the inscrutable savant:

> To be quite candid—and what I am going to say now is something I have never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill—I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more. (SO 45)

As Davydov has pointed out Nabokov would often make his metaphysical point through the medium in which it was being delivered (the reading of books), arguing that he ‘models his cosmology as an analogy to poetics’ (‘Metapoetics and Metaphysics’, 105). By this way of thinking, the reader is the consciousness in the world seeking a glimpse of the extratexual deity, and Nabokov would use the metaphor *within* the fictions itself, such as in this example from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*:

> The answer to all questions of life and death, ‘the absolute solution’ was written all over the world he had known: it was like a traveller realizing that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural
phenomena, but the page in a book where these mountains and forests, and
fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence;
the vowel of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings
of a road writing its message in round hand, as clear as that of one’s father;
trees conversing in dumb-show, making sense to one who has learnt the
gestures of their language . . . Thus the traveller spells the landscape and its
sense is disclosed, and likewise, the intricate pattern of human life turns out
to be monogrammatic, now quite clear to the inner eye disentangling the
interwoven letters. (RLSK 150)\textsuperscript{19}

This mystificatory metaphysics, combined with the presence of ghosts in
‘The Vane Sisters’ and Transparent Things, has led some critics to explore
the supernatural elements in Nabokov’s fiction.\textsuperscript{20}

By his own account, though, Nabokov was not a dualist. In an inter-
view he gave to Alfred Appel in 1966 he declared that ‘[p]hilosophically, I am
an indivisible monist’ (SO 85). Asked to elaborate on this statement in
an interview with Time magazine three years later, Nabokov said: ‘Monism,
which implies a oneness of basic reality, is seen to be divisible when, say,
“mind” sneakily splits away from “matter” in the reasoning of a muddled
monist or half-hearted materialist’ (SO 124). The term ‘monism’ was coined
by the German Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolf in the eight-
eleventh century and was revived by the Positivists in the 1860s, and, as
Blackwell explains, its
central tenet—the core idea linking the various incarnations—is that the
universe is unitary and consistent, of a single, self-consistent and coherent
entity. In this strict and basic sense, monism opposes itself to dualism of any
kind, whether body-spirit, mind-world, and so on. (‘Nabokov, Mach and
Monism’, 123).

\textsuperscript{19} The book is also employed as a metaphysical metaphor in ‘Ultima Thule’, in which
life is described as but a ‘muddled preface’ to the book that is to follow (S 520). This sense
of life being somehow paratextual to a true transcendent existence is echoed in Pale Fire, in
which John Shade writes: ‘Man’s life as commentary to abstruse | Unfinished poem. Note
for further use’ (ll. 939–40).

\textsuperscript{20} As D. Barton Johnson points out in ‘Prologue: The Otherworld’, P. M. Bitsilli was
probably the first critic to pick up on this theme, back in the 1930s (p. 20). Brian Boyd,
from his 1979 doctoral dissertation through to Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic
Discovery (1999), has repeatedly written about ghostly presences in Nabokov’s novels.
William Woodin Rowe, in Nabokov’s Spectral Dimension (1981), wrote the first full-
length study devoted to the subject, while Vladimir Alexandrov developed the topic in
Nabokov’s Otherworld (1991). As Leona Toker has pointed out, though, Nabokov’s
‘mysticism was a matter of feeling, of relationship with the world, rather than of definable
hypostasis’ and its uncritical application to his fiction closes down various levels of equally
valid interpretation (Mystery of Literary Structures, 4). In his discussion of Gogol, Nabokov
wrote that ‘[g]reat literature skirts the irrational’ and efforts to systematize what is neces-
sarily beyond a rational approach are inherently flawed (NG 140).
How to explain the seeming contradictions in Nabokov’s ontology? Blackwell suggests that Nabokov was influenced both by the Positivist scientist and philosopher Ernst Mach’s ‘neutral’ monism and the Bergsonian argument that objective reality can only be mediated through human cognition:

The three main branches of turn-of-the-century monism are ‘idealistic’ monism, according to which only the spiritual is real and all physical bodies are but illusory and derivative of the one true realm […]—or, alternatively, only mental sense perceptions are real while the world of ‘things in themselves’ is not; ‘materialist’ monism, according to which only the physical world and its laws exist, all other phenomena finally being relatable to the understanding of the world of things; and so-called ‘neutral’ monism, which holds that the world is known only through sense-perceptions which are considered to be organically related to the world of things in themselves but not always directly revealing them. (‘Nabokov, Mach and Monism’, 123).

Nabokov was obviously not interested in purely materialistic or idealistic monisms but Blackwell makes a convincing case for his exploration of a ‘third-way’ monism. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, for example, there is a passage that seems to enact just such a version of this ‘neutral’ monism: ‘All things belong to the same order of things, for such is the oneness of human perception, the oneness of individuality, the oneness of matter, whatever matter may be. The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition’ (RLSK 87). As Kuzmanovich argues, at no point does Nabokov’s thought engage in a ‘complete slide into idealism’ (‘Nabokov and the Claims of the Real’, 37). It is also true that, as he matured as a writer, Nabokov developed ‘a suspicion of a Symbolist epistemology that effectively devalues the material world by conceiving of it as a token of a more veridical reality’ (Glynn, 3). Nabokov rejected symbolic or allegorical interpretations of his work, and of literature in general.21 ‘Literature’, he argued, ‘is not about something: it is the thing itself, the quiddity’ (LL 116). This quiddity is more than just a Kantian lack of interest in detail, it is a conviction in the integrity of perceived reality, in what, in ‘The Creative Writer’, he defined as the fit subject for the ‘writer of genius’: ‘Time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds’ (CW 25). In this we can see something of Nabokov’s scientific

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21 The most visceral expression of this opposition to symbolic readings of his fiction can be found in Nabokov’s response to Rowe’s Nabokov’s Deceptive World (1971): ‘The notion of symbol itself has always been abhorrent to me […] The symbolism racket in schools attracts computerized minds but destroys plain intelligence as well as poetical sense. It bleaches the soul. It numbs all capacity to enjoy the fun and enchantment of art’ (SO 304–5).
thinking grading into his ontology; as a lepidopterist he worked diligently for six years on taxonomic work at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology and Blackwell tells us that in this period he ‘dissected at least fifteen hundred specimens’ under the microscope (The Quill, 3). This commitment to documenting and ordering the natural world involves a substantial investment in its integrity, even while believing, in Blackwell’s words, that ‘the empirical world does not exhaust all of reality’ (The Quill, 7).

For Nabokov, then, specificity mattered and he was intensely suspicious of abstractions, especially in their political application. Toker argues that Nabokov’s work expresses ‘an idealistic variety of rational individualism’ and there is no doubt that Nabokov was heavily influenced by his father’s liberal politics and staunch advocacy for the rights of the individual (‘Nabokov’s Worldview’, 237). Dana Dragunoiu has shown just how deeply rooted Nabokov’s thinking was in this liberal tradition, highlighting the importance of the concept of lichnost’, which she glosses as ‘a term that can mean personality, person, individual, individuality, or selfhood’ but which in the context of the liberal thought of the period designated ‘the individual as a bearer of absolute value, dignity, and autonomy’ (p. 11). By placing lichnost at the core of his politics and philosophy, V. D. Nabokov was evidently influenced by Alexander Herzen. In Speak, Memory, Nabokov writes, in the caption to the photograph of the Nabokovs’ St Petersburg home on Morskaya, that Herzen was a ‘talented author’ and that ‘Bïloe i Dumi [translated as My Past and Thoughts] was one of my father’s favourite books’ (SM 107. i). As Isaiah Berlin has made clear, Herzen’s liberalism meant he was fundamentally opposed to the tyranny of abstractions over the individual; for Herzen, Berlin writes, ‘liberty […] is an absolute value […] not to be suppressed in the name of abstractions or general principles […]’ (p. 87). Herzen’s views on the integrity of the individual became central to V. D. Nabokov’s politics, a politics his son then inherited and retained throughout his life. In an interview for Playboy, conducted in March 1963, Nabokov said that, ‘since my youth […] my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness.

22 In his politics and journalism, V. D. Nabokov, an expert in criminal law, repeatedly defended the rights of the individual against the state: ‘The rights of the individual before the law, V.D. Nabokov insisted, were not abstract theoretical propositions but the fruit of long political struggle to guarantee political freedom against the power of the whole, whatever it may be called.’ Boyd goes on to note V. D. Nabokov’s opposition to ‘the generalising force of sociology’ and his staunch defence of ‘[h]omosexuals, ex-convicts, vagrants, Jews, the politically suspect […] against the oppression of the law’ (RY 28). For more detail on V. D. Nabokov’s career see RY 24–34 and Dragunoiu, 3–31.
Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art’ (SO 34–5). The latter freedom included the freedom of art from any kind of social utility: ‘A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me. I don’t give a damn for the group, the community, the masses and so forth’ (SO 33).

In the inset biography of Chernyshevsky in The Gift, Fyodor attacks what he sees as the fallacy of abstraction at the heart of materialist thought:

> Our overall impression is that materialists of this type fell into a fatal error: neglecting the nature of the thing itself, they kept applying their most materialist method merely to the relations between objects and not to the objects themselves; i.e., they were the naivest of the metaphysicians precisely at that point where they most wanted to be standing on the ground. (G 222)23

Fyodor goes on to write: ‘Look what a terrible abstraction resulted, in the final analysis, from materialism!’ (G 223). This ‘fatal error’, Nabokov wrote in a letter to Edmund Wilson, led to the tragedy of the Russian revolution: ‘Another horrible paradox about Leninism is that these materialists found it possible to squander the lives of millions of real people for the sake of the hypothetical millions that would be happy some day’ (NWL 38). The idea that ‘the thing itself’ must not be tyrannized over by an abstraction was the keystone of his ethics and nowhere does he better dramatize this than in Lolita, where Dolores Haze is subsumed by Humbert’s solipsistic pursuit of the idealized ‘Lolita’. The individual consciousness, or a work of art, must not have its freedom and integrity compromised to fit an abstracted ideal.

Despite the implied dualism of his aesthetics, Nabokov deplored the amorality of a transcendent aestheticism and while he treated ethically didactic literature with derision he was insistent on the ‘deep morality’ of all great art. Writing in defence of his supposedly amoral treatment of Gogol in his 1944 book, Nabokov makes the following distinction:

> There is a deep morality in The Overcoat which I have tried to convey in my book, but this morality has certainly nothing whatever to do with the cheap political propaganda which some overzealous admirers in nineteenth century Russia have tried to squeeze out of, or rather into it, and which, in my opinion does violence to the story and to the very notion of art. (SL 44)

In his discursive writing Nabokov is constantly walking a fine line, trying to preserve an autonomous aesthetics without falling into the trap of sterile

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23 This was one of the opinions Nabokov shared with his fictional creation. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, he wrote: ‘Another horrible paradox about Leninism is that these materialists found it possible to squander the lives of millions of real people for the sake of the hypothetical millions that would be happy some day’ (NWL 38).
aestheticism, the art-for-art’s-sake movement which, to use Thomas Karshan’s neat definition, had become a ‘decadent parody’ of Kantian aesthetics (Art of Play, 34). He was stridently opposed to materialism yet was not prepared to slide wholly into idealism; it is understandable, then, that he saw the appeal in a metaphysics that tried to negotiate this ontological impasse.

WOODBRIDGE, BERGSON, ALEXANDER

Two philosophers were important to Nabokov as he sought to find an ontological ‘third way’ of understanding aesthetic creativity. Nabokov’s enthusiasm for Henri Bergson has been well established; Nabokov’s familiarity with the work of Samuel Alexander has not yet been explored. To contextualize Nabokov’s reading of Bergson and Alexander we can return to Nabokov’s journalism of the early 1940s, and a review of Frederick J. E. Woodbridge’s An Essay On Nature, published in the 10 December 1940 edition of The New York Sun, under the headline ‘Prof. Woodbridge in an Essay on Nature Postulates the Reality of the World’. Woodbridge had died earlier that year with a reputation as one of the leading proponents of philosophical realism and as founder of the American Naturalist school (alongside John Dewey and George Santayana). An Essay on Nature is a robust defence of a monistic, naturalistic philosophy and in his polemical introduction Woodbridge writes that his essay expresses

radical opposition to the dualism which contends that the ways and means of acquiring knowledge and the knowledge thereby acquired warrant the conclusion that the familiar scenes we explore are but data whereby we ascertain the character and structure of a universe which somehow lies independently beyond and external to them. (p. v)

In his review, Nabokov praises Woodbridge’s ‘verbal integrity’ in his shearing of ambiguity from his terms of use; he is ‘not to be taken in by

24 For an enlightening reading of Kant’s aesthetics in relation to Ada see Dragunoiu, 142–85.
25 Will Norman links Nabokov’s description of his plunging into ‘a mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time’ to that of Bergson’s conception of la durée as elucidated in Time and Free Will (1889), where the subjective purity of la durée is contrasted with the spatialized ‘clock’ time of le temps (SM 19; Nabokov, History, 114). John Burt Foster has previously identified allusions to Bergson’s work in Nabokov’s fiction (Nabokov’s Art of Memory, 82–7). In his study of Bergsonian influences on Nabokov’s work, Michael Glynn argues that Nabokov takes from Bergson the idea that man fundamentally misperceives duration (pp. 53–77).
the imp of ambiguity in a messenger boy’s disguise’ (PW 15). While
Nabokov praises the rigour of Woodbridge’s ‘genuine’ thought, he does
not believe he fully escapes slippage into dualism:

His major assumption is (and his wisdom would appreciate my using the
present instead of the past) that, man being within nature, there cannot be
any independent explanation of what we do and of the world in which we do
it. This is an example of the author’s very refreshing common sense; but it
does not quite manage to put the solipsist into the fool’s paradise which it
assigns to him. Every monistic philosophy must somehow avoid (or ignore,
as Prof. Woodbridge does) the old pitfall of that dualism which separates the
ego from the non-ego, a split which, strangely enough, is intensified the
stronger the reality of the world is stressed. (PW 15)

The fusion between ego and non-ego is only achieved, Nabokov goes on
to argue, in death, ‘but while the brain still pulses, one cannot escape the
paradox that man is intimately conscious of Nature because he is walled in
himself and separated from her’ (PW 15).26

This split, between ego and ‘nature’ (Woodbridge uses the word to mean
‘the familiar setting of human history’ [PW 3]), recurs in Nabokov’s fiction,
most notably in Pnin, when the protagonist has one of his episodes ‘detaching
him [...] from reality’, strange attacks that make him feel ‘porous and
pregnable’ (Pn 17). The onset of the first of Pnin’s episodes in the novel is
accompanied by the following narratorial intervention:

I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main
characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we
die. Man exists only so far as he is separated from his surroundings. The
cranium is a space traveller’s helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is
divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the
landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. (Pn 17)

The connections with Nabokov’s point about Woodbridge’s philosophy
are clear. At the end of the review, Nabokov subtly brings Woodbridge’s
argument into alignment with his own ideas about the value of creativity
in bridging the dualist gap:

Taken as a piece of writing, it is a good instance of the author’s contention that
language is not applied to Nature but is really made in Nature, and one thinks
of the way a creative writer must feel, namely that trying to set down his
sentence in the best possible state—of conservation rather than creation—is
but an effort to materialize the perfect something which already exists in the
somewhere which Prof. Woodbridge obligingly terms Nature. (PW 15)

26 In a lecture he gave on playwriting at Stanford in 1941, Nabokov described the
‘unbridgeable division between ego and non-ego’ as the ‘only acceptable dualism’ (USSR 321).
This review was written the year before Nabokov published ‘The Creative Writer’, and this idea of the writer’s ‘materializ[ing] the perfect something which already exists’ was at the hub of Nabokov’s efforts to negotiate the monist–dualist dichotomy. It certainly chimed with the privileging of creativity in the vitalist philosophy of Bergson.

Like Symbolist aesthetics, Bergson’s intuitivism was part of a larger attempt to escape the dominance of rationalism and materialism in the late nineteenth century. His work was enormously popular in Russia and a translated collected edition was published between 1913 and 1914 in five volumes (although many Russian writers and thinkers had already read him in French). Hilary Fink points out that Bergson’s philosophy had been, at least in part, anticipated by a Russian tradition of ‘Romantic, organicist’ thought, a tradition that ‘included Ivan Kireevskii, Aleksei Khomiakov, Viassarion Belinskii, Lev Tolstoy, and Vladimir Solov’ev’ (8). Fink contends that it was because Bergson’s philosophy so chimed with this Russian organicist tradition that interest in his philosophy was sustained in Russia when it was sliding out of fashion in the rest of Europe after the First World War. It is easy to see how Nabokov was seduced by Bergson’s contention that art was ‘the highest form of human endeavour and artistic intuition the most privileged faculty of man’ and little wonder that he described Bergson as having been among his ‘top favourites’ of the inter-war years (Fink 23; SO 43). Bergson challenged the dichotomy between matter and mind, claiming they were both part of the ‘one fundamental principle, the so-called élan vital, the life force that suffuses and directs all life’ (Glynn, 58). Toker argues that if one is to take seriously ‘the possibility of subsuming [Nabokov’s] two-world cosmogony within a monistic vision, one must also take into account the twist that also occurs in Bergson’s system’. This ‘twist’, Toker goes on to explain, is the ‘transformation of the duality of the physical and the spiritual into a continuum’ as, at certain points, ‘inert matter is transmuted into creative consciousness’ (‘Nabokov and Bergson’, 369).

In January 1928 Nabokov gave a paper to the Iulii Aikhenvald literary circle called ‘Man and Things’ (‘Chelovek i veshchi’) which is a clear distillation of his Bergsonism:

27 For a full exploration of the resonances between symbolist aesthetics, especially those of Bely, and Bergson’s philosophy see Fink, 42–61.
28 Fink also stresses the importance of the theology of the icon to this organicist tradition, an idea to which we will return later in this chapter.
29 In The Gift, Nabokov gives his Bergsonian reading of Hegel, imputing a version of the élan vital to the German idealist: ‘The moulders of opinion were incapable of understanding Hegel’s vital truth: a truth that was not stagnant, like shallow water, but flowed like blood, through the very process of cognition’ (G 223).
A thing, made by some thing, in and of its self, does not exist [...] a thing, in the absence of man, instantly returns to nature’s bosom. A gun, lying in the back of a tropical thicket, is no longer a thing, but a legitimate part of the forest; today a reddish stream of ants flows through it, tomorrow it will be swamped, perhaps it will flower. A house is simply a block of stone when man leaves it. He leaves—for five hundred years—and the house, like some quiet, cunning beast, making off towards freedom, imperceptibly returns to nature and, in truth, simply becomes a heap [...] not only is there no object without man, but there is no object without there being a clear relation towards it on the part of man. (‘Chelovek’, 20) [My translation]

In another part of the paper, Nabokov argues that the same object can have multiple existences, depending on the consciousness that is observing it. He uses the example of a portrait of a lady: the art expert, the craftsman, the friend of the woman depicted, and the person with an urgent dental appointment will all look at the picture before them in a different way. This anticipates the highly subjectivist position he adopted in interviews he gave in the United States, long after Bergson had fallen from intellectual fashion. In the 1956 afterword to Lolita he wrote that ‘reality’ was ‘one of the few words that mean nothing without quotes’, a position he enlarged upon in a 1962 interview with the BBC:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information, and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. 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. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it’s hopeless. (AL 312, SO 10–11)

The idea of the subjective creative consciousness animating reality was the foundation of Nabokov’s ontology from at least 1928 onwards and in Ada, published forty-one years later, Nabokov has Van Veen ‘deliver three farewell lectures—public lectures—on Mr Bergson’s Time at a great university’ (A 430).

The idea that reality was provisional and subjective can even be found in Nabokov’s scientific work. In another interview, with Herbert Gold for The Paris Review in 1966, Nabokov expressed bafflement at the very idea of objective ‘everyday’ reality:

Whose ‘reality’? ‘Everyday’ where? Let me suggest that the very term ‘everyday reality’ presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially
objective, and universally known. I suspect you have invented that expert on ‘everyday reality.’ Neither exists. (SO 94)

Blackwell has shown that Nabokov, in his cataloguing butterflies at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, was thinking about the provisional nature of systems of classification in the face of his ontological relativism. In some of his lepidopterological notes from 1943–4 Nabokov writes of taxonomic labels (species, subspecies) that

if they do exist they do so taxonomically as abstract conceptions, mummified ideas severed from and uninfluenced by the continuous evolution of data-perception, some historical stage of which may have endowed them at one time with a fugitive sense. (NB 302)

As Blackwell points out, there is ‘a Bergsonian concern with the spatialization of time’ in this passage that underscores the fundamental gap between ‘the system of description and the underlying reality of the thing described’ (‘Nabokov’s Fugitive Sense’, 17). This ‘fugitive sense’, Blackwell argues, is just as important to understanding Nabokov’s art as it is to his science.

Van Veen is not the only one of Nabokov’s invented philosophers to be interested in Bergson. Adam Krug, the philosopher-protagonist of Bend Sinister, is at one stage described as using a memorable ‘simile of the snowball and the snowman’s broom’ which, as John Burt Foster has pointed out, is a play on Bergson’s explanation of duration in Creative Evolution through the analogy of a snowball (Nabokov’s Art of Memory, 84). Krug’s philosophy, however, is also directly borrowed from that of Samuel Alexander (1859–1938). At the beginning of the fifteenth chapter of Bend Sinister, Krug is looking through some of his old papers and finds ‘a reprint of a Henry Doyle Lecture which he had delivered before the Philosophical Society of Washington’. Krug rereads the passage ‘which he had polemically quoted in regard to the idea of substance’: ‘When a body is sweet and white all over, the motions of whiteness and sweetness are repeated in various places and intermixed…’ (BS 148).30 This passage is taken verbatim from the categorical analysis of ‘substance’ in the first volume of Alexander’s ambitious 1920 study Space, Time and Deity:

The motion of whiteness (which for us is white) may to our coarse apprehension be in the same place as the sweetness; and we may say the sugar is white and sweet all over. But two different motions, when not compounded into a single-resultant motion, do not occupy precisely the same place.

30 There is an erotic undercurrent to this passage—ostensibly about sugar—that is reinforced by the subsequent square-bracketed fragment of Catullus 5 ‘[Da mi basia mille]’, which is repeated in the following chapter when Krug is fondling a book as Mariette tries to seduce him (BS 164).
One may take place in the interstices of the other, as it were, and be indistinguishable for us in locality. *When a body is sweet and white all over, the motions of whiteness and sweetness are repeated in various places and intermixed*, as blue and red points of colour may be dotted over a page one set among the other. The motions of white are spread over the volume like stippled points in an engraving and the sweetness motions among them. Just as blood is seen uniformly red though only the red corpuscles in it are red, so the sweet and white stippling gives the impression (through different senses) of a uniformly sweet white thing. (p. 275, my italics)

*Space, Time and Deity* was built out of the Gifford Lectures that Alexander had given at the University of Glasgow in 1916–18 and Nabokov’s reference to the ‘Henry Doyle Lecture’ seems a deliberate reference to these famous lectures (Bergson had delivered the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in 1913). Alexander’s name only appears once in Nabokov’s oeuvre, when Van Veen dismisses his defining concept of space-time in the ‘Texture of Time’ chapter of *Ada*:

The same section of Space may seem more extensive to a fly than to S. Alexander, but a moment to him is *not* ‘hours to a fly,’ because if that were true flies would know better than wait to get swapped. I cannot imagine Space without Time, but I can very well imagine Time without Space. ‘Space-Time’—that hideous hybrid whose very hyphen looks phoney. One can be a hater of Space, and a lover of Time. (A 425)

Nabokov had a copy of *Space, Time and Deity* in his Montreux library and the book is mentioned in Nabokov’s notes for the ‘Texture of Time’ chapter (the copy of *Space, Time and Deity* is now in the Berg collection at the New York Public Library). He must have returned to Alexander’s work when preparing *Ada*, having been familiar with at least parts of it since writing *Bend Sinister*. It is entirely plausible that Nabokov would have become familiar with Alexander’s work during his Cambridge University years (1919–22) when Alexander was at the height of his post-Gifford fame and his magnum opus had been published.

Like Bergson, Alexander’s goal was to try to offer an alternative to the impasse of the realist–idealist dichotomy in philosophy. Alexander was a student of the British idealists F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet but he rebelled against the absolute privileging of mind in Berkeleyan idealism, became a New Realist, and held the position that ‘Minds are but the most gifted members known to us in a democracy of things’ (*Space, Time and Deity*).

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31 Alexander discusses what he perceives as the failure of Bergson’s ‘method’ in the fourth chapter, ‘Mental Space-Time’, of the first volume of *Space, Time and Deity* (pp. 141–3).
As to the terms idealism and realism, I should be heartily glad if we might get rid of them altogether: they have such shifting senses and carry with them so much prejudice. They serve, however, to describe a difference of philosophical method or spirit [. . .] no sane philosophy has ever been exclusively the one or the other, and where the modern antithesis has hardly arisen, as with Plato, it is extraordinarily difficult to say under which head the philosophy should be classed. (p. 8)

This effort to navigate between absolutes is expressed in what Michael Weinstein identifies as the ‘Dionysian element’ in his thought: the idealistic, Hegelian strain that tempers his realism (p. 57). Alexander’s vitalist concept of the ‘nisus’ is equivalent to Bergson’s *élan vital*, a strain in the universe that pushes forward to create an infinite quality but ever fails. Another analogy would be to that of Nabokov-via-Fyodor’s interpretation of Hegel, whose ‘vital truth’, he believed, ‘was not stagnant, like shallow water, but flowed like blood, through the very process of cognition’ (G 223). That Krug’s philosophy is a composite of Bergson’s and Alexander’s is clear evidence of Nabokov’s interest in this vitalistic ‘third way’ of thinking about ontology.32

**DETERMINISM**

Russian liberalism, Symbolist aesthetics, and vitalist philosophy can all be understood as reactions against materialist accounts of the world and determinist explanations of human behaviour. It is in these intellectual movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that one can find the genesis of Nabokov’s fierce opposition to Darwinist, Freudian, and Marxist determinism, expressed most stridently in the interviews of the 1960s (collected as *Strong Opinions*) and the forewords to the translations of his Russian novels composed in the same period.33

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32 In the context of *Bend Sinister* as an anti-totalitarian, anti-Nazi novel—published in 1947—it is important to note that both Bergson and Alexander were Jewish. Although he did not practise Judaism, Bergson refused the Vichy government’s offer to excuse him from their anti-Semitic laws and in 1940 he registered himself as a Jew. Alexander was the first Jewish fellow at an Oxford college and throughout his life he was a committed opponent of anti-Semitism and a supporter of the Zionist project.

33 Blackwell points also to the formative influence of Aikhenvald on Nabokov in the 1920s as another source for his assertion of aesthetic autonomy. As an example of Aikhenvald’s emphasis on creative individuality, Blackwell quotes the following passage from *Silhouettes of Russian Writers* (1909), a passage that Dragunoiu also cites in her monograph: ‘The most real and certain thing that one can encounter here is the writer (i.e. his writings). Only he is a fact. Everything else is doubtful. There are no movements;
the dignity of the individual (liberalism), idealist aesthetics (symbolism),
and the ontological emphasis on human creativity (vitalism) come together
in his autonomous conceptualization of artistic inspiration, as outlined in
‘The Creative Writer’. While the work of art is understood to have its source
in an irrational ‘other’ place, it requires the artist-genius to fashion the
Platonic ideal into the ‘real’ artwork (to harness the élan vital or nisus). By
this understanding the artist remains autonomous from determinist forces,
even if, paradoxically, her conscious agency is undermined in doing so.

Nabokov’s detailed explanation of the roots of his creative process was
part of a wider strategy of insulating his work from determinist interpre-
tation. Dragunoiu argues cogently that this ironclad individualism was the
core of his intellectual patrimony, the foundational understanding of the
world he inherited from his liberal father:

Respect for the inviolable uniqueness and autonomy of the individual subject
rests at the core of Nabokov’s intellectual and artistic universe. It fuelled
his fierce opposition to all schools of thought that undermined human agency
and refused to acknowledge personhood as a self-determining end: positivism,
materialism, scientism, and utilitarianism (whether inspired by Darwin, Marx,
or Freud). (p. 11)

In Nabokov’s liberal worldview the integrity of individual freedoms is what
matters. As such he was a historical miniaturist, invested in the shaping force
of the agglomeration of small incident and of the decisive unpredictability of
chance, just as was Isaiah Berlin, another Russian émigré steeped in the
liberal tradition. Nabokov’s position is best elucidated in his 1930 novel
The Eye, in which the narrator expresses his opposition to the tectonic
thinking of Marx:

It is silly to seek a basic law, even sillier to find it. Some mean-spirited little
man decides that the whole course of humanity can be explained in terms of
insidiously revolving signs of the zodiac or as the struggle between an empty
and a stuffed belly; he hires a punctilious Philistine to act as Clio’s clerk, and
begins a wholesale trade in epochs and masses; and then woe to the private
individuum, with his two poor u’s, hallooing hopelessly amid the dense
growth of economic causes. Luckily no such laws exist: a toothache will cost
a battle, a drizzle cancel an insurrection. Everything is fluid, everything
depends on chance, and all in vain were the efforts of that crabbed bourgeois
in Victorian checkered trousers, author of Das Kapital, the fruit of insomnia
and migraine. (Eye, 27–8)

there are writers. That means however many writers there are, there are that many
movements, and each one in his own essence defines himself. There is no society; there
are individuals’ (quoted in Zina’s Paradox, 27).
For Russian thinkers and artists of Nabokov’s generation, historical materialism was not simply an intellectual position to be adopted but an agent of radical change in their world, and Fink has suggested that one of the reasons Russian modernists seized on Bergsonian ideas with such enthusiasm was as ‘weapons against the determinism and materialism of Marxism-Leninism’ (p. 4). In his memoir, Nabokov employed the idea of Bergsonian creativity to explain childhood development in anti-determinist terms:

Besides dreams of velocity, or in connection with them, there is within every child the essentially human urge to reshape the earth, to act upon a friable environment (unless he is born a Marxist or a corpse and meekly waits for the environment to fashion him). (SM 231)

The passage is part of the final chapter of Speak, Memory, in which Nabokov reflects on the psychological development of his son, Dmitri, and defends it from determinist explanation, including that of Freudian theory. Nabokov’s particular antipathy for Freud was well established before he became a father—he had first read Freud’s work in the 1920s and, in 1931, wrote the anti-Freudian satirical essay ‘What Should Everybody Know?’—and so it is unsurprising that he vigorously rejected Freudian theories of childhood sexuality when writing about his son’s infancy:

It might be rewarding to go into the phylogenetic aspects of the passion male children have for things on wheels, particularly railway trains. Of course, we know what the Viennese Quack thought of the matter. We will leave him and his fellow travellers to jog on, in their third-class carriage of thought, through the police state of sexual myth (incidentally, what a great mistake on the part of dictators to ignore psychoanalysis—a whole generation might be so easily corrupted that way!). Rapid growth, quantum-quick thought, the roller coaster of the circulatory system—all forms of vitality are forms of velocity, and no wonder a growing child desires to out-Nature Nature by filling a minimum stretch of time with a maximum of spatial enjoyment. (SM 230)

Nabokov’s career-long polemic against Freudian theory has been the subject of much critical discussion but what is of interest in the above excerpt is the way Nabokov deploys Bergsonian tropes of ‘velocity’ and ‘vitality’ as means of showing the way human consciousness shapes its environment, rather than consciousness being shaped by a determining environment.34 What is also pertinent about the above excerpt is the way Nabokov interlinks

34 For more on Nabokov’s hostile relationship with Freud see Green, Freud and Nabokov; Shute, ‘Nabokov and Freud’; Blackwell, ‘Nabokov’s Wiener-Schnitzel Dreams: Despair and Anti-Freudian Poetics’; De la Durantaye, ‘Vladimir Nabokov and Sigmund Freud, or a Particular Problem’.
Freudianism with totalitarianism: the ‘Viennese Quack’ is accompanied by ‘fellow travellers’ as he travels through ‘the police state of sexual myth’. For Nabokov, Freudian and Marxist determinist theories are connected in that they both erode the integrity of the individual. In the last sentence, in writing about the child’s desire to out-Nature Nature, Nabokov also hints at his complicated relationship with the third major branch of nineteenth-century determinist thought: Darwinism.

As we have seen, Nabokov was an accomplished lepidopterist who conducted important scientific research, yet he was dissatisfied with what he understood as Darwinian explanations of evolution. If, once again, we return to the last chapter of the memoir, we find Nabokov making his dissatisfaction clear, suggesting that Darwinism fails to account for the ‘riddle of the initial blossoming of man’s mind’ and that one can only resolve the riddle by postulating a voluptuous pause in the growth of the rest of nature, a lolling and loafing which allowed first of all the formation of Homo poeticus—without which sapiens could not have been evolved. ‘Struggle for life’ indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar, to the grunting beast’s crazy obsession with the search for food. (SM 228)

To move beyond biological determinism, Nabokov pointed to what he believed was the excessively elaborate, even artistic, quality of mimicry in the natural world. In late 1939 he wrote ‘Father’s Butterflies’, a fragment that was not published in his lifetime and which was intended as a continuation to *The Gift*. In ‘Father’s Butterflies’ Fyodor has returned, fifteen years later, to his father’s magnum opus, *The Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire*, published in 1912. This work contained a ‘supplement’ in which Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev outlined his radical new ‘spherical’ theory of classification. In a characteristically Nabokovian framing device, the volume that contains this essay eludes Fyodor and he has to rely on a book by Murchison, who interprets his father’s theory. In his entomological work, Konstantin became convinced of ‘the absolute impossibility that given similarities were attained through evolution, through the gradual accumulation of resemblance, or through the fixation of magical mutations (the very thing that caused him to re-examine and reject the more “logical” theory of the origin of the species)’ (G 357). It is the ‘uselessness’ of sophisticated acts of mimesis—the ‘rhymes of nature’ to use Konstantin’s

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35 For the most in-depth study of Nabokov’s lepidoptery see Steve Coates and Kurt Johnson’s *Nabokov’s Blues*. Blackwell also has an insightful chapter on Nabokov’s scientific work in *The Quill*, 21–52.

36 This is Dmitri Nabokov’s translation from Alexander Dolinin’s typescript. It is included as an addendum in the 2000 Penguin Classics edition of *The Gift*.
phrase—that suggest a higher artistry at play, anticipating its reception in the human mind:

we are speaking of the fantastic refinement of ‘protective mimicry’, which, in a world lacking an appointed observer endowed with artistic sensitivity, imagination, and humour, would simply be useless (lost upon the world), like a small volume of Shakespeare lying open in the dust of the boundless desert. (G 354)

This theory is, of course, presented as part of a fiction but there are echoes of this in Nabokov’s memoir in which he writes that the ‘mysteries of mimicry’ showed ‘an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things’ (SM 98). By suggesting a creative force beyond evolution, Nabokov is back with a form of vitalism. Blackwell argues that whether ‘recalling Henri Bergson’s élan vital or some other impetus, nature’s continuous expansion and variation is to Nabokov emblematic of the principle of innovation through the free development of organic form’ (The Quill, 73). At its root, however, this is the argument from design and, as Leland de la Durantaye has pointed out, there are obvious and ‘uncharacteristic faults’ in Nabokov’s argument that seem to be seeking some reconciliation between his scientific work and his artistic thought (‘Artistic Selection’, 57). Blackwell argues that Nabokov was conflicted about the issue of evolution and has pointed out that one of the reasons he set such store by William James’s Principles of Psychology (1890) was because of ‘James’s ability to describe the systems of cognition and behaviour from a point of view that simultaneously respected Darwinism and its implications for the evolution of human behaviour and also preserved belief in mind’s essentially secret nature’. Blackwell notes that while Nabokov did submit an article on mimicry to the Yale Review, he ‘did not complete or even preserve materials for an envisioned comprehensive study of mimicry in nature’. Blackwell goes on to speculate that this may have been because Nabokov ‘became persuaded that his work would not receive a sympathetic hearing among the scientists he so respected, or else he himself came to doubt the validity of his claims in the face of mounting counterevidence’ (The Quill, 13–14).

Nabokov’s theory of inspiration was a means of emancipating his art from determinist fetters; it was an expression of autonomy. He not only pushed back against the idea of literature being determined by larger social and political forces but also was alert to the way literature, and the literary tradition, could itself be deterministic. In this he was of course typically modernist and his work shows a dedication to making it new. In the same period as he was putting together ‘The Creative Writer’, Nabokov was engaged in a large-scale project to collect and order his ideas about literature. Between the autumn of 1940 and the spring of 1941, Nabokov
laid the foundations of his future teaching, preparing ‘perhaps a hundred lectures’ on Russian and European literature (AY 23). Some of these lectures were initially designed for delivery at Stanford in the summer of 1941 but Nabokov hoped he would also be able to use them in a future job. At the same time as writing these lectures he pitched a dramatic adaptation of *Don Quixote* to Mikhail Chekhov, and was working on a survey article on Soviet literature for the *New Republic*, as well as working on ‘The Creative Writer’ (which was drawn from material for his Stanford lectures on the Art of Writing). This was a period of intense work in which Nabokov was recapitulating and revising his ideas about literature. The Stanford lectures included another meditation on creativity: Howard Lanz of the Slavic department had asked him to deliver lectures on ‘practical playwriting’ as Nabokov had been sold to the department as an active Russian playwright (AY 22). As Boyd tells us, Nabokov did his research for the course, reading plays by Lillian Hellman, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O’Neill, and John Steinbeck, but as the emphasis of the course was on composition he read ‘a handful of playwriting guides’ as well (AY 23).

In the lecture ‘The Tragedy of Tragedy’, published posthumously as part of *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*, Nabokov damns the theatre for its failure to break with formal convention. Siggy Frank points out that the term he invents to discuss these generic and technical shaping forces is ‘dramatic determinism’ (p. 61). This, in fact, is the source of the title of the lecture itself: the tragedy of tragedy is its inability to escape ‘the same old iron bars of determinism that have imprisoned the spirit of playwriting for years and years’ (USSR 326).37 Nabokov equates the creation of literature with ‘pure liberty’, the lack of which has hampered the theatre’s ability to evolve as an art form:

On one hand a written tragedy belongs to creative literature although at the same time it clings to old rules, to dead traditions which other forms of literature enjoy breaking, finding in this process perfect liberty, a liberty without which no art can thrive; and, on the other hand, a written tragedy belongs also to the stage—and here too the theatre positively revels in the freedom of fanciful sets and in the genius of individual acting. The highest achievements in poetry, prose, painting, showmanship are characterized by the irrational and the illogical, by that spirit of free will that snaps its rainbow

37 One of the causes of this stagnation is, for Nabokov, the collaborative nature of the theatre, which dilutes authorial control and as such ‘will certainly never produce anything as permanent as can be the work of one man because however much talent the collaborators may individually possess the final result will unavoidably be a compromise between talents’ (USSR 323). Once again, the individual creative consciousness is privileged in the creation of genuine art.
fingers in the face of smug causality. But where is the corresponding development in drama? (USSR 326)

The strictures of classical tragic form are a formal echo of the materialist determinism Nabokov rejected: the individual’s fate is shaped by forces beyond his or her control and the role of chance, of the ‘irrational and illogical’, is removed from the mechanistic world of the stage.

In asking Nabokov to emphasize theatrical composition in his creative writing course, Lanz claimed, ‘playwriting in America is the most popular and practical form of literature’ (quoted in AY 22). This very popularity was, for Nabokov, part of the problem, and in ‘The Tragedy of Tragedy’ he argued that the ‘best plays of today are on the level of magazine stories and fat bestsellers’. This commercial imperative was bound up with the collaborative process of staging plays, which Nabokov felt were too often inhibited by an attempt to anticipate perceived audience demands, and that the ‘only audience that a playwright must imagine is the ideal one, that is, himself. All the rest pertains to the box-office, not to dramatic art’ (USSR 327). This chimes with the final paragraph of ‘The Creative Writer’, in which Nabokov urges the prospective author to evict the ‘monster of grim commonsense’ before it can ‘whine that the book is not for the general public, that the book will never, never—And right then, just before it blurts out the word s, e, double-l, false commonsense must be shot dead’ (CW 29).

