A Nietzschean Analysis of Vladimir Nabokov's Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis uses the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche to explore and explain moral and literary problems in Vladimir Nabokov's works. Although a phalanx of 'Nabokov and X' studies exist, there remains no English-speaking work that focuses solely on the relationship between these two figures. This seems strange given their deep connection to the Russian Silver Age, Nabokov's frequent references and allusions to Nietzsche, and their thematic similarities.

The many knotted issues in Nabokov studies – *Lolita*'s relationship to morality, *Pale Fire*'s internal authorship, Nabokov's relationship with his readership – often create impasses that frustrate interpretation. By breaking with traditional approaches in Nabokov studies; by 'answering back' to Nabokov rather than adhering to the conditions he suggested for reading his work, I demonstrate how a Nietzschean analysis can negotiate such interpretative stalemate and act as a fulcrum to problems in Nabokov's fiction.

The study is divided into three sections, each with two chapters: 'Nietzschean Engagements', 'Nietzschean Readings' and 'Beyond Nietzsche'. The first section deals with Nabokov's more obvious points of contact with Nietzsche through allusions and references. 'Nietzschean Readings' looks at Nabokov's texts through the lens of Nietzschean philosophy, allowing us to frame certain literary problems differently. The last section describes how Nabokov moves away from Nietzsche – from respectful pupil to rebellious disciple.

Each chapter of the thesis looks at existing problems in Nabokov's *oeuvre* and challenges the assumptions surrounding them. For the most part, this challenging is uncomfortable insofar as it asks readers to question, perhaps even doubt, the very mechanisms that they go about understanding literature. One of the main concerns running through the thesis is the insistence that such disconcertment is not only rewarding in respect to understanding Nabokov's works but also beneficial to the reader's capabilities.

Contents

Introduction

> 'Alas, I am not one to provide much sport for influence hunters' (Nabokov [1990] 1973, p.152)

Despite Vladimir Nabokov's insistence that his texts should not be interpreted through the lens of his life or his reading, critics often look outside of his works for potential answers inside of them. On a website dedicated to Nabokov (*Zembla*), for example, there are over 200 'Nabokov and X' listings of articles and books. Yet, when in the foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938), Nabokov notes that he 'could never understand why every book of mine invariably sends reviewers scurrying in search of more or less celebrated names for the purpose of passionate comparison' (2001 [1938], pp.7-8), his suggestion is that such comparative analysis is misinformed, futile even.[1] In more reflective moods, he offers his explanation for why this is so, as in this passage on literary influence in *Strong Opinions* (1973):

> [It] is a dark and unclear thing. One may imagine, for example, two writers, A and B, completely different but both under a certain Proustian influence; this influence goes unnoticed by reader C inasmuch as each of the three (A, B, and C) has understood Proust in his own way. It happens that a writer has an oblique influence through another writer, or that some sort of complex blending of influences takes place, and so on. One may not foresee anything in this regard. (Nabokov 1990 [1973], p.283)

[1] On Nabokov's insatiable desire to control his critics, see, for example, Maurice Couturier's 'The Near-Tyranny of the Author: *Pale Fire*' in Julian Connolly, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Nabokov's list of features as to how students should read in *Lectures and Literature* (New York: Harvest, 1980, p.8).

The question of literary influence is indeed a 'dark and unclear thing' yet it is worth exploring for at least three reasons. Firstly, recognising and identifying specific references to one text in another allows us to theorize about how the first text was disseminated as well as *why* the author of the second text chose certain passages from the first. Secondly, such interpretative context can point to a broader literary context for the second text – for example, whether it adheres to the pastoral genre or the comedic. Thirdly, and perhaps most profoundly, the relationship between two or more authors can be seen as constitutive of texts, something articulated by critics such as T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom[2] and in studies such as Jonathan Bate's *Shakespeare and Ovid* (1994) or Katrin Ettenhuber's *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (2011). In this introduction, I concentrate on the first two reasons, aiming to identify specific references to the work of Nietzsche in Nabokov's work and to provide an interpretative context for the thesis. In the main body of the thesis, I will mostly address the third reason, the broader relationship between Nietzsche and Nabokov, though some parts of my arguments rely on direct and indirect evidence of Nabokov's knowledge of Nietzsche. In both introduction and thesis, I hope to show a background of Nietzschean assumptions in Nabokov's work in order to make sense of some persistent problems in Nabokov's *oeuvre*, such as the nature of the relationships between art and morality or between author and reader. I suggest that a Nietzschean context provides fresh, but not always palatable, ways to understand these problems. My thesis therefore identifies a relationship between Nabokov's texts and Nietzsche's as well as providing Nietzschean readings of Nabokov. When discussing questions of direct influence and allusion, I draw on scholarship investigating Nietzsche's evolving reception in both Russia and the West. In my

[2] See Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1917) in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp.13-22 and Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Nietzschean readings of Nabokov more generally, I also draw on current scholarship interpreting Nietzsche.

In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom claims that 'belated' poets suffer from the dominance of the 'precursor' poets of literary history in that there seems no new way to express ideas. Rather than viewing this negatively however, Bloom theorizes that 'belated' poets resist and challenge their 'precursors' in order to find an authoritative place for their creative output (pp.14-16). In regard to Nabokov and Nietzsche, I do not simply claim that Nabokov merely imitated all of Nietzsche's philosophical concepts. Rather, I argue that, in some instances, Nabokov appears to extend Nietzsche's philosophy, seeing him as both model *and* rival. Towards the end of the thesis, I make the claim that Nabokov rewrites or, in Bloom's vocabulary, 'misreads' some of Nietzsche's thought in order to make his creative output unique.[3] I will look at the *relationship* between the two figures, rather than the influence of Nietzsche on Nabokov, arguing that while the latter is a reductive method, aligned with the puzzle-solving element in Nabokov studies, the former can illuminate deeper problems in the texts.

Nabokov's contempt for the 'literature of ideas' may have deterred critics from 'any attempt to press his work for seemingly distant sources in philosophy' (Karshan 2011, p.23). Yet, such attempts do exist. Most philosophical studies of this kind have looked at the relationship between Nabokov and German idealism – a movement that grew out of Enlightenment thought, concerned with mind/reality distinctions, aesthetics and universalized ethics. The figure of Immanuel Kant in Nabokov criticism, for example, has been brought up by a number of critics. Kant's absorption into Russian

[3] This can be seen as analogous to Nietzsche's idea of 'taking in' Zarathustra but also resisting him.

intellectual thought was deep.[4] In the third chapter of *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (2011), Dana Dragunoiu looks at the interplay between art and ethics by looking at parallels between Nabokov and Kant. Discussing Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), Dragunoiu claims that 'Van's offhand reference to Kant…provides an incisive clue about the ethical dimension of Nabokov's work' (p.143). She continues:

> As a professor of literature in the United States, Nabokov exasperated his own students by insisting that they familiarize themselves with the source of every allusion in a given literary work. Such meticulousness makes it reasonable to guess that he held himself to the same standard. (p.147)

I agree with Dragunoiu's idea of furrowing Nabokov's seemingly offhand allusions as well as hypothesising about the sources of Nabokov's recurring interests (for example, his intellectual acquaintances, or his father's legal research and prison reading) (p.147). I also follow Dragunoiu's example in contextualizing the influence of the Russian Silver Age on Nabokov.

In *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (2011), Thomas Karshan also explores Nabokov's links with Kant. He provides a thorough account of Kant's aesthetics, suggesting that 'its internal themes will be replicated in Nabokov's work' (p.26). He also suggests a genealogical progression of influence, claiming that those who influenced Nabokov (Friedrich Schiller, Nietzsche, and Andrei Bely) were, in turn, influenced by Kant (ibid). Exploring allusions and identifying chains of ideas are both methods with considerable strengths and I draw on both in this thesis. Yet, these relationships can be overstated; it is difficult to reconcile Kant's philosophy with the literary and moral

[4] See Dana Dragunoiu's *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (2011, pp.146-148) and Thomas Karshan's *Nabokov and the Art of Play* (2011, pp.25-30).

outlook of Nabokov's protagonists and literary persona. Where Kant's categorical imperative stresses that one should act as if it were a universal law, Nabokov's works seems to privilege free-willed, autonomous individuals who resist all-encompassing evaluation. Similarly, where Kant values *disinterested* aesthetic judgement, Nabokov is keen to stress 'the mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine, is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book' (Nabokov 1980, p.4).[5] In other words, Kant's philosophy is perhaps *too* objective to sit satisfactorily with Nabokov's art. I take a slightly different approach to Nietzsche than either Dragunoiu or Karshan do to Kant. My aim is to attempt an ethical and literary examination of a writer's entire *oeuvre* through the application of various philosophical tenets promoted by one philosopher.

Given Nabokov's frequent references to spirals, and ideas of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, Georg Hegel is also a frequent subject of comparison for Nabokov scholars.[6] In 'Nabokov's Dialectical Structure' (1967) for example, Carol T. Williams identifies numerous Hegelian references in Nabokov's works (looking mostly at *The Gift*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Lolita*). Although these literary references, and Nabokov's own pronouncements, give strength to the idea that he knew Hegel's philosophy reasonably well, her project aims mostly to show correlations between Nabokov's writing and Hegel's tropes. Some of the references Williams provides also seem to have an ambiguous element to them – Fyodor's claim that 'the time for hearty Russian

[5] In 'Good Readers and Good Writers', Nabokov claims that 'We ought to remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy – passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers – the inner weave of a given masterpiece. To be quite objective in these matters is of course impossible. Everything that is worthwhile is to some extent subjective' (1980, p.4). In *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov writes that 'the books you like must be read with shudders and gasps' (1981, p.105).

[6] See Brian Boyd's *The Russian Years* (pp.294-295) and *The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999, pp.10-13, pp.89-90). Boyd, however, claims that Nabokov's idea of the 'spiral' comes before his exposure to either Hegel or Henri Bergson. See, also, the discussion of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in *The Gift* (p.132) and the mention of 'thoughtful Hegelian synthesis' in *Lolita* (2000 [1955], p.307).

Hegelianism was now past' (p.223) and that 'some extravagantly praised Kant, others *Kont* (Comte), others again Hegel or Schlegel' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.187) are just two examples that may suggest Nabokov's dismissal of the philosopher. Williams herself concedes that 'Nabokov seems to twit Hegel with a rhyme' (p.251). Indeed, although she acknowledges Nabokov's critical approach to Hegel's philosophy - 'Hegel's triadic series expressed *merely* the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time' (p.250, my emphasis) - Williams often declines to explore the ambiguity in the relationship, instead leaving the reader to decide whether Nabokov was entirely convinced by Hegel's philosophy or not. Williams' case, however, that both Hegel and Nabokov are effectively artists (both effectively able to articulate philosophical insight through literary means) anticipates some of my own claims about Nabokov's relationship with Nietzsche.

Another link exists between Nabokov and Arthur Schopenhauer, with critics such as Leona Toker, Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts arguing that Nabokov was familiar with his writings.[7] Toker argues that 'Nabokov seems to have preferred Schopenhauer to Hegel' (1989, p.153). In *The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989), many of the approaches she adopts are similar to those explored in the body of this thesis: she claims that Schopenhauer can improve our understanding of Nabokov's fiction and does not seek to position him as the latter's 'source' (p.7); authenticates her choice of philosopher through the fact that 'Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were widely read by

[7] Leona Toker, in *The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989), claims that 'Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were widely read by Russian writers of the turn of the century' (1989, p.7). Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts, in "'If We Put Our Heads between Our Legs": An Introduction to the Theme "Vladimir Nabokov and Arthur Schopenhauer"' (*Nabokov Studies*, Volume 11, 2007/2008), also stress Nabokov's knowledge of Schopenhauer. Such studies seem to be strengthened through Dmitri Nabokov's comment: 'Father and I were making what was likely to be the last of our mountain rambles while summering near Gstaad and Rougemont, Switzerland…He had written almost everything he had wanted to, and his method was, he said, simple. Everything existed in his mind like an undeveloped film, and his sole function was to set it down -- a concept of creation he thought was not unlike Schopenhauer's' ('Comment to Mr Dolinin's Letter', in NABOKOV-L, Sept 23rd, 2005).

Russian writers of the turn of the century' (1989, p.7)[8]; and uses Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' theory: 'Nabokov's ethical principles may be considered a swerve from Emerson and Thoreau, just as his metaphysics is a swerve from Schopenhauer' (1989, p.12). Yet, Toker's use of Schopenhauer seems mostly confined to one particular text, *The World as Will and Representation* [*WWR*], and her application of his philosophy is both relatively specialized and kept very brief - 'the coda of *The World as Will and Representation* can be read as a commentary on the ending of Nabokov's *Invitation*' (p.6); Nabokov and Schopenhauer's mention of '*camera obscura*' (p.14), and Schopenhauer's 'active/passive selves' and Krug's personality (p.190) are just three examples. Rather than simply placing certain phrases, or ideas, side-by-side, I will draw on a range of examples from numerous Nietzsche texts, illuminating the parallels by close consideration of both Nietzsche's and Nabokov's texts. I enter into discussion with Toker's approach in more detail in chapter four.

Senderovich and Shvarts' article also explores links between Nabokov and Schopenhauer. They concentrate on four Schopenhaurean motifs as a way to understand Nabokov's fiction ('Quercus', 'Camera Obscura', 'The World as Puppet Show', and 'Alive Among Puppets'). Like Toker, however, they focus heavily on the conjunctions between *WWR* and *Invitation to a Beheading*. In doing so, they argue that Nabokov's writing contains a 'systematic philosophy', despite his numerous disclaimers (his loathing of symbols and the literature of ideas, his thoughts on existentialism, his dismissal of ready-made ideas). My study does not make such a claim. In addition, the reader is often *told* by Senderovich and Shvarts that Nabokov was interested in Schopenhauer, or left to discern this claim for themselves, rather than being given explicit evidence ('the writer worked through Schopenhauer's texts'; 'Strannolyubsky…speaks for Godunov

[8] Toker does not reference Nietzsche anywhere else in her study.

Cherdnyntsev as well as Nabokov'; and 'we assume that Nabokov was acquainted with Schopenhauer through Aikenvald's edition'). Senderovich and Shvarts seem to aim to elucidate how much Schopenhauer's philosophy influenced *Nabokov* rather than his texts (something that can be inferred, perhaps, from the title of their article). In the main body of my study however, I focus predominantly on the interplay between Nabokov's *texts* and Nietzsche's philosophy.

Although literary associates of German idealism, namely Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, have also been discussed in relation to Nabokov, idealism is not the only philosophical movement to be linked with him.[9] Toker, Brian Boyd, Michael Glynn and Constantine Muravnik have all established connections between twentieth-century philosophical writers and Nabokov, such as Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger[10], whilst critics as varied as Pekka Tammi, Jacqueline Hamrit, Richard Rorty, and Julian Connolly have looked at how poststructuralist theorists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida can give us insight into how Nabokov's fictions work.[11] Tammi, in her study of Nabokov and Foucault, opts to uncover 'intriguing resemblances' rather than trace a causal link, and stresses the 'differences' between Nabokov and Foucault

[9] See Omry Ronen's article 'Nabokov and Goethe' in Gennady Barabtarlo's *Cold Fusion: Aspects of the German Cultural Presence in Russia* (2000).

[10] Boyd claims that Nabokov read Bergson 'avidly in his years of European exile' (1990, p.294). Articles that discuss the connection include Leona Toker's 'Philosophers as Poets: Reading Nabokov with Schopenhauer and Bergson' (*Russian Literature TriQuarterly*, Ann Arbor, MI, 24, 1991, pp.185-196) and 'Nabokov and Bergson' in Vladimir E. Alexandrov's *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland, 1995, pp.367-373). Other critics who have made links with Nabokov and Heidegger include Richard Rorty, Christine Clegg, and Toker.

[11] Pekka Tammi, for example, in 'Shadows of Differences: *Pale Fire* and Foucault's *Pendulum*' (*Cycnos*, Vol. 12) looks at the links between Nabokov and Foucault. Revealingly, in *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (1989), Foucault is documented as saying 'I am a Nietzschean' (Callinicos 1989, p.86). For links between Nabokov and Derrida, see Jacqueline Hamrit's '"Play! Invent the World! Invent Reality!" Nabokov/Derrida' (*The Oxford Literary Review*, Volume 25, 2003, pp. 157-77) and Julian W. Connolly's 'Cincinnatus and Différance: Subversive Discourse in *Invitation to a Beheading*' (*Cycnos*, Vol. 12, No.2, 2008).

parallels. Connolly explains that Nabokov and Derrida 'are not frequently linked' (2008) and explores the benefits of retrograde analysis – using Derrida's notions of authority and otherness in an exploration of *Invitation to a Beheading* and stressing, like Tammi, differences. I endorse both methods but opt to hypothesize *why* such resemblances exist, and stress similarities between Nietzsche and Nabokov as well as differences.

Figures to whom Nabokov is explicitly hostile or indifferent towards have also been studied in relation to his work. Alexander Moudrov's article 'Invitation to Plato's Beheading' in *The Goalkeeper: The Nabokov Almanac* (2010) states that 'Plato's presence in Nabokov's works is largely unexamined, in spite of the apparent affinities between the two writers and the critical interest in the metaphysical aspect of Nabokov's prose' (Moudrov in Leving 2010, p.61), perhaps because 'Nabokov gave the impression that he wanted to discourage this line of inquiry' (ibid). He argues persuasively that Nabokov's dismissal - 'I detest Plato, I loathe Lacedaemon and all Perfect States' (Karlinsky 2001 [1979], p.180) – ironically illustrates his knowledge of Platonic thinking. Like Moudrov, I feel that this ostensible 'covering up' of knowledge, or influence, is worth exploring and investigate the question of Nabokov's silence on Nietzsche later in this introduction. Perhaps the most interesting series of studies in this sense have been on the relationship between Nabokov and Freud – a person who Nabokov referred to as 'the Viennese Quack' (Nabokov 2010 [1947], p.xi). Geoffrey Green, Jenefer Shute, and Leland de la Durantaye are among those who have explored this relationship – worthwhile precisely because Nabokov is so loquaciously keen to negate it.[12]

[12] For discussion of Nabokov and Freud, see Geoffrey Green's *Freud and Nabokov* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) and Jenefer Shute's *Nabokov and Freud: The Play of Power* (Ph.D., 1984); 'Nabokov and Freud: The Play of Power' (*MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 30:4, 1984, pp.637-650); and 'Nabokov and Freud' in Vladimir E. Alexandrov's *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland, 1995, pp.412-420). Durantaye's 'Vladimir Nabokov and Sigmund Freud, or a Particular Problem' (*American Imago*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2005, pp.59-73) also explores the relationship.

So, there is no shortage of works on Nabokov's relationship to philosophy, with critics adopting a range of methods in relation to several different philosophies. Nor have the links between Nabokov and Nietzsche gone entirely unnoticed. The only full-length study focusing on the two figures is Anatoly Livry's *Набоков-ницшеанец* [*Nabokov as a Nietzschean*] (2005), which was translated into French in 2010 (Paris: Hermann). Concerned with the relationship between modern European civilization and ancient tragedy, the legacy of Socrates, and the decline of Europe, the study privileges historical parallels and the idea of direct influence at the expense of detailed close reading (often providing long passages from both writers' works that sometimes stretch conceivable parallels). Livry has also published four articles on the relations, one of which provided 'a not entirely successful attempt to see Nabokov as a "Nietzsche Anhänger [adherent or follower]"' (Furness 2008).[13]

Constantine Muravnik's thesis *Nabokov's Philosophy of Art* (2010) also takes a considerable interest in Nabokov and Nietzsche and takes a far more rigorous

[13] Livry's articles include: 'Nabokov le bacchant' (*Nietzsche im Film: Projektionen und Götzen-Dämmerungen*, Volker Gerhardt and Renate Reschke, eds. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009. Nietzscheforschung ; Bd. 16), pp. 305-319); 'Nabokov, Nietzsche und ihre dionysischen Wurzeln' (Persues Verlag, Basel, 2008-2009); 'Nabokov der Nietzsche-Anhänger' (Nietzscheforchung 13, 2006, Berlin, Akademie Verlag); 'La Méditerranée' de Nietzsche dans l'œuvre de Vladimir Nabokov' (Slavica Occitania, Toulouse, 15, 2002). In his PhD thesis *Nabokov's Philosophy of Art*, Constantine Muravnik has the following to say:

> I mention for the record Livry's uninformed and largely offensive book, *Набоков-ницшеанец* (Nabokov as a Nietzschean). Livry bases his book on the outdated and discredited criticism of Nietzsche from the Nazi period (Richard Oehler and Arthur Knight) and ignores the vast body of important works on the philosopher, including the books by Heidegger, Kaufmann, Safranski, and many others. Consequently, he structures his work around the simplistic and false opposition of Nietzsche to Socrates and thus misses the essential points about aesthetics and ethics of both Nietzsche and Nabokov…I refer to Livry's book only because it directly addressed the topic of my dissertation. It does not, however, merit any further attention or criticism. Needless to say, my own approach to Nietzsche and Nabokov has nothing in common with Livry's. (p.458, fn 43).

approach.[14] Muravnik uses Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and, to a lesser degree, Heidegger to theorize Nabokov's association of aesthetic experience with the transcendental. He uses their philosophies as interpretative tools to analyse Nabokov's 'aesthetic metaphysics' or his philosophy of art. In looking at the relationship between Nabokov and Nietzsche, Muravnik analyses a relationship that, so far, has received little scrutiny and he is relatively thorough in documenting Nabokov's explicit references to Nietzsche, as well as the potential role of the Russian Silver Age in creating the relationship. It is an original project in that, in reading Nabokov's art through Kantian aesthetics, its interpretation sits between the two dominant extremes of the metafictional and metaphysical. Yet, it could be argued that the sheer range of philosophical positions here is hard to unite in a coherent account of Nabokov. For example, Kant, advocating 'categorical imperatives' and 'disinterested aesthetic judgement', and Schopenhauer, as a pessimist and advocating 'will-less contemplation of aesthetic ideas' (p.90), are perhaps unlikely bedfellows for Nabokov's aesthetic and moral visions.

Muravnik is not focussing on Nietzsche alone and so it is not surprising that he concentrates on a fairly limited range of Nietzsche's ideas, especially tragedy and eternal recurrence (p.393). My thesis considers a broader range of Nietzsche's philosophy,

[14] There are three main sections devoted to the relationship between Nabokov and Nietzsche. The first is in the 'Theoretical Introduction' under the subheading 'Philosophy, Science, and Art: Aesthetic Experience vis-à-vis Conceptual and Scientific Thinking; Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger and Nabokov's Philosophy of Art' (pp.11-12, pp. 19-23, pp. 26-27). The second section looking at the relationship is also in the Theoretical Introduction, under the subheading 'Ethics' (pp.77-102), whilst the third is the whole of chapter IV ('The Ethical Dimension of Nabokov's Aesthetic Metaphysics in *Transparent Things* and *Bend, Sinister*'), specifically under the subheadings 'The Ethics of "Holographic Tralatitions" in *Transparent Things*: from Schopenhauer's Constant Recurrence to Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence and Cosmodicy' (pp.347-393) and 'Nietzsche's Tragedy in *Bend, Sinister*' (pp.394-446). Smaller references to Nietzsche in Muravnik's thesis can be found at p.49, pp.109-10, p.118, pp.131-132, p.180, p.286, p.304, p.309, p.324, p. 335, p.346, p.474 (fn 181), p.476 (fn 197), p.479 (fn 216), pp.481-482 (fn 231), p.483 (fn 239), p.484 (fns 245, 247, 248) and p.485 (fn 253).

including perspectivism, the will to power, and the *Übermensch* for example. He also chooses to ignore the 'annoying question of influence' (p.102) whereas I argue that, handled with care, the influence of Nietzsche on Nabokov can be both identified and fruitfully analysed.

Other books that refer in passing to the relationship between Nabokov and Nietzsche include John Burt Foster's *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (1993), Marina Grishakova's *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames* (2006) and Karshan's *Nabokov and the Art of Play*. Foster's *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (1993) explores how Nabokov's conception of memory intersects with other seminal figures of modernism, specifically Proust, Bergson, Freud, Mann, Joyce and Eliot. His choice of the phrase 'art of memory' relates to 'Nabokov's memory-writing, his deliberate oscillation between fictive invention and mnemonic truth' (1993, p.x) and focuses mainly on Nabokov's writings between 1925 and 1950. Where Foster argues that 'except at the very beginning of his career, Nabokov had little contact with Nietzschean modernism' (p.x), I aim to illustrate Nabokov's continual engagement with Nietzsche throughout his literary career.[15] Also, where Foster 'downplays… [Nabokov's] response to the Silver Age literature of his youth' (1993, p.ix), I privilege this period as a point of pollination. Foster is shrewd, however, in suggesting that Nabokov 'exceeds even Nietzsche in his commitment to individuality and the literary image' (ibid). I explore more of my divergences from Foster's arguments in chapter one of this study.

Grishakova's *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames* looks mainly at spatio-temporal models presented by Bergson, Proust and Lacan but her study dedicates four pages (pp.101-105) to the

[15] Foster claims that 'Nabokov only read him [Nietzsche] in his youth…Nietzsche rarely appears in Nabokov's later work" as well as that they have 'very different tendencies' (1993, p.39).

relationship between 'Nietzsche's circle of the eternal return' and Nabokov's conception of time. Her analysis extends only to Nabokov's first novel *Mary* (1926) however - where the phrase 'eternal return' occurs - and focuses on crude interpretations of the *Übermensch* (strength, brutality), whereas my own analysis considers how Ganin is unable to fulfil the criteria for 'eternal recurrence' (chapter one) and looks at parodies, and modifications, of the *Übermensch* (chapter five). Grishakova accepts Foster's argument that Nabokov turns the phrase 'upside down' and into a hollow slogan. Yet she is astute in thinking that Nabokov's treatment of eternal return is ambivalent rather than, as Foster argues, simply 'hollow'; I explore this ambivalence in depth in chapter one. Similarly, her brief foray into how the Symbolists perceived 'eternal recurrence' provides helpful context. Her claim, however, that 'there is no evidence of a direct intertextual linkage' (2006, p.103) other than that Nabokov read Nietzsche in the Crimea (and the mention of 'eternal return' in *Mary*) is incorrect. As I show in the first chapter, there are references to eternal recurrence in *Pnin* and *Speak, Memory*. And Nabokov's seemingly indefatigable zest for life can be seen as analogous to Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati* (a prerequisite for the operation of eternal recurrence).

Karshan's *Nabokov and the Art of Play* theorizes Nabokov's conception of play in German idealism (Schiller, Hegel, Kant and, to some extent, Nietzsche), claiming that play was Nabokov's 'signature idea' (2011, p.5). Like Karshan, I argue in favour of a precursor playing a significant part in Nabokov's artistic philosophy, yet differ from him in focusing on the impact of just one philosopher. Also, although Karshan's study provides thorough philosophical background to play at the start of his study, my thesis prefers to present the philosophical next to the literary wherever possible so that readers never have too much distance to travel.

Passing references to the relationship between Nietzsche and Nabokov also exist in a handful of articles. Most of these are concerned with local detail rather than a

sustained analysis of the relationship between the two writers. The only one to focus explicitly on the two figures is Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts' "The Underwater Gold: Nitzschean [sic] Motifs in Nabokov's *Gift"* (in Russ.: "Podvodnoe zoloto") (*Analysieren als Deuten.* Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2004, pp. 575-91).[16] Constantine Muravnik's 'Choosing the Hero: Nabokov's Short Story 'Recruiting' as an Introduction to His Aesthetics' (*Russian Literature* 2008, pp.61-84) looks at the role of aesthetics in Nabokov's art as part of his larger project mentioned earlier. Other articles also make references to Nietzsche, but mostly as asides. D. Barton Johnson's 'Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and Russian-American Literature or, the Odd Couple' (*Cycnos*, Vol. 12, 2008) makes a brief case for the role of Nietzsche in early twentieth-century Russia in connection with Nabokov and Ayn Rand. Alexander Dolinin, in 'Caning of Modernist Profaners: Parody in *Despair*' (2008), claims that the protagonist of Nabokov's *Despair* (2000 [1965]) may be referring to Nietzsche's idea that '*Gott ist tot*' [God is dead] when he says 'God does not exist, other does our hereafter'.[17] Similarly, Sergei Davydov's 'Dostoevsky and Nabokov: The Morality of Structure In "Crime and Punishment" And "Despair"' (2008) claims that Hermann is a caricature of Raskolnikov who, in turn, is a caricature of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.[18] Martine Hennard's 'Playing a Game of Worlds in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*' (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 1994), briefly links Kinbote's 'presumptuous display of learning' and 'errancy' to ideas in Nietzsche. In *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, Durantaye suggests that, near the end of the *Lolita*, Humbert may be making a veiled allusion to Nietzsche.[19] Jerome H. Katsell, in '*Pnin*: The Perils of

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[16] As already mentioned, these authors also collaborated on "'If We Put Our Heads between Our Legs": An Introduction to the Theme Vladimir Nabokov and Arthur Schopenhauer'; *Nabokov Studies*, Volume 11, 2007/2008.

[17] http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1449

[18] http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/DS/03/157.shtml. This idea is explored in detail in chapter five.

[19] Overhearing Dolores' words to Eva Rosen near the end of the novel, Humbert remarks, 'I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly,

Repetition' (2009), suggests that Nabokov 'did not believe in a Nietzschean principle of eternal return that requires a posthumous, exact and endless repetition of what has been…[but] believed that full human consciousness is centred in the mind' (2009). Finally, Maurice Couturier refers to Nietzsche's issue with the Kantian idea of 'disinterestedness' in 'Nabokov or the Cruelty of Desire: A Psychoanalytic Reading'.[20]

As well as these studies of Nabokov's work in relation to specific, named philosophers, there are many more general works on philosophical aspects of the texts. Early English-language criticism of Nabokov, heralded by Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1966), was keen to stress Nabokov's aesthetic sensibilities; his interest in art at the expense of moral engagement.[21] Since this publication, and perhaps because of it, many studies have focused on the relationship between Nabokov and ethics. Following Ellen Pifer's *Nabokov and the Novel* (1980), studies such as Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (1989), Leona Toker's *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989), Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts* (1994) and Durantaye's *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* offered readings that positioned Nabokov as, what I call in chapter one, a 'hidden' moral writer; a moral didact in disguise whose aestheticism cloaked an essentially Christian morality of virtue.

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behind the juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.284). Durantaye claims that, 'It is unlikely, but possible, that Nabokov had in mind Nietzsche's remark in his *Gay Science*: "We all have our hidden gardens and bowers [*Wir haben Alle verbonene Garten und Pflanzungen in uns*]" (Nietzsche, 3: 381)". Nabokov was doubtless aware that the etymology of paradise is "garden" or "park"' (2007, p.92 fn8).

[20] http://www.libraries.psu .edu/nabokov/coutnab1.htm

[21] This idea still exists in modern criticism: 'I don't think that there is anything deeply philosophical or moral at the centre of Nabokov…Aside from his exquisite use of language you have to assign Nabokov to a man of talent rather than genius' (Glynn 2007, p.156).

In the last two years, at least five further studies have looked at the moral or philosophical aspect of Nabokov, all but two of which are discussed above.[22] My study continues this trend in looking at the question of Nabokov and ethics, but departs from them in illustrating the links between Nabokov and a philosopher who questioned not only moral parameters but whether our morality is valid at all. Like Maurice Couturier, I take issue with those who 'have tried to prove the celestial level of [Nabokov's] moral standards' (1996, p.215).

To sum up, my approach differs in three important respects from those who have already engaged with Nabokov and philosophy. Firstly, it makes a case for the socio-historical and literary impact of a single philosopher on Nabokov. Despite Nietzsche being directly, and indirectly, referred to on numerous occasions in Nabokov's fiction, no major study has yet looked at the relationship in depth using the methods of close reading a wide range of texts and referencing a wide range of Nietzsche's ideas. By tracing the links of Nabokov and Nietzsche to Russian Silver Age writers and philosophers, I show the direct relevance of Nietzsche's philosophy. Secondly, by looking at how philosophy can be used to explore, and explain, literary problems, it opens Nabokov studies more widely to philosophers, cultural theorists, and literary theorists. The study uses the theoretical framework of Nietzsche in order to explain some of the most pressing issues in Nabokov's fiction – such as aesthetics, morality, cruelty, and author/reader relations. To simply look at the aspect of socio-historical influence is, to a certain extent, to veer off into literary biography, and is not my

[22] These five texts are: Eric Naiman's *Nabokov, Perversely* (2010), Muravnik's *Nabokov's Philosophy of Art*, (Ph.D., Yale University, 2010), Karshan's *Nabokov and the Art of Play*, Dragunoiu's *Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* and David S. Rutledge's *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery: The Expression of Metaphysics in His Work* (North Carolina: McFarlane & Company, 2011).

objective. Instead, socio-historical evidence is used simply to support the application of Nietzsche's philosophical concepts to specific problems or areas in Nabokov's prose.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the study does not adhere to a critical consensus in which Nabokov's apparent faults are forged, or reinterpreted, into benevolent acts. His troubling aspects, as a result, are looked at *as* troubling rather than 'misunderstood'. This in no way suggests that I am condemning Nabokov (it is impossible, and inappropriate here, to comment on the real figure of course). Instead, this study celebrates Nabokov for what I call his Nietzschean 'revaluation of values' – his questioning of customs, his playfulness with form and expectation, and, ultimately, his surpassing of Nietzsche's thought in exactly the way that the philosopher himself demanded.

Finally, although criticism such as Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* and Wood's *The Magician's Doubts* mention Nietzsche and Nabokov in their texts only in passing, both texts were pivotal in my formulation of this project. Rorty's project was beneficial in illustrating how philosophy can shed light on literary problems (see chapter four's discussion of his 'Barber of Kasbeam' essay for more detailed discussion) and, in *The Magician's Doubts*, Wood's discussion of how, and why, Nabokov conceals loss, pain and pity in his texts; how the magician's doubts, rather than tricks, are integral to his art.

Nabokov and the Russian Silver Age

In *Strong Opinions* (1973), Nabokov stated that his favourite novels of the twentieth century were James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1913), Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), and the first half of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927) (Nabokov 1990 [1973], p.57). Bely's novel is arguably the least well-known of the four novels given here, yet its position in Nabokov's canon is testament to

the respect that Nabokov had for the Symbolist movement and its expression in the Russian Silver Age.

The Silver Age was a highly fertile Russian literary period around the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries. Major exponents included Alexander Blok, Maximilian Voloshin, Maxim Gorky, Ivan Bunin, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, Bely and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Their literature was concerned with the upheaval of convention, the questioning of form and vocabulary, and the role of the individual in art. In response to Edmund Wilson's claim that no important Russian poetry had been written between 1900 and 1920 in Russia, Nabokov responded that:

> The "decline" of Russian literature in 1905-1917 is a Soviet invention. Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff in those days. And never was poetry so popular – not even in Pushkin's days. I am a product of that period, I was bred in that atmosphere. (Karlinsky 2001 [1979], p.246)[23]

Brian Boyd claims that, 'as a youth Nabokov devoured Symbolist verse rapturously' (1990, p.93). By eleven, Nabokov had collected a number of symbolist, acmeist, and futurist poets and, by fifteen, he had 'read and digested practically *all* of the contemporary poets' (ibid). This early interest in Symbolist literature increased in the Crimea between 1917 and 1919, where he met the Symbolist poet Maximilian Voloshin – an acquaintance of Nabokov's father, V.D. Nabokov, who tutored Nabokov in the art of poetry and introduced him to the work and critical discussion of Andrei Bely (Boyd

[23] For more detail, see Vladimir E. Alexandrov's essay 'Nabokov and the Silver Age of Russian Culture' in *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991) and D. Barton Johnson's 'Belyj & Nabokov: A Comparative Overview' (*Russian Literature*, Amsterdam, 9, 1981, pp.379-402).

1990, p.149).[24] Nabokov's relationship with Symbolist thought continued over the next two decades, with Nabokov corresponding with figures such as Nikolai Berdiaev, Ivan Bunin, and Vladimir Khodasevich in the late 1930s.[25] Barry Scherr suggests that Nabokov's 'early love poems show evidence of his familiarity with the Russian Symbolists, among whom he seems, at least for a while, to have been closest to Alexander Blok'. Scherr observes that 'a pair of poems in *The Cluster* were written on the occasion of Blok's death in 1921 (*Stikhotvorennia*, 66-68)' using Blok's own imagery and vocabulary. He also mentions Nabokov's poem's 'A Song' and 'Vstrecha' ('Meeting'), the latter having an epilogue from Blok (Scherr in Connolly 2005, p.114).[26]

Nabokov predominantly wrote under the pen name of 'Sirin' between the 1920s and 1940s, a word associated with the mythical firebird in Russian mythology. In *Strong Opinions*, however, he reveals that this name also had a connection to the Symbolist movement:

> Incidentally, circa 1910 there had appeared literary collections under the editorial title of *Sirin* devoted to the so-called 'symbolist' movement, and I remember how tickled I was to discover in 1952 while browsing the

[24] Karshan claims that, 'Like all of the Russian Symbolists, Voloshin was a devotee of Nietzsche's' (2011, p.40).

[25] The Nabokov Archives in the United States' Library of Congress reveal that Nabokov was in correspondence with Nikolai Berdiaev, Ivan Alekseevich Bunin, and V. F Khodasevich between 1937 and 1939. Nabokov also details knowledge of Silver Age thinkers and thought in *Speak, Memory* (2000 [1967], London: Penguin Books, p.218). Further, Boyd observes that 'less suggestive to the English-speaking reader but more substantial are Nabokov's relations in his years of European exile with friends and foes among the writers of the emigration: robust Lukash, gentle Aykhenwald, the acid and exacting Khodasevich, slippery Adamovich, envy-choked Bunin' (1993, p.4). Articles on specific links to Nabokov and Silver Age writers include David M Bethea's 'Nabokov and Khodasevich' in Alexandrov's *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (pp.452-463) and Maxim D. Shrayer's 'Vladimir Nabokov and Ivan Bunin: A Reconstruction' (*Russian Literature*, 1998 Apr. 1, Vol.43, no. 3, pp.339-411).

[26] Scherr also reveals that '*The Cluster* includes an admiring poem entitled "To Ivan Bunin"…Yuly Aikhenvald, in reviewing the collection, saw Nabokov as attempting to follow Bunin (*Rul'*, January 28, 1923, 13) and other critics seeing similarities with Khodasevich' (Barry Scherr in Connolly 1999, p.114).

> Houghton Library at Harvard that its catalogue listed me as actively publishing Blok, Bely, and Bryusov at the age of ten. (Nabokov 1990 [1973], p.161)[27]

In *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (2006), Lesley Chamberlain claims that, 'As contemporary émigré Russians knew him, Nabokov was not so much a Western modernist as the last representative of the Russian Silver Age longing for that mystical Symbolist Russia he had left behind' (p.226). This claim is strengthened if we look at the close resemblance between Symbolist manifestoes and Nabokov's priorities. Boyd, for example, argues that

> In the 1890s the entire Russian symbolist movement produced the independence of art: its right to explore metaphysical possibilities materialism flatly denies, and its allegiance to the primacy of the individual. (1990, p.23)

In Boyd's account, Symbolism had three main remits: the individual's priority over society; the independent value of art; and privileging the artist's role as suggesting a higher reality beyond the tangible world (1990, p.93). These are all themes taken up by Nabokov throughout his work.

Nietzsche and Russian Silver Age

The influence of Russian Silver Age writers on Nabokov is relatively well known but there has been less interest in Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on the writers that

[27] Experienced Nabokov readers will note the use of 'incidentally' to introduce such a claim.

influenced Nabokov.[28] In 1888, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote to the Danish critic Georg Brandes with the hope of acquainting foreign readers with his work. Although he felt his own countrymen did not, or would not, understand his writings, he believed that French and Russian readers would – despite his work being completely banned in Russia from 1872 until 1898.[29] At the start of the 1890s, a few translations appeared in print. However these were subject to errors, censorship, and excision - Nietzsche's name had appeared as *Nitche* and *Niche* for example.[30] Nel Grillaert claims that 'the Russian censors could not completely prevent the gradual and often coincidental permeation of Nietzsche's thoughts and works into Russian intellectual circles' (2008, pp.20-21). After the relaxing of censorship rules when Nikolai II succeeded Aleksandr III in 1894, there soon appeared a translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Iuly Antonovsky in 1898, which was followed by translations of almost all of Nietzsche's *oeuvre*. These translations, however, were often inaccurate – Clowes observes that 'the only critical edition of Nietzsche was begun in 1909 by a variety of philosophers and writers, among them, S.L. Frank, M.O. Gershenzon, Balmont, Briusov, Belyi, and Ivanov. Only four volumes, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1912), *Thoughts Out of Season* (1909), *Human-All-Too-Human* (1911), and *The Will to Power* (1910), were published before the project was abandoned' (1988, p.46). Understanding of

[28] See, for example, Vladimir E. Alexandrov's 'Vladimir Nabokov and the Silver Age of Russian Culture' in *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991) and 'Nabokov and Bely' and 'Nabokov and Blok' in Alexandrov's *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (1995).

[29] See Grillaert 2008, p.23 fn. In 1888, Nietzsche was 'toying wishfully with the idea that the last syllable of his name betokened Slavic ancestry' (Foster in Barabtarlo 2000, p.1).

[30] Grillaert reveals that 'In an 1890 translation of an overview of new developments in philosophy by I. Kheinze (*Istoriia novoi Filosofii*), Nietzsche's name appeared in the index under two different spellings (*Nitche* and *Niche*), showing the translator's ignorance regarding Nietzsche (Mikhailovskii 1894b: 111)' (2008, pp.20-21). Nietzsche's first popularizer was Aleksandr Reingoldt in 1891. Edith Clowes reveals that Nietzsche's introduction to Russia partly came about through 'Russian sojourns abroad' by the likes of Merezhovsky, Lev Shestov, and Viacheslav Ivanov (1988, p.47). Also, Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal claims that 'others came to know his ideas through commentaries, especially those of George Brandes and George Simmel, whose German books on Nietzsche were translated into Russian a few years after their original publication' (1994, p.396).

Nietzsche's works, therefore, already difficult in modern, accurate translations, was muddied in early twentieth-century Russia through 'deleted passages and distorted translations' well after the abolition of censorship in 1906 (Clowes 1988, p.47).[31]

Early responses to Nietzsche in Russia were not immediately favourable. Grillaert claims that, in 1892, although the article did much to disseminate Nietzsche's philosophy, 'the editors of *Voprosy Filosofii Psikhologii* stated that they had only allowed Vasilii Preobrazhenskii's article on Nietzsche for publication to prove to the Russian readers "what strange and sick phenomena are presently being generated by a well-known trend in Western European culture" (Preobrazhenskii [1892] 2001: 1009)' (2008, pp.24-25). Three 'discrediting papers' were to follow in the next issue (by Lev Lopatin, Nikolai Grot, and Petr Astaf'ev). Yet, a series of articles on Nietzsche by the intellectual authority and theoretician Nikolai Mikhailovskii were to 'contribute to Nietzsche's growing popularity among the Russian intelligentsia' (Grillaert 2008, p.32).

The interest that these late 19th-century and early 20th-century Russian writers had in Nietzsche seems to have 'permeated *fin de siècle* Russia at a time when national consciousness was suffering an impasse' (Grillaert 2008, p.1).[32] In *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary* (1994), Rosenthal claims that:

> [Nietzsche's] populizers were artists and writers, who hailed Nietzsche as the prophet of a new culture of art and beauty, and of a new kind of human being – courageous, creative, free…Nietzsche's Russian admirers stressed what they called the "inner man" – artistic, cultural, and psychological issues.

[31] Clowes observes that, in the 1913 translated edition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the chapters 'On Priests,' Out of Service,' 'The Festival of the Ass,' and the second part of the chapter, 'Awakening', were omitted (1988, p.48).
[32] Clowes argues that 'Nietzsche's worldview did not become an openly acknowledged, freely imitated model as Hegel's, Schelling's, or Schopenhauer's had in Russian intellectual circles earlier in the nineteenth century' (1988, p.10).

(pp.2-3)

Nietzsche's reception at this tumultuous time was extremely varied.[33] Grillaert identifies three main interpretations of Nietzsche – the religious, the political and the aesthetic. For Russian religious philosophers, or 'God-seekers' as she terms them, such as Vladimir Solov'ëv, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and Nikolai Berdiaev, Nietzsche offered a way to deal with crumbling faith. After the failed revolution of 1905, Nietzsche was also interpreted politically by the likes of Maksim Gorkii and Alexandr Boddanov - Nietzschean Marxists who were concerned with the new movement of God-building. It was, however, the Russian Symbolists who interpreted Nietzsche aesthetically, with his belief in the Dionysian principle, individualist aesthetics, and his mystical and religious dimension appealing to writers such as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely, and Aleksandr Blok (Grillaert 2008, pp.35-37).

The influence of Nietzsche on Russian Silver Age writers such as Bely, Blok, Ivanov, Bunin, and Vladimir Mayakovsky is significant, and arguably derives from Nietzsche's ability to 'distinguish himself from the conventional moralists of the past and to shock his reader into a new awareness of the process of moral valuation' (Clowes 1988, p.16). Bely's first point of contact with Nietzsche was in 1899, with his essay 'Friedrich Nietzsche' appearing in 1907. John Burt Foster, in *Heirs to Dionysus* (1981), claims that:

> In Moscow, around the turn of the century, as Andrei Bely tells it in his autobiography, he experienced "a simply crazed enthusiasm for Nietzsche"…But

[33] At the turn of the twentieth century, 'critics of all different schools – the Marxist, V. Lvov-Rogachevsky; the historian of Russian modernism, S. Vengerov; and the religious thinker, N. Berdiaev – all coloured the period in Nietzschean terms as a time of "transvaluation of values" (*pereotsenka tsennostei*)' (Clowes 1988, p.1).

> Nietzsche also encouraged his literary ambitions: he was "the creator of the most vivid images, the theoretic or esthetic meaning of which was revealed only through creative emulation and not simply by following his thought…I saw in him…an artist of genius" (1981, p.24)

As already mentioned, Nabokov listed Bely's *Petersburg* amongst his favourite novels of the twentieth century. Clowes, in turn, observes that 'when he discovered Zarathustra in 1899… Belyi was smitten with a "crazy passion" for Nietzsche' (1988, p.153).[34] Bely's 'symbolist brother' Alexandr Blok, also had a strong connection with Nietzsche.[35] Clowes argues that 'For all the considerable differences between the Symbolist poets, Merezhkovsky, Ivanov, Blok, and Belyi shared much the same orientation in their separate responses to Nietzsche: all were drawn to the religious-mythical aspect of Nietzsche's inquiry, his overarching vision of life and the role of human creativity in it' (1988, p.116). Interestingly, it is specifically these Russian Silver Age writers that were highly regarded by Nabokov. As Simon Karlinsky argues:

> It was precisely in the brilliant literary flowering of that age [Russian Symbolism],…that Nabokov's art originated – from the experimental

[34] Works looking at the relationship between Bely and Nabokov include Sandra Joy Russell's 'The City as Dialectic: Andrei Bely's Creative Consciousness, its Nietzschean Influence, and the Urban Centre in *Petersburg*' (*TranscUturAl*, Vol.1, (4), 2011, pp.31-46); Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman's *Creating Life: the Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); and Boris Christa's *The Poetic World of Andrey Bely* (Michigan: Hakkert, 1977).

[35] Studies on Nietzsche and Blok include Evelyn Bristol's 'Blok Between Nietzsche and Soloviev', (*NR*, p.150a); Virginia Bennet's 'Esthetic Theories from *The Birth of Tragedy* in Andrei Bely's Critical Articles, 1904-1908' (*NR*, pp.161-79); and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal's *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche To Stalinism* and 'Alexander Blok and Nietzsche' (*Journal of Slavic Studies*, Vol. 27, 1951, pp.201-208). Nabokov and Blok have been linked, for example, in David M. Bethea's 'Nabokov and Blok' in Vladimir E. Alexandrov's *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland, 1995, pp. 374-382) and in Alexey Sklyarenko's 'Aleksandr Blok's Dreams as Enacted in Ada by Van Veen--and Vice Versa' (*Zembla*, 9/16/05).

> prose of Remizov and Bely, from the more traditionalist, but stylistically exquisite prose of Bunin and, even more importantly, from the great and innovative poetry that was then being written by Annesky, Blok, Bely, and, later, Mandelstam and Pasternal, among so many others. (2001, pp.23-24)

Nabokov's admission that he was "a product of that period" (Karlinsky 2001, p.246) suggests that the indirect influence of Nietzsche would be hard to avoid.[36]

Nietzsche's initial reception in the Anglophone world seemed just as unfavourable as it was in *fin-de-siècle* Russia but for different reasons. For English-speaking readers, it is as easy to misread Nietzsche's influence in Russia as it is to ignore it. For when Nietzsche did penetrate the English-speaking world, he was valued by some not for the aesthetic manifesto adopted by Russian symbolists but rather reviled for espousing hostile philosophy that would later become associated with West-European proto-fascism.[37] David Bradshaw in *A Concise Companion to Modernism* (2003), claims that Nietzsche had

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[36] On the 'Nabokov-L' forum, John Burt Foster suggested that:

> On "vulgar Nietzscheanism" in MARY, let me simply repeat that I am more interested in Ganin's encounter with "esoteric Nietzscheanism". When working with Nietzsche in the seventies, I never thrilled to the "Ubermensch" (the "good European" was another story), though I realize that historically many of his readers did. As I write, I find myself wondering if Nabokov knew Bely's essay on Nietzsche, which has some pointed criticisms of vulgar Nietzscheanism. (20th Aug 1993)

For more detail, see Vladimir E. Alexandrov's essay 'Nabokov and the Silver Age of Russian Culture' in *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991).

[37] Oscar Levy translated the first complete English edition of Nietzsche's *Collected Works* (1909-1913), completing an unfinished English translation of Nietzsche's works originally undertaken by the Glasgow Professor, Alexander Tille (1896-7).

> acquired notoriety as a name and reputation before making an informed impact on the most serious and creative minds of the time. In particular, his reception suffered from lurid misrepresentation in Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (translated into English in 1895), which was the first widespread source of information about him for many anglophone readers. (p.56)

Bradshaw also mentions that the 'immediate reception of Nietzsche, which focused on key ideas such as the "overman," "the will to power," and "eternal recurrence," tended to treat these Nietzschean themes as doctrines' (p.57). Nietzsche's initial reception in the Anglophone world was also not helped by numerous negative reviews that appeared over the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries by critics such as F.C.S. Schiller (who disagreed with Nietzsche's views on race, evolution and politics) and George Santayana, who, in *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916), lampoons Nietzsche's voice as, at times, a self-indulgent child. This is in sharp contrast to the way in which Nietzsche was being received in Russia just before World War I – as a 'German Dostoevsky' and even as a religious thinker (Rosenthal 2004, pp.137-141).

Moreover, when English-speaking writers engaged approvingly with the themes and ideas of Nietzsche, it was often in a proto-fascist way. Texts such as George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1901), Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan', 'The Second Coming', and 'The Statues', and D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) would broaden Nietzsche's readership considerably yet continue to add to the Anglophone world's proto-fascist view of the philosopher.[38] Nietzsche's later reputation in the English-speaking world

[38] It is interesting that 'in 1902, when Yeats first read Nietzsche at the urging of his American friend John Quinn, he found him to be "a strong enchanter"' (Foster 1981, p.24). See chapter five, pp.215-216 for more discussion of this idea. Foster argues that 'Nietzsche's marked concern with expression has led twentieth-century philosophers of

suffered greatly by association with the rise of Fascism in Germany. The links between Hitler and Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche in the 1930s (Nietzsche's sister had taken over her brother's estate when he died) served to foster a belief that Hitler's ideology was built on that of Nietzsche's. Such a link proved to be a demonizing force in the Anglophone world's interpretation of Nietzsche.[39] It is possible, then, that the West-European reception and its links to Fascism discouraged Nabokov from open discussion of Nietzsche in his work and elsewhere. And, for English-speaking readers, the influence of Nietzsche in a Russian context might be a different experience from that of an English-speaking one.

Direct Evidence of Influence on Nabokov

Nabokov's knowledge of Nietzsche seems to have been more thorough than might at first appear from a reading of his texts. In *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (1993), Boyd claims that when Nabokov's father, V.D. Nabokov, spent three months in solitary confinement in St. Petersburg's Kresty prison in 1908 (for signing the Vyborg Manifesto), he read 'Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Knut Hamsun, Anatole France, Zola, Hugo, Wilde, and many others' (1990, p.76). He also notes that, while in the Crimea, V.V. Nabokov 'drew up his own idiosyncratic reading list from the Yalta library: entomology, duels, natural-explorers, Nietzsche' (Boyd 1990, p.150).

In fact, direct evidence of Nabokov's engagement with Nietzsche can be found from his late teens right up until his death and indicates an enduring interest. In *Nabokov and the Art of Play*, Karshan notes that 'In a notebook Nabokov kept in 1918, he made a list of ten "books which must be read". One of the three books crossed out, and marked

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the austere analytic school to dismiss him as "merely literary"' (Foster 1981, p.4). This literary aspect of Nietzsche, however, has arguably meant more of a connection with writers.

[39] See pg.30 fn 48 for extended discussion of this point.

as read, is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*' (2011, p.7).[40] Nietzsche, then, was a preoccupation right at the start of his career. Almost sixty years later, at the end of Nabokov's life and career, there is another direct (but spurious) allusion to Nietzsche in his posthumous novel *The Original of Laura* (2009):

> the art of self-slaughter
> TLS 16-1-76 "Nietz[s]che argued that the man of pure will...must recognise that that there is an appropriate time to die" (Nabokov 2009, p.265)

Nabokov's omission (and Dmitri Nabokov's addition) of a letter in Nietzsche's name is ostensibly a telling point. It may simply be another spelling mistake amongst the many in the text, arguably caused by Nabokov's failing health.[41] It is also possible that the spelling mistake, like "Montherland" (Nabokov 2009, p.95), is a ridiculing technique, a "patronizing indifference" to the supposed source.[42] Or, it may simply be that 'Nietzsche' itself is a difficult name to spell given that it has five consonants in succession. The fact that Nabokov details the supposed source of the Nietzschean reference should clear the matter up. The source appears to be the well-known acronym for the *Times Literary Supplement* for the week beginning the 16th January 1976 - published a full year before Nabokov's death. However, no such reference to Nietzsche appears in the *Times Literary Supplement* on that date or around it.[43] Readers are therefore left to decide whether they

[40] Karshan details that 'The notebook is titled *Stikhi i skhemi* [Poems and Problems], and is in the Library of Congress, Vladimir Nabokov Papers, Box 10, Folder 25' (2011, p.7).
[41] The double use of the deictic 'that' adds strength to this suggestion.
[42] John Simon argues "Why is Montherlant misspelled 'Montherland'? Out of sloppiness, patronizing indifference, or the sake of a jeering parallel with Morand?" (*The New Criterion*, February 2010).
[43] An edition of the *Times Literary Supplement* was indeed published on 16 January 1976 but it does not include any explicit mention of Nietzsche. In *Pnin* (1957), it is worth

can simply explain this as Nabokov wishing us to believe that Nietzsche is included in a review in a broadsheet or whether we should grant it significance given its charlatan authenticity; its parading of a hermeneutic reference squarely in our faces.

Nabokov's allusion appears to refer to a chapter entitled 'Voluntary Death' in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) (*TSZ*), promoting the virtuous action of dying at the right time (Nietzsche [1969] 1883-1885, p.97).[44] In tracing this allusion, it can be seen that Nabokov seems to harbour more knowledge of Nietzsche than the misspelled allusion might suggest.[45] In the course of this study, I look at other examples of fairly direct allusions to Nietzsche: including references to Nietzsche's concept of 'eternal return' in *Mary*, the opening of *The Defense*, and the subject of Dr Bodo von Falternfels' research topic and the fantastic recurrence of situations in *Pnin*.[46] The reference in *The Original of Laura* however, is a salient reminder of Nietzsche's presence from the start to the finish of Nabokov's *oeuvre*.

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noting that the novel mentions: 'a reference checked and found to be falsified by incompetence, carelessness, or fraud' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.120).

[44] A detailed analysis of the Nietzschean themes in *The Original of Laura* can be found in my article '*The Original of Laura* and Nietzsche: A Zarathustran Tool?' in *The Shades of Laura: Critical Approaches to Nabokov's Last Novel* (eds. Brian Boyd and Yuri Leving, McGill-Queen's University Press), forthcoming.

[45] This is similar to what Moudrov argues in relation to Nabokov's knowledge of Plato (see page 9).

[46] Describing the conception of *The Defense* (1930), Foster argues

> Just as Nietzsche recalls first conceiving of eternal recurrence near "a powerful pyramidal rock," so Nabokov associates the genesis of his novel with a similar scene: "I remember with special limpidity a sloping slab of rock, in the ulex and ilex-clad hills, where the main thematic idea of the book first came to me (Foster 1993, p.67)

Here, Foster is quoting from Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Werke* 2:1128 and Nabokov's *The Defense*, translated by Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Putnam's 1964). The motif of the mountain setting of inspiration derives from the conception of *TSZ*. But this is no stranded allusion. The mountain motif can also be seen in Nabokov's early collection of poems, *The Empyrean Path* (*Gornii Put'*) (1923), *Glory* (*Podvig*) (1932), 'Spring in Fialta' (1936), and in his essay 'Good Readers and Good Writers' (p.2) in *Lectures on Literature* (1980).

Interpreting silence – an approach to Nietzsche and Nabokov

Yet despite this selection of direct allusion to Nietzsche spread across a lifetime of writing, Nabokov apparently had little to say on Nietzsche directly. It is always dangerous to interpret silence, and I do so here tentatively. But Nabokov is often silent on significant things – his thoughts on the Russian Revolution, his relationships with his brother Sergey and his Uncle Ruka, the impact of the Holocaust on his life, and his indebtedness to other figures are prominent examples.[47] Despite numerous links between the two writers, it is striking that Nietzsche never figures among the writers Nabokov approved of (such as Pushkin or Gogol for example). I wish to argue that Nabokov's silence on Nietzsche can be interpreted as respectful rather than either contemptuous or indifferent. One explanation for silence, consistent with my argument, has been touched on already. Nabokov narrowly avoided the horrors of German fascism, and since Nietzsche was seen by many as a forerunner of Nazism, it may be that Nabokov wanted to distance himself from the appropriation of Nietzsche by the Nazis.[48] Nabokov's relationship to Germany itself was ambivalent. Omry Ronen suggests that

[47] As Boyd argues, 'Nabokov always denied that he was ever influenced by *any* writer' (1990, p.91).

[48] Not only did Hitler visit Nietzsche's house on several occasions to converse with Nietzsche's sister, but he also had a bust of Nietzsche in his study, attended Elisabeth's funeral in 1935, and, in 1943, gave some of Nietzsche's writings to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. Also, the three books apparently given to Nazi soldiers in WWII were Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Astore and Showalter 2005, p.99). Elisabeth's censoring and distorting of Nietzsche's unpublished works led to an uneasy association between Hitler and Nietzsche. In a letter to his sister Elizabeth however, dated Christmas 1887, Nietzsche, however, declares:

> It is a matter of honor to me to be absolutely clean and unequivocal regarding anti-Semitism, namely *opposed*, as I am in my writings…I have been persecuted in recent times with letters and *Anti-Semitic Correspondence* sheets; my disgust with this party…is as outspoken as possible, but the relation to Forster, as well as the after-effect of my former anti-Semitic publisher Schmeitzner, always brings adherents of this disagreeable party back to the idea that I must after all belong to them. (Nietzsche in Kaufmann 1974, p.45)

> While very critical of contemporary German literature, with the exception of Kafka and, possibly, Rilke, Nabokov proceeded to invent, in his novels, a series of German authors and literary situations (Ronen in Barabtarlo 2000, p.243)

Ronen discusses *The Gift*, *Camera Obscura*, *Laughter in the Dark*, and *Transparent Things* amongst other texts, and there are other obvious examples, such as 'A Guide to Berlin' and 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia'.[49] Nabokov's claim that he could not read German enabled him to refute suggestions of German influence but the claim was far from true.[50] Aged nine, 'despite needing a dictionary for almost every word', Boyd reports that Nabokov had 'gained absolute control over the European lepidoptera" in Hofmann's *Die Grosschmetterlinge Europas*' (1990, p.77).[51] Between 1911 and 1914, Nabokov learned German at the Tenishev School in St Petersburg. (Boyd 1990, p.87). Foster also comments that Nabokov 'has in fact given conflicting accounts of his command of German. It is also worth noting that German was the first foreign language into which his novels of the 1920s were translated' (Foster in Barabtarlo 2000, pp.212-213). Further, Nabokov translated Goethe's "Zueignung" from *Faust* (Ronen in Barabtarlo 2000, p.247) and John Updike, in the introduction to *Lectures on Literature*, remarks: 'In 1969 he [Nabokov] told a BBC interviewer, "I do not know German and so could not read Kafka before the nineteen thirties"…two years later he told Bavarian

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[49] Of course, much of these situations arose from Nabokov's stay in Berlin between 1922 and 1937 as a result of his exile from Russia.
[50] In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov details his German ancestry (the von Korffs and the Grauns) (pp.43-45).
[51] See also *Strong Opinions*, p.189.

Broadcasting, "I read Goethe and Kafka *en regard* as I also did Homer and Horace'" (Nabokov 1980, p.xxi).[52]

Thus, Nabokov's relationship with German culture is complex. His affection for Kafka, Rilke, and Goethe (p.165) is countered by his rejection of Thomas Mann's 'asinine' *Death in Venice* (Nabokov 1990 [1973], p.57) and Fyodor's characterization of German culture found in *The Gift*, for example – 'the German is in small numbers vulgar and in large numbers unbearably vulgar', 'skittle-headed German' and 'germanically ignorant' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.79, pp.149-150).[53] These, and the later guilt by association in the Anglophone world with fascism, suggest explanations for his silence on Nietzsche. Further, his silence is consistent with Nietzsche's *own* tactic, in the words of Michael Tanner, practising 'a kind of systematic ingratitude towards those great figures who meant most to him, and how this is the only way of taking them completely seriously' (Tanner in Nietzsche 2004 [1888], p.x).

Chapter summaries

Influence is not a deterministic process - Nabokov, like his contemporaries, responded to Nietzsche in his own way. The range of Russian responses to Nietzsche alone - whether Blok's aesthetic, Berdiaev's religious, or Uspensky's metaphysical – signals the danger of assuming one unified version of the philosopher. I have tried to

[52] Ronen explains further, 'Under the heading "Posviashchenie k 'Faustu'," it appeared in *Poslednie novosti* (Paris) in 1932. Alexander Dolinin has found some other translations of Goethe in the Nabokov archives, apparently unpublished (Ronen in Barabtarlo 2000, p.247). Also, in a note in his annotated copy of his lecture on *The Metamorphosis*, Nabokov claims 'In the original German there is a wonderful flowing rhythm here in this dreamy sequence of sentences' (1980, p.258).

[53] Just as Nabokov continually critiques what he sees as the negative social, political, and cultural trends of place and time (whether, for example, Bolshevism in Soviet Russia, the extravagance of interwar Europe, or the 'poshlost' element in post-war America), Nietzsche responded to the failings of the society he found himself in. Nietzsche's disparaging remarks on German culture are a common feature in his writings.

identify specific aspects of Nietzsche's thought which I argue feature heavily in Nabokov's work without implying a mechanical implant of the older on the younger writer. To do this, I have reduced Nietzsche's project to six main philosophical tenets in order to bring some cohesion to his multifarious thought. These tenets – eternal recurrence, perspectivism, master/slave morality and the will to power, morality, the *Übermensch*, and the otherworld – are applied to particular areas in Nabokov's work that have attracted uncertainty or speculation (the role of memory in *Pnin*, *Pale Fire*'s authorship, *Lolita*'s morality, Nabokov's relationship with the reader, the frequency of 'elevated' protagonists, and the beyond). Structurally, I have divided the six chapters into three thematic sections: 'Nietzschean Engagements', 'Nietzschean Readings', and 'Beyond Nietzsche'. The first section is predominantly concerned with plotting Nabokov's direct points of contact with Nietzsche whilst the second uses Nietzsche's philosophy to address two major problems in Nabokov studies. The third section concerns Nabokov move away from Nietzsche – from respectful pupil to rebellious disciple. An overview of each chapter is as follows:

I: NIETZSCHEAN ENGAGEMENTS

Chapter 1: 'Eternal Recurrence and Memory'

Nietzsche's concept of 'eternal recurrence' is the idea that everything that has happened will recur in exactly the same way. It has been understood both as a kind of thought experiment suggesting the exact, and endless, repetition of events and as a quasi-scientific doctrine related to the possibility of the world's atoms reconfiguring in the same order. For Nabokov, I argue, eternal recurrence is a central idea, one which is both alarming and alluring, a paradox expressed through his conception of time and, perhaps more importantly, his conception of memory. Looking predominantly at *Pnin*, *Mary*, and

The Defence, I document each novel's contact with Nietzsche and demonstrate how certain features of the texts (the depiction of Mira Belochkin in *Pnin* or certain protagonists' lack of *amor fati* for example) demonstrate a deep preoccupation with eternal recurrence. This analysis illustrates that Nabokov displays conflicting attitudes towards circular or recurring situations. On the one hand, Nabokov's art of memory ensures that nothing is lost. On the other, it also means that nothing, however horrifying, is forgotten. The last section of the chapter suggests a resolution to this conflict, illustrated in the short story 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia'. Here, I argue that Nabokov combines eternal recurrence with another Nietzschean concept, the view of the world as an 'aesthetic phenomenon'. In this light, the recurrence of suffering becomes, to some extent, a kind of representation rather than a real phenomenon, transforming tragedy into an affirmation of life.

Chapter 2: 'The Will to (Disem)power: Nabokov and his Readers'

Nabokov's relationship with eternal recurrence demonstrates a writer both empowered, and made vulnerable, by a Nietzschean concept. A similar combination of rapture and fear appears to be at work in relation to Nietzsche's concepts of 'Master/Slave morality' and the 'Will to Power' in Nabokov's work. The first concept deals with the contrast of values between two distinct groups and the latter describes what Nietzsche thought of as our primary drive – the will to increase our power. In this chapter, I hypothesize about what I call the 'author/reader relationship' and argue that, in Nabokov's work, the oppositional tension of master and slave is fruitfully analogous to that of author and reader. I illustrate the rhetorical similarity between Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* and Nietzsche's definitions of his concepts. I then engage with a contested issue in Nabokov studies – the relationship he has with his readers. Drawing on Bernard Reginster's interpretation of the 'Will to Power' as a search for conflict to

stimulate creativity, I look at two of Nabokov's short stories – 'Recruiting' and 'The Vane Sisters' - to illustrate what I call his 'will to (disem)power'. For Nabokov, this tendency becomes a desire to provoke a distressed response from his reader. Yet this desire is often thwarted by his readers' inability to rise to his challenge. I conclude with a suggestion that thinking about *why* Nabokov, or the implied author, plays textual games, rather than *how* to solve them, can both empower the reader at the expense of the author and offer more fertile readings.

II: NIETZSCHEAN READINGS

Chapter 3: '*Pale Fire*: A Differing Perspective'

Chapters one and two look at Nabokov's direct engagements with Nietzsche. In this section, I turn to Nietzschean readings or, more accurately, the benefits of reading Nabokov's texts through Nietzschean ideas, whether he alludes to them directly or not. Following on from the end of the second chapter, this section considers the question of the reader's empowerment rather than the author's. Chapter three looks specifically at Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, arguably his most interpretively resistant novel. One reason for this resistance is the reader's inability to ascribe internal authorship with absolute certainty; that is to establish beyond doubt who, in the novel's fictional world, has written what. Using Nietzsche's concept of 'perspectivism', I argue that *Pale Fire* can be read as five *equally valid* but different novels from five different Nietzschean perspectives. On the face of it, this might seem close to a relativist account of the text, in which no reading can be considered more valid than another. But Nietzsche's perspectivism is not a form of relativism. Instead, I argue that his concept allows for the formation of a hierarchy of values attached to the different perspectives. Such a hierarchy enables readers to see what they privilege whilst reading and so determine their readerly values. A perspectivist

reading allows for 'incompatible' readings to mutually exist and cross-pollinate without implying critical relativism.

Chapter 4: '*Lolita*'s Nietzschean Morality'

Chapter four provides another Nietzschean reading, rather than a reading of Nietzschean allusion, one that illuminates reader disempowerment rather than empowerment. Existing readings of *Lolita* often equate literary and moral experience, whereas my reading depends on a similar analogy but applied in a different way. Rather than seeing *Lolita* as a demanding but effective school for virtue, as some critics do, I characterise the novel as an exercise in moral disorientation. Just as Nietzsche's philosophical remit is to undermine moral conventions, Nabokov's *Lolita* can show us both how conventional reading processes and conventional ideas on the origins of good and evil can be undermined simultaneously. Distilling Nietzsche's moral outlook into three tenets – exhibiting a 'moral vacuum', 'unmasking false candidates', and introducing a 'transvaluation of values' – I look at how the figures of John Ray Jr., Charlotte and Dolores Haze, and Humbert Humbert relate to these tenets respectively.

III: BEYOND NIETZSCHE

Chapter 5: 'Rewriting Nietzsche'

In this final section of the thesis, I consider Nabokov as Nietzsche's potentially rebellious disciple, writing in dialogue with the Nietzschean 'master'. In this chapter, I engage with the similarities between Nietzsche's figure of the *Übermensch* and common traits in most of Nabokov's protagonists. Where the previous chapter discussed *Lolita* as an exercise in moral disorientation (rather than the more comfortable moral lesson of some readings), this chapter illustrates a less disturbing moral use of Nietzsche through

the recurring figure of a Nabokovian *Übermensch* who fails. Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is characterized as an individual with 'higher' values from 'ordinary' individuals. Nabokov persistently uses characters with some or all of the qualities of the *Übermensch*, yet all of these characters ultimately fail to achieve *Übermensch* status. Looking at the characterization of Hermann in *Despair* and Falter in 'Ultima Thule' in this respect, this chapter argues that these characters can be seen as parodies of the Nietzschean figure. Nabokov also both attends to, and departs from, Nietzsche in his representation of pity. For Nietzsche, pity was incompatible with *Übermensch* status. But in Nabokov's works, illustrated here by Krug in *Bend, Sinister* and, indeed, for Nabokov himself, pity is central. In his divergence from Nietzsche, Nabokov surpasses him in a very Nietzschean fashion, by pointing to a new kind of *Übermensch* – someone combining Nietzschean values with Nabokovian vulnerabilities.

Chapter 6: 'The Other World'

Chapter five showed Nabokov in conflict with Nietzsche. This final chapter identifies a synthesis between Nabokov's transcendent outlook and Nietzsche's materialist vision. Much has been made of the concept of *potustoronnost* in Nabokov's works, but most criticism interprets this 'beyond' in a spiritual fashion. This means that, at first sight, Nietzsche's repudiation of an 'otherworld' seems to be at odds with Nabokov's obsession with it. Yet, both writers demonstrate a marked preoccupation with *this* world. Through an account of Fyodor's outlook in *The Gift*, I suggest that Nietzsche's materialist vision can be combined with Nabokov's otherworldly tendencies by pointing to a 'beyond' in the everyday. Through concentrating on perception as a transformative experience, Fyodor is able to fuse the spiritual and material, pointing to an 'other world' rather than an 'otherworld'. I argue that Fyodor's vision is both a 'gift' and a burden.

Chapter One: 'Nabokov, Memory, and Eternal Recurrence'

> The…faculty of impassioned commemoration, of ceaseless return, that makes me always approach that banquet table from the outside, from the depth of the park – not from the house – as if the mind, in order to go back thither, had to do so with the silent step of a prodigal, faint with excitement. (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.134)

Literature has a long relationship with memory. In *Theories of Memory: A Reader* (2007), Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead show that interest in memory often informs literary inquiry, from the ancient Greeks, to Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and Georg Hegel, to twentieth-century figures such as Marcel Proust and Henri Bergson. Rossington and Whitehead also argue that, throughout this long period, there has been a consistent emphasis on one aspect of memory, an aspect they call 'recollection' (p.4). Recollection describes the involuntary passive experience of the past in the mental present, which appears to have been foregrounded at the expense of 'retrospection', something I define here as the 'active, willed survey of the past'. The emphasis on recollection begins with Plato's account of the soul's anamnesis of ideal 'Forms' (1963, pp.496-497), something Rossington and Whitehead argue has led to neglect in retrospection.

Rossington and Whitehead may overstate their case however. John Locke, for example, clearly has some kind of active remembering in mind when he calls memory a 'Store-house of our *Ideas*' (2009 [1690], p.87) which we draw on to prevent future errors. Yet this metaphor, still popular today, continues to downplay the experiential aspects of active memory. Howard Eichenbaum and Neal J. Cohen, for example, claim that spatial metaphors for memory are misleading from a neurological point of view: 'memories are not items warehoused in individual, memory-dedicated brain regions, nor are memories transferred among areas'. Yet they also claim that 'Many features of the "warehouse"

metaphor of memory are thoroughly built into common concepts about memory processing. (2001, p.6, p.508).

Diane Thompson, on the other hand, claims that memory seems to interrelate 'Remembering, forgetting and anticipating (foretelling) [which] are three major modes of response to experience' (Thompson 2009, p.17). Theories of memory like Thompson's suggest that memory can help us deal with certain situations experientially and to connect the past, present and future through pattern. It is specifically this interplay between memory, experience, and loss in literature that this chapter will focus on in regard to Nabokov.

The topic of memory and its relationship to human consciousness can be seen throughout Nabokov's writing. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1967), for example, he writes: 'The act of vividly recalling a patch of the past is something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zest all my life, and I have reason to believe that this almost pathological keenness of the retrospective faculty is a hereditary trait' (2000 [1967], p.60).[1] Memory also informed his idea of reading practice, listing it - alongside 'imagination', 'a dictionary', and 'artistic sense' - as a criterion for what constitutes a 'good reader' (Nabokov 1980, p.3). In regard to the relationship between Nabokov and memory, scholars have tended to concentrate more on the relationship between Nabokov's debts to Marcel Proust and Henri Bergson in his depiction of time and memory.[2]

[1] See Boyd 1990, p.9, p.313; Connolly 2005, p.34, p.96 for more detail regarding the role of memory in Nabokov's works.

[2] Talking about writers in *Strong Opinions* (1973), Nabokov recalls that 'between the ages of 20 and 40, my favourites were Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Bergson, Joyce, Proust, and Pushkin' (1990 [1973], p.43). Scholarship exploring, or noting, the Proustian/Bergsonian vein in Nabokov includes Leona Toker's 'Nabokov and Bergson' in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (1995), pp.367-373, John Foster's *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (1993), Maurice Couturier's article 'The French

One problem with the focus on Proust and Bergson, however, is with timing. John Burt Foster, for example, suggests that, by the late 1920s, Nabokov 'did not yet know his [Proust's] work in any real depth, and did not view him as a model for his own work' (1993, p.53) whilst Boyd guesses that Nabokov was only introduced to Bergson in the mid 1920s (1990, p.294). Boyd continues: 'Nabokov heartily approved Bergson's cutting time off from space in order to emphasize the indeterminism of the world…although the insistence on the absurd contrast between a possible return in space and an impossible return in time *is his own*' (p.294, my emphasis).[3] In addition, the focus on Proust and Bergson seems to be influenced by Nabokov's own retrospective account of his sources (or denial of them) and, as we have seen, Nabokov is not always the most reliable guide to his own work. I argue that the focus on Proust and Bergson has obscured some important ways in which Nabokov differs from familiar conceptions of memory – his belief that memory, paradoxically, can look forward[4], his distinction between memory and nostalgia, and his desire to remember pain, suffering and loss as

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Nabokov' in *Transitional Nabokov* (2009), pp.135-150, Richard Rorty's chapter 'The barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty' in *Cruelty, Irony, Solidarity* (1989), pp.141-168, Michael Wood's chapter 'Epilogue – the History of Pain' in *The Magician's Doubts* (1994), pp.232-235, and Yvette Louria's article' Nabokov and Proust: The Challenge of Time' (*Books Abroad*, Volume 48, No.3, 1974, pp.469-476). For more references, see Eric Laursen's article 'Memory in Nabokov's *Mary*' (*Russian Review* 1996, pp.55-64).

[3] In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche remarks:

> We cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity to want to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there might be; e.g. whether other beings might be able to experience time backwards, or alternately forwards and backwards (which would involve another direction of life and a different conception of cause and effect). (2001 [1882], p.239)

[4] The seeming nonsensicality of having 'memory of the future' is suggested by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass, And What Alice Found There* (1871) when the Queen remarks, 'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards' (Carroll in Thompson 1991, p.26). In *The Gift*, Fyodor talks about his 'future memories' and remarks, 'It's queer, I seem to remember my future works' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.55, p.179). Heidegger asserts a similar proposition in his discussion of eternal recurrence: 'We know nothing of an earlier "life" when we think back. But can we *only* think back? No, we can also think ahead – and that is thinking proper' (1991, p.135).

well as joy and happiness.