In this way, Nabokov links formal determinism with market forces, the rejection of which were an established part of his cultural politics. Yet while his theory of inspiration and artistic creativity was part of a wider strategy to insulate his work from biological, psychological, and socio-historical determinism, he cannot isolate his literary production from the market. In his conceptualization of the process of inspiration, the work of art is envisioned as an idealized book. The book is not in reality a transparent vessel for pure art however; it is a technology designed for the more efficient production, preservation, and circulation of writing and however private the moment of Nabokovian inspiration is, that it comes in the shape of the book anticipates its future socialization. Nabokov’s autonomy from the market is complicated by the implication that the material form of the book is fundamentally bound up with its status as artwork. The process of book production, and the fact that books are marketplace commodities, has historically determined the shape that literature has taken, with the three-volume structure of the nineteenth-century novel, demanded by the lending libraries, being perhaps the best-known example. It is interesting therefore that Nabokov’s theory of inspiration placed such emphasis on the idea of the book, haunted as it
is by the spectre of market determinism, and did so at the very point (the early 1940s) when his cultural politics were most stridently anti-commercial. In order to understand why this was the case, it is necessary to explore why the book was so important to Nabokov’s poetics.

THE INSPIRED BOOK

The ideas Nabokov developed in ‘The Creative Writer’ are echoed in his later discursive prose. As we have already seen, Nabokov told Alfred Appel in 1966 that he feared getting ‘mixed up with Plato’ for revealing that in the inspired moment, ‘the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension’ (SO 69).38 Nabokov’s most sustained return to the subject of inspiration came near the end of his career. If ‘The Creative Writer’ had been a declaration of artistic intent after arriving in America then the tone of ‘On Inspiration’, published in the Saturday Review in 1973, was one of reflection.39 The contrast with the low-key academic publication of ‘The Creative Writer’ is striking: Nabokov was featured on the cover of the magazine and, in addition to his essay, the editors had commissioned four novelists—Edmund White, Joseph McElroy, William H. Gass, and Joyce Carol Oates—to write about the influence of his work on their own. Lord Snowdon also contributed a series of photographs of Nabokov in Montreux while Simon Karlinsky—the scholar who decoded Ada—contributed an exegetical essay on Transparent Things. While three decades had passed and Nabokov’s status in the world republic of letters had been totally transformed, he retained his distinctive conceptualization of inspiration.

38 Nabokov also wrote about the way John Shade is inspired in lines 45–6 of Pale Fire. Of these lines Bethea, in his study of Joseph Brodsky’s work, writes that ‘it is a tribute to Nabokov that he can describe in such detail, and yet so unpoetically, this condition called inspiration’ (Joseph Brodsky, 226). Bethea sees Nabokov as an essentially prosaic thinker ‘nominal and adjectival, descriptive rather than presentational’ (p. 224).

39 The sources of the creative process seem to have come into focus for Nabokov in his last years. Dmitri Nabokov recalls that during a summer hike in 1975, his father told him that his writing ‘was all there, ready inside his mind, like film waiting to be developed’ (‘On Revisiting Father’s Room’, 129). In his last complete novel Look at the Harlequins! Nabokov refracted his creative process through Vadim, who shares with Nabokov the epiphanic visions of inspiration but whose process of composition is more tortuously conceived. Vadim’s writing of A Kingdom By the Sea is described as being like slowly pulling out ‘a long brain worm, hoping it would not break’ (LATH! 102, 148). What is consistent is the idea of the work of art as pre-existent.
In ‘On Inspiration’ he divides the experience of being inspired into different stages, the first of which concerns the physical ‘symptoms’ of its onset:

One can distinguish several types of inspiration, which intergrade, as all things do in this fluid and interesting world of ours, while yielding gracefully to a semblance of classification. A prefatory glow, not unlike some benign variety of the aura before an epileptic attack, is something the artist learns to perceive very early in life. This feeling of tickly well-being branches through him like the red and the blue in the picture of a skinned man under Circulation [. . .] The beauty of it is that, while completely intelligible (as if it were connected with a known gland or led to an expected climax), it has neither source nor object. It expands, glows, and subsides without revealing its secret. In the meantime, however, a window has opened, an auroral wind has blown, every exposed nerve has tingled. Presently all dissolves: the familiar worries are back and the eyebrow redescribes its arc of pain; but the artist knows he is ready. (OI 30)

Just as in ‘The Creative Writer’ the artist here enters a privileged state, which has its source in an immaterial locus, outside the realms of everyday cognition.40 At the initial stage, the artist is passive, unsure of the direction in which he is being taken, waiting for the felicitous gust of ‘auroral wind’.41 The second stage is more explicit, and comes after a ‘few days’ have elapsed:

The next stage of inspiration is something ardently anticipated—and no longer anonymous. The shape of the new impact is indeed so definite that I am forced to relinquish metaphors and resort to specific terms. The narrator forefeels what he is going to tell. The forefeeling can be defined as an instant vision turning into rapid speech. If some instrument were to render this rare and delightful phenomenon, the image would come as a shimmer of exact details, and the verbal part as a tumble of merging words. The experienced writer immediately takes it down and, in the process of doing so, transforms what is little more than a running blur into gradually dawning sense, with epithets and sentence construction growing as clear and trim as they would be on the printed page. (OI 30, my italics)

This makes more explicit what Nabokov had suggested in ‘The Creative Writer’: the vision of the work-to-come in its material form. What is striking about this ‘forefeeling’ is the clarity with which it is expressed. The vague and

40 Leona Toker emphasizes that these states refer not only to ‘heightened aesthetic perception but also to states of quickened ethical awareness and to states of metaphysically refined consciousness’ (‘Nabokov’s Worldview’, 232).

41 The metaphor ‘auroral wind’ positions Nabokov within the context of Classical accounts of inspiration, derived as they were from Cicero’s afflatus, literally the ‘blowing in’ of divine breath or wind. Wind, gusts, and breezes are all favourite Nabokovian metaphors for supernatural hints. When interviewed by Tofller, Nabokov was asked about his legacy, answering that he had ‘sensed certain hints, I have felt the breeze of certain promises’ (SO 34).
metaphorical is replaced by the ‘definite shape’ of an ‘instant vision turning into rapid speech’ and Nabokov stresses that it is ‘exact details’ that are revealed to him. Furthermore, he goes on to show one of the fruits of this second stage of inspiration, a fragment of what would subsequently become the Villa Venus scene in Ada—what he calls ‘the first throb’ of that novel—‘the strange nucleus’ around which the rest would grow (OI 30).

Why does Nabokov formulate inspiration in such a way that the literary work of art is inextricably bound up with its eventual embodiment as a book? He was primarily a novelist but he composed much work, especially poetry, which was not published in book form but in newspapers, magazines, or even simply pasted into the private albums of family and friends (his mother kept an album of his poetry). If Nabokov risked marginalizing his fragmentary or incidental work through privileging the book, he was also playing into a larger literary tradition, which grew out of Romanticism and into French and Russian Symbolism. Nabokov’s inspired artist was in many ways a neo-Romantic and Andrew Piper has made the case for Romanticism being the period in which the ‘bibliographic imagination’ became established. In his *Dreaming in Books*, Piper argues that the explosion of the book industry in the first decades of the nineteenth century prompted a significant change in the literary imagination, which in itself became a ‘bibliographic subject’:

> To dream in books, however, was not only to dream while reading, to engage in a kind of hallucinatory reading experience in which the book itself was forgotten. To dream in books also meant to dream in the shape of the book as well. It was precisely the materiality of the book that provided the contours to such imagining, indeed to the imagination itself. (p. 2)

In Piper’s formulation, the bibliographic imagination is pervasive and deep-rooted. In this elevation of the book from technology to a more integrated role in the way literary art is conceived one finds the sources for the cult of the book that culminated in Mallarmé’s proposition in *Divagations* ‘that everything in the world exists to end up as a book’ (p. 226).

In *The Book as Instrument*, Anna Sigridur Arnar shows how Baudelaire was responsible for creating a ‘value-laden vocabulary and hierarchy’ for considering different forms of publication. In such a hierarchy, works that were fragmented through being serialized—the roman-feuilleton for example—were relegated below publications that ‘metaphorically implied

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\[42\] Nabokov used that expression—‘the first little throb’—when writing that ‘the initial shiver of inspiration’ for Lolita ‘was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing charcoaled by an animal: the sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage’ (*AL* 311).
coherence and totality’ (Arnar, 30). Baudelaire made this argument about a book’s integrity in defending *Les Fleurs du mal* from prospective censorship, claiming that parts of the poem could not simply be excised without destroying the whole. This was Baudelaire’s poetics of correspondences writ large, as the book expressed the architecture of the author’s intention through complex symbolic resonances: the integrity of the poem is matched by the integrity of the collection in which it is placed. All that mattered to this uncompromising authorial position, drawn from Baudelaire’s reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s critical writings, was the inherent spatial form of the work, not the demands of the censors or the marketplace.

As Arnar tells us, Mallarmé then pushed the sacred text to ‘a higher level of idealization’ as the Book came to figure as the ‘ultimate measure of all literature’ (p. 42). All his work, indeed all literature, was a contribution to a larger Book and he left behind an unfinished project, entitled *Le Livre*, which consisted of a complicated mathematical plan for this ideal book (this was published in 1957 under the editorial guidance of Jacques Scherer). Like Nabokov’s Platonic book, Mallarmé’s Book was an ideal that could only ever be approximated. Mallarmé, though, was working in different market conditions to Nabokov; the book trade had yet to become thoroughly commodified and in France the years 1895–1910 were a period of economic crisis for the book market, with publishing houses going bankrupt as books went unsold and newspapers surged in popularity. In this context Mallarmé was ambitious to experiment with the materiality of the book; as Arnar puts it, he conceived an approach whereby ‘the poet radically redefined the experience of reading by exploiting the textual, visual, and temporal elements of the book’. With his well-known experiments with page layouts, close attention to typographical matters, and his collaborations with illustrators and artists, Mallarmé was the driving force in much modernist experimentation in book production. These experiments were not mere embellishment, Arnar argues, but part of Mallarmé’s reader-oriented poetics in which ‘the book is not simply an exquisitely rendered container or precious relic but a catalyst for redefining the relationship between the book and its reader’ (p. 2). In this, as we shall see in Chapter 4 of this book, Mallarmé was a precursor to Nabokov’s attempts to trespass on to the territory of the publisher in his later work.

The Russian symbolists were particularly receptive to Baudelaire and Mallarmé’s bibliographic imagination, as Russian culture was already invested

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43 It is interesting to note the similarities in this abstract modelling of literary form with the geometrical prosody theorized by Andrei Bely. This system was thoroughly assimilated by Nabokov while holed up in Crimea in 1918; he applied it to ‘thousands of lines of Russian verse classics’ (*RY* 150).
in the book as a privileged object. David Bethea tell us that ‘Russian writers have long operated under the conviction that they are writing, not one more book, but versions, each in its way sacred, of The Book’ (‘Literature’, 164). One can see clear echoes of Baudelaire’s arguments about the integrated structure of the Les Fleurs du mal in Bryusov’s defence of poetry collections as coherent works of literary art:

A book of poems should not be a chance collection of verses of various provenance but a book in the precise sense of the word, a whole complete in itself, united by a single thought. Like a novel, like a treatise, the book of poems reveals its content consistently from the first page to the last . . . The sections of a book of poems are neither more nor less than chapters which explain one another and which cannot be arbitrarily reshuffled. (Quoted in Pyman, 174)

Avril Pyman informs us that this passage made a profound impression on Blok, who quoted it in the opening paragraph of his review of Bryusov’s 1903 collection Urbi et Orbi for Novyi Put. Mallarmé’s interest in transforming books into art-objects was echoed by some of the more refined productions of the Symbolist period, especially the lavish Skorpion books, which ‘used several Mir Iskusstva artists, particularly Bakst and Somov, but also favoured Bal’mont’s friend Durnov, Briusov’s favourite Feofilaktov and other Muscovites of the “Blue Rose” school such as Borisov-Musatov’ (Pyman, 167).

The Acmeists, in turn, championed the integrity of the book, even if their unifying principle was not the Symbolist authorial personality but in more austere formal theories. As Justin Doherty explains in his study of the movement, it was ‘a requirement of an Acmeist collection that the constituent poems should together say more than they do individually, but without relying directly on the principle of autobiographical narrative’ (p. 211). Both Akhmatova and Mandelstam paid extremely close attention to the way poems and poem-cycles were collected as a kniga (book) while Gumilev, Doherty suggests, developed his ‘principle of a thematic organization of poems’ from Gautier, whose Émaux et Camées he translated in 1914. Nabokov, then, was steeped in these principles of organization, in which poems were in an important way validated by their relationship to the larger kniga. Books were not merely a convenient technology for the mounting of literary art but part of its artistic coherence.

ICONIC SPACE

For Nabokov it is in art that the ideal and the real are brought into convergence. The material art object, the book or painting, can be worked
in such a way by the creative consciousness as to become, when observed from the right angle, a window to the transcendent. Georges Poulet argues that immersive reading is a form of transcendence and that the book is a threshold whose objective reality is necessarily dissolved during the process of immersion:

Where is the book I held in my hands? It is still there, and at the same time it is there no longer, it is nowhere. That object wholly object, that thing made of paper, as there are things made of metal and porcelain, that object is no more, or at least it is as if it no longer existed, as long as I read the book. For the book is no longer a material reality. It has become a series of words, of images, of ideas which in their turn begin to exist. And where is this new existence? Surely not in the paper object. Nor, surely, in external space. There is only one place left for this new existence: my innermost self [...] This is the remarkable transformation wrought in me through the act of reading. (pp. 42–3)

The book, for Poulet, is a liminal object between the real world, where it exists as ink and paper, and a creative interiority. This transcendent state can only be reached by a reader with, in Poulet’s definition, ‘total commitment’, and the willingness to ‘suspend mental reservation’ (p. 45).

In an essay that considers Nabokov’s ‘magical’ objects, Emily Collins makes a distinction between objects that are fetishes and those that are portals. The latter is an object that ‘magically transports people to a non-contiguous elsewhere—a point of contact between otherwise mutually inaccessible areas of space, time or reality’ (p. 193). Perhaps the definitive literary portals are Lewis Carroll’s rabbit hole and looking glass, and it is worth recalling that Nabokov translated Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland into Russian in 1923. Collins cites Marcel Proust’s madeleine as being another portal that influenced the formation of the Nabokovian aesthetic; this was an object whose taste, when combined with tea, transports the narrator into his past.44 For Nabokov, books are capable of triggering this passive, associative kind of memory and he recalls reading War and Peace at the age of 11 for the first time ‘in Berlin, on a Turkish sofa, in our somberly rococo Privatstrasse flat giving on a dark, damp back garden with larches and gnomes that have remained in that book, like an old postcard, forever’ (SM 155).

Speak, Memory itself is a portal to Nabokov’s past, and this idea of books as objects with access to the seemingly inaccessible is figured within the memoir. On immersing himself in French children’s books (Mme de

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44 As an example of a Nabokovian portal, Collins cites his penultimate novel Transparent Things (1972), wherein the ghosts of the dead are able to slide through the surface of an object and into its past.
Ségur’s *Les Malheurs de Sophie* among them) found in the Vyra household, Nabokov’s uncle Ruka delivers ‘an ecstatic moan’ on discovering ‘a passage he had loved in his childhood’, a moan that Nabokov would echo years later when rediscovering the same books:

In my own case, when I come over Sophie’s troubles again […] I not only go through the same agony and delight that my uncle did, but have to cope with an additional burden—the recollection I have of him, reliving his childhood with the help of those very books. I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die. (*SM* 62)

Books are layered on books, portal on portal: Ruka, himself a Proustian figure (he is described as succumbing to a ‘Proustian excoriation of the senses’ [*SM* 60]), is transported back to his childhood by his old books, the same books which also transport Nabokov to *his* childhood while simultaneously reflecting Ruka’s own reading (note he sits beneath a mirror), all of which is framed by Nabokov inviting the reader into his past through the portal of *Speak, Memory*. The faux naïve conclusion—’Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die’—is Nabokov’s celebration of literature’s ability to construct its own ‘robust reality’, a reality that, in his aesthetics, is repeatedly evoked and re-created by the series of future readers.

There is a crucial analogy to be made here between the act of reading and the idea of ‘iconic space’. For Bethea this idea, as expressed by the mathematician and philosopher Pavel Florensky, is ‘an important attribute of the literary expression of Russian spirituality’:

The icon, with its physical materials (painting on wood), its otherworldly, two-dimensional figures, and its notion of divine authorship (the icon painter is merely the instrument of the higher power), is not perceived by the viewer as a representation of holiness itself: when the penitent individual kisses the icon, he or she as it were steps *through* its frame from the realm of the profane to the realm of the holy. (‘Relativity and Reality’, 164–5)

The icon is analogous to the book, and the passage of the ‘penitent individual’ into a metaphysical dimension is analogous to the total immersion of Poulet’s ‘committed’ reader. For many of the Symbolists, the sacred book was inextricably connected to the literary artwork but for Nabokov the book was also more than itself, occupying an iconic space
between its ideal expression and its material reality. By occupying this iconic space the book becomes more than just a reproducible, socialized object: it becomes a portal to transcendence. It is this that protects Nabokov’s autonomous aesthetic from sterile solipsism. In his interviews, Nabokov was dismissive of suggestions that he wrote with his readers in mind, claiming to ‘write for myself in multiplicate’, yet by imbuing the book with the potential for transcendence, he was allowing the reader an analogous experience to that which he underwent during inspiration (SO 114). This iconic space can therefore be understood as a locus of aesthetic communion as the author’s and reader’s relations are elevated—or transported—beyond the materialist determinations of the world.

The different intellectual influences discussed in this chapter—all anti-determinist—contributed to the formation of Nabokov’s particularly late modernist aesthetics of autonomy. The Russian liberalism he inherited from his father was an antecedent to the anti-totalitarian Cold War liberalism that was ascendant in post-war America; in figures like Berlin, Nicolas Nabokov, and Mikhail Karpovich, the link between the Russian liberal tradition (swept aside by the Bolsheviks) and the Cold War version was direct. Nabokov’s engagement with pre-revolutionary Symbolism and post-revolutionary Acmeism, and his rejection of futurist and avant-garde movements that were invested in revolutionary politics, brought him firmly into alignment with the ostensibly anti-political tenor of late modernism, an anti-politics that, as we have already seen, constituted a politics of its own in the context of the early Cold War. Finally, Nabokov’s understanding of the book as occupying iconic space was a strategy for dealing with the commodification of literature; it was a way for Nabokov, at least in theory, to insulate his work from the corrosive threat of the large-scale field of production that he was entering by publishing in the United States. As we shall see in the next chapter, by making the book—the very object of buying and selling—the site of transcendence, Nabokov proposed a reception of his work that defied the market logic of consumption.
On 28 May 1940, Vladimir Nabokov and his family arrived in New York on the \textit{Champlain}, docking at the French Line pier in Manhattan. When he disembarked, he entered a city that was emerging as the literary capital of the world, supplanting the Paris he had left behind. Nabokov was also leaving behind his identity as a writer of Russian fiction—Sirin—and with it embracing the language of the surrounding culture. Nabokov described the process of changing languages as being ‘exceedingly painful—like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion’ (SO 54). It was not just a new language he had to learn, however, but also how to compete for symbolic capital in a literary field on a vastly different scale. In the Russian emigration he had been writing for a community of committed readers; in the United States he was walking out on to a much larger public stage. His new books, written in a new language, would be produced in completely different market conditions, a situation that would have important formal consequences for Nabokov’s work. How this new market shaped Nabokov’s literary production is the subject of this chapter.

When Nabokov arrived in New York, the Second World War was transforming an American economy recovering from the Great Depression. After the end of the war, with Nabokov establishing himself in his adopted country as a writer and scholar, the United States entered the ‘long boom’ and its publishing industry underwent huge expansion. Numerous factors were at work but clearly an aspirant class, with more wealth and more leisure time, and greater access to higher education, was consuming more books. The end of wartime paper rations, the promotion of movie tie-ins, and the huge success of paperback publishing catalysed the growth of the industry and in 1959 \textit{Publishers Weekly} reported that it was ‘approaching a billion dollar level’ (quoted in Brier, 8). As Evan Brier points out, the American Book Publishers Council had been formed in 1946, helping to ‘organize and modernize’ the book trade, and publishing became increasingly canny about distancing itself from its commercial ambitions while ruthlessly pursuing them (p. 10). Books were advertised like other commodities through the mass-market media of newspapers,
radio, and television. More books were published every year: according to Publishers Weekly statistics 11,022 new titles were published in 1950, rising to 40,846 in 1974.

The contrast with Russian émigré publishing in Paris and Berlin is striking. At first the trade was buoyant. Robert Williams points out that by June 1924 ‘nearly 4,000 separate titles had been recorded from throughout the diaspora, and no less than 142 Russian publishing firms had appeared abroad, émigré and Soviet, of which eighty-six were located in Berlin’ (p. 133). Production was cheapest in Berlin and as a consequence it was the centre of the publishing business in these early years and Russia’s literary capital in exile. Andrei Bely, Nina Berberova, Ilya Ehrenburg, Maxim Gorky, Vladislav Khodasevich, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Tolstoi, and Marina Tsvetaeva all visited Berlin and Marc Raeff credits the heightened literary exchange of these years with introducing a ‘modernist strain’ into the ‘intellectual environment of the emigration’ (p. 76).

These years of intellectual plenty proved short-lived; drastic inflation in 1923 forced publishing houses to close or move and the émigré publishing industry went into decline. This is a story hard to tell in precise figures; Raeff concedes that getting accurate information about émigré publishing ventures is ‘well-nigh impossible’ as so many of their archives were lost or destroyed during the Second World War (p. 73). For example, the influential Petropolis Press, which had published Nabokov’s Despair in 1936 and was interested in publishing The Gift, had their papers seized by the Gestapo in 1938. What Raeff does tell us is that ‘print runs were small and distribution complicated and costly’ and that ‘even titles of a more general interest, like the classics brought out by several small houses, were competing for a restricted circle of readers and bookstores’ (p. 74). Already hit hard by inflation, émigré publishers were further weakened by ‘rising tariffs and censorship imposed by nationalistic, authoritarian governments’ (Raeff, 75).

This was a world in which conservative literary influence was strong and publishers were reluctant to publish new, younger writers like Nabokov, preferring the dependable sales of established authors, such as Mark Aldanov and Vasily Nemirovich-Danchenko. The main driver of sales was not advertising but reviews in the intellectual journals, creating an intensely engaged intellectual environment with a relatively small number of players. The émigré literary scene was, as a consequence, what Bourdieu calls a field of restricted production, in which the judgement of peers is more important than demands of the general public:

In contrast to the field of large-scale cultural production, which submits to the laws of competition for the conquest of the largest possible market, the
field of restricted production tends to develop its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors. (Bourdieu, 115)

For Bourdieu, it was this restricted field that enabled modernist writers to operate with aesthetic autonomy. The cultivation of coterie literature in the inter-war years was a cultural strategy to place the artist in opposition to—and outside the influence of—the larger culture. The writers of the Russian emigration were working in different circumstances: their restricted field was enforced and their opposition was not directed against their surrounding culture but against that of the Soviet Union. In short, a writer could not make money by aligning herself with the social or political order: in the Russian emigration you could not sell out even if you wanted to.

On arriving in the United States, Nabokov’s cultural politics had to be recalibrated for a marketplace that was not only vastly larger (the field of large-scale cultural production) but also growing and changing through the increasing pressures of mass culture. During this period literary culture was consumed on a scale unprecedented in American history and Nabokov’s career in the United States is coterminous with this great boom in reading, writing, and publishing. The bestselling success of *Lolita* ensured that he was fully exposed to the celebrity that awaited the writer whose work reached this expanding market, setting in motion the machinery of marketing and promotion. This was not only a vastly larger public stage than Nabokov had previously known but it was one growing by the year.

These market conditions, in which books became consumable commodities, enabled Nabokov to become a professional writer but also aroused in him an ambivalent response to the reception of his work. The symbolic capital of a work of literature, which had been defined as autonomous from economic and social concerns, was gradually brought into alignment with these other forms of capital as a function of the institutionalization of high modernism in the period. Nabokov’s late modernist aesthetics were invested in the idea that good art was opposed to the demands of the marketplace and, even in his most successful novels, Nabokov remained committed to formal strategies that resisted the logic of consumption. The most important of these strategies was Nabokov’s writing novels that were designed not simply to be read but to be re-read. As Roland Barthes has argued in *S/Z*, re-reading is ‘an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us “throw away” the story once it has been consumed (“devoured”), so that we can then move on to another story’ (p. 15). Nabokov’s novels were
tiered, designed with a hierarchy of readers in mind, from the superficial consumer through to the deep reader. This was Nabokov’s way of asserting (relative) authorial autonomy while continuing to operate in the marketplace, to develop a modernist poetics of reception while also being able to function as a professional writer.\(^1\) How he went about doing so is the subject of the first half of this chapter. In the second half of the chapter I consider the way this assertion of authorial autonomy is problematized by the process of its reception, by its material dissemination. Nabokov may have been in artistic control as he created his meticulously determined novels but inherent in the writing and publishing of his work is a necessary abdication of authorial control, a situation that is repeatedly dramatized in Nabokov’s fiction itself.

**AUTONOMY AND THE MARKET**

Nabokov was an unwavering champion of aesthetic autonomy. The argument he had made for art’s special status in ‘The Creative Writer’ at the December 1941 meeting of the New England Modern Languages Association was a development of the early lectures he had given on the art of writing at Wellesley College the previous spring. He was subsequently appointed Interdepartmental Visiting Lecturer in Comparative Literature for the academic year 1941–2, with help from the Faculty Fund for Refugees. He left the college in 1942 to pursue a lecture tour around the United States, funded by the Institute for International Education, which was seeking to counter Axis propaganda efforts by working closely with the Department of State (it was a busy time for Nabokov: by 1944 he had visited twenty-three US states). He returned to Wellesley in 1943 as a Russian instructor before founding the Russian department for the 1944–5 academic year. In lecture notes from the period, one can see Nabokov taking his assertion of authorial autonomy, as expressed in ‘The Creative Writer’, into the classroom:

Art has been too often turned into a tool to convey ideas—whether political or moral—to influence, to teach, to improve and enlighten and what not. I am not telling you that art does not improve and enlighten the reader. But

\(^1\) Walter Cohen, in his 1983 article ‘The Making of Nabokov’s Fiction’, makes a similar argument about Nabokov’s deliberate resistance to the passive consumption of his work, arguing that his ‘class origins may have reinforced his aversion to the commercialization of literature’ (p. 336).
it does this in its own special way and it does it only then when its own single purpose remains to be good, excellent art, art as perfect as his creator can make. (Quoted in *AY* 111)

In invoking the idea of art having no purpose outside of itself, Nabokov is aligning himself with the tradition of autonomous aesthetics that has its source in Kantian thought. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Nabokov’s aesthetics had their roots deep in the Russian literary tradition and despite his disavowal of influence he was enmeshed in these generation-spanning arguments about the social utility of literature.

Nabokov was largely consistent in asserting his aesthetic autonomy from social and historical forces, but in regard to his autonomy from the marketplace, the issue becomes more complicated. Nabokov, after all, was a professional writer who needed to publish to put food on the table, a situation made problematic by the belief that market forces corrupted and deformed true art. As we have seen, in the final paragraph of ‘The Creative Writer’ Nabokov had invoked the ‘lumbering’ monster ‘of grim commonsense’ who will ‘whine’ that a work of true literature ‘is not for the general public, that the book will never never—And right then just before it blurts out the word *s, e, double-l*, false commonsense must be shot dead’ (*CW* 29). The monster was right when it came to *Bend Sinister*, the novel Nabokov was working on during the war and which he finished in May 1946. Nabokov was under no illusions about its chances in the marketplace; on 1 February 1946 he had written to Wilson to say he ‘dare not rely on any literary earnings’ (*NWL* 160). It only got published because Allen Tate, the poet and New Critic, convinced his colleagues at Henry Holt that the novel’s modernist difficulty was worth sticking with. Tate then left Holt before publication in June 1947 and a lack of promotion combined with the novel’s prickly hostility to conventional reading practice resulted in ‘dismal’ sales figures (*AY* 120). The commercial failure of *Bend Sinister* followed hard on the failure of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to sell, a novel it had taken Nabokov almost three years to get published. If Nabokov wanted to retire from teaching and elevate his writing to a full-time job he would need to find considerably more success in the marketplace. His work as university lecturer protected him from market forces and allowed him to write about what he wanted but it also restricted the time he was able to devote to writing. It is one of the ironies of Nabokov’s literary career that the success of *Lolita* with the general public enabled him to fully develop an oeuvre that was ostensibly opposed to reception by a mass audience.

The history of the idea of aesthetic autonomy has been shaped by its attempt to reject determinative market forces. As Harold Schweizer
argues, the ‘evolution and ideology of aesthetic autonomy through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ offered resistance to the ‘commodification of values’ and justified ‘a renunciation of history and culture radically transformed by the Industrial Revolution and expanding economic markets’ (p. 231). The German Romantic philosophy of Schiller and Schelling, taking its cue from Kant, granted art an autotelic status that served as a refuge against the tumult of changing conditions of literary production. As Andrew Bennett writes of Romantic poetics:

Romanticism develops a theory of writing and reception which stresses the importance of the poet’s originating subjectivity, and of the work of art as an expression of self uncontaminated by market forces, undiluted by appeals to the corrupt prejudices and desires of (bourgeois, contaminating, fallible, feminine, temporal, mortal) readers. (p. 3)

This argument for autonomy was radicalized by the aestheticist movements of the nineteenth century. Théophile Gautier’s famous preface to his 1835 novel Mademoiselle de Maupin, which served as a kind of manifesto for l’art pour l’art, derided the declining market share of real literature and the commodification of books (‘a book cannot be turned into gelatin soup’), sniffily insisting that the ‘finest things are neither saleable or purchasable’ (quoted in Schweizer, 240). The rise in consumerism facilitated by technological change was met by uncompromising assertions of art’s inutility on the part of Symbolists and Decadents. In his 1964 interview with Playboy, Nabokov sought to distance himself from the fin-de-siècle excesses of Wilde and Pater, without watering down his assertion of aesthetic autonomy:

Although I do not care for the slogan ‘art for art’s sake’—because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists—there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art. (SO 33)

Nabokov here invokes deferred reception as the true measure of literary value; surviving ‘larvae and rust’ is more important than climbing bestsellers lists or winning literary awards. In his lucid explanation of Bourdieu’s account of the emergence of modernism, James English points out that ‘the revolutionary artistic habitus can best thrive […] among those sufficiently privileged to maintain themselves as cultural producers through a protracted (potentially lifelong) period of deferred economic rewards’ (p. 370). Nabokov inherited the privilege to enable such autonomous literary production and it is a testament to his aesthetic commitment that he held to it even as his economic circumstances became dire in the 1930s.
Nabokov’s case for art’s exceptional status was made in an intellectual environment in which there was much concern for the prevailing decline in high cultural standards. In 1960, four years before that Playboy interview and two years after the publication of Lolita, Dwight Macdonald— influential critic, editor, and crusading figure on the anti-communist left—published ‘Masscult and Midcult’ in Partisan Review. This essay was part of an ongoing project that had begun when Macdonald wrote a damning article about Soviet cinema in the winter 1939 edition of Partisan Review, an article that prompted a letter from Clement Greenberg, which in turn prompted the pair to collaborate (with Macdonald as interventionist editor) on what became the influential ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ (published in the fall 1939 edition of Partisan Review).

Macdonald returned to the issues of ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ many times, including in ‘A Theory of Popular Culture’ which he published in the first edition of his magazine Politics in 1944, before synthesizing his thinking in ‘Masscult and Midcult’ in 1960, in which he argued stridently against the influence of American capitalist mass culture on literary standards. In doing so, Macdonald’s work complemented that of the New Critics, who, as Mark Jancovich explains, shared this belief in the corrosive effect of popular culture:

The New Critics unproblematically assumed that due to its production within (or at least its entanglement with) capitalist commodity production, popular culture was forced to rely on the easy or abstract solutions against which they define literature—that it was not complex in form or content and that its consumption involved the complete inverse of ‘disinterested contemplation’.

(p. 217)

Jancovich argues that this rejection of the validity of popular culture was an extension of their wider Agrarian politics, through which the New Critics claimed that ‘not only had the emergence of capitalism destroyed culture in America, but also that culture could not be repaired without establishing a set of social and economic relations which were fundamentally different from those dominant within modern America’ (p. 204). There are obvious correspondences here with Macdonald’s cultural politics, in which the entrance of the masses ‘onto the political stage’ during the French Revolution brought about the gradual marginalization of ‘the traditional kind of authorship […] until by the end of the nineteenth century the movement from which most of the enduring work of our time has come had separated itself from the market and was in systematic opposition to it’ (Masscult and Midcult, 19). This movement was modernism, which, on Macdonald’s account, was not based on ‘wealth or birth but on common tastes’. These artists had ‘shared respect for certain
standards and an agreement that living art often runs counter to generally accepted ideas’ and the art they produced ‘simply refused to compete in the established cultural marketplaces’ and ‘made a desperate effort to fence off some area within which the serious artist could still function, to erect again the barriers between the cognoscenti and the ignoscenti that had been breached by the rise of Masscult’ (Masscult and Midcult, 53).

As recent scholarship of modernism has shown, these barriers were not as high and strong as Macdonald suggests. In an important recent study of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, Andrew Goldstone argues that while ‘[t]he market is the primary domain from which in many accounts—not least Adorno’s aesthetic theory—modernism’s effort to create an autonomous aesthetic seeks to escape, freeing art from the demands of popularity and commercial success in the realm of mass culture’, the idea that artistic production happened outside a marketplace is illusory. ‘If autonomy is understood as the absolute isolation, self-enclosure, and denial of all contexts of the artwork,’ Goldstone writes, ‘then modernist literary works were clearly not autonomous from the marketplace’ (p. 22).

Macdonald may have exaggerated the degree to which modernist artists achieved autonomy from the market but his argument that the market was growing and changing in ways that had fundamentally altered literary production were made on firmer ground. The crucial shift for Macdonald—and one that is central to understanding the way the formal properties of Nabokov’s work respond to market forces—was from the active to the passive, ‘a matter of consuming rather than creating’ culture (Masscult and Midcult, 57). The reception of a work determined whether it could be called successful, and that reception occurred in a mass-marketplace, rather than in salons or literary journals:

Today, in the United States, the demands of the audience, which has changed from a small body of connoisseurs into a large body of ignoramuses, have become the chief criteria of success. Only the Little Magazines worry about standards. The commercial press, including the Saturday Review and The New York Times Book Review, consider books as commodities, rating them according to audience-response. (Masscult and Midcult, 18)

While Nabokov shared this suspicion of mass consumption, as a writer it was the huge market success of Lolita that allowed him to dedicate himself to his vocation on a full-time basis, enabling him to not only write his American fiction but also to translate and re-publish his Russian oeuvre.

Macdonald’s relationship with Nabokov is enlightening when considering the latter’s problematic position in the marketplace. Macdonald had admired Lolita greatly and had socialized and corresponded with Nabokov after its publication in 1958. After one visit, Macdonald attempted to
persuade Nabokov to review *Doctor Zhivago*, presumably for *The New Yorker*, an attempt that failed due to Nabokov’s concern of the two books’ market rivalry (SL 264–5). One could certainly make a case for the influence of Nabokov’s conception of *poshust*, as formulated in *Nikolai Gogol*, as being a direct precursor to Macdonald’s idea of Midcult; Macdonald called the Gogol book ‘the best introduction to that writer I know’ (‘Virtuosity Rewarded’, 137). Their relationship soured in the summer of 1962 when Macdonald wrote a typically obstreperous review of *Pale Fire* for *Partisan Review*, in which he called Nabokov a ‘minor writer’ (which Macdonald felt was a compliment) and dismissed the novel as ‘unreadable’ (‘Virtuosity Rewarded’, 138). Macdonald accused other reviewers of going soft on Nabokov not only because of his ‘literary reputation’ but also because ‘his last book was a bestseller’ (‘Virtuosity Rewarded’, 138). This fits with Macdonald’s polemic in ‘Masscult and Midcult’, published two years previously, that success was being determined by reception in the marketplace rather than through the imposition of high cultural standards. In that essay, Macdonald had written of the malign mechanism behind contemporary cultural production:

In Masscult (and in its bastard, Midcult) everything becomes a commodity, to be mined for $$$, used for something it is not, from Davy Crockett to Picasso. Once a writer becomes a Name, that is, once he writes a book that for good or bad reasons catches on, the Masscult (or Midcult) mechanism begins to ‘build him up,’ to package him into something that can be sold in identical units in quantity. (*Masscult and Midcult*, 25)

Nabokov had, of course, written in *Lolita* a book that had ‘caught on’, and he was subsequently subject to the very pressures of the masscult mechanism that Macdonald here describes, pressures that, as we shall see, were important in shaping his fiction. Macdonald sees in *Pale Fire* an attempt by Nabokov to defy market expectations, sensing ‘a perverse bravado’ on his part, ‘as if the author, with a superior smile, is saying to the large public that read “Lolita”: “So you think I’m a manufacturer of bestsellers? Try this on your pianola!” I must confess I find this attitude, if not its product, attractive’ (‘Virtuosity Rewarded’, 138).

Nabokov’s efforts to engage with a wider readership while also resisting the commodification of his work were more complicated than simply defiant bravado. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Nabokov was very much a modernist in his commitment to aesthetic autonomy but, as his correspondence attests, he was also a diligent professional writer who, as we shall see in the next chapter, cared about how his books were packaged and sold; he pushed his publishers to spend more money on advertising his work and was assiduous in studying his contracts. What concerns us in this
chapter, however, are the formal ways Nabokov asserted his autonomy from the marketplace in the reception of his work. The foundational statement of Nabokov’s poetics of reception is the lecture ‘Good Writers and Good Readers’, which is a sister text to the ‘The Creative Writer’ (and the subsequent iteration of that piece as ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’). The lecture as published is a tidied-up version of Nabokov’s opening remarks to his Cornell class and does not have the same authorial status as the ‘The Creative Writer’; Nabokov never published his lectures himself. As Boyd tells us, in 1972 he had gone back over them and inserted a note that read: ‘My university lectures (Tolstoy, Kafka, Flaubert, Cervantes, etc. etc.) are chaotic and sloppy and must never be published. None of them!’ (AY 602). It is ironic that these lectures, in which he stridently asserted the autonomy of the author, were published against his wishes. Fredson Bowers, the editor who put them together for their 1980 publication, writes in his foreword that ‘[s]tylistically the most part of these texts by no means represent what would have been Nabokov’s language and syntax if he had himself worked them up in book form’ (Bowers, p. xiii). Bowers concedes that his task has been one of ‘synthesis and redaction’, explaining that he added ‘bridge passages’ before quotations and that the Stevenson lecture was assembled by Bowers from little more than rough notes (p. x). ‘Good Readers and Good Writers’ is particularly problematic. Bowers tells us that it ‘has been reconstructed from parts of his untitled written-out opening lecture to the class before the exposition began of Mansfield Park’ (pp. xiv–xv). As we have seen in the previous chapter, what he fails to notice is that the two pages he said were ‘missing’ from the ‘The Art of Literature and Common Sense’ were mistakenly inserted in ‘Good Readers and Good Writers’, a mistake that could only have been made had he not been familiar with ‘The Creative Writer’. As cautiously as one must tread when dealing with the lectures, however, it is pertinent that the ideas about reception Nabokov outlined in ‘Good Readers and Good Writers’ were clearly of a piece with those expressed in his other writing of the period. ‘The Creative Writer’, ‘Good Readers and Good Writers’, Nikolai Gogol, and the lectures Nabokov worked up for Wellesley and Cornell are all part of a mid-career reassessment of the literary fundamentals, an interrogation of authorship and readership that was instrumental to the composition of his subsequent fiction.