Nabokov, Circular Time, and Eternal Recurrence

Just as questions of memory have, in the past, led Nabokov critics to Bergson rather than Nietzsche, so discussions of time have tended to lead them to Hegel. Numerous critics, such as Brian Boyd and Barbara Wyllie, see Nabokov's theorization of time as akin to that of the Hegelian spiral – something that he refers to explicitly in *Speak, Memory*: 'The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious, it has been set free' (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.211).[5] Exploring this idea in her essay 'Memory and Dream in Nabokov's Short Fiction', Barbara Wyllie claims that 'Nabokov's self-imposed "problem" was how to overcome the regressive, destructive forces of time' (Wyllie in Kellman and Malin 2000, p.5). She continues:

> The potential for memory and dream to negate the linear, regressive passage of time suggests a notion of ceaseless return. An echo of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return, for Nabokov this is not a retrograde process, but a liberating one. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov refers to his life as a "coloured spiral in a small ball of glass." The spiral, rather than the circle, suggests a continual movement forward through time, whilst maintaining the proximity of the past and future to the present. (Wyllie in Kellman and Malin 2000, p.19)

Like most critics, Wyllie seems to privilege the spiral form over the circular; the Hegelian

[5] Nabokov equates circularity and negativity near the beginning of *Speak, Memory*: 'I have journeyed back in thought…to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exits' (2001 [1967], p.18).

method over the Nietzschean. This belies Nabokov's comment about spirals becoming vicious circles again later in *Speak, Memory* (p.231), though Wyllie does make an astute point about memory being able to bring about a 'ceaseless return'.[6] Nabokov's ambivalence towards the circular shape, and the conflation of Hegelian and Nietzschean thought in his work, has been discussed by Marina Grishakova in a study entitled *Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction* (2006):

> One of the most obvious examples of Nabokov's sources is the Symbolist idea of the spiral as a spiritualized circle (*SM*, 275) elaborated in the polemics against the Nietzschean "vicious" circle of the "eternal return" In Nabokov, however, the vicious circle of logical thinking or the negative meaning of the encirclement as pressure of the material world is counterweighted by the positive meaning of the circle (see e.g., a collection of Nabokov's dictums on the topic "all good things are round" in Hayles 1984: 124; cf. also: "Commonsense is square, whereas all the most essential visions and values of life are beautifully round, as round as the universe or the eyes of a child at its first circus show"; *CW*, 22) (p.81)[7]

Grishakova makes an adroit point about the ambivalence that Nabokov seems to have had towards the circle. Nabokov does mention the 'vicious' character of the circle. But Alexandrov draws attention to the idea of the 'charmed circles of Nabokov's fiction' (1995, p.6): despite Fyodor's 'urge to break out of the circle' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.312) in *The Gift*, he also makes reference to the positive effect of recurring incidences and circular motions (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.84, p.188). Nabokov's paradoxical

[6] In *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Boyd makes the claim of memory freeing us from the 'prison of consciousness' (p.79).
[7] In the poem "An Evening of Russian Poetry," Nabokov writes: 'Not only rainbows – every line is bent /And skulls and seeds and all good worlds are round. (1959, p.20).

relationship to the circular notion of time can also be seen in his treatment of time's philosophical equivalent.

Eternal Recurrence

Nietzsche's 'doctrine' or 'theory' of eternal recurrence is spread across a range of works; there can be no single, monolithic account, despite Heidegger, for example, asserting that eternal recurrence was the 'fundamental doctrine of Nietzsche's philosophy' (1991, p.6). As we will see, some variation in the accounts of the theory is an important part of Nabokov's use of the idea; it may be at times that he is adopting a rather terrifying 'strong' form rather than the more endurable 'weak' form. In *The Gay Science* (1882), where Nietzsche first mentions the 'death of God', he also introduces the concept of eternal recurrence:

> This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again, and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence. (2001 [1882], p.194)

Eternal recurrence then appears in his next work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), in a chapter called 'The Intoxicated Song' in part IV, where Zarathustra asks:

> Did you ever say Yes to one joy? O my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well. All things are chained and entwined together, all things are in love; if ever you wanted one moment twice, if ever you said: 'You please me,

> happiness, instant, moment!' then you wanted *everything* to return! you wanted everything anew, everything eternal, everything chained, entwined together, everything in love, O that is how you *loved* the world, you everlasting men, loved it eternally and for all time: and you say even to woe: 'Go, but return!' *For all joy wants - eternity!* (Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], pp.331-332)

Here, Zarathustra associates eternal recurrence with the notions of oneness, of affirmation of both joy and woe, and its apparently paradoxical nature (mentioned in the opening two sentences). The notion of *amor fati* is present both in content ('Yes to *all* woe') and in its bombastic style (through rhetorical questions, exclamation marks, and italics). Referring to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche writes that 'the basic conception of the work, *the idea of eternal recurrence*, [is] the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained' (2004 [1888], p.69).

Tanner observes that eternal recurrence 'has proved the most riddling of all of Nietzsche's views'. He asks whether Nietzsche devised the concept in a '"What if…?" spirit, or as a serious hypothesis about the nature of the cosmos' (1994, p.61). In this respect, eternal recurrence can be understood as a thought experiment and this is what I call the 'weak' form of the theory. But the idea of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence as a thought experiment raises some problematic issues. It could be argued that we would not have *any* burden if eternal recurrence were to be true - according to Nietzsche's theory, we have already experienced the same life an innumerable number of times before (making every action forever identical to the first in infinite cycles). However, if we are to imagine the possibility of *this* life being the first in the sequence, we live with a huge burden on our shoulders (given that our actions would then have innumerable replications and consequences).

The 'strong' form is illustrated by sections 55 (pp.35-39) and 1066 (pp.548-549) in the posthumous *The Will to Power* (1901), where the theory is presented as closer to a scientific hypothesis rather than a thought experiment. Although Tanner claims that it is most certainly the latter that Nietzsche is advocating in *The Gay Science*, he reveals that, in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche 'tries giving proofs of it as a general theory, based on the fact that if the number of atoms in the universe is finite, they must reach a configuration that they have been in before, and that will inevitably result in the history of the universe repeating itself' (1994, pp.61-62). It is uncertain as to whether we should take each version as seriously as the other from the point of view of Nietzsche scholarship. Tanner concludes that 'The cosmological view of the doctrine has not in general been regarded favourably'. Yet he also concedes that 'people's imaginations are…gripped by the idea' because 'they take up a perspective outside any one cycle, so that they can visualize it occurring again and again…viewing the whole thing from a god's-eye point of view' (1994, pp.62-63). So, while the 'strong' form of the theory may be highly doubtful as a scientific hypothesis, as an intellectual challenge it is far more powerful, terrifying and irresistible than the 'weak' thought experiment. One of the few critics to explore Nabokov's engagement with eternal recurrence, John Burt Foster, can arguably be seen to misunderstand it through conflating the weak and strong versions that I mention below, so it is important to make the distinctions clear.

In order for eternal recurrence to occur, Nietzsche argues that it has to function alongside what he calls *amor fati* or 'a love of one's fate' - that is, we must want our lives to repeat endlessly with the utmost fervour in order for eternal recurrence to be conceivable. In the chapter in *Ecce Homo* entitled 'Why I Am So Clever', Nietzsche claims: 'My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity' (2004 [1888],

p.37). The concept is also mentioned in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the chapter 'The Intoxicated Song': 'All joy wants the eternity of all things, wants honey, wants dregs, wants intoxicated midnight, wants graves, wants the consolation of graveside tears, wants gilded sunsets' (Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], p.332).

Eternal Recurrence and Nabokov

Eternal recurrence is one of the few ideas directly attributable to Nietzsche that explicitly appears in Nabokov's works. In *Mary* (1926), for example, Nabokov's earliest novel, the protagonist Ganin questions what will become of the world when he dies, asking, in solipsistic fashion, 'surely it won't all die when I do?' and pondering that he 'once read about the eternal return' (Nabokov 1989 [1926], p.55). Further, Foster notices the parallels between the opening of the preface of *The Defense* and that of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 'Just as Nietzsche recalls first conceiving of eternal recurrence near "a powerful pyramidal rock," so Nabokov associates the genesis of the novel with a similar scene: "I remember with special limpidity a sloping slab of rock, in the ulex and ilex-clad hills, where the main thematic idea of the book first came to me"' (1993, p.67).[8] Thirty years later, in *Pnin* (1957), Dr Bodo von Falternfels' research topic on Nietzsche (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.116) foreshadows Joan Clements' mention of the 'fantastic recurrence of certain situations' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.134). In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov's narrative memoir acts as a quasi-imperative summoning of the possibilities of 'Mnemosyne', in which he talks about the 'impassioned commemoration, ceaseless return' (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.134) of a picnic he once had in his youth. He also reinvents the 'Vivian Darkbloom' anagram (found in *Lolita*'s foreword), this time suggesting 'eternal recurrence' through his reference to 'cosmic synchronization' (both

[8] In this passage, Foster quotes from Nietzsche's *Werke in Drei Banden*, ed. Karl Schlecta (Munich: Hanser, 1966, 2:1128) and Nabokov's *The Defense*, translation by Michael Scammell (New York: Putnam's, 1964, p.7).

being concepts that allow us to 'see' the world's events in one unifying pattern):

> Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time...That summer I was still far too young to evolve any wealth of 'cosmic synchronization' (to quote my philosopher again). (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.169)

As mentioned in the introduction, Nabokov is usually coy, disingenuous even, about his sources. In *Strong Opinions*, for example, Nabokov said that 'I do not believe that any particular writer has had any definite influence on me' (1990 [1973], p. 46). Nabokov's dismissiveness of possible influences can also be seen, for example, in *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: the Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971* (1979), where he remarks that Proust and T.S. Eliot are anagrams, respectively, of 'stupor' and 'toilets' (Nabokov 2001 [1979], p.241). Such lampooning of literary figures perpetuates his image of being an all-powerful master, in control and original, begrudging of others that might have had more original ideas. Because of this, the rare glimpses of indebtedness to Nietzsche suggest that eternal recurrence was a significant idea for him.[9] Eternal recurrence is important because, among other reasons, it can help to explain one of the main problems in Nabokov's *oeuvre* – his relationship with loss. Nabokov's explicit and implicit references

[9] It is interesting to know that the theory of the world repeating itself 'an infinite number of times' is spoken by the Devil in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880, p.823). Nabokov's relationship to Dostoevsky is discussed in chapter five. One possible reference to Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence may have been P.D. Uspensky's 'The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin' (1915) which was published in St Petersburg and explicitly alludes to the concept. For more detail on this, see Mary Fox's PhD on Nabokov, Ouspensky and G.I Gurdjieff (Mary Immaculate College/University of Limerick). There also exists a photo of Ouspensky in the Nabokov Museum crypt.

to the theory of eternal recurrence demonstrate an unusual level of respect, fractured between confidence and fear.

Nabokov's preoccupation with memory may stem from similar preoccupations of Russian writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In *The Brothers Karamazov and the Poetics of Memory* (2009), Thompson suggested that

> Memory has now become topical in Russia but it is not new. The Symbolists and Acmeists, in particular V.I. Ivanov and O. Mandel'shtam, were deeply involved with cultural memory, both as poets and critics. In Russian literary scholarship we can trace a continuous interest in memory from V.I. Ivanov, one of Dostoevsky's early interpreters, to Bakhtin and to Lotman and Uspensky in the present. (p.xiii)

In the period that Russian writers began to become interested in memory, they were also becoming interested in Nietzsche. One reason for the Russian preoccupation with memory may be related to the 'Soviet policies which aimed to suppress and efface whole areas of Russian history and culture' (Thompson 1991, p.xiii). So, Nabokov's youth coincided both with a general intellectual engagement with Nietzsche, as discussed in the introduction, and with memory simultaneously. Eternal recurrence became combined with contemporary Russian interest in memory. In *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, Bernice Rosenthal claims that

> Russians interpreted the concept [of eternal recurrence] in a variety of ways. To occult philosophers, it meant reincarnation; to Symbolists and Acmeists, historical cycles and the rebirth of Hellenic civilization in their own time. To the Futurists, "eternal recurrence" meant the end of history, of linear time, and even of death. (1994, pp.16-17)

This varied Russian interest in both eternal recurrence and memory in the early twentieth century would have been part of the intellectual climate that Nabokov was growing up in.

Through an account of eternal recurrence as both ecstatic and terrifying, I present Nabokov both as the confident 'enchanter' that he claimed to be and a fearful or apprehensive 'doubter' (to adopt Michael Wood's terminology).[10] I will also argue that Nabokov's relationship with memory is deeply engaged with Nietzsche's idea of '*amor fati*' as well as with 'eternal recurrence'. In his role as enchanter, Nabokov rejoices both in *amor fati* and eternal recurrence. He uses the latter idea to resurrect his own past consciousness again and again as texts are read and reread again and again. Emigrating from Russia because of the Bolsheviks in 1919 (losing a fortune and estate inherited from his Uncle Ruka as a consequence), from Germany and France because of the Nazis in 1937 and 1940 respectively, Nabokov had to abandon his 'natural idiom, [his] untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.316-317). Even more horrifically, he also lost family members to extremist violence (his father was assassinated in 1922 and his brother Sergey was killed in a death camp in 1945). Nabokov's conception of memory and eternal recurrence can be seen both to neutralize the terrible losses he and his contemporaries endured, and to magnify their horror through endless repetition.

Nabokov the 'doubter' has a fearful, perhaps even horror-struck, relationship with *amor fati* and eternal recurrence. Memory recovers what is lost but also allows the eternal recurrence of pain, his own and others'. And even where memory as eternal recurrence brings back delight – 'the shadow on the tablecloth' (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.134), the petal's reflection on the water (Nabokov 2000 [1967], pp.208-209) – it is only

[10] See *The Magician's Doubts* (1994), p.22.

available to those with *amor fati*. As Wood has noted, 'I think that Nabokov often tries to be inhumanly secure, and confident, and happy, and unregretful…If he pulled that off, he would be a monster' (Wood in Grossman 2000). I will look at a range of Nabokov's texts in which narrators and characters are faced with the challenges of *amor fati* and eternal recurrence – some accept, some decline, and some are simply overwhelmed.

I will begin by considering examples of Nabokov acknowledging, through coded and less coded references, an intellectual debt or influence. Then I turn to examples of Nabokov's engagement with eternal recurrence and *amor fati* as an 'enchanter' before turning to examples of the more fearful 'doubter' for whom eternal recurrence and *amor fati* may act as impasses that prevent the forgetting of pain. I suggest that memory enables his apparent indifference to his own losses, yet only with a sense of uncertainty. It is worth noticing that Nabokov's version of memory departs from eternal recurrence in important ways in allowing him to assimilate loss and pain.

The 'fantastic recurrence of certain situations'

One notable example of Nabokov engaging with eternal recurrence, both confidently and fearfully, can be found in the campus novel *Pnin*. Written whilst working on *Lolita* (1955), *Pnin* follows the nomadic existence of Professor Timofey Pavlovich Pnin (a Russian scholar at Waindell University). *Pnin* can be read as a treatise on memory and on its pitfalls and possibilities. The intrusive narrator of *Pnin* (who eventually enters the narrative as a character at the start of chapter seven), describes Pnin as 'beloved not for any essential ability but for those unforgettable digressions of his, when he would remove his glasses to beam at the past whilst massaging the lenses of the present' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.10). The excerpt conflates the idea of vision with that of memory; Pnin's reflection on past events, done without his glasses, suggests a lack of

focus or of blurred, hazy recollection compared to the clear, crisp images of the present. As mentioned earlier, Nietzsche is explicitly referred to as the research topic of the sinister Austrian scholar Dr Bodo von Falternfels, the new head of the German Department who will succeed Dr Hagen:

> Another charitable institution had come to the assistance of Dr Bodo von Falternfels, to enable him to complete 'a bibliography concerned with such published and manuscript material as has been devoted in recent years to a critical appraisal of the influence of Nietzsche's disciples on Modern Thought. (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.116)

And shortly after this reference to Nietzsche, the topic of eternal recurrence arises. The remark comes from Pnin's former landlady Joan Clements at a small soirée that Pnin holds at his new flat. Like Pnin, we are privy to the tail end of a conversation between Joan Clements and Roy Thayer: 'But don't you think - haw - that what he is trying to do - haw - practically in all his novels - haw - is - haw - to express the fantastic recurrence of certain situations?' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.134). The narrative indicates that Joan is talking about an unnamed male author's tendencies here. We may be forgiven for not giving this passage enough attention, simply thinking that Nabokov wishes to illustrate his ability in relaying a speech impediment through the written word. In the afterword to *Pnin*, however, Wood claims that the reference is too obvious an allusion to Nabokov's practice in his own novels:

> the remark looks like a clue - too much like a clue, because it's hard to resist the thought that the novelist Joan is talking about is our narrator, a thought almost dizzyingly complicated by the fact that as a writer he cannot be separated from Nabokov himself, and that both of them are indeed

> unusually interested in the fantastic recurrence of certain situations. It's unlike either of them to be so helpful, so they are probably teasing us. Just teasing? What we have, I think, is a curious double move, a clue which is also a cancellation; a sort of parable about how all talk about literature, even when true, is a betrayal of literature. Writers don't 'express' anything, in Nabokov's view. They invent, display, collate, observe; they create worlds. 'Fantastic recurrence,' however, could hardly be more precise, so the remark points us in the right direction even as it tells us not to point. (Wood in Nabokov 2000 [1957], pp.167-168)

Although I agree that this 'clue' does seem to refer to Nabokov, Wood does not remark on the implicit reference to Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. In fact, the Nietzschean reference in the conversation between Clements and Thayer has deeper resonance the further we probe the novel. When Pnin helps Joan Clements into a taxi after getting his teeth repaired, we are told that he 'slipped on the pavement, and the taximan said "Easy," and took her bag from him, and everything had happened before, in this exact sequence' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], pp.44-45). Shortly afterwards, outside his new apartment in uptown New York, the concept of memory and the suggestion of eternal recurrence start to blur in Pnin's mind:

> on a block memorable for the wastepaper along the curb, the bright pat of dog dirt somebody *had already slipped upon*, and a *tireless boy pitching* a ball against the steps of the high brown porch; and even that room became positively dapper in Pnin's mind (where *a small ball still rebounded*) (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.52, my emphasis)[11]

[11] In chapter four of the novel, Pnin is described as 'letting his gaze dwell upon various philosophical objects to imagine what it would be to see them again after the ordeal and

Interestingly, Pnin often feels himself 'dissolving' into his surroundings throughout the narrative. Pnin's apparently 'normal' existence is counterpoised by certain epiphanic moments throughout the novel that seem also to be moments in which he experiences metaphysical dialogue with the hereafter. Although Pnin believes these phantasmagorical experiences are 'cardiac sensations', numerous critics have looked at their relation in terms of the beyond.[12] Pnin's preoccupation with dissolving atoms and molecules breaking down is echoed in the 'porous and pregnable' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.17) feeling that he experiences within the novel and the 'awful feeling of sinking and melting into one's physical surroundings - sunset, red boles of trees, sand, still air' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.109). One possible alternative to this 'otherworld' dispute is that Nabokov is flirting with the scientific, or strong, version of eternal recurrence. We are told that 'poor Pnin, with hallucinatory sharpness, imagined Mira slipping out of there into the garden and coming toward him among tall tobacco flowers whose dull white mingled in the dark with that of her frock. This feeling coincided somehow with the sense of *diffusion and dilation* within his chest' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.111, my emphasis). Here, the image that 'poor Pnin' sees blurs the demarcation between body and nature but also 'coincides somehow' with the cardiac tingles he experiences throughout the novel. Such a theory may be masked by the fact that, because the seizures are linked to something in Pnin's chest, the connection to a heart condition would be a more rational explanation than something metaphysical. Also, it is interesting that Pnin is described as 'imagining' Mira rather than 'remembering', something that Jajdelska et al

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then recall what it had been to perceive them through the prism of expectation' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.32). Although the 'ordeal' refers to his dentist's trip, the imagined experience is suggestive of eternal recurrence.

[12] For claims that Pnin's experiences are a metaphysical dialogue with the hereafter, see Gennady Barabtarlo's *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1989) and *Aerial View: Essays on Nabokov's Art and Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

(2010) argue are similar activities. Not only does this passage suggest that Nabokov may be alluding to his version of Nietzsche's 'atom theory' of eternal recurrence but the mention of the character of Mira, as we shall see, gives further force to the theory that Nabokov is using memory not only as a synonym for eternal recurrence and its possibilities but as a way to enact it in moving between past, present and future.

Mira

Indeed, I want to suggest that the character of Mira Belochkin is at the centre of *Pnin*'s relationship to eternal recurrence and illustrates the difficulty of *amor fati* working in conjunction with it. The first proper love of Pnin's life, Mira reappears throughout the novel and affords him a bridge back to his past and a sense of nostalgia for a lost love. The following passage recalls her horrifying but uncertain death at the hands of the Nazis, yet also reveals something that is arguably more horrifying:

> In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, over the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin…because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained

> nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. (Nabokov 2000 [1957], pp.112-113)

Because the 'form of her death had not been recorded' we are told that, for Pnin, Mira 'kept dying a great number of deaths and resurrections'. Such terminology is very close to the scenario suggested by eternal recurrence (yet it is important to remember that these 'resurrections' occur only in Pnin's mind rather than in the universe). Wood also focuses on the passage:

> When Pnin meets up with Mira Belochkin, an old sweetheart whose memory recurs in the book like an image of what it means to be young, her features are 'unchanged', 'immortal'; and as long as he remembers the meeting, she cannot change. The trouble is that this memory is not alone, and that the dead who are still alive are also endlessly dying…The suddenly refreshed memory of her unchanged and immortal self becomes unbearable, and Nabokov writes, in an extraordinary sentence, that 'only in the detachment of an incurable complaint, in the sanity of near death, could one hope to retain this for a moment'. (Wood in Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.169)

If we link Mira's recurring image with eternal recurrence, Pnin's description of 'an incurable complaint' (something that is inevitable) serves to suggest the negative implications of what eternal recurrence can allow for – that Mira's death may happen again and again *and* that he might experience the same 'unbearable' memories repeatedly. The idea of eternal recurrence as a negative concept is illustrated by the obvious pain that Pnin feels in regard to recalling Mira's image. Not only does this suggest that he is fearful of imagining eternal recurrence (and seemingly unable to possess *amor fati*), but it also

suggests an element of cruelty in *bringing about* eternal recurrence through memory and that it is better to let it go. This ambiguity is illustrated, for example, by the fact that the narrator, VN, is described as 'a dreadful inventor' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.155) and claims to amuse people with the 'unusual lucidity and strength of my memory' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.150) whilst Pnin talks about a commemorative crucifix as 'burdensome' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.107). As such, the reader is unsure whether Pnin or the narrator VN, or an amalgam of the two, acts as *raisonneur* for Nabokov in the potential problems of memory and eternal recurrence *in* memory.

In *The Magician's Doubts*, Wood takes his discussion of Pnin's memory further: 'Nabokov always remembered such events, but his writing construed them obliquely, as a form of duelling with history: his art was an answer to what Pnin couldn't bear to think of' (1994, p.17). Wood's idea of memory as a fight with history is consistent with the references to memory throughout *Pnin*. Although Pnin is said to be a 'stickler for historical truth' and thinks of memory as a 'brilliant cosmos that [seems] all the fresher for having been abolished by one blow of history', he remarks that 'The history of man is the history of pain' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.137, p.11, p.141). But is memory here a voluntary or involuntary act – something either desired or, conversely, something that acts as an anodyne in the healing process? Wood argues that 'an unconscious memory, for Nabokov, would be no memory at all' (Wood in Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.165).[13] What the passage from *Pnin* seems to suggest is that memory and willed imagination are complicit in Mira's innumerable deaths; in the repeated life and death cycle. In turn, this raises issues about the benefits and difficulties of memory. Tanner talks about this possibility when discussing eternal recurrence:

[13] Talking about remembering his father when six years old, Nabokov describes it as his 'first *conscious* return' (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.76). Nabokov seems to be suggesting an act of will or volition in such a remembrance.

> As someone asked me recently: which is worse, a universe in which Auschwitz occurs once, or one in which it occurs infinitely many times? It seems to need, to say at least, an unfeeling person to say that it does not matter. Recurrence, even if it makes, in practical terms, no difference, still invests with a terrible weight what *does* happen. (1994, pp.62-63)

The common worldview that we experience events only once (related to the adage that 'time can heal'), seems to be related to the view that we can arguably come to terms with horrific events, like the Holocaust, by moving further away from them in time. When this view is inverted by eternal recurrence, Auschwitz is given the possibility of repeating itself and so a nightmarish version of life suddenly dawns. The possibility of events occurring over and over again in an infinite cycle is something that Heidegger refers to as 'the most burdensome thought' (1984, p.25) and, like Tanner's concept of 'weight', is the central theme of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984).[14]

These ideas of burdens and the weight of history occur in one particular passage in *Pnin*, where Pnin seems to obliquely refer to Nietzsche's early writings on history:

> Laurence, on going up to his study one day, a secret and sacred lair cunningly carved out of the attic, was incensed to find the mellow lights on and fat-naped Pnin braced on his thin legs serenely browsing in a corner: 'Excuse me, I only am grazing,' as the gentle intruder (whose English was growing richer at a surprising pace) remarked, glancing over the higher of his two shoulders; but somehow that very afternoon a chance reference to a rare author, a passing allusion tacitly recognized in the middle distance of an idea, an

[14] Kundera's novel, however, suggests an inversion of the 'burden' – the premise of the novel is that, if eternal recurrence is indeed false, our actions may be 'unbearably light' and, arguably, positive (London: Faber and Faber, 1999 [1984]).

> adventurous sail descried on the horizon, led insensibly to a tender mental concord between the two men, both of whom were really at ease only in their warm world of natural scholarship. (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.34)

The following passage from Nietzsche's 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' in *Untimely Meditations* (1876) will allow for a sustained comparison and analysis:

> Consider the cattle, *grazing* as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy or bored...That is why it affects him like a vision of a lost paradise to see the herds *grazing* or, in closer proximity to him, a child which, having as yet nothing of the past to shake off, plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and present. (Nietzsche 1983 [1876]), pp.60-61, my emphasis)[15]

This passage, mentioning a 'chance remark to a rare author', may be similar to Wood's earlier claim that Joan Clements' remark 'seems too much like a clue'. The possible relationship between these two texts (the 'passing allusion'), may be in the use of the word 'grazing' which seems to set off the 'mental concord' between Laurence and Pnin. This is strengthened if we take into consideration the themes that the two texts deal with. In *Pnin*, the difficulty of remembering is perhaps best summed up by Pnin's lament that 'The history of man is the history of pain' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.141) whilst, for Nietzsche, arguing that we must live 'unhistorically', claims in his *On the Genealogy of*

[15] In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche claims: 'Other learned cattle caused me on account of it to be suspected of Darwinism' (2004 [1888], p.41).

Morality that 'There is perhaps nothing more terrible and more uncanny in all of man's prehistory than his mnemo-technique' (1994 [1882], p.37).[16] But, Nietzsche's belief, in 'On Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', that forgetting must be intrinsic to our lives seems at odds with his later idea of *amor fati* which must be present in order to will *everything* in life to recur an infinite amount of times no matter what the content. Nietzsche's position seems to mirror Nabokov's in that the latter's texts can be seen as tempestuous loci in which memory functions as both the highest form of life-affirmation *and* as a burdensome reminder of what cannot be forgotten or escaped.

Nabokov and Loss

Having illustrated the depth of Nabokov's engagement with eternal recurrence in at least one text, I wish to develop the argument that Nabokov's conception of memory functions like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, or can even be thought of *as* eternal recurrence. In other words, I argue that by thinking of Nabokovian memory as a faculty that will forever replicate previous events, by proxy, the past is made present. In this way, memory functions as a positive force functioning as a coping mechanism that allows him to be undefeated by misery, with a robust immunity to loss. Nabokov's life was one of unusual turmoil and seeming sadness in losing homes and countries as well as friends and relatives to totalitarian regimes. However, Nabokov projects a self-image as one immune, even indifferent, to such heartbreak. The glib description he gives when talking about his Uncle Ruka's and his brother Sergey's deaths serve as examples:

> He [Uncle Ruka] insisted that he had an incurable heart ailment and that, when the seizures came, he could obtain relief only by lying supine on the

[16] In a letter to Elena Sikorski about her recent bereavement, Nabokov wrote: 'When a new vacuum forms, the recollections immediately rush in, and one senses with increased intensity the eternal oppression of the past' (1989, p.226).

> floor. Nobody took him seriously, and after he did die of angina pectoris, all alone, in Paris, at the end of 1916, aged forty-five, it was with a quite special pang that one recalled those after-dinner incidents in the drawing room… (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.57)

And:

> the only person who memorized the music and all the words was my brother Sergey, whom he [Uncle Ruka] hardly ever noticed, who also stammered, and who is also now dead. (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.60)

Nabokov repeatedly depicts himself as neither vulnerable nor particularly concerned with the horrors he witnessed or experienced ('after he did', 'quite'), but his seeming indifference should be met with scepticism.[17] The beautiful sadness of the writing alone can reveal this pose for what it is (see, for example, *Speak, Memory*, p.41, pp.150-151, p.194, p.237). One way to interpret Nabokov's trumpeted indifference to the horrors he faced is to look at his depiction of memory as a *negation* of loss. In this respect, Nabokov's faculty of memory may be the only way to secure, for the dead, their "reality"; to achieve their immortality; to allow them to *return*, or be returned to, in the future.

This is consistent with *Speak, Memory*'s continual reflection on the difficulty of evoking the past. Nabokov claims that 'the bright mental image (as, for instance, the face of a beloved parent long dead) conjured up by a wing-stroke of the will; *that* is one of the bravest movements a human spirit can make' (2000 [1967], p.28). He nevertheless *desires* this difficulty and, therefore, in consciously reliving the memory, enacts the prerequisite of *amor fati* in order for eternal recurrence to occur (albeit in a metaphorical sense). Nabokov seems to be going against our natural proclivity for consciously trying to

[17] See Wood's quote, in Grossman, on page 50.

remember only positive memories and suppressing negative ones (Thompson 2009, p.25). Instead, he immerses himself in what would seem unbearably sad to most of us. One explanation for Nabokov's 'pathological keenness' (2000 [1967], p.60) for remembering may be that it forms some kind of compensation for the crushing losses he experienced in his life. Talking about his childhood in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov remembers his schoolroom again in Vyra:

> 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. (2000 [1967], p.62)

The fact that Nabokov refers to the past as 'reality' (a word that he was always wary about and usually ensnared with inverted commas) suggests a possible privileging of the past over the present.[18] The final sentence, made up of three small clauses, allows for a variety of meanings. It could be that 'everything is as it should be' means that that is how the actual event took place (i.e., the memory has fidelity to truth) *or* how Nabokov wishes the memory to be. However, it could be that this is the way that Nabokov would like *life* to be - some kind of halcyon time-space, protected from death and change. Although this is effectively a static scene, Nabokov's claim that 'nobody will ever die' links memory with eternal recurrence in that both seem to negate the efficacy of death. It reads as a poignant vignette of a child's naivety about matters of death and horror, written by a man *fully* aware of them. As such, the main point seems to be the ambiguity of the paragraph; the number of readings it seems to suggest.

[18] In the afterword to *Lolita*, for example, Nabokov argues that "'reality" [is] (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes)' (2000 [1955], p.312).

Rather than simply explaining this memory, for example, Nabokov appeals to the *reader*'s memory through several different techniques. The reader experiences, or participates in, the recollected scene, reliving its immediacy through the use of present and perfect tense and the oddness of the personification ('a bumblebee has entered'). The alliteration within the passage (brims, brightness, bumblebee, bumps) makes the mundane scene remarkable, making it more vivid and memorable simultaneously. Arguably, although the reader has different memories, the *process* of remembering is so familiar that the reader enacts the same nostalgia.[19] Certain aspects of the scene – the idleness available to children in the summer, their fascination with insects – are common to many. The fact that Nabokov is writing about himself with hindsight (although in the present tense) serves to suggest a fear of loss and change, and that memory can act to immobilize death's caprices.[20]

Talking about his mother slightly earlier in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov recollects

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[19] Foster also notes the simultaneous act of readerly and writerly remembering when he talks about the use of 'cultural memory' in the use of unidentified allusions: 'Both character and reader, from their positions within and outside the text, are engaged in the activity of remembering' (1993, p.40). Thompson also addresses this particular area in *The Brothers Karamazov and the Poetics of Memory*:

> When we speak of literary art we are concerned not so much with the storage of information about reality, but with transformations of reality by the individual imagination in its potentially creative alliance with cultural memory...Memory is at once a highly conservative and a highly creative mechanism. Therein lies its great significance for art. As a conservative mechanism, memory, remarks Lotman, is not only 'panchronic, but opposed to time'. (2009, p.6)

It is interesting, in this respect, that Nabokov feels it necessary to inform us, in *Speak, Memory*, that 'I confess I do not believe in time' (Nabokov 2001 [1967], p.109).

[20] Thompson argues that:

> Memory has great combinatorial potentials and this is another of its creative facets. Past experience retained in memory can freely combine with present events thereby giving rise to unexpected associations and striking juxtapositions. Thus the workings of memory erupt the flat surface of sequential events, creating new associations, connotations and connections, thereby rendering the text polysemantic, multi-dimensional. (2009, p.24).

that:

> She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past. Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum - the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate - and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses. (2000 [1967], p.33)[21]

The allusion to later losses is masked not only by the brevity of the statement but also by the fact that Nabokov calls his mother's gift 'a splendid training'. Nabokov presents himself as indifferent, or light-hearted, about the struggles he faced; the loss of Uncle Ruka's estate is neatly compensated by the estate of memory bequeathed by his mother. This fits with Nabokov's claim that nothing is lost (Boyd 1990, p.157) and Boyd's idea of 'the consolation of memory' (1990, p.5).

Yet memory's gifts are not uncomplicated. As much as Nabokov may seem to pour scorn on those who do not possess a photographic or perfect memory, there are examples in *Speak, Memory* where Nabokov makes explicit the interaction between imagination and memory, and sometimes even acknowledges his own embellishment: "'How you hugged me, how you danced with joy!" she exclaimed ten years later in the course of inventing a brand-new past' (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.101); 'And now comes the bicycle act - or at least my version of it' (p.162); and 'Just as it was, or perhaps a little more perfect' (p.167). Even in the spoof review at the end of the text, Nabokov's assumed critical persona is quick to point to the potential criticism of blurring the demarcations between the two: 'to stick to the truth through thick and thin and not be tempted to fill gaps with logical verisimilitudes posing as preciously preserved recollections' (p.239). Foster calls this aspect of Nabokov's writing his 'art of memory'.

[21] Some of Nabokov's losses are given on page 49.

He argues that the term 'art of memory proved a convenient and even unavoidable label for one key tendency in Nabokov's memory-writing, his deliberate oscillation between fictive invention and mnemonic truth' (1993, p.x), stressing the blurred boundaries between what can be considered true and what cannot. Nabokov challenges received ideas of art as a creative discipline and memory as a passive ability. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov emphatically insists that 'Imagination is a form of memory - "Down, Plato, down, good dog"' (1990 [1973], p.78). This example not only allows the processes to dovetail, but also mocks Plato by reducing him to a barking animal, seemingly annoyed that Nabokov radically alters this particular 'Form' for good.

'Eternal concurrence': Reading as resurrection

It is this kind of art of memory which lets Nabokov's texts function as memorial objects. Like tombstones, statues, or photographs, the book as object is something that can forever commemorate or record particular instances of life because it can be revisited. Like these other objects, books memorialize the (real or imagined) events depicted within them and can always be returned to. Similarly, readers attach emotional significance to books just as they do with other material objects. However, books differ from other memorial objects in that the experience of remembering or commemorating is a more active one. Skilled narrative recollection requires readers to actively construct the given sequence in their minds. Unlike film (where one is simply receiving given pictorial and aural sequences), books require imaginative effort in being able to envisage particular scenes. In other words, events are manifested rather than simply given. It is through this narrative experience of imagining, this reliance on the reader's ability to *share* in his form of memory, that Nabokov is actively engaging in what I term 'eternal *con*currence'.

Talking about Nabokov's first novel *Mary*, Foster makes the case that the protagonist Ganin 'realizes the fragility of his memories, which are weak reflections of the actual experience of summer love and will themselves vanish when he dies' (1993, p.39). Foster may be correct to call memory fragile given its seemingly evanescent quality and the fact that not all memories can be recalled. We may also arguably call memory a *futile* activity - no matter how strong or evocative they are, our own memories seem to die when we die. However, in literature, depicted events or actions survive - every time we open the text, the action, dialogue, and narration will be repeated in the same sequence. Ophelia will drown in every reading or production of *Hamlet*; Piggy will always fall from the cliff in *Lord of the Flies*. In the foreword to *The Defense* (1930), Nabokov refers to this idea of eternal, literary recurrence explicitly:

> Rereading this novel today, replaying the moves of its plot, I feel rather like Anderssen fondly recalling his sacrifice of both rooks to the unfortunate and noble Kieseritsky - who is doomed to accept it over and over again through an infinity of textbooks, with a question mark for monument. (1964, p.7)

Nabokov's use of 'doomed' and 'noble' reveal an ambiguity in his attitude to literature's capacity to allow things to eternally recur (bolstered by the way a punctuation mark monumentalises the mistake). Foster suggests that memories are 'weak reflections', or that they can 'provide no real return'.[22] But in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov suggests that, in literature at least, this is not so: 'There it was, the same ominous flaw, the banal hollow note, and *glib suggestion* that our love was doomed since it could never recapture the

[22] See J.W. Schooler and T.Y. Engstler-Schooler's article 'Verbal Overshadowing of Visual Memories: Some Things are Better Left Unsaid' (*Cognitive Psychology*, 22, 1990, pp.36-71) for more detail concerning the robustness of memory.

miracle of its initial moments, the rustle and rush of those limes in the rain, the compassion of the wild countryside' (2000 [1967], p.184, my emphasis). Foster's terminology introduces a devaluation of memories as inauthentic, synthetic, suggestive of escape or dependency. Instead, I argue that Nabokov's depictions of memory can evoke equally vivid experiences in the reader which belie Ganin's belief that his 'memories [will] vanish when he dies'. The fact that the text of *Mary* itself records Ganin's (albeit) fictitious memories seems to undermine Ganin's, and Foster's, argument. Yet Nabokov's victory is bittersweet. In rereading as in memory, the book re-enacts the pains, as well as the joys, of life. Foster's account understates, even misses, the extent to which Nabokov's relationship with memory mimics 'eternal recurrence' – something that I shall discuss in more depth in relation to *shared* memories.

Sharing in a memorable experience

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov talks about a former tutor called Lenski who would put up 'Educational Magic-Lantern Projections' at his St Petersburg home. He observes that Lenski '*fondly believed* [the slide show] would consist of entranced boys and girls sharing in a memorable experience' (2000 [1967], p.127, my emphasis). Nabokov seems to dismiss the idea that simply projecting an image onto a screen will result in the sharing of a memorable experience. Developing this notion, he talks about his ability to describe the 'things' that he perceives:

> I did not know then (as I know perfectly well now) what to do with such things - how to get rid of them, how to transform them into something that can be turned over to the reader in printed characters to have *him* cope with the blessed shiver - and this inability enhanced my oppression. (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.165)

As a developing writer, his ability to allow the *reader* to experience the writer's memory is a skill of the utmost importance. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov also talks about a worry over the actual, perceived falling of a petal meeting its reflected image:

> one feared that the trick would not work, that the blessed oil would not catch fire, that the reflection might miss and the petal float away alone, but every time the delicate union did take place, with the magic precision of a poet's word meeting halfway his, or a reader's, recollection. (2000 [1967], pp.208-209)

Again, Nabokov seems to be concerned with making the reader experience *his* recollections through his depiction of the minutiae of the past. One method of bringing this about is his coupling of descriptive power and sensory evocativeness. Brian Boyd, in his essay 'Nabokov as Storyteller', argues that Nabokov's use of detail is unusual in this respect:

> Nabokov uses detail with a naturalist's, a photographer's, a painter's, and a poet's eye: visual, natural, social, locomotory, and gestural particulars, seen from the outside but also felt from the inside. But despite his precision, he is sparing. He operates not by steady accumulation of detail but by swooping and swerving in ways that catch our attention, stir our imagination, and prod our memory, for the detail is highly selective, highly open-ended, highly diverse, highly correlated. (Boyd in Connolly 2005, p.33)[23]

Boyd sees Nabokov's use of detail as unusual given that the latter is able to conflate the perspective of numerous skilled visual practitioners. In *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov

[23] This relationship between 'outside' and 'inside' is discussed in the passage where Nabokov mentions 'ceaseless return' in *Speak, Memory* (p.134).

claims that one must 'caress the details…the divine details' (1980 p.xxiii). His predilection for life's minutiae is correlated with the importance he gives to the senses in describing, and evoking, memory. Indeed, this penchant for all things sensory is evinced in his claim that Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* was imbued with particular uniqueness: 'to recreate the past something other than the operation of memory must happen: there must be a combination of a present sensation (especially taste, smell, touch, sound) with a recollection, a remembrance, of the sensuous past…in other words, a nosegay of the senses in the present *and* the vision of an event or sensation in the past, this is when sense and memory come together and lost time is found again' (Nabokov 1980, p.249).

This relationship with the reader's sensual memory and imagination is harnessed to allow deeper insight. In Nabokov's short story 'Spring in Fialta' (1936), for example, the narrator's unreliability can be deciphered if the reader collaborates with the writer in both imagining and remembering specific pieces of information. Here, the narrator, Victor, recounts his first meeting with Nina:

> in Berlin at the house of some friends…I instinctively determined which of the men knew more about her than I. She was sitting in the corner of a couch, her feet pulled up, her small comfortable body folded in the form of a Z; an ashtray stood aslant on the couch near one of her heels; and…proceeded to utter slowly and joyfully, "Well, of all people— "
> (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.418)

A few pages later, Victor appears to recount the same scene:

> It had been in a Paris house, with many people around, and my dear friend

> Jules Darboux…led me to Nina, who sat in the corner of a couch, her body folded Z-wise, with an ashtray at her heel, and she took a long turquoise cigarette holder from her lips and joyfully, slowly exclaimed, "Well, of all people—' (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.428)

Both passages recall Victor meeting Nina at a house party, describe the way in which she is seated, the placement of a cigarette, and report the same speech. Yet, although seemingly describing the same scene, the two passages reveal discrepancies. These inconsistencies mar the veracity of Victor's truthfulness: where the first passage describes the meeting place as Berlin, the second describes it as Paris, and where the first mentions Victor's intuition, the second tells how he was 'led' in Nina's direction. Just as Victor describes "a trivial remark related to some unknown topic coiled and clung to one's own intimate recollection" (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.428), the reader's memory of a visual scene prompts him or her to question just how reliable Victor is. The one trivial detail that stuck in Victor's head is dwarfed by the number of other 'trivial' details (Paris vs. Berlin, the volition of the gaze) that readers are aware of. Such details are hugely important for our impression of Victor. In a scene where an earlier event is seemingly repeated (and the theme of literal recurrence evoked), Nabokov asks us to realise that the two scenes differ dramatically in the details and allow us to question the narrator's veracity. Not only does the short story provide an example of Nabokov inviting collaboration from the reader's memory – readers are rewarded if they do - but its evocation of literal recurrence also illustrates the foibles of memory. Similarly, just as 'Spring in Fialta' falls short of fulfilling the Nietzschean requirement of eternal recurrence in that the scenes are not exact replications of one another, other works of Nabokov seem also to lack the necessary criteria for eternal recurrence (despite engaging with the concept). Memory's potential gift of eternal recurrence is once again presented

as double-edged.

A Lack of *amor fati*: *Mary* and *The Defense*

As discussed earlier, Foster sees the allusions to eternal recurrence in *Mary* as ironic, signals of the fragile and illusory quality of memory. For example, in this extract from the novel, he argues that because Ganin 'breaks off inconclusively', Nabokov's use of 'eternal recurrence' is 'turned upside down' or becomes a 'hollow slogan' (1993, pp.39-42)[24]:

> Two weeks later he was already riding himself to exhaustion on his bicycle and playing Russian skittles in the evening...After another week the event he had been waiting for happened. "And where is it all now?" mused Ganin. "Where is all the happiness, the sunshine, where are those thick skittles of wood which crashed and bounced so nicely, where is my bicycle with the low handlebars and big gear? It seems there's a law which says that nothing ever vanishes, that matter is indestructible; therefore the chips from my skittles and the spokes of my bicycle still exist somewhere to this day. The pity of it is that I'll never find them again - never. I once read about the 'eternal return.' But what if this complicated game of patience never comes out a second time? Let me see – there's something I don't grasp - yes, this: surely it won't all die when I do? (Nabokov 1989 [1927], p.34)

[24] In his article 'Transnational Authorship on the German-Slavic Border: The Examples of Nabokov and Nietzsche', Foster astutely observes the connection between Nabokov's words in a letter detailing his plans for *Speak, Memory* – 'this will involve the picturing of many different lands and people and modes of living' and the claim that 'Zarathustra has seen many lands and many peoples' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Foster in Barabtarlo 2000, p.217). Although Foster explores this connection in terms of the relationship between 'unusual cultural mobility' and 'pluralistic education' that both figures had, he again seems to downplay the extent to which Nabokov alludes to, or appropriates, Nietzsche's phrasing or concepts.

Yet it could be argued that, because Ganin is unsure about the concept, he is depicted as one excluded from the group of 'higher men' (Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], p.328) able to possess *amor fati* in order for eternal recurrence to occur. The idea that these things might 'still exist somewhere to this day' seems ironic given that they *do* exist in Ganin's memory. Indeed, despite Ganin acknowledging 'just how vivid his memories are', Nabokov can be seen as toying with the reader in suggesting that memory *can* provide eternal return only if this is wholeheartedly accepted (again, related to *amor fati*). Instead, given his reservations about the theory, it may be that Ganin is simply not fit to experience eternal recurrence. This is not, I would argue, an isolated example. Nabokov creates a number of characters who flirt with the themes of eternal recurrence and *amor fati* yet are seemingly unable to endure or fulfil the criteria needed, including Ganin in *Mary*, Pnin, and Luzhin in *The Defense*.[25]

One cogent example occurs in *The Defense*, a novel concerned with the growing paranoia that Luzhin feels as a result of his thinking that his life is condemned to be repeated like some nightmarish, infinite chess game. At the beginning of the novel, Luzhin talks about his excitement at reopening narratives: 'Only much later did he clarify in his own mind what it was that had thrilled him so about these two books; it was that exact and relentlessly unfolding pattern' (Nabokov 1930, p.26). This positive image of a 'relentlessly unfolding pattern' begins to take on a more sinister aspect when he talks about his son:

> His terrible little double, little Luzhin, for whom the chess pieces had been

[25] These characters seem not to have the *amor fati* required to allow eternal recurrence to operate: for example, Ganin asking 'Where is all the happiness?' (Nabokov 1989 [1926], p.134); Pnin's pain at remembering Mira (Nabokov 2000 [1957], pp.122-123); and Luzhin committing suicide at the thought of the world repeating itself (Nabokov 1964, p.201).

> set out, crawled over the carpet on his knees…*All this had happened before*…And again he had been caught, had not understood how exactly the repetition of a familiar theme would come out in practice. (Nabokov 1930, p.172, my emphasis)

Finally, on the last page of the novel, the notion of recurrence is again suggested. Referring to an unchanging world whereby he is forced to replay his moves forever[26], it is arguably the notion of 'eternal recurrence' that prompts him to his final move:

> Before letting go he looked down. Some kind of hasty preparations were under way there: the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly *what kind of eternity* was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him. (Nabokov 1964, p.201, my emphasis)

Luzhin provides, like Ganin, an example of a character who conceives of eternal recurrence but finds the idea unbearable. Luzhin, however, is at odds here with Ganin in that he does not seem to 'accept the possibility of literal recurrence'. Luzhin's remark that 'It seemed as though that distant world was unrepeatable' (1964, p.129), suggests a terrified recognition that the world may allow for such recurrence. Although Luzhin's steadily worsening mental state seems to correlate with, for him, the terrifying implications of eternal recurrence, ultimately, he fails to possess the *amor fati* which could make this bearable and commits suicide. Yet, this is not always the case. Nabokov's own self-presentation as 'undefeated by misery' can be related to his willingness to engage

[26] See Nabokov's discussion of the 'doomed' Kieseritsky on p.65.

with memory no matter how difficult it is, exhibiting Nietzsche's *amor fati*. Although the phrase *amor fati* (or a 'love of one's fate') does not appear verbatim in any of Nabokov's works, his self-image, and many of his fictive narrators, seems to include an indefatigable zest for life, or life-affirmation, in the face of pain or ugliness.[27]

Nabokov's stance?

The short story 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia' (1925), an early version of a never-written novel entitled 'Happiness', also written whilst Nabokov resided in Berlin, seems also to include a potential example of *amor fati* and its moral difficulties. The unnamed protagonist observes that:

> at the Russian Orthodox cemetery far outside the city, an old lady of seventy committed suicide on the grave of her recently deceased husband. I happened to go there the next morning, and the watchman, a badly crippled veteran of the Denikin campaign, moving on crutches that creaked with every swing of his body, showed me the white cross on which she hanged herself, and the yellow strands still adhering where the rope ("brand-new one" he said gently) had chafed. Most mysterious and enchanting of all, though, were the crescent-shaped prints left by her heels, tiny as a child's, on the damp soil by the plinth. "She trampled the ground a bit, poor thing, but apart from that there's no mess at all," observed the watchman calmly, and, glancing at those yellow strands and at those little depressions, I suddenly realized that one can distinguish a naïve smile even in death. Possibly, dear, my main reason for writing this letter is to tell you of that easy, gentle end.

[27] Such hesitancy towards life, however, can be countered by the life-affirmation that, for example, the narrator in 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia' (1925), Martin Edelwiess in *Glory* (1932), and Fyodor in *The Gift* (1938) possess.

> Thus the Berlin night resolved itself. (Nabokov 1995 [1925], pp.139-140)

What is perhaps most noticeable about this passage is the response of what would normally be expected in such a scene. The fact that the story of suicide apparently does not upset the narrator is one thing. But the fact that he can smile at the scene seems to be an attack on *our* moral response; we are apparently forced to choose between aesthetic appreciation and moral horror. One way to resolve this is by resort to Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* – the fact that Nietzsche explicitly refers to 'gravesides' in describing *amor fati* may be purely coincidental, yet the story's ethos is undeniably similar to Nietzsche's account of *amor fati* (Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], p.332, quoted here on page 45). Nietzsche's quote in *The Gay Science* can also help us to shed light on Nabokov's passage: 'As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be *able* to make such a phenomenon of ourselves' (2001 [1882], p.104). The narrator in Nabokov's story seems to have this perspective, remembering, or focusing on, the aesthetic aspects of experience in order to make bearable what would otherwise be unbearable. Such an interpretation arguably makes the narrator's stance less morally repugnant. He goes on to express his happiness to his unnamed lover:

> Listen, I am ideally happy. My happiness is a kind of challenge. As I wander along the streets and the squares and the paths of the canal, absently sensing the lips of dampness through my worn soles, I carry proudly my ineffable happiness. 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 surrounds human loneliness. (Nabokov 1995 [1925], p.140)

The seeming paradox of the narrator's feeling of joy despite his meagre, exiled existence, his life-affirmation, suggests Nietzsche's *amor fati*. Yet, although the narrator notes the incessant progression of time, he affirms the never-wavering presence of his happiness rather than of himself. Such an occurrence is illustrative of what Nietzsche would call 'life-affirmation'. Nabokov's reflections about Mademoiselle O in *Speak, Memory* – 'What bothers me is that a sense of misery, and nothing else, is not enough to make a permanent soul. My enormous and morose Mademoiselle is all right on earth but impossible in eternity' (2000 [1967], p.92) – may indicate that she does not meet the criteria for being able to live in eternity or, indeed, eternally recur. Ultimately, 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia' may be analogous to Nabokov's own stance towards *amor fati*; it is uncertain whether the story acts as a defiant declaration of the concept or as a horrified, ironic, critique of it. As we have seen by looking at some of his major works, Nabokov's engagement with Nietzsche's concepts of eternal recurrence and *amor fati* is one that appears, simultaneously, to suggest that he is at once Nietzsche's champion as much as his frightened pupil.

Conclusion

Talking about his mother's photographs in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov claims that 'She did not really need them, for nothing had been lost' (2000 [1967], p.40). Nabokov's conception of memory seems to function like eternal recurrence, effectively negating the idea of loss. The frequent references and suggestions to 'eternal recurrence' in Nabokov's works suggest indebtedness – something very unusual for him. Such references and suggestions, however, seem to be caught somewhere between horrified

respect and unbridled fear. As we have seen, his works are ambivalent towards, but entangled with, the concepts of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*. His authorial persona is like one 'undefeated by misery', and therefore an exponent of *amor fati*. But Nabokov's frequent depictions of hesitancy towards eternal recurrence, and common depiction of characters lacking *amor fati*, suggests that such an idea may be too horrific for Nabokov to allow. I argue that Foster is mistaken in suggesting that Nabokov dismisses eternal recurrence but accept his notion of going beyond Nietzsche as shrewd (this idea will be explored in chapters five and six). Finally, from a slightly different angle, I also argued that the textual object will forever record particular instances of life in a way similar to eternal recurrence. Looking at Nabokov's ability to describe certain instances in an unusually vivid manner seems to suggest the notion of 'eternal recurrence' in that the *reader* has the same sensorial experience of the memories that Nabokov depicts.

The philosopher Richard Rorty has written that 'Nabokov seems never to have forgotten anything' (1989, p.158). Proclaiming the power of his memory is just one way that Nabokov fashioned a persona that was closely related to genius and skill. The next chapter will look at the ways in which this all-powerful persona affects his readers. Using Nietzsche's concepts of the 'Will to Power' and Master-slave morality, I will explore the idea that although Nabokov asserts his dominance through his texts and can be seen to strive for resistance, such a stance, similar to the discussion of loss in this chapter, is coupled with the anxiety that he will not be understood.

Chapter Two: 'The Will to (Disem)Power: Nabokov and His Readers'

Nabokov has a lot to say about his readers. In chapter three of his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, he warns: 'The following passage is not for the general reader, but for the particular idiot who, because he has lost a fortune in some crash, thinks he understands me' (p.59). Since no reader wants to think of him or her self as an idiot, Nabokov's strategy is to persuade readers to think of themselves as 'general readers', *above* the 'idiot' category. Some readers, having just elevated their conception of how well they think they read, may also indulge in a spot of haughty laughter at the readers who fall into this 'lower', and lampooned, category. Given, however, Nabokov's disparaging remarks on 'general readers', experienced Nabokov readers will not classify themselves with this general grouping either, instead raising themselves further, perhaps, to the status of 'good' readers (able to laugh at, or look down on, both 'idiot' *and* 'general' readers).[1] Yet, when Nabokov declares 'The general reader may now resume' (ibid) at the end of the passage, he covertly brands *every* reader as 'general' given that we all effectively 'resume' the text at the same point. Such a narrative trick is perhaps most embarrassing for the reader who thinks of him or her self as belonging to the hypothetical 'good' group given that he or she, ironically, might not notice the trick at all.[2]

This is as an illustration of how Nabokov seems to both toy with his readership and assert his authority.[3] One way to explore this authorial persona is to theorise the

[1] See Nabokov's essay 'Good Readers and Good Writers' in *Lectures on Literature*.
[2] David Lodge raises a similar point in regard to the section in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* where the narrator tells the implied reader 'Madam' to 'read the whole chapter over again' (Sterne 1997 [1759], p.48) for having been inattentive. Lodge argues, 'We who, as it were, remain with the author are made to feel privileged by his confidence, and tacitly invited to distance ourselves from the imperceptive reader' (1992, p.83).
[3] The author-reader relationship in Nabokov's works has received some critical attention. See, for example, Leland de la Durantaye's *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir*

roles of author and reader in Nabokov's works and how they relate to the concept of power. In particular, Nabokov's stance as an educated aristocratic writer, coupled with his disparaging remarks about 'average' or 'general' readers, recall aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy – specifically 'Master-Slave' morality and what he called the 'Will to Power'. This chapter will theorise the roles of author and reader in Nabokov's work and explore how Nietzsche's philosophy relates to the interplay between ethics and power in Nabokov's writing. Informed by Bernard Reginster's recent interpretation of the Will to Power as the '*activity of overcoming resistance*' (Reginster in Leiter & Sinhababu 2007, p.36), this chapter argues that much of Nabokov's art hinges on a frequent 'disempowering' of the reader and his inviting of readerly objection. I label this trait Nabokov's 'will to (disem)power'.

The Author-Reader Relationship

Although some kind of mutual obligation between writer and reader seems to be a constant, this communicative dynamic can differ dramatically between one text and another. The custom of some Victorian writers, for example, was to address the reader as friend or confidant. When Charlotte Brontë has Jane Eyre announce 'Reader I married him' (1994 [1847], p.444), it is paradigmatic of this kind of intimacy. Another view of the author-reader relationship is that it is reciprocal, whereby readers can gain understanding or insight of a text (through techniques such as foreshadowing or allusion) and writers, in turn, receive critical acclaim. The relationship can also be characterized by playfulness – the kind found, for example, in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1981) or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.[4] The onset of the twentieth century, however, has arguably seen

Nabokov (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, pp.26-27), and Michael Wood's 'The Kindness of Cruelty' in *Transitional Nabokov* (Bern, Peter Lang, 2009, pp.229-244).

[4] The opening to Calvino's novel reads, 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought.

a shift in the relationship between author and reader. The writings of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce, for example, suggesting a learned implied reader, seem to be concerned with highlighting, and lamenting, the cultural and religious 'wasteland' of both their world and their more general readership. In other words, the implied reader's presence in the text has seen a shift from confidant or equal to a site for critique, exclusion, and antagonism.[5] In an article that appeared in *The Guardian* for example, entitled 'Ten Rules for Writing Fiction', Margaret Atwood claims that 'You don't know who the reader is, so it's like shooting fish with a slingshot in the dark'.[6] Interestingly, but problematically, Atwood's imagery suggests that the reader-figure is someone to be caught or killed. If the author-reader relationship can indeed be based on combat or belligerence, it raises some unsettling issues.[7]

Nabokov can be seen as a writer who perverts the traditional author-reader 'contract' (in which both exist on an equal plane and display respect for one another) but does so in a peculiar fashion. Much has been written about Nabokov's cruelty towards his characters, but not much on how he treats his readers. Although Durantaye, for example, adds to the critical consensus that Nabokov displays cruelty towards his characters, he also claims that Nabokov displayed 'extraordinarily little concern for his readership' (pp.22-31).[8] This is a surprising claim given how much the reader-figure is

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Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the other room' (1981, p.3).

[5] For further discussion of this idea, see John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice amongst the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

[6] http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one. Accessed 22nd Feb 2010).

[7] In *The Gift*, Fyodor asks 'Why must one "disarm" the reader? Is he dangerous?' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.18).

[8] Durantaye continues: 'What Calvino, Oates, Carroll, Proffer, Rorty, Amis, and many others were responding to in Nabokov's work was in part an indifference verging on the cruel within his works – in the cruel fates dealt to kind characters. But they were also responding to an indifference verging on the cruel as concerns his relation to his

referred to in Nabokov's texts, the tricks that he often subjects them to, and the extent to which Nabokov tried to stress his supposed lack of concern. In what is called 'The Last Interview', for example, Nabokov stated that 'the author is perfectly indifferent to the capacity and condition of the reader's brain' (Quennell 1980, p.122). Reading Nabokov's treatment of his readers through Nietzschean eyes, however, suggests an authorial stance far from indifference.

Master-Slave Morality

One of Nietzsche's main concerns was evaluation – his dissatisfaction, for example, with traditional Christian morality was partly based on what he deemed incorrect value judgements. Nietzsche's theorization of 'Master-Slave' morality involves a dialectic between two opposing value systems – the former privileging such qualities as pride, intelligence, and power and the latter privileging the (commonly Judea-Christian) virtues of the common good, modesty, and humility.[9] Nietzsche viewed such slaves as inferior because of their *re*action rather than action. 'Master-Slave' morality was a way for Nietzsche to address and critique the doctrines of Christian morality that had been imbibed in Western culture and to celebrate the alternative values of the master. I want to suggest that Nietzsche's account of the master-slave relationship is a revealing way in which to view the author-reader relationship established in Nabokov's texts given that this is another dialectic between two distinct 'persons', one of whom often seems to uphold values in complete contrast to the other's.

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audience and his stress that he was "perfectly indifferent," "supremely indifferent" to what they thought and felt' (p.30). This essay aims to explore this second idea – Nabokov's 'controlling' relationship with his audience (something, I argue, is anything but indifferent).

[9] Nietzsche's concept seems to be derived from Hegel's theorization of the 'Master-Slave dialectic' in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

Nabokov's 'author-reader' morality

Throughout his work, Nabokov seems keen to establish that the author and reader are not equal.[10] Indeed, in continually privileging the select few, the artists and geniuses that pervade his work, Nabokov, at times, seems to display an 'ethical elitism' comparable to that of Nietzsche (Reginster in Leiter & Sinhababu 2007, p.46). I shall first look at one of Nabokov's paratexts in order to demonstrate how his 'author-reader' morality manifests itself as readers begin to read *Invitation to a Beheading*. I will then continue to discuss Nabokov's author-reader morality in his short story 'The Vane Sisters', framed and explained through Nietzsche's Will to Power, arguing that readers can resist such subjugation if we read as 'Nietzschean readers'.

Written in the summer of 1934 'in one fortnight of wonderful excitement and sustained inspiration' (Nabokov 1990 [1973], p.68), *Invitation* is also notable for Nabokov's mischief in both its later epigraph and foreword (attached to the English translation in 1959). The epigraph reads: '*Comme un fou se croit Dieu, nous nous croyons mortels*'.[11] It is said to be taken from 'Discours sur les ombres' ('Speech on the Shadows'), a text by a philosopher called 'Delalande' (Nabokov 2001 [1959], p.5).[12] The epigraph is followed by a foreword in which Nabokov laments the fact that reviewers repeatedly compare him to other writers (reduced to 'harmless missiles'). Given his erudition and seemingly helpful manner (he raises the possibility of the novel being a possible critique of totalitarianism earlier in the foreword), readers may be inclined to accept Nabokov's assertion. Yet, with rapport established, Nabokov closes the paragraph by revealing that he has invented the only author he recognises as an influence (giving six sycophantic pre-

[10] In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes that 'nervous publishers of popular novels pamper the "average reader" – who should not be made to think' (p.124).
[11] This translates as 'As a madman believes himself to be God, we believe ourselves to be mortal'.
[12] This figure also makes an appearance in Nabokov's *The Gift* (p.282, p.332)

head modifiers before 'Pierre Delalande'): 'the only author whom I must gratefully recognize as an influence upon me at the time of writing this book… [is] the melancholy, extravagant, wise, witty, magical, and altogether delightful Pierre Delalande, whom I invented' (2001 [1959], p.8). Rather than providing a potential insight to the formation of the text then, Nabokov reveals that the novel is attributable not to some esoteric author but simply to a fictive person of his own imagining. Given that we now know that Delalande is a fictitious creation, readers quickly realise that Nabokov is parodying the convention of alluding to a text or author at the beginning of a piece of literature (a convention used by T.S. Eliot, for example, who quotes from Dante's *Inferno* in the epigraph to 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' [1915]).[13] In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche suggests that it was the masters

> who felt and ranked themselves and their doings as good, which is to say, as of the first rank, in contrast to everything base, low-minded, common and vulgar. Out of this *pathos of distance* they first took the right to create values, to coin names for values: what did they care about usefulness? (p.10)

Nietzsche's conception of 'masters' refers to the 'strong willed' who are able to create value. The slaves, by contrast, value what is opposite to the masters' values - the (predominantly) Christian virtues of the common good, modesty, and humility for example. In this small example from *Invitation*'s paratexts, Nabokov can be seen not only opposing the 'common' conventions of his predecessors but also connecting anti-utilitarian customs (arrogance and deceit are not usually thought of as beneficial to understanding) to progressive literature. So, Nabokov's epigraph and foreword presents Delalande as an author whose work might shed light on *Invitation*, only to withdraw the

[13] In the case of Eliot's poem, the epigraph could be seen as helpful to the reader by indicating the tone of what follows.

possibility at the end of the paragraph. Nabokov goes even further however. He mentions his 'favourite author (1768-1849)' (p.9), which is followed by a quotation in untranslated French. Despite surmising that this figure probably refers to Delalande also (fictive birth and death dates included), some readers may still attempt some detective work (matching up dates to real-life figures and translation) for example.[14] What seems to be operating here is an explicit example of what I label 'open deceitfulness'.[15] Not only does Nabokov trick the reader from the outset (orientating us firmly below him on the literary ladder before the novel begins) but also, because we *have* been tricked, it establishes a hierarchical relationship from the very outset analogous to that of 'master' and 'slave'.[16] Importantly, however, Nabokov invites us to participate in the 'spirit of the game' (1980, p.4) despite the default slave position we have adopted.

The distinction between elevated author/subjugated reader has received some attention from Nabokov critics. In *Nabokov, Perversely*, Eric Naiman describes an incident concerning a Wesleyan undergraduate who posted a query on the 'Nabokov-L' list [an online forum dedicated to Vladimir Nabokov] a few years ago. The post details the undergraduate's fear and apprehension in doubting his understanding of Nabokov's texts: 'I still feel without reward or at least without comprehension having read and "reread," *as he would require*, most of his books' (in Naiman p.109, my emphasis). Naiman's response suggests the student is not alone, and also evokes, unknowingly,

[14] In a letter to Carl R. Proffer, Nabokov wrote 'The favourite author is not Chateaubriand but Delalande mentioned in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Gift*, who survived Chateaubriand by one year. The quotations, and Delalande himself, are, of course, invented' (Nabokov 2001 [1979], p.390).
[15] In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov states that 'art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex' (p.33).
[16] Nabokov's note to the short story 'Details of a Sunset' further demonstrates his seeming pleasure at the difficulty it will cause: 'I have now given it a new title, one that has the triple advantage of corresponding to the thematic background of the story, of being sure to puzzle such readers as "skip descriptions," and of infuriating reviewers' (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.646).

Nietzsche's terminology: 'This post captures the anxiety that many readers of Nabokov experience but few scholars dare to put into print. Have I met the *Master*'s expectations?' (p.110, my emphasis).[17]

'Good Readers and Good Writers'

The foreword to *Invitation* illustrates Nabokov's practice with regard to readers. It is consistent with his theory. Nabokov's ostensibly pedagogical essay, 'Good Readers and Good Writers', conveys his indictment of the 'general reader' and his thoughts on the 'good reader'. His subtitle is "'How to be a Good Reader" or "Kindness to Authors"'. Nabokov gives ten definitions of what a good reader might be (despite claiming to have 'mislaid the list') and asks the reader to choose from the options. He goes on to say, 'Of course, as you have guessed, the good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense' (1980, p.3). Nabokov's use of 'you' here is again coercive. It creates the impression that these categories are universally accepted by readers, including *all* readers regardless of their answers. We are inclined to agree with these definitions because our agreement makes us 'good' readers in Nabokov's eyes (an established author in whom we are sufficiently interested to be reading a piece of his criticism).[18] Yet, on closer inspection, rather than being elements of good reading practice in general, these 'correct' criteria illustrate the ways in which Nabokov would *like* to be read. Although ostensibly helpful, this 'priming' of the reader acts to limit his readers' autonomy in narrowing the categories in which he wants to be analyzed. The essay forges distinct roles for the reader and writer:

[17] In one edition of the *Slavonic and East European Review* (vol.89, October 2011), for example, Nabokov is referred to as 'master' in three separate reviews (Will Norman p.723, Udith Dematagoda p.725, and Barbara Wyllie p.726). The caption 'The Master in his seventies' adorns one of the photos contained in *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters, 1940-77*.

[18] Naiman argues that we display 'certain uneasiness at having pleased the teacher by divining and responding to pedagogic desire' (2010, p.108).

> Time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds, all these are for writers of genius (as far as we can guess and I trust we guess right) not traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which *master artists* have learned to express in their own unique way… that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself…Up a trackless slope climbs the *master artist*, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The *panting and happy reader*, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever...Since *the master artist* used his imagination in creating his book, it is natural and fair that the consumer of the book should use his imagination too. (Nabokov 1980, pp.2-4, my emphasis)

Although Nabokov professes to want the reader and writer to 'meet' together at the top of a mountain - something that relates to the 'artistic harmonious balance between the reader's mind and the author's mind' (p.4) - his repeated references to himself as a 'master' and as a genius sets himself amongst the more 'noble' (through the use of the first-person plural pronouns) at the opposite end of the scale to the 'panting and happy' reader, reduced to a loyal, docile creature.[19] Indeed, the passage seems to allude several times to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) in evoking notions of noble

[19] See chapter one of this thesis, p.64. Another possible influence for the mountain motif may have been through Mikhail Lermontov. Although Nabokov thought that Lermontov's prose was often poor, he translated *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), some of Lermontov's poetry, and published an essay on his work. *A Hero of Our Time* contains a famous duel scene where Pechorin dispatches his 'enemy' Grushnitsky after having led him on to combat on a precarious mountain ledge, a scene which some critics have seen as having explicit Nietzschean references. In Nabokov's *The Gift*, Fyodor remarks: 'I shall experience a certain satiation of suffering – perhaps on the mountain pass to a kind of happiness which it is too early for me to know (I know only that when I reach it, it will be with pen in hand)' (p.31).

caste, creating (a table of) values, and climbing a mountain.[20] When he goes on to suggest that 'For instance, you sitting there may be merely my dream, and I may be your nightmare' (Nabokov 1980, p.4), the dichotomy of these roles takes on an increasingly menacing quality, as if the author delights in the difficulty he will pose for reader or student. What also seems curious is his remark that 'for better or worse the reader enters into the *spirit of the game*' (Nabokov 1980, p.4, my emphasis). Apparently indifferent to his or her welfare, Nabokov wishes the reader to enter into a game in which full consent has not really been granted - it is only their existence that is needed to let the game function or begin.

Nietzsche's 'Will to Power'

These examples illustrate the potential role of master-slave morality in Nabokov's work. A second Nietzschean concept is also relevant; that of the 'will to power'. Refashioning Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of the 'Will to Live' as a subsidiary drive, Nietzsche's 'will to power' is one of his most controversial theories and is commonly associated with control and domination (Reginster in Leiter & Sinhababu 2007, p.32). Citing such examples as the risks that Greek warriors continually took in battle, Nietzsche theorizes that our primary human drive is to increase our power: 'The devotion of the greatest is to encounter risk and danger and play dice for death' and 'The living creature values many things higher than life itself; yet out of this evaluation speaks – the will to power!' (1969 [1883-1885], p.138) are just two examples. In his essay 'The Will to Power and the Ethics of Creativity', Bernard Reginster claims that:

> Few of Nietzsche's ideas have been more maligned than his concept of the will to power. Among the various objections it has invited, the deepest and most enduring remains rooted in a tempting interpretation of power in terms

[20] See the introduction to this thesis (p.29, fn.46).

> of *control* or *dominance*: to will power is to seek to control or dominate. (Reginster in Leiter & Sinhababu 2007, p.32)

Reginster identifies three broad strategies that Nietzschean scholars have provided to avoid the embarrassing affiliation between the 'Will to Power' and Nazism. Firstly, some have downplayed or suppressed its disturbing features (in making it about the self, about mastery instead of tyranny, or as the *capacity* to achieve ends); secondly, some have related it to Nietzsche's metaethical views about ethical objectivism; and, thirdly, some have argued that his new valuation process 'does not depend on the will to power at all', either because it is 'too vague to be the foundation of a substantive ethics' or because it is merely meant to parody other moral theories (such as ethical naturalism) (pp.33-34). This latter strategy interests Reginster because, building on Alexander Nehamas' suggestion that Nietzsche's new ethics are about 'self-creation', he believes Nietzsche's 'ethics of creativity' is a 'paradigmatic manifestation' (Reginster in Leiter & Sinhababu 2007, p.34) of the will to power. Reginster goes on to develop a theory that reads the will to power 'as a desire for the overcoming of resistance' (Reginster in Leiter & Sinhababu 2007, p.37) which compels a person to actively seek out resistance in order to overcome it. As Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power*,

> Man does *not* seek pleasure and does not avoid displeasure…what man wants, what every smallest part of a living organism wants, is an increase of power…driven by that will it seeks resistance, it needs something that opposes it – Displeasure, as an obstacle to its will to power, is therefore a normal fact…; man does not avoid it, he is rather in continual need of it... (p.373)

Reginster's rethinking of Nietzsche's Will to Power in terms of the overcoming

of resistance can illuminate the way in which Nabokov exerts his dominance through his texts. Rather than simply subjugating his readers, Nabokov's authorial tactics may suggest a wish to provoke the reader into 'resisting' the author. Amalgamating Nietzsche's valuing of the will to power, greatness and creativity, Reginster argues that 'the individual who is creative in this sense will deliberately seek out opportunities for creative activity in the form of limitations to challenge, difficulties to overcome, or boundaries to transgress' (Reginster in Leiter & Sinhababu 2007, p.43). In the discussion below of the short stories 'Recruiting' and 'The Vane Sisters', I draw on Reginster's interpretation of Nietzsche to argue that Nabokov actively sought resistance to his writing. But I go on to explore the idea that such behaviour may actually be shielding a furtive anxiety.

The Will to (Disem)Power

Nabokov often seems to be seeking the resistance of his readership by exploiting the conventions with which readers approach texts. Here, I use 'convention' in the technical, non-pejorative sense, as 'a way in which something is usually done; socially acceptable behaviour' (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, p.312). There is widespread assumption by critics and theorists that such conventions must exist in the reading of literature and, to an especially high degree in the twentieth century, an agreement about what they are. For example, one strand of twentieth-century literary theory has been dominated by the attempt to understand literary texts through sets of objective constraints, such as not referring to authors' intentions or not allowing the role of the reader to impact upon interpretation. In movements or theories such as Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, and reader-response theory, for example, there tends to be a preference for understanding literary communication in terms of prescriptive theory; each movement frames the text by sets of theoretical paradigms before the text is opened – for Russian Formalism, focusing on the artistic effects of

language rather than content; for New Criticism, looking at ambiguity and organic complexity rather than origin or effect, for Structuralism, concentrating on 'binary opposites' and how language is reflective of culture; and, for reader-response, privileging the reader's reaction rather than the work itself. Such theories are undeniably helpful in understanding texts from more than one perspective. But they can be reductive in positing their criteria as the only set.[21]

Nabokov may or may not have been conscious that his work acts as a pastiche of different models of reading or of differing theoretical movements. But he certainly seems to be aware that readers are understood to assume the presence of conventions, including the adoption by writer and reader of certain roles. More specifically, Nabokov's work can be related to two poles of the reading model – those of the implied author and the reader. Wayne Booth and Wolfgang Iser are among the theorists who teach that we cannot infer conclusions from certain textual locations (such as from the author or reader's perspectives). For example, a reader's conclusions are erroneous if he or she does not properly understand who to attribute certain remarks to, or grasp, for example, that the author is not the speaker in a dramatic monologue. This, of course, is hardly controversial. But the approach perpetuates the idea of a predefined model that most readers adhere to; a kind of prescriptive formulation for how literature operates. Nabokov ruthlessly exploits assumptions of this kind to undermine the reader.

'Recruiting' implicitly conveys the nature of power I discuss here. Written in Berlin in 1935, the story is initially concerned with an old man called Vasiliy Ivanovich (V.I.), his attendance at Professor D's funeral, and his subsequent thoughts on his deceased sister. Soon, however, with the introduction of a 'nonpracticing lawyer', the

[21] An argument could be made for the 'vilifying' of the reader in New Criticism where critics, intent on banishing the reader and labelling reader-inclined criticism as erroneous, sought to remove the extraneous bulk that the reader's persona brought to the text by advocating that *only* textual evidence should matter in interpretation.

narrator informs us that this character 'was also of little use to anyone except me' (2001 [1995], p.402), a comment that heralds the start of the narrator's intrusive comments and the story's use of *mise-en-abyme*. After V.I. has attended Professor D.'s funeral, the narrator goes on to question the reasoning behind V.I.'s happiness (suggesting that he might be an omniscient narrator) given the numerous losses that V.I. has suffered in his life. Relaying V.I.'s thoughts on his dead sister once more, the narrator then mentions a 'man with the local Russian newspaper' whom he finds difficult to describe given that a 'self-portrait is seldom successful' (2001 [1995], p.404). Having therefore revealed that the newspaper-carrying figure is actually the narrator himself, he explains how the plot of the story has been fabricated ('I made her his sister'), writing that, 'at all costs I had to have somebody like him [V.I.] for an episode in a novel with which I have been struggling for more than two years' (p.404). The story's penultimate paragraph concludes with the idea that V.I. has been forever captured in the narrator's words, 'doomed to appear for a moment in the far end of a certain chapter, at the turning of a certain sentence' (p.405).[22] The supposed clarification of the story's conception, and V.I.'s existence, however, is then muddied as an anonymous narrator proceeds to usurp the narrator who is working on the novel in the final paragraph:

> My representative, the man with the Russian newspaper, was now alone on the bench and, as he had moved over into the shade where V.I. had just been sitting, the same cool linden pattern that had anointed his predecessor now rippled across his forehead. (p.405)

[22] See again Nabokov's reference to the 'doomed' Kieseritsky (p.65).