GOOD READING

It must have been disheartening to the students of Nabokov’s course on the masterpieces of European literature to discover that their reading load
was doubled on a point of aesthetic principle. In laying out his best reading practice, Nabokov told his students that ‘one cannot read a book: one can only reread it’ (LL 3). To explain what he meant, Nabokov used the analogy of the synchronic reception of painting:

When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting. (LL 3)

What stands between the reader and true artistic appreciation, in Nabokov’s argument, is the very material the art is made of, the paper, ink, and the way they are laid out and bound, dictate its sequential assimilation. This is a direct extrapolation from the penultimate paragraph of ‘The Creative Writer’ in which Nabokov had written that

If the mind were constructed on optical lines and if a book could be read in the same way as a painting is taken in by the eye, that is without the bother of working from left to right and without the absurdity of linear beginnings and ends, this would be the ideal way of appreciating a novel, for thus the author saw it at the moment of its conception. (CW 29)

In developing this theory of reception, Nabokov is plugging into some old arguments; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing famously made the distinction between the synchronic appreciation of painting and the diachronic appreciation of literature in Lacoön (1766). In a Horatian manoeuvre—Ut pictura poesis—Nabokov is making the case for closing the semiotic gap by a synchronous appreciation of the work of literary art enabled by repeated reading, through which the reader constructs the work in

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2 Nabokov returned to the analogy with painting when talking about the workings of inspiration in his 1964 interview with Alvin Toffler of Playboy: ‘Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one’s mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing’ (SO 32).

3 In the published version of ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’, which was the lecture Nabokov derived from ‘The Creative Writer’, there appears to have been an editorial mistake in transcription as ‘optical’ is replaced by ‘optional’ (LL 380).
imaginary space and as such transcends the materiality of the book itself. By this theory, the formal properties of ‘true’ literary art are opposed to the material status of the book as object (and, by extension, as commodity). Unlike works with mass cultural appeal, the literary work is not to be consumed and disposed of. The pages can be turned and a book can be ‘finished’, but the work of art demands further contemplation, deeper reading.

In making his case to the students of Cornell, Nabokov was empowering them as creative readers (within, of course, certain limits) while at the same time making claims for the reception of his own work. For all his professed authorial hauteur, Nabokov’s poetics was one that depended on the collaboration of the reader in the aesthetic project. If the artist experiences transcendence at the moment of inspiration then the reader can undergo an analogous experience through a work’s synchronic assimilation. As Nabokov goes on to argue in ‘Good Writers and Good Readers’ the co-creation of a work of art can only be achieved through the mutual labour of writer and reader:

The writer is the first man to map [the fictional world] and to name the natural objects it contains [ . . . ] that mountain must be conquered. Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, who do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever. (LL 2)

That the work of art can only be ‘realized’ through this union of mutual effort anticipated some aspects of the phenomenological aesthetics of Roman Ingarden and the reception theory developed by Wolfgang Iser and the Constance School in the 1960s. As Stephen Blackwell has shown, however, Nabokov’s aesthetics of reception resonate most harmoniously with the work of the Russian literary critic Iulii Aikhenvald, with whom Nabokov became close during the 1920s in Berlin. Nabokov gave papers at Aikhenvald’s colloquia and Aikhenvald enthusiastically reviewed Nabokov’s (then Sirin’s) poetry in the émigré journals (RY 274, 287–8). The pair had many intellectual affinities, including a propensity to dismiss literary ‘movements’, and Nabokov included what he called a ‘friendly sketch’ of Aikhenvald in his 1927 short story ‘The Passenger’, recognizable to ‘[r]eaders of the time [ . . . ] by his precise, delicate little gestures and his fondness for playing with euphonically twinned phrases in his literary comments’ (S 671).

4 Karshan argues that Aikhenvald was an aesthetic mentor to Nabokov and that through his In Praise of Idleness (1922) Nabokov ‘learned not only about Schiller’s idea of play but also about the Kantian aesthetic framework’ (Art of Play, 57).
It is in their understanding of the relations between writer and reader that Nabokov and Aikhenvald demonstrate the most productive kinship. In Aikhenvald’s ‘The Writer and the Reader’ Blackwell finds

[a] collection [of] ideas that so closely parallels Nabokov’s own that one could only assume that either Nabokov as a theorist of writing and reading adopted many of Aikhenvald’s critical underpinnings, or else the sympathetic reverberations between the two ran so deep that they both independently produced the same ideas, ideas which were uncommon for their time and immeasurably far from anything trendy. (Zina’s Paradox, 29)

Those ‘trendy’ ideas were the scientific approaches of nascent Russian Formalism, and it is easy to see how Aikhenvald’s subjectivist approach, heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, failed to chime with the Russian Formalist quest for objective literary standards. For Aikhenvald, the author and reader mutually define each other, and it is at the moment of union between the two that art is created (this is Blackwell’s translation):

Literature is a conversation; the writer converses with the reader, and that unification of lips and hearts, this spiritual duality produces the artistic effect. Not only does the writer define the reader, but the reader defines the writer as well: the former creates the latter according to his own image and likeness, sympathetically revealing his essence. A writer exists not in that which is written down, but in that which is read. (Quoted in Zina’s Paradox, 30)

For this artistic union to be successful, Aikhenvald believes the reader is obliged to sacrifice as much subjectivity as possible, something that Blackwell finds analogous to Nabokov’s insistence that his readers ‘fondle details’ of the fictional world. When this criterion has been met, the artistic moment (as figured by Nabokov in the mountaintop embrace) is possible, although, as Aikhenvald maintains, that moment is never static (indeed by its nature cannot be static). For Aikhenvald the fluidity of the point of connection between writer and reader means that ‘the artistic work [is] never finished or definitive, ever flowing’, a vision of art that is decidedly reader-centred and, for him, every reading ‘enriches and complicates’ the work of art (quoted in Zina’s Paradox, 30). This is the point of vulnerability obscured by Nabokov’s extratextual efforts to control the reading of his work. When he claims, for example, that he does not believe ‘an artist should bother about his audience’, it does not correlate with his own fictional practice (SO 18). The writer cannot be his own reader and therefore an act of communion is necessary for the creation of the work of art, an act of communion in which the creator is absent. To paraphrase Michael Wood, these were the risks of fiction that Nabokov had to take.
Where Nabokov departs from Aikhenvald is in his emphasis on rereading. For Nabokov, the ‘real’ shape of the work has been carefully and intentionally submerged beneath the surface of the text by the author (or by the instincts of artistic genius working through the author) and it can only be uncovered by the attentions of the careful reader, assuming that reader is careful in the way the author intended. Gennady Barabtarlo expresses this idea in seductively Nabokovian terms, using the trope of the novel-as-maze. In the preface to *Aerial View*, Barabtarlo calls Nabokov a ‘thematic’ plotter (as opposed to a linear plotter) and argues that only through rereading can this thematic plot be accessed. A novel, like a maze, needs to be understood in spatial terms, from an ‘aerial view’, and in order to be in a position to do this there needs to be a first reading in which the novel-as-maze is explored and all the ‘alluring dead-ends and elegant curves’ tried and appreciated. Only once this basic navigation has been carried out can a rereading reveal the ‘thematic’ plot:

Successive readings of a novel by Nabokov promotes the well-trained reader to ever higher observation points, affording a view of the entire compass. This lofty position brings him closer to the author’s, whose plan he must struggle to understand, and although the struggle may leave him slightly limping, like Jacob, he will be the more invigorated for it. (Barabtarlo 3–4)

Barabtarlo applies to Nabokov’s work what Nabokov had asked his students to apply to the works of literature he started teaching at Cornell in 1948. The painting, like the maze, is another spatial metaphor for the shape of the work of art, lending it a stability that is not dependent on its material embodiment as a book. The reader’s creativity is limited by the need to be obedient to an authorial blueprint; the material book may have slipped from the author’s direct control through the dynamics of the literary marketplace but the author retains control of this immaterial space, the true home of the artwork. One of the problems of this argument is that, as Matei Calinescu points out, it obscures the fact that rereading is still a diachronic process and that the idea of rereading disclosing a stable spatial form presupposes in the reader ‘the angelic capacity of absolute recall’ (p. 22). By this reckoning, Nabokov’s only true readers could be himself and perhaps Borges’s Ireneo Funes. Barabtarlo’s theory further assumes the author is possessed of divine properties; the reader is elevated

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5 David Bethea has pointed out that ‘Nabokov’s style clearly shows on those who write about him’ and that his biographer Brian Boyd is ‘energized by that typical Nabokovian oscillation back and forth between the precisely named and the generalising abstract’ (*Style*, 696). In his *Nikolai Gogol*, Nabokov writes that after reading Gogol’s work, ‘one’s eyes may become gogolized’ (*NG* 144). Fanger notes that, in turn, Nabokov’s study goes on to ‘nabokovize Gogol’ (p. 426).
closer to the author by each stage of reading, gaining a clearer vantage of the maze in which she had previously been trapped. The maze, though, remains of the author’s ultimately mysterious (and infallible) design. This is Nabokov apotheosized: after all, Jacob got his limp wrestling with God in the desert. Even Nabokov himself, at the peak of his hauteur, never claimed to be a divine being.6

SPIRAL FORM AND MODERNISM

Nabokov applied his theory of rereading to the practice of writing novels that, on a formal level, demanded to be reread. In Nabokov’s fiction, the interruption of narrative linearity begins at the micropoetic level, through the use of rhetorical strategies, fluid shifts of perspective, and retrograde allusion. The exploitation of parentheses,7 agnorisis,8 phrasal tmesis,9 recherché vocabulary, archaisms, neologisms, bilingual puns, and unusual juxtapositions all serve to interrupt the flow of reading.10 Writing to Katharine White in November 1947, to complain about the editing of ‘Portrait of my Uncle’ in The New Yorker, Nabokov defends what he calls his ‘sinuosity’ of construction:

I would like to discriminate between awkward construction (which is bad) and a certain special—how shall I put it—sinuosity, which is my own and which only at first glance may seem awkward or obscure. Why not have the reader re-read a sentence now and then? It won’t hurt him. (SL 77)

Nabokov’s unorthodox sentence construction and startling rhetorical devices deliberately rein in the reader, just as she begins to gallop (note the rhetorical parenthesis in the letter to White). In writing about

6 Although he did come close. In an early letter to his mother Nabokov wrote the following about the characters in Mary: ‘I know how each one smells, walks, eats, and I understand how God as he created the world found this a pure, thrilling joy. We are translators of God’s creation, his little plagiarists and imitators, we dress up what he wrote as a charmed commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius’ (RY 245).

7 For an analysis of the extensive use of parentheses in Nabokov, and their particular role in facilitating a rereading of Lolita, see my essay, ‘“(I have camouflaged everything my love)”: Lolita’s Pregnant Parentheses’.

8 Kinbote gives a striking example in his introduction to ‘Pale Fire’ in which he explains that the repetition of the first line to fill the ‘missing’ last line ‘[…] would have completed the symmetry of the structure, with its two identical central parts, solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings of five hundred verses each, and damn that music’ (PF 14–15).

9 For a discussion of Nabokov’s use of phrasal tmesis see Peter Lubin’s ‘Kickshaws and Motley’.

10 Jane Grayson argues that this ‘arresting’ style is in part down to his seeing ‘the English language through different eyes’ (Nabokov Translated, 216).
Nabokov’s style, David Bethea points out Nabokov’s debt to the Russian Formalist strategy of estrangement, pointing out that Nabokov ‘constantly interrupts the flow of his narratives in order to stimulate his reader to see better, with increased alertness and cognitive engagement’ (‘Style’, 698). Eric Naiman argues that Nabokov not only defamiliarizes reading but also ‘the manner in which the reader understands what he reads’ and that ‘this defamiliarization of reading often takes a transgressive, sexual turn, so that the mind awakened to hidden possibilities of understanding is figured in the text as sexually, and often inappropriately, aroused’ (p. 8).

This ‘sinuosity’ of construction at a ‘micro’ level is echoed in the way Nabokov’s novels are structured at a ‘macro’ level. From the mid-1930s, Nabokov began constructing novels that were formally recursive, novels that sought, through various strategies, to solicit rereading. Nabokov’s novels are designed to encourage the reader to return to the text, often encoding readings in his novels that can only be understood by a rereader. In this sense they operate on a principle of ‘eloquent reticence’, the term Leona Toker uses to describe novels that withhold information:

In the case of ‘reticent’ novels the main difference between the first and repeated readings is that at the outset of the latter we possess the information that was withheld from us for some time during the former. Hence, the structure of our expectations on a repeated reading is radically different and cannot be accounted for merely by the absence of the ‘what-happens-next’ sort of suspense. (Eloquent Reticence, 8–9)

Each successive reading of a Nabokov work should, to the attentive reader, disclose the hidden patterns carefully concealed by the author.

Nabokov began experimenting with recursive textual strategies as early as the 1926 short story ‘A Nursery Tale’ before refining them in ‘The Circle’, a short story he wrote in 1936 while composing The Gift. The story concerns Innokentiy Bychkov, the son of the Leshino schoolmaster from The Gift, and his infatuation with Tanya Godunov-Cherdyntsev, Fyodor’s sister. It opens with the following ostensibly baffling sentence: ‘In the second place, because he was possessed by a sudden mad hankering after Russia’ (S 375). The reader is plunged into the story mid-narrative and it is only on reading the story’s final line that the reader learns what came ‘in the first place’. Having been (initially unsatisfactorily) reunited with Tanya in Paris in the mid-1920s, Innokentiy suddenly grasps a ‘wonderful fact’:

nothing is lost, nothing whatever; memory accumulates treasures, stored up secrets grow in darkness and dusk, and one day a transient visitor at a lending library wants a book that has not once been asked for in twenty-two years. He got up from his seat, made his adieus, was not detained overly effusively.
How strange that his knees should be trembling. That was really a shattering experience. He crossed the square, entered a café, ordered a drink, briefly rose to remove his own squashed hat from under him. What a dreadful feeling of uneasiness. He felt that way for several reasons. In the first place, because Tanya had remained as enchanting and as invulnerable as she had been in the past. (S 384)

The final sentence completes the circle, whisking the reader back to the beginning. This is not trickiness for its own sake: Innokentiy’s epiphany about the imperviousness of the past is immediately followed by a narrative strategy that sends the reader back into that past (and, of course, their own readerly past). Furthermore, this was written in Nabokov’s precarious final years in Berlin, as a new set of historical forces were conspiring to push him into a second degree of emigration.

Nabokov repeated this technique in the fourth chapter of The Gift, Fyodor’s biography of Chernyshevsky, which opens with an epigraph that is only later revealed to be the second part of a sonnet:

Alas! In vain historians pry and probe:
The same wind blows, and in the same live robe
Truth bends her head to fingers curved cupwise;
And with a woman’s smile and a child’s care
Examines something she is holding there
Concealed by her own shoulder from our eyes. (G 195)

The chapter ends with Fyodor quoting ‘a mediocre but curious sonnet’ composed by an ‘unknown poet’:

What will it say, your far descendant’s voice—
Lauding your life or blasting it outright:
That it was dreadful? That another might
Have been less bitter? That it was your choice?
That your high deed prevailed, and did ignite
Your dry work with the poetry of Good,
And crowned the white brow of chained martyrhood
With a closed circle of ethereal light? (G 276)

11 The story is also replete with circular motifs: the intersecting circles made by rain on the surface of a pond, the ‘sleep circle’, the circular motion of Innokentiy chewing on sunflower seeds, and a rotating linden seed (S 378, 379, 380, 381). Nabokov wrote of this story that ‘[t]echnically, the circle which the present corollary describes (its last sentence existing implicitly before its first one) belongs to the same serpent-biting-its-tail type as the circular structure of the fourth chapter in Dar (or, for that matter, Finnegans Wake, which it preceded)’ (S 675).
The poem alludes to the experience of its own reading and to close the circle and complete the sonnet the reader must return to the chapter’s epigraph. Nabokov made his purpose even clearer to the readers of the English version, explaining in his foreword to the 1963 translation that the chapter is ‘a spiral within a sonnet’ (G 9). The recursive structure of this chapter—set against what Nabokov characterizes as the blind, progressive linearity of Chernyshevsky’s materialist thought—is also used to structure The Gift as a whole. The novel ends with a piece of embedded poetry, composed in the form of an ‘Onegin stanza’.

Good-by, my book! Like mortal eyes, imagined ones must close some day. Onegin from his knees will rise—but his creator strolls away. And yet the ear cannot right now part with the music and allow the tale to fade; the chords of fate itself continue to vibrate; and no obstruction to the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow’s morning haze—nor does this terminate the phrase. (G 333)

In the foreword to the English translation Nabokov pointedly wonders ‘how far the imagination of the reader will follow the young lovers after they have been dismissed’ (G 9). For the reader who follows the recursive hints, there will be rewards: as Blackwell has shown in Zina’s Paradox, it is only on rereading the novel that many of the problems faced by the first-time reader are resolved—including the narratorial slippage between first and third person—and that Zina Mertz is revealed as the primary addressee of the text and the novel’s ‘shaping artistic force’ (p. 3).

In his subsequent work, Nabokov would continue to experiment with reticent narrative (the submerged pattern of Quilty’s covert pursuit of Dolores in Lolita) and recursive structures (the narrative loops of Pale Fire).12 In Ada, he even has his ‘modest narrator’, Van Veen, addresses the ‘rereader’ directly (A 21). The problem is that the cyclical logic of this technical virtuosity implies sterility. For the Russian émigrés reading ‘The Circle’ and The Gift, the recursive structures may have fortified their memories of a lost Russia, but did such a dynamic offer anything other than paralysing nostalgia? Nabokov sought to transcend the limitations of circular narrative by taking as his spatial model the spiral. In Speak, Memory, he writes that in ‘the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free’ (SM 211). The spiral is, for

12 It is important to note here Julian Connolly’s ‘Pnin: The Wonder of Recurrence and Transformation’ in which he argues that Pnin was also ‘organized along the lines of one of Nabokov’s famous spirals’ and that ‘events, images and associations recur in the course of the novel in a tightly controlled pattern in which external repetition is accompanied by internal transformation’ (p. 195).
Nabokov, the geometric expression of the Hegelian triad and the revelation of the ‘essential spirality of all things’ is shown to be an important formative idea in his intellectual development:

The spiral is a spiritualized circle [...] I thought this up when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel’s triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time. Twirl follows swirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call ‘thetic’ the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; ‘antithetic’ the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and ‘synthetic’ the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on. (SM 211)

This adoption of the spiral as an aesthetic motif has its roots in Russian modernism, specifically in the work of Andrei Bely and Alexander Blok. In *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction*, David Bethea tells us that ‘[l]ike Blake and Yeats, both Bely and Blok were intrigued by the form of the spiral, and it is arguable that they saw the development of history in general and of their own artistic development in particular in helical or conical terms’ (p. 119). Bethea goes on to argue that this spiralete model of history, developed out of Hegel, was appropriated by the Romantics as a way of moving beyond the cyclical pattern suggested by neo-Platonism (and of course the linearity of Christian teleology) before the second wave of Symbolists invoked it as a means to ‘escape from the “eternal return” of Nietzsche’ (p. 120).

Bely’s innovation is to take the spiral as a model of time and use it as a formal model for constructing narrative. Bethea shows that Bely had ‘this geometrical form in mind as he worked on *Petersburg*’ citing two articles Bely had composed in 1912: ‘The Line, the Circle, the Spiral—of Symbolism’ and ‘Circular Movement (Forty-Two Arabesques)’ (p. 121). For Bely, the reader was placed on a spiralete trajectory by the very material process of reading:

A book is indeed a four-dimensional being—this is obvious to the point of banality. The fourth dimension, intersecting three dimensionality, describes, as it were, a cube in the shape of a booklet in octavo, where the page is a plane, and the line time in its most linear form. The transition of one line [to the next], forming the plane of the page, is a joining of circular movement to straightforward movement: from line to line the eye describes a circle. The joining of page to page, which combines circular movement with movement along a line, forms a spiral. The truth of a book is spiralete; the truth of a book is the eternal change of changeless positions. (Quoted in *The Shape of Apocalypse*, 123)
For Bely, the book as object occupies a stable objective existence but the engagement of that object by the reader gives it, in the process of reception, an abstract spiralate form. This concern with the way the reader engages with the book as physical object anticipates Nabokov’s own concern with the need for the reader to transcend the book’s materiality to reach a level at which its spatial form can be appreciated. Gerald Janacek has identified the spiral as ‘an image of expanding consciousness’ in another Bely novel, Kotik Letaev, and both Bely and Nabokov seem to have been attracted to the metaphysical implications of structuring their work in spiralate form (Janacek, 357). In Petersburg, Bethea argues, the ‘only way out of the circle of history and into the spiral of which it is part is to remain open to the intrusion of the fourth dimension into the three-dimensional realm of habitual cognition, to intuit, as it were, the fingers of one’s author turning the pages of the book that is one’s life’ (The Shape of Apocalypse, 129).

If recursive structures can be an escape from sterility and passage toward transcendence, they are also a means of exerting authorial control. The book goes into the world of buying and selling and is either read or ignored, a process that constitutes, as Barthes dramatically framed it, the first death of the author. As we have seen, the intrusions of history had undermined the security with which Nabokov’s work circulated during his career in the emigration and it is no exaggeration to say that he faced the threat of his own authorial erasure. In embedding these formal patterns in his work, Nabokov is marking his heightened authorial presence in the text at a variety of levels. The spiral’s very open-ended structure is appealing because it does not imply a final reading, an end to authorial presence. Nabokov, the exile who cannot return (to Russia, to his past), is able to assert his presence in his work’s spatial form.

**SPATIAL FORM AND LATE MODERNISM**

One can see the appeal to Nabokov of the theory of spatial form. It works in counterpoint to his theory of inspiration; the transcendent Platonic book is transcribed by the author into a material form, but in such a way that the reader is then able, through a process of rereading, to transcend

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13 Irina Paperno also points out that Nabokov may also have been drawing on Vladislav Khodasevich’s contention that ‘the evolution of art takes on the configuration of a spiral’ in the way he figures the evolution of Russian literature in The Gift. Paperno argues that in making this contention Khodasevich drew on the theories of Russian formalism (‘Nabokov’s Gift’, 298).
the materiality of the book and discover the artwork’s true ‘spatial’ form beyond that of ink and paper. In the process of conception and reception the work is comprehensively decontextualized, taken out of time, granted an ahistorical permanence. The theorization of the idea of spatial form is itself specific to a historical moment, however, as can be seen in the similarities between Nabokov’s ‘Good Writers and Good Readers’ and Joseph Frank’s influential essay ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature’. In his attempt to insulate art from the social and historical contexts of its making Nabokov was very much a man of his moment.

Frank’s essay is a classic of Late Modernism, a key text in the broad movement, led by the New Critics and the New York Intellectuals, to bring modernist literature to the centre of a reshaped canon. It was first published in 1945 in three consecutive issues of the Sewanee Review, which had emerged as one of the most important journals of the New Criticism thanks to the editorial involvement of Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate. The canonization of ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature’ was swift, especially when taking into account the fact that the precocious Frank was only twenty-seven when it was first published; in 1948 a slimmer version (a detailed examination of Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood was cut) was included in Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment, edited by Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, and Gordon McKenzie. This anthology, like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s Understanding Poetry, was important in bringing New Critical methodology to the high school and university classroom. While the editors included in their anthology canonical literary criticism—Plato, Aristotle, Sidney, Coleridge, Shelley—the collection was heavy on the formalist approach of the New Critics: Ransom, Brooks, Tate, Warren, and W. K. Wimsatt were all included. Frank’s inclusion established him as a fellow traveller to the movement.

In his essay Frank, like Nabokov, picked up on Lessing’s argument in Lacoín that ‘form in the plastic arts is necessarily spatial, because the visible aspect of objects can best be presented juxtaposed in an instant of time’ and that ‘it follows that literary form, to harmonize with the essential quality of its medium, must be based primarily on some form of narrative sequence’ (p. 380). For Frank, however, modernist literature subverted this dynamic; when reading Eliot, Pound, Proust, and Joyce, ‘the reader is intended to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence’ (p. 381). Frank traced spatial form back to two sources. The first was in poetry, where it can be found emerging from Pound’s definition of Imagism, in which ‘an image is defined, not as a pictorial reproduction, but as the unification of disparate ideas and emotions into a complex presented spatially in an instant of time’ (p. 381).
The simultaneous perception of ‘word groups’ allows for a synchronic appreciation of the poem as a whole: ‘Esthetic form in modern poetry [. . .] is based on a space-logic which demands a complete reorientation in the reader’s attitude towards language’ (p. 383).

Frank traced the second source of spatial form back to Flaubert’s famous country fair scene in *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert’s technical virtuosity was foundational to modernist literary practice, Frank argued, and his technique of rapid cross cuts in this scene would eventually find its fullest expression in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a novel of ‘an infinite number of cross references’ that ‘must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole before the book fits together into any meaningful pattern’. By the novel’s end Joyce expected the reader to have gained an intimate knowledge of the Dublin he created, and it ‘is only by such knowledge that the reader, like the characters, can place all the references in their proper context’ (p. 384). This corresponds closely to Nabokov’s own teaching of *Ulysses*, which he described as a ‘splendid and permanent structure’ shaped by ‘a deliberate pattern of recurrent themes and synchronization of trivial events’ (*LL* 287, 289). As if to underline Frank’s point for him, Nabokov would draw a map of Dublin to help his students understand the novel’s urban topography. Frank, echoing Nabokov’s dictum, extrapolates from his own argument about *Ulysses* to declare that the positing of spatial form ‘is practically the equivalent of saying that Joyce cannot be read—he can only be re-read’ (p. 385).¹⁴

The timing of all this is remarkable: Nabokov began teaching his course on the masterpieces of European fiction in 1948, the same year that Frank’s work reached a wide audience through its inclusion in the *Criticism* anthology. This is not to suggest that Nabokov got his ideas from Frank; there is no evidence that Nabokov had read Frank’s essay and Nabokov’s own aesthetics were well established. Rather it is to give an indication of how central to the prevailing literary culture—the late modernist literary culture—were these formalist approaches to literature and that their ahistorical conception of how art should be read was itself a product of a specific historical moment.

Where Frank and Nabokov’s positions parted was in their understanding of why writers chose to construct their work ‘spatially’. Frank argues that modernist authors sought to overcome ‘the time-elements involved in their perception’ because they were ‘rooted in the same spiritual and emotional climate—a climate which, as it affects the sensibility of all artists,

¹⁴ In a further twist Frank, who went on to write a five-volume critical biography of Dostoevsky, contributed an essay on Nabokov’s lectures to *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (1995).
must also affect the forms they create in every medium’ (pp. 391–2). This is where Frank’s argument gets a little vague; he offers the suggestion that the unifying principles of spatial form operate against the fragmented state of the world in the first half of the twentieth century in which, paraphrasing Eric Fromm, man ‘no longer feels able to cope with the bewildering complexities of megapolitan existence’ (p. 392). For Nabokov, however, spatial form cannot be explained by socio-historical considerations but is something to be understood as the latest leap in the evolution of literary technique. Where they agree, however, is in this technique—both in composition and reception—being an assertion of true art being timeless, outside of history. Even Proust’s pure time, Frank argues, is essentially spatial and the use of spatial form in À la recherche du temps perdu is ‘an attempt to communicate the extra-temporal quality of his revelatory moments’ (p. 392). For Proust’s modernist contemporaries and successors, Frank argued, the use of spatial form provides access to the ‘timeless world of myth’ and allows them to ‘transcend historical limits’ (p. 392).

In applying late modernist aesthetics to the critical analysis of modernist works Frank and Nabokov were making a case for the exceptionalist status of literature. It was an argument made on behalf of (or in defence of) high culture and cannot be disassociated from its context: the shared sense across the most influential intellectual communities in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s that this high culture was under siege from the emergence of mass culture and that its standards were being eroded by the forces of capitalism. The material form of a book can be stamped with a price and sold in a bookstore but its true form—its spatial form—cannot be bought, sold, or consumed. All that is required is the aesthetic disposition and the time to dedicate one’s creative labour to the project of its realization. What the New Critics, Frank, and Nabokov did not address was that this aesthetic disposition, what Bourdieu calls the ‘pure gaze’, is itself only enabled by certain social and material conditions of privilege.

Where Nabokov’s formal strategies of reception have met with great success has been in academic scholarship. The way Nabokov helped cultivate a certain kind of critical reading of his work is discussed in the final chapter, but it is important to note at this stage that Nabokov’s model of recursive close reading is one that has been fruitfully applied to his own novels by literary scholars. Reading Nabokov in a Nabokovian way has generated many works of remarkable formalist exegesis, tracing submerged patterns and teasing out complex allusions. Influential work by Vladimir Alexandrov, Alfred Appel, D. Barton Johnson, and especially Brian Boyd shaped a scholarly community that is dedicated to reading closely and recursively. The foundation of the International Nabokov Society in 1978 (and with it The Nabokovian newsletter) and the
establishment of the *Nabokov Studies* journal by Johnson in 1994 created institutions that helped further this approach to reading Nabokov. This community has also embraced digital methods of fostering interaction and collaboration, especially the Nabokv-L online forum, which was founded by Johnson in 1993 and is open to academics and non-affiliated enthusiasts. More tightly focused are online resources dedicated to annotation of individual works such as the ongoing *AdaOnline* project, set up by Boyd in 2002, and Yuri Leving’s playful concordance to *The Gift*.

These digital spaces offer new ways of reading Nabokov’s work that are accretive and, most importantly, communal. In this way, Nabokov, through his poetics of reception, has re-created a restricted field in which his work receives the closest thing to a synchronic appreciation (even if the individual reader’s theoretical moment of transcendence is jeopardized in the process). This close community of readers has its antecedents in the literary community Nabokov found and lost in the Russian emigration, in which literature served as a means of building and bonding a community. The relationship between Nabokov and his exegetes is also analogous to what Bourdieu called the ‘new solidarity’ which was formed between artist and critic during the emergence of the restricted field of cultural production. As we have seen, for Bourdieu the emergence of this field is also the story of the emergence of modernism:

This new criticism […] placed itself unconditionally at the service of the artist. It attempted to scrupulously decipher his or her intentions, while paradoxically excluding the public of non-producers from the entire business of attesting, through its ‘inspired’ readings, the intelligibility of works which were bound to remain unintelligible to those not sufficiently integrated into the producer’s field. (p. 116)

Nabokov’s fostering of recursive readings, and his intellectual investment in spatial form created the environment in which an interpretive community flourished, although one that was inevitably dependent in its approach to Nabokov’s work on the application of Nabokovian hermeneutics.

**MATERIAL CONTINGENCY**

If Nabokov exploited the formal properties of his novels to exercise control over their reception and defy the market logic of consumption, then the material expression of these same novels also necessitated an abdication of control. ‘Once words are in motion,’ writes Michael Wood in his study of Nabokov, ‘they cannot be revoked and won’t always mean what we thought they meant, or wanted them to mean’ (*Magician’s Doubts*, 17).
In Nabokov’s case this is not just a theoretical point about the materiality of writing and reception: the loss of papers and manuscripts during his escape from Europe, as well as the material destruction of many copies of his books, showed how precarious the fate of his material work could be once released into the world. If the act of writing necessitates a loss of control, then publishing exacerbates it. As we have seen, in 1937 Nabokov gave a lecture on Pushkin in which he claimed that the ‘greater the number of readers, the less a book is understood, the essence of its truth, as it spreads, seems to evaporate’ (PRP 41). Publishing a literary work not only entailed collaboration with others in the production of the material book but its mass reproduction seemed to dilute its essential ‘truth’. In moving to the United States just three years after delivering that lecture, Nabokov was entering a market with a far larger number of readers than even the most successful book could find in the restricted field of émigré publishing. In these new market conditions, Nabokov’s authorial control was placed under a different kind of pressure and that pressure shaped the formal properties of the fictions he composed. In Nabokov’s American fiction, he increasingly dramatized the conditions of the novel’s physical production in the fictional world, and in doing so repeatedly returned to the trope of material contingency and the threat it posed to authorial control.

The material contingency of literary art is most intensely dramatized in *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, the novels that followed the huge market success of *Lolita*. This is not to say, however, that these ideas are absent from his earlier work. Nabokov’s first confrontation with a larger marketplace came when he started to sell his work to French, British, and American publishers in the last years of the emigration and it is in the mid-1930s that we can see the genesis of his formal interest in the idea of the book-as-object. It is not coincidental that in the same period in which Nabokov began exploring recursive narrative structures, his work began to meditate on its materiality, on the conditions of its production within the fictional world. The first full expression of these concerns comes in *Despair*, which was first published serially in *Sovremennye zapiski* in 1934 and then as a book in 1936. In *Despair* he left behind the third person narration of *Mary* (1926), *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), *The Defense* (1930), *Glory* (1932), and *Laughter in the Dark* (1933), developing the first person narration he had used in the 1930 novella *The Eye*. Where *Despair* differed from *The Eye* was that Hermann narrated the novel in writing. All Nabokov’s subsequent novels would interrogate their own material production, whether through being authored by a fictional writer within the fictional world (*The Gift*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada*, and *Look at the Harlequins!* or through ‘Nabokov’ foregrounding his own
writing of the work (*Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister*, *Pnin*, *Transparent Things*).

*Despair* identifies itself as written within its fictional world from the first sentence: ‘If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvellous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness . . . So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale’ (*D* 13). The vanity of Hermann’s self-conscious style, ill disciplined and indecisive, repeatedly interrupts the otherwise naturalistic telling of his tale, reminding the reader that he is reflecting on his efforts to commit the perfect murder. What becomes clear toward the end of the novel is that Hermann has been writing in a hotel near Pignan in the Pyrenees, feeling the need to bring to his work of art—the murder of his supposed doppelgänger Felix—the recognition it deserves after reading newspaper reports that completely failed to grasp his intentions. At the end of the tenth chapter—intended as an ‘epilogue’—Hermann describes how he had written frantically—up to nineteen hours a day—over the course of a week, calling it ‘an inhuman, medieval purge’ (*D* 162). So close is he to completing his manuscript that he is already preparing to send it off for publication:

Now, however, when I am finishing and have almost nothing more to add to my tale, it is quite a wrench to part with all this used-up paper; but part with it I must; and after reading my work over again, correcting it, sealing it up and bravely posting it, I shall have, I suppose, to move on farther [ . . . ] (*D* 163)

The tenth chapter is interrupted, however, Hermann breaking off mid-word (‘passp-’ [*D* 163]).

The eleventh, final, chapter opens with Hermann declaring: ‘I have moved to a slightly higher altitude: disaster made me shift my quarters’ (*D* 164). He has discovered through a newspaper report that his abandoned car had been recovered (he had meant for the police to discover it sooner but it was stolen from the scene before they found it) and in it had been found ‘an object [ . . . ] settling the murdered man’s identity’ (*D* 165). So anxious is Hermann that he cannot complete his final chapter and, despite having professed an earlier reluctance to do so, rereads what he has written:

In quest of some way of freeing myself of those intolerable forebodings I gathered the sheets of my manuscript, weighed the lot on my palm, even muttered a facetious ‘well, well!’ and decided that before penning the two or three final sentences I would read it over from beginning to end. (*D* 166)

Hermann’s dread is confirmed when, on rereading, he comes across the very incriminating object that the newspaper report had mentioned, Felix’s branded walking stick. On realizing his perfect crime is anything but, Hermann finally discovers the title he had been searching for, the title
the reader had known from the beginning: ‘[. . . ] I smiled the smile of the condemned and in a blunt pencil that screamed with pain wrote swiftly and boldly on the first page of my work: “Despair”; no need to look for a better title’ (D 169). As he attempts to flee the advancing French police, his carefully planned work of art ‘degenerates into a diary [. . . ] the lowest form of literature’ (D 173). His last entry is penned in a rented house, which has been surrounded by police.

Encoded within the narrative is a pathway to the manuscript’s subsequent transformation into a book. Even before he wrote ‘Despair’ Hermann had been composing fiction: ‘In the mornings I read and write; maybe I shall soon publish one or two things under my new name; a Russian author who lives in the neighbourhood highly praises my style and vivid imagination’ (D 149). It is this Russian who is the likely recipient of Hermann’s manuscript. Hermann writes that he ‘had at first toyed with the idea of sending the thing straight to some editor—German, French, or American—but it is written in Russian and not at all translatable’ before deciding to ‘give my manuscript to one who is sure to like it and do his best to have it published’: ‘my chosen one (you my first reader) is an émigré novelist’ (D 132–3). Hermann is at pains to try to control the way his manuscript gets out into the world, entrusting it to an implied ‘Nabokov’. This sets a pattern for future novels in which the loss of fictive authorial control is dramatized in a moment in which Nabokov asserts his own control as the creator of the fictional world.

There are clear reasons why Nabokov would be anxious about the material production of his work in the mid-1930s. Despair was written between July and September of 1932 and that summer fascists and communists had fought on the streets of Berlin; the Nazi party won 230 seats in the Reichstag in the July elections and Hitler had almost beaten Hindenburg to the presidency. The following January Hitler was appointed chancellor. Russian émigrés were flooding out of Berlin and heading for Paris. During this period, with the political mood increasingly poisonous and income scarce, Nabokov realized that he could not sustain himself as a professional writer in the Russian emigration, a community that, in Germany at least, was subject to existential threat. He began looking for a way out, with Britain and America his preferred destinations. It is in this period that we see him reaching out to publishers in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, and hoping to earn more from his books through their access to larger markets. In January and February 1936 he travelled to Brussels and Paris to give readings and seek new contacts and in January, February, and March of 1937 he visited Brussels and Paris again, also travelling to London. After moving to Paris in October 1938, Nabokov took two further trips to London (in April and
in May–June 1939) to try to secure book deals or an academic job. As his letters to Véra from these trips attest, Nabokov met with dozens of editors, publishers, and writers but struggled to make much headway (see LV 232–439). He submitted his novels to every American publishing house he knew of and, as Leving tells us, in the Library of Congress archive, ‘there are nearly a hundred unpublished letters from various American publishers rejecting Nabokov’s novels during the 1930s’ (Marketing Literature, 102). At various points from the mid-1930s he had agents working on his behalf in London (A. M. Heath and Otto Thien), Paris (Douissa Ergaz), and New York (Altagracia de Jannelli). In May 1934, through the work of literary agent Otto Klement, he managed to secure interest in English translations of Camera Obscura and Despair (RY 407). The John Long imprint eventually published Camera Obscura in 1936 and Despair in 1937. Nabokov also secured the French publication of Despair by approaching Gallimard in 1937 (it was published in Michael Stora’s translation as La Méprise in 1939). The most lucrative deal, however, was the sale of Camera Obscura to the American firm Bobbs-Merrill, for which Nabokov secured a $600 advance. As Boyd tells us, ‘he at once set about rewriting the novel to appeal more to himself and America and Hollywood.’ He also changed the name to a more consumer-friendly Laughter in the Dark (RY 445). Efforts were made to sell the film rights but without success (the rights were eventually sold in 1945, once Nabokov had settled in the United States).

This was also the period when Nabokov was working on The Gift. He wrote it between 1935 and 1937 and it was published serially by Sovremennye zapiski, until the editorial board refused to publish the fourth chapter in 1938. In the sixty-seventh edition of the journal the editors placed an extended two-line ellipsis with a footnote that read: ‘Part Four, wholly comprised of the “Life of Chernyshevski”, written in the manner of an heroic novel, is omitted with the consent of the author—ed’ (my translation). This act of editorial censorship by the most important literary journal of the emigration created problems for Nabokov in finding a publisher prepared to bring it out as a book, a problem that was soon dwarfed by the outbreak of war. The Gift was not published in full until 1954, when the Chekhov Publishing House (a Cold War propaganda operation) published it in New York, seventeen years after the manuscript had been completed.

What is remarkable is the way Nabokov’s novel appears to anticipate its own problems with finding a publisher. The refusal of Sovremennye zapiski to publish the Chernyshevsky chapter echoes the fictional publisher Vasiliev’s refusal to publish the book within the novel, calling it ‘a reckless, antisocial, mischievous improvisation’ (G 191). Fyodor does have more
success than Nabokov in getting his ‘Life of Chernyshevsky’ published, though, when the hapless playwright Busch helps secure an obscure publisher for it.\textsuperscript{15} Nabokov knew his chapter would make Sovremennye zapiski uncomfortable: this was a journal that had taken direct inspiration from Sovremennik, which, under Chernyshevsky’s editorship, became the most influential journal of the early 1860s. When Chernyshevsky’s anti-establishment stance landed him in prison, it was Sovremennik that published What is to be Done? A parodic debunking of Chernyshevsky could not have been placed in a more provocative forum than in a journal that explicitly drew its lineage from Sovremennik. Despite his abhorrence for Chernyshevsky’s aesthetic and political opinions Nabokov writes that it is ‘impossible to handle this old magazine (March 1863), containing the first instalment of What is to be Done?, without a certain thrill’ (G 253).

There is something of the bibliophile’s faith in the sanctity of the printed word in this, a faith that was shaken by what was to happen to his own book as it languished unpublished for nearly two decades.

**LOLITA AND THE AMERICAN MARKETPLACE**

With the full version of The Gift unpublished and a new novel—Solus Rex—abandoned, Nabokov entered the American marketplace a writer with his legacy in jeopardy. He held out little hope for finding a publisher for his first English-language novel, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, and was surprised when James Laughlin of New Directions decided to take it.

‘After three years of rejections,’ Boyd writes, ‘Nabokov had no choice but to accept the low advance of $150’ (AY 33). Laughlin’s decision was based not only on Delmore Schwartz’s positive reading of the manuscript but also on the good agency of Nabokov’s friends Harry Levin and Edmund Wilson.

It is worth pausing to consider the subject of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, which is ostensibly a biography of a famous Anglo-Russian writer, composed by his half-brother V., a Russian émigré writing in English. Apologizing to the reader for his ‘miserable English’, V. tries to piece together Sebastian’s mysterious biography by travelling to England and France, seeking out his brother’s old friends and former lovers (RLSK 29).

\textsuperscript{15} There is a further irony in that Chernyshevsky’s What is to be Done? itself got past the Tsar’s censors. As Nabokov recounts: ‘[t]he censorship permitted it to be published in The Contemporary, reckoning on the fact that a novel which was “something in the highest degree anti-artistic” would be certain to overthrow Chernyshevski’s authority, that he would be simply laughed at for it’ (G 252).
In the process V. discusses the content of Sebastian’s novels and there is pathos in Nabokov creating in such detail an oeuvre of published and successful works when his own books had been marginalized by historical circumstance.

While *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* received some enthusiastic reviews and had Wilson’s influential backing, it was, in Boyd’s words, ‘an immediate flop’ when it was published (*AY* 40). As with *The Gift* Nabokov’s work was being swept aside by historical events: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* came out two weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. *Bend Sinister* also sold poorly and Nabokov appeared to be living out the logic of his cultural politics: his late modernist aesthetics precluded success in the market. This all changed with *Lolita*. It is fitting that Nabokov’s relations to the American market should be so radically altered by a novel preoccupied with the material fate of the written word.

Did Nabokov know he was writing a potential bestseller? In writing *Lolita* was Nabokov consciously breaking with his high modernist principles concerning market success? It is hard to reach a definitive conclusion but, as we have already seen, he had told Wilson he was fed up with how little money his work made him. He had also approached Katharine White about getting an American agent. Stephen Blackwell urges us to be ‘skeptical both of Brian Boyd’s assertion that with *Lolita*, Nabokov had no idea he would “shock the public into taking notice,” and of Nabokov’s own suggestion that he would be distressed by a succès de scandale’, citing a 1954 letter to Laughlin in which Nabokov referred to his future novel as a ‘timebomb’ (*Nabokov and his Industry*, 232; *SL* 144). In the mid-1940s, Nabokov had followed closely the fate of Wilson’s *Memoirs of Hecate County*, the sexual frankness of which had brought brisk early sales followed by censorship. Nabokov appears to have intuited that *Lolita* had the capacity to cause a sensation but was also sceptical of its chances of getting published in such a censorious environment (as it was, Nabokov had good timing: his novel came out shortly after the Supreme Court diluted the powers of obscenity laws in *Roth v. United States*). All of which is to say that Nabokov was clearly reconfiguring his relationship with the market, even if he could not have anticipated the scale of the impact his novel would eventually have upon it.

*Lolita* takes the form of a prison manuscript, written by Humbert Humbert as he awaits his trial for the murder of Clare Quilty. In John Ray Jr.’s foreword we learn that Humbert died ‘in legal captivity, on 16 November 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start’ (*AL* 3). Humbert claims that his confession is based on the diary he kept while ‘seducing’ Dolores Haze: ‘Exhibit number two is a pocket diary bound in black imitation leather, with a golden year, 1947, *en escalier*, in its upper
left-hand corner’ (AL 40). According to Humbert the diary was first composed in pencil, ‘with many erasures and corrections’ on a ‘typewriter tablet’ before being copied ‘with obvious abbreviations in my smallest, most satanic, hand’ into the diary. Yet this documentary record, from which Humbert quotes, turns out to be no such thing; Humbert concedes that the diary itself was ‘destroyed five years ago and what we examine now (by courtesy of a photographic memory) is but its brief materialization, a puny unfledged phoenix’ (AL 40). Exhibit number two does not exist. The story of Lolita grows out of a destroyed book that can only be recovered and approximated by an imprisoned author.

In the final chapter, the reader learns from Humbert that he has been working on the manuscript for fifty-six days and that its publication is to be deferred until after the death of Dolores.16 Humbert intuits his own imminent end and Nabokov told Alfred Appel in 1966 that, in the closing sentences of Lolita, he wanted ‘to convey a constriction of the narrator’s sick heart, a warning spasm causing him to abridge names and hasten to conclude his tale before it was too late’ (SO 73). Humbert’s manuscript has subsequently been brought to publication through the intervention of a lawyer, Charles Choate Clark, Esq., to whom Humbert had entrusted it. Clark, it is disclosed, decided to ask his cousin, Ray, to edit the manuscript, as Ray is the author of the prize-winning book Do the Senses Make Sense? and is familiar with ‘certain morbid states and perversions’ (AL 3). Ray claims to have limited his work to the correction of ‘obvious sol-ecisms’ and the ‘careful suppression of a few tenacious details that despite “H.H.”’s own efforts still subsisted in his text as signposts and tombstones’ (AL 3). While there are obvious problems with trusting Humbert’s account of what happened, Humbert’s own manuscript has been altered and amended by Ray and we cannot know what has or has not been included or excised during the editing process.

One of Nabokov’s formidable technical achievements in Lolita is his ability to create a narrator who is rhetorically persuasive and controlling but still undermined by subtle slips and giveaways. If Humbert were in absolute control and did not slip, or was too obviously manipulative, then the novel’s embedded ethics would be compromised. The novel’s ‘success’ on an ethical level is dependent on the exercise of Nabokov’s authorial control; in order to read ‘through’ Humbert, the novel needs to be rereread. After all, it is only by returning to the foreword that one learns of what happened to Dolores after the ostensibly end of the narrative. Humbert’s death results not only in the loss of control over his manuscript but also

16 For an account of the disputes on the timeline in Lolita see Boyd, ‘Even Homais Nods’.
the loss of control as an author. His text becomes open to interference. In turn, when Nabokov sent out the manuscript of Lolita to publishers he was abdicating absolute control over what he had created.

This loss of control had previously proved professionally traumatic for Nabokov. Whether it was the decision of the editorial board of Sovremennye zapiski to excise chapter 4 of The Gift, the failures of Henry Holt to market Bend Sinister, or the larger impact of world historical events on the material survival of his writing, the reception of Nabokov’s work had been undermined by events beyond his authorial control. Initially, Lolita was no different; rejected by American publishers Nabokov decided to go with Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press in Paris, a relationship that swiftly unravelled and ended up in legal proceedings when Girodias demanded excessive royalties from the American publication of the novel (AY 300–1).

When Lolita was first published in the United States it was in expurgated form, as excerpts in The Anchor Review, a literary journal put out by Doubleday. Each excerpt was linked by short italicized passages:

Chapter four to chapter ten: ‘... Humbert Humbert, the hero-narrator, now in his forties, and in the United States, has just been dismissed, after a breakdown, from a sanatorium. ED.’ (LAR 24)

Chapter ten to fifteen: ‘... It has been decided by Lolita’s mother, who by this time has taken an interest in Humbert Humbert analogous to his in her daughter, that Lolita shall go to camp for the summer.’ (LAR 30)

Chapter eighteen to twenty-two: ‘... Her mother has decided that from camp Lolita shall go directly to boarding school so that she and Humbert can be alone.’ (LAR 46)

Before part two: ‘Humbert with Lolita begins a tour by automobile of the United States.’ (LAR 50)

Chapter two to chapter four: ‘... Humbert arrives at Beardsley School where he intends to enroll Lolita.’ (LAR 59)

Chapter eleven to eighteen: ‘... Beardsley School behind them, the two are on their way again.’ (LAR 69)

Chapter eighteen to twenty-three: ‘... Lolita having absconded with the sinister “Trapp,” Humbert pursues her.’ (LAR 75)

Chapter twenty-three to chapter twenty-nine: ‘... Lolita, now married to a war veteran, has requested financial assistance of Humbert. He visits her.’ (LAR 80)

Chapter twenty-nine to chapter thirty-five: ‘... Having learned from Lolita the real name of her abductor (the mysterious Trapp), Humbert sets out to kill him.’ (LAR 92)

Nabokov not only participated in the preparation of the Anchor Review but did so with great enthusiasm after Jason Epstein, his editor at
Doubleday, had suggested it as a strategy to head off potential obscenity suits (publishing the unexpurgated version might have been too great a risk). Nabokov travelled down to New York City to meet with Epstein, Anchor Review editor Melvin Lasky, and literary critic Fred Dupee to make the selections (AY 300). He was evidently ready to collaborate and compromise if it meant getting his novel published without going to court.17

Subsequent to publication in the United States, Lolita became a cultural commodity that escaped Nabokov’s control in another way. Since the mid-1930s Nabokov had been seeking a larger market for his work and in 1958, with the publication of Lolita in the United States, he finally found it.18 The ambiguity of this success and the loss of control it entailed were expressed in the novels he wrote after Lolita, novels in which the status of the fictional manuscripts was contingent. If John Ray constituted an unsettling editorial presence in Lolita, then in his next novel, Pale Fire, the text was placed in the hands of Charles Kinbote, an interventionist editor of pathological unreliability.

**PALE FIRE**

**Pale Fire** was the first novel Nabokov wrote as a famous writer. It was begun in Nice in November 1960 and was completed in Montreux, Switzerland in December of the following year, and published in 1962. It is structured to resemble a scholarly edition of a long poem—‘Pale Fire’ by John Shade—complete with foreword, commentary, and index by Charles Kinbote.19 In his dry, pedantic foreword, Kinbote gives a careful account of the material composition of ‘Pale Fire’:

> The manuscript, mostly a Fair Copy, from which the present text has been faithfully printed, consists of eighty medium-sized index cards, on each of

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17 His British publisher, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, took a different approach: the first British edition of Lolita included an appendix featuring laudatory blurbs from writers and critics from around the world.
18 Lolita even brought Nabokov commercial success in advance of its American publication: when Pnin was published in March 1957 it went into its second printing in just two weeks. By this time, as Boyd points out, Nabokov’s reputation was established as the author of the ‘still-unreviewable Lolita’ (AY 307).
19 The novel’s unusual structure was informed by Nabokov’s own scholarly work on Eugene Onegin. During the 1950s Nabokov had worked on translating Alexander Pushkin’s narrative poem, as well as providing an introductory essay and copious annotations: a structure that anticipated Pale Fire. Due to problems with publishers, his edition of the poem would not actually come on to the market until two years after the publication of Pale Fire. Further inspiration was drawn from Nabokov’s own fictional work, with the fantastical world of Zembla anticipated in the abandoned novel Solus Rex and in the short fantasy sections in Pnin.
which Shade reserved the pink upper line for headings (canto number, date) and used the fourteen light-blue lines for writing out with a fine nib in a minute, tidy and remarkably clear hand, the text of his poem, skipping a line to indicate double space, and always using a fresh card to begin a new canto. (PF 13)

In the spirit of academic diligence Kinbote informs the reader that the last cards, used on the day of Shade’s death, ‘give a Corrected Draft instead of a Fair Copy’ (PF 13). Kinbote goes on to relate how he came to edit the manuscript:

Immediately after my dear friend’s death I prevailed on his distraught widow to forelay and defeat the commercial passions and academic intrigues that were bound to come swirling round her husband’s manuscript (transferred by me to a safe spot even before his body had reached the grave) by signing an agreement to the effect that he had turned over the manuscript to me; that I would have it published without delay, with my commentary, by a firm of my choice; that all profits, except the publisher’s percentage, would accrue to her; and that on publication day the manuscript would be handed over to the Library of Congress for permanent preservation. (PF 16)

Interlaced with Kinbote’s description of the index cards are unsettling indications of his unstable cast of mind. In only his second paragraph he refers to Canto Two as ‘your favorite’ and Canto Three as a ‘shocking tour de force’ while the third paragraph concludes with the bizarre declaration that ‘[t]here is a very loud amusement park outside my present lodgings’ (PF 13).

Kinbote acknowledges that the last fifty lines—those in Corrected Draft—are ‘extremely rough in appearance, teeming with devastating erasures and cataclysmic insertions’ yet insists that they turn out to be ‘beautifully accurate once you make the plunge and compel yourself to open your eyes in the limpid depths under its confused surface. It contains not one gappy line, not one doubtful reading’ (PF 14). Kinbote goes on to insist that this ‘fact’ renders groundless the allegations made by the ‘Shadean’ Professor Hurley in a newspaper interview that this section ‘consists of disjointed drafts none of which yields a definite text’ (PF 14). In the same interview Hurley has suggested that what survives of ‘Pale Fire’ might only represent a ‘small fraction’ of John Shade’s intended whole, a proposal Kinbote refutes by asserting that

there remained to be written only one line of the poem (namely verse 1000) which would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure, with its two identical parts, solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings of five hundred verses each, and damn that music. (PF 14–15)
Even ignoring Kinbote’s emotional interruptions—he is distracted by the fairground outside his motel room—his editorial practice is obviously inept. The final text of the foreword has been proofread but uncorrected:

Frank has acknowledged the safe return of the galleys I had been sent here and has asked me to mention in my Preface—and this I willingly do—that I alone am responsible for any mistakes in my commentary. Insert before a professional. A professional proofreader has carefully rechecked the printed text of the poem against the phototype of the manuscript, and has found a few trivial misprints I had missed; that has been all in the way of outside assistance. (PF 17, my italics)

That Kinbote should make such an error at the very point at which he is acknowledging the ‘trivial misprints’ that have been corrected doubles the point. It is evident that the novel we are reading is mimicking a sloppily edited edition of a fictional poem, an edition that has been seen to press by this mysterious publisher ‘Frank’ (who insists on Kinbote being frank). As with the ending of Lolita, Nabokov seems to want to convey a sense of the ‘fictional’ book being hurried to conclusion, the deterioration in Kinbote’s mental state reflected in the latter part of the commentary, the foreword, and the index. In an interview with Alfred Appel in 1966, conducted four years after the publication of the novel, Nabokov claimed that Kinbote ‘certainly’ committed suicide ‘after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem’ (SO 74).

It is not only Kinbote’s incompetence and mental fragility that make him an unreliable editor: there is also deliberate deception on his part. Kinbote’s account of the day of John Shade’s murder by Jack Grey makes clear the lengths to which he has gone to purloin the poem. Kinbote visits Shade, finds him close to finishing the poem, the index cards of which are contained in ‘a huge pregnant manila envelope’, and invites him for dinner (luring him with the promise of alcohol, the drinking of which Shade conceals from his wife Sybil). Kinbote recalls the ‘inward leap of exultation’ he felt after he ‘relieved [Shade] of the large envelope that hampered his movements as he descended the steps of the porch’ (PF 226). The physical touch of the poem triggers a rhapsody on the miracle of writing itself, as he anticipates the poem’s evocation of his lost homeland, Zembla:

In the large envelope I carried I could feel the hard-cornered, rubberbanded batches of index cards. We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. (PF 227)

Kinbote rents his house from Judge Goldsworth, against whom Grey holds a grudge and having waited outside for the judge to appear, mistakes
Shade for Goldsworth and shoots him. Even before calling the emergency services, Kinbote quickly stashes the envelope at the bottom of a closet ‘from which I exited as if it had been the end of the secret passage that had taken me all the way out of my enchanted castle and right from Zembla to this Arcady’ (PF 231).

Kinbote moves the manuscript to his ‘black valise’ that night. Only at daybreak does he permit himself to read it and finds, to his horror, that not a trace of his ‘Zemblan theme’ is to be found: ‘I sped through it, snarling, as a furious young heir through an old deceiver’s testament’ (PF 232). The deception Kinbote feels has been perpetrated on him is an ironic reflection of the way he deceives first Sybil Shade and then the reader. As he rereads the poem, his anger begins to abate:

Gradually I regained my usual composure, I reread Pale Fire more carefully. I liked it better when expecting less. And what was that? What was that dim distant music, those vestiges of color in the air? Here and there I discovered in it and especially, especially in the invaluable variants, echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripplewake of my glory. (PF 233)

Secure in the knowledge that the poem contains, albeit submerged and in the variants, allusions to his story of escape from Zembla, Kinbote resolves to take control of its publication and ensure that his story is accurately portrayed in the final edition. Sybil Shade, who does not realize Kinbote believed the bullets were for him, thinks he tried to save her husband’s life and, taking advantage of her misapprehension and her grief, Kinbote gains her permission to edit and publish the poem and the ‘next day her signature was under the agreement I had a quick little lawyer draw up’ (PF 234).20

Kinbote, anxious about the security of the poem, transfers the index cards from the ‘black valise’ to a ‘steel box’ before distributing them in various pockets around his person and sewing the pockets shut: ‘Thus with cautious steps, among deceived enemies, I circulated, plated with poetry, armoured with rhymes, stout with another man’s song, stiff with cardboard, bullet-proof at long last’ (PF 235).21 After a week in New Wye after Shade’s death, having interviewed Grey and himself grown increasingly paranoid, Kinbote flies to New York City to negotiate a deal with a publisher and, from there, travels to ‘Cedarn, Utana’, to conduct his editing.22

20 It is interesting to note Kinbote’s careful phrasing: Sybil is not described as having signed the document: her signature simply appears there.
21 Pale Fire addresses the Cold War more directly than any other Nabokov novel with scholars picking up on the fact that Novaya Zemlya was used by the Soviets as a nuclear testing site (see Belletto, No Accident Comrade).
22 In the foreword, Kinbote writes that he has known Frank ‘a few months’, which is presumably the length of time it took him to edit the poem.
As we have seen, Nabokov makes it perfectly clear that Kinbote’s editorial practice is incompetent and inept but concealed beneath these mistakes is a more sinister deformation of ‘Pale Fire’. In his foreword, Kinbote stresses the importance of the unpublished variants that he discovered with the index cards of the poem: ‘Another, much thinner, set of a dozen cards, clipped together and enclosed in the same manila envelope as the main batch, bears some additional couplets running their brief and sometimes smudgy course among a chaos of first drafts’ (PF 15). Kinbote goes on to explain that Shade would meticulously burn drafts as he only ever wanted the final version to be read, which gives the preserved variants an especial value: ‘he saved those twelve cards because of the unused felicities shining among the dross of used draftings’ (PF 15). That these variants seem to engage more directly with the ‘Zemblan theme’ than anything in the poem—and often prompt long discursions into the story of Charles’s flight from his kingdom—should raise the suspicion of the rereader who has seen Kinbote’s mental deterioration in the later parts of the commentary. It seems strange that Kinbote should claim that ‘Mrs Shade will not remember having been shown by her husband who “showed her everything” one or two of the precious variants’ and that, in the foreword, he insists so much on their superiority, describing them as ‘more valuable artistically and historically than some of the best passages in the final text’ (PF 233, 15). It is only in the index that Kinbote can confess to his having forged these variants. Under the index for ‘Variants’ he concedes that three of the alternate lines have been doctored or composed by himself: ‘the Zemblan King’s escape (K’s contribution, 8 lines), 70’; ‘the Edda (K’s contribution, 1 line), 79’; ‘children finding a secret passage’ (K’s contribution, 4 lines), 130’ (PF 247).

The full extent of Kinbote’s editorial interference is disclosed in Kinbote’s editorial architecture, especially in the index. If Shade’s poem ‘Pale Fire’ is preoccupied with what happens to consciousness after death, its setting in Kinbote’s editorial framework means Nabokov’s novel Pale Fire is preoccupied with what happens to art after the death of the artist, how the work is shaped and moulded by its material embodiment. Resonating throughout the novel is the ominous last sentence of Kinbote’s foreword, which follows his assertion that Shade’s poem has ‘no human reality’ without his notes: ‘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 25).

*ADA*

Despite the mixed reaction it has received from critics and readers, it is hard to contest Brian Boyd’s assertion that Ada is Nabokov’s ‘most
ambitious’ book (AY 537). One of the ways this strange and sprawling novel is intimately linked to Lolita and Pale Fire is the way the fictional ‘book’ is materially produced, and the mediation the fictional manuscript undergoes before it reaches its readers. Just as in the previous two novels, the reader is faced with an editor who is ultimately responsible for the manuscript’s final form: Ronald Oranger. The Lolita manuscript gives the impression of being hurried to its conclusion and the author does not live to see its publication, while in Pale Fire the author is killed before his poem can be completed (even if, as Kinbote argues, there is only one line missing). The situation in Ada is more complicated.

Nabokov was a stickler for compositional rigour, and he lends the discipline of his working methods to Van Veen. In Part Two of Ada, Van is describing, in the third person, the final process of getting his Letters from Terra published:

He devoted a couple of months at Chose to copying in a clean hand his scarecrow scribblings and then heavily recorrecting the result, so that his final copy looked like a first draft when he took it to an obscure agency in Bedford to have it secretly typed in triplicate. This he disfigured again during his voyage back to America on board the Queen Guinevere. And in Manhattan the galleys had to be reset twice, owing not only to the number of new alterations but also to the eccentricity of Van’s proofreading marks. (A 269)

Van, like Nabokov, worked on his prose over several different sets of proofs and galleys in order to achieve what Kinbote calls, in another context, ‘marble finality’ (PF 15). Ada is both a fictional ‘book’ (Van’s Ada) that is unfinished and a real book that is ‘finished’ to a level of claustrophobic intricacy (Nabokov’s Ada). Van’s Ada is vast and littered with the editorial markings made to what he had hoped would be the final copy ‘guéri de tous ces accrocs’:

What everybody thought would be Violet’s supreme achievement, ideally clean, produced on special Atticus paper in a special cursive type (the glorified version of Van’s hand), with the master copy bound in purple calf for Van’s ninety-seventh birthday, had been immediately blotted out by a regular inferno of alterations in red ink and blue pencil. (A 459, 460)

This revised version, edited by Ronald Oranger, is the Ada that Nabokov has designed to mimic a manuscript in its final stages of revision (an approach analogous to the non finito in sculpture). Van starts writing his Ada in 1957 (he was born in 1870):

He was a very slow writer. It took him six years to write the first draft and dictate it to Miss Knox, after which he revised the typescript, rewrote it
entirely in long hand (1963–65) and dictated the entire thing to indefatigable Violet, whose pretty fingers tapped out a final copy in 1967. (A 453)

As we have seen, that copy is not as final as Van intended. His narrative makes repeated allusions to his impending death: when recalling the metaphysical speculations of his 14-year-old self lying in a hammock at Ardis under the night sky, Van makes a direct link between these and his own elderly confrontation with mortality:

His nights in the hammock [...] were now haunted not so much by the agony of his desire for Ada, as by that meaningless space overhead, underhead, everywhere, the demon counterpart of divine time, tingling about him and through him, as it was to retingle—with a little more meaning fortunately—in the last nights of a life, which I do not regret, my love. (A 62)

Van’s impending death is directly reflected in hurried aspects of the book’s production (errors that Oranger has seemingly left uncorrected) such as at the end of the thirty-fifth chapter of Part One when he writes: ‘I am weak. I write badly, I may die tonight. My magic carpet no longer skims over crown canopies and gaping nestlings, and her rarest orchids. Insert’ (A 174).

Van cannot write or revise Ada after he has died so his death is made implicit in the book’s unrevised errata and editorial marginalia, the equivalent of Humbert’s hurried initials at the end of Lolita or Kinbote’s hints about his plans for suicide. The very structure of the book, with its five parts decreasing in size, replicates the sensation of time speeding up as Van ages. Whereas Ray tells us in the foreword to Lolita that Humbert is dead and Nabokov confirmed, albeit extratextually, that Kinbote commits suicide after he completes his work, Van and Ada’s situation is more ambiguous. The family tree that precedes the novel—a ‘family chronicle’ after all—does not give the year of death for either Ada or Van but it is immediately followed by a cryptic editorial note, arranged like a poem and presumably composed by Ronald Oranger, which states:

With the exception of Mr and Mrs Ronald Oranger,
a few incidental figures,
and some non-American citizens, all the persons
mentioned by name in this book are dead.

[Ed.] (A 8)

Has Oranger deliberately not updated the family tree? Wood remarks that it is ‘scrupulous of him not to tamper with the text’ but ultimately it is unknowable how much or little he has tampered with (A 204).

Oranger’s editorial presence throughout the narrative is connected with Van’s death. In the final, fifth part, when we learn that a decrepit Van has made a whole host of changes to the ‘final’ copy, Wood sees an analogy to
the contingency of death: ‘The book was cured, and then driven back into a critical condition, a perfect metaphor for a death that must come but can never be seen arriving. A clean copy, it seems, is too close to a prepared corpse’ (‘Nabokov’s Late Fiction’, 205). Ada teems with Oranger’s parentheses, which indicate where Van and Ada made marginal marks in blue and red ink on that final manuscript. Sometimes figuring out who is responsible for making these insertions is difficult: in chapter 36 when Van, Ada, and Lucette are playing their version of Scrabble there is the following insertion: ‘The wit of the Veens (says Ada in a marginal note) knows no bounds’ (A 176). Has this parenthesis been inserted by Van or is it a posthumous piece of editing by Oranger? It is impossible to be sure: the text has been subtly destabilized.

Oranger’s explicit presence in the text is signalled by the use of editorial square brackets. These are infrequent and ostensibly the businesslike indication of Van’s errors such as: ‘[thus in MS. Ed.]’ (A 67, 68, 291, 332). Occasionally Oranger is more intrusive, offering guidance to areas where he feels the reader might require context or clarification. In the fifth chapter of Part Two, Van writes about a ‘ten-page letter, which shall not be discussed in this memoir’ to which Oranger appends ‘[See, however, a little farther. Ed.]’ (A 287). This is narrative playfulness on the part of Nabokov but it is also another reminder of the provisional status of Van’s final manuscript. There are further parenthetical clarifications from Oranger when Van moves between correspondence and remembered speech, and when Van seems to be using unacknowledged letters later in that chapter (A 294, 297).

The tone of these parentheses changes later in the novel, however. At the beginning of chapter 5 of Part Two, there is a bizarrely personal editorial interpolation at the point when Van is writing about the composition of his academic work: ‘Van Veen [as also, in his small way, the editor of Ada] liked to change his abode at the end of a section or chapter or even paragraph’ (A 286). There is something of Kinbote in the


24 Although this is further confused when Van inserts Ada’s letters into his narrative and uses square brackets to signify his contributions. In the following example Van confuses things even further by impersonating an ‘editor’: ‘Nor would I mention that even if he had proceeded to recruit anonymous messengers and informers, it might have ended in the wrecking of his own reputation as soon as his motives and actions were exposed, as they were bound to be in the long run [sic! “run” in her blue stocking. Ed.]’ (A 263).

25 Boyd points out that these editorial interventions seem to coincide with the presence of Lucette. For a discussion of Oranger and Violet’s role in the novel see the section ‘Outside Influence’ in Boyd, Nabokov’s Ada, 187–95.
self-regard of this unnecessary parenthesis, a glimpse of Oranger’s character. It is with the introduction of Van’s typist, Violet Knox, that the editorial presence becomes increasingly intrusive. At the beginning of chapter 4 of Part Five Van writes (the square brackets are in the original):

Violet Knox [now Mrs. Ronald Oranger. Ed.], born in 1940, came to live with us in 1957. She was (and still is—ten years later) an enchanting English blonde with doll eyes, a velvet carnation and a tweed-cupped little rump [. . .]; but such designs, alas could no longer flesh my fancy. She has been responsible for typing out this memoir—the solace of what are, no doubt, my last ten years of existence. A good daughter, an even better sister, and half-sister, she had supported for ten years her mother’s children from two marriages, besides laying aside [something]. I paid her [generously] per month, well realizing the need to ensure unembarrassed silence on the part of a puzzled and dutiful maiden. (A 451)

Oranger has obviously censored the manuscript to preserve his now wife’s dignity, although it is not clear exactly how much of Van’s sexual fantasizing has been excised. Later in the same chapter, Oranger, of whom the reader has only sporadically been aware, enters the narrative:

Violet knocks at the library door and lets in plump, short, bow-tied Mr Oranger, who stops on the threshold, clicks his heels, and (as the heavy hermit turns with an awkward sweep of frieze robe) darts forward almost at a trot not so much to stop with a masterful slap the avalanche of loose sheets which the great man’s elbow has sent sliding down the lectern-slope, as to express the eagerness of his admiration. (A 452)

If Oranger is capable of interfering with Van’s writing about Violet, what is to stop him doing the same when Van is writing about Oranger himself? Oranger has already demonstrated self-regard and a fussy sense of propriety in editing the passages about Violet. Is it completely implausible to suggest that Oranger could have composed the above quoted paragraph? His ‘masterful slap’ arraigning the ‘avalanche of loose sheets’ is, after all, emblematic of the editorial process as a whole: keeping Van’s papers in order. Vain Van Veen is perfectly capable of appreciating the fawning of others in his presence but it strikes an odd note for Van to find in Oranger’s dart forward the expression of ‘the eagerness of his admiration’. These words seem to belong rather to Oranger himself. Could Oranger, described on the same page as a ‘born catalyzer’ (by Van? by himself?), be interfering more than initially appears?

There is certainly something odd going on in the way Violet’s presence is used in the narrative. In chapter 3, Part Five, Van’s narrative of Lucette’s suicide is unexpectedly interrupted:

Although Lucette never died before—no, dived before, Violet—from such a height, in such a disorder of shadows and snaking reflections, she went with
hardly a splash through the wave that humped to welcome her. That perfect end was spoiled by her instinctively surfacing in an immediate sweep—instead of surrendering under water to her drugged lassitude as she had planned to do on her last night ashore if it ever did come to this. (A 389)

Later in the same paragraph, there is a dashed parenthesis after ‘tentacling hair’ which seems to be aiding Violet with her spelling (‘t,a,c,l’) and Van seems to lose his place (‘Now I’ve lost my next note’) before discovering it again (‘Got it’). We later learn that Van is dictating to his typist but this is a strange kind of dictation, as if Violet is taking dictation of a scene in which she is taking dictation, including Van’s asides to her and his corrections of her spelling. It does not add up—even if Violet was taking dictation with the remorselessness of a piece of computer software, would Van have not tidied it up on one of his two subsequent revisions of the text?26

It is intriguing that the material composition of the fictional book is stressed at the very moment when Van is confronting Lucette’s death. For Boyd, it is Lucette’s suicide that shapes the novel’s ethics and he makes a compelling case for Van’s writing his book as an attempt to confront his guilt about what happened.27 There is something ethically suspicious about Van’s stylized account of Lucette’s dive into the ocean, however. After all, he cannot know the manner in which Lucette died, whether she resurfaced after the initial dive, whether or not she could see the lights of the liner from the water, or whether her nausea tasted of anise. When Van writes that Lucette ‘thought it proper to inform a series of receding Lucettes [. . .] that what death amounted to was only a more complete assortment of the infinite fractions of solitude’ he is highlighting the very paradox of the whole passage: Lucette is alone in her dying and Van’s empathetic efforts are by definition futile. It is at this very point, at the novel’s most ethically complicated hub, that it is destabilized through the use of Violet’s ‘impossible’ dictation. Is Van deliberately simulating the dictation of this passage to draw the reader’s attention to his necessary fabrication of Lucette’s dying moments? Or is Nabokov making a wider point about the necessary authorial absence in ‘writtenness’? Just as Van cannot know the ‘truth’ of Lucette’s suicide, the reader cannot know the

26 Boyd believes Violet to be incompetent, taking down Van’s corrections as if they were part of his dictation—improbable though that seems—but this does not account for the fact that Van revised Violet’s text and would presumably have picked up on her errors. See Nabokov’s Ada, 189.

27 See Boyd’s Nabokov’s Ada for his argument concerning the centrality of Lucette to the novel: ‘Lucette is at the centre of Ada’s “responsibility” theme, Nabokov’s answer to the problem of reconciling detachment of the world the artist creates and the pressures of our involvement in our own real world’ (p. 211).
'truth' of the book, a point subtly made by the nagging presence of the fraudulent typist Violet and the unsettling editor Oranger.28

One way of thinking about Charles Kinbote and Roland Oranger is as expressions of an anxiety on the part of the author about losing control of his text (an anxiety that can be traced back to the composition of Despair in the mid-1930s). The intensification of this concern with the fate of the material text, as expressed in these two novels, is coterminous with Nabokov’s success in the large-scale American marketplace after the publication of Lolita. This kind of success, and the financial and professional security it brought, not only allowed Nabokov to write the novels he wanted, but also allowed him to rescue those books that had seemed destined for relative obscurity. It was not an uncomplicated success, however, as the new demands of this larger marketplace posed a more direct threat to his autonomy. If John Shade’s poem and Van Veen’s novel were vulnerable to outside agents, then so were Nabokov’s manuscripts as they entered the publication process. If Nabokov battled to retain control of his books through the formal strategies discussed in this chapter, his fictions also revealed an anxiety about the limits of that control. In the next chapter, we will examine the way Nabokov sought to expand his sphere of influence by controlling aspects of book production that were conventionally the province of the publisher.

28 Boyd’s reading of the problem presented by Oranger and Knox is that they are a kind of vehicle for the dead Lucette to convince Van to write Ada: ‘What seems to be suggested here [the introduction of Oranger as a character in Part Five] is that Lucette, somehow acting through the agency of Violet Knox and Ronald Oranger, has encouraged Van to write Ada and has acted throughout as a source of inspiration’ (Nabokov’s Ada, 192).
There is a difference between writing a novel and making a book. In his later years Nabokov wrote his novels in autopoetical serenity, standing at his lectern and composing on index cards in the tranquillity of his Montreux Palace rooms. Once complete, however, the novel had to be made into a book, and that could only happen through collaboration with editors, copysetters, publicists, distributors, and other members of what Robert Darnton has called the ‘communications circuit’ (p. 111). Darnton, and other book historians such as Andrew Piper, have argued that literary production should be understood as a ‘social process’ rather than as a ‘singularly generative moment’ (Piper, 9). Nabokov was ardently in favour of generating things singularly, and fought to resist the socialization of his work. If he were ever a theatre or film director, Nabokov claimed he would have advocated and applied a system of total tyranny, directing the play or the picture myself, choosing settings and costumes, terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the bit part of guest, or ghost, prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual—for there is nothing in the world that I loathe more than group activity, that communal bath where the hairy and the slippery mix in a multiplication of mediocrity. (Quoted in AY 409)

This palpable repulsion at the idea of collaboration extended to his relations with publishers.

Nabokov was fastidious about the way his writing made it from his manuscripts onto the printed page, carefully consulting two sets of galleys before poring over the final proofs. A letter to Walter Minton, who was in the process of bringing Lolita to press with Putnam’s in 1958, indicates the degree to which Nabokov attended to micropoetic detail. ‘I am sending you herewith a copy of LOLITA which we have checked for misprints and errors,’ Nabokov wrote. ‘I would like to change the paragraphic division, and would like to be consulted on any questions of punctuation that may arise. A number of words are not in Webster, but will be in its later editions’ (SL 251). The saturated quality of the Nabokovian text magnifies the problem of misprints, especially when he builds textual games into his
work. The 1951 story ‘The Vane Sisters’, for example, turns upon an acrostic in the final paragraph and its ludic mechanism would not work were a misprint to have crept in (this in a story in which a librarian combs old books for misprints that take on unexpected meanings). Nabokov even used the publication of his 1967 interview with Alfred Appel in Strong Opinions to open an ‘Errata Department’ correcting misprints in the 1963 Lancer paperback edition of Pale Fire; the futility of trying to retrospectively correct misprints speaks to Nabokov’s frustration with the flawed material expression of his work (SO 75). The consultation of the final proofs was Nabokov’s last act before he had to abdicate control to his publisher and wait for his books to enter the marketplace. His need to determine the final shape of the text develops into a need to determine the final shape of the book and, as a result, Nabokov sought to exert control over the parts of the book that were traditionally the province of the publisher, what Gérard Genette terms ‘peritexts’: blurbs, puffs, and cover art. In this chapter I consider the way Nabokov trespassed into this peritextual territory, asserting his authorship and seeking to diminish the degree of collaboration with the publisher in the production of his books.

NABOKOV’S PUBLISHERS

Nabokov’s first experience with publishing his work was not auspicious. In 1916, when he was still only 17 years old, he published a collection of sixty-eight poems at his own expense. His uncle, Vasily Rukavishnikov, died that year and Nabokov inherited ‘the equivalent of several million dollars, along with the two-thousand-acre estate of Rozhdestveno and its century-old neo-classical manor’ (RY 121). Boyd tells us that Nabokov was flush with pride at having a poem accepted by the distinguished literary journal Vestnik Evropy and in his enthusiasm for his newfound literary celebrity had 500 copies of Stikhi printed (RY 118). As a result Nabokov was humiliated at the Tenishev school by his teacher, Vladimir Gippius, who read aloud the most excruciating passages as his classmates laughed. Zinaida Gippius, the influential Symbolist poet and his teacher’s cousin, told Nabokov’s father that his son would never make a writer. A ‘sycophantic journalist [ . . . ] who had reason to be grateful to Nabokov’s father’ sought to publish an embarrassingly fulsome review (Nabokov senior intercepted it). ‘The whole business’, wrote Nabokov in Speak, Memory, ‘cured me permanently of all interest in literary fame and was probably the cause of that almost pathological and not always justified indifference to reviews which in later years deprived me of the emotions most authors are said to experience’ (SM 238–9). That these
thoughts were expressed in a literary memoir suggests the cure was not quite as permanent as all that.

Undeterred by the reception of his first book, Nabokov selected a further twelve poems the following year for a collaboration with his Tenishev schoolmate Andrey Balashov. The collection, entitled *Two Paths*, was published in 1918 when the post-Revolutionary civil war had already begun and the Nabokov family was sheltering in the Crimea. It is unsurprising to discover that, according to Boyd, only one copy survives (*RY* 131). Nabokov did not publish another book in Russia during his lifetime.

Nabokov began to publish with the émigré presses in Berlin in 1922 (*annus mirabilis* of high modernism in Europe), making his mark by bringing out four books with three publishers in the space of four months. Nabokov’s father had been murdered that March and therefore did not see his son’s work published in the emigration but his status and influence in the densely interconnected world of the emigration helped facilitate his son’s career. *Nikolai Persik*, Nabokov’s translation of Romain Rolland’s *Colas Breugnon*, was published in November and initiated a productive relationship with Slovo, which was run by Iosif Hessen, a close friend of Nabokov’s father. Hessen, as editor of the émigré newspaper *Rul*, had published Nabokov’s poetry and with Slovo went on to publish *Mary* (1926), *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), *The Defense* (1930), and the short story collection *The Return of Chorb* (1930). In December 1922, Nabokov published his first collection of mature poetry, *The Cluster*, with Gamaïun, and the same press brought out *Anya v Strane Chudes*, his translation of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the following March (he received a US five dollar bill as an advance) (*RY* 197). A third émigré press, *Grani*, published his second collection of poems, *The Empyrean Path*, in February 1923, although, confusingly, the poems in this volume were drawn from an earlier period (1918–21) than those contained in *The Cluster* (1921–2).

The standard path to publication for Nabokov’s novels in the 1920s and 1930s was to first serialize them in one of the ‘thick’ journals that were at the heart of Russian literary culture. Nabokov found champions of his work in Mark Vishnyak and Ilya Fondaminsky, who serialized his novels in the most influential of these journals, *Sovremennye zapiski*. Nabokov first published poems with the Paris-based journal in 1921 and 1922 but had to wait until 1927 to have his first story accepted by them (‘Terror’). From 1929 onward, Nabokov serialized seven novels with the journal (*The Defense*, *Glory*, *Kamera Obskura*, *The Eye*, *Despair*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *The Gift*) before going on to have them published as books. Working with *Sovremennye zapiski* gave Nabokov a degree of
stability in an émigré publishing world that was subject to much financial uncertainty. After the boom years for émigré publishing in Berlin in the early 1920s, most publishers moved west to Paris and by the late 1930s Nabokov was publishing his books there: Despair with Petropolis in 1936, The Eye with Ruskiia Zapiski in 1938, and Invitation to a Beheading with Dom Knigi in 1938.