One effect of 'Recruiting' is to unsettle our habitual conceptions of narration. Narrators are normally described through specific categories, such as first-person, omniscient, intrusive, and unreliable. Initially, it seems as though we can identify the narrator of 'Recruiting' as the 'intrusive' type - a narrator deemed as omniscient but who offers further comments on characters and events (Baldick 2004, p.128). He makes the kind of 'universal' claims found in Tolstoy or Austen ('had reached the point of his life'; 'as happens in such cases'), is privy to otherwise unknown knowledge ('tumour in his stomach), and also has access to characters' inner thoughts ('his thoughts nevertheless kept slipping off into that corner of his memory'). Simply labelling the narrator as 'intrusive', however, would be to oversimplify things – he often seems uncertain of particular facts ('I think'; 'if I am not mistaken'; 'unknown origin') and, related to *amor fati*, is unable to understand why V.I. remains so happy despite his losses (p.402). This inability to understand V.I.'s happiness, coupled with his uncertainty, might seem to suggest that he is also of the 'unreliable' type – 'a narrator whose account of events appears to be faulty, misleading, or otherwise distorted, so that it departs from the "true" understanding of events shared between the reader and the implied author' (Baldick 2004, p.268). The extent to which the narrator is openly deceitful about the story's conception would seem to cement his position as an unreliable narrator. However, given that the narrator is finally described as 'My representative', this figure finally ends up as a character in the text. This modulation between numerous narrative roles can be shown as follows:

> **Omniscient narrator** (universals, privy to unknown information) →**Intrusive narrator** ('of no use to anyone except me') →**Unreliable narrator** ('I think', 'it seems') → **Character** ('My representative')

The 'representative' even tries to come *out* of the text. Not only does the story's *mise-en-abyme* technique ('had to have him for a novel') suggest the self-reflexive presence of a real author but, with the presence of the anonymous narrator in the final paragraph, the story is also suggestive of an implied author – both of which point to Nabokov himself. Effectively, Nabokov 'disempowers' the reader in that we are unsure where the *mise-en-abyme* technique ends – although the anonymous narrator seems to be the omnipotent force in the text, his presence is inextricably linked to the existence of an implied author. Baldick argues that 'the "Chinese box" effect of *mise-en-abyme* often suggests an infinite regress…an endless succession of internal duplications' (Baldick 2004, p.158). Indeed, the story could almost be a parody ahead of its time of the Boothean 'implied author'. Interestingly, not only is the implied author evoked but the real author is too. The Russian title of the story, 'набор' (Nabor), meaning 'recruitment' in Russian, evokes Nabokov's name and reminds us of who has ultimate control.[23]

In addition, the representative effectively equates himself and V.I. in mentioning 'whenever he [V.I.] and I experienced such fits of happiness' (p.404). He also remarks that his [V.I.'s] 'face …was made up to look like that of a reader' (p.405), thereby conflating character and reader. In allowing the 'representative' to fall down the narratological ladder (and preventing the 'real' reader from being able to designate the representative in a set narrative role), Nabokov thwarts our attempts to process the narrative conventionally. In Nomi Tamir-Ghez's article 'The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*' (1979), she attempts to illustrate how Humbert (conjured through Nabokov) is so effective in seducing the reader in siding with the protagonist. Tamer-Ghez devises the following formula in order to explain her point: 'A [s (c ↔ c) Ad] R',

[23] The idea that Nabokov was aware of the pun of the title is strengthened by his appendage to his short story 'Orache': 'Its English name, orache, by a miraculous coincidence, renders in its written form the "ili beda," "or ache," suggested by the Russian title (2001 [1995], p.652).

where 'A= author, s = speaker, c = character, Ad = addressee, R = reader, [ ], ( ) = embedding' (1979, p.67). Her formula is helpful in understanding the differing textual levels that Nabokov is working on. This oscillation between narrative roles undoubtedly makes it harder to process narrative.[24] In this respect, 'Recruiting"s disruption of the reader's ability to differentiate between narrator and character can be equated with disempowerment. Barthes' comment, 'the essence of writing (the meaning of the work which constitutes writing) is to prevent any reply to the question: who is speaking?' (1977, p.132), is relevant here. Nabokov is undermining the easiness with which readers deal with literary texts and again reminding the reader of who is actually in control.

The dizzying narration of 'Recruiting' can be related to reader disempowerment most explicitly through the concepts of dramatic irony and authorial intrusion. The anonymous narrator's appearance in the last part of the narrative allows for dramatic irony to operate in that we, as readers, know 'more about [the] character's situation than the character does, foreseeing an outcome contrary to the character's expectations, and thus ascribing a sharply different sense to some of the character's own statements' (Baldick 2004, p.130). Dramatic irony normally operates (or is normally effective), then, by affording the reader a sense of omnipotence. Nabokov allows this to some extent but, crucially, leaves the reader uneasy regarding the varying levels of narration. So there are two levels of dramatic irony functioning. Firstly, we are aware that the callous figure of the representative does not know that he is a character - the irony is that he thinks he is free in his creation while we, in knowing that his strings are being pulled, laugh at his folly. Nabokov therefore allows the reader to feel the 'detached superiority' (ibid) that

[24] It is worth noting that another Nabokov short story, 'Cloud, Castle, Lake' (1937), beginning with the sentence 'One of my representatives' (2001 [1995], p.430), has a protagonist with the name Vasiliy Ivanovich, and combines narrator and V.I.: 'We both, Vasiliy Ivanovich and I' (p.432). Thus, it can be argued that being able to slot the V.I. of 'Recruiting' into a defined narrative role is further problematised once having read the later story.

dramatic irony can produce – we are effectively allowed a feeling of omnipotence knowing that he is merely a character. Yet, we are not allowed to feel completely satisfied with this irony because we are unable to properly attribute narrative roles; we are unsure as to where the level of regression finishes (something augmented by the implicit presence of Nabokov). The second level of dramatic irony is far less obvious and is related to the anonymous narrator. The narration in the last paragraph is relatively free of any personal comment that would allow 'characterization' to function (although the anonymous figure does call the 'previous' narrator 'My representative'). Although the anonymous narrator appears as all-powerful at the end of the narrative, his power is implicitly undermined in that he is yet *another* of the implied and real author's creations. Without explicitly stating it, Nabokov is able to introduce the theme of his own power (foreshadowed by the phrase 'the terrible power of my bliss') by undermining the supposed omnipotence of the anonymous figure and parading his own dominance over the text. Evoking the same kind of dominance over different presences in describing the 'will to power', Nietzsche claims that

> some men have such an intense need to exercise their strength and love of power that, lacking other objects or because they have always otherwise failed, it finally occurs to them to tyrannize certain parts of their own being, as if they were sections or stages of their selves. (2004 [1878], p.95)

In this light, Nabokov may be seen to be toying with our distinctions between narrative roles. For example, if we think that the only 'authentic' figure in the text is the anonymous narrator, we are not noticing the extent to which Nabokov appears to be signalling his own presence in the text. When reading Nabokov, the implied author is usually a learned, difficult, even arrogant, writer who shows concern for detail, wordplay, and the 'otherworld'. Similarly, the frequency with which Nabokov employs Russian

émigrés (or speakers with other 'Nabokovian attributes') is a notable feature in his fiction and seems to suggest that he *wants* readers to mistake narrators or speakers for himself despite his proclamations to the contrary. In 'Recruiting', the speaker is a learned Russian émigré capable of evocative description. If Nabokov did not want this contamination, why not give his narrator a name or initials that do not suggest his own, or allow him to come from any region in the world other than Russia? Thus, it could be argued that he invites, or wants the baggage of, the intentional fallacy.

The concept of power is also foreshadowed by the conductor's role in the text: 'Once on the ground, he accepted from above, with unhurried gratitude, his own arm, which the conductor had still been holding by the sleeve' (2001 [1995], p.402). Although it is obvious that the conductor wants to help the older gentleman, the fact that he holds on to his sleeve may suggest the way in which this person 'from above' is ultimately dictating the direction of V.I. and what he is given (V.I. is said to express 'gratitude' at being given a part of his *own* body). This scenario is alluded to again in the midst of the representative's confession: 'What did I care if this fat old gentleman, whom I first saw being lowered from the tram, and who was now sitting beside me, was perhaps not Russian at all?' (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.404). It is telling that the moment that the conductor 'gives' V.I. his arm back from above is the moment that the representative first sees him – an act where one figure is effectively in 'control' of another. The story also makes many references to conventionality, or tradition, which may reflect how Nabokov views the reading process. When the representative remarks, 'as happens in such cases' (p.401), talks of the 'ridiculous rigmarole' (p.403) and 'ritual', mentions a 'setting as gloomy and typical as possible', and says 'exactly the type' (p.404), Nabokov can be read as articulating his dissatisfaction not only with 'traditional' notions of things and people but also with the stagnancy of conventional reading practice.

Readers, then, are an important but elusive part of Nabokov's textual landscape, harder to control than his characters or 'galley slaves' (Nabokov 1990 [1973], p.95). Yet, although Nabokov cannot control readers directly, he can manipulate them, whether emotionally, psychologically or intellectually. One such example is 'The Vane Sisters', a short story that Naiman thinks 'works in many ways like a test' (2010, p.108), presumably of its readers. The story's somewhat convoluted plot revolves around two academics and their relationships with the sisters Sybil and Cynthia Vane. At the start of the narrative, a French literature professor, the narrator, is shown to have a keen eye for detail. After a few 'trivial investigations', he eventually bumps into fellow Professor D., who informs him that one Cynthia Vane has committed suicide. The story then recounts how the characters know one another - Cynthia had been the narrator's student and had had an affair with him. Cynthia's younger sister Sybil had an affair with D. and committed suicide after D. decided to leave town. The narrator soon contacts Cynthia after hearing the news about Sybil, with the story then centring on their developing relationship. Concerned with their competing views of the occult, the relationship eventually dissolves due to the narrator's scepticism about life after death. Referring back to the narrator's encounter with D., the last paragraph expresses the narrator's anxiety about Cynthia's death:

> I could isolate, consciously, little. Everything seemed blurred, yellow-clouded, yielding nothing tangible. Her inept acrostics, maudlin evasions, theopathies – every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning. Everything seemed yellowly blurred, illusive, lost. (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.631)

At first reading, the paragraph simply seems odd and seemingly open-ended. However,

an exceptionally zealous and inquisitive reader may eventually see that it can be read as an acrostic: 'Icicles by cynthia meter from me sybil'. This refers to two events in the narrative: the narrator noticing icicles at the beginning of the story ('I had stopped to watch a family of brilliant icicles drip-dripping from the eaves of a frame house' (Nabokov 2001[1995], p.619); and the parking meter that the narrator sees soon after ('The lean ghost, the elongated umbra cast by a parking meter upon some damp snow' (Nabokov 2001[1995], p.620)). The acrostic effectively suggests that the narrator's gaze has been directed by supernatural forces – more specifically, by the influence of the two dead sisters. The narrator's scepticism about the beyond seems to be undermined, without his knowing it, by influences and messages from beyond the grave. But whose narrative voice, if any, can be understood as authoritative? In what follows, I offer three readings from a Nietzschean perspective.

The first reading is that of an impartial reader who has perhaps not read Nabokov before. He or she is unlikely to pick up on the acrostic in the last paragraph; we have no narrative expectation that stories normally finish like this. This reader might be confused by the apparent lack of closure and, as a consequence, draw general conclusions from the story as a whole.[25] For example, the impartial reader may pick up on the name Sybil Vane as a reference to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (strengthened by the allusion to Oscar Wilde in the narrative) and draw an analogy between Sybil's influence on Dorian Gray's painting and Sybil's influence on the narrator's story. Such a reader may also pick up on the deviant use of language in the last paragraph (such as the presence of asyndeton), though he or she may not be able to make anything of it. Indeed, the apparent lack of closure in 'The Vane Sisters' seemingly violates the Labovian

[25] Comparing 'The Vane Sisters' to *Finnegans Wake*, Christine Raguet-Bouvart argues that 'the absence of conclusion to the plot, or rather the absence of plot, empties the text of any logical sense but it also hints at some other function, that is its ludic mechanism' (2008).

concept of 'reportability' in presenting a story that may be met with a "So what?" response – a "question that every good narrator is continually warding off" (Labov 1977, p.366).

The second reading is that of the experienced Nabokov reader, perhaps equivalent to a Nabokov critic, who has a thorough knowledge of his texts and signature themes. This reader is familiar with the four criteria of good reading that Nabokov privileges in *Lectures on Literature* – 'imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense' (Nabokov 1980, p.3) – and acknowledges him as a punster and etymologist with a penchant for meta-fiction. The experienced reader has been trained to reread and to 'caress the details…the divine details' (p.xxiii) – exactly, it seems, the 'trivial investigations' (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.619) that the narrator undertakes. Similarly, this reader will probably be aware of the 'otherworld' motif that runs through Nabokov's fiction and his fondness for literary deception. Further, such a reader will surmise that clauses such as 'every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning' (ibid) are probably to be read as meta-clues that refer to the text itself. Yet, although he or she will perceive the use of the term 'acrostic' in the final paragraph, and the allusions made to trick-reading made during the narrative, it is still unlikely that they will 'solve' the story by decoding the last paragraph: this is not a trick Nabokov has tried before. Instead, it is likely that this reader will simply be impressed once the acrostic technique is pointed out, serving to further elevate Nabokov's status as innovator and 'master'.

The third reading is one produced by what I call the 'Nietzschean reader'. Importantly, he or she is no more likely than the first two to solve the acrostic. Similarly, he or she is also likely to be baffled by the text's conclusion on first reading. But instead of praising Nabokov after being informed of the acrostic, he or she might ponder whether this text is a test for obedient readers. He or she recognises that such a story is

an attempt to question traditional reading behaviour through audacious and destabilizing means. But the 'Nietzschean reader' recognizes that Nabokov's readers cannot be held culpable for 'failing' him in 'The Vane Sisters' - readers almost always read and process narratives by reading them as made up of sequential sentences, not as acrostics. When we embark on a wordsearch, for example, we know the (backwards, length-ways, diagonal) operational parameters and may be able to complete it as a consequence. Without knowing the correct parameters for how 'The Vane Sisters' operates, we cannot be judged for having failed. Nabokov continually draws attention to the game that he is playing – whether through the (ultimately self-reflexive) mention of 'acrostic' in the final paragraph, the suggestion that the 'first letters of the words in its last paragraph formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message from his dead mother' (p.626), or the narrator's references to how we should avoid the custom of sequential narrative processing: 'I set myself to reread my dream – backward, diagonally, up, down – trying hard to unravel something Cynthia-like in it, something strange and suggestive that must be there' (p.631).[26] But even if readers start to pick up on these references, Nabokov caricatures them, putting them off the trail once again:

> She was sure that her existence was influenced by *all sorts* of dead friends each of whom took turns in directing her fate as much as if she were a *stray kitten* which a *schoolgirl* in passing gathers up, and presses to her cheek, and carefully puts down again, near some *suburban* hedge… Cynthia, a much more perverse *amateur* of misshapen or illicitly connected words, puns, logogriphs, and so on, had helped the *poor crank* to pursue a quest that in the light of the example

[26] Indeed, the reference to 'gullible readers' (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.626) may be an offhand remark to those very people reading the story.

she cited struck me as *statistically insane*. (pp.624-626, my emphasis)[27]

Here, Nabokov connects acrostics with the possibility that the dead might influence writing. Yet, he also lampoons this very idea by associating such a technique with the naïve inclinations of schoolgirls. A Nietzschean reader will ask *why* the narrative has been created in this way rather than trying to resolve the puzzle itself.

Power and Anxiety

The same Nietzschean reader might begin to answer this question by asking if Nabokov is actively seeking resistance – in doing so, he or she may be privy to a perspective that Nabokov himself was not necessarily keen to reveal. One example of this is in the apparently casual representation of suffering. A traditional reader might try to automatically assume that Nabokov's stance here relates, somehow, to inscrutable moral or aesthetic benefit. A Nietzschean reader, however, might also ask what such a method of representing suffering can reveal about the author's weaknesses or vulnerabilities. In 'Recruiting', for example, the following passage is paradigmatic of the apparently senseless death and torture that the self-declared puppet master inflicts on his characters:

> After all, just think, here is a sick old man with the mark of death already on him; he has lost all his loved ones: his wife, who, when they were still in Russia, left him for Dr Malinovski, the well-known reactionary; the newspaper where V.I. had worked; his reader, friend, and namesake, dear Vasiliy Ivanovich Maler,

[27] Making sense of illicitly connected words is something that Boyd does in *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (chapter nine, pp.129 -149) to elucidate a certain hermeneutical key in the 'barn section' of *Pale Fire*, i.e., the 'Atalanta' butterfly. Boyd takes the repeated references as validation of the theory of Hazel's ghost helping Kinbote's composition.

> tortured to death by the Reds in the civil war years; his brother, who died of cancer in Kharbin; and his sister. (pp.402-403)

Here, the reader is introduced to themes of illness, betrayal, torture, and death depicted in typically Nabokovian fashion - matter-of-factly, even dismissively. Nabokov's tendency to place such sadness, suffering, and cruelty in subordinate clauses – 'that blood on his dickey', 'tears she shed at night', 'the tumor in his stomach' (2001 [1995], pp.403-405) - may appear to give the impression that he is indifferent or unmoved by such plights. Many readers might conclude that they are to understand such suffering as diminished by, or powerless over, the author. But a Nietzschean reader might recognise the author yielding to a demand to represent such suffering whilst simultaneously arousing anxiety and the desire to dilute their magnitude. Humbert's famous '(picnic, lightning)' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.10) description of his mother's death in *Lolita* (1955), although extremely humorous given its brevity, is the perfect example of how Nabokov seems to be exerting power over death; describing it in such a way as to disarm its potency.

Seen from this viewpoint, the issue of death more generally seems to be a major cause for anxiety for Nabokov. When Nabokov has the narrator of 'Recruiting' mention 'death's shame and its vulgar equality' (2001 [1995], p.401), it seems to be passing comment on the fact that, no matter how learned, aristocratic, kind, or mean one is, death is ultimately a democratizing process in which different 'kinds' of people are treated all the same. It may have been a thought that troubled Nabokov. In his reading of *Transparent Things* (1972), for example, David Rampton argues that 'Sifting through other passages relating to Mr R., we get a sense of a private Nabokov: an old man, a little afraid of death and silence, forced to go on talking' (1984, p.169). These fears of death, and the otherworld, also appear in 'Recruiting'. And, yet again, Nabokov seems to raise the issue

while simultaneously deflecting it from himself – he gives, for example, V.I.'s sister 'an insane terror of ghosts, because, as she said, she did not believe in God' (p.403).[28] The atheist's sister's belief in ghosts and another world is strikingly similar to what Nabokov is believed to have held.[29] In 'The Vane Sisters', similarly, the idea of ghosts being able to influence this world arguably expresses Nabokov's wish-fulfilment that death might not be absolute. When Cincinnatus claims in *Invitation to a Beheading*, that 'my dream world, it must exist' (Nabokov 2001 [1959], p.79), it may appear to the reader with enough confidence to ask whether the doomed protagonist is a vehicle for Nabokov's own anxieties.

The ending of 'Recruiting' relates to that of 'The Vane Sisters' and may shed light on Nabokov's own anxieties. The strange *mise-en-abyme* usurpation technique that Nabokov employs in the former may be evoking an anxiety about self-determinism. The idea of being controlled (whether in life or fiction) frequently recurs in Nabokov's writing and higher levels of influence (whether fate, coincidence, cosmic irony, the otherworld, or authorial power) can be seen in numerous works. Just a few examples include 'McFate' in *Lolita*, the Englishman in 'Spring in Fialta', or Nabokov's own description of his characters as 'galley slaves'. In the creation of fictional worlds, Nabokov apparently acts as the omnipotent force which controls everything (a suggestion that his 'anthropomorphic deity' persona in *Bend, Sinister* adds strength to). Leona Toker has explored Nabokov's possible feelings of survivor guilt whilst Maxim Shrayer has made a similar case in relation to Pnin's guilt about Mira Belochkin.[30] The longing, pain, and dissatisfaction that Nabokov experienced may be manifested in his writings as a need to

[28] The idea of otherworldly influence in Nabokov's writings is discussed in Brian Boyd's *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999) and relates to the acrostic's presence in 'The Vane Sisters'.
[29] See Vladimir E. Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld* and page 109, fn 41.
[30] See Leona Toker, 'Nabokov and the Hawthorne Tradition' (*Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 32, 1987, pp.323-349, pp347-9) and *The Mystery of Literary Structures*, p.17 and Maxim Shrayer, http://fmwww.bc.edu/sl-v/ShrayerSavingJRE.pdf.

control, a way to impose his own rationality on the irrational. The fact that the 'representative' in 'Recruiting' makes it clear that he is almost ineffably happy may suggest some sort of 'reaction formation'[31] in which the poignant themes of loss and suffering wrestle with the self-aggrandizing, even ostentatious, happiness of the author. These are forbidden thoughts to students trained by Wimsatt and Beardsley and their successors. But a reader prepared to resist Nabokov will not be disarmed by this training in his or her revolt against the authorial master.

Ressentiment

'Slave revolt' is an important element in Nietzsche's concept of 'Master-slave' morality. In making masters 'evil', the slaves define 'good' by what is unlike them. Nietzsche names this tendency '*ressentiment*'. For Nietzsche, the slave's *ressentiment* allows their belief system to usurp the master's – the domination of Christianity is the exemplar of this. Nietzsche accepts that the 'slave revolt' should actually be lauded given that they have displayed admirable ability in allowing their system to prevail. Yet, for Nabokov, even the chance of a slave revolt in his fiction is challenged. When readers react to the games being played by Nabokov, complain that his techniques are too challenging, find his fiction too difficult, or attack his stories, Nabokov is quick to respond to such objections and undermine them with insouciant retorts.[32] As we have seen, however, Nabokov can be seen to demarcate between different *kinds* of reader – whether good, general, or idiot for example. Writing to Alfred Appel, Jr. about *The Annotated Lolita*, Nabokov's comment that 'I think it will fascinate the good reader as surely as it will distress flippant fools' (Nabokov 1991 [1989], p.469) shows the extent to which

[31] The *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines this as 'the tendency of a repressed wish or feeling to be expressed at a conscious level in a contradictory form' (p.1196).
[32] In a letter to Katharine White, for example, Nabokov wrote 'Why not have the reader re-read a sentence every now and then? It won't hurt him' (1989, p.77).

Nabokov segregates his audience. The opinions of 'lesser' readers seemed to interest him less than those of better readers: 'On the ethical plane, it is of supreme indifference to me what opinion French, British or any other courts, magistrates, or philistine readers in general, may have of my book' (Nabokov 1991 [1989], p.210). Nabokov's most impassioned responses were reserved for his better readers - his exchanges with Edmund Wilson about *Bend, Sinister* (Nabokov 2001 [1979], pp.209-212) and the translation of *Eugene Onegin* (Nabokov 2001 [1979], pp.374-377, pp.492-494) for example, or his description of Jean-Paul Sartre's 'remarkably silly article' (p.10) in response to the latter's critique of *Despair*.[33] Here, what seems to be occurring is a clash between *masters* rather than between masters and slaves – after all, Sartre and Wilson can hardly be called 'slave' readers or fools.[34]

What seems to be integral is the fact that these 'masters' have different values. Nabokov's seem more aligned with those of Nietzsche's masters (daring, difficulty, anti-utilitarian) whereas Sartre's and Wilson's are, at least in this context, more like those of the slave (humility, understanding, helping others to understand). Yet, Nabokov can be seen to both crush *and* welcome such critiques – Nabokov wrote Wilson on one occasion that, 'It may sound foolish (in the light of what I always have felt towards criticism of my work), but your letter did give me a twinge of pleasure' (Nabokov 2001 [1979], p.288) and that 'We have been always frank with each other, and I know that you will find my criticism exhilarating' (p.338). It seems that Nabokov welcomes their resistance, yet is

[33] See 'Sartre's First Try' in *The New York Times Book Review*, April 24th, 1949 and *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters, 1940-1977*, p.217.
[34] For example, Edmund Wilson wrote, 'I had no difficulty in solving it ['The Vane Sisters'], but I thought that the meter applied to the poem that came in through the ouija-board' (Nabokov 2001 [1979] p.363).

reluctant to relinquish his 'master' status.[35]

When Nabokov sent 'The Vane Sisters' to the *New Yorker*, it was rejected by in-house chief Katharine White for its 'overwhelming style', 'light story', and 'elaboration' (Nabokov 1989, p.117). Despite his respect for White not only as person but as a 'good' reader (see *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters, 1940-77*, p.77, p.80, pp.180-81), Nabokov wrote to her informing her of the acrostic:

> You may argue that reading downwards, or upwards, or diagonally is not what an editor can be expected to do; but by means of various allusions to trick-reading I have arranged matters so that the reader almost automatically slips into this discovery, especially because of the abrupt change in *style*…I am really very disappointed that you, such a subtle and loving reader, should not have seen the inner scheme of my story…When some day you re-read it, I want you to notice – I hope with regret – how everything in the tale leads to one recurving end. (1991 [1989], pp.116-117)[36]

Nabokov's expectation of a reader who 'automatically slips into this discovery' is revealing. He seemed to assume that all 'good' readers would not only spot things like the lack of coordinating conjunctions, or the excessive use of adverbs and adjectives, in the final paragraph, but interpret them as clues and uncover the acrostic as a

[35] In a letter to Page Stegner, Vera Nabokov wrote 'My husband wants to confirm that he *is* supremely indifferent to hostile criticism' (Nabokov 1989, p.395). I argue that this did not seem to be the case.

[36] A passage from *Human, All Too Human* seems to summate Nabokov's situation:

> *The genius's sorrows and their value*. The artistic genius wants to give pleasure, but if his work is on a very high level, he may easily lack people to appreciate it; he offers them food, but no one wants it. That gives him a sometimes ludicrously touching pathos; for basically he has no right to force pleasure on me. His pipe sounds, but no one wants to dance. Can that be tragic? (p.107)

consequence. Those who do not automatically 'slip' into these discoveries are those who will not meet 'the master artist…at the top, on a windy ridge' (Nabokov 1980, p.2) after all. It appears that Nabokov *needs* this good reader to join him in his fiction, to enter into the 'game', specifically for the possibility of their complicit resistance.[37] Nietzsche's conception of the '*Artistic ambition*', artists who 'wrote in order to triumph; their whole art cannot be imagined without competition' (2004 [1878], p.116), seems very much applicable to Nabokov's art in this respect.

In 1975, Nabokov appended a note to 'The Vane Sisters' which appeared in *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*:

> In this story the narrator is supposed to be unaware that his last paragraph has been used acrostically by two dead girls to assert their mysterious participation in the story. This particular trick can be tried only once in a thousand years of fiction. Whether it has come off is another question. (2001 [1995], p.659)

Despite the apparent egotism of Nabokov's note, the fact that he has to again explicate the hidden riddle of the story suggests that this particular trick had still not come off. Although he can be seen to strive for greatness through detail and daring, Nabokov's reader seems not to have the ability to discern such techniques unless they are explicitly worked through using conventional reading patterns. Nabokov decided to simply inform readers about the acrostic sixteen years later.[38] When Nabokov says that this trick can

[37] It is known that some *did* work out the puzzle – see Nabokov's letter to the *Encounter* congratulating the '*first five code-crackers*' (1991 [1989], p.285). What seems to be upsetting for Nabokov is that certain 'master' readers were not able to work it out.

[38] No such explication exists, however, for another of Nabokov's short stories, entitled 'A Guide to Berlin' despite Nabokov calling it 'one of [his] trickiest pieces' (2001 [1995], p.648). Nabokov's numerous forewords and afterwords that he appended to his novels and short story collections may also be related to this.

only be tried once in a thousand years, he effectively delegitimizes any other writer over the next thousand years from replicating it (presumably based on issues of plagiarising or appropriating 'innovation' or 'genius'), positioning himself as a writer of regard and authority. Yet, Nabokov seems to circumvent such a problem by obliquely hypothesising about a reader who *does* get the acrostic. Nabokov's belated, and concessionary, description of how the story can be interpreted seems a way to provoke the resistance that did not occur in its initial publication. This is the 'will to (disem)power'. Although Nabokov's haughty suggestion of unique composition situates himself as an innovative writer, it is soon followed by his fear of whether it has come off or not. It reads as a challenge to his readership - 'I'll make the suggestion that it has not come off so that readers will try harder' – but it also suggests vulnerability; an anxiety that, frequently, nobody gets what he is up to. As he wrote himself, 'I am really quite depressed by the whole business…what matters most is the fact that people whom I like so much and admire have completely failed me as *readers* in the present case (1991 [1989], p.117).[39]

One of Nabokov's key aims was to resist convention through continuous literary innovation. In a letter to James Laughlin, for example, Nabokov wrote: 'In modern Russian literature I occupy the particular position of a novator, of a writer whose work seems to stand totally apart from that of his contemporaries' (1991 [1989], p.34). Nabokov's innovation in 'The Vane Sisters' sits alongside, for example, the 'anthropomorphic deity' in *Bend, Sinister*, the claim that Professor Timofey Pnin is a 'new

[39] Interestingly, Nietzsche himself claims in *Human, All Too Human*:

> *Artist and his follower must keep step*. The progress from one level of style to the next must be so slow that not only the artists, but also the listeners and spectators in it and know exactly what is taking place. Otherwise, a great gap suddenly forms between the artists, who creates his work on remote heights, and the public, which can no longer climb up to those heights, and finally climbs farther downhill again, disgruntled. (p.115)

kind of character', the idea that the 'commentary *is* the novel' in *Pale Fire*, and Nabokov's own third-person review in *Speak, Memory*.[40] These techniques illustrate Nabokov's strive for artistic originality, often at the risk of losing readerly understanding, a price he not only considered worth paying but actually seems to have sought.

Conclusion

Nabokov studies sometimes seems obsessed with obediently following the ways in which Nabokov wanted to be read, whether through 'caressing the divine details' (Nabokov 1980 p.xxiii), riddle-solving or decoding anagrams (Nabokov 1991 [1989], pp.116-117), following his command to subjugate general ideas (1990 [1973], p.128), or obediently appreciating his 'artistic sense' (Nabokov 1980, p.3). But it is perhaps unwise to allow a writer almost complete governance as to how we read him. In an article entitled 'Teaching Nabokov' in *The Goalkeeper: The Nabokov Almanac* (2010), David Rampton suggests the idea that readers should approach Nabokov 'on his own terms':

> What strikes me as so interesting about these responses by Priscilla, Christine, and Corinne [other Nabokovian critics]*, is how clearly they show the extent to which Nabokov has influenced the way we read him, and how crucial it is to get students to approach his work, at least at first, on his own terms.* All this emphasis on sleuthing out patterns and aesthetic bliss is also a somewhat unfashionable position in the academy at the moment, *which makes it that much more important that we make as convincing and enthusiastic case as we can for it.* (Rampton in Leving 2010, pp.240-241, my emphasis)

[40] Commenting on *Bend, Sinister*, Nabokov writes: 'This singular apotheosis (a device never yet attempted in literature) is, if you like, a kind of symbol of the Divine power' (1989, p.50).

But asking us to conform to Nabokov's reading parameters not only rules out readers' own potential ways of reading him but also focuses their eyes on the aspects that Nabokov *wants* us to attend to. In turn, this fosters a parochial understanding of Nabokov's works. Reading him through Nietzschean resistance, 'against the grain', is an alternative to this approach, one that wrenches Nabokov studies from Nabokov's grasp. Rather than follow his commands, it seems appropriate, instead, to read him, at least sometimes, in opposition to what he advocated. This is not to ignore his demands, but to question the reasons behind them, and the reasons readers often put up with his (often) condescending games.

Talking about the relationship between Nabokov's art and morality, Michael Wood argues that 'to be thoroughly clear and balanced on a subject like this is to plod, *that is to refuse a chance for provocation*, and Nabokov is not going to do that except in extremis… His art is flatly *confrontational*' (Wood in Norman & White 2009, pp.232-233, my emphasis). To relate back to our three types of reader, Nietzschean readers will be likelier to question Nabokov rather than be sycophantic; to be more intrigued by what he does not want us to look at rather than what he does. Effectively, a Nietzschean reading suggests that disempowerment and resistance are key elements in the way Nabokov's texts function. Discussing Nabokov's lecture on *Bleak House*, and his claim that the chapter where Dickens describes the death of Jo is 'a lesson in style, not in participative emotion' (Nabokov 1980, p.94), Richard Rorty argues that 'if Nabokov had said "as well as" instead of "not," nobody would have disagreed' (1989, p.147). Rorty's observation is a shrewd one in that it highlights exactly the type of obstinate exclusivity that pervades Nabokov's fiction – a tendency to rile those with an egalitarian or inclusive outlook.[41]

[41] Talking about Nabokov's insistence of the incompatibility of Housmanian tingles and participative emotion which moved liberal statesmen, Rorty adds 'Why doesn't he just say that these are two distinct, noncompetitive, goods?' (p.147). In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche

Nabokov's claim that he liked 'to lure the reader this way and that and then tickle him behind the ear just to see him whirl around' (Boyd 1991, p.71) suggests that he is not only tightly focussed on the reader but in pursuit of his or her resistance (here, the 'whirling').[42] Such resistance was perhaps an antidote to the stagnation and complacency he disliked in many literary texts, and a prompt to constant innovation. When we invert our normal reading of Nabokov, and evade his provocations by becoming Nietzschean readers, we can be less intimidated by his literary persona and 'revolt' in his texts in fruitful ways.

argues that 'Caution, even hostility towards new books is rather part of my instinct than 'tolerance', '*largeur du coeur*' and other forms of 'neighbour love' (p.27).

[42] Nabokov's attitude to describing his faith seems as frustratingly coy: 'To be quite candid – and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it *provokes* a little salutary 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' (1990 [1973], p.45, my emphasis).

Chapter Three: '*Pale Fire* – A Differing Perspective'

Michael Riffaterre, in *Fictional Truth* (1990), argues that the wonder of fiction is that it 'still manages to interest, to convince, and eventually to appear relevant to the reader's own experience, despite containing so many reminders of its own artificiality' (1990, p.1). Some relationship between truth and fiction appears to be an inherent component in our understanding of literary texts and is a recurring preoccupation of literary theorists. For Riffaterre, a text's referentiality refers to 'an actual or potential relationship between language and reality', whilst describing a text as having verisimilitude denotes 'a system of representations that seems to reflect a reality external to the text' - a text which would mimic our spatial and temporal universe for example. Further still, extrapolating from the text to the real world – seeing 'situational analogies between the writer's inventions and representations of recognized reality' – also factors in a text's symbolic truth (1990, pp.xiii-2).

Despite these and other attempts to describe the relationship systematically, a number of areas have not been fully explored in relation to how truth functions in fictional narrative. One such area is that of authorial intention, and the truth or fictional status of the authorial or narrative persona. Authorial intention plays an integral role in how we conceive of a text and its meaning, and has dominated twentieth-century thought. From I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929) detailing the 'four meanings' of a text to T.S. Eliot's 'extinction of personality' (1961 [1932], p.17), criticism in the modern era has tended to downplay the importance of the author. It was arguably Wimsatt and Beardsley's conception of the 'intentional fallacy' in 1946 that had the most debilitating effect on future critics' privileging of the author's influence, although Roland Barthes'

'The Death of the Author' (1968) also vies for this position. Attempting to put the meaning of the text firmly in the hands of the reader, Barthes' famous argument is that:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (1977, p.146)

Although privileging the myriad perspectives that readers can have when looking at any particular text, Barthes, in investigating the reader's response towards a particular text, neglects the importance of the fact that the words contained in the text have not been randomly assigned there and, instead, are attributable to specific individuals. Such knowledge defines the text as a literary object. Wayne Booth's 'implied author' in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) attempts to address this problem by reference to the presumed storyteller. For Booth, it is impossible to talk about a text without talking about an author, because the existence of the text implies the existence of an author. His theorizing of 'Types of Literary Interest' describes the ways in which the implied author's presence affects the reader's experience of the text (1983 [1961], p.125). Yet, the importance of authorial intention in deciphering meaning goes against the grain of twentieth-century criticism in many ways.[1] Since at least the time of William Empson, twentieth-century criticism has adopted the idea of interpretative ambiguity comfortably, enthusiastically even. But the idea of ambiguous implied authorship is less familiar. It is this problem which I wish to discuss in relation to *Pale Fire*.

I do so using the concept of 'implied internal authorship' – that is, who we believe to have articulated the words within the fictional world of part or whole of the

[1] For further discussion, see Tom Furniss and Michael Bath's *Reading Poetry: An Introduction* (Second Edition, 2007, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited), pp.19-21.

narrative. Implied internal authorship is something that we arguably take for granted in most fictions. Although we are aware of a *real* person who has written and arranged the words in any given text, we are also aware, unconsciously or not, of an implied author or authors residing within the text or any given part of it. For example, we normally accept a signature below a block of text as an indicator that the preceding words belong to the person named – we enter a trusting, reciprocal relationship whereby we entertain these fictional narratives as words coming from the named source. Modernism and postmodernism have taught us to be sceptical readers in many respects yet, despite an increased awareness of authorial deception, this trusting relationship still survives. The meaning and value attributed to the text depends on this information (Barthes 1977, p.21). For many, perhaps most, readers of *Pale Fire*, this is still the case; there is no apparent mystery about which fictional character allegedly wrote which section of the text. My discussion therefore applies only to those diligent readers who work hard enough to discover the textual anomalies planted by Nabokov which make this alignment of sections of the text to fictional authors less straightforward. With this in mind, we need to ask about the implications of a text, or given section of a text, that presents itself as the product of more than one possible internal author. What do we make of dialogue potentially being attributed to the person who we thought was being addressed? To read a text only to discover that someone other than we thought has voiced certain words all along is a disconcerting thought – the idea that Lear's words might actually be Cordelia's, and *vice versa*, is almost unfathomable.

Engaging with Friedrich Nietzsche's theories of 'perspectivism' and 'untruth', this chapter will attempt to show how a perspectivist outlook can help to explain the problematic issue of ambiguity in the implied internal authorship in *Pale Fire*. The issue of internal authorship in *Pale Fire* is a contentious one in Nabokov studies, engendering

numerous articles about who the internal author might be, based, largely, on the identification of clues and puzzles within the text.[2] The problem that *Pale Fire* poses is that there are five plausible but incompatible theories concerning the internal implied authorship. Unlike, for example, Julio Cortozar's novel *Hopscotch* (1963), where the reader can choose to formulate the *plot* of the text through utilising expendable chapters or not[3], *Pale Fire* seems to offer five different interpretations as to whom the internal implied author of any given section is. In this light, Nabokov's text seems to flagrantly defy Barthes' idea that 'the essence of writing (the meaning of the work which constitutes writing) is to prevent any reply to the question: who is speaking?' (1977, p.132).[4] In other words, where Barthes sees the essence of writing as ensuring the speaking voice is unambiguous, Nabokov appears to make this the locus of his novel. Writing about the difficulty of establishing the truth in *Pale Fire* in 1977, Peter Rabinowitz asks:

> How then is one to read the book? The only way, I suppose, is to make an arbitrary choice about which narrative audience one wants to join – or to read the novel several times, making a different choice each time. As in a game, we are free to make several opening moves; what follows will be dependent upon our initial decision. Simply with respect to the questions suggested above, we can generate four

[2] Boyd's *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* is paradigmatic of the 'Russian-doll' analyses of *Pale Fire* being executed by scholars who are focused on solving Nabokov's riddles. Such analysis allows these riddles and anagrams (e.g. Jack Gradus, Jacques d'Argus, Sudarg of Bokay) to act as the underlying 'truth' of the novel rather than as aesthetic games or potential traps.

[3] Another similar choice is given in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) where the 25 chapters between the first and last are designed to be read in any order. Such choices are also present in children's books, such as in Edward Packward's *Choose Your Own Adventure* (1979-1998) series and R.L. Stine's *Give Yourself Goosebumps* (1995-2000) series.