On arriving in the United States, Nabokov was forced to find new publishers for his work. No longer could he publish eighty-page chunks of his novels in a ‘thick’ journal and rely on established relationships with editors. The financial rewards of success in the American marketplace were far greater but it was unambiguously a marketplace. Nabokov’s first five novels published in the United States all came out with different publishers: Laughter in the Dark (Bobbs-Merrill, 1938), The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (New Directions, 1941), Bend Sinister (Henry Holt, 1947), Pnin (Doubleday, 1957), and Lolita (Putnam’s & Sons, 1958). Conclusive Evidence, his other major work of this period, came out with a sixth publisher, Harper & Brothers in 1951. Nabokov would go on to strike up strong relationships first with Putnam’s (who published six Nabokov books) and then with McGraw-Hill (who published twelve) in the United States, and with Weidenfeld & Nicolson (who published twenty-four Nabokov books) in the United Kingdom. Even so, Nabokov had books published by thirty-three different hardback and paperback imprints in the United States and the United Kingdom during his lifetime. On top of that he was publishing Russian-language books, as well as translations of his English-language works into French, German, and a multitude of other languages.

Another significant consequence of entering the American marketplace was the way Nabokov’s books were designed. In the emigration Nabokov’s books had been published with plain, unadorned paper covers, with sales largely generated by reviews in newspapers and journals.¹ The one exception to this trend was the cover of the 1933 edition of Kamera Obscura, which depicted the title of the novel repeated in a filmstrip (Juliar 114).² It is pertinent that it was this novel that appeared most commercially viable to western publishers, and Nabokov succeeded in getting it published with John Long in the United Kingdom in 1936 (entitled Camera Obscura and

¹ Examples of the austere jackets of Nabokov’s émigré novels are reproduced in Juliar’s Bibliography: Mary (p. 58), King, Queen, Knave (p. 69), The Return of Chorb (p. 85), The Eye (p. 91), Glory (p. 103), Despair (p. 126) and Invitation to a Beheading (p. 140).

² The English translation of Nabokov’s Despair, published by John Long in 1937, had an illustrated cover, depicting Hermann and Felix and the important walking stick (Juliar, 129).
translated by Winifred Roy) and, as we have seen, by Bobbs-Merrill in the United States in 1938 as *Laughter in the Dark*. In 1945 he managed to sell the film rights to the book for the impressive sum of $2,500 (*AY* 89).

Nabokov cared very much about the way his books were designed. In an essay on Nabokov’s correspondence, John M. Kopper argues that

The sheer number of letters devoted to details of book design reveals one of Nabokov’s obsessions. He saw the book cover not as a marketing device but as an interpretative statement controlling a reader’s entry into the work [. . .]

The need to supervise all aspects of his works reflected a deeper demand for control. (p. 62)

This demand for control over how his books were made is an extension of the control Nabokov sought over the reception of his work. This idea of the book’s physical apparatus—the peritext—being part of a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* has its roots in the modernist practice of Stéphane Mallarmé. As Anna Sigrídur Arnar tells us, Mallarmé ‘assumed an inordinately active role in selecting typography, overseeing layout, and recruiting visual artists to contribute images to his publications’ (p. 2). This creation of elaborate editions was an anti-commercial strategy, treating books not as commodities but as *objets d’art*, a practice reinforced by his collaborating with artists, hand-signing books, and releasing editions in limited numbers. This was an ideal of author-centred book production that could only be conducted with independent funding, but even in the commercial world of post-war American book publishing, Nabokov considered the book a part of his work’s artistic expression.

To have alien texts at the threshold of his fiction was often a source of frustration to Nabokov, especially when these texts were deployed as transparent marketing devices. Book covers, after all, are advertisements. In seeking to exert control over these peritexts, Nabokov sought to expand the scope of his authority. The success of *Lolita* initially gave him the leverage to exert this authority over how his books were made but it was this very success that also defined the limits of his authorial reach.

**NEW DIRECTIONS**

Nabokov’s relationship with American publishing was shaped by his dealings with his first American publisher, James Laughlin of New Directions. On deciding to publish *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Laughlin initially offered Nabokov no advance, only royalties (plus an option on Nabokov’s next three books), and when Nabokov asked for an advance, Laughlin came back with only $150 (Laughlin’s biographer, Ian
MacNiven, describes his subject as ‘constitutionally tight-fisted’) (p. 182). What he did offer Nabokov, however, was a long-term commitment to building his career and the potential for slow-burning royalties from a backlist that stayed in print much longer than other publishers’ lists. In a letter of 2 July 1941, Laughlin conceded that the advance isn’t very much, but, as I pointed out in my initial letter, I do not feel that Sebastian will sell much. It is too delicate, too quiet—on the other hand, it is such a beautifully written book that I would feel wrong to let it go. I asked for further options because I think we can build you up over a period of time and finally get a steady public for you here. There are a few people who really know good writing and want it. But I wouldn’t want you to entertain false hopes about our glorious country. (Berg)

The compensation for such poor remuneration was a relationship with a publisher that supported difficult or experimental writing. New Directions had an unambiguously modernist agenda. As a Harvard student, Laughlin had been an aspiring poet and in 1933 he travelled to Europe where he met Gertrude Stein and became, according to Greg Barnhisel, Ezra Pound’s ‘disciple, correspondent, agent’ (p. 15). He shared the cultural politics of a modernism hostile to the commodification of literary work, reviling mass-market publishers ‘who sell books like soap’ (quoted in Barnhisel, 12).

Laughlin was wealthy thanks to his family’s success in the steel industry and he took to heart Pound’s advice to give up writing poetry and ‘do something useful… Go back [to Harvard] and be a publisher’ (quoted in Barnhisel 51). In 1936, fed up ‘with the absolute lack of exposure for the experimental writing he loved’, he founded the annual journal New Directions in Prose and Poetry before expanding it into a publishing house; in February 1937 New Directions published its first book, White Mule by William Carlos Williams. In a postscript to that book, Laughlin claimed it was time to damn the book publisher as hard as you can damn them. They’re traitors and enemies of the people. They have made literature a business. They have made the writing of books the production of cheap-goods. They have made a book a thing no more valuable than an automobile tire. (Quoted in Barnhisel, 64)

The publication of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight with New Directions was a statement of modernist allegiance: Laughlin told Nabokov that ‘the standard of your writing fits perfectly with our aims and ideals’ and

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3 As a point of comparison, The Atlantic Monthly paid Nabokov $150 for ‘Cloud, Castle, Lake’ (1941) and Henry Holt gave Nabokov an advance of $2,000 for Bend Sinister (NWL 42, 173).
described Nabokov’s ideal audience as the ‘few people who really know good writing’, a cultural elite including the New Critics and the New York intellectuals (Laughlin had published John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* the previous year) (*NWL* 55). Laughlin was committed to books he knew would fail in the market; when he published Nabokov’s *Nikolai Gogol* in 1944 he feared it would lose money so ‘kept the copyright in his own name so that it would not be charged against N[ew] D[irections]’ (MacNiven, 193).

Nabokov’s relationship with Laughlin became strained in December 1943 when Nabokov sought to back out of the agreement to publish *Three Russian Poets* when Doubleday offered ten times the advance New Directions had offered.4 The book was ‘due at press in two weeks’ and Laughlin refused Nabokov’s request to cancel their agreement (Nabokov offered to repay his advance plus 10 per cent). According to MacNiven, Nabokov had not told Laughlin ‘the whole story’, withholding both the name of the publisher and the fact that the Doubleday edition would have also included introductory essays by Edmund Wilson (p. 204). Laughlin did not back down and told Nabokov that ‘if you are going to behave this way no one can dare to trust you with an advance’ (quoted in MacNiven, 204). Eventually an agreement was reached whereby the publication of *Three Russian Poets* went ahead with a reversion-of-rights clause added and Nabokov paid back the $250 advance for his next novel, *Bend Sinister*, which he was now free to publish elsewhere.

Even a publisher whose cultural politics resonated with Nabokov’s own failed to understand how closely Nabokov wanted to control the way his work was published and disseminated. Writing to Laughlin five years after the publication of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in a letter of 9 April 1946, Nabokov expressed his unhappiness at being kept in the dark about negotiations for the British rights to his *Nikolai Gogol*. Nabokov told Laughlin that, ‘my literary work and rights are a serious matter in which I wish to achieve a certain order and over which I wish to keep control’ (*Berg*).

Nabokov did not want to put the control of his work in jeopardy and even in his early years in the United States, when he was struggling financially, scrutinized contracts for clauses that would weaken his future hold over his work. On receiving a returned contract from Nabokov with six alterations in the clauses, Allen Tate, of Henry Holt, replied in a letter of 6 November 1946:

If anybody again ever tells me that a White Russian is not capable of reading a contract, I shall have evidence to the contrary. I am ashamed to confess that

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4 Ken McCormick of Doubleday had first approached Nabokov in November 1941 after reading ‘The Aurelian’ in *The Atlantic*. 
I have never read so carefully any of my contracts with publishers [. . .] For heaven sake please sign this contract so that we can get the book to the printer and out in eight months. If we keep on arguing like two Philadelphia lawyers, we shall never get the book published. (Berg)

As a writer without ‘a steady public’, Nabokov was often negotiating from a position of weakness with publishers in these years. In the emigration he had felt himself in control of the way his work was published but in a new market and a new language he was forced, on occasion, to swallow his pride. In what he had initially conceived as a sixteenth chapter to Conclusive Evidence, Nabokov wrote that had Sovremennye zapiski offered the same grammatical advice as The New Yorker’s copy editors it would have been a ‘monstrous insult’ (‘Chapter Sixteen’, 258). Some publishers treated Nabokov poorly and he was left furious when the British edition of Three Russian Poets, published by Lindsay Drummond, failed to adequately acknowledge his contribution. ‘Never in my life have I been subjected to the cavalier treatment these publishers seem to reserve for their authors,’ he wrote to the literary agent David Higham on 24 March 1948. ‘Frankly, I would very much prefer not being published at all in England to being published like this!’ (SL 84).

Ironically it was Laughlin who was responsible for a Nabokov book first being published as a mass-market paperback, when he arranged for the publication of Laughter in the Dark by Signet Books in 1950. Signet was unashamedly populist and enjoyed great success publishing hugely popular authors like the crime writer Mickey Spillane. Signet’s books had distinctive pulpy designs, sensationalizing their content through promises of sex and violence. The cover art of their Laughter in the Dark edition was no exception: a man looks back at a woman as he leaves a room although, despite holding back a drape for him, she does not meet his eyes; she is depicted wearing a tight blouse and, crucially, her right hand is resting on a bedstead. The man is wearing a suit but is walking out into the night: a secret assignation has clearly taken place. Across the top of the cover is the tantalizing blurb: ‘An unforgettable novel of a man who forsook his wife for a mistress.’ It can rather safely be assumed that the woman on the cover is not the wife. On the inside cover there was a further publisher’s note: ‘To go into any details of the plot of this extraordinary novel would be to spoil for the reader as suspenseful and continuously surprising a book as any that has been written (and this applies to detective and “suspense”

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5 This chapter is reproduced as an appendix to the Everyman edition of Speak, Memory, edited by Brian Boyd. Nabokov was reluctant to be edited in any conventional sense but while he told Wilson he resisted The New Yorker’s efforts to edit him, as Roper points out he did accept edits for length and house style (NWL 154; Roper, 196).
novels as well).’ This note is rendered absurd by the opening two sentences of the novel which immediately follow-on: ‘Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster’ (LiD 1).

The timing of the Signet publication was unfortunate for Nabokov, as he had only recently established himself as a writer with The New Yorker and Partisan Review. The Signet edition was successful: according to the first sales report it sold 76,000 copies. Nabokov was furious with Laughlin for arranging the publication without his knowledge, especially as the contract jeopardized his long-term rights to the novel. In an angry letter of 21 February 1950, Nabokov wrote with remarkable self-confidence that ‘there may be more money in my books, in the long run, than in many a fast-selling volume of rubbish fated to drown in Lethe after a more or less durable boom’ (Berg). For Nabokov there was far more value in creating and shaping an oeuvre, in accruing substantial symbolic capital in the American literary field, than any short-term financial gain.

Nabokov’s efforts to control all aspects of book production brought even New Directions, an author-centred publisher, to the point of frustration. Robert MacGregor, Laughlin’s colleague at the firm, finally lost his composure when negotiating about a reissue of Laughter of the Dark in a letter of 9 September 1960:

I am beginning to think that you have abandoned your hobby of composing chess problems for a game that must be much more fun, devising problems for publishers. Certainly we never seem to get one thing settled but that you propose a new move. Possibly our error has been that we didn’t long ago recognize it all as a game and play it as such. (Berg)

The relationship with Laughlin, MacGregor, and New Directions remained fraught into the late 1960s, as Nabokov contested the firm’s secondary rights to his works (see MacNiven, 216, 300, 332–3). Nabokov’s demands were sometimes impractical but then he was not particularly concerned with the pragmatics of publishing: his primary interest was in ensuring the long-term aesthetic integrity of his oeuvre.

PARATEXTS AND AESTHETICS

The motivation for Nabokov’s fastidiousness regarding his contracts and the protection of his long-term publishing rights is easily understood; after

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6 Nabokov and Laughlin repaired relations in the early 1970s and in 1973 Laughlin nominated Nabokov for the Nobel Prize via the New York PEN chapter (MacNiven, 377).
what had happened to his Russian works he had every right to be protective. What requires more explanation is the zeal with which he sought to control the design of his books. Nabokov seemed to want a unity between form and content. He was particularly pleased, for example, with the New Directions edition of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* for achieving just this effect. In a letter to Laughlin on 3 January 1942, Nabokov wrote that he ‘liked the looks of the book immensely. The binding reminded me of certain [sic] 1920–25 edition of Georgian poetry in England and so it is just in the period style of Sebastian Knight’ (*Berg*). Nabokov would be less pleasantly surprised in future: rather than discovering an unexpected synthesis between his work and the publisher’s product, Nabokov time and again railed against the way proffered designs sabotaged his aesthetic project.

In his 1987 book *Seuils* (translated into English in 1997 as *Paratexts*), Genette argued that peritexts should be understood as a transitional zone, functioning as ‘an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much respiratory difficulty from one world to the other, a sometimes delicate operation, especially when the second world is a fictional one’ (p. 408). In Genette’s reading, these zones of pre-reading substantially influence the subsequent reading by determining what a reception theorist like Jauss would call the trajectory of expectation (*Erwartungsrichtung*). Genre disjunction—such as in the case of the 1950 Signet edition of *Laughter in the Dark*—can undermine the author’s aesthetic goals. The peritext is an interpretive threshold, a problematic space through which the reader negotiates a path to the text. Genette goes on to define this space as a zone that is

always the conveyer of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author [. . .] a zone not only of transition but of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (p. 2)

What troubled Nabokov was the perceived authorial legitimacy of these peritexts: they were composed or designed by the publisher but their presence as part of the book implied authorial approval. Genette defines as officiel ‘any paratextual message openly accepted by the author or publisher or both’ and as officieux those paratexts for which either party can deny responsibility (for Genette this is mostly the authorial epitext) (p. 10). These distinctions would not have satisfied Nabokov: for him only the author has aesthetic legitimacy. As we shall see, Nabokov repeatedly sought to cleanse his books of peritextual material not under his direct control. He did not want his peritexts to be officieux or officiel. He wanted them to be authorial.
FOREWORDS

Nabokov’s most systematic peritextual project was the composition of the forewords to the English translations of his Russian novels between 1959 and 1971. John Updike called these the ‘landlordly prefaces that slam shut the doors of unsightly closets, inveigh against the Freudian in the hall, and roughly nudge the prospective tenant toward the one window with a view’ (Picked-Up Pieces, 195). Nabokov asserts his authority over these textual thresholds and his ‘rough nudging’ is an attempt to control the angle of the reader’s trajectory into the reading. In Towards an Aesthetic of Reception, Jauss writes about the different ways a text can create certain expectations about what he calls the zusammenhang von spielregeln (‘the hanging together of the rules of the game’) (p. 79). In his study, Jauss is more concerned with how genre shapes these expectations: in Nabokov’s forewords the rules of the game are established much more explicitly. Nabokov is asserting his rights as landlord and he has certain expectations of his tenant.

The idea for the forewords germinated with ‘On a Book entitled Lolita’, the afterword Nabokov wrote for his novel in 1956 (part of a campaign to build paratextual fortifications against possible obscenity charges in the United States), which ‘suggested the model he was to follow for all the forthcoming translations of his Russian novels’ (AY 385). Over the following twelve years he composed ten forewords (to Invitation to a Beheading; The Gift; Bend Sinister; The Defense; Despair; The Eye; The Waltz Invention; King, Queen, Knave; Mary; Glory), all but one of which introduced new translations of his Russian work.7 The exception is the longer introduction to Bend Sinister that was included in the 1965 Time Reading Program edition of the novel, eighteen years after its initial publication.

For Boyd, Nabokov’s forewords contain ‘some of his breeziest autobiographical and autocritical writing’ as well as providing cultural contextualization for readers who knew little or nothing of the Russian emigration in which the novels were written (AY 385). Charles Nicol has identified a ‘paradigm’ of the Nabokov foreword, splitting it into four functions: i) personal and bibliographic; ii) miscellaneous comments prompted by this particular novel; iii) polemic statements; iv) elliptical commentary on

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7 Laughter in the Dark is the one Russian translation not to have a foreword appended. It was not translated in this period; Winifred Roy’s translation for Camera Obscura (1936) had so angered Nabokov that he had translated the novel himself as Laughter in the Dark (1938). The Nabokov translation was then reprinted in 1965.
the plot’ (p. 115). While Nicol concedes his paradigm does not always fit, he is right to detect something formulaic in the construction of the forewords. In his 1963 foreword to *The Defense*, Nabokov writes about ‘a rule’ he has made for his prefaces:

In the Prefaces I have been writing of late for the English-language editions of my Russian novels (and there are more to come) I have made it a rule to address a few words of encouragement to the Viennese delegation. The present Foreword shall not be an exception. (*LD* 10–11)

This is a rule that Nabokov followed. Nicol identifies this anti-Freudian stance as part of Nabokov’s general polemics, including his dismissal of social, historical, political, or moral influences on his work, yet there is a particular insistence to Nabokov’s anti-Freudianism; every foreword contains a warning against Freudian readings of the work to follow, with the exception of the foreword to *The Gift*. At the time of writing the foreword to *The Defense*, in 1963, Nabokov had written only two other prefaces to ‘the English-language editions of my Russian novels’, so his claims to have ‘made it a rule to address a few words of encouragement to the Viennese delegation’ seem a little premature: the foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading* does address ‘the disciples of the Viennese witch-doctor’ but in the foreword to *The Gift* he does not mention Freud at all (*IB* 9). From 1963, though, it would be applied with rigour. In his final foreword, to *Glory*, Nabokov wrote, ‘Nowadays, when Freudism is discredited, the author recalls with a whistle of wonder that not so long ago—say before 1959 (i.e., before the publication of the first of the seven [sic] forewords to his Englished novels)—a child’s personality was supposed to split automatically in sympathetic consequence of parental divorce’ (*Gl*, p. xviii). Nabokov links the perceived fall in Freud’s standing to his own polemical forewords, suggesting that his attacks on psychoanalysis had contributed significantly to the discrediting of the deployment of Freud’s theories as a valid means of literary interpretation.

What Nabokov specifically resisted was a sexual-symbolic reading of his works, a reading that undermined his conscious authorial agency, inveighing against a rival system of interpretation in a peritextual space in which the ‘rules of the game’ are being established; as Nabokov writes in his foreword to *Bend Sinister*, ‘all my books should be stamped Freudians, Keep Out’ (p. 11). To counter the loss of authorial control implicit in a psychoanalytic reading, Nabokov claimed to have anticipated Freudian interpretation. One of his strategies was to parody these potential readings, such as the mock-oedipal symbolism of the chess pieces he uses in the foreword to *The Defense*. Another is to warn the reader that his fictions are spring-loaded with traps for the psychoanalytic reader: ‘If [...] a resolute
Freudian manages to slip in, he or she should be warned that a number of cruel traps have been set here and there in the novel’ (KQK, p. viii). If Freudian readings undermine the authority of the author, then Nabokov’s claim to have anticipated them undermines the Freudian reading itself. It is an effort on Nabokov’s part to reclaim the initiative but it is one necessarily fraught with risk: by attacking Freud in the vestibule of the text, Nabokov is also placing Freud in the reader’s mind. It is a contradictory position to adopt. Nabokov grants Freud a primacy in the critical zone of transaction between off-text and text, invoking his presence through denying it. If Nabokov believed that Freud was destined to be discredited, why invoke him at all? Nabokov claimed Freud was finished by the time he published the translation of Glory in 1971, yet the forewords to his books are marked into posterity by their defensive anti-Freudianism.

If Nabokov slams certain doors shut on the threshold of the text, he also tantalizes readers with what appear to be alternate routes into his fiction; this is the fourth aspect of Nicol’s paradigm: the ‘elliptical commentary on the plot’. In ‘On a Book Entitled Lolita’, Nabokov is deliberately enigmatic when he lists the ‘secret points, subliminal co-ordinates’ of the novel, a collection of scenes and moments that are ostensibly unrelated. Nabokov implies a hidden texture to his work, a subtle pattern that binds the novel together, which the careful reader should try to apprehend (AL 316). Just as he had done with his students at Wellesley and Cornell, Nabokov stresses the need for a structural, thematic approach to reading, privileging networks of related images and metaphors above plot. By encouraging an elliptical reading, Nabokov is challenging conventional reading practice and inviting the reader into the adoption of his aesthetic approach. That the ‘subliminal co-ordinates’ are not clearly related to one another only serves to strengthen Nabokov’s hand: it invites a certain type of formalist, tantalizingly teleological reading without falling into the trap of becoming explicitly programmatic. The placement of the afterword to Lolita has a recursive function, suggesting as it does that the reader, caught up in the plot, might have missed the novel’s important internal resonances. It invites a rereading and a reassessment of the novel on Nabokov’s terms.

The subsequent forewords attempt to accelerate the process of spatial reading by disclosing important plot developments and, in some cases, even the ending of the book. In the foreword to The Gift, Nabokov provides a broad plot summary that informs the reader that Fyodor and Zina will end up as lovers while insisting that the reader be alert to embedded references to Russian literature. The foreword to The Defense discloses Luzhin’s suicide, while in the foreword to The Eye Nabokov undermines his own plot twist
by warning the reader of the need to ‘catch on’, and that ‘it is unlikely that
even the most credulous peruser of this twinkling tale will take long to
realise who Smurov is’ (Eye, p. iv). In the foreword to Glory, Nabokov
reveals that Martin will follow ‘the perilous path [...] into forbidden
Zoorland’ (Gl, p. xii). Nabokov performs this deliberate plot sabotage
most systematically in the introduction to Bend Sinister; giving extensive
details of the plot at every stage, he even tells the reader that Krug’s son
David will be abducted in chapter 15 and that Krug will himself eventually
succumb to madness and death. This strategy of premature revelation is a
deliberate relegation of plot on Nabokov’s part, as his readers are encour-
aged to contemplate, rather than consume, the text.

In this peritextual mode Nabokov can appear straightforwardly helpful:
he translates a Pushkin poem that is later alluded to in Despair; he discloses
the presence of an Onegin stanza in the final paragraph of The Gift. The
forewords, however, can also be deliberately deceptive. As first pointed out
by Fred Moody in his 1976 essay ‘Nabokov’s Gambit’, the foreword to
The Defense contains scenes that do not appear in the book, presumably to
trap the lazy reviewer he is pretending to help:

I would like to spare the time and effort of hack reviewers—and generally
people who move their lips when reading and cannot be expected to tackle a
dialogueless novel when so much can be gleaned from its foreword—by
drawing their attention to [...] the pathetic way my morose grandmaster
remembers his professional journeys [...] in terms of the tiles in different
hotel bathrooms and corridor toilets—that floor with the blue and white
squares where he found and scanned from his throne imaginary continu-
ations of the match game in progress. (pp. 8–9)

Nabokov then describes three such scenes, all of them ‘faked’. While
doubtless motivated, at least in part, by mischief, Nabokov’s description
of these fictitious scenes further blurs the line between text and off-text,
forcing the reader to question whether this is enriching the novel itself, or
whether this is an abuse of authorial power.

The introduction to Bend Sinister is the most invasive and problematic
of Nabokov’s forewords. It was composed in 1963, for a new edition of
the novel for the Time Reading Program, run by Time-Life books. At first
glance the self-consciously difficult Bend Sinister might have seemed an
unusual choice for a book club but the creator of the series, Max Gissen,
was a Nabokov enthusiast: he was a Russian-born book critic who had
previously worked with Edmund Wilson at The New Republic in the 1930s.
For the new edition, Nabokov was asked to write an introduction. One of
the most important questions the novel asks is about the ethics of
authorial agency. The subject of the novel, the philosopher Krug, grieving
for his wife, is made to suffer the abduction, torture, and murder of his son
before being sent mercifully mad by the ‘author’ who is revealed, at the
novel’s conclusion, to be in his study having finished composing the novel
just read.\textsuperscript{8}

In the introduction, Nabokov tells us that the world of Krug is presided
over by an ‘anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me’ and there are
many examples of authorial intrusion or deliberate foregrounding of the
provisional status of what is happening to Krug (BS 11). With the 1963
introduction the authorial interventions became even more explicit. He
lists the ‘subthematic’ recurrence of an ‘oblong pool’ image, explains
elements of the novel’s ‘paronomasia’, and discloses the source of many
embedded allusions, from Shakespeare and Melville, to Mallarmé and
Joyce. He finishes the introduction by indicating where the reader is to
expect the intrusions of the author within the novel (BS 8–11).

As he made clear in a 13 April 1973 letter to Frederic W. Hills, editor-
in-chief at McGraw-Hill, Nabokov felt the introduction ‘an important
piece’, and one that should be retained whenever Bend Sinister was
republished (SL 515). He concedes that his deliberately difficult novel
made only a ‘dull thud’ on publication and perhaps the introduction is an
attempt to reconcile the reader to the text’s impenetrability (BS p. xii).\textsuperscript{9}
That would make it a concession of artistic failure on Nabokov’s part, an
acknowledgement that the novel is not capable of breathing on its own
and needs the peritextual apparatus to live. In contrast with the way he
invokes enigmatic ‘nerve points’ in the afterword to Lolita, in the intro-
duction to Bend Sinister Nabokov explicitly links a series of related, liminal
images (initiated by the puddle in the opening sentence) that disclose an
authorial presence in the fictional world of the novel. This act of authorial
intrusion is materially figured in the make-up of the book itself: in the
Time-Life edition a bookmark was included in some copies, with a
quotation from Nabokov’s new introduction inscribed on it (Juliar,
186). The author was given a vehicle for the physical invasion of the
reading process.

Arguably the most profound problem with the introduction, though, is
an ethical one. Nabokov identifies the book’s ‘main theme’ to be ‘the
beating of Krug’s loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is sub-
jected to’ (BS, p. xiv). Despite what Nabokov said about the lack of

\textsuperscript{8} Nabokov described this authorial intrusion as ‘a device never yet attempted in
literature’ (SL 50).

\textsuperscript{9} In his review of the novel Frank Kermode wrote, ‘[w]e do not much care to be the
objects of an author’s contempt, and—to simplify for a moment—that is the way Nabokov
seems to feel about us’ (p. 228). In another review, V. S. Naipaul called it ‘bizarre, puzzling
and difficult’ (p. 74).
influence of history on his work, this ‘thought experiment’ in cruelty from the mid-1940s drew from obvious contemporaneous sources. As John Burt Foster points out, the treatment of David ‘resonates with several extreme events in twentieth-century Europe, most notably Stalin’s purges and the Nazi Final Solution’ (‘Bend Sinister’, 29). While the author reveals to Krug his status as a fictional character, the author is also responsible for creating the world in which Krug and David are forced to suffer, and David, of course, is not granted the same revelation. Taking issue with Julia Bader’s claim that within the novel ‘death is disinfected of its horror by being rendered as a problem of fictional representation’, Zoran Kuzmanovich argues that what Nabokov is in fact asking of his reader is to ‘imagine fully, then to nullify fully, the logic of Krug’s suffering’ (96; ‘Suffer the Little Children’, 51). What troubles Kuzmanovich is the ‘instrumentality’ of David’s death: ‘Why torture David, for whom, I repeat, there is no relief in the emotional and metaphysical economy of the book’ (pp. 53–5). His own conclusion is that Nabokov, composing the book as the horrors of the Holocaust were being disclosed, refused to make sense of David’s death because to do so would be unethical.

Another explanation, offered by Thomas Karshan, is that Nabokov is drawing analogies between the author and deity and that the narrator/author of Bend Sinister is as ‘contradictory as the God mankind posits as the author of both torture and salvation’ (Art of Play, 188). These convincing arguments for an ethical reading of the novel rely on the narrator-deity being distinct from Nabokov, yet the 1963 introduction, clearly authored by Nabokov and not the narrator-deity of the novel, undermines this position. In the introduction Nabokov discloses that extratextual vengeance has been meted out to the Ekwilist characters:

Is there any judgement on my part carried out, any sentence pronounced, any satisfaction given to the moral sense? If imbeciles and brutes can punish other brutes and imbeciles, and if crime still retains an objective meaning in the meaningless world of Paduk (all of which is doubtful), we may affirm that crime is punished at the end of the book when the uniformed waxworks are really hurt, and the dummies are at last in quite dreadful pain, and pretty Mariette gently bleeds, staked and torn by the lust of 40 soldiers. (BS 7–8)

10 Earlier in the introduction Nabokov writes that he ‘has never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment’ and that ‘the influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my books, or at least of this book, on my epoch’. He does, though, concede that there can be found ‘reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of Fascists and Bolshevists, of Philistine thinkers and jack-booted baboons’ (BS 6).
If we accept that this is part of an introduction that is unambiguously written by Nabokov (who attaches his name to the end of it), then it is Nabokov who is conjuring brutal sexual violence back into existence having moments before dismissed the world in which it putatively occurs as composed merely of his ‘whims and megrims’ (*BS 7*). Furthermore it is written at a temporal distance from its initial composition in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. The perversion of childhood play in the ‘release games’ practised upon David has an uncomfortable echo here, in the author’s revenge upon his own imagination, his own release game. The introduction undermines any effort to read *Bend Sinister* ethically.

**BLURBS**

If Nabokov’s authorship of his forewords and introductions was hardly in dispute, control over the content of his books’ blurbs was a source of much contestation.

The blurb was a crucial aspect of marketing a book but the promotional text that appeared on the dustjacket of a hardback or the cover of a paperback was almost always unattributed. Blurbs can take one of two forms: by-lined endorsement by a fellow writer or critic, or a short promotional text that is not by-lined but is assumed to be the product of the publisher and/or author. Nabokov was particularly sensitive to the content of the blurbs on his books as he believed they had the power to distort readerly expectation.11 An exchange with Oliver Caldecott of Penguin in October 1971 serves as a pertinent example: the publisher’s edition of *Pnin* contained a blurb that suggested the novel was in part an attack on McCarthyism, a statement that Nabokov resented (this is Véra writing):

> Another matter that my husband finds extremely annoying. Who and why has written in the blurb to PNIN (back cover) ‘...such Nabokovian enemies as McCarthyism’? In point of fact VN has never criticized or attacked McCarthy for the simple reason that he found anti-McCarthyists much more repulsive than McCarthy himself. Since, moreover, it does not reflect any statement occurring in PNIN, this sentence on the jacket, says VN, is absurd and must be removed. (*SL* 495–6)

The problem as Nabokov saw it was that the unattributed blurb, coming as part of the book’s published apparatus, could be mistaken for being his

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11 To give one example: in his negotiations with Doubleday over *Pnin* in the summer of 1956 he demanded a clause be inserted in his contract giving him final approval of any blurb.
composition, or at least having his blessing. What made this so much more frustrating for Nabokov is that over three years earlier, in a letter to Caldecott’s colleague, Heather Mansell, on 25 November 1968, amid various other complaints, Nabokov had expressed his displeasure at the ‘absurd reference to “McCarthyism”’ in the proposed blurb for *Pnin* (SL 436). Caldecott replied contritely to the second letter, saying that it would be too expensive to recall the book and that they would correct the error on a reprint. Furthermore, he promised Véra that he had renewed instructions to his team that Nabokov must have final say on selections of peritextual material, including covers and blurbs. In his initial negotiations with Doubleday over the publication of *Pnin*, Nabokov returned a contract to Jason Epstein on 17 August 1956, with ten emendations and three new clauses to be added, including one that insisted on ‘Author’s approval of the blurb and right to make changes to it’ (*Berg*). The blurb was an important peritext over which Nabokov did not want to cede control.

On 20 July 1950, he had written to John Fischer of Harper and Brothers, after being shown the blurb for *Conclusive Evidence*:

> I object strongly to the following points: 1. Sitwell, a ridiculous mediocrity, does not belong here. 2. The paragraph stressing the ‘immeasurable wealth’ etc. is impossible—sets my teeth on edge. 3. Nabokov does not tell about the assassination of his father with ‘good humoured detachment’. 4. The sentence about the ironically appropriate butterflies is too silly for words. 5. The quotation from Proust is bad English and anyway irrelevant. (SL 104)


The association with Edith Sitwell, presumably because of her own aristocratic background (daughter of Sir George Sitwell, and granddaughter of the Earl of Londesborough), and the emphasis on the ‘immeasurable’ wealth of the Nabokov family implied that Nabokov’s memoir was being packaged as a nostalgic celebration of the pre-revolutionary Russian elite. The reference to Nabokov’s recounting the death of his father with ‘good humoured detachment’, aside from its insensitivity, is directly counter to the subtle pathos with which Nabokov writes about his father’s death.

Nabokov was not always consistent. Even though Edmund Wilson’s effusive endorsement of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* contributed to the novel being widely reviewed, Nabokov wrote to Jason Epstein of Doubleday, on 13 November 1956, that he no longer wanted his work to be promoted by Wilson’s paratextual patronage in a new edition:

> Do you think you could do without any quotations from Edmund? He never wrote anything of value about me except in the case of ‘Sebastian Knight’ his misrepresentation of which he greatly admired. We are very close friends, I admire and respect him greatly, but it is not a friendship based on similarity of opinions and approaches. (SL 193)
Nabokov changed his mind on this when Epstein reminded him quite how effusive Wilson’s praise was; Wilson had said Nabokov was a ‘master of English prose—the most extraordinary phenomenon of the kind since Conrad’ and that he was ‘something like Proust, something like Franz Kafka, and, probably, something like Gogol’ but ‘as completely your self as any of these other writers’.\textsuperscript{12} Nabokov replied four days later: ‘It never occurred to me that you might want to use that particular comment by Edmund (I was thinking of an entirely different one). This is a general appraisal, and a very warm and kind one, and I have no objection whatsoever if you think it appropriate for use in the present occasion. You might want to skip the reference to Conrad, since he did not start upon his literary career in his native (Polish) language (as I did, in Russian)’ (\textit{Berg}).\textsuperscript{13}

After the bestselling success of \textit{Lolita} in 1958 he faced a fresh struggle: publishers, especially of paperback editions, wanted to capitalize on his celebrity and market his books like bestsellers. Take the case of Phaedra, the publishing house that had initially seduced Nabokov in 1964 with plans to publish his cherished \textit{Butterflies in Art} project. Nabokov negotiated a deal with Phaedra whereby they would publish some of the titles in which Putnam’s had little interest but was then horrified to discover their marketing strategy. In autumn 1965 Phaedra’s publication of \textit{The Eye} was advertised as ‘A James Bond-type book by the author of \textit{Lolita!}...a spy story in the Ian Fleming and John Le Carré tradition’ (\textit{AY 501}). When Nabokov responded with a strenuous objection, Boyd writes that Oscar de Liso followed the lead of an early review and ‘altered the terms of the comparison to Turgenev, Fitzgerald, and Conrad’ only for Véra to respond that Nabokov ‘does not want to be compared to anyone in the advertisements because you should realise that you are publishing a completely individual writer’ (\textit{AY 501}).

Nabokov’s initial strategy in the years after the publication of \textit{Lolita} was to try to control and edit these blurbs as strenuously as he could, but this remained an unsatisfactory state of affairs. The blurbs, even when screened and approved, constituted an unwanted textual collaboration with the publisher. He wanted to reduce to the absolute minimum the number of words on his books composed by anyone other than him, and his eventual solution, facilitated by the leverage his \textit{Lolita} success gave him, was to cleanse the dustjackets of the hardback editions of as much collaborative

\textsuperscript{12} Nabokov had written to Wilson on 25 May 1946 to tell him that ‘\textit{Sebastian} is doing rather well in England, with the assistance of your delightful blurb’ (\textit{NW L 169}).

\textsuperscript{13} I have quoted from the letter in the archive as it has a small but significant alteration in emphasis to the one reproduced in \textit{Selected Letters}, 195. In \textit{Selected Letters} the part of the letter referring to the blurb is transcribed as ‘a particular comment by Edmund’, but the original letter has ‘\textit{that} particular comment by Edmund’.
peritextual material as possible. That meant only brief blurbs that he had approved and no endorsements from fellow writers. When writing to William Maguire of the Bollingen Foundation on 26 May 1963, Nabokov asked that his *Eugene Onegin* translation not have an endorsement or blurb from another writer or reviewer. This, Nabokov told him, was part of a ‘great decision’ he had made:

So a couple of years ago I wrote Walter Minton of a great decision I had taken, in consequence of which the jackets of PALE FIRE and THE GIFT are without endorsements. I am afraid I must also ask you not to quote any friendly opinions in the jacket of my EO. (*SL* 345–6)

He held his position on this matter and also refused to endorse the works of other writers, even if he admired them. In a letter to Pat Covici of Viking on 23 February 1963, for example, he declined to provide an endorsement for Evan S. Connell’s *Notes from a Bottle Found on a Beach at Carmel* despite liking the book:

I am emphatically against blurbs penned by friendly fellow-writers. I have been often asked to contribute quotable lines and have always refused, and of course I cannot make an exception in this case. Incidentally, my latest books are as free of these ornaments as were my very first ones. (*SL* 343)

The first books were, of course, published in the restricted field of Russian émigré publishing and Nabokov’s ‘great decision’ was part of this modernist impulse to shear away the commercial apparatus of the published book.

Nabokov repeatedly disagreed with his publishers that endorsements helped sell books, instead arguing, as he did with almost every publisher he dealt with, that the route to commercial success lay in advertising. In the same letter to Maguire of Bollingen he made this credo clear:

[...] I do not believe that a distinguished critic’s review (or indeed any review) helps to sell a book. Readers are not sheep, and not every pen (pun) tempts them. Some of my best flops have been ushered in by extravagant (albeit well-deserved) praise from eminent critics. The only thing that is of some help to the commercial success of a book (apart from topicality or sexuality) is a sustained advertising campaign, lots of ads everywhere. (*SL* 345) 14

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14 Leving points out that in the negotiations with Harper’s over the contract for *Conclusive Evidence* in 1949, Nabokov was already concerned with publicity budgets (*Marketing Literature*, 104). In a letter to Edmund Wilson he went on to accuse Harper’s of ‘taking a morbid pleasure in hushing up the book’ because he gave his ‘candid opinion about an idiotic blurb’ (*NWL* 264). Nabokov would also go on to reproach George Weidenfeld in 1971 for perceived lack of advertising for his books (*SL* 489).
Nabokov was happy for his publishers to promote his work, as long as the advertising did not make it on to the material book itself: he understood the need for epitextual promotional work but guarded his peritexts. Nabokov showed himself open to the marketing of his books through advertisements from his very first years in the United States. In a letter to Albert Erskine of New Directions on 16 October 1941, he wrote, ‘By the way may I suggest that in the present state of acute interest in “England + Russia” it might perhaps be wise, commercially speaking, to have the book [The Real Life of Sebastian Knight] appear as soon as possible and somehow allude to the special Anglo-Russian character of the book when advertising it’ (Berg).

It is an irony of Nabokov’s publishing history that it was success in the marketplace that facilitated his attempts to ‘cleanse’ his books of the instruments of their commercial promotion. By then Lolita, and the authorial imprimatur, had become literary brands, and Nabokov was able to negotiate with Putnam’s and McGraw-Hill from a position of strength. This position of strength translated into a position of newfound creativity. No doubt inspired by the paratextual play of Pale Fire, Nabokov came up with a new approach to the blurb for Ada.

On 27 October 1968, Nabokov wrote to Frank Taylor of McGraw-Hill to inform him that he had finished his novel: ‘My little elephant was completed, with built-in blurb, on October 16th’ (Berg). Nabokov fought to have this ‘built-in-blurb’ used on the dustjacket of the American hardback edition but its length put off McGraw-Hill. If it could not be used, Nabokov insisted that none be used, as he told Taylor in a letter of 29 December:

Here are some important desiderata. I would like the book to be dedicated ‘To Vera’. Please, no blurb (unless you wish to use my own built-in one at the end of the novel) and no biographical notes (just a picture and the titles of my American publications). (Berg)

To Nabokov’s delight, however, Weidenfeld & Nicolson did include his blurb on the dustjacket of the British edition. For Nabokov it was an all or nothing situation: he either wanted his blurb used or none at all. This is clear from his negotiations over the British paperback edition with Penguin, who sent Nabokov two alternate blurbs ahead of publication, the second of which compared Nabokov to Lawrence and Joyce. Véra responded on Nabokov’s behalf on 7 November 1969 in a letter addressed to Julia Sankey-Barker:

He hopes you will agree not to use any blurb at all except the one on the last page and a quarter of ADA, as Weidenfeld did. The passage in question begins with ‘Ardis Hall—the Ardors and Arbors of Ardis’, and you may use either all or part of it.
Please be sure that there are no misprints, especially in the last sentence ‘a misty view descried from marble steps; a doe at gaze in the ancestral park; and much, much more.’

PS. My husband asks me to add that, as you will readily see, any other blurb you add would clash with, and spoil the effect of, the one he carefully has inset. Incidentally, he loathes Lawrence. (*Berg*)

It is clear how crucial Nabokov felt the use of Van’s blurb is to the success of the novel; he would call it a ‘parody of a blurb, a built-in finale within the novel, [that] took me at least a week to compose’ (*SL* 527).

The full ‘blurb’ runs as follows:

Ardis Hall—the Ardors and Arbors of Ardis—this is the leitmotiv rippling through *Ada*, an ample and delightful chronicle, whose principal part is staged in a dream-bright America—for are not our childhood memories comparable to Vineland-born caravelles, indolently encircled by the white birds of dreams? The protagonist, a scion of one of our most illustrious and opulent families, is Dr Van Veen, son of Baron ‘Demon’ Veen, that memorable Manhattan and Reno figure. The end of an extraordinary epoch coincides with Van’s no less extraordinary boyhood. Nothing in world literature, save maybe Count Tolstoy’s reminiscences, can vie in pure joyousness and Arcadian innocence with the ‘Ardis’ part of the book. On the fabulous country estate of his art collecting uncle, Daniel Veen, an ardent childhood romance develops in a series of fascinating scenes between Van and pretty Ada, a truly unusual gamine, daughter of Marina, Daniel’s stage-struck wife. That the relationship is not simply dangerous cousinage, but possesses an aspect prohibited by law, is hinted in the very first pages.

In spite of the many intricacies of plot and psychology, the story proceeds at a spanking pace. Before we can pause to take breath and quietly survey the new surroundings into which the writer’s magic carpet has, as it were, spilled us, another attractive girl, Lucette Veen, Marina’s younger daughter, has also been swept off her feet by Van, the irresistible rake. Her tragic destiny constitutes one of the highlights of this delightful book.

The rest of Van’s story turns frankly and colourfully upon his long love-affair with Ada. It is interrupted by her marriage to an Arizonian cattle-breeder whose fabulous ancestor discovered our country. After her husband’s death our lovers are reunited. They spend their old age traveling together and dwelling in the various villas, one lovelier than another, that Van has erected all over the Western Hemisphere.

Not the least adornment of the chronicle is the delicacy of pictorial detail: a latticed gallery; a painted ceiling; a pretty plaything stranded among the forget-me-nots of a brook; butterflies and butterfly orchids in the margin of the romance; a misty view descried from marble steps; a doe at gaze in the ancestral park; and much, much more. (*A* 460–1)

The formal functions of this dense passage appear to be various. Within the context of the narrative it has the quality of epilogic summation, while at the same time operating as a parody of that very form. This final section makes a series of references to the death of Lucette: her ‘tragic destiny’ is singled out as ‘one of the highlights of this delightful book’. This has been interpreted as a prompt for the rereader to follow more closely the role of Lucette in the novel, of Van’s telling of her exclusion from his and Ada’s amours and her eventual suicide.

There is, though, an important shift in emphasis if the ‘blurb’ is also used as the blurb for Nabokov’s published book. As shown by the correspondence above, Nabokov marked out the passage for just such a purpose and Van does the same inside the narrative when he writes: ‘One can even surmise that if our time-racked, flat-lying couple ever intended to die they would die, as it were, into the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of the blurb’ (A 460). Not only does the ending serve a recursive function, sending the reader back to the beginning, it is also important in defining the first-time reader’s ‘horizon of expectation’. In Ada: The Place of Consciousness, Boyd argues that Nabokov designed Ada in such way that the reader needs to reread the text several times in order to attain a sense of understanding of the novel’s complexity and the seriousness of its ethical message. Certainly, this is a novel that directly engages with the rereader (Van even address his ‘rereader’), but Boyd’s thesis is subtly altered—and perhaps strengthened—if the ‘blurb’ is found on the cover. A first-time reader is given a framework of what is to follow but also directed to pay attention to Lucette, in a way that a reader deprived of the blurb would not. The particularly alert (re)reader may even be intrigued by the incongruous ‘pretty plaything stranded among the forget-me-nots of a brook’, listed as an example of the novel’s ‘delicacy of pictorial detail’. A sidelined Lucette will lose her doll the first time she sees Van and Ada having sex, a premature loss of innocence whose consequences will result in her eventual suicide. She, like the doll floating in the brook, ends up drowning in the sea and just as the doll floats among the forget-me-nots, the whole novel is, by Boyd’s ethical reading, a subtle imperative not to forget Lucette.

The use of parodic language in the Ada blurb (‘the story proceeds at a spanking pace’, ‘and much, much more’) could well serve to camouflage it from the first-time reader: a combination of location (dustjacket flap) and locution (the inflated rhetoric of the conventional blurb) offsetting some of the curiosities (what are ‘Vineland-born caravelles’?). The blurb therefore occupies an unstable territory: it could be read as a traditional publisher’s blurb or it could be read as Nabokov’s blurb, the rereader could recognize it as Van’s blurb, or it could be ignored entirely. What is indisputable, however, is that in editions that carried the blurb in their
peritext, Nabokov had succeeded in expanding the range of authorial control over the material book by trespassing on what had traditionally been the territory of the publisher.

COVER ART

Nabokov’s most ambitious efforts to control the paratextual material of his books were concentrated on the cover art for his books. The design of a book’s cover or dustjacket was the peritext about which the author traditionally had least control. The use of book jackets dates to the 1820s but, according to Drew and Sternberger, ‘until late in the century they had only been used as protective packaging and tended to be non-pictorial, labelled wrappers with little focus on design’ (p. 20). From the 1890s, blockings of books began to be decorated, a practice that moved to dustjackets in the early twentieth century and finally to the covers of paperbacks. The first books to consistently use cover decoration were children’s books, which were often illustrated by the same artist; Nabokov’s Russian translation of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, brought out by Gamaïun in 1923, had a cover design and illustrations by S. Zalshupin.

The exploitation of jacket design as a marketing device became more popular in the early part of the century. As Alan Powers has documented, ‘increased competition within the book trade before the First World War’ meant illustrated jackets became more widespread but it was not until the 1920s, with innovations in branding and sales techniques in the United States, that publishers began to understand the true potential of the jacket as a way of selling books (p. 7). By the middle of the twentieth century, book design in the United States had, through the ‘adaptation of European modernism’, grown from ‘prosaic illustration and straightforward lettering […] into a sophisticated integration of type and image’ (Drew and Sternberger, 20). As Powers points out, there is an element of contradiction in the idea of a jacket as a ‘selling device’ because books have a ‘built-in resistance to obsolescence’ (p. 6). Drew and Sternberger believe this was the reason that modernist art was so attractive to many American book designers in the decades after the Second World War, offering as it did ‘an interweaving of rigorous formal aesthetics and potential for creative expression with an ultimate goal of social and economic utility’ (p. 20).

Many of the designers responsible for this new aesthetic in book design were, like Nabokov, exiles from Europe. Foremost among them was Georg Salter, who revolutionized the art of book design in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s. Alongside E. R. Weiss, Salter made Berlin the hub of exciting developments in the way cover art was approached, designing dustjackets
of independent aesthetic value, as the avant-garde aesthetics of the previous decade began to filter through into mainstream culture. Salter worked on German translations of such Nabokovian favourites as Chateaubriand, Kafka, and Proust, and Nabokov would have seen Salter’s work in every Berlin bookshop. Salter was forced to leave for the United States in 1934 by the rise of National Socialism and continued to design covers in American emigration. By the 1950s, American book publishing, inspired by the likes of Salter (now going by George), Ernst Reichl (another German émigré, who had designed the cover to the 1934 Random House edition of Ulysses), W. A. Dwiggins, E. McKnight Kauffer, Alvin Lustig, and Paul Rand, was borrowing freely from abstract art to create designs for book covers. Reichl and Lustig both worked for Laughlin at New Directions, which was one of the firms to most enthusiastically embrace a modernist approach to book design. Both worked on Nabokov books: Lustig designed the 1944 cover for Nikolai Gogol; Reichl designed the 1945 cover for Three Russian Poets.

Nabokov’s arrival in the American book market coincided with this energetic new period in book design. Publishers were very much in control of how they wanted their books to look: they knew their consumers would judge by the cover. As such, Powers tells us, authorial control over cover design was traditionally limited: ‘the author may be asked for approval, but he or she is unlikely to be able to contradict the professionals’ (p. 10). As we shall see, Nabokov sought to exert his authority over cover design, demanding the right of veto, offering suggestions, and even submitting his own designs, on which he collaborated with his son Dmitri. Nabokov asked for samples of cover art to be sent to him in Montreux and he returned them with sketched suggestions for how to improve them. At the height of his fame and influence in the 1960s, Nabokov enjoyed great success in determining what went on the cover of his books. This made him somewhat exceptional, for ‘few authors have ever demanded or been allowed much choice about the images used or the design of their book jackets, and instances of deep and meaningful collaboration between artist and author are not to be expected’ (Powers, 24).

In his efforts to get the cover design he wanted, Nabokov found a receptive publisher in Jason Epstein of Doubleday, who was open to

15 For examples of Salter’s work see Drew and Sternberger, By Its Cover, 28–9; Hansen, Classic Book Jackets; Holstein, Georg Salter.
16 Powers notes a few exceptions. T. S. Eliot with Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats (1939) and Evelyn Waugh with Love Among the Ruins (1962) sketched designs for their covers while the cover of Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (1927) was designed by her sister Vanessa Bell, and published by Woolf, in partnership with her husband Leonard, for the Hogarth Press. It is also worth noting the case of George Bernard Shaw, who exercised near-total control over the way his books were produced.
Nabokov’s ideas and happy to have him collaborate on the cover of *Pnin*. Nabokov sought to meet with Epstein about the jacket design for *Pnin*, expressing anxiety in a letter of 13 September, that, after being forced to cancel a meeting that month, it would be ‘too late to discuss cover design and jacket for PNIN when we get together in New York’ (Berg). Epstein appeased Nabokov by sending him some sample sketches of a portrait of Pnin, one of which depicted Nabokov’s character holding a book and asked Nabokov if he could suggest appropriate Russian lettering.¹⁷ In his 1 October reply, Nabokov told Epstein that ‘the sketch looks like the portrait of an underpaid instructor in the English department or like a Republican’s notion of a defeated Adlai, when actually he should look like a Russian muzhik clean-shaven’ (SL 190). Nabokov goes on to issue seven instructions on how the sketch should be more accurately rendered and encloses some photographs of famous Russians as a visual aid: the shape of Pnin’s head, his glasses, his nose, his upper lip, the cheeks, the shoulders, and the tie are all carefully described. He recommends that Pnin hold a copy of *Pnin*, with the title in Cyrillic. Nabokov was extremely pleased with the resulting sketch, describing the jacket, in a letter to Epstein on 13 November, as ‘absolutely splendid—I never imagined that an illustrator could render an author’s vision so accurately’ (SL 192).

Not all publishers were as receptive as Epstein to collaborating with Nabokov on book design and he fought battle after battle with his publishers. Nabokov reacted most stridently to covers that undermined his stated aesthetics. What most frustrated him was the frequency with which illustrations slipped into inaccuracy, symbolism, and abstraction, in direct opposition to the precision of his prose style. Writing to Pyke Johnson, Jr., Epstein’s colleague at Doubleday, on 15 March 1959, Nabokov expressed his displeasure at the illustration of butterflies that was being suggested for the cover art for *Poems*:

> To stylize adequately one must have complete knowledge of the thing. I would be the laughing stock of my entomological colleagues if they happened to see these impossible hybrids. […] Now, turning to the title-page butterfly, its head is that of a small tortoise, and its pattern is that of a common Cabbage White butterfly (whereas the insect in my poem is clearly described as belonging to a group of small blue butterflies with dotted undersides), which is as meaningless in the present case as would be a picture of a tuna fish on the jacket of *Moby Dick*. I want to be quite clear and frank: I have nothing against stylization but I do object to stylized ignorance. (SL 284–5)

¹⁷ Nabokov actually pencilled the Cyrillic ‘ПНИН’ on to the letter he received from Epstein.
It is not just the mockery of his fellow lepidopterists that Nabokov feared; his work is built on a foundation of precise details and it is ‘stylized ignorance’ that he believes the especial mark of literary philistinism, the poshlust he detected in advertising, popular culture, and kitsch.

A decade later, in a 17 November 1969 letter to Oliver Caldecott of Penguin, Nabokov sought to veto a prospective cover of Ada, for a similar issue of inaccurate stylization:

Your artist’s Cyprideum looks like a ghastly vulva, and the Puss Moth caterpillar is all wrong (and, moreover, does not breed on orchids). I am emphatically against this symbolic design. I want three or four non-anatomical genuine orchids, prettily colored, garlanded around ‘A D A’. Why don’t you simply use the drawing of the three species I made for you—possibly multiplying and stylizing them (but not freudianizing those innocent blossoms)? (SL 463)

In this cover design, perceived ignorance was mixed with Freudian sexual symbolism: a toxic combination for Nabokov. Ada, as the most overtly erotic of Nabokov’s novels, engages in a sustained polemic against Freudian theories of sexuality. There are various Freudian puns on the names of Aqua’s satirized therapists: ‘Dr Froid’ and his émigré brother ‘Dr Froit’, both of ‘Vienne, Isère’, who Van believes to be one and the same man, and another ‘agent or double’ of this professor, ‘a Dr Sig Heiler whom everybody venerated as a great guy and near-genius in the usual sense of near-beer’ (pp. 28–9). The equation of Freud with Nazism (‘Dr Sig Heiler’ as a pun on Sieg Heil/Hitler) underlines the depth of Nabokov’s hostility to ‘totalitarian’ Freudian theory. Jenefer Shute has noted that the infiltration of Freudian discourse across all levels of culture means that ‘the novelist can no longer be non-Freudian, only anti-Freudian—which very position invites psychoanalytic scrutiny’ (‘Nabokov and Freud’, 413). The ‘freudianizing’ of the orchids on the cover of a novel that so explicitly attempts to satirize Freud’s ideas was evidence of the very pervasiveness of psychoanalytic theory that so repulsed Nabokov. No wonder he opted for the veto.

Nabokov wanted more than just to veto his publisher’s designs—he wanted to make the cover part of his work, to make the book part of the novel. In this regard he enjoyed some (limited) success, particularly with the 1963 Penguin edition of Invitation to a Beheading and the 1966 Panther edition of The Gift. Both were published with covers designed by Dmitri Nabokov and exhibit formal relations to the novels that

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18 Dr Froit works at Signy-Mondieu-Mondieu: the fictional Ardennes town contains ‘Sig’ and ‘Mond’ as well as the French repetition of ‘Good Lord’.
followed. This was a remarkable extension of authorial control: Nabokov was already present on the threshold of the text, having composed forewords to both these novels. Now he had collaborated on the design of the doorway.

The cover of the 1963 Penguin edition of *Invitation to a Beheading* resembled the work of a young child, evoking the childish capriciousness of the world in which Cincinnatus is trapped. Emmie, who represents Cincinnatus’s false hope of escape, is depicted outside the prison walls and her authorship of this cover is implied by the rough nature of the composition. In the novel itself, the director’s daughter, in childish hand, sketches an escape plan for Cincinnatus, which, it inevitably transpires, turns out to be no such thing. Furthermore, the most telling detail of this cover is on the far right, where the world of the novel is limned by the wings of a stage set (this detail was unfortunately cropped from later editions). Cincinnatus’s world is a sham: his jailors wear costumes and make-up and seemingly ‘real’ objects are revealed to be props. Even the weather is stage-managed. The cover then is not only thematically congruent with the novel but also provides a reading of the novel, reinforcing a specific interpretive approach. This is cover art integrated into the aesthetics of the novel, something of a victory for Nabokov over the traditionally commercial function of the peritext. In a 3 August 1963 letter to Penguin, Nabokov professed to be ‘absolutely delighted with its appearance’, and Véra followed up on 27 September to say that ‘several people who have seen the book said it had the nicest cover Penguin ever used (at least on my husband’s books)’ (*Berg*). In negotiations over the reissue of the book five years later, Heather Mansell of Penguin assured Nabokov that they had used Dmitri’s illustration on the cover.

Nabokov sought a similar effect with the cover of the 1966 Panther edition of *The Gift*. In a letter to Bud McLennan on 8 February 1966, Nabokov rejected an ‘artistically preposterous’ design of a broken butterfly and expressed his bafflement as to ‘why they are not using the subtle and intelligent sketch I sent them, with the keys on the floor of the hall’ (*SL* 384). Panther relented. Those keys are an important motif in the novel and are depicted on the floor of an entrance hall, a version of the room that awaits Zina and Fyodor at the novel’s conclusion, Zina’s mother having posted the keys through the letterbox before leaving. Once again, Nabokov is making an interpretive point in the peritext: the relation of the illustration to the novel can only be fully understood by the rereader. Also, the drawing is not as straightforward as might initially be suspected. On close inspection the mirror on the wall in the hall reflects an impossible mountain view, a neat metaphor for the power of Fyodor’s artistic imagination to transcend corporeal and geographical thresholds, in this case alluding to
Fyodor’s vivid imagining of his father’s Central Asian explorations from his Berlin bedsit. The cover draws attention to its own status: it is a threshold that depicts a threshold, a portal that contains twinned portals (the door and the mirror), a doorway into the fictional world of the novel.

These were Nabokov’s most successful exploits in trespassing on the publisher’s peritext. In doing so—indeed, in the way he involved himself so heavily in the production of his books—Nabokov’s status as author becomes enmeshed with the commercial aspects of his books. Do these covers advertise these books? Or are they an expression of anti-market cultural politics? Does his failure to veto a cover grant that cover authorial status? The complications of getting involved in his works’ peritexts can be seen in how he tried, and ultimately failed, to control the cover art of Lolita.

COVERING LOLITA

If we are to take seriously the claim that Lolita is an ethical novel—a claim convincingly made by Brian Boyd, Ellen Pifer, and Leland de la Durantaye among others—then what goes on the cover, and how complicit the author is in this decision, becomes important.19 Humbert’s motivation in writing his confession is not so much self-exoneration but the recapturing of the Lolita he has lost. Humbert rails against himself for not having photographed or filmed her, finding his language insufficient to capture her completely. All he has, he complains, is ‘words to play with’ and as a consequence can only reconstruct his Lolita one word at a time, trapped by the logic of syntax. This anatomical itemization is what Shute has called ‘the cartography of desire’ (‘So Nakedly Dressed’, 112). Shute argues that Dolores has ‘not yet constituted herself as an object of visual consumption’ and that her perceived ‘sexuality’ is Humbert’s projection (p. 112). The moment Dolores is seen outside of the eye of the beholder, when she is no longer filtered through Humbert’s solipsistic prism—such as on the cover of the book—then the way she is depicted becomes ethically problematic. Humbert writes that after first abusing her, ‘What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her and having no will, no consciousness—indeed no life of her own’ (AL 62).

One can see why, then, Nabokov insisted during his negotiations for publication that he did not want Dolores represented on the cover of *Lolita*. When Maurice Girodias published *Lolita* in 1955 in Paris, it came out with the characteristic green covers of the Olympia Press, without illustration. Three years later, when it came to the American edition, Nabokov repeatedly told Walter Minton of Putnam’s that there should be ‘no girls’ in the cover art. In a letter of 1 March 1958 Nabokov wrote:

> What about the jacket? After thinking it over, I would rather not involve butterflies. Do you think it could be possible to find today in New York an artist who would not be influenced in his work by the general cartoonesque and primitivist style jacket illustration? Who would be capable of creating a romantic, delicately drawn, non-Freudian and non-juvenile, picture for LOLITA (a dissolving remoteness, a soft American landscape, a nostalgic highway—that sort of thing)? There is one subject which I am emphatically opposed to: any kind of representation of a little girl. ([SL 250])

That emphatic opposition is repeated in a letter of 23 April after Nabokov had received some sample cover art:

> I have just received the five designs and I quite agree with you that none of them is satisfactory […]. I want pure colours, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls. If we cannot find that kind of artistic and virile painting, let us settle for an immaculate white jacket (rough texture paper instead of the usual glossy kind), with LOLITA in bold black lettering. ([SL 256])

Putnam’s did not share Nabokov’s enthusiasm for a landscape and instead opted not to use any kind of illustration. Boyd writes that on receiving an advance copy of the Putnam edition, Nabokov ‘was pleased with the book’s discreet cover—lettering only, no picture of a little girl—and Putnam’s discreet publicity’ ([SL 363]).

As *Lolita* went to the top of the bestseller list, and as the novel became ever more commercially successful, so Nabokov lost control of the para-textual Lolita. Nabokov did not have the time and energy to monitor all the different editions that came out in translation and paperback, especially after Stanley Kubrick’s 1962 film adaptation of the novel, with its iconic poster, depicting Sue Lyon in heart-shaped sunglasses enjoying a lollipop, had gained a durable iconicity.\(^{20}\)

In the novel, Dolores Haze is 12 years old when Humbert first meets her and sports a bob of ‘chestnut brown hair’. In the peritext, on the cover of

\(^{20}\) As Ellen Pifer points out in ‘Uncovering *Lolita*’, the heart-shaped sunglasses were only used in the film poster as those Lyon wears in the film ‘are entirely conventional in shape’ (p. 145).
the British, Italian, German, and Dutch paperback editions, she emerged as a late-adolescent blonde. This reinvention of Lolita is commercially driven—she becomes a more palatable, and conventional, object of sexual desire. The ethics of the novel become secondary to the imperative to sell copies. In Robert Hughes’s 1965 documentary for WTEN-13, NY, Nabokov is seen perusing a bookshelf of the various translations of *Lolita*. One of his favourites was the ‘remarkably pretty edition’ produced by Gallimard’s Livre de Poche series in 1963, which he found ‘delightful’ for the playful way it depicted a portrait of Lolita’s face on the front cover, and the back of her head on the back cover. He also praised the ‘perfectly enchanting’ Dutch first edition that has Humbert’s ominous presence in the foreground (SL 274). For the most part Nabokov despaired of the way Lolita was depicted on subsequent covers of his novel; in the letter to George Weidenfeld, written on 12 January 1959, wherein he had praised the Dutch edition, Nabokov expressed his horror at the ‘horrible young whore’ on the cover of the Swedish edition (SL 274). In the Hughes interview he was baffled but amused by the ‘extraordinary’ 1959 Turkish edition (‘I am not sure who is older’ he says as he holds a cover showing Humbert and Lolita embracing). In his afterword to the novel, Nabokov writes that pornography ‘connotes mediocrity, commercialism and certain strict rules of narration’ and the conventionality or salacity of certain designs exposed his novel to the charge of those connotations (AL 313). Publishers found it difficult to resist cashing in on the novel’s salacious reputation, even if it meant the book performing a dubious kind of self-censorship, transforming Lolita into a more acceptably desirable figure on the cover of the book.

Nabokov eventually conceded that he had lost authorial control. In a letter to Philip Oakes on 3 March 1976 about a new English edition, the year before his death, Nabokov’s resignation is clear:

> The pictures by Ovenden of that young sea-cow posing as my Lolita are, of course, preposterous, and the Academy Editions’ plan to publish them has not received my blessing. Yet there is nothing much I can do about it. Recently I was shown an advert in an American rag offering a life-size Lolita doll with ‘French and Greek apertures’. (SL 558)

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21 See for example the 1966 and 1969 Mondadori (Italy) editions and the 1969 and 1973 Corgi (UK) editions. Many more have reproduced the iconic movie-poster photograph of Sue Lyon. The less said about the 1970 Dutch Omega edition and the 1974 German Gutenberg editions the better.

22 Alan Powers illustrates the transition from discretion to titillation in *Lolita* covers in *Front Cover*, 62–3.
Lolita as an idea has entered the public imagination and, as documented in Graham Vickers’s 2008 book *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov’s Little Girl All Over Again*, was exploited in everything from pornography to Japanese gothic fashion. In 1992 17-year-old Amy Fisher shot her older lover’s wife and swiftly became known by *The New York Post* as the ‘Long Island Lolita’. Alexander Dolinin has shown that the real case of the abduction of Florence Sally Horner by Frank LaSalle in 1948 informed Nabokov’s composition of *Lolita*: through the looking glass of the ‘Lolita effect’, victim has become perpetrator. In Nabokov’s novel, Humbert exploits Dolores Haze to create his Lolita, abducting her, bullying her, raping her; the ethical challenge to the reader is not to be seduced by Humbert into ignoring that suffering. The extratextual Lolita has become mass media shorthand for a teenage murderer.

In more recent *Lolita* covers we see a move back in the other direction: while covers in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s sought to obscure or muddy the subject of child abuse through depictions of a late-adolescent or adult Lolita, recent covers have sought to push the limits of the taboo on depicting the sexuality of a young girl (and we are not just talking about Russian bootleg editions). The initial design of the Penguin fiftieth anniversary edition of the novel by art director John Gall had a pair of porcelain lips rotated through to the vertical axis. This image was released as part of the advance promotional materials for the book. It is not a design of great subtlety. When it came to actually putting the book into production, Penguin and Gall opted to rotate the lips back to the horizontal axis. The Nabokovian novel may remain under Nabokov’s aegis but the Nabokovian book has long escaped his authority. Although even the Nabokovian novel is not as impervious as he might have desired. When Everyman published *Lolita* in 1992, they decided that the extant foreword was a bit too dull and its author, John Ray, was a bit too obscure. They decided to replace it with a foreword by the English novelist Martin Amis. While Amis has the advantage of being real, Ray is of course part of the novel. The error is compounded by Amis’s introduction itself, which begins:

> Like the sweat of lust and guilt, the sweat of death trickles through *Lolita*. I wonder how many readers survive the novel without realizing that its heroine is, so to speak, dead on arrival, like her child. Their brief obituaries are tucked away in the ‘editor’s’ Foreword, in nonchalant, school-newsletter form […] (p. v)

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23 For a survey of other aspects of the *Lolita* legacy see Pifer, ‘The *Lolita* Phenomenon from Paris to Tehran’. 
Amis proceeds with a quotation from the foreword (non-existent in this edition of the work) before going on to insist that: ‘The presiding image of Lolita, so often missed by the first-time reader (I know I missed it, years ago), is adumbrated in its Foreword: Lolita in childbirth, dead, with her dead daughter’ (pp. xvi–xvii). The presiding image is certainly missed by readers of the Everyman edition, even if they have gained second-hand knowledge of the foreword’s encoded disclosure of Dolores’ death. Everyman are not alone: the mistake was repeated by Penguin in the summer of 2010 when they had to pulp their entire print run of the Modern Classics edition of Lolita after editing out Ray’s foreword. Nabokov’s efforts to exert authorial control over the book begin to blur the lines between where the novel begins and ends. What bits of the book are art? And what bits are being used to sell that art? Nabokov consciously implicated himself in this ambiguity, in the question about who has authority in the paratext.
5

Legacy

Quare habe tibi quidquid hoc libelli, qualecumque quod, o patrona virgo, plus uno maneat perenne saeclo.

(Catullus 1)

CELEBRITY

In August 1974 George Feifer, an American novelist and journalist, went to Montreux to interview Nabokov for *The Sunday Telegraph*. It was an assignment he approached with some trepidation. In the introduction to the interview he confessed that ‘[f]ew of Vladimir Nabokov’s books have moved me as much as the best critics said they should’ and that he found it difficult to see anything more than sterile aestheticism in his writing. With the work of Boris Pasternak, for example, Feifer detected ‘powerful passions’ behind the lyricism but Nabokov’s ‘exquisite prose might have been produced by some twenty-one-jeweled prose machine’. What Feifer revealed as the ‘principal cause of my nervousness’ was the suspicion that the fault lay not with Nabokov—or his prose—but rather with a deficiency in Feifer himself. This was exacerbated by Feifer’s admission that he had not read Nabokov’s ‘complete oeuvre’. The ‘crowning dreadmaker’, however, was Nabokov’s ‘attitude toward the forthcoming interview itself, which required I submit written questions and reproduce his answers verbatim’. The format, which was standard practice for an interview with Nabokov, was felt by Feifer to be a kind of journalistic ‘humiliation’ as Nabokov’s ‘conception of an ideal interview—eliminating every element of spontaneity and all semblance of actual talk to achieve a neatly paragraphed essay—was opposite to mine’. ‘I was to have no insight through random associations, no opportunity to play my thoughts against his to see when he would reach for the lob or try his dropshot,’ wrote Feifer. ‘I was going into literary Wimbledon with the moves preplanned, like some parlor version of tennis for rainy days’ (‘Two Hours’, 20).
Feifer submitted twelve questions in advance and was instructed to meet Nabokov in the bar of the hotel at 3.10 p.m.; the interview was to last two hours. A letter repeating the ‘ground rules’ was waiting for him on arrival, a reminder that ‘anything he [Nabokov] says during the actual interview may only be paraphrased, without quotation marks’ (p. 21). In order to comply with these rules, Feifer and his editors clearly chose (as others had before) to have the verbatim question and answers inserted into the flow of the piece. Feifer reports trying to probe Nabokov on issues not covered by the pre-circulated questions but is repeatedly rebuffed: ‘Beyond an impish smile and a reference to the Nixon saga as a little “contretemps,” I’m unable to draw anything specific from him about his politics. To his wife’s amusement, he professes to be confused by this story of that Mr. Watergate fellow, or whatever, who got himself into some muddle’ (p. 21). After asking a question about the effects of pollution on butterflies—a question Nabokov apparently delighted in answering—Feifer makes one last effort:

I try to use his enthusiasm to somehow get beyond the safe subjects to the heart of him. He parries and thrusts like a fencing master with a tyro, and for the nth time our conversation peters out. ‘But of course that can’t be discussed.’ ‘That’s not for publication.’ ‘We can’t go into that I’m afraid.’ (p. 24)

Only towards the end of the piece does Feifer let on that Nabokov might have hoaxed him during the interview about the existence of a ‘supposedly brilliant scholar-cum-critic’. Feifer concludes that Nabokov’s ‘determination to shape, polish, and play with everything before saying it is integral to his art and, as much as I can tell now, his personality. It is his great strength and, insofar as my judgment is valid, his weakness as a writer’ (p. 26).

Nabokov exerted one further level of control over the interview, however, as The Sunday Telegraph sent him the final manuscript, which he found ‘rather upsetting’ and returned with corrections. He demanded the excision of passages that described him as ‘hard of hearing’, that called Véra his ‘editor and typist’, and the allegation that he had called critics ‘swine’ (‘Nabokov’s Interviews’). He also wanted derogatory references to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Igor Stravinsky, and to his own biographer, Andrew Field, to be deleted. The Sunday Telegraph agreed to these changes when the piece was finally published on 14 November 1976, but just under a fortnight later, on 27 November, the piece was published unexpurgated in Saturday Review in the United States (it is this version from which I am quoting). It was one of the last interviews to be published in Nabokov’s lifetime; he died seven months later, on 2 July. The version of the piece published in Saturday Review, without Nabokov’s deletions, foregrounds the unconventional process of interviewing Nabokov as its
central theme. The front cover carried a photograph of Nabokov with the headline ‘Two Hours with Nabokov’ and inside the section led with the subheading: ‘Wherein a literary genius gives two hours of carefully structured time to an inquiring young novelist’ (p. 20). The rules of the game were clearly outlined.

Not that Feifer, or his editors, ought to have been at all surprised by Nabokov’s constraints: it was established practice by that stage, a strategy for managing his public persona. Nabokov had become a celebrity thanks to the huge success of Lolita; in her recent biography of Nabokov, Barbara Wyllie goes so far as to call the decade of 1958–68 his period of ‘world fame’ (p. 163). He appeared on the cover of Newsweek on 25 June 1962 and the following year he was nominated for an Oscar for best-adapted screenplay for Stanley Kubrick’s Lolita (he lost to Horton Foote, for his adaptation of To Kill a Mocking Bird) (Wyllie, 144). He attended glamorous parties at which he met stars like Marilyn Monroe and Billy Wilder and corresponded with Alfred Hitchcock about writing a screenplay for a Cold War thriller (SL 361–4). His success in the marketplace transformed his public profile completely. He gave his first television interview on 26 November 1958 at The Rockefeller Center Studios in New York and even at this early stage Nabokov was relying on written material for his answers rather than speaking spontaneously.1 The interview was supposed to be a three-way discussion of Lolita between Nabokov, Lionel Trilling, and an interviewer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation but Nabokov can be seen quite clearly reading from prompt cards. After the publication of Lolita in the United States, Nabokov became a prolific interviewee; Dieter Zimmer lists 118 interviews that Nabokov gave from 1958 onward, including eight radio interviews and thirteen for television (‘Nabokov’s Interviews’).

In March 1963, Alvin Toffler and his wife Heidi interviewed Nabokov in Montreux for Playboy. In the published version of the interview, Toffler asks Nabokov what he perceives to be his ‘principal failing as a writer’. ‘Lack of spontaneity,’ Nabokov replies, ‘the nuisance of parallel thoughts, second thoughts, third thoughts; inability to express myself properly in any language unless I compose every damned sentence in my bath, in my mind, at my desk.’ ‘You’re doing rather well if we may say so,’ Toffler writes. Nabokov’s response? ‘It’s an illusion’ (SO 34). This, of course, is Nabokov playing games with his own imposed interview conventions: an ironic simulated spontaneity. In fact the Tofflers met with Nabokov for

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1 This was not Nabokov’s first high-profile media appearance, however. As Leving points out in Marketing Literature Nabokov went on Mary Margaret McBride’s highly popular NBC radio show to promote Conclusive Evidence in 1951 (p. 105).
half an hour every day over the course of the week in which they stayed at the Montreux Palace Hotel. Tofler, an experienced Washington journalist, told Yuri Leving in a 2009 interview that ‘Heidi and I would formulate questions and then send them upstairs’ and admitted that he was ‘surprised’ that ‘Nabokov wanted such total control’ (Leving, Goalkeeper, 237). According to Heidi Tofler, the couple also brought tape recording equipment but ‘Véra wouldn’t allow us to make any recordings’ (quoted in Leving, Goalkeeper, 232). When Herbert Gold arrived to interview Nabokov for Paris Review in September 1966, Nabokov handed him an envelope and said: ‘Here is your interview. You may go home now’ (AY 514). Nabokov was joking—Gold ended up staying for two weeks—but there was truth in jest: Nabokov was always interviewed on his terms.

Nabokov justified his approach to interviews in the foreword to Strong Opinions, a collection of twenty-two interviews and other material published in 1973. After describing his difficulty in expressing his thoughts in spontaneous speech, Nabokov argued that under these circumstances nobody should ask me to submit to an interview if by ‘interview’ a chat between two normal human beings is implied. It has been tried at least twice in the old days, and once a recording machine was present, and when the tape was rerun and I had finished laughing, I knew that never in my life would I repeat that sort of performance. Nowadays I take every precaution to ensure a dignified beat of the mandarin’s fan. The interviewer’s questions have to be sent to me in writing, answered by me in writing, and reproduced verbatim. Such are the three absolute conditions. (SO, p. xi)

The interviews republished in Strong Opinions were carefully edited by Nabokov and purged of all descriptive material—what Nabokov called ‘the floating décor’—so that all that remained was the ‘basic substance’. Nabokov ensured he eliminated ‘every element of spontaneity, all semblance of actual talk’ (SO, p. xiii). This move to decontextualize his interviews was of a piece with his autonomous aesthetics, an assertion of authorial control over any extratextual material. In this way Nabokov’s scripted answers are bound into one volume and included in the authorial canon (and by the same token, those not included are judged dubious). The interviews included in Strong Opinions have been granted the status of official epitext, just as the forewords to his translated novels are granted the status of official peritext. In fact, the first interview in the collection, which is conducted by an anonymous interviewer, is seemingly invented by Nabokov himself. Galya Diment argues convincingly that it ‘strongly suggests a Nabokovian hoax’ (pp. 686–7).

Through these two textual forums—forewords and interviews—Nabokov carefully constructed a public persona. This patrician projection
of his authorial self has had a powerful shaping effect on the reception of Nabokov’s work. Scholars in the field have given this public persona different names to allow them to differentiate it from Nabokov the novelist, or even Nabokov the private individual. In *The Magician’s Doubts* Michael Wood called this the ‘mandarin’ Nabokov and Siggy Frank sees in ‘VN’ a kind of authorial theatricality, another performance, as he enters ‘a space somewhere between reality and fiction where identity is both empirical and enacted’ (pp. 22; 192). Blackwell also sees a theatrical element to Nabokov’s self-presentation in this period, an attempt to ‘refine and present a persona’ that ‘amounted to a collection of principled positions—some deeply held, some more or less performed—that could be dramatized and verbalized in highly entertaining ways’ (‘Nabokov and his Industry’, 234). Will Norman, meanwhile, has argued that this construction of a ‘Swiss Nabokov’ was a strategic component of the writer’s retreat from the tumult of American domestic politics of the Cold War period (*Nabokov, History*, 130).

Why did Nabokov want to engage with a larger public through this persona? One of the answers to this question lies in the way he conceived of authorship’s relationship with posterity. When, in a 1969 interview with Allene Talmey of *Vogue*, he was challenged about his willingness to be interviewed, he replied:

Why not? Of course, in a strict sense a poet, a novelist, is not a public figure, not an exotic potentate, not an international lover, not a person one would be proud to call Jim. I can quite understand people wanting to know my writings, but I cannot sympathize with anybody wanting to know me. As a human specimen, I present no particular fascination. My habits are simple, my tastes banal. I would not exchange my favorite fare (bacon and eggs, beer) for the most misspelt menu in the world. I irritate some of my best friends by the relish with which I list things I hate—night clubs, yachts, circuses, pornographic shows, the soulful eyes of naked men with lots of Guevara hair in lots of places. It may seem odd that such a modest and unassuming person as I should not disapprove of the widespread practice of self-description. [...] I do not believe that speaking about myself can encourage the sale of my books. What I really like about the better kind of public colloquy is the opportunity it affords me to construct in the presence of my audience the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether displeasing personality. (*SO* 157–8)

Nabokov is careful to decouple his declared motives from the demands of the marketplace and, in an important sense, his public profile was *the result* of market success, rather than the cause: Nabokov was famous because he was the author of a controversial bestseller.