[4] In 'What is an Author?' (1977), Foucault cites Beckett's phrase 'What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking' and argues that 'we must recognize [this question] as one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing' (1977, pp.14-15).

> novels, all different but all couched, oddly, in the same words. (1977, p.140)

I will discuss the four different authorial attributions that Rabinowitz mentions below, as well as the Boydian theory of 'inspiration beyond the grave' which was published in 1999. But first I wish to pursue the issues Rabinowitz raises. By invoking choice, he suggests the idea that options are available to the reader to make sense of the novel – that we can accept any of [at that time] four theories assigning fictional authors to all or part of the text as true, if incompatible. He also suggests the presence and power of the reader, privileging not only the reader's freedom in making sense of the text but also the reader's capacity to allow other potentially *valid* authorship interpretations or readings to exist. I develop this to argue that we can read *Pale Fire* not only as five different novels (to include Boyd's theory) but also as five *equally* valid novels, depending on who we decide the fictional author, or authors, is or are. Drawing on Nietzsche's theory of 'perspectivism' and his difficulty with 'all-encompassing' explanations (discussed later in the chapter), I will attempt to show how the 'problem' of *Pale Fire*'s internal authorship (and its relationship to truth) can be thought of in a different light if we are to accept multiple solutions. Just as I will argue in chapter four that *Lolita* forces its readers to adopt a disorientating moral world, I suggest here that *Pale Fire* appears to be pushing the reader into perspectivism by providing multiple possibilities of internal authorship. This might, at first sight, appear to be an egalitarian, relativist reading. But I complicate this account by examining how, while all five perspectives are valid, some perspectives may be considered *more* valid than others (a paradox that exists in Nietzsche's 'perspectivism'). Each internal authorship theory is supported by enough textual evidence to be statable with potentially serious consequences for our conception of literary truth. As Rabinowitz argues, 'the answer to this question, of course, must come prior to any satisfactory

discussion of the overall meaning of the novel: until we know what is going on, we can hardly interpret it, much less evaluate it' (Rabinowitz 1977, p.122). In this chapter, I shall argue that this interpretative impasse can be solved without being reductive, as Boyd's solution arguably is. I begin by outlining the five existing authorship theories. I then give an account of Nietzschean perspectivism, drawing on current scholarship on Nietzsche and, in the final part of the chapter, I give a perspectivist resolution of the authorship problem in *Pale Fire*.

Pale Fire

Nabokov's fourteenth novel, his fifth written in English, is described by Mary McCarthy as a 'Jack-in-the-box, a Faberge gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself kit' (1962, p.21). *Pale Fire* poses as a critical edition of a poem and consists of a foreword, an eponymous poem, critical commentary on that poem, and an index. The foreword is attributed to a Dr Charles Kinbote, a colleague and neighbour of the American poet John Shade, both of whom teach at Wordsmith College and live in New Wye, Appalachia. Readers are met with a foreword that, initially academic in tone, soon alerts the reader to Kinbote's unorthodox editorial approach as his personality begins to intrude on what should be formal exposition: 'Canto Two, your favourite' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.13). A 999-line poem follows, also called 'Pale Fire', seemingly by Shade. Written in heroic couplets and in four cantos, the poem blends the styles of Robert Frost and Alexander Pope (Kostelanetz 1987, p.41) and concerns Shade's childhood, his grief over the suicide of his daughter Hazel, his near-death experience, and thoughts about life

after death.[5] Kinbote's commentary on the poem follows, becoming increasingly removed from the rigour one would normally expect in critical commentary. Initial academic exposition is usurped by lengthy (but wonderfully comic) description of the tribulations of a certain King Charles II Xavier, the disposed king of Zembla who, Kinbote broadly hints, is Kinbote himself. *Pale Fire* ends with an index that contains entries for numerous characters and events within the poem and commentary (albeit in a rather selective and disproportionate fashion). Kinbote, for example, is given two pages whilst the entry for Shade's wife Sybil comprises of just three words.

To most readers, the attribution of material to Kinbote and Shade respectively is simple: Kinbote wrote the foreword, commentary and index whilst Shade wrote the poem. But scholarly readers have noticed that the text is not so straightforward. There are underlying echoes between each section, 'impossible' knowledge of certain facts that either Shade or Kinbote are privy to for example, which have problematized the attribution of authorship. Such echoes include the fact that Kinbote, Shade and the character Gradus all share the same birthday (July 5th) and that the mirror imagery of the waxwing literally reflects the mirror-land of Zembla. Because of the interplay between the sections, critics have put forward five major theories as to who wrote what in *Pale Fire*.

'Dual Authorship' reading

The dual authorship theory is the obvious solution as to who is accountable for each section of *Pale Fire*. Adherents of this view simply believe that the names appended

[5] Despite the poem's odd number of lines, it is assumed that the last line can be married to the first (which would achieve couplet status). The use of such circularity, especially in such a complex text, is reminiscent of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

to each section tell you who has written each section of text; that the text's internal authorship is exactly as it seems. For Robert Alter,

> there is no reason to doubt the existence of the basic fictional data – the Poem and its author, on the one hand, and the mad Commentary and *its* perpetrator on the other, inverted left hand. (1978, p.186)

This view has been advanced by Ellen Pifer and David Lodge as well as Alter. It is supported by the disparity between Shade's stylistic formality and Kinbote's haphazardness, between Shade's introverted and Kinbote's extroverted nature, between Shade's imaginative quest and Kinbote's suspect exegesis (Boyd 1999, p.116). Yet there are problems with this attribution as well. There are, for example, numerous resonances between poem and commentary that would supposedly be unknown to either Shade or Kinbote, examined below.

'Shadean' reading

The Shadean reading, first proposed by Andrew Field in 1967, is by far the most popular theory of those critics who favour single-author explanations.[6] Critics endorsing this view include Andrew Field, Gennady Barabtarlo, Chris Ackerley, and Sergey Il'yn. Internal echoes that seem to exist between the different sections of the text mean that theories about covert authorship have followed *Pale Fire* since publication. The poem's self-reflexive content is the most obvious evidence for attributing the authorship of *Pale Fire* to Shade. Lines such as 'I was the shadow of the waxwing slain…I lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.29, lines 1-4), and '*Man's life as commentary to*

[6] See Boyd's *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, p.114.

abstruse/ Unfinished poem. Note for further use' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.57, lines 939-940) suggest to some critics that Shade is 'projecting himself imaginatively beyond death' (Boyd 1999, p.123). Moreover, there are constant references to 'Pale Fire' in the commentary. This allusion to Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (1623) refers to a passage describing the moon as a thief of the sun's fire: 'The moon's an arrant thief/And her pale fire she snatches from the sun' (1997 [1623], 4.3, 430-431). Its rich metaphorical relationship to the novel includes the implication that Kinbote steals his inspiration from Shade's poem. It cannot be known by Kinbote, however, because he only has a Zemblan version of the play, bereft of the phrase 'pale fire'. His translation reads: 'The moon is a thief: / he steals his silvery light from the sun' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.66).

But there are serious problems with the Shadean reading. If Shade did write the commentary and attributed it to an invented writer called Kinbote, he would be an egomaniac since Kinbote praises Shade fulsomely. Shade would also have to be completely insensitive to use his daughter's death as a foil for Kinbote's fantasies.[7] Yet, hidden levels of meaning beneath the story would not be the only occurrence in Nabokov's *oeuvre*, as we have seen in the case of 'The Vane Sisters' (1959). In that case, Nabokov maintained that 'a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent one' (Nabokov 1991 [1989], p.117).

'Kinbotean' reading

The Kinbotean reading was first proposed by Page Stegner in 1966 and advocates include Pekka Tammi and Charles Nicol. It starts from a similar point to the Shadean reading. As already mentioned, Kinbote does not have a faithful translation of

[7] Boyd counters by relating the parallels between *Pale Fire* and Nabokov's father's death. He also asks, if Shade has invented his death scene, who is to say that he has not also invented his life (1999, pp.123-125).

Timon of Athens yet he makes a number of apparent allusions to the key phrase in Shakespeare's play: 'the pale fire of the incinerator' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.15), 'I… have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.67), and 'any fire (even a 'pale' one!)' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.191). If Kinbote does allude to Shakespeare's play, this would suggest that he is an invented character of Shade's. Boyd, for example, argues that if he 'has the imagination to invent the outlandish world of Zembla; why could he not also add the demurer world of Appalachia?' (1999, p.116). However, there are several important points that arguably negate the idea of Kinbote having concocted the poem. For one, Kinbote's constant self-aggrandizing does not extend to his ability to write verse: 'I am a miserable rhymester' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.227). Also, if Kinbote did write the poem, why does he not just write 'Solus Rex', the text that he desperately tries to see in 'Pale Fire' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.232)? As Boyd points out, Kinbote seems genuinely pained that Zembla does not appear to be in Shade's poem and Kinbote is not only 'too misogynistic to talk about John and Sybil Shade' but he also 'frequently makes himself look stupid' (1999, p.116-117).

A subsidiary authorship theory of the Kinbotean reading is that a character named Professor V. Botkin has written the story and that Kinbote is his alter ego. The 'Botkin' theory is advocated by critics such as Mary McCarthy, Alfred Appel, and D. Barton Johnson. Textual details in the commentary, such as 'she [Sybil Shade] used to call me "an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly…the monstrous parasite of a genius"' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.138) and the fact that Botkin is a near anagram of Kinbote add force to this theory (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.210). Nabokov himself, in an interview in 1962, stated that 'the nasty commentator is not an ex-King of Zembla nor is he professor Kinbote. He is professor Botkin, or Botkine, a Russian and a madman' (Dolbier 1962,

p.5). This identification, of course, does not solve the question of whether Kinbote, or Botkin, wrote the whole text.

'Undecidability' reading[8]

The fourth possible reading is that of 'undecidability'. This reading has been proposed by Alvin B. Kernan, Brian McHale, Michael Wood, Peter Rabinowitz, George Steiner, Nigel Dennis and Frank Kermode. In the case of *Pale Fire*, they suggest, we have no way of knowing *who* is unreliable, no 'ground-level' reference point in which to adequately decide on the meaning, no entirely reliable hook, as Wood puts it, on which to hang our coats.[9] One possible response to these problems then is that they are undecidable. Because of the conflicting internal evidence that the novel seems to provide, these critics compare *Pale Fire* to the Rubens Vase or to Wittgenstein's 'duck/rabbit' paradigm (1997 [1953], p.194). Rabinowitz has called *Pale Fire* 'a frustrating novel to read, and in some respects an impossible one...the ambiguities seem intentional' (1977, p.139) whilst McHale argues that '*Pale Fire* … is a text of absolute epistemological uncertainty' (1987, p.18). Boyd disparages this reading as symptomatic of a modern age of relativism and our tendency to view art as removed from explanatory 'grand narratives':

> Because it invites us to discovery, *Pale Fire* also prompts us to disagree radically about what we think we have found. Nabokov's finest novel has become a paradigm of literary elusiveness, a test case of apparent undecidability…That seems to suit our muddled times,

[8] In *Lolita* (1955), conversely, such undecidability is given by the fictitious John Ray Jr. who nonetheless gives us 'factual' data – such as newspaper reports, jail sentences, death dates – in a metanarrative removed from the content of the story. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) works in much the same way. Because of the first-person narration, we have no way of deciding on two interpretations – either Quint and his lover threaten the children, or they are part of the governess's imagination.

[9] From Wood's paper 'Modern Mimesis' given at the 'Nabokov and Morality' symposium held at the University of Strathclyde on the 5th and 6th May 2011.

> when "advanced" thinkers claim we must all accept as a universal truth that there is no such thing as truth, only local versions. (1999, p.3)[10]

The relativistic connotations Boyd ascribes to *Pale Fire*'s 'apparent undecidability' are, however, at odds with at least one kind of Nietzschean interpretation. Rather than embracing all five interpretations, perspectivism would suggest the *possibility* of each, but resolutely declare only one privileged viewpoint for any given reader. According to the Nietzschean view, this would be dependent on a particular critic's 'interest' after having weighed up the 'pros' and 'cons' (Nietzsche 1994 [1887], p.92) of each theory.

Boydian reading

The newest theory is that of Brian Boyd's. Previously a Shadean, Boyd significantly altered this view in *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999). He formulated a new argument whereby the ghost of John Shade's daughter Hazel inhabits the Vanessa Atalanta butterflies that roam around Shade's and Kinbote's gardens and which, in turn, provide Kinbote and Shade with imaginative inspiration. This theory is largely based on the fact that the word 'atalanta' appears three times in the 'jumble of broken words' passage quoted above, and on other evidence from the text. Boyd likens literary discovery to scientific discovery in that clues about the text lead on *ad infinitum*. However, what we must remember is that the text has been wrought by human hands and so a limit on the number of clues *will* have a limit. Boyd's approach is (quite rightly) to privilege the textual detail yet it seems to bypass the book's aesthetic delight. Boyd's 'butterfly' theory, although coherent enough to be possible, seems reductive and highly sentimental in that it claims that the internal inspiration for writing *Pale Fire* comes down

[10] See pp.126-128 for more detail.

to a ghost, inhabiting butterflies, being able to somehow communicate with the living - that we might not actually die but, like Hazel, be able to infiltrate the real world and provide a catalyst for writing in the afterlife. Boyd addresses Michael Wood's wariness of this view:

> [Wood] expresses his reluctance to accept my proposal in this way: "The trouble with it is its cost, what you have to take with it and give up because of it…Death itself is diminished, its horror is cancelled, and a desperate sentimentality beckons" (Wood in Boyd 1999, p.257)

Through his close reading, for example, of the barn section in *Pale Fire* (see pp.126-127 of this chapter), Boyd's theory is scholarly and apparently convincing. However, what seems problematic about this theory is that Boyd, although in dialogue with Karl Popper's suspicious view of 'knowledge' and Thomas Kuhn's theory of 'paradigm shifts', seems to argue that *his* is the theory to end all theories, that *his* theory solves the 'authorship' problem.[11] Yet, as Nietzsche states in *Human, All Too Human* (1878), 'there are *no eternal facts*, nor are there any absolute truths' (Nietzsche 1994 [1878], p.15). He also claims that 'the *more* eyes, various eyes, we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our 'concept' of the thing, our "objectivity"' (1994 [1887], p.92). Nietzsche thus problematizes the methodological dogmatism of the sort that Boyd seems to be advocating. Boyd also mentions Wood's reservations about his theory given that 'it leads to the *kind* of interpretation I [Boyd] suggest' (1999, p.255). Presumably, by '*kind*', Wood's reservation is based not only the idea that art is commonly inspired by the dead but also one that attempts definitive interpretation, a school of 'monomania' that fails to

[11] For more discussion of these issues, see Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934).

negotiate any aesthetically complex discussion as to *why* the two halves of the novel seem to complement one another. This is where Boyd's viewpoint seems detrimental.

Nietzsche's perspectivism

My argument for *Pale Fire* as an equivocal text, in which two or more of the apparently conflicting interpretations outlined above are simultaneously true, draws on Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism. In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche summarizes a particular problem that he feels is symptomatic of the modern age: 'it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year-old faith, that Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine' (2001 [1882], p.201). Perspectivism, instead, is a theory that attempts to show the plurality of truth and is integral to much of Nietzsche's philosophy. Perspectivism advocates the privileging of the individual perspective, negating the idea of hegemonic interpretations able to give meaning to the world that transcends perspective. Linked irrevocably to his statement that 'God is dead', Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism 'Derives from the idea that morality has been invented by human beings' (Magnus and Higgins 1996, p.32) and privileges the individual's beliefs. Nietzsche's problem with objective knowledge is concisely put in his posthumous *The Will to Power*:

> In so far as the word 'knowledge' has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.—"Perspectivism." (1968 [1901], p.267)

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche expands upon this theory, detailing how it differs from simple relativism:

> Not as 'contemplation [*Anschauung*] without interest' (which is, as such, a non-concept and an absurdity), but as *having in our power* our 'pros' and cons': so as to be able to engage and disengage them so that we can use the *difference* in perspectives and affective interpretations for knowledge (1994 [1887], p.92)

Here, Nietzsche's description of perspectivism argues for the importance of 'interest' and of the 'pros and cons' of a particular perspective. For Nietzsche, each individual has been selective in choosing to believe a particular perspective. His idea of each individual having '*in our power*' the ability to see the 'pros and cons' of a given perspective suggests not a blinkered, unwavering belief in any particular view being the right one but a perspective derived from acknowledging other positions and only coming to an interpretation once this process has been executed.

Bernd Magnus condenses Nietzsche's perspectivism into four criteria:

> (1) no accurate representation of the world as it is in itself is possible; (2) there is nothing to which our theories stand in the required correspondence relation to enable us to say that they are true or false; (3) no method of understanding our world – the sciences, logic, or moral theory – enjoys a privileged epistemic status; (4) human needs always help to "constitute" the world for us. (Magnus in Magnus & Higgins 1996, p.4)

I want to suggest that these four criteria provide a model for the ways in which *Pale Fire* can be understood. Where Magnus claims that 'no accurate representation of the world…is possible', we can claim that no accurate representation of *Pale Fire* is possible. Where Magnus claims that there is nothing to say that our theories are true or false, we

can remind ourselves of the longevity and resilience of *Pale Fire*'s various and incompatible interpretative theories and that each is internally consistent enough to be statable. Magnus's account of Nietzsche as arguing that no method of understanding our world enjoys privileged status, echoes different theorists' views of *Pale Fire* – is the Shadean theory somehow 'better' than the dual authorship theory because the Shadeans focus on minute textual details? Is the dual authorship theory 'better' than Boyd's because the dual authorship theorists want to take a text at face value? Ultimately, it is impossible to say which is better and, thus, it is the individual reader that must decide, based on what he or she wants to draw from the text. This, in turn, is parallel to Magnus's fourth feature of Nietzschean perspectivism.

Pale Fire: definitive interpretation and Nietzsche

Duncan White argues that *Pale Fire* demands 'that an energised reader take on the role of metafictional sleuth' (2007). Given the extent to which buried clues are located in *Pale Fire*, many critics believe pursuing these, as White suggests, is the path to 'solving' the novel. Yet this critical path fails us at certain points. For example, Kinbote discusses the late Hazel Shade's notes about the possibility of paranormal activity in a barn located near New Wye:

> The jumble of broken words and meaningless syllables which she managed at last to collect came out in her dutiful notes as a short line of simple letter-groups. I transcribe:
>
> pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.151)

Kinbote attempts to decode this mishmash of letters:

> I abhor such games; they make my temples throb with abominable pain – but I have braved it and pored endlessly, with a commentator's infinite patience and disgust, over the crippled syllables in Hazel's report to find the least allusion to the poor girl's fate. Not one hint did I find. (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.151)

Nabokov, as puppeteer, allows Kinbote to make a reference to the reader's own potential desire to try to 'solve' this collection of letters for a hidden clue. Probably unable to, the reader is thus likely to identify with Kinbote's assertion that he abhors such games.

At first glance, Boyd's theory, unlike the previous four theories, appears consistent with a Nietzschean outlook and should be addressed separately from them. His weighing up of the existing theories resembles the weighing up of 'pros and cons' that Nietzsche advocates. And since, for Boyd, discovering textual details through rereading is central to a novel, he displays genuine 'interest' in Nabokov's way of thinking. He is also quick to concede that *his* theory is like the others, in that it cannot be decisive, consistent with a Nietzschean perspectivist outlook. Discussing the benefits of having *other* theories, Boyd asks, 'isn't a theory, even if mistaken, worthwhile because of the knowledge it engenders?' (1999, p.256).Yet, Boyd's all-encompassing explanation of *Pale Fire* seems at odds with these perspectivist features, and his general argument is that previous theories do not seem up to scratch with his own butterfly theory. When Wood says that 'Kinbote has literally, arrantly, stolen the poem, gone off with the index cards it is written on; and metaphorically stolen it too, since he wants to endow it with a meaning which is all his own' (1994, p.180), it is almost possible to substitute Boyd for Kinbote.

Nietzsche, however, reminds us that 'forcing, adjusting, shortening, omitting, filling-out, inventing, falsifying and everything else [is] *essential* to interpretation' (1994 [1887], p.119). The problem with Boyd's theory is that although ostensibly left to individual readers to agree or disagree with it, it attempts to completely resolve the book's tensions, leaving nothing for the forcing, adjusting or falsifying described by Nietzsche. It is the multiple viewpoints regarding authorship which give *Pale Fire* some of its vibrancy. As Will Norman and Duncan White argue, 'one of the costs of solution-orientated scholarship in Nabokov studies has been felt in the diminishment of his readers' interpretative autonomy' (2009, p.10), in this case, the autonomy to exert a Nietzschean perspective.

Pale Fire as five different novels, some *more* valid than others

Rabinowitz suggests that the ambiguities in *Pale Fire* seem intentional so that the text is 'a frustrating novel to read, and in some respects an impossible one' (1977, p.139). Our inability to determine what facts are 'real' and what are not, Rabinowitz goes on to say, makes it impossible for us to join the 'narrative audience' because we do not know what is expected of us.[12] He explores the possibility of reading it, at the time of his argument, as four different novels but puts more weight on the undecidability theory, arguing that it is impossible to choose between each theory. In what follows, I argue that *all* of the five major theories (the four Rabinowitz engages with, plus Boyd's) are potentially valid but to different degrees.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche argues that 'Perhaps nobody has been truthful enough about what "truthfulness" is' (2002 [1886], p.73). Despite the scepticism over authorial intention and truth itself in much twentieth-century literary theory, this verdict could in some ways be applied to literary criticism. The desire to interpret or

[12] This is similar to my point about 'The Vane Sisters' (see pages 99-100).

understand a text is obviously strong and readers normally have no problem in being able to embark on interpretation given that we usually have conventions in which to situate the writing. However, the problem of author attribution in *Pale Fire* has created an interpretative bottleneck with much of the criticism surrounding the novel devoted to trying to solve this problem. To clear this bottleneck, readers may need a robust view of who has authored a particular account. *Pale Fire* invites each reader to decide what is true in the novel based on how a particular theory's 'pros and cons' match up. This is not an interpretative free-for-all however – a Nietzschean approach requires that the reader's decision must be based on what they find most appropriate and what they most have interest in.[13]

The five major interpretations of *Pale Fire* arose through rigorous close reading.[14] As Boyd puts it:

> The idea of evidence is important – texts do offer discussable evidence, and the discussion of evidence is not merely the airing of opinions – but the alternative to dogmatic or scattershot doubt is

[13] For example, much like *Pale Fire*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) was interpreted in distinctly different ways: 'European reviewers saw it as political and topical; murder mystery fans were delighted; lovers of the historical novel were given their heart's desire; medievalists were generous in their admiration; learned readers celebrated its intertextuality' (Currie 1995, p.225). It comes as no surprise that Eco called his novels 'machines for generating interpretations' (ibid, p.224).

[14] In *Structural Poetics: Structuralism, Poetics, and the Study of Literature* (1975), Jonathan Culler argues that, 'Indeed, the striking facts that do require explanation are how it is that a work can have a variety of meanings but not just any meaning whatsoever or how it is that some works give an impression of strangeness, incoherence, incomprehensibility' (2002 [1975], p.142). Thus, to adopt the perspective that Humbert Humbert has internally authored *Pale Fire* cannot be ruled out but has absolutely no evidence to validate such a theory and would be considered a poor perspective based on this major 'con'. Magnus and Higgins also touch on the robustness of meaning: 'He [Nietzsche] praises the ancient world for having invented the "incomparable art of reading well, the prerequisite for all systematic knowledge," and with that "the sense for facts, the last-developed and most valuable of all the senses" (1996, p.16). See, also, Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), p.96.

> argument rather than any clinching experiment or demonstration. (1999, p.256)

However, in discussing Nietzsche's perspectivism, Alexander Nehamas argues that

> To engage in any activity, and in particular in any enquiry, we must inevitably be selective. We must bring some things into the foreground and distance others into the background. We must assign a greater relative importance to some things than we do to others, and still others we must completely ignore. We do not, and cannot, begin (or end) with "all the data". (1985, p.49)

Thus, although Boyd is correct to stress the importance of evidence, Nehamas is *also* correct that it is impossible to amalgamate all of the evidence simultaneously. The idea of there being some perspectives that are more valid than others seems strange given the fact that perspectivism seemingly denies the privileging of any epistemic status. However, although perspectivism values the plurality of viewpoints, it also allows for the privileging of them. For Nietzsche, for example, a perspective that is self-conscious of its being a perspective is privileged (Nehamas 1985, p.2, p.66). Perspectives that attempt to dominate reality and posit theirs as the only way in which to view the world are less valid than those that accept their own conditionality. In addition, certain viewpoints that hold particular moral views (for example, in the opposition of good and evil) and *a priori* judgements are less privileged than others (Nietzsche 2003 [1886], p.42). There are certainly problems with Nietzsche's conception of perspectivism (that perspectivism is a perspective itself – otherwise known as the 'liar's paradox', and that moral choices conflicting with Nietzsche's are less privileged). But it does offer a way out of the critical impasse around *Pale Fire*'s internal authorship.

Indeed, *Pale Fire*'s relationship with truth is to some extent explicitly Nietzschean. For example, in John Shade's wavering faith in the afterlife, *Pale Fire* engages with the idea of the 'death of God' explicitly: 'My God died young. Theolatry I found/Degrading, and its premises, unsound/No free man needs a God; but was I free?' (Nabokov 2001 [1962], p.32, lines 99-101).[15] Shade's disillusionment with religion recalls Nietzsche's statement that God is dead in *The Gay Science* (1882). Nabokov also makes explicit reference to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) – another text that addresses God's death and its consequences (1880, pp.309-321, pp.749-764).[16] In Canto Three, which is predominantly concerned with the thought of an afterlife, Shade details 'Fra Karamazov, mumbling his inept / *All is allowed*, into some classes crept' (Nabokov 2001 [1962], p.48, lines 641-642). Shade's description of Fra Karamazov's mumbling as 'inept' (his thinking that 'All is allowed' is deficient as a worldview) allows the suggestion that, despite God's death and the loss of a divine worldview or truth, vulgar relativism, at the opposite end of the spectrum, is not desired either. Instead, Shade, in the passage included in Kinbote's commentary about the possibility of 'Higher Intelligence', claims, 'There are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance' (Nabokov

[15] Kinbote's commentary to this line reads as follows: 'When one considers the numberless thinkers and poets in the history of human creativity whose freedom of mind was enhanced rather than stunted by Faith, one is bound to question the wisdom of this easy aphorism' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.95). It is left to the reader to decide whether Kinbote's beliefs are continuing to be undermined by Nabokov's sardonic humour. Indeed, Gregory Currie, in an essay entitled 'Fictional Truth', argues:

> Sometimes, as in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the explicit narrator is unreliable: what Kinbote the explicit narrator believes and what is true in that story come apart. What is true in such a story is a matter of what beliefs it is reasonable to attribute to the unobtrusive narrator who, by putting words in the mouth of the explicit narrator in a certain way, signals his scepticism about what the explicit narrator says. (1986, p.211)

[16] It is also worth noting that the fifth book of *The Brothers Karamazov* is entitled 'Pro and Contra' – exactly what Nietzsche describes weighing up when formulating our perspective. Further discussion of Nabokov and Dostoevsky can be found in chapter five.

2000 [1962], p.179). This is not to say that Nabokov's model for *Pale Fire* was Nietzsche's theory of perspectivism. But it does suggest the Nietzschean model of truth might find echoes within the novel.

We can see this in an example. In Canto Four, a particular couplet stands out, both for its being marooned (and thus foregrounded) as a stand-alone stanza and (as previously mentioned) for its self-reflexive nature: '*Man's life as commentary to abstruse/Unfinished poem*. Note for further use' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.57, lines 939-940). Dual authorship theorists, accepting internal authorship at face value, would attribute this couplet to John Shade but be perplexed as to how Shade would know that his poem would remain unfinished and how he could have foreseen Kinbote's mass of endnotes. Thus, for dual authorship theorists, the couplet is steeped in dramatic irony – it is an eerie coincidence that Shade does not get to finish his poem and Kinbote's commentary sits alongside it. If we are Shadeans, however, we are suspicious of this coincidence and, thinking that the commentary is also written by Shade, read this couplet as evidence that Shade has staged his fictive death in order to allow readers to think he has some mystical foresight (alongside creating a foil to write about himself in a self-aggrandizing manner). If we are Kinboteans, we assume that Shade is an invented character and that Kinbote has written the poem (this particular couplet included). If so, the themes of death and suffering that the invented character of John Shade describes are used simply as aesthetic devices. Also, Kinbote has included a couplet that nods to his commentary – the idea of man's life as a commentary to an unfinished abstruse poem suggests that Shade's life, or essence, is encapsulated in the commentary (which, cruelly, concerns Kinbote and his numerous aliases) and, absurdly, that the poem is more abstruse than the commentary. Kinbote himself thinks that 'human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.214).

Such disparity shows how differently we read *Pale Fire* depending on the perspective we adopt. In *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967), Stanley Fish talks about the importance of reading the same passage in different ways and its experience for the reader:

> In each of the sonnets we have considered, the significant word or phrase occurs at a line break where a reader is invited to place it first in one and then in another structure of syntax and sense. This moment of hesitation, of semantic or syntactic slide, is crucial to the experience the verse provides. (1967, p.155)

Fish's description of 'syntactic slide' seems to be what can occur in *Pale Fire* if we adopt different views of who the internal author is. The 'moment of hesitation', 'crucial to the experience the verse provides' is strikingly similar to how I argue Nabokov felt his literary composition worked. Where Fish can be seen to embrace interpretative ambiguity, Nabokov seems to be asking us to embrace 'authorship ambiguity'. For Fish, this would mean several different interpretations of one individual work whilst, for Nabokov, this could mean several different interpretations of several different works all, as Rabinowitz reminds us, 'couched, oddly, in the same words'.

How then can the different authorship theories be related to a hierarchy of Nietzschean perspectives? As Shade argues in *Pale Fire*, 'Different people see different similarities and similar differences' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.208). Keeping the criteria of perspectivism in mind, if we are dual authorship theorists we *want* to view *Pale Fire* at face value. We want to enjoy the opposition between the control of Shade and the chaos of Kinbote rather than focus on problematic textual details or echoes that ripple through both sections, perhaps because this vision of humanity satisfies something else about us.

For example, we might derive emotional and aesthetic pleasure from the interplay between Shade's formality and Kinbote's creative haphazardness, Shade's indebtedness to literary precursors and Kinbote's sheer inventiveness, and our sympathy for Shade in regard to his loss and our pity for Kinbote in his failings. We would also view *Pale Fire* as a novel that poses as, and critiques, academic practice. And, perhaps most importantly, we would be more interested in the human aspects of the story that Nabokov is expressing. Boyd, for example, argues that Ellen Pifer, an advocate of the dual authorship theory, 'made a powerful case for approaching his [Nabokov's] novels not as mere literary games but as stories that involve characters and concerns that matter' (1999, p.122).

If we are Shadeans, on the other hand, our perspective would arise from an interest in the interplay between text and commentary, in the internal evidence and problematizing details that position *Pale Fire* as trick needing to be solved. We would enjoy discovering hidden patterns within the text, rewards for our curiosity. We would view *Pale Fire* as a novel devised by John Shade that poses as a piece of criticism, and enjoy the dizzying implications of a *fictional* character, an imagined persona of an imagined persona, lampooning academic practice. We would also see Shade as a self-aggrandizing character – Kinbote's lauding of Shade seems horribly arrogant if we are to think of Shade inventing a critic to praise both him and his poem.

If we are Kinboteans, we are *also* interested in the interplay between text and commentary, in the internal evidence and problematizing details in treating *Pale Fire* as a piece of trickery needing to be solved. However, from the perspective which assumes that Kinbote has written 'Pale Fire', the distress and anguish that John Shade articulates (and the empathy that we feel for him as a consequence) are hollow; he is merely an aesthetic device. Kinbote's depiction of death and suffering for aesthetic means seems

contemptible given the callousness he shows towards it. Kinboteans accept that art is privileged over life; death and suffering subjugated to aesthetics. They can accept passages such as Kinbote's statement that he has 'no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.71), turning acute dramatic irony into smug self-reflexivity.

What perspective then informs the undecidability theory? Perhaps unwittingly, the undecidability theory declares there is not enough evidence in *Pale Fire* to support any internal authorship theory. The 'undecidable' theorists can therefore happily see the text's content as coming from oscillating internal authors rather than the acutely problematic effect of having multiple voices articulating the same words.

Finally, if we are Boydians, we believe that a text can be definitively solved through detailed reading, re-reading, and re-re-reading, that anagrams and hidden clues are the blueprint of the novel, and that, at least in the world of the novel, the dead can provide artistic inspiration. Boyd's feelings about the Shadean theory, which he once thought of as correct, are glossed over – words that he once thought of as voiced by Shade, and which have now changed, are not considered in depth.[17]

The perspectives associated with existing accounts can therefore be characterised as follows: the dual authorship perspective privileges humanity in art, and the aesthetic representation of the richness of human emotions, executed here through a pattern of contrast and similarity between the two men. The Shadean perspective privileges the challenge of problem-solving in art and the cognitive pleasures of perceiving multiple layers of deceit. Such a perspective can cleave aesthetic pleasure from human emotion, allowing readers to enjoy the artistry in representing an unlikeable, yet clever, man. Like the Shadean perspective, the Kinbotean perspective also privileges problem-solving in

[17] See the comments about King Lear and Cordelia on page 113.

aesthetic experience but combines this with an almost stoic approach to death and the vanity, and hubris, of human desire. The undecidability perspective privileges the pleasures of doubt and uncertainty of the ineffable and the aesthetic skill in representing more than one perspective simultaneously. Finally, the Boydian perspective privileges a readerly work ethic, relishing the prospect of a world where the reader's toil will eventually reap rewards. Such a perspective is perhaps indifferent to the price paid for a world run on these lines in that the potential absurdity or sentimentality of the rewards are less important than the fact that they might exist. Perhaps more revealingly, this is a perspective from which human immortality is essential to give life meaning.

In what follows I show how by pushing us to acknowledge these perspectives and the different values attached to them, Nabokov forces us towards a Nietzschean vision of truth as an experience and not just the logical elimination of falsehood but as an assertion of value. This account of truth can be illuminated by the Nietzschean approach developed by Bernard Williams, and can be differentiated from postmodern relativism. In what follows, I show how Nabokov himself arguably both anticipated and rejected this kind of relativism, pushing us instead towards the Nietzschean account of truth as experience, inseparable from the question of human value and perspective.

Nietzsche, Williams and Truth

In 'On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense' (1873), as we have seen, Nietzsche explores truth itself:

> What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and

> embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. (Nietzsche in Magnus et al 1993, p.84)

Here, Nietzsche uses literary devices to explain just how amorphous truth can be. This passage apparently undermines people's belief in the kind of unchanging truth as an objective reality, independent of human thought. Going further in *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche asks:

> This unconditional will to truth – what is it? Is it the will not to let oneself be deceived? Is it the will *not to deceive*? For the will to truth could be interpreted in this second way, too – if "I do not want to deceive *myself*" is included as a special case under the generalization "I do not want to deceive". But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived? (2001 [1882], p.200)

Rather than thinking of truth as seeking the 'correct' or 'true' set of facts about a particular object or event, Nietzsche thinks of truth as an activity, one which can be more than a mere defensive mechanism arising from 'a need not to be deceived' or to deceive.

In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Bernard Williams draws on Nietzsche to provide not a theory of truth but an account of 'the value of truth' (2002, p.6). He focuses on the concepts of accuracy and sincerity and uses a fictional genealogy, heavily indebted to Nietzsche, to explain our need for truth and truthfulness, starting from the assumption that cooperation is needed in order for humans to flourish. For Williams, lying is pernicious because of the betrayal of trust and the exertion of power – he appeals to the Kantian notion of not treating people as means but always as ends and discusses humans'

'demand for truthfulness' or our 'reflex against deceptiveness' (2002, p.1). It is commonsensical for humans to be driven towards truth, to 'demand' truth in order that they can make sense of the world. Williams refers to the passage in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* quoted above. He claims that 'The reasons for not wanting to be deceived, he [Nietzsche] goes on to say, are prudential; seen in that light, wanting to get things right in our intellectual studies and in practical life will be a matter of utility' (2002, p.14).

This utilitarian preoccupation with 'getting things right' has, in the literary realm, arguably limited the interpretative framework of a critic like Boyd by promoting the view that there is only *one* 'correct' assignation of authorship. Nietzsche shows how limiting a view like this can be:

> The falseness of a judgment is to us not necessarily an objection to a judgement…The question is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding. (1973 [1886], p.4)

The extent to which something can be called 'false' is simply relative to how it differs from what other people think of as true. Further, if a judgement is deemed to be 'false', the implications are not what traditionalists would commonly uphold as negative if the 'false' judgement offers the possibility of life-affirmation or new knowledge.

Authorial intention/intrusion

Nabokov's intrusion as author is one safeguard against any temptation to read the novel as altogether sceptical about truth. An example of this authorial intrusion comes in the last page of Kinbote's commentary in *Pale Fire*:

> I may pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments. Oh, I may do many things! (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.236)

This self-reflexive, meta-fictional passage injects an apparently explicit postmodern element into the text, questioning the very nature of the ostensible dual authorship theory (and the more complex single-author theories) by reminding us of the 'higher' presence of Nabokov as authorial puppeteer. Yet, as Wood suggests, Nabokov usually anticipates even the moves we think are pretty clever (1994, p.178). The apparently postmodern scepticism is undermined by dramatic irony through Kinbote's recapitulation of the events in the novel: that of a delusional man who does not know, moreover, that he is fictional.[18] Dmitri Nabokov observed that 'his father thought the idea that *either* Shade *or* Kinbote could have invented the other barely less absurd than the idea that *each* could have invented the other' (Boyd 1999, p.115) again pointing to Nabokov's disdain for total relativism. As David Rampton puts it:

> Nabokov anticipates both the methods of post-structuralist critics and their preoccupations, the notion of language as a play of differences, the revealing of self-referential paradox and self-conscious indeterminability, the emphasis on interpretation and misinterpretation, the arbitrariness of the boundaries between truth

[18] See chapter two's discussion (pp.89-95) of 'recursive' authorship that occurs in Nabokov's short story 'Recruiting' (1935). The presence of the narrator V.N. in *Pnin* (1957) can also be said to contain similar distinctions.

> and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and marginal. (1984, p.108)

Yet, despite Rampton's claims, it is important to remember that Nabokov would not have necessarily endorsed them.