This was a period in which consciously literary (and even consciously modernist) writing sold well, and, thanks to the rise of new media—
television especially—the authors of these books became celebrities. To many of these writers, their public profile became an essential element of their authorial self-fashioning. Truman Capote and Norman Mailer both used their fame to fictionalize their own identity, becoming as celebrated for their lives as their work, blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction (this was true, also, for many of the Beat writers). Writing in the long shadow of Hemingway, novelists like William Styron, James Jones, and Saul Bellow understood public renown to be an integral aspect of the quest to become a great American novelist, a position that, in various complicated ways, they all came to reject in later life. Others, like Mary McCarthy, James Baldwin, and Gore Vidal (and Mailer), translated their fame as novelists into their work as public intellectuals. For others, though, literary celebrity, and the pressure of public expectation that accompanied it, appeared to inhibit their capacity for literary production. Ralph Ellison never completed the follow-up novel to *Invisible Man* (1952) and Harper Lee did not publish *Go Set a Watchman*, her ‘sequel’ to her 1961 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, until 2015, and then not without controversy over whether she could be judged fit to have made that decision. Other writers were inhibited in other ways: after the success of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), J. D. Salinger became reclusive while Thomas Pynchon, who published *V* in 1963, rejected any kind of extratextual public profile outside of some occasional journalistic pieces. This withdrawal was just as much an act of authorial self-fashioning as Mailer’s exploitation of his fame for his own ends. Literary celebrity was used to accrue symbolic capital and to jostle for position in the field and Nabokov was no exception.

Nabokov exploited his celebrity as an opportunity to ‘construct’ a new fiction: the ‘plausible and not altogether displeasing personality’ of what we might call VN. This was, as with Salinger and Pynchon, a form of withdrawal—it is interesting that in the above quotation he talked about himself almost exclusively in negations, what he did not like—as Nabokov concealed his private self in a Swiss hotel. Instead of leaving a public vacuum (itself a provocative act) Nabokov exploited this space to deliver a carefully controlled performance. This performance (as VN) is a late modernist twist on the idea of high modernist impersonality, the idea of authorial discretion that had its roots in the aesthetics of Flaubert. In an 1859 letter to Ernest Feydeau, Flaubert responded to a request from a journalist friend of Feydeau for biographical information by declaring:

*Je n’ai aucune biographie. [ . . . ] On ne peut plus vivre maintenant! du moment qu’on est artiste, il faut que messieurs les épiciers, vérificateurs d’entregistrement, commis de la douane, bottiers en chambre et autres s’amusent sur votre
In his lecture on Dickens’s *Bleak House* Nabokov defined Flaubert’s conception of the authorial self for his students as follows:

Gustave Flaubert’s ideal of a writer of fiction was vividly expressed when he remarked that, like God in His world, so the author in his book should be nowhere and everywhere, invisible and omnipresent [ . . . ] But even in such works where the author is ideally unobtrusive, he remains diffused through the book so that his very absence becomes a kind of radiant presence. As the French say, *il brille par son absence*—‘he shines by his absence.’ (*LL* 97)

This omnipresent diffusion of the author in his work became the modernist ideal of presence-in-absence.

The ideal of modernist impersonality was problematized when the modernist author became a celebrity, the subject of important recent scholarship by Loren Glass, Jonathan Goldman, and Aaron Jaffe. There is a paradox at the heart of the modernist idea of impersonality, in that those judged to have executed it most successfully became celebrated ‘personalities’ off the page:

T. S. Eliot no sooner claimed that poetry should be an ‘escape from personality’ than he became the object of an international personality cult, eventually appearing on the cover of *Time*. James Joyce could affirm that the author sat invisible, ‘paring his fingernails’ behind the text; but he nevertheless became at least as well known as he was well read, particularly after the censorship of *Ulysses*. (Glass, 5)

Joyce, too, made the cover of *Time*, in 1934. Goldman points out that what his own work has in common with that of Glass and Jaffe is an understanding that there is a ‘correlation between celebrity and modernist authorial self-fashioning’ (p. 6). In *Authors, Inc.*, Glass, too, argues that there are ‘intimate relations between modernist modes of self-fashioning and mass cultural models of fame’ and that celebrity creates a ‘new public subject irreducible to author or audience’ (pp. 4, 2). The creation of this

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2 ‘I have no biography [ . . . ] One cannot live any more! Once one becomes an artist, the gentlemen grocers, accountants, custom house officials, small-time bootmakers and others have fun on your account! There are people who need to be informed whether you are brown-haired or blond, facetious or melancholy, old or young, inclined to drinking or an amateur harmonica player. I think, on the contrary, that the writer must leave behind only his works. His life means little.’ (My translation, with generous help from Monica Monalescu.)
'subject' necessitates a loss of control, as celebrity, in Goldman’s words, ‘makes the self contingent’ (p. 1). In this regard Glass finds useful P. David Marshall’s definition of this subject as a ‘celebrity-function’, a concept that borrows from Foucault’s idea of the ‘author-function’.

It was Nabokov’s strategy to counter this loss of control by creating, in VN, a rival ‘author-function’, to try to avoid the contingent status of the self in celebrity while retaining the ability to jostle for position in the cultural field. Goldman writes of Joyce, in a way that is applicable to Nabokov, that by ‘establishing the author as both a function of the writing and the means of decoding it, Joyce enacts a fantasy of a complete and bounded subjectivity, uncontaminated by and impermeable to the outside world’ (p. 57). Nabokov’s strategy was to cultivate an extratextual authorial presence whose own texts (interviews and forewords) were part of the larger aesthetic project of the fiction, a presence that helped one read or decode those fictions. There are analogies here with Mailer, a writer Nabokov found thoroughly obnoxious. In *Advertisements for Myself*, which was published the year after *Lolita* by the same publisher (Putnam’s), Glass argues that Mailer ‘invented a public subject as both sword and shield, as a way to enter the mass cultural arena without being engulfed by it’ (p. 27). In creating VN, Nabokov engaged in a similar project to Mailer, even if they differed significantly in aesthetics, politics, and (especially) lifestyle. Mailer embraced his fame while Nabokov sought to keep it at a careful, safe distance, but both saw in it an authorial pay-off.

Unlike Mailer, Nabokov’s public persona was concerned with eliding the day-to-day events of his life—Nabokov frequently claimed to live a boring routine existence—and focused instead on aesthetic judgements and extratextual commentary on his own works. Nabokov used the public space afforded him to assert his place in the hierarchies of the cultural field and cultivate a specific aesthetics of reception in his public.³ Flaubert’s insistence that the ‘artist must so arrange things that posterity will not believe he ever lived’ resonated with Nabokov as it did with the writers of high modernism, especially Proust, Joyce, and Eliot (quoted in Wood, *Magician’s Doubts*, 11). Nabokov shared both Proust’s opinion that the ‘writer’s true self is manifested in his books alone’ and also his opposition to biographical criticism as expressed in the posthumous collection *Contre

³ Nabokov’s criticism of other writers in his interviews are legendary: James (‘I really dislike him intensely’), Camus (‘awful’), Sartre (‘more awful’), Dostoevsky (‘mediocre’), Galsworthy, Tagore, Dreiser, Rolland, Gorky (‘formidable mediocrities’), Rilke and Mann (‘dwarfs or plaster saints’), Faulkner (‘corn-cobby’), T. S. Eliot (‘not quite first-rate’), Pound (‘definitely second-rate’), Kazantzakis, Lorca, Lawrence, Wolfe (‘puffed up’ and ‘second-rate’), Hemingway and Conrad (‘writers of books for boys’), Pasternak (‘Emily Dickinson in trousers’) and, of course, Freud (‘medieval’).
Sainte-Beuve (Marcel Proust on Art and Literature, 106). Faulkner (another writer whose work Nabokov did not care for) inherited this attitude to biography from Flaubert and Proust and the result was a similar conception of authorial posterity to that held by Nabokov:

It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books; I wish I had enough sense to see ahead thirty years ago and, like some of the Elizabethans, not signed them. It is my aim, and every effort bent, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: He made the books and he died. (Faulkner, Selected Letters, 285)

One can see this desire to leave ‘no refuse save the printed books’ expressed in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. In a novel that explicitly engages with modernist ideas of authorial self-effacement and impersonality, we find V. trying to write a biography of his eponymous brother. V.’s task is severely hampered by his having followed Sebastian’s instructions to ‘burn certain of his papers’, something he does with filial loyalty:

It [the instruction] was so obscurely worded that at first I thought it might refer to rough drafts or discarded manuscripts, but I soon found out that, except for a few odd pages dispersed among other papers, he himself had destroyed them long ago, for he belonged to that rare type of writer who knows that nothing ought to remain except the perfect achievement: the printed book; that its actual existence is inconsistent with that of its spectre, the uncouth manuscript flaunting its imperfections like a revengeful ghost carrying its own head under its arm; and that for this reason the litter of the workshop, no matter its sentimental or commercial value, must never subsist. (RLSK 30)

As it transpires, what V. is instructed to destroy are ‘two bundles of letters on which Sebastian had scribbled “to be destroyed”’; V. ‘struggled with the temptation to examine closer both bundles’ before ‘the better man won’ (RLSK 32). Deprived of these letters, V. uses Sebastian’s published books as a way of reconstructing his life. Sebastian’s oeuvre is fully described during the course of the novel, comprising as it does The Prismatic Bezel (1925), Success (1927), Lost Property (1930), The Funny Mountain (1932), and The Doubtful Asphodel (1935). V. refers extensively to these books and, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that there are strange correspondences between the plots of these novels and the biography

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4 It is not confirmed that Lost Property is actually published on this date but Sebastian begins writing it in 1929.

5 This collection includes the earlier short story collections Albinos in Black and The Back of the Moon.
V. is writing. The life is being subtly reconstructed from the books, not from ‘the litter of the workshop’: Flaubert, Proust, and Faulkner’s fantasy of authorial posterity is enacted within the fictional world of the Nabokovian novel.

POSTERITY

Preserving a bookshelf was, in Nabokov’s case, not only motivated by the commitment to an aesthetic position: it was also an act of recuperation and preservation. When Nabokov wrote *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* his own legacy appeared in ruins. He began writing the novel in December 1938 and completed it while working out of the bathroom of a rented Paris flat ‘using a suitcase over the bidet as a desk’ (*AY* 496). His Russian works were banned in the Soviet Union and the Nazis had all but destroyed the Russian emigration in Germany (and were closing on Paris as Nabokov worked on his manuscript). With his Russian readership scattered by the forces of history, Nabokov saw writing in English as the only possibility of creating a viable future for himself as a novelist. Thomas Karshan has pointed out that when Nabokov moved to Paris in 1937, he ‘entered a period of artistic (as well as personal) crisis [. . . ] his mother died, he had an affair, considered leaving his wife, and contemplated suicide’ (‘Nabokov’s Transition’, 246). This crisis was intensified by the sense that his legacy was in jeopardy. He had spent the previous two decades living hand-to-mouth, finding time to write when he could, and had published nine novels, a collection of short stories, and two collections of poetry. The future of those books appeared bleak.

The unstable conditions of the emigration heightened the importance that deferred reception played in constructing literary value. This idea grew out of a Romantic poetics that figured posterity as the only genuine judge of artistic talent. Andrew Bennett writes that in the eighteenth century artistic posterity ‘begins to be figured as a determining force in cultural production’ as the identity of the artist is ‘transformed and transliterated’ and survives by being ‘disseminated in the endless acts of reading’. This practice, argues Bennett, is ‘most clearly and most thoroughly theorised and practised’ in Romanticism, in which what mattered was ‘textual survival, contemporary neglect, and the redemptive possibilities of a posthumous life’ (pp. 2, 17). The Acmeist poet Osip Mandelstam (whose work Nabokov admired and who was, like Nabokov, a graduate of the Tenishev school) writes in his 1913 essay ‘About an Interlocutor’, that ‘poetry as a whole is always directed at a more or less distant, unknown addressee, in whose existence the poet may not doubt without doubting
himself’ (p. 64). This attitude toward posterity might have its roots in the inherited aesthetic conventions of Romanticism and Modernism but became an existential working condition for writers of both émigré and dissident literature.

From his earliest poetry, Nabokov’s aesthetic outlook was shaped by this sense of reception in a distant futurity. In the Crimea in 1919, with the Russian Civil War raging, Nabokov composed the short poem ‘I Still Keep Mute’, which expressed a confidence in his future achievement:

I still keep mute—and in the hush grow strong.
The far-off crests of future works, amidst
the shadows of my soul are still concealed
like mountaintops in pre-auroral mist. (PP 23)

In this youthful poetry, Nabokov expressed a serene confidence in the future validation of his work. By the time he was writing in the emigration in Germany, and exile was acquiring a sense of permanence, the idea that he was writing for the eyes and ears of the future became more fully developed. In the short story ‘A Letter That Never Reached Russia’ (published in January 1925), an émigré writes to a lover left behind in Russia of his life in Berlin. The story concludes:

The centuries will roll by, and schoolboys will yawn over the history of our upheavals; everything will pass, but my happiness, dear, my happiness will remain, in the moist reflection of a streetlamp, in the cautious bend of stone steps that descend into the canal’s black waters, in the smiles of a dancing couple, in everything with which God so generously surrounds human loneliness. (S 140)

This optimism is complicated by the story’s title and the disclosure that the letter never found its addressee. The implication in this story (and the way it is framed) is that the material means of transmission may be vulnerable and contingent but the poetic way of seeing the world is permanent.

In ‘A Guide to Berlin’ (written and published in December 1925), the narrator observes in poetically precise detail the everyday life of the streets of the city, trying to visualize them as subjects for future recollection:

I think that here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will

6 This poem is echoed in The Gift, when, in one of the imagined dialogue sequences, Koncheyev calls Fyodor’s poems ‘the models of your future novels’ (G 71).
become exquisite and festive in its own right: the times when a man who might put on the most ordinary jacket of today will be dressed up for an elegant masquerade. (S 157)

A baffled friend of the narrator asks him what he sees while looking at a child watching the goings on in the pub in which they are sitting. The narrator does not reply, instead asking the reader, rhetorically, ‘How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody’s future recollection?’ (S 160). This was a recurring creative motif: in the The Gift Fyodor collects what he calls ‘future memories’, and in ‘Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible’, published in 1937, Nabokov described the sensation of becoming ‘time’s accomplice’ while watching a child store away a ‘future recollection’ (G 55; PRP 41).

While the idea of ‘future recollection’ was for Nabokov a way of estranging reality—analogous to the Russian Formalist’s ostranenie—it was also an essential condition of a writer exiled from his homeland. In the 1929 poem ‘The Muse’, a poet-dreamer sees his manuscript pages on display in a museum case: ‘in my dream the page was under glass, | immortal, all zigzagged with my corrections’ (PP 57). The confidence of the poet of ‘I Still Keep Mute’ and the ‘The Muse’ can be read as an act of authorial defiance, a Romantic faith in poetic destiny despite the socio-historical conditions acting against him.

As the emigration crumbled and Stalin tightened his lethal grip on Soviet culture, the confidence of Nabokov’s lyric voice is shaken. Nabokov’s doubts about the security of his legacy are most explicitly confronted in the long Russian poem ‘Fame’, composed in 1942 when he was no longer the feted young writer of the Russian emigration but one of many European émigrés trying to make their mark in the United States. The poet is confronted by a voice that taunts him, predicting a bleak posterity for his work: “Your poor books,” he breezily said, “will finish | by hopelessly fading in exile” (PP 107). The poet, though, tries to rise above the goading voice, insisting on his private happiness and taking solace in a transcendental ‘secret’, something about which he ‘must not be overexplicit’ (PP 111). The confidence of the early poetry in its future success has been replaced by a poet figure forced to acknowledge that his

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7 Post-Lolita Nabokov finds cause for a more optimistic prediction about his future reception in Russia. In the poem ‘What Is the Evil Deed’, composed in San Remo in 1959, Nabokov imagines a future Russia in which a statue has been raised in his honour:

Amusing, though, that at the last indention,
despite proofreaders and my age’s ban,
a Russian branch’s shadow shall be playing
upon the marble of my hand. (PP 147)
legacy is not as secure as he might hope and that his only sure consolation can be found in a private, metaphysical secret. Abjuring ‘readers, and body, and glory’ the poet insists that ‘A book’s death can’t affect me since even the break | between me and my land is a trifle’ (PP 111). The poet is self-reliant even if his books may die, forgotten.

Without the nourishment of Russian soil, or even Russian readers, the antagonizing voice in ‘Fame’ claims that the work of Sirin will perish:

No, never will anyone in the great spaces  
make mention of even one page of your work;  
the now savage will dwell in his savage ignorance,  
friends of steppes won’t forget their steppes for your sake. (PP 109)

As Nabokov points out in his notes to ‘Fame’ in Poems and Problems, published in 1969, the last two lines of the quatrain refer to the third stanza of Pushkin’s ‘Exegi monumentum’, the most famous poem about literary legacy in the Russian language. Boyd calls ‘Fame’ a ‘bleak reversal of the exegi monumentum tradition’ and Nabokov was anxious about his literary legacy while he was composing it (AY 42). In the same year that he composed ‘Fame’, he was commissioned by James Laughlin to bring out a collection of translations of Russian verse for New Directions and ‘Exegi monumentum’ was among them. In the poem, Pushkin ostensibly proclaims his poetic immortality—‘Within my song, | safe from the worm, my spirit will survive, | and my sublunar fame will dwell as long | as there is one last bard alive’ (TRP 5)—but Nabokov made it clear in his notes to Eugene Onegin that it was more complicated a poem than that, involving a ‘stanza by stanza’ parody of Derzhavin’s 1796 poem of the same title, itself an imitation of Horace. In these notes, Nabokov wrote that the first part of the poem should be printed within quotation marks while ‘[t]he last quatrain is the artist’s own grave voice repudiating the mimicked boast. His last line, although ostensibly referring to reviewers, slyly implies that only fools proclaim their immortality’ (EO II. i. 310). Nabokov’s allusion to Pushkin’s poem in ‘Fame’ was a means of expressing doubts about his artistic immortality—and refuting his more naive youthful certainties—while also textually connecting himself to the most canonical writer of the Russian tradition, a writer who had flourished even in exile.

In ‘The Death of the Book à la russe’ Clare Cavanagh points out that the claims made by Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida about the death of the author and the death of the book ‘can retain their purely metaphorical status only in a society that has long since lost the habit of literally destroying writers and texts for their verbal crimes against the state’ (p. 111). For dissident writers within the Soviet Union, the death of the
book was literally enacted: Anna Akhmatova composed what she called ‘burnt notebook’ poetry and ‘poems written for the ashtray’ (quoted in Cavanagh, 118). As Cavanagh writes,

[...] for both Akhmatova and Mandelstam, their civic authority is underwritten by their perishability and the perishability of their works. It is precisely because the poets and their poems are subject to literal, physical death that they are authorized to speak for the dead and dying victims of a nation under siege by its own rulers. (p. 118)

Nabokov was not a dissident and did not seek this kind of civic authority, but he was invested in the preservation of his own books, and of the Russian literary tradition out of which they had developed, a tradition that was being assailed by state-dictated Socialist Realism in his homeland. Nabokov may not have run the personal risks of Mandelstam and Akhmatova (and both suffered brutally as a result of their status as non-conformist writers) but his books, his Russian books, existed in a similarly precarious relation to posterity. It is little wonder then that once Nabokov found success and celebrity in the American literary marketplace, he sought to exploit his new position in the cultural field to excavate and rescue his Russian books for posterity.

THE COLLECTED EDITION

One of the most important ways Nabokov sought to shape the posterity of his work was to cultivate it as a coherent, unified oeuvre. He pursued his goal strategically through the epitextual rhetoric of his performances as VN: as we have seen, one of Feifer’s chief anxieties ahead of interviewing Nabokov was not having read all his books, an anxiety no doubt compounded by Nabokov’s answer to one of Feifer’s pre-submitted questions. He had asked Nabokov if his ‘sweet temperament’ was ‘dependent on isolating yourself from the likes of me’. In response Nabokov chastised Feifer for mixing up reviewers and interviewers in his question before disclosing that, ‘lately I have prepared a kind of descending scale to grade critics from A-plus to D-minus’. To qualify for an A+ a reviewer must have ‘read and reread all of my previous novels; if the reviewer feels a vague repulsion for the work, it does not affect his grade’. The reviewer who has ‘read almost all of my books’ receives a ‘plain A’ while knowledge of ‘everything except The Gift, Pale Fire and Ada’ is worth only a B-. The grading scale continues to descend with the reviewer’s presumed ignorance of Nabokov’s corpus. The reviewer seeking the master’s approval is left in no doubt about what his task is: to read, and preferably reread, all of
Nabokov’s works. By 1974, when the Feifer interview took place, Nabokov’s oeuvre was well formed. He published his last complete novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, that year while *Glory*, the last of his Russian novels to be translated, had been published in 1971. He published just two more books in the United States before his death in 1977: the story collections *Tyrants Destroyed* (1975) and *Details of a Sunset* (1976).

This epiphenomenal strategy for shaping his oeuvre was complemented by a desire to bring the material books into coherent relation with each other through the publication of the English and Russian works in a uniform collected edition. Andrew Nash argues that authors can never have complete control over their own reputations, but certain actions they may take can be seen as part of an attempt to try and shape the way posterity will view their lives and works. The construction of a collected edition is only one of many possible actions—the depositing or destruction of letters and manuscripts, the authorization of biographies or the writing of an autobiography might be others. (Introduction, 2)\(^8\)

This history of the writer collecting his or her own work (as opposed to the formation of a posthumous collected edition) reached its zenith in the nineteenth century. Changes in copyright legislation gave authors greater control over the production of their own work and, as Nash argues, the publishing of a collected edition, a kind of auto-consecration, was viewed as ‘the ultimate embodiment of their artistic endeavours’ (Introduction, 4).\(^9\) The process of putting together such an edition was a way for the author to revise or edit his or her earlier work to conform with the later material and to make the life’s work appear fully integrated. Influential in this regard was Mallarmé, who, in 1888, began ‘to publish lists of his “authorized” works and insert them in his published books under the rubric “From the Same Author”’ (Arnar, 53). Mallarmé appended a note to the bottom of these lists that declared the ‘editions designated above […] ‘the only ones that conform to the will of the Author and produced under his care’. Arnar notes they were also ranked by order of perceived importance (pp. 53–4).

The practice of collecting, editing, and revising one’s work finds its fullest expression in Henry James’s ambitious late-career project to revise his complete works, the famous New York Edition. In 1905 James

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\(^8\) As Michael Millgate points out, writers must also enjoy ‘literary fame, economic security, personal longevity, and continued physical and mental well-being [to be] granted the opportunity not only to reappraise their own past works and deeds but actively to enforce such a reappraisal and seek to ensure its continuation beyond their own lifetimes’ (p. 3).

\(^9\) While Nash tells us the late nineteenth century represented the ‘golden age of the form’, the practice of collecting one’s own work can be traced back through Alexander Pope (whose *Works* were published in 1717, when he was only 29) to Ben Jonson (Introduction, 7).
decided to collect his work in one authoritative edition, modelled on those of Robert Louis Stevenson and George Meredith, which would allow him to revise his works, write a preface for each, and ‘quietly disown a few things’ (quoted in Horne, 5). The edition was partly conceived as a means of driving income and while James became bitter about its failure in that respect, he also became disenchanted with the failure of critics to understand the New York Edition as an aesthetic project:

The Edition is from that point of view really a monument (like Ozymandias) which has never had the least intelligent critical justice done it—any sort of critical attention at all paid it—& the artistic problem involved in my scheme was a deep & exquisite one, & moreover was, as I hold, very effectively solved. (James, 405)

James’s project was one of consolidation: as Simon Gatrell, with reference to James and Thomas Hardy, has argued, it provided ‘an opportunity eagerly seized to revisit early work and [...] bring it into harmony with the later’ (p. 83).

For Nabokov, a collected edition would allow him to bring back into the light those Russian works that had been left to languish by the break-up of the Russian emigration in Europe and to bring these works into alignment with his late-career aesthetics. Between 1959 and 1971, he translated and revised the Russian novels he had written in the emigration. Like James this was a systematic process and like James it was also an act of reframing: each translation was given a preface in which Nabokov provided a reading of the work in question. If the mature James occupied the persona of the Master as he reworked his earlier novels, then Nabokov occupied that of VN as he performed his own revision. During this period John Updike observed that Nabokov’s oeuvre was ‘growing at both ends’ and that it gave ‘the happy impression of [...] a continuous task carried forward variously, of a solid personality, of a plentitude of gifts exploited knowingly’ (Assorted Prose, 248). The solid personality of VN was the guiding principle in this work. The difference between the New York Edition and Nabokov’s translating and reframing

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10 In Testaments Betrayed Milan Kundera writes about a similar ambition held by Stravinsky: ‘Towards the end of his life, Stravinsky decided to bring his whole oeuvre together in a great recorded edition of his own performances, as pianist or conductor, so as to establish an authorized sonic version of all his music’ (p. 241).

11 The one exception is Laughter in the Dark, which he had translated in 1938 and did not revise. He had also previously worked on the translation of Despair in 1937 but revised that translation in 1965.

12 Alexander Dolinin contends that, in doing so, Nabokov denigrated the work of his younger self and that ‘the Russian writer Sirin fell victim to the tricky mythmaking and playacting Nabokov indulged in during his later years’ (‘Nabokov as a Russian Writer’, 53).
of his Russian novels is that Nabokov was being forced to work with different publishers. The uniform presentation of James’s books was the physical embodiment of his consolidating project. It is understandable, then, why Nabokov was enthused by the opportunity to do something similar to the New York Edition when it was proposed by McGraw-Hill.

In 28 February 1967, Peter Kemeny of McGraw-Hill wrote to Nabokov to try to persuade him to switch to them from Putnam’s as his American hardback publisher:

I speak for all of our editors, and indeed for the management of the firm, when I say that there is no writer alive we would more proudly publish. I do not think it extravagant to say that we regard you as the greatest writer of fiction at work today, the most profound and inventive master of the English language, the novelist whose work one must be most convinced will endure. I and my colleagues ask you to allow the most successful and powerful book publisher in America to place its resources in your service. We would design, print, promote and distribute your books as they should be—the work of the greatest living writer of our day. (Berg)

Kemeny then followed up this letter on 14 March with the suggestion that the publisher could bring out a definitive collected edition of Nabokov’s work: ‘We would further hope that, in time, it may be possible to publish in America all the works of Vladimir Nabokov under our imprint, in a handsomely produced uniform edition’ (Berg). In July McGraw-Hill agreed to pay a then-extraordinary advance of $250,000 for eleven books, with generous royalty agreements, a deal in which Nabokov also gained firm control of the way his books were produced (AY 525). The deal was formalized at a meeting with Ed Booher and Frank Taylor in December 1967. The following month Booher proposed to mark the publication of Nabokov’s first book with McGraw-Hill (the translation into English of King, Queen, Knave) with the plan to simultaneously republish the Russian original Korol, dama, varet. Boyd observes that:

In the twenty years between Nabokov’s switching to English in 1938 and the American publication of Lolita he had had to take his first four English novels from publisher to publisher, and to abandon altogether the attempt to

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13 In Marketing Literature, Leving points out that this deal was packed full of special provisions which were ‘more in line with the symbolic capital [Nabokov] had accrued through his own self-promotion and branding efforts. These provisions included a royalty of 17½% of royalties on all copies of the publisher’s regular edition. For paperbacks they proposed Nabokov receiving ‘65 percent of the first $10,000 of such income, 70 percent of the next $5,000, 75 percent of the next $10,000, and finally 80 percent on all such income over $25,000 derived from each title’ (Leving and White, 109).
have his Russian novels translated, let alone republished in the unprofitable Russian. How different were things now! (AY 530)

Few twentieth-century novelists collected their work during their lifetime (Graham Greene and Joyce Cary being notable exceptions) so it is understandable why the distinction appealed to Nabokov, harking back as it did to the way nineteenth-century novelists had been consecrated and canonized.

Michael Millgate writes that ‘[f]or English and American writers of the last two centuries the supreme model of career closure—and, indeed, of noble dying—has been Sir Walter Scott’ (p. 1). In the last years of his life Scott collaborated on the assembly of his collected works, the so-called *magnum opus* edition. Like Scott, Nabokov was in a position to grant his work a sense of completion, all the more desired because of the disarray into which his work had been cast at mid-century. Jane Millgate has written that Scott’s formal gathering up of his career’s work was a conscious act of completion and that ‘the concrete expression of that completeness is […] a shelf filled with books’ (p. 114). As it transpired, Nabokov never had the opportunity to collect his works in this manner. Having fulfilled his first contract with McGraw-Hill, Nabokov signed a new six-book four-year deal with the firm in April 1974, which was to include *Look at the Harlequins!*, the novel after that, a new volume of translated stories, a volume of his plays, his lectures, and a volume of translations of Russian nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry (AY 643). In total, McGraw-Hill published twelve Nabokov books in hardback (thirteen if one counts the Russian *King, Queen, Knave*) but did not go on to publish a collected edition.14 To this day there is no uniform collected edition of Nabokov’s whole oeuvre in English, even if all of his novels remain in print.15

If Nabokov was denied the opportunity to collect his books in a materially coherent form, in his late work he was seeking to unify his oeuvre through formal strategies. Nabokov was determined to ensure that his work be understood as constituting what Vladimir Alexandrov has called a ‘macrotext’ (p. 12). So much of his work was published in such a concentrated period—between the publication of *Lolita* in 1958 and his death in 1977 Nabokov published twenty-five books in the United

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14 *King, Queen, Knave; Ada; Mary; Poems and Problems; Glory; Transparent Things; A Russian Beauty; Strong Opinions; Lolita: A Screenplay; Look at the Harlequins; Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories; Details of a Sunset and Other Stories.*

15 The closest to a collected edition is the authoritative Library of America edition of the work he wrote in English, edited by Brian Boyd in three volumes: *Novels and Memoirs 1941–51; Novels 1955–62; Novels 1969–74.*
States—that there were certain consequences for the way the work was projected. Unlike the author of the Russian books (and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*), the author of the *oeuvre* (that is, VN) was one operating in conditions of serenity, stability, and financial security. Nabokov had realized in physical terms (the Montreux Palace Hotel) what he had argued for in his aesthetics (the Ivory Tower): as near an ahistorical, asocial locus of composition as possible. The public persona he created in this period became the gravitational centre of his *oeuvre*, exerting centripetal force on the works. The author-persona became the context for the work, not the historical moment in which they were written or published. In this regard, much of Nabokov’s work was essentially a product of the 1960s, but not the 1960s of student rebellion, Civil Rights, the sexual revolution, and counter-cultural movements, rather the Swiss 1960s. There were no protests or music festivals on the banks of Lake Geneva.

In terms of consolidating the *oeuvre*, the most important formal strategy deployed by Nabokov as author was an increase in autointertextual allusion. The requirements of an A+ reviewer—having read, or better reread all of Nabokov’s work—also became a requirement of the reader of late Nabokovian work, particularly *Look at the Harlequins!*, his last completed novel. When it was published in 1974 it met with what D. Barton Johnson indulgently calls ‘mixed’ reviews, conceding that ‘the consensus was that the book was narcissistic, hermetic and so laden with arcane references to Nabokov’s earlier work that only Nabokov buffs could make sense of it’ (*Look at the Harlequins!*, 331). It was a finalist for the National Book Award (as had been *Pnin, Lolita, Pale Fire, Transparent Things; Tyrants Destroyed* was a finalist in 1976) but sold poorly. Where *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* were engaged with a recognizable social reality (the American suburbs; the American campus), *Look at the Harlequins!* was a development of the self-referential aspects of *Ada*: it was a book not just about books, but about Nabokov’s books.

From the opening list of ‘other works by the narrator’ it is clear that this novel serves as an allegorical coda to the rest of Nabokov’s fiction, a roman-à-clef for Nabokov’s life and work. As such, *Look at the Harlequins!* becomes a kind of autointertextual glue, binding the *oeuvre* together while playing with the idea of just what might be wrong with the idea of collapsing the works and the biography into one narrative. The protagonist, Vadim, is not only a distorted version of Nabokov but, as is hinted at by the list of his works, an amalgam of Nabokov and various characters he has created. Vadim shares characteristics with Humbert and Van, as well as biographical details that correspond to Nabokov’s own life. In its critique of the biographical fallacy, the novel is, from an authorial
perspective, fundamentally defensive. It is a book that seeks to bind the oeuvre more tightly against the assaults of agents external to authorial control and, as a consequence, expresses certain anxieties about the status of that oeuvre as an entity independent of the author.

BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICISM

The provocation to write *Look at the Harlequins!* was Nabokov himself becoming the subject of a first biography, by Andrew Field. D. Barton Johnson tells us that the composition of the novel ‘was assertedly triggered by Nabokov’s reaction to the draft version of Andrew Field’s *Nabokov: His Life in Part* which Nabokov was reading and correcting at the time he launched his final novel’ (‘*Look at the Harlequins!*’, 330). The breakdown in relations with Field was very much on Nabokov’s mind when Feifer came to visit Nabokov in the summer of 1974 (Nabokov had completed *Look at the Harlequins!* that April). One of the passages Nabokov wanted excised from the published interview was a reference to an anonymous biographer (Field) having ‘incurred his subject’s displeasure’ (‘Two Hours’, 26). Feifer had used one of his questions to ask about Nabokov’s attitude to being the subject of a biography:

Q. You have been quoted as saying that biography can produce no closer likeness of its subjects than macabre dolls. Are you making any provisions to enable your biographers to make their mistakes?

A. The biographer is apt to become a macabre doll himself if he does not accept, meekly and gratefully, to comply with all the desires and indications of his still robust subject—or those of wise lawyers and hawk-eyed heirs. If the subject is dead and unprotected, a century or so should be allowed to elapse before his diaries can be published and chuckled over. In this connection I see that the reviewer of an unauthorized biography of T. S. Eliot believes that ‘a famous man dead or alive is fair game.’ Such a pronouncement coming from a usually sensitive and sober critic strikes me as revolting. The facts in my *Speak, Memory* and *Strong Opinions* as well as a collection of special notes should prevent a vicious mediocrity from distorting my life, my truth, my anecdotes. (p. 26)

By this time Nabokov was clearly on the defensive: this answer could well be construed as a public instruction to Field to ‘meekly and gratefully’ accept Nabokov’s terms regarding changes to the manuscript draft of the biography. It is clear that Nabokov wanted to protect himself from what he had not ‘authorized’ and was ready to pursue legal action to that end. What is surprising, judging from the attitude expressed in this interview, is that Nabokov consented to collaborate on a biography at all.
Nabokov claimed that the ‘best part of a writer’s biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style’ and in the three versions of his autobiography—Conclusive Evidence, Drugie Berega, Speak, Memory—he bore this out (SO 154–5). The story of his life was that of his artistic development, and the structure and style of the memoir, with its virtuosic temporal transitions and subtle patterns of recurrence, is the expression of its own thesis. Shortly after starting work on Conclusive Evidence Nabokov wrote a letter to Ken McCormick of Doubleday, on 22 September 1946, claiming that his book would be ‘a new kind of autobiography, or rather a new hybrid between that and a novel’ (SL 69). Nabokov’s approach to autobiography undoubtedly influenced his thinking when it came to potential biographers: if the story of his life was the story of his style then his biography should be written by one of his best readers.

Nabokov was more engaged with his readers than his professed disdain suggested. In an interview with Robert Hughes in 1965 he claimed to be ‘supremely indifferent to adverse criticism’ of his work and admitted that while he felt ‘a ripple of almost human warmth, a sense of harmony and satisfied logic’ when a writer he admired praised his work, in all other cases his reaction was to ‘yawn and forget’ (SO 53–4). He may have been indifferent to reviews of his work but he was certainly interested in the scholarship that began to flourish in the mid-1960s. Page Stegner’s Escape into Aesthetics, published in 1966 by Dial Press, was the first book exclusively about Nabokov’s work. Nabokov had known Page Stegner’s father, the novelist Wallace Stegner; a young Page had played tennis against Nabokov at a literary conference in Salt Lake City in 1949, with Page partnering Wallace to take on Vladimir and Dmitri in father-and-son doubles. Stegner sent Nabokov a letter on 5 October 1966, enclosing a copy of his book, and Nabokov replied praising it in general but wrote that had he ‘been shown the MS, it might have been possible to eliminate a few errors of fact (with errors of judgement I am not concerned)’ and that if ‘ever a second edition loomed and you wished to correct slips of that sort, I would be glad to list them all for you’ (SL 393).

By the time Stegner’s book was published, Nabokov was corresponding with another influential early critic, Carl Proffer, who was putting together his Keys to Lolita (1968). Proffer sent Nabokov the manuscript and received a reply with a list of ‘little corrections and explanations’ (SL 390). Nabokov then read the published version two years later offering another list of ‘notes’ in a letter of 1 May 1968 (SL 433). Proffer’s book indulges in some arch Nabokovian tropes: in a foreword Proffer makes it clear that his work is not an ‘interpretation’ (a word he places in quotation marks) but simply a guide to solving some of the novel’s ‘technical puzzles’: ‘after Nabokov’s own lucid narrative any paraphrase would be more reprehensible than
raping Mabel Glave’ (p. 2). He concludes the foreword with a ‘final word’: ‘some may say my commentary is a parody of Nabokov. This, of course, is probably untrue’ (p. 2). In the (brief) acknowledgements, Proffer discloses his ‘special gratitude’ to ‘Mark V. Boldino’ for his ‘expert suggestions’ (p. 1). It is something of an understatement to say that Proffer was clearly rather taken by Nabokov; he would, along with his wife Ellendea Proffer, go on to found the Ardis publishing house in 1971, which he named after the idyllic country estate in Ada.

In 1970, Alfred Appel brought out his *Annotated Lolita*, which, according to Christine Clegg, was the ‘first annotated edition of a modern novel to be published in the lifetime of its author’ (p. 66). Appel, one of Nabokov’s former students at Cornell, had corresponded with Nabokov while working on the edition in 1967 and the following year travelled to Montreux to ‘revise his annotations in tandem with Nabokov’ (*AY* 530). Appel interviewed Nabokov over four days in September 1966 for *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* and again in August 1970 for *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Nabokov included both interviews in *Strong Opinions*. In 1970, Appel and Charles Newman edited a special edition of *TriQuarterly*, dedicated to Nabokov on his seventieth birthday. Nabokov was invited to respond to the pieces collected in the journal, which he did with what he described as the ‘rough jottings’ of an ‘objective reader’ (*SO* 284). He conferred almost universal praise, except in the case of George Steiner’s essay ‘Extraterritorial’, aspects of which he found ‘a little cheap’ (*SO* 288).

Nabokov was largely generous and broad-minded in his responses to this nascent criticism of his work but a structure had been established in which his approval could be sought and attained. By being prepared to play the game by certain Nabokovian rules, the critic, especially the formalist critic, could have his or her reading validated by the author. If you went about it the right way, Nabokov was even prepared to read and correct your manuscript. The risk, of course, is that your work could become the subject of authorial disapproval, even though Nabokov claimed to be ‘supremely indifferent’ to what he perceived as negative criticism.

In 1971 William Woodin Rowe published *Nabokov’s Deceptive World* (1971), which gave a sexual-symbolic reading of Nabokov’s novels. This psychoanalytic interpretation of his work moved Nabokov from his professed indifference and he responded to Rowe’s book with a negative review in the 7 October issue of *The New York Review of Books*. ‘The

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16 On this evidence it is probably for the best that Proffer did not venture a reading of the ‘meaning or morality of the novel’ (p. 2). Mabel Glave is one of Dolores Haze’s classmates and an object of Humbert’s desire.
purpose of this present review is not to answer a critic but to ask him to remove his belongings,’ Nabokov wrote. He objected to the final third of the book and the ‘indecent absurdities’ of Rowe’s symbolic readings, dismissing them as ‘preposterous and nasty’ (SO 304). Nabokov wrote that he wished to share with Rowe ‘the following secret’:

in the case of a certain type of writer it often happens that a whole paragraph or sinuous sentence exists as a discrete organism, with its own imagery, its own invocations, its own bloom, and then it is especially precious, and also vulnerable, so that if an outsider, immune to poetry and common sense, injects spurious symbols into it, or actually tampers with its wording (see Mr. Rowe’s crass attempt on his page 113), its magic is replaced by maggots. (SO 305)

Rowe responded in the 18 November edition of the review. ‘To whatever extent I have trampled upon the cabbages in Nabokov’s Garden of Delights, I sincerely apologize,’ Rowe wrote, before going to claim that Nabokov had misunderstood what he meant by symbols. Whatever the merit of Rowe’s interpretation of Nabokov’s work, he stood by his critical right to operate outside of the author’s intentionality:

Very seldom, it happens that a writer has truly rare genius, wields his abilities with awe-inspiring control, and yet, paradoxically, is as unaware of precisely why his effects are successful as he is of precisely where his gifts came from. This is also a kind of vulnerability, a chink in the writer’s armor of objectivity about his own writing. The method works perfectly, the author senses its special success, but he is nevertheless not fully aware of the nature of some of its mechanisms. In this respect only, the incredibly wide vision and powerful control of genius is paradoxically tinged with the blinding splendor of supreme self-consciousness. Nikolai Gogol was such a writer. Vladimir Nabokov (see the conclusion of my book, where I quote him on his wondrously balanced ‘mad mind’) may be one too. (‘Arbors and Mists’)

Rowe was very gently making a case for the kind of critique—symptomatic reading—that was to flourish in the academy in the next three decades: the hermeneutics of suspicion. It is fairly safe to speculate that Nabokov would have been unimpressed by an argument that claimed there was an inherent vulnerability in his poetics. Rowe was privileging his own hermeneutics above Nabokov’s intentionalist formalism. This was not a private disagreement but one conducted in The New York Review of Books, arguably the most prestigious literary journal of its day: in the edition in which Rowe’s letter was published it carried pieces by Gore Vidal, Edmund Wilson, Richard Ellmann, Christopher Ricks, and Hannah Arendt. In a sense, it was an issue of Nabokov’s own making: had he not reviewed it, Rowe’s book would not have received this kind of prominent attention. Perhaps the purpose was to discipline his critics, to make an example of Rowe.
Nabokov compounded Rowe’s ‘infamy’ by including the takedown in *Strong Opinions* when it was published in 1973. Nabokov clearly felt the need to refute Rowe into posterity. The final sentence of his review reveals the source of his most profound frustration: ‘he will be read, he will be quoted, he will be filed in great libraries, next to my arbors and mists!’ (SO 307). In this regard, by attacking Rowe in *The New York Review of Books*, Nabokov was acting against his own best interests.