Instead, Nabokov seems to illustrate the apparent fragility of a conception of truth divorced from human experience through the use of coincidences and mistakes. For example, we have shown that Kinbote cannot know the phrase 'pale fire' from *Timon of Athens*. Yet Nabokov deliberately undermines the novel's illusory truth status by having Kinbote reference this phrase on numerous occasions. Another example pointing to commonplace versions of truth being wilfully overturned comes in the tail-end of a conversation between John Shade and Mrs Hurley, overheard and reported by Kinbote:

> I espied at last the top of my poet's head and the bright brown chignon of Mrs H. above the backs of two adjacent chairs. At the moment I advanced behind them I heard him object to some remark she had just made:
>
> 'That is the wrong word,' he said. 'One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That's merely turning a new leaf with the left hand.' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.188)

It is typical of *Pale Fire*'s technique to leave the reader to work out what the word could be.[19] Working backwards, we know that the word in question is a negative one from

[19] Two similar passages occur elsewhere in the text. The first is when Kinbote finds a note that says 'You have hal…..s real bad, chum' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.80). Kinbote

Shade's response. As Shade replaces fact with fiction, we can see the author nodding to us that this is a wider point to do with truth and falsity. Further, the poetical way in which Shade describes this process illustrates that he does not hold the same view of the person in question (presumably Kinbote) and feels that the process of falsification is a worthwhile one. Thus, Nabokov seems to tease his readers by hinting opinions on the subject of truth but does not actually reveal them.[20]

Pale Fire again engages with the notion of truth and untruth in Shade's 'experience' of the afterlife. Having had some sort of seizure after his lecture at 'The Crashaw Club', Shade notes that 'dreadfully distinct/Against the dark, a tall white fountain played' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.50, lines 706-707). He describes how 'My vision reeked with truth. It had the tone, /The quiddity and quaintness of its own/Reality. It *was*.' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.51, lines 737-739). Shade then reads about a report in a newspaper about a woman who has seemingly seen a fountain in her near-death experience too. Shade writes,

> Our fountain was a signpost and a mark
>
> Objectively enduring in the dark,
>
> Strong as a bone, substantial as a tooth,

---

thinks this refers to 'hallucinations' but, if we are to count the number of dots, we can surmise that the word in question is probably halitosis. The second, "Poor Swift, poor –, poor Baudelaire" (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.134) is from the commentary to the poem and challenges the reader to fill in the gap. Kinbote asks us to think of a name of a celebrated poet, painter or philosopher that scans as a trochee and who became insane before his death (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.135). Nietzsche would fit all three criteria.

[20] Similarly, the opening image of *Pale Fire*, 'I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/By the false azure of the windowpane' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.29, lines 1-2) is highly suggestive of the shadow-play of Plato's Cave yet it is left to the reader to recognise the similarity.

> And almost vulgar in its robust truth! (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.51, lines 763-767)

However, having asked the reporter to locate the transcript of the interview, Shade discovers that 'There's one misprint – not that it matters much:/*Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.53, lines 801-802). His response, 'Life Everlasting – based on a misprint!' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.53, line 803) is the culmination of a section that effectively questions the legitimacy of truth and the cruelty with which this imagined truth peters out. The implication is that the mistake was a valuable one, that it created an experience of truth, despite arising from a random error. Nabokov intertwines the notions of afterlife and writing as the chief vehicles to illustrate scepticism about truth and reality but not the scepticism of postmodernism. In this respect, it is unsurprising that Nabokov opts to precede the concept of truth with the disparaging words 'reeked' and 'vulgar'.

On a meta-level, the relationship between the written word and truth is what *Pale Fire* seems to be continually engaged with – the entire premise of the novel is that, as a piece of academic criticism, the commentary is supposed to represent or give objective details about the poem in question, to be the hallmark of truthful enterprise. As already mentioned, the extent to which Nabokov parodies this idea (given the farcicality of Kinbote's notes) has led some readers to conclude that the form of *Pale Fire* is a critique of academic practice.[21] But in *Lectures on Literature* (1980), Nabokov argued that:

> Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth. Every great writer is a great deceiver,

[21] Many postmodern texts use explanatory notes in a way that is different from their traditional usage – Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1967), Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* (1988), and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) are notable examples.

> but so is that arch-cheat Nature. Nature always deceives. From the simple deception of propagation to the prodigiously sophisticated illusion of protective colors in butterflies or birds, there is in Nature a marvellous system of spells and wiles. The writer of fiction only follows Nature's lead. (1980, p.5)

Pale Fire differentiates truth as external reality from truth as human experience by building some of its most powerful experiences on externalities arising from chance and error. Truth is thus disguised as coincidence and mistake.

Conclusion

If the major authorship theories about *Pale Fire* cannot be disproven (the Shadean and Kinbotean theories have, for example, survived academic scrutiny for fifty years), the only way to read the text coherently at any one moment is to adopt one of the five mutually exclusive authorship theories. This adoption (the one that we have the most interest in and having weighed the 'pro and cons' of the other theories) allows us a way past the authorship problem and into the text's plot whilst acknowledging the possibility of other perspectives. The adoption of a Nietzschean approach also reveals why we have chosen a particular perspective (leading to more impassioned discussion) and allows for a meaning of the text that has importance to the individual. As Norman and White argue,

> Perhaps more than any other canonical texts of the twentieth century, Nabokov's writings have been the focus of passionate debate about the most fundamental issues of criticism, concerning the intentions and ethical responsibilities of the author, the possibility of "right" or "wrong" readings, the value of historicist and of postmodern

> approaches to literature. *His fiction has a particular ability to help us reflect on our own critical practices, to tell us what kind of readers we are, where we have come from and where we might be going.* (2009, p.11, my emphasis)

Whoever we attribute authorship to in the text will have a significant bearing on how we experience *Pale Fire*. Rather than simply being seen as a frustrating, tricksy text that denies its readers the satisfaction of a solution, *Pale Fire* should be viewed as a text aware of its own fictionality. Rather than undermine the idea of truth, the novel acts both to deepen it and raise the stakes surrounding it. As Wood argues, 'what we discover in a persuasive reading of a novel is a range of new understandings, rather than a new settled truth' (Wood in Boyd 1999, p.256). Given that readers have the ability to choose which author is responsible for the text, the perspectivist account provides a way past the deadlock of *Pale Fire*'s authorship problem.

Chapter Four: '*Lolita*'s Nietzschean Morality'

Among the many critical views of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) there is a clear strand which emphasises aestheticism, with the text seen as a definitive example of the aesthete's outlook.[1] This is perhaps unsurprising given the combination of the narrator's sordid actions with his iridescent wordplay - not to mention Nabokov's own endorsement of the novel as a locus for 'aesthetic bliss' (2000 [1955], p.314) . In more recent years, criticism of *Lolita* has challenged this supposed *l'art pour l'art* status by suggesting that its aesthetic qualities are inextricably coupled with moral questions.[2] The moral aspect of *Lolita* was first given prolonged treatment by Ellen Pifer in *Nabokov and the Novel* (1980) which, emphasising Nabokov's humane side, stressed the text's moral commitment rather than amoral aestheticism. David Rampton's *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (1984) also discussed *Lolita*'s moral fabric, while Leona Toker's *The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989) explored the interplay between the moral and aesthetic dimensions of Nabokov's texts and their form and content. In the same year, Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* engaged with the following extract from Nabokov's afterword to *Lolita*:

> I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (2000 [1955], pp.314-315)

[1] See especially Alfred Appel's *The Annotated Lolita* (1970) and Carl Proffer's *Keys to Lolita* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968).
[2] See Leland de la Durantaye's *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007) for the most recent discussion of this coupling.

Rorty's essay is devoted to the case that '*Lolita* does have a "moral in tow"' (p.164) and thus serves to highlight that there seems to be a problem about *Lolita* and morality. For Wood, 'This [morality] is the realm of the unspeakable for Nabokov, but it is nonetheless (or for that very reason) everywhere implicit in his work' (1994, p.7).

This chapter will examine the theories of critics who treat *Lolita* as a moralizing text, among them Leona Toker, Colin McGinn, and Richard Rorty. I investigate the assumptions behind their suggestions that *Lolita* is a text which advocates, or directs, the reader towards virtue. Toker (1994), McGinn (1999) and Rorty (1989) are among several subtle and sophisticated critics who suggest in different ways that *Lolita* is a normative text that can educate its readers; that it can teach virtue. In many ways this is a boldly contrarian position, defying satirical elements in the text itself, not to mention Nabokov's own pronouncements. For example, the spoof foreword by John Ray Jr makes fun of the kind of reader who could finish *Lolita* and reflect on our obligations to provide better children's services (Raine in Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.320). Critics like Toker and Rorty are, of course, better readers than that. Instead, their account of reading *Lolita* as an exercise in moral education draws on a distinctive feature of Nabokovian writing – the buried clue. Nabokov is fond of throwing important details into texts in a way that the reader, carried along by the plot and style, is almost certain to miss. Sometimes these details are signposts to the suffering of a particular character, such as the acrostic we have seen in the last paragraph of 'The Vane Sisters' (1959) or Boyd's suggestion that Hazel Shade's ghost inhabits Vanessa butterflies in *Pale Fire* (1999, p.146). In the case of *Lolita*, Rorty discusses the case of a barber who appears for only a paragraph in the text, and who has no impact on characters or plot, but whose dead son is a poignant echo of Dolores's dead brother (1989, p.163). Rorty's critical case for *Lolita* as a didactic text

relies on the lesson learned by the reader who fails to notice these details during a first reading.

The assumption lying behind this account is that failure to scrutinise a novel for details which are apparently irrelevant to the plot, atmosphere or characterization, can be compared with a failure to be alert to the needs of the real people we encounter every day. Although there is certainly a case to be made for careful reading of literature as a moral exercise, it is important to point out that what is being discussed here is not 'close reading' as understood in the tradition, for example, of I.A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* (1929). What Nabokov demands is almost an anti-literary exercise, treating the text like a crossword puzzle rather than an organic work of art. Students trained to disregard the matter of L.C. Knights's question 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' (1933), for example, can excel as close readers but fail as vigilant observers of Nabokovian clues. Conversely, it is easy to imagine a reader who spots the anagram in 'Vivian Darkbloom' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.4) but who fails to notice the weeping child who is raped in *The Enchanted Hunters* (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.176), or the woman who accomplishes a magnificent generosity as an adult wife (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.273-280). In this chapter, then, I do not contest the claim that *Lolita* immerses the reader in a moralised encounter, but I do query the assumption behind the claim that there is an equation between sensitivity to real fellow human beings and defensive vigilance in reading the text for authorial traps.

This chapter's aims are to show how existing theories about *Lolita* fail to account for the gulf between a somewhat eccentric mode of reading fiction and 'real world' morality, and then to propose a new theory of the novel's relationship with morality. This theory demonstrates the parallels between Nietzsche's philosophy and *Lolita*'s interactions with the reader. I suggest that Nabokov's text has a far more unsettling relationship with

morality than previously thought of in the way it forces us to inhabit a Nietzschean world. It is important, however, to distinguish between the kind of Nietzschean reading I advocate here and any attempt to portray Humbert as an admirable and Nietzschean '*Übermensch*'. Surprisingly, not all critics have found it obvious that Humbert's behaviour is unspeakably cruel and beyond defence. Lionel Trilling, for example, talks of the beauties of a love story and refers to anthropological justifications for sex with children (1958, pp.9-19). I reject this position entirely, both as an account of the text and as an account of the responsibilities of adults towards children. On the contrary, there is clear evidence from the text itself that Humbert can be identified as a monster of solipsism, vanity and cruelty, and notwithstanding his seductive narrative voice, few readers have trouble identifying these moments (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.21, p.29, p.60, p.125, p.161, p.308). The moral problem is not whether we should admire Humbert, then, but how to reconcile our aesthetic delight in the work he is portrayed as creating and our readerly enjoyment of what Wood calls his 'tacky charm' (Wood in Pifer 2003, p.181), with what should be moral and emotional distress at the relentless suffering of his victim. Nietzsche can help here not by justifying Humbert but by providing a model for a text of fruitful but painful moral disorientation. When treated as the product of an aesthete, *Lolita* seems to be a novel that, rather than positing traditional Christian values such as charity, compassion or kindness, advocates that such traditional moral responses should be subjugated to aesthetic ideals such as beauty, daring and individuality. This is an unsettling moral challenge within the text indeed and it is understandable why critics have sought to escape such a conclusion by reference to Nabokovian clues which make manifest the author's value for compassion. But it is possible to read *Lolita* as a Nietzschean challenge not to these traditional values as such, but to our account of where they come from. In other words, it can be argued that the novel's apparent aestheticism confronts the reader not with *complicity* in Humbert's crimes through

inattentive reading, but with an inadequate account of moral life, one which substitutes codified conventions for a willingness to confront and question the nature and origins of good and evil. It is specifically this transgressive revaluing that this chapter seeks to explore.

My account of *Lolita* as a text which disorients us by undermining our moral foundations has a parallel in the interests of twentieth and twenty-first century moral philosophers. Moral theory, or normative ethics, has evolved radically from algorithmic approaches such as Hobbes's idea that 'morality is the solution to a problem', or John Rawls's idea that 'justice is the solution to a problem', or Bernard Williams' idea of using convergence between science and ethics to come to an agreement between the subjects in question (Korsgaard 2003, pp.100-106). Virtue ethics, for example, practiced by G.E.M. Anscombe (1958) or Alastair MacIntyre (1981), does not seek to provide tools for the resolution of moral dilemmas, as, say, utilitarianism does, but instead investigates morality as a whole as a defining human quality. Using literature to comment on morality (and *vice versa*) allows for a more inclusive dialogue on both sides. Rorty highlights the issue of methodology concisely. Asking 'Is it right to deliver *n* innocents over to be tortured to save the lives of *m* x *n* other innocents?', he declares that 'anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question – algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort – is still, at heart, a theologian or a metaphysician' (1989, p.xv).

Throughout this chapter, I shall be looking at what I call the 'didactic theory' and the 'critique theory' of the text. I define the 'didactic theory' as the theory which views *Lolita* as a text with 'the ability to morally educate its readers'. When speaking of the 'didactic theory' (implicitly underlying the work of Rorty, McGinn and Toker for example), I refer to the shared characteristics of a significant strand in scholarship on

Lolita – the claim that not only does the novel 'teach' us but also that reading the novel with vigilant attention for Nabokovian traps and puzzles is equivalent to lived experience in regard to being held morally culpable for failure. By referring to these critics' views under the umbrella term of the 'didactic theory', I hope to show that, although there are differences between these critics' interpretations of *Lolita*, they can be seen to exhibit certain common features. Where Rorty describes *Lolita* as allowing us to 'redescribe ourselves' (1989, p.xvi), Toker claims that the novel can 'modify our attitudes' (1989, p.202), that our "'vigilance" is, or should be, introspective, directed to the potential vulnerability of the reader's own system of values' (1989, p.199). Similarly, McGinn argues that 'we emerge [from *Lolita*] with a better understanding of human sin and its consequences' (1994, pp.38-39). What I propose, in opposition to the 'didactic theory', is the 'critique theory' - an account of *Lolita* as a work that both exposes, and satirizes, everyday unexamined accounts of what morality is and where it comes from. For clarification, I take 'morality' to be 'principles concerning the distinction between right or wrong or good and bad behaviour' and 'ethics', in a more general sense, to be 'the moral principles governing or influencing conduct' (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, p.927, p.490).

Lolita: The Moral Problem

Owing partly to Graham Greene's endorsement of the novel in the *Sunday Times* (Christmas, 1955) just after its publication, *Lolita* remains Vladimir Nabokov's *cause célèbre*. Superficially, the text is a quasi-memoir written by the paedophilic Humbert Humbert detailing his demands upon the pubescent Dolores Haze and displaying his dazzling command of language. Beneath the surface, it is revealed how Humbert tries to reconcile what he knows is wrong with what he loves (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.284) and a prolonged identity crisis that leads to the novel's wonderfully bathetic climactic scene

involving Humbert's doppelganger Claire Quilty (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.293-305). The novel's structure is made up of John Ray Jr's foreword, Humbert's first-person narrative, and Nabokov's afterword (appended a year after its initial publication).[3] As we shall see, in some respect, this framing structure supports the Nietzschean account I provide in that the real-life author's afterword acts as a problematic counterweight to the austere foreword of fictitious John Ray – *Lolita*'s mock voice of authority, an ironised voice that condemns Humbert from the conventional point of view.

Lolita is a novel that couples child molestation with resplendent language, and which problematizes the reader's response by coercing us into empathizing with its vile anti-hero and narrator Humbert Humbert. The difficulty, for readers and critics alike, is that the narrative flair and verbal art that Nabokov endows Humbert with may well seduce us into enjoying the performance of a narrator who perpetrates evil. But our double response to the text is not the same as catharsis through tragedy (as in A.D. Nuttall's *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (1996) for example). While tragedy provides terror *followed* by relief, *Lolita* generates simultaneous disgust and aesthetic enjoyment. When enjoyment and disgust are elicited simultaneously by the same text, we have difficulty in reconciling them, a difficulty that can be related to 'cognitive dissonance'.[4] Developed by Leon Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance is defined as 'a motivational state that impells the individual to attempt to reduce and eliminate it. Because dissonance arises from inconstant knowledge, it can be reduced by decreasing or eliminating the inconsistency' (Wicklund & Brehm 1976, p.1). Festinger's theory can be related to the 'didactic theory' of *Lolita*. He argues that people have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and/or behavior. The didactic theory tries to reduce the dissonance of

[3] This may again relate to Wood's point about 'provocation' discussed in chapter two (p.109).
[4] McGinn also talks about the relationship between aestheticism and cognitive dissonance in *Ethics, Evil, Fiction* (2003), p.117.

aesthetic delight and moral horror in *Lolita* by taking an aesthetic tool – Nabokov's buried clues – and recasting it as a moral tool, used to instruct. There are two problems with this approach. Although literature can provide rich material for the discussion of moral issues (Williams 2002, p.13), there is no evidence that I know of to show that reading literature of any kind can influence behaviour. Secondly, the kind of reading required to spot Nabokov's moral traps and buried clues involves defensiveness and vigilance, a cautious refusal to be caught up in the story and the style in case the author is playing a trick on us. Such a style of reading is unlikely to help the reader respond emotionally to Dolores herself. More importantly, it is not at all clear how learning to read in this way could help readers respond with greater compassion to the suffering they encounter in real people.

I now want to look at the interpretations of Toker, McGinn and Rorty in more detail in order to distil certain similarities in their criticism; this, in turn, will provide a robust foundation for discussing what I have called the 'didactic theory' of *Lolita*. Toker, for example, argues that, underneath the obvious parody, Ray's foreword is integral to the text's morality:

> *Lolita* does, in a sense, improve one's "vigilance and vision", yet it does not merely call upon "parents, teachers and social workers" to instill more solid values into the younger generation and protect it from prowlers. The desired "better generation" is not even the moldable younger generation; it is the current generation of readers themselves. (1989, p.199)

She explains how the text improves moral 'vigilance and vision' by claiming that 'the cathartic effect of *Lolita* derives from its promotion of our temporary sympathy for Humbert and inattentiveness to Dolly Haze and then in its making us modify our

attitudes' (1989, p.202). Notably, she also argues that *Lolita*'s 'trap' works 'not in encouraging a lack of attention to narrative clues but, conversely, in producing a too diligent imaginative collaboration with them' (1989, p.212). In this argument, Toker identifies a problem with the wrong kind of vigilant reading, but vigilance of a different kind is at the heart of the reader's moral education.

McGinn makes his case for the edifying aspect of *Lolita* by saying 'we emerge from reading it with a better understanding of human sin and its consequences' (1994, pp.38-39). Here, he stresses the lesson we supposedly learn from Humbert's actions given that we are 'meant to take seriously John Ray's prefatory denunciation of Humbert' (p.38). McGinn echoes Toker in stressing the need to remain vigilant when reading the text:

> the naive reader of *Lolita* sees only the bare bones of the pedophilic plot and deplores what he reads; the sophisticated reader puts aside all moral concerns and simply enjoys the beauty of the work; but the 'astute' reader (as he is occasionally addressed in the book) sees that this is a work in which morality and art are intermingled in original and challenging ways. (1994, p.39)

With respect to *Lolita*'s foreword, both McGinn and Toker view John Ray Jr as a subject of ridicule but they also claim that his voice nonetheless articulates truth. Both critics, then, identify a learnable moral lesson from the text, whether through catharsis (Toker) or an understanding of sin (McGinn).

Rorty introduces the idea of 'curiosity' as a solution to the moral problem of *Lolita*. His discussion draws on the following two brief episodes which show Humbert's

incuriosity about two deaths - the death of a son endured by a barber he encounters briefly when passing through a small town, and the death of Dolores's own little brother:

> In Kasbeam a very old barber gave me a very mediocre haircut: he babbled of a baseball-playing son of his, and, at every explodent, spat into my neck, and every now and then wiped his glasses on my sheet-wrap, or interrupted his tremulous scissor work to produce faded newspaper clippings, and so inattentive was I that it came as a shock to realize as he pointed to an easeled photograph among the ancient gray lotions, that the mustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.213)

> What I present here is what I remember of the letter, and what I remember of the letter I remember verbatim (including that awful French). It was at least twice longer. I have left out a lyrical passage which I more or less skipped at the time, concerning Lolita's little brother who died at 2 when she was 4, and how much I would have liked him. Let me see what else can I say? Yes. There is just a chance that "vortex of the toilet" (where the letter did go) is my own matter-of-fact contribution. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.68)

It is easy to overlook both passages' significance. The passage recalling the barber of Kasbeam consists of several clauses, the last of which finally reveals the point of the passage. The cognitive processing that the reader has to go through in recognising the importance of the final clause is complicated by Humbert's description - 'babbled', 'spat', 'interrupted' continually remind the reader just how much annoyance the barber is giving

Humbert. The use of a long noun phrase – 'mustached young ball player' instead of 'son' - also disrupts the intensity with which we consider Humbert's realization, as does the lack of reflection on the incident which, instead, is followed by a new paragraph listing banal details such as Humbert's 'cup of hot flavorless coffee' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.68). Importantly, this reference to the barber of Kasbeam's dead son is the only one in the entire narrative and so the likelihood of retaining the incident in mind is significantly lessened.

We overlook the significance of the passage concerning Dolly's little brother for slightly different reasons. Perhaps the most noticeable effect of the passage is the blatant, but humorous, contradiction between what is said to have been relayed and what actually is ('verbatim' and 'vortex of the toilet'). This comic retelling extends also to the characteristically laconic, derisory wit of Humbert ('that awful French' and 'Where the letter did go'). The possibility of the comic voice carrying the reader along and distracting him or her from the details is coupled with the fact that the revelation of the existence of Dolores's little brother is placed in a subordinate clause in the middle of a paragraph, relegating this information to the realm of additional asides or 'filler' material. Finally, the fact that this passage immediately succeeds Charlotte's letter declaring her undying love for Humbert (which is of undeniable structural importance to the plot) prevents the reader from attributing much significance to this particular passage. However, unlike the barber of Kasbeam's son, the presence of Dolly's little brother can be seen elsewhere in the text (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.80). In a parody of what Humbert described himself as omitting from Charlotte's letter, he draws attention to Dolly's dead little brother through heavy alliteration ('blurred, blond male baby') to produce an overly lyrical description of a harrowingly sombre subject. Why the reader arguably misses the detail however is its placement next to one of the most obscene passages in the text when he imagines the

possible consequences of Dolores' mother's pregnancy: 'a nice Caesarean operation and other complications in a safe maternity ward sometime next spring, would give me the chance to be alone with my Lolita for weeks, perhaps – and gorge the limp nymphet with sleeping pills' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.80). If the reader *has* managed to acknowledge the reference to Dolores's little brother, the memory of the reference is perhaps significantly lessened once he or she has finished the same paragraph. If not, the reader must have a chilling indifference to Humbert's plans for Dolores.

For Rorty, fiction like Nabokov's 'gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves' (1989, p.xvi). He suggests that the reader mimics Humbert's incuriosity when he or she fails to recognise the presence of Dolly's little brother or the barber of Kasbeam's son in the text. Rorty claims that he "was just as inattentive to that month-long sentence, and to that dead moustached son, as Nabokov suspected he [Rorty] had been' (1989, p.163).[5] Rorty's interpretation is inextricably related to the idea of curiosity, the idea that *Lolita*'s readers are likely to be as unperceptive as Humbert in failing to notice the deaths of these (one is careful not to say minor) characters. Rorty thinks that 'the reader, suddenly revealed to himself as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious, recognizes his *semblable,* his brother, in Humbert' (1989, p.163). Through the reader's acknowledgment of these deaths, whether from initial recognition or, more likely, from the benefit of rereading, Rorty argues that the reader can be said to start demonstrating improved moral virtue because his or her newly-found attentiveness can be applied to real life.[6]

[5] Rorty argues that the 'fact that Humbert does not make the connection himself, is exactly the sort of thing Nabokov expects his ideal readers – the people who he calls "a lot of little Nabokovs" – to notice. But ruefully and contemptuously aware that most of his readers will fall short, he tells us in the Afterword what we have missed' (1989, p.163).

[6] For more detail, see Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (1989), p.167, n34.

Toker rightly observes that Rorty 'puts most literary critics to shame by connecting the scattered references to Dolly's dead little brother with the reference to happy normal child Avis Bird's chubby little brother at home' (2004, p.197). Moreover, most literary scholars would surely be happy to endorse the value of close reading to uncover the potential meaning of a text. Yet, there are problems with Rorty's account and with the other accounts which relate virtue to stubbornly careful reading. Rorty implies that *only* through careful reading will the text have any morality to impart because it is only this kind of reading which demonstrates the virtuous quality of curiosity. Thus, a somewhat exclusive correlation can be said to arise between 'astute readers' and morality, suggesting that those who skim past the aforementioned sections are effectively not conscious of the moral lesson that Rorty describes.

However, there is surely a difference between 'vigilant reading' and 'close reading'. A close reader is sensitive to form and its relationship to content, interested in the work as a whole constructed from multiple aspects. He or she can identify formal patterns in the text and is interested in these rather than apparently contingent details of plot and background. A vigilant reader, on the other hand, might be quite indifferent to form and have a simple inability to discriminate between foreground elements in the story which affect the plot and those which are part of the background. This reader, instead, may start off with the assumption that the author is out to trap him or her and concentrate on avoiding the trap. The vigilant reader will spot the link between the barber of Kasbeam and Charlotte's dead son, but will not necessarily be alive to the poignant beauty of those passages where we glimpse of Dolores's sadness and learn to pity her:

> In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a

> travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments – swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks. At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.141-142)

Although the passages which reveal Dolores's suffering are fairly rare, they are, unlike the passages referring to the barber of Kasbeam or Dolly's little brother, quite hard to miss. The passage above arguably remains in the reader's memory given its location within the text. Not only does 'she had absolutely nowhere else to go' end the paragraph (consisting of three steadily decreasing sentence-lengths), it also ends the first part of the novel. Given that readers are accustomed to bestowing significance to particular areas or pointers of texts (Loines 1991), this particular 'hotspot' blends a sorrowful statement with an informal delivery ('You see') - a stylistic choice that attempts to dilute the magnitude of what has been said yet fails to mask the sadness. The irony of the last sentence, which plays against the materialism of the first, adds to this poignancy.

Another notable revelation of Dolores's suffering occurs slightly later in the text where Humbert and Dolores are continuing on their road trip around America:

> And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her

> sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.175-176)

This example, similar to the previous passage, allows the magnitude of Dolores's suffering to appear at the end of the paragraph – especially since Humbert's repetition of 'every night' brings the idea of Dolores's incessant sorrow into stark relief.

Rorty is not alone in this approach. Brian Boyd makes a similar case with respect to Lucette's role in *Ada* (Boyd in Nabokov 2000 [1969], pp.481-482). But, if we can only recognise the kind of details that Rorty and Boyd draw our attention to through vigilant *re*reading, how can this be compared with our responses to real people? After all, we do not necessarily get a chance to revisit a particular moral challenge in the real world. And it is hard to imagine that paying equal attention to all the information before us about the real people we encounter, equating for example a piece of news about a stranger heard at third hand with a direct appeal for help from someone we know, would lead to more virtuous lives. It may be possible to be a reader for the plot (and skip the details) yet simultaneously be a kind person – a person like Mrs. Holigan in *Lolita*, a 'kindly and harmless woman [who] had…a rather bleary eye that missed details' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.180). Conversely, it is not hard to imagine a vigilant reader of Nabokov's texts who is callous about the suffering of those around him or her. Rorty argues

> Just insofar as one is preoccupied with building up to one's private kind of sexual bliss, like Humbert, or one's private aesthetic bliss, like the reader of *Lolita* who missed the sentence about the barber the first time around, people are likely to suffer still more. (1989, p.164)

Yet this leaves little room for careless readers who skim-read but who are also good people. To be fair, Rorty does not explicitly point to a correlation between aesthetic excellence and good behaviour. But it is a corollary of his argument that failing to notice Nabokov's buried clues has implications for a reader's moral sensitivity. And there is also an aesthetic problem with the argument. If all readers were to read like this consistently, it would be difficult to process narrative at all given that we would have to accord all incidents equal importance. Here, the distinction between close reading and vigilant reading is important. The first can indeed be morally enriching in that it allows us to uncover complexity and nuance in order to effectively comprehend complex moral matters. The latter, however, is effectively asking us to read 'upstream'. Readers, it is argued, are accustomed to reading narrative in certain ways. Kintsch and Rawson, for example, argue that 'a good reader must maintain [the following] in working memory: crucial fragments of the prior text, including its macrostructure, linguistic knowledge, relevant world knowledge, reading goals' (Kintsch and Rawson in Snowling & Hulme 2005, p.224). If, as Rorty urges, we are expected to retain the deaths of Dolly's little brother and the barber of Kasbeam's son, it is extremely unlikely that we will retain this information in our long term memory. As Snowling and Hulme argue,

> An assumption common to all models of comprehension is that all information processing must take place in a finite capacity working memory. For instance, if two concepts never co-occur in working memory during the processing of a text, no new associations will be formed as a consequence of reading this text. (2005, p.224)

Thus, the expectation that we will be able to retain small pieces of information in mind is extremely unrealistic unless they are reinforced through other semantic information.

Indeed, Masson argues that 'the reader must be able to determine which information is relevant to his or her goal and must be able to focus processing efforts on that information' (1982, p.400). Despite the possibility that readers' goals differ, it would be unlikely that readers would privilege the deaths of Dolly's little brother and the barber of Kasbeam's son over more general information about *Lolita*'s macrostructure. Even if we did, it is not obvious why this would imply greater sensitivity to real people.

There is a second problem with the didactic accounts of Toker, McGinn, and Rorty in that they all rely on some sense of self-recognition as the reader contemplates Humbert. Like the narrator, we are assumed not to be curious enough to immediately notice the barber of Kasbeam's suffering. Humbert himself plays on the idea that he reflects the reader, for example when readers are accosted as '*Bruder!*' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.262). However, there are problems with the suggestion that *Lolita*'s typical reader learns to perceive him or herself as on the same moral level as Humbert. For one thing, the focalized account of the narrative (we are reminded that Humbert relays his highly unreliable information to us after the events have taken place) means that the reader is more likely to become aware that Humbert is using words like '*Bruder*' and 'reader' manipulatively. In the following passage Humbert refers to himself in the third person (preceded by his ostentatious pre-head modifiers):

> Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.129)

Humbert appears to be simultaneously manipulating the reader by an intimate and pitiful plea and making the mechanism of manipulation explicit by referring to himself in the

third person, even hinting at his own fictionality. By doing so, he distances the reader and effectively pre-empts any sense that the reader sees in Humbert his or her reflection. Although Rorty's idea that Humbert induces unwelcome identification in the reader has affinities with Stanley Fish's theory of 'entanglement' (which he argues readers experience when reading *Paradise Lost* (1667) in being seduced by Satan's rhetoric), Rorty's argument cannot be equated with Fish's. Where Fish argues that the reader's 'mistake, correction, instruction' (1967, p.42) is the intended effect of Milton's text, Rorty's interpretation of Nabokov's text as making the reader morally culpable is suspect given that our 'mistake' lacks the equivalent moral scaffolding that is needed – we are all innately sinful according to Milton's world-view, for example, but we are not all child abusers. As Carroll suggests, 'the moral implications attributed to artworks are not supported by the kind of argumentation that one typically expects to accompany and to authenticate ethical claims in the realm of moral debate and contestation' (Carroll in Kivy 2004, p.128).

As Flaubert, Arnold and Eliot have suggested, this is not to say that literature cannot provoke moralised responses or reflections on morality. McGinn argues plausibly that fiction can effectively engage with real-life philosophical problems and that 'in reading fiction…moral judgements flow more spontaneously, more authentically' (1994, p.40). Similarly, Halliwell develops McGinn's approach with reference to Modernism (2006, p.18). Rorty, like McGinn, makes a case for fiction (and specifically Nabokov's fiction) as a medium for moral inquiry which does not depend on the 'curiosity' argument outlined above. My dispute here, then, is with the specific account of *Lolita* as teaching morality through experiencing one's own failure to be curious about the

suffering of others in the text and thereby recognising one's moral continuity with Humbert.[7]

Nietzsche and Ethics

For an alternative approach to the moral problem of *Lolita*, I turn to Nietzsche. Nietzsche's philosophical writings on ethics deliver trenchant critiques of the dominant ethical positions of his day, notably, Christianity, utilitarianism and Kantianism. His ethical stance derives largely from his condemnation of traditional morality and religion and his desire for a 'revaluation of all values' (Nietzsche 1990 [1888], p.199). As Brian Leiter puts it, 'Nietzsche attacks morality, most simply, because he believes its unchallenged cultural dominance is a threat to human greatness' (2002, p.26). Yet Nietzsche was neither a libertine nor a nihilist:

> It goes without saying that I do not deny – unless I am a fool – that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged – but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto*. (1982 [1881], p.60)

This and other passages make clear that, in many cases, Nietzsche's dissatisfaction was not with any given prohibition as such but with the reasons given in its support. Simon May conveniently summarises the overall conception of morality rejected by Nietzsche in six principal ideas (1999, pp.105-106). Alastair MacIntyre's analysis echoes May's, distilling Nietzsche's moral philosophy into three tasks: 'to exhibit the historical and psychological causes of the vacuum', to 'unmask false candidates for the role of the new

[7] For a more detailed discussion of fiction and ethics, see Carroll's essay 'Art and Morality' in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (1994).

morality', and 'by a transvaluation of values, to prophetically introduce a new way of life' (1998 [1967], p.216). Even more concisely, Aaron Ridley suggests that Nietzsche 'identifies an ill, suggests its origins, and tries to prescribe a cure' (1998, p.3). Some of the most influential voices in recent Nietzschean scholarship therefore give us a workably robust account of Nietzsche's ideas about morality despite his somewhat capricious views on the subject throughout his work.[8] May, MacIntyre, and Ridley portray Nietzsche's vision in a way which is certainly disturbing in its desire to dismantle the schemes by which we measure value, but which by no means provides a manifesto for the cruelties of Humbert.

The moral vacuum and the conventional reading process

In what follows, I aim to show that, like Nietzsche, Nabokov can be seen as effectively critiquing a schematic approach to good and evil – an approach which reduces them to mere social norms. In the following extract from *Lolita*, Humbert visits the now seventeen-year old Dolores (or the newly named Mrs Dolly Schiller) towards the end of the novel:

> *Carmencita, lui demandais-je*… "One last word," I said in my horrible careful English, "are you quite, quite sure that– well, not tomorrow, of course, and not after tomorrow, but– well– some day, any day, you will not come to live with me? I will create a brand new God and thank him with piercing cries, if you give me that microscopic hope" (to that effect).
>
> "No," she said smiling, "no."

[8] This summarised account is in contrast to perhaps the more familiar image of a laudable superman whose contempt for the weak is supposed to be admired – a view held by W.H. Mallock for example (Bridgwater 1972, p.16).

"It would have made all the difference," said Humbert

Humbert.

Then I pulled out my automatic– I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it.

"Good by-aye!" she chanted, my American sweet immortal dead love; for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this. I mean, such is the formal agreement with the so-called authorities. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.280)

There may be explicit Nietzschean references in this passage (creating 'a brand new God' or disillusionment with the 'so-called authorities'). But it is arguably the *Carmen* allusion that demonstrates the affinities Nabokov's writing has with Nietzsche's view of morality. We are reminded of how Don José kills Carmen in Prosper Mérimée's novella because of her liaisons with Lucas. Playing on this reference, Humbert uses American slang for describing his imagined murder weapon – choosing 'automatic' instead of 'gun'. The use of 'automatic' might also suggest what our reading behaviour might be referred to as well as something that could potentially harm us. This hint is further strengthened by the use of 'fool' rather than 'foolish' – is the act of acknowledging, and projecting, an allusion (in order to foresee another text) the entirety, the 'full' extent, of how a reader deals with such a reference?

We might also ask who the 'fool' reader is meant to refer to. Toker suggests that:

The episode is usually interpreted as making fun of the reader who, under the influence of Merimee's *Carmen* (to which the allusion is made

> several lines before), expects Humbert to kill his unfaithful love. (1989, p.216)

If Toker is correct in implicating readers in the making of allusions, then the reader is being punished for those very skills which literary critics and reader-response theorists put at the heart of literary reading: recognising an allusion and using it to interpret a character's actions. Perhaps, however, there is a reader who is one step ahead of the reader who recognises allusions, an 'informed' reader who paradoxically expects that expectations may be confounded, a kind of reader imagined, for example, by Sartre in his essay 'Why Write?' (1947).[9]

Appel certainly seems to assume two such different readers in his footnote to the Carmen section in the *Annotated Lolita*:

> 'fool thing a reader…suppose': especially a consumer of pulp fiction and movies, or a learned reader who has kept Carmen in mind. The several Carmen allusions on nearby pages serve as very fresh bait. (1991 [1971], p.443)

In Appel's reading, *both* the learned and the less distinguished reader fall into the trap, whether they are lured by the bait of pulp fiction or by a knowledge of *Carmen*, and thus both readers are victims of mockery. In a similar example, Humbert gives a mock rendition of 'Carmen' early on in the novel whilst a lodger at the Haze house:

> O my Carmen, my little Carmen!

[9] In *What is Literature? And Other Essays* (Ed. Steven Ungar. New York: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Something, something those something nights,

And the stars, and the cars, and the bars and the

[barmen –

And, O my charmin', our dreadful fights.

And the something town where so gaily, arm in

Arm, we went, and our final row,

And then the gun I killed you with, O my Carmen,

The gun I am holding now. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.61-62)

Using 'Oh My Darling, Clementine' (1884) as a further allusive template, these two verses are followed by Humbert suggesting that the male lead character 'Drew his .32 automatic, I guess, and put a bullet through his moll's eye' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.62). Humbert, in the act of guessing, assumes the role of the informed reader in that he is drawing inferences from his literary knowledge. But, because he draws on *two* allusions, his expectations are both correct and incorrect (the female in 'Oh My Darling, Clementine' drowns whereas Carmen is stabbed because of Don José's jealousy). Humbert's games of allusions, then, carefully documented by Appel, undermine both sets of readers – the uninformed and informed readers are both the subject of ridicule.