**ANDREW FIELD**

It is with Andrew Field that Nabokov appeared to find his best reader; here was a man whom he felt could be entrusted with his reputation. Field did a tremendous amount of work to establish Nabokov’s critical reputation, especially in writing about Russian works that remained unavailable to those early critics and readers who did not speak the language. He compiled a bibliography that turned up many Nabokov works previously thought lost and offered close readings of the novels that influenced a generation of Nabokov scholars. It was after taking up a commission to write the first biography of Nabokov, however, that the relationship soured.17

With hindsight the first hints of the eventual breakdown in relations between Nabokov and Field can be seen in their early exchanges about Field’s first book on Nabokov. On 3 September 1965, Field wrote to Nabokov to inform him he had signed a contract to write a critical study of his work, a study that would become *Nabokov: His Life in Art*.18 By then Field, a Harvard graduate student, had written a short article on *The Defense* in *The New Leader* which Nabokov had read and liked and, more importantly, in April of the previous year, Field had presented a delighted Nabokov with a copy of his father’s book *Essays on Criminal Law* (1904), which Field had obtained in the Soviet Union. Véra replied on 9 September assuring Field that, ‘[m]y husband asks me to tell you that your plan to write a critical study of his work touches and pleases him very much’, once again expressing gratitude for the gift of V. D. Nabokov’s book, which is

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17 For Boyd’s account of the denouement of Nabokov and Field’s relationship see *The American Years*, 609–21. Boyd himself was drawn into the dispute after Nabokov’s death, as Maurice Couturier discloses: ‘In a trial held in London in January 1994, Boyd testified as a witness against Field, who was suing an English journalist. Field had to withdraw his complaint before the case was resolved; the entire affair cost him £20,000’ (‘1, X Does Not Equal Nabokov’, 2). The journalist in question was David Sexton, the literary editor of *The Sunday Telegraph*.

18 I do not quote from Field’s side of the correspondence because I could not track him down to secure copyright permission.
described as ‘the greatest treasure on his shelf’. Even at this nascent stage Nabokov implicates himself in Field’s project:

My husband says that, in the course of your research, you will find incidents differently reported by different people. He suggests that when in doubt you check with him. (A case in point is Struve’s description of the Georgiy Ivanov incident and my husband’s complete account of it in his Playboy interview.)

Around this time Nabokov was warned about Field’s academic professionalism by Gleb Struve, a warning Nabokov chose to ignore (AY 604). Field claimed Struve’s criticism was motivated by professional jealousy and that while he admitted he had made mistakes in his translation of Abram Tertz’s Mysli vrasplokh, he blamed them on the poor photomechanical copy he had been working from.

As he worked on his book, Field sent queries to Nabokov for clarification, even running past him interpretations which he felt had solved certain Nabokovian riddles, such as his belief that the Botkin character of the Pale Fire index concealed the Russian word nikto for ‘nothing’. Véra replied, on 23 December 1965, with Nabokov’s refusal to ‘accept’ the reading:

I must disappoint you: Botkin is not derived from an inverted nikto spiced with a ‘b’ lost by zembla. The derivation is explained in the book (bodkin-botkin). It is also a fairly common Russian name. Nor did my husband give any thought to the word bezumstvo (or bezumie). But he asks me to tell you that he finds your explanation ingenious and amusing. Nevertheless, he cannot accept it. (Berg)

It was not only Field’s work on Nabokov that was being monitored from Montreux: on 18 February 1966, Véra wrote to Field about an article he had written on Tertz in the 14 February edition of The New Leader:

I wonder if you would very much mind my saying that I am emphatically opposed to the automatic use of Freudian idées reçues. You handle, for instance, the term ‘castration symbol’ as if it were an irrefutable truth whereas actually it is on the same level as our ancestors’ notion that the liver of a lynx is a sure cure for leprosy or a hysterical girl’s stigmata are a heavenly sign (I apologize if you are a practising Roman Catholic). I think that such an original and independent mind as yours should avoid the clichés of the couch. (Berg)

Writing on 18 May 1966, Véra said that she would ‘be glad to check your finished ms. for an accidental factual slip, but I would not want in any way to interfere with your critical opinions’. Field duly sent the manuscript of Nabokov: His Life in Art to Montreux and Véra, returning it on
23 September 1966, assured Field that despite Nabokov not seeing ‘eye to eye’ with Field ‘on many points of comment and explication’ he respects ‘the critic’s right to have his own opinion’ and that the ‘book is a brilliant work of creation and scholarship, brilliantly executed. It is also admirably organized and in every way a splendid important work’ (Berg).

The praise was applied no doubt to sugar the pill of criticism: three days later Nabokov sent through eight pages of corrections (which did not include misprints and repetitions) and a request to see the proofs and suggested adding an index. Field seemed more preoccupied with the negative reviews he seemed to believe his book would generate than addressing some of the manuscript’s scholarly limitations (errors in translations, no references, made-up critics). While he stood his ground on certain interpretative issues he reluctantly acquiesced to Nabokov’s request for an index and declared that the thing he was proudest of in his book was that it had ‘500 pages without a footnote’ (AY 612).

Field called Nabokov: His Life in Art, published in 1967, a ‘critical narrative’ and, true to the tenor of his correspondence with Nabokov, he spent much time fussily establishing his own credibility and seeking to attain a Nabokovian formal elegance (or his approximation of such) at the expense of conventional scholarship. He warns the reader in his introduction that his study is unusual in that ‘it is formed, that is, it is structured in a way that is roughly corresponding to that of the narrative in fiction’ with ‘parabolic’ chapters. Nabokov’s novels, poems, stories, plays, and essays are, he tells us, to be treated as ‘characters in a novel’ (Nabokov: His Life in Art, 6). For all its eccentricities, however, the book’s exegetical close readings of the novels, especially those in Russian, found favour with Nabokov and, in turn, Field thanked the Nabokovs in his ‘Concluding Remarks’ for their help with information and allowing him the freedom of his opinions: ‘This complete freedom from any restraints together with generous aid is something, I think, quite extraordinary if not unprecedented in the uneasy history of the relations between writer and critic’ (p. 383).

19 So insistent was Field on making his readers treat his book like a novel that he claimed to have laid traps for those who attempted to ‘spot-read’ it: ‘Nabokov: His Life in Art is sufficiently complected so that serious and amusing distortions will result from spot-reading it. We “read” novels (or we are supposed to), but we spot-read or “use” criticism, and “usefulness” by itself; important though it is, ought not to be cultivated as an ultimate purpose or value in literature or in literary criticism. A skeleton index of Nabokov’s works has been included, however (with some misgivings), for the convenience of re-readers and also for an ardent “old index-maker” of my acquaintance’ (p. 7).

20 Field here glosses over the fact that he amended several aspects of his reading of Pale Fire on Nabokov’s request.
On 5 February 1968, the Nabokovs wrote to Field, having read an excerpt of his forthcoming novel *Fractions* in *TriQuarterly*. When Field wrote back on 28 April it was to announce that he had been commissioned to write a biography of Nabokov. Véra informed Field, in a letter of 21 May, that Nabokov ‘warmly welcomes’ the project and that he ‘could not imagine anyone else whom he would want to accept as his biographer’ (*AY* 532). This is perhaps surprising given what Boyd calls Nabokov’s ‘hypertrophied sense of privacy’ (*AY* 611). A biography was inevitable given Nabokov’s fame, however, and the Field project would, in theory, allow Nabokov to control many elements of it. To that end, Field assured the Nabokovs that they would have final copy approval.

Nabokov was much stricter about source material than Field might have anticipated. He barred him from conducting interviews with figures he felt unreliable and refused to let Field see his notes to *Conclusive Evidence*. There was a falling out at a meeting in Montreux in January of 1971, which was patched up, but by the following year, as can be seen in a letter of 24 July 1972, Nabokov was growing suspicious about Field’s work:

I don’t believe I ever assumed any obligations, did I? [To provide material] On the other hand you did volunteer to assume the obligation not to publish in your book anything that I or my wife might find objectionable. This, in

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21 *Fractions*, published in 1969, with its foreword by Truman Foreword, reflects Field’s preoccupation with Nabokov’s work, his sense of persecution, and his grandiose ambition. The protagonist is called ‘Andrew Field’: ‘While ostensibly writing a dissertation on Russian Symbolist prose, Andrew was really secretly at work all the time on his cranky though remarkable study of Vladimir Nabokov, the book which first made his name known and engendered so much hostility in certain regions such as Cape Cod and New York—hostility which, I think, has not subsided even to this day and is responsible for the marked lack of warmth with which so many of his novels have been received’ (pp. 9–10). The Field of the novel displays a fondness for Nabokovian literary game playing: ‘He was, by the way, much given to mild deceptions or affectations, his only real affinity with that celebrated Russian-American overwriter. By far the most intriguing such dramatic presentation, and I do not think that he ever did it more than a few times, was a fierce mockery of Nabokov and his own book on him that, at a certain point, quite convinced one of its earnestness. Only in retrospect does this fall into place and find its proper corner in a larger pattern.’ When ‘Andrew Field’ publishes his novel *A Tale of Excess* he is ‘at last mentioned wherever American Literature was being discussed and read, and *Time* magazine was earnestly intoning that “Field seems bent upon challenging the acknowledged master of his youth”’ (p. 13). Having read the novel, Nabokov wrote to Field on 10 June 1969, expressing his reservations about it: ‘I thank you for your FRACTIONS which I read very carefully. As I think you suspect yourself they don’t quite make a whole number. I am sorry to be saying that but I’m sure you would prefer a frank opinion to jejune compliments. Were I a reviewer, I would put it this way: This little novel seems to be a very mediocre desert up to Ager’s arrival after which it ends in a first-rate mirage. It is rather like winning a tennis match 0–6, 0–6, 19–17, 6–3, 6–0.’ (*SL* 452–3)
fact, became the basic condition under which you undertook the writing of my biography.

Nabokov was concerned that Field was ‘starting an argument’ with *Speak, Memory* and was ‘puzzled’ at some of the lines of research Field was pursuing.22

The following 16 August, Field claimed the manuscript was not ready to be shown even though he was four years into his work. That Field had been making enquiries about aspects of Nabokov’s family history and love life made him nervous and on 8 September he wrote to Field that:

I should have warned you, perhaps, before you started upon your project, that despite a semblance of joviality and ready wit, I am really a rather dreary and lonely person in terms of visible life (my invisible one is glimpsed only by some of my invented characters).

To sum up: the only rational and artistic way to write the history of an individual of my dismal kind (whose only human and entertaining side is the gift of inventing clouds, castles, lakes) would be to follow his development as a writer from his first opaque poems to *TRANSPARENT THINGS*. (*AY* 606)

Further on in the letter, Nabokov made a startling claim:

Unless one of us (my wife or I) is alive and physically able to check the biography in its present shape, and then in page proof, I must forbid its publication as I forbid that of all my possible *Lives* in years to come. (*Berg*)

There is an undercurrent of futility, even absurdity, to this Nabokovian proscription: how is it possible for him to forbid future biographers? At this point Nabokov sensed he was losing control of Field and his project. When the manuscript finally arrived, in January 1973, Nabokov made 250 index cards of corrections: ‘It was a great mistake on your part’, Nabokov wrote to Field, ‘not to have shown me the chapters one by one’ (*Berg; SL* 511).23 Nabokov was ‘shocked’ at what he felt were aspects of the work’s vulgarity and the ‘casual brutality you reveal in hurting my relatives’ (*Berg*). In a letter of 23 March to his friend Samuel Rosoff, Nabokov wrote that correcting the errors of his ‘biographer’ (Nabokov placed the word in quotation marks) had cost him two months of ‘dull and complex’ work (*SL* 513).

Field claimed to have evidence to back up even his most controversial claims and even hinted in one letter that there was even more damaging

22 Nabokov’s cousin Sergey, a journalist in Brussels and a keen genealogist of the Nabokov family tree, had expressed concern at the ‘strange direction’ Field’s enquiries were taking (*AY* 602).

23 Boyd notes that Nabokov clocked up over 100 hours of work in the first three weeks of February working on the Field manuscript (*AY* 610).
material he had left out (Nabokov appended a pencilled note to that letter of 7 May 1973: ‘a veiled threat?’). Unsurprisingly, the relationship deteriorated beyond repair thereafter, Field lashing out in a letter of 9 July. He accused Nabokov of manipulating him to try to present a false version of his life story and warned him that ‘he could easily wait until Nabokov’s death and then write a book entitled, say, *He Called His Mum Lolita*—but of course, he added, he could never write a book of that sort’ (*AY*620). He felt Nabokov was deliberately destroying not just his book but also the five years he had spent writing it. Nabokov responded to what he called Field’s ‘ignoble letter’ on 8 August, claiming it was the work of a ‘deranged mind’.

Mental derangement is one thing, and blackmail another, and blackmail is the word for your threats to publish my informal utterances on two afternoons of tape-recording, the garbled recollections of strangers, and the various rumours that fell into your unfastidious lap, if I continue to insist on your deleting from your book the errors of fact, the blunders of fancy, and [offensive misinterpretations] which still mar your ‘revised’ version. (*SL* 517, square brackets in the original)

The two areas in which Field believed Nabokov had attempted to keep him in the dark were his supposed relation to the Romanov dynasty, and his affair with Irina Guadanini. Despite Nabokov quoting from the correspondence in which Field had given him final copy approval, Field refused to back down. As Boyd notes, Nabokov persisted with correcting Field’s draft in the hope of minimizing the damage he felt was being done and ‘[o]ver the next three years Nabokov’s lawyers and Field’s editors battled it out’ (*AY*619). When *Nabokov: His Life in Part* was published in 1977 much of what Nabokov had wanted deleted remained in the text.24

Field, who Nabokov had seen as an agent in helping to secure his legacy, turned out to be a threat to the very basis of Nabokov’s conception of literary posterity. Perhaps he had been seduced by what Field had written at the conclusion of his introduction to *Nabokov: His Life in Art:*

> Nabokov, I have mastered your themes. (Nabokov, have I mastered your themes?) See how your books lie carefully arranged in the window of my critical eye. (I return your books, neatly packed and unsoiled, but I have kept and cut the pages and taken up the images.) Each is an essential cubist plane of a bookish portrait that, in the necessary cultural perspective and light, is your truest and most palpable biography. (Together they form your future monument, the shadow of which even now extends from Moscow to New York). (p. 8)

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24 Field would go on to publish *Nabokov: His Life and Art* (1985), a book unfettered by any previous restraint that combined *Nabokov: His Life in Art* and *Nabokov: His Life in Part.*
Nothing could have been more fitting to Nabokov than to view his legacy as a row of books on a bookshelf. Like the ‘real life’ of Sebastian Knight, his biography was best understood by what was contained within the covers of the books he had written: the story of his style. As he would write to Field, on 26 February 1973, with the relationship already deteriorating:

I am far from being the type of sage or professional wit who treats strangers to a flow of sparkling aphorisms. I am a bookworm, not a tapeworm, and whatever I have said or shall say in life must be in writing. I exist only as a writer, Andrew, this is something which you ignore in your book. (Berg)

Reflecting on the Nabokovs’ naivety in trusting Field, Boyd believes they were ‘[w]on over by Field’s enthusiasm and energy, by his sense of his own originality and his eagerness to extol Nabokov’s, they had pardoned him for errors they would have been outraged at in anybody else’ (AY604). His best reader had proved anything but docile and respectful.

**DEATHS OF THE AUTHOR**

After fifteen years in which Nabokov enjoyed incredible artistic productivity, literary celebrity, and financial stability, the 1970s proved less auspicious. The battle with Field was draining and represented a loss of control over a public self that he had worked hard to establish on his own terms. To compound these problems the two novels he published, *Transparent Things* (1972) and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), met with mixed reviews and sold poorly. The relationship with McGraw-Hill, which had begun with such promise, began to sour. Boyd writes that they had ‘little interest in promoting Nabokov’ as ‘inflation and currency exchange provisions built into his first agreement with McGraw-Hill’ combined with a ‘rise in inflation and weakening of the dollar’ to ensure that the publisher ‘now made almost no profit on his works’ (AY 651). In his eighth decade Nabokov could have been excused for feeling relatively embattled.

Back in 1964 he had been asked by Toffler in the *Playboy* interview what he wanted to ‘accomplish or leave behind’:

Well, in this matter of accomplishment, of course, I don’t have a 35-year plan or program, but I have a fair inkling of my literary afterlife. I have sensed certain hints, I have felt the breeze of certain promises. No doubt there will be ups and downs, long periods of slump. With the Devil’s connivance, I open a newspaper of 2063 and in some article on the books page I find: ‘Nobody reads Nabokov or Fulmerford today.’ Awful question: Who is this unfortunate Fulmerford? (SO 34)
Nabokov may have had supreme confidence in his posthumous reputation but that did not prevent him from repeatedly interrogating the idea of the author’s final loss of control. When answering Feifer’s question about biography, he had invoked ‘wise lawyers and hawk-eyed heirs’ as his posthumous proxies and he was clearly concerned, in his collaboration with critics, in his review of Rowe’s book, and in his battles with Field, with shaping his legacy beyond the books he published.

What happens to an author’s work after his death had established itself as one of the major themes of his fiction. *Lolita, Pale Fire*, and *Ada* were all novels in which authors died, leaving their work in the hands of mediating figures. In his last two completed novels and the one he left unfinished, *The Original of Laura*, his investigation of authorial death intensified. In *Transparent Things* this is clearly the case: it is a story told by ghosts, one of them a writer. Hugh Person, the novel’s protagonist, works for ‘a great publishing firm’ as a ‘research assistant, scout, associate editor, copy editor, proof-reader, flatterer of our authors’ and he is assigned to work with ‘Mister R.’, a celebrated German novelist who ‘wrote English considerably better than he spoke it’. While Mister R. was not considered ‘a master of the very first rank’ he was, in the estimation of the narrator, ‘a true artist who fought on his own ground with his own weapons for the right to use an unorthodox punctuation corresponding to singular thought’ (*TT* 23–4). Person’s task is to coax a new novel out of this author and his publisher sends him over to Switzerland where R. lives. After R. finally submits a manuscript, entitled *Tralatatios*, Person is sent back to Switzerland to ask him to ‘alter certain much too recognizable people in the typescript’ and to convince R. to change the ‘commercially impossible title’ (*TT* 69). R. naturally refuses to make any alterations and Person leaves, promising to send through ‘a sample of the jacket design’ on his return to New York (*TT* 71). As the novel reaches its conclusion—with Person imprisoned for killing his lover, Armande, while sleepwalking—the twenty-first chapter is devoted to a letter written by R. to Phil, Person’s boss at the publishing house, in which he declares that he is ‘leaving you for another even greater Publisher’ after a botched operation left him on his deathbed (*TT* 81). In the letter, R. regrets that Person will not be able to handle the publication of his final novel. He also tells Phil that he is writing under separate cover about ‘measures I would like to be taken after my departure in order to thwart Tamworth at every turn of his labyrinthian plans’. This Tamworth, one of R.’s assistants turned budding biographer, has ‘gnawed his way into all my affairs, crawling into every cranny, collecting every German-accented word of mine, so that now he can boswell the dead man just as he had bossed very well the living one’ (*TT* 83).
Death does not leave R. without agency, however. He is one of the ghosts that narrates the novel, recognizable by his distinctive ‘misusing, garbling, or padding of the commonest American cliché’ (SO 195). The strange final sentence of the novel—‘Easy, you know, does it, son’—is, according to Nabokov, spoken by ‘no other than a discarnate, but still rather grotesque, Mr. R. who greets newly-dead Hugh in the last line of the book’ (SO 196). The above quotations are taken from an interview in Strong Opinions which, according to Nabokov, a New York newspaper ‘refused to publish’. There are no details about which newspaper this was or when the interview took place and, according to Nabokov, ‘the interviewer’s questions have been abridged or stylized’ (SO 194). Every single one of those questions provoked an exegetical explanation of Transparent Things. Even in the doubtful event that this interview was genuine, the fact that Nabokov felt the need to include it in Strong Opinions expressed a desire that his use of ghosts as narrators in the novel be better understood. The novel had certainly prompted confusion when published and even as devoted a Nabokovian as John Updike was baffled. ‘Confession: I have never understood how they saw the woman in half,’ Updike wrote in his review of the novel. ‘And I do not understand Vladimir Nabokov’s new novel Transparent Things’ (Picked-Up Pieces, 211).

In 1967 Roland Barthes had published an English translation of ‘The Death of the Author’ in the American journal Aspen (the French version was published the following year in Manteia) and in 1969, Michael Foucault, prompted by Barthes’s essay, published his own attack on conventional notions of authorial presence in ‘What is an Author?’ As this radically new understanding of literary authority was filtering into the academy through poststructuralist ideas, Nabokov was seeking new ways to assert authorial control. In Transparent Things we have an author die within the course of a narrative only to come back to shape it from beyond the grave. There is an analogy here to Nabokov’s desire to retain control over the reading of his texts even after he has abdicated control over the book as a material object. Nabokov is certainly trying to shape the reception of Transparent Things through the exegetical explanations he included in Strong Opinions. Could the author of the novel continue to exert authority over his work after his own authorial death (in Barthes’s sense)? If so, could he not also continue to exert authority over his work after his own death (in the literal sense)?

In his last completed novel, Nabokov returned to these questions. As we have seen, Field’s biography provoked Nabokov to write a stylized travesty of his own life in Look at the Harlequins! as an exercise in the reassertion of authorial control over his life and work. Maurice Couturier has argued, however, that Nabokov’s authority is implicitly challenged by
the strange mental condition Vadim suffers from in the novel. This psychological disorder prevents Vadim being able to imagine a spatial volte face, a torment that Couturier argues is analogous to Nabokov’s inability to control the books that he has put into circulation:

Vadim’s mental confusion and his incapacity to retrace his steps in imagination may well be a reflection of the aging author’s own embarrassment. He is a replica of the author who is about to die and who realizes that, no matter what he does, he cannot go back, he cannot retrieve his past or rewrite his novels, which will continue to live and be read after him. This last attempt to retake everything has failed since a new layer of writing has been added. His name will continue to be associated in the centuries to come with those of his own inventions because he has allowed his inventions to circulate in thousands, nay millions, of printed books. The author has turned himself into a fiction, as it were, into what Barthes used to call ‘un être de papier’, and he painfully realizes that he cannot regain his pre-literary self. (Textual Communication, 227)

Nabokov’s contradictory attitudes to becoming this ‘être de papier’ are worked out in the fiction itself. On this view, what is concealed behind the mask of authorial omnipotence and public disdain is an author exploring his own anxieties about the material proliferation of his work and the loss of control represented by different levels of authorial ‘death’. There is the loss of control that is a necessary consequence of publishing his work and, at this late career stage, the loss of control that resulted from a decline in stature in the cultural field as his books stopped selling and his publisher began to lose interest. Hovering behind both these losses is that of the impending final loss of authorial control: the death of the author was something Nabokov had explored on a formal level in Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada. In Look at the Harlequins! Vadim lays out a rule at the beginning of Part Seven:

There exists an old rule—so old and trite that I blush to mention it. Let me twist it into a jingle—to stylize the staleness:

The I of the book
Cannot die in the book (LATH! 187)

Michael Wood argues there is in this passage ‘a pathos that goes well beyond literary prescription’. For Wood, Vadim ‘is saying he can’t die if he is writing, and by implication, won’t die as long as his writing continues’. Therefore, when the novel ends with Vadim’s final sentence apparently unfinished, it carries with it the implication that he has died: ‘I had been promised some rum with my tea—Ceylon and Jamaica, the sibling islands (mumbling comfortably, dropping off, mumble dying away)—’ (LATH! 197). As this passage is not being dictated, this can
only be a simulation of the death of the author, ‘miming loss of control’ in Wood’s phrase (‘Nabokov’s Late Fiction’, 203). Is this not, at several degrees of regress, Nabokov miming his own authorial death? As Boyd tells us, taped to the lid of the box in which the index cards of the manuscript were kept, was a note from Nabokov: ‘To be destroyed unread if unfinished’ (‘The Nabokov Biography’, 33).

POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATION

The necessary futility of Nabokov’s desire for authorial control into posterity is demonstrated by the publication of The Original of Laura in 2009. The unfinished manuscript of this novel was subject to the same edict as Look at the Harlequins!: it was to be destroyed if Nabokov died before it was completed. This uncompromising strategy was one of the ways, in Boyd’s elegant phrase, that Nabokov erected ‘ramparts between himself and the future image of his past’ (‘The Nabokov Biography’, 27). He had destroyed many of his drafts, what he called the ‘litter of the workshop’, and those that had been preserved in the Library of Congress between 1959 and 1963 (for tax reasons), were placed there with the proviso that the archive be closed for fifty years after his death. Thanks to the opportunities provided him by the success of Lolita, he had been able to arrange his oeuvre for posterity. To recall that line of Faulkner’s: no refuse save the printed books.

After his death, however, Nabokov books continued to be published. Stikhi, a collection of his Russian poems, was published in 1979, two years after his death, under the supervision of Véra, while Dmitri Nabokov continued to translate material that was discovered in the following years, such as the novella The Enchanter (1986) and the stories ‘Easter Rain’ (1997) and ‘Natasha’ (2008). A Nabokovian absolutist might argue that publishing these works without the author’s explicit consent undermined his authority but convincing arguments can be made that, had he known about the existence of some of the manuscripts hidden among his papers, he would have published. As Dmitri pointed out, in the case of The Enchanter, written in Russian in Paris in 1939, Nabokov had decided it should be ‘done into English by the Nabokovs’ and published when it was first rediscovered in 1959 (before being misplaced again) (TL, p. xiv). Nabokov had even tried to publish the novella himself in 1939, only to have the manuscript rejected by Sovremennye zapiski (RY 514). The other

25 This presents a rather unusual problem: how would you know the novel was unfinished when, in its finished state, it mimics the form of an unfinished novel?
major posthumous publications were the editions of the lectures. Nabokov had decided against publishing his lectures on several occasions and, as Boyd relates, in 1972 he reviewed them and left a note in which he described them as ‘chaotic and sloppy’ and insisted that they ‘must never be published. None of them!’ Véra and Dmitri did not see this note before consenting to the publication because it was filed with his ‘notes for work in progress rather than with the manuscript of the lectures’ (AY 173). Even though Nabokov had not found the lectures fit for publication, one could make the argument that the lectures as delivered to his students constituted a public document, even if Nabokov would not have wanted them included in his authorized oeuvre without considerable revision.

The case of *The Original of Laura* is, though, unambiguous: Nabokov did not want it published. It is unclear exactly how close Nabokov felt he was to finishing the novel. He had the idea for it in 1973 and had begun to map it out in 1974. Poor health interrupted his progress and when he did resume writing it was at a slower rate. In April 1976 Véra wrote to Fred Hills of McGraw-Hill to say that ‘[m]y husband believes that he has passed the hundred printed-page mark which is about half of *TOOL*’. In October 1976 he was telling a reporter from *The New York Times* it was ‘not quite finished’ and the following month he wrote to Hills that he had ‘practically finished it in my head’ but that ‘the writing will take some time yet’ (quoted in Boyd and Leving, 20). It was clearly still in an early phase of being written, even if it was going to be a short novel like his other late fiction; the extant manuscript was made up of 138 index cards compared to the 348 cards that made up the final manuscript of *Transparent Things* or the 807 cards that made up *Look at the Harlequins!* According to Boyd and Leving, when Nabokov was taken into intensive care at a Swiss hospital on 30 June 1977, he instructed Véra that ‘the draft is to be destroyed’ if he died before finishing it (p. 22).

Dmitri was unequivocal about his father’s decision to destroy the material. In his introduction to the published version, he discloses that, ‘[o]nly during the final stages of his life did I learn about certain confidential family matters. Among them were his express instructions that the manuscript of *The Original of Laura* be destroyed if he were to die without completing it’ (TL, p. xii). Dmitri dismissed the argument that Nabokov would have destroyed the manuscript himself if he really did not want it published: *The Original of Laura* was not a work he had composed in full and found himself dissatisfied with but was a work in progress, one he continued to compose even as he fell repeatedly ill in the final two years of his life. Nabokov, Dmitri writes, had been working on the novel ‘feverishly’ during ‘the last months of his life’ (TL, p. xvi). He also dismissed the argument that Nabokov entrusted the destruction of the manuscript to his
wife—who famously saved a draft of *Lolita* from the incinerator—because he knew she would not go through with destroying it (this argument has been made in relation to Franz Kafka, who, it is argued, selected Max Brod as his executor because he knew he would not destroy the work). Véra did not destroy the manuscript and after her death in 1991 the responsibility shifted to Dmitri.26 What prompted Dmitri to contravene his father’s direct instructions? The quality of the work initially appeared his primary motivation; Dmitri confidently believed it to be ‘an embryonic masterpiece’ (*TL*, p. xii).27 A second—contradictory—motivation appeared to be that Nabokov’s reputation, so firmly established, could not be harmed after ‘Laura had survived the hum of time this long’ (why would Nabokov’s reputation need protecting if this was indeed an ‘embryonic masterpiece’?) (*TL*, p. xviii).

Placed in a Hamlet-like dilemma (to publish or not to publish?), Dmitri hinted that he had received a visitation from his father’s ghost:

I have said and written more than once that, to me, my parents, in a sense, had never died but lived on, looking over my shoulder in a kind of virtual limbo, available to offer a thought or counsel to assist me with a vital decision, whether a crucial mot juste or a more mundane concern [...] If it pleases an adventurous commentator to liken the case to mystical phenomena, so be it. (*TL*, p. xvii)

In February 2008 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation hosted a radio discussion about whether Dmitri should burn or publish, featuring Boyd, Leland de la Durantaye, and Ron Rosenbaum, the journalist whose pieces for Slate had provoked the whole issue.28 During the broadcast, an email was received from Dmitri, in which he once again implied an intervention from his father:

I have quickly twisted my thoughts this way and that and I think this way is best. As I mentioned, my ruminations have undergone some evolution and it

26 In February 1987 Véra had shown the manuscript to Boyd, then working on his biography of Nabokov. He advised against publication (Boyd and Leving, 22).

27 Martin Amis gives a counter-reading to Dmitri’s, arguing that what has been left is insubstantial and evidence of a writer whose talent was in decline: ‘It is not “A novel in fragments”, as the cover states; it is immediately recognisable as a longish short story struggling to become a novella. In this palatial edition, every left-hand page is blank, and every right-hand page reproduces Nabokov’s manuscript (with its robust handwriting and fragile spelling—“bicycle”, “stomack”, “suprize”), plus the text in typed print (and infested with square brackets). It is nice, I dare say, to see those world-famous index cards up close; but in truth there is little in Laura that reverberates in the mind’ (*The Problem with Nabokov*).

28 For an account of how Dmitri Nabokov’s dilemma became public see Rosenbaum. Boyd gives an account of his own change of heart over the publication of *The Original of Laura* in ‘Nabokov Lives On’. 
happens that your broadcast might just be the perfect opportunity for a well balanced announcement to reverberate forth from the antipodes. To wit, and quite independently of any words anyone might have wanted to put in my mouth or thoughts into my brain, I have decided that my father, with a wry and fond smile, might well have contradicted himself upon seeing me in my present situation and said, ‘Well, why don’t you mix the useful with the pleasurable? That is, say or do what you like but why not make some money on the damn thing?’ (Should Nabokov’s Unpublished Manuscript Be Burned?)

The argument for publication becomes one of authorial intentionality (what does Nabokov, as author, believe to be the right decision?) rather than one of, say, its value to academic researchers, or simply a belief in the importance or quality of the work. As such, the publication of the book is justified through an appeal to the idea of the author (as ghost or mental projection), even if publishing the book goes against the explicitly stated goals of that aesthetic project as expressed by the author. In concluding his email to the ABC discussion, Dmitri invoked Nabokov’s famous response to being asked if he believed in God: ‘I know more than I can express in words and the little I can express would not have been expressed had I not known more.’ In the case of The Original of Laura, Nabokov’s clearly delineated aesthetics were ultimately trumped by mystificatory Nabokovian metaphysics.

In formal terms, The Original of Laura is a remarkable coda to Nabokov’s concern in his late fiction with the death(s) of the author. On one of the manuscript index cards, Nabokov recorded a series of synonyms: ‘efface, expunge, delete, rub out, [illegible, scribbled over], wipe out, obliterate’ (TL 275). This card is placed both at the beginning and at the end of the book and serves as epigraph and postscript, as well as self-reflexive statement about the book itself: we are reading what, by authorial edict, should have been effaced, expunged, and so forth. The editorial decision to place the card so prominently integrates the story of the book’s publication with that of the novel, and in doing so foregrounds the author’s own limitations: his own words about effacement are used to dramatize his very failure to efface them.

The card presumably relates to the section of the manuscript devoted to Philip Wild, a philosopher and neurologist who is experimenting with auto-dissolution, which is the attempt to make himself disappear by the power of his mind alone:

A process of self-obliteration conducted by an effort of the will. Pleasure, bordering on almost unendurable exstasy, comes from feeling the will working at a new task: an act of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of totally free will.
Learning to use vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion[,] standing vitality on its head. \( TL \ 213 \)

In Couturier’s reading of *Look at the Harlequins!* Vadim’s strange mental condition is explained as authorial embarrassment at the uncontrollable circulation of his books in the world after his death. If Vadim is the figured author paralysed by his own irrevocable productivity, then Wild is the figured author seeking absolute effacement, but an effacement on the author’s own terms. As with *Look at the Harlequins!* this invites a paradox. Vadim’s mental condition is part of a novel which, as Couturier points out, adds ‘a new layer of writing’ to the very material legacy the author is struggling with; in *The Original of Laura* Wild’s experiments in self-effacement are conducted in writing that conjures both Wild and his experiments into existence. He seeks his dissolution at the very moment of being ‘embodied’ in paper and ink. In a further twist, *The Original of Laura*’s embodiment as a manuscript is rendered precarious by the threat of destruction hanging over it should it not be completed.

What we have of the manuscript further explores the theme of an author losing control of his material text. It transpires that the original of Laura is Flora, the wife of Wild, with whom the narrator had an affair and about whom he has written a bestselling novel, called *My Laura*. He describes that novel as follows:

The ‘I’ of the book is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters, who destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her. Statically—if one can put it that way—the portrait is a faithful one. Such fixed details as her trick of opening her inguen or of closing her eyes when smelling an inodorous rose are absolutely true to the original. \( TL \ 121 \)

At one stage, Flora is urged to read *My Laura*, in which her own death is dramatized. If Wild is writing a book about destroying himself then Flora is encouraged to read one about her own destruction. The author of *My Laura* has managed to steal not just Wild’s wife but also the manuscript of Wild’s philosophical work, which was ‘deftly plucked’ from the hands of Wild’s secretary after the author had died of a heart attack (an echo of Charles Kinbote purloining ‘Pale Fire’ from John Shade).

Flora is repeatedly identified with a book. In the opening sequence of index cards there is a sudden transition as Flora’s ‘exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel—became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems’ \( TL \ 15 \). As the narrator seeks to describe his having sex with her, he writes that only

by identifying her with an unwritten, half-written, rewritten, difficult book could one hope to render at last what contemporary descriptions of
intercourse so seldom convey [. . .] Readers are directed to that book—on a very high shelf, in a very bad light—but already existing, as magic exists, and death, and as shall exist, from now on, the mouth she made automatically while using that towel to wipe her thighs after the promised withdrawal. (TL 21–5)

The metaphor is revived in an index card marked for the third chapter:

This is Flora of the close-set, dark-blue eyes and cruel mouth recollecting in her mid twenties fragments of her past, with details lost or put back in the wrong order, TAIL betwe[e]n DELTA and SLIT, on dusty dim shelves, this is she. Everything about her is bound to remain blurry, even her name which seems to have been made expressly to have another one modelled upon it by a fantastically lucky artist. (TL 85)

In an important way, Flora is modelled on a specific book: Lolita. In the passage that is marked as the second chapter, the narrator describes Flora’s sexually precocious childhood. After her father’s suicide, her mother is courted by Hubert H. Hubert, whose real interest is in Flora: Hubert, ‘constantly “prowled” (rôdait) around her, humming a monotonous tune and sort of mesmerizing her, enveloping her, so to speak, in some sticky invisible substance and coming closer and closer no matter what way she turned’ (TL 57). Like Dolores Haze, Flora is described through an itemized physiological description, echoing Humbert’s rhetorical strategy of anatomical rhetorical mapping. Humbert, of course, was trying to recapture the original of Lolita, the Annabel Leigh of his childhood. If Flora is the original of Laura, then Lolita, it seems, is the original of Flora. The narrator in each case is seeking to exert control over the lost object of desire.

In the effort expended to bring rhetorical coherence to fragments of fugitive meaning, the publication of The Original of Laura is a kind of enactment of the frustrated desire of its narrator. While there are some numerical guidelines in the top corners of some index cards indicating a possible larger structure, the ordering of the text is necessarily an editorial, rather than an authorial, decision and as a consequence at odds with the Nabokovian aesthetic project. It is therefore formally fitting that the book as published should open with a scene of infidelity, with Flora in the act of betraying her husband. Why is faithless Flora identified so strongly with a book? Why is she identified with Lolita? From what can be understand of the passages about the narrator’s own novel, the idea of what constitutes artistic fidelity is at the heart of The Original of Laura. Humbert was betrayed by Lolita, and, in one crucial sense, Nabokov was betrayed by Lolita: it was the book that brought him wealth, security, and reputation but it was also promiscuous. It is worth recalling what Nabokov had written in relation to Pushkin back in 1937: ‘The greater the number of
readers, the less a book is understood, the essence of its truth, as it spreads, seems to evaporate’ (PRP 41). By the mid-1980s, Lolita had sold fourteen million copies: that is a lot of readers with whom to share ‘truth essence’. Recall also V.’s following his brother’s instructions and burning his papers in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. For Sebastian, ‘nothing ought to remain except the perfect achievement: the printed book’ and the ‘litter of the workshop, no matter its sentimental or commercial value, must never subsist’ (RLSK 30).29 The Original of Laura not only subsists but also formally interrogates its own subsistence.30 It is fitting, in this regard, that the book opens not just with an act of infidelity, but an act of infidelity committed against a writer.

29 Nabokov made this claim himself in his notes to Eugene Onegin: ‘Rough drafts, false scents, half-explored trails, dead ends of inspiration are of little intrinsic importance. An artist should ruthlessly destroy his manuscripts after publication, lest they mislead academic mediocrities into thinking that it is possible to unravel the mysteries of genius by studying cancelled readings. In art, purpose and plan are nothing; only the result counts’ (EO I.15).

30 There is a further twist. Boyd notes in a postscript to ‘The Last Word—Or Not?’ that in February 2011, while staying with Dmitri Nabokov, he found twenty index cards that ‘clearly belong’ to The Original of Laura (p. 257).
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