In *Daybreak* (1881), Nietzsche declares that 'morality is nothing other (therefore *no more*!) than obedience to customs, of whatever kind they may be; customs, however, are the *traditional* way of behaving and evaluating' (1982 [1881], p.10). This can be compared with Nabokov's games with literary tradition in *Lolita*. Readers who follow

literary tradition will be lured into the comforting sense that they can understand the text through allusion, only to be mocked and confounded again and again (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.70, p.173, p.211). By mocking obedience and tradition, Nietzsche implies that new thought, rather than reliance on custom, is the way we must address or engage with morality. What is supposed to replace this custom however is only vaguely hinted at in Nietzsche's notion of the 'revaluation of all values' (1990 [1888], p.199), his over-riding approach to morality. And it is often the case in Nietzsche's writings that he does not give a detailed corrective to the ideas he critiques. Similarly, Nabokov punishes readers for following literary custom obediently without providing an explicit alternative.

So far, my analysis would merely suggest that *Lolita* has a disorienting effect on our aesthetic vision comparable to the effect Nietzsche aims to have on our moral vision. But I would further argue that there is a moral aspect to the reading experience produced by *Lolita* in that the novel goes beyond the challenging of readerly expectations to undermine the reader's faith in the author's respect for the reader. The 'Carmen' episode, and the many similar episodes in which Humbert uses allusion as 'bait', can be viewed as a violation of the 'reading contract'. This can be defined as 'an imagined agreement between reader and author governing all things anticipated and met throughout the textual experience, on both sides'. This is not the same as the theories of reader response and reception theory. Reader-response theory, developed by critics such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, focuses 'on the responses of readers to literary works, rather than on the works themselves considered as self-contained entities' (Baldick 2004, p.212). 'Reception theory', developed by the German literary historian Hans Robert Jauss, draws on 'philosophical hermeneutics' in suggesting that 'literary works are received against an existing horizon of expectations consisting of readers' current knowledge and presuppositions about literature' (Baldick 2004, p.213).

Reception theory does resemble a social contract in that some kind of tacit agreement is assumed between writer and reader as abstract persons who will never meet and do not know each other. However, the 'reading contract' I use here goes beyond these theories in focusing on the idea of a relationship between writer and reader. This relationship recalls the elements of Paul Grice's idea of the 'cooperative principle' (1975) which have been developed by game theorists as 'common knowledge':

> Our talk exchanges…are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to *some* extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction…at each stage, some possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable. (Grice 1989, p.26)

The reading contract assumes a desire (consistent with Grice's theory) on the part of the writer that the reader should ultimately understand the text, however difficult that might be. It further assumes that the reader knows of this expectation in the writer, that the writer knows that the readers know and so on. This is common knowledge in the sense given above – 'something is common knowledge if everybody knows it, everybody knows that everybody knows it, everybody knows that everybody knows that everybody knows it; and so on' (Binmore 2007, p.43). Difficulty might be seen as a rewarding part of the reading experience; indeed relevance theory, which builds on and modifies Grice's account of communication, suggests that creative texts are those which generate a higher than usual number of possible meanings or, in other words, 'a putative creative author who seeks to make manifest a number of weak implicatures' (Green 1997, p.137). This multiplicity of meanings is understood by the reader in relevance theory not

as a failure to be clear (a violation of Grice's maxim of clarity) but as a necessary part of rich utterances. However, there is no implication in Grice's or Green's work that difficulty should be understood as the writer's (or speaker's) hostility towards the reader. Indeed, it is arguable that the only reason the reader is willing to persist with difficult texts which depart from tradition or developed conventions is because they assume a desire on the part of the author that the reader should understand. And this desire implies some kind of reciprocity, of mutual respect, between author and reader. *Lolita* constantly undermines this mutual respect, and consequently the reader's faith in the terms of the contract.

Lolita also challenges the reader's expectations in more usual ways, for example in its use of a highly wrought and poetic style as the medium for sordid and cruel thoughts. When Dolores is suffering from fever whilst in Humbert's 'care', Humbert reports that, 'Her brown rose tasted of blood... She complained of a stiffness in the upper vertebrae – and I thought of poliomyelitis as any American parent would' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.240). We defer our initial repulsion as we struggle to comprehend what is actually occurring. Our ability to process what is happening is significantly delayed because of the verbosity in which he gives us the obscene information – Raine argues that Humbert performs cunnilingus on the youngster, only taking her to hospital because of the impossibility of having intercourse with her (Raine in Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.323). Nabokov arguably infuses Humbert's description with morbid humour to attempt to throw the reader - not only do we feel inclined to laugh at the idea that every parent, American or not, would think of polio (let alone its full medical name) in this situation, but the ambiguity as to why Dolores shakes from head to toe is unsettling.

But *Lolita* goes beyond this challenging of readerly expectations. For example, the reader's expectation that departure from convention has a literary purpose is both

exploited and repeatedly mocked by Humbert. It is not hard to find examples of twentieth-century texts which play with reader's expectations – through, for example, disrupting linear narrative progression as in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). So Nabokov is not alone in doing this in *Lolita*. More unusual is the narrator's attitude to this technique: Humbert draws attention to these disruptions in a tone of weariness which tends to cancel the expected effect, implying that literary construction is not a co-operative process between author and reader but a chore: 'A few words about Mrs. Humbert while the going is good (a bad accident is to happen quite soon)' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.79) or 'I think I had better describe her right away, to get it over with' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.37).

Elsewhere, Humbert's manipulative relationships with other characters mirror the author's violations of the contract with the reader, as in the argument between Humbert and Dolores' mother Charlotte Haze, caused by Charlotte's wanting to go to England as a couple. Charlotte pleads,

> No, please, wait. When you decorate your home, I do not interfere with your schemes. When you decide – when you decide all kinds of matters, I may be in complete, or in partial, let us say, disagreement – but I say nothing. I ignore the particular. I cannot ignore the general. I love being bossed by you, but every game has its rules. I am not cross. I am not cross at all. Don't do that. But I am one half of this household, and have a small but distinct voice. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.91)

The experience of 'being bossed', the idea that 'every game has its rules', and feeling that one has a 'small but distinct voice' may be suggestive of a reader's sentiments. Humbert

plays at championing the justice which readers need at the hands of authors. Yet this is inevitably undermined when we consider that Charlotte, far from being a despotic ruler who does not acknowledge or respect Humbert's wishes, is, in fact, his victim.

Narrative deceit in *Lolita* is coupled with Humbert's continual undermining of the reader. When Humbert cheekily observes: 'As greater authors than I have put it: "Let readers imagine" etc. On second thought, I may as well give those imaginations a kick in the pants' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.65), he simultaneously challenges the reader's ability to conjure up a scene (in favour of his own description) whilst lauding himself as different, and implicitly better, than the great authors he refers to. Humbert's throw-away 'etc', in this respect, serves to pre-empt the reader's response. Similarly, when Humbert observes that 'the reader remembers that 'Know-Your-Child' book' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.107), we are only too aware of why he equates the reader's knowledge of child education with Charlotte's.

A presumption made earlier on in the novel is arguably the most pointed. Describing the beginning of his advances towards Dolores, Humbert imagines that the learned reader's eyebrows have now travelled to the back of his bald head (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.48). Not only does Nabokov allow Humbert to make fun of the reader (by presuming that his readers are learned, male, bald, and will be shocked by Humbert's pronouncements), but he also allows Humbert to make an early allusion to Clare Quilty, a character that, as yet, neither the reader nor Humbert, recognizes. Only by rereading can the reader recognise Humbert's unintentional allusion. Realizing that Nabokov has deceived his readership strengthens the extent to which he can be seen to be acting in bad faith.

Unmasking False Candidates

Nietzsche's idea of a 'moral vacuum' correlates with Nabokov's view of the conventional reading process because both take issue with, for them, schematic and limiting behaviour. Examining the role of satire in the novel will illustrate how Nabokov performs something akin to Nietzsche's second task – described by MacIntyre as unmasking 'false candidates for the role of the new morality' (1998 [1967], p.216). Nabokov does this by satirising certain characters' moral perspectives within *Lolita*. Frank S. Meyer was an early reader who responded to this aspect of the text when he declared that 'satire, I am sure, considering his ability and the quality of what he has written, was Mr Nabokov's intention' (Meyer in Bloom 1993, p.147).

In the preface to *Lolita*, John Ray Jr, the supposed voice of authority who introduces Humbert's memoir, concludes:

> in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac – these are not only vivid characters in a unique story; they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. *Lolita* should make all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.5-6)

As previously mentioned, although we are 'meant to take seriously John Ray's prefatory denunciation of Humbert' (McGinn 1994, p.38), the safe, sterile description in the foreword above makes it evident that he is the subject of ridicule. As Wood observes,

'John Ray, Jr stands for all the idiot readers and critics who think that such stuff matters in literature' (1994, p.107). Compared to the mercurial language used within the main body of the text, John Ray encapsulates the 'common' language and values of parents, social workers, educators – 'a better generation in a safer world' - at the expense of personalized and individual vocabulary. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, and as many critics have observed, Nabokov gives us more than enough material to understand and pity Dolores's suffering (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.176, p.308). So the text cannot be said to advocate or justify Humbert's acts. Yet the preface attacks the moral discourse normally used to identify them as cruel.

Ray articulates many truths in the foreword: his stance on the evils of child abuse is self-evidently correct. However, there are several factors that show how Ray's words are satirized to problematise the truths that he voices. Not only does the quasi-scientific tone of the passage ('12% of American adult males') distance the reader's engagement with what Ray says (notably quoting 'Dr Blanche Schwarzmann' whose name is as much an aesthetic mirroring as John Ray Jr's initials), but its blandness, viewing *Lolita* as just another anthropological case study of paedophilia, highlights the fact that John Ray would rather document evil than investigate its origins. Furthermore, Ray's high opinion of himself – he informs us that 'the editor of his choice [i.e., John Ray himself] had just been awarded the Poling Prize for a modest work ("Do the Senses make Sense?")' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.3) – is coupled with a lame attempt at coercion. His idea of the urgent 'ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.5) is also being satirized given that his appeal is directed to the 'serious' reader – a reader who would, ironically, detect the lampooning of Ray's character.

For the reader, the satire is unsettling. We laugh at Ray and yet it is hard for any reader with ordinary levels of compassion to actually disagree with what he says. More

than ever, in an era which puts great stress on transparency and accountability in public life, it would be fair to think that most of *Lolita*'s readers laugh at Ray while, at the same time, being entirely in favour of 'greater vigilance' to protect children from predators, or sharing the responsibility for children's well-being between parents and institutions.[10] In accepting the invitation to laugh at Ray, then, the reader is in a very unsettling position, because what he says is true.

In 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense' (1873), it is exactly the idea of truth that Nietzsche rebels against. He argues that 'Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins' (Nietzsche in Magnus et al. 1993, p.15). The problem with Ray, then, is not specifically the proposition that, for example, social workers should aim to protect children from kidnappers and paedophiles. Rather it is that this is the sound of authority responding to evil in automatic terms. The mock authority of John Ray parallels Nietzsche's conviction that 'the belief in authorities is the source of the conscience: it is therefore not the voice of God in the heart of man but the voice of some men in man' (Nietzsche in Hollingdale 2003, p.85).[11]

Another problem with Ray's foreword is revealed in the way Nabokov's afterword echoes it. In the foreword, Ray notes that 'the robust philistine who is conditioned by modern conventions into accepting without qualms a lavish array of four-

[10] The furore surrounding the 'Baby P' case highlights its topicality – see, for example, "Baby P: The Official Files", Mark Hughes and Cahal Milmo, *The Independent*, 18th November 2008.

[11] In a letter to his brother Kirill, Nabokov warned: 'And, above all, beware of platitudes, i.e., word combinations that have already appeared a thousand times…every person sees things in an individual way and must find his *own* words' (Nabokov 1990 [1989], p.8, my emphasis).

letter words in a banal novel, will be quite shocked by their absence here' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.4). In the afterword, Nabokov declares that 'Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity' (2000 [1955], p.315). Ray and Nabokov both feel the need to mention philistinism. But whilst Ray defines a philistine as someone who enjoys banal novels and anticipates ribald language, Nabokov gives the term positive connotations. What is at stake here are competing ideas of why this is a potentially shocking text, ideas which are situated in two different moral discourses.

For Ray, it seems, the novel may shock because it is about, and at times represents, sex. He assumes that this is why the novel will attract philistines who will be disappointed in the absence of violations of a different taboo (that of profane language). So the non-philistine reader is encouraged by Ray to read a text otherwise of interest to philistines because, despite the depictions of sex, that reader will learn about preventing such abuses in the future and, in addition, they will not be confronted with coarse language. Nabokov, in the afterword, almost seems to welcome the philistine reader *precisely* because he or she will be free from Ray's rationalisation of evil as a failure in the system of social care. Philistines are to be preferred to dealers in 'coins which have lost their pictures' as Nietzsche puts it.[12]

Lolita's mother, Charlotte, serves a similar function in being another 'false candidate' for the role of a 'new morality' in Nietzsche's terms. Charlotte positions herself as the moral superior of some of her neighbours through the exercise of taste and culture. The reader is invited to laugh at her banality, mispronunciation of French phrases, clichéd expressions, and religious zeal. Humbert's description of Charlotte's front hall illustrates this supposed lack of substance:

[12] Constantine Muravnik claims, 'Notwithstanding the abundance of caustic eloquence directed at philistines, Nabokov usually keeps them in the background of his fictional narratives (2010, p.97). I argue that, just because they are in the background, it does not mean they are unimportant.

> The front hall was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh's "Arlésienne."…She was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or a bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality. (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.36-37)

Although supposedly cultured and proper, the objects used to give a sense of Charlotte's character clearly suggest the opposite. Her taste in paintings is yet another kind of socialisation ridiculed by Humbert, akin to that of the book or bridge club. Not only does Humbert's word choice (the satirical 'graced', the nondescript 'thingamabob', or the derisory 'commercial') serve to undermine Charlotte's way of life to the reader but the allusion to Van Gogh's 'Arléssienne' - that 'banal darling of the arty middle class' - evokes Eliot's banal women in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915) who 'come and go, talking of Michelangelo' (1964 [1930], p.11, lines 13-14). These female presences, wanting to be seen to have an interest in or knowledge of high art, are being satirized as unaware of the triteness of their own actions.

This undermining of available moral discourses extends beyond Charlotte. Describing his relationship with his first wife Valerie, the 'animated merkin' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.25), Humbert is quick to release a venomous attack on her character. He notes that Valerie paints 'cubistic trash' and refers to her as both a 'poodle' and an 'idiot' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], pp.25-27). Perhaps most revealingly, Humbert, annoyed at her sudden change of character (because of the presence of Valerie's new lover Mr Maximovich), details that she 'was quite out of keeping with the stock character she was supposed to impersonate' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.27). Although the scene where

Valerie and Mr Maximovich explain their goings-on to Humbert appears to give them the upper-hand in their exchange, Humbert is quick to inform his readers that the couple were found, ten years later, taking part in a social experiment where they were made to be 'in a constant position of all fours' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.30). Jettisoning the subject of Valerie, Humbert's Parthian shot completes his view of them as vulgar, animalistic persons lacking an 'upright' moral discourse.

Dolores, importantly, is also subjected to ridicule of her morals and taste despite being a child and an ostensibly beloved victim. Describing her as 'disgustingly conventional' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.148), Humbert lampoons her way of life by listing the banal things that interest her ('sweet hot jazz, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals'), a sickly-sweet itinerary of the vapid interests of popular American culture of the period. He goes on to describe her as 'the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.148). It seems that Dolores is Charlotte in the making given that the daughter's penchant for all things commercial is reflected in her mother's hallway.

Thus, readers are invited to laugh at a variety of moral/aesthetic discourses – to laugh at Charlotte's emptiness and conventionality just as they laugh at Ray's institutionalised recommendation of improved 'vigilance' in the face of monstrous evil. Laughing at these characters by no means commits us to endorsing Humbert's actions. But it does put us in the difficult - and Nietzschean - position of leaving us morally unarmed against Humbert, with our usual tools for moral judgement mocked as unfit, worn out and irrelevant. What is more, the reader is implicated in this Nietzschean attack on conventional moral discourse because readers are, to varying degrees, confronted with themselves in these characters. As Pifer points out, 'many of us have heard ourselves talking like John Ray Jr on too many occasions' (2003, p.191). Her claim arguably relates

to the description of Charlotte – if we read her description as satirical, we recognise how pervasive her perspective is in our society.

When satire is at work, the expectation we often have is of a rounded third-person narrator mocking somebody for acting stupidly or immorally, as in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931). However, if the satirical voice comes from the perspective of a character or narrator not aligned with accepted cultural norms, it jolts us into an arguably more powerful understanding of satire through estrangement, and the recognition of scenarios close to home yet immeasurably removed. Charlotte's satirist is a heartless libertine whose moral vision is damnably worse than her own. If the reader laughs with Humbert, he or she is also forced either to laugh at himself or herself or to abandon moral discernment altogether, albeit temporarily. Toker asks, 'isn't there a moment, reading John Ray, when we are almost nodding in approval or ready to write "How true" in the margin? Some of our laughter has to do with the narrowness of our escape' (1989, p.106). Here, she presumably means *our* escape from being the subject of ridicule for adopting such clichéd moral positions. However, given the inevitable similarities between the general reader and John Ray that Nabokov suggests, it can be argued that we do not in fact achieve this escape.

In the afterword, Nabokov describes *Lolita* as a 'highly moral affair' and laments the 'idiotic accusation of immorality' (2000 [1955], p.315). I am arguing that the text can be described in these terms without any commitment to a traditional didactic approach in which plot and characterisation illustrate ethical dilemmas or the strengths and weaknesses of competing ethical programmes. I suggest that the moral aspect of *Lolita* is that it produces Nietzschean disorientation which operates first by violating the reading contract and then by implicating the reader in a satirical attack on the banal moral discourse which emerges in the face of relentless evil.

Revaluation of values

Nietzsche's third task, that of a 'revaluation of all values', is explained by Edith W. Clowes as follows: 'The purpose of his [Nietzsche's] hostility is partly to distinguish himself from the conventional moralists of the past and to shock the reader into a new awareness of the process of moral valuation' (1988, p.16). If, as I am suggesting, Nabokov is forcing the reader of *Lolita* to inhabit a Nietzschean world, the idea of accepting our own moral blindness is particularly unnerving with regard to the paedophilic Humbert Humbert. For although his actions towards Dolores are indefensible, those aspects of his moral *outlook*, concerned with the 'violation of cultural codes' (Rampton 1993, p.81), are harder to condemn.

It appears indeed that Nabokov's outlook has some affinities with Nietzsche's. This outlook is not quite identical to that which Nietzsche practised; tenderness is not part of the Nietzschean programme for example. But in *Ecce Homo* for example, it is clear that Nabokov's high value for individuality, pride, aestheticism and intelligence all follow Nietzsche. (Nietzsche 2004 [1888], p.34, p.40, p.96). In *Strong Opinions* (1973), Nabokov foretold that

> one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel – and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride. (1990 [1973], p.193)

But I do not read Humbert as the traditional Nietzschean '*Übermensch*'. Instead, I am suggesting that he is a vehicle for questioning the rules and codes of society – a kind of limiting case, as when he discusses the problems of law and morality in 'a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve'

(Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.18). As McGinn points out, 'Bravery, imagination, and individuality can also constitute a virtuous character – and I would say of the most attractive kind. Certainly, mindless conformity is no part of a proper conception of virtue' (2003, p.117). So can the contradiction between those parts of Humbert's character which are potentially virtuous, and the vicious nature of his actions, be resolved? One possible answer lies in Humbert's solipsism. In *The Annotated Lolita* (1971), Appel defines solipsism with reference to Humbert as an 'epistemological theory that the self knows only in its present state and is the only existent thing, and that "reality" is subjective; concern with the self at the expense of social relationships' (1991 [1971], p.336). Evidence of Humbert's solipsism permeates the text (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.21, p.60, p.125, p.161). So the potentially admirable qualities of Humbert's character – 'bravery, imagination, individuality' – are locked in a view of the world which by definition excludes the reader. His difference from us is simultaneously menacing and otherly *and* alluring in its defiance, like the 'total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106' (Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.314). In this regard, Nabokov, in *Lectures on Literature* (1980), argues that a 'real' author 'has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself' (1980, p.2). Humbert appears to act as the vehicle for a demonstration of a Nietzschean 'revaluation of all values' which privileges an aesthetic outlook on morality.

At the start of this chapter I outlined the moral problem with *Lolita*: that our enjoyment of the novel is interwoven with the aesthetic sensitivity and charming and charismatic personality of a monstrous narrator. The aesthetic aspects of the text let it operate as a Nietzschean critique of morality without acting as a manifesto for cruelty. As mentioned in the introduction, Toker claims that the aesthetic philosophy that Nabokov

adheres to resembles that of Arthur Schopenhauer.[13] Nabokov shares Schopenhauer's view that 'the power of aesthetic enjoyment is to put to sleep the insistent urgings of the malevolent will' (1989, p.108). This view implies that 'pleasure is nothing more than the temporary cessation of pain' (Tanner 2000, p.56). But, as Toker argues in her article 'Nabokov's Worldview', there appears to be an 'ethical value [also] in aesthetic experience' (Toker in Connolly 2005, p.232) in Nabokov's work, implying something beyond the mere 'cessation of pain'. Here, I suggest that Nabokov, like Nietzsche, advocates an 'aestheticization of morality' (Tanner 2000, p.96) through his literary texts.

In *The Gay Science*, we remember, Nietzsche argues that 'As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all a good conscience to be *able* to make such a phenomenon of ourselves' (2001 [1882], p.104). Discussing the relationship between Nabokov and Nietzsche (and commenting directly on the above statement from *The Gay Science*), Wood argues that 'aesthetic…implies not art for art's sake but a pointed contrast to the moral (and specifically Christian) interpretation of existence and the world' (1994, p.170). Nabokov's portrayal of Humbert, in certain limited ways, as morally superior to more conventional characters is a pervasive and disconcerting, but revealing, facet of the novel.

In the afterword, Nabokov tells us that his 'initial shiver of inspiration' was derived from an ape's sketch that 'showed the bars of the poor creature's cage' (2000 [1955], p.311). Rather than reading this as pity for the way Humbert is trapped within a morally blind outlook, I suggest that it could be read as a parable for the restrictions that are imposed on Humbert that prevent him from living a flourishing life. Wood remarks, 'Humbert sees plenty of bars but also some remarkable perspectives on the zoo' (1994,

[13] See Toker's *The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989) and her essay 'Liberal Ironists and the "Gaudily Painted Savage": On Richard Rorty's Reading of Vladimir Nabokov' (2004).

p.117).[14] In *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche writes that: 'To be moral, correct, ethical means to obey an age-old law or tradition…To be evil is to be "not moral" (immoral), to practice bad habits, go against tradition, however reasonable or stupid it may be' (2004 [1878], p.66). Similarly, rather than being seen as a writer completely removed from morality, or a writer with an 'evil' intent, Nabokov joins with Nietzsche in 'making strange' the relationship of ethics to good and evil, addressing it from a new perspective and throwing off the inheritance of the past. Nabokov and Nietzsche, then, can both be seen to be advocating a 'revaluation of all values'; without endorsing specific acts of cruelty such as Humbert's.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the ways in which *Lolita* enacts Nietzschean moral disorientation. I began by querying the arguments of critics such as Toker, Rorty and McGinn, who in various ways suggest that *Lolita* is a morally didactic text. I argued that Rorty in particular relies on the moral value of 'vigilant' (as opposed to 'close') reading in his account of the text. But this moral value is dependent on problematic equivalence between vigilant reading and sensitive curiosity about real people in personal encounters. In the remaining parts of the chapter I proposed an alternative to the 'plodding morality' that 'recent criticism, with an audible sigh of relief, has wheeled on to the page' (Wood 1994, p.7). Drawing on recent Nietzsche criticism in order to distil his moral philosophy into three tasks, I argued that *Lolita* engages in a similar set of tasks through morally disorienting the reader. Where Nietzsche could be seen to be critiquing the moral vacuum of late nineteenth-century German society, Nabokov is concerned with the conventional, even stagnant, approach to the reading process that had become prevalent in the West in the first half of the twentieth century. Where Nietzsche could be seen to be reacting

[14] See Appel's *The Annotated Lolita* (1971), p.432.

against the major philosophies of his time, or exposing false candidates for alternative moralities, Nabokov demonstrates a similar concern in his depiction of John Ray Jr and Charlotte Haze. Nietzsche's final task, that of the 'transvaluation of all values' has a literary counterpart in Nabokov's text insofar as Humbert acts as the vehicle for questioning what we commonly value.

Today it is assumed by critics without question that the novel in no way celebrates paedophilia. But it can nonetheless be argued that the novel subjugates our traditional moral responses and discourses. *Lolita*'s relationship with morality can be seen to have affinities with what Rosenblatt calls 'sublimation' – a 'term most often invoked when we have imaginatively shared in actions forbidden or frowned upon in our own culture' (1994, p.145). It is arguably this idea that allows Martin Amis to conclude that readers 'read *Lolita* sprawling limply in [their] chair, ravished, overcome, nodding scandalized assent' (2002, p.261). The implications of this are unnerving. Unlike the figure of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), who anticipates a Nietzschean outlook on life only to turn to the salvation of Christianity, there is no suggestion that *Lolita*'s protagonist goes on a 'moral journey'.[15] I would query any argument which claims that noticing our own carelessness as readers constitutes a moral journey for the reader. The Nietzschean moral outlook is not a packaged set of ideas illustrated by the text. Instead, it is an experience of moral disorientation which leaves us in no confusion about the extent of Humbert's cruelty but in considerable confusion about where that cruelty comes from, how we can account for it, and what responses we have to it.

[15] I explore Nabokov's relationship to Dostoevsky in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: 'Rewriting Nietzsche'

> Nabokov has never shied from characters who excel. In *Pale Fire* he presumed to give us a long poem by an American poet second only to Frost; Adam Krug in *Bend Sinister* is the leading intellectual of his nation; no doubt is left that Fyodor Godunov Cherdyntsev of *The Gift* is truly gifted. Luzhin's "recondite genius" is delineated as if by one who knows… (Updike 1964)

In the introduction to the thesis, I discussed the nature and extent of Nietzsche's influence on Nabokov, direct and indirect, and pointed out that one text in particular – *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – was a rich source of metaphor for Nabokov from his earliest to his last writings. Zarathustra's 'central theme' (Tanner 2000, p.55) is that of the '*Übermensch*' – Nietzsche's idealized model of what man can become. Although aestheticism, memory, and power are all themes of Nabokov's art, the issue of privileging a superior individual over the 'masses' is equally important. In *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981), for example, Nabokov writes that 'I approach literature from the only point of view that literature interests me – namely the point of view of enduring art and individual genius' (1981, p.98). While some Nabokovian criticism has considered this subject, none has looked at his representation of the superior individual in relation to the Nietzschean figure of the *Übermensch*.[1] Yet an examination of Nietzsche's theoretical being sheds considerable light on Nabokov's figure of the 'higher' individual, indicating what this figure might represent and the reasons that Nabokov chooses to privilege it. This chapter

[1] For discussions on the role of the individual in Nabokov's works, see Leona Toker's essay, 'The Dead are Good Mixers: Nabokov's Versions of Individualism' in Julian Connolly's *Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.92-108) and Brian Boyd's *Stalking Nabokov* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp.159-202).

aims to elucidate why Nabokov represents this kind of character repeatedly, by drawing analogies between examples found in his fiction and the characteristics of the *Übermensch*, whom Zarathustra proclaims will overcome man and his 'commonplace' values. In the prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra proclaims: '*I teach you the Superman*. Man is something that should be overcome' (p.41).[2] In this chapter, I examine two of Nabokov's protagonists who seem both to conform to the figure of the *Übermensch* and to *depart* from it, either as failed *Übermensch* or parodies.[3] The conformity suggests what it is that Nabokov thought admirable in this figure, while the divergence suggests a way to make sense of the difficult, ostensibly callous, protagonists who pervade Nabokov's fiction and perplex many readers. By using parody to undermine the celebration of the *Übermensch* virtues of his protagonists, Nabokov limits the extent to which we may identify with them. In addition, Nabokov again seems unwilling to acknowledge Nietzsche's role in the creation of Nabokovian protagonists.

This chapter will also look at the divergence between Nabokov and Nietzsche regarding pity. For Nietzsche, pity is his biggest danger, a negative emotion preventing man from pushing forward (2001 [1882], p.220). Nabokov, however, is on record as viewing pity differently. This departure from Nietzschean doctrine, I argue, is a reworking of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and suggests not only a rebellion on the part of Nabokov the pupil but also indebtedness as he effectively echoes, and surpasses, Nietzschean ideas in a way recommended by Nietzsche himself. I argue that Nabokov strives to 'overcome' his predecessor, and perhaps his own 'Nietzschean' protagonists, in modifying Nietzsche's idea. In this respect, Nabokov appears to be Nietzsche's most

[2] The word *Übermensch* had been translated as 'superman' by Thomas Common and was used by George Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman* (1903). Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche's main translator and biographer, prefers 'Overman' - see his note to the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (1976 [1959]. New York: Penguin, p.115). I follow Michael Tanner's example, who, finding "'superman" absurd, and "overman" unnatural' (2000, p.30), leaves *Übermensch* untranslated.

[3] Nietzsche never referred to this noun in the plural.

earnest disciple and, in surpassing him, just as Zarathustra insists that the *Übermensch* must surpass man (Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], p.237), strives for the part of a reworked *Übermensch* himself. In this respect, I echo the conclusion of Muravnik in *Nabokov's Philosophy of Art* (2010), who claims that 'Nabokov may prove to be more Nietzschean when he does not overtly credit the philosopher, but essentially follows his moral and aesthetic teaching than if he were to appeal to his authority slavishly and extensively' (p.79).

The *Übermensch*

Nietzsche's attack on convention and tradition was arguably at its most intense when it came to the notion of the individual. For him, systems of belief or thought such as Christianity, Kantianism or liberalism had inherent failings in their own right but were also jointly guilty of egalitarianism.[4] In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* for example, Zarathustra proclaims, 'Overcome, you Higher Men, the petty virtues, the petty prudences, the sand-grain discretion, the ant-swarm inanity, miserable ease, the "happiness of the greatest number!"' (p.298). For Nietzsche, bourgeois Christian Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century was characterised by the fear of everything individual (1982 [1881], p.12). Such fear, he insisted, prevented those people with the most potential from 'overcoming' themselves – something Zarathustra claims to be the 'meaning of the earth' (Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], p.238). Indeed, as John Burt Foster observes, Nietzsche's 'prose abounds with terms such as "über," "um," and "jenseits," all of which signal the need to move above and beyond received conceptions' (Foster in Barabtarlo 2000, p.214).

[4] In Nabokov's *Transparent Things* (1972), R states 'Total rejection of all religions ever dreamt up by man and total composure in the face of death! If I could explain this triple totality in one big book, that book would become no doubt a new bible and its author the founder of a new creed' (p.84).

The concept of the *Übermensch* is central to almost all the other facets of Nietzsche's philosophy, such as the need for meaning in a godless world, the notion of *amor fati* and eternal recurrence, perspectivism, and the will to power. For example, the *Übermensch* realises that objective truth is a falsehood and that values relating to the development of the self are of more importance than those of mass society. He distils the notions of overcoming, strength, and purpose in purely human form with no connotations of otherwordliness.[5] It is important to remember that, although Zarathustra himself may be seen to embody many of the characteristics of the *Übermensch*, it is very much apparent that he is *not* this figure. Zarathustra refers to himself simply as a prophet who heralds the *coming* of the *Übermensch*, stressing that this figure does not yet exist (ironically paralleling the role of John the Baptist).

In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche elaborates on his conception of the *Übermensch*:

> Let us therefore *limit* ourselves to the purification of our opinions and evaluations and to the *creation of our own new tables of what is good that are new and all our own*…We, however, *want to become those we are* – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. (1974 [1882], pp.265-266)

Nietzsche's appeal to jettison old values and to be active in the creation of the new resembles Nabokov's description of 'authentic' authors. In 'Good Readers and Good Writers', Nabokov writes:

[5] See R.J. Hollingdale's quotation in the conclusion to this chapter.

> But the real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib, that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself. (1980, p.2)

Through the phrase 'sleeper's rib', Nabokov connotes Eve's existence coming about through God's 'tampering' with Adam's rib. In doing so, Nabokov stresses the 'God-like' power with which 'good writers' have – an idea he furthers in his essay on Dostoevsky in *Lectures on Russian Literature* when he claims that '[art] is divine because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming a true creator in his own right' (1981, p.106). Such allusions are, of course, ironic in that Nabokov continually debunks the idea of both a Christian God and some specific values that the Christian faith upholds (see Nabokov 1981, p.110 for just one example).[6] As Brian Boyd claims, Nabokov's 'skepticism is ruthless, his indifference to any religion complete' (1990, p.295). Rather, Nabokov makes the claim that 'real' writers must create values themselves, declaring that 'I do not give damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere' (Interview 1967). Both writers were concerned with questioning existing value and striving to create new values.

At the end of *Lectures on Literature*, there is a short essay entitled 'L'Envoi'. In the last sentence of the essay, Nabokov claims that

> We are liable to miss the best of life if we do not know how to tingle, if we do not *learn to hoist ourselves just a little higher* than we generally are in order to sample the rarest and ripest fruit of art which human thought has to offer. (1980, p.382, my emphasis)

[6] Boyd, for example, claims that Nabokov 'always remained aloof to "Christianism," as he called it, utterly indifferent "to organized mysticism, to religion, to the church – any church" (1993, p.72).

Nabokov's farewell comment to his students stresses the importance of great literature – something that can only be realized, or understood, if they surpass the normality of reading behaviour and 'hoist' their outlook and abilities above the *status quo* in order to grasp the best that life has to offer. Such an appeal to better one's standing implies a critique of the mediocre in their respective societies (whether in the moral malaise of Nietzsche's society or the literary '*poshlust*' of Nabokov's) and wanting their readerships to 'overcome' tradition in order to create value.[7]

Nabokov's Protagonists

Describing the '*counterideal*' (Nietzsche 1968 [1901], p.129) to Christian thought, Nietzsche prescribes the following values:

> pride, pathos of distance, great responsibility, exuberance, splendid animality, the instincts that delight in war and conquest, the deification of passion, revenge, of cunning, of anger, voluptuousness, of adventure, of knowledge (1968 [1901], p.129)

Most of Nabokov's protagonists display some instantly recognizable *Übermensch* traits, such as high intelligence, an aesthetic inclination, a seeming indifference to the welfare of others, and distrust, disregard even, of social conventions. Examples in Nabokov's works abound: Ganin in *Mary* (1926), Franz and Martha in *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), Luzhin in *The Defense* (1930), Smurov in *The Eye* (1930), Martin Edelweiss in *Glory* (1932), Axel Rex in *Laughter in the Dark* (1933), Hermann Karlovich in *Despair* (1934), Fyodor in *The Gift* (1938), Falter in 'Ultima Thule', Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938), V in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), Adam Krug in *Bend, Sinister* (1947), Humbert Humbert

[7] See Nabokov's essay 'Philistines and Philistinism' for more discussion on this phrase (1981, p.313).

in *Lolita* (1955), Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire* (1962), Van Veen in *Ada or Ardor* (1969), Hugh Person in *Transparent Things* (1972), Vadim Vadimovich in *Look at the Harlequins* (1974), and Philip Wild in *The Original of Laura* (2009). This list is, of course, by no means exhaustive. Although varied, these protagonists can all be said to possess some similar specific qualities. Of the protagonists listed above, Smurov, Martin, Axel Rex, Hermann, Fyodor, Falter, Krug, Humbert, Kinbote, Van Veen, Vadim Vadimovich and Philip Wild are proud, independent, intelligent characters, each having their own cunning and audacity, each intent on succeeding in their worlds. They recall, as Frederick Appel puts it, Nietzsche's 'uncompromising repudiation of both the ethic of benevolence and the notion of the equality of persons in the name of a radically aristocratic commitment to human excellence' (1999, p.2). Even Nabokovian characters such as Ganin, Luzhin, Cincinnatus, and Pnin, whose inner conviction is not as outwardly strong as the others, are also characterized by being outside of 'normal' society, whether through Luzhin's 'recondite genius' (Nabokov 1964, p.9), Cincinnatus's claim that he is 'not an ordinary' (Nabokov 2001 [1959], p.45), or Timofey's epiphanic 'cardiac sensations' (Nabokov 2000 [1957], p.109).[8] Muravnik disputes this suggestion that this broad group can all be characterised as Nietzschean, dividing Nabokov's protagonists instead into 'Gnostics' (including Luzhin, Falter and Kinbote) and Nietzscheans (including Shade, Krug and Fyodor) (2010, p.98). But where he characterises the 'Gnostics' as having an 'attitude of resignation, fail to reconcile their inner life and imagination with reality, confuse "obsession and inspiration (LL 377) and consequently make fools of themselves, go mad, die and even make the reader question the genuineness of their gift' (2010, p.98), I characterise such characters as still engaging, even flirting, with Nietzschean tenets. I argue instead that *all* of the protagonists here can be labelled as possessing Nietzschean

[8] The fact that these specific characters also evoke pity is something I will discuss in the second part of this chapter.

characteristics, although a division can be drawn between those who may be said to achieve *Übermensch* status and those who do not. This latter group, something I will term failed, or parodied, *Übermensch* would include, most notably, Luzhin (in that he demonstrates a lack of *amor fati*), Shade/Kinbote (it is the interplay between the Apollonian/Dionysian [Shade/Kinbote] in *Pale Fire* itself that seems to be Nietzschean) and Falter (that Muravnik groups Falter as a 'Gnostic' is especially strange in that his characterization is arguably the most Nietzschean in all of Nabokov's works). The former group would be led by *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert (a character conspicuously absent from Muravnik's Nietzschean list). Yet none of these protagonists fully succeed in convincing the reader of a robust superiority in their irrevocable difference from the rest of society. It is true that almost all of Nabokov's protagonists are learned or 'different', but their failures and foibles (as we will see with *Despair*'s Hermann or Falter in 'Ultima Thule' for example) suggest that Nabokov may not be glorifying the conception of the *Übermensch* as much as parodying, or modifying, it.

Despair – Hermann as *Übermensch*?

Nabokov's novel *Despair* focuses on the protagonist Hermann Karlovich and his ploy to kill his supposed *doppelganger* Felix – a homeless man who we are to believe bears an uncanny resemblance to Hermann. Talking about his novel in 1936, Nabokov remarked: 'My book is essentially concerned with the subtle dissections of a mind anything but "average" or "ordinary": nature had endowed my hero with literary genius, but at the same time there was a criminal taint in his blood; the criminal in him, prevailing over the artist, took over those very methods which nature had meant the artist to use' (1989, p.17). Although this passage elucidates that Hermann is indeed another example of a 'higher' kind of protagonist, it also reveals why his treatment of

Hermann may differ from others.[9] In this section, I explore the role of Nabokov's protagonist in *Despair* by viewing him as a parody of an earlier reincarnation of the *Übermensch* figure – Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov.

In *Despair*, Hermann is characterized as what Nietzsche would describe as a 'higher' individual on numerous occasions. He displays a marked inner conviction of his abilities – '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' (Nabokov 2000 [1965], p.13) – and frequently suggests that he belongs to a higher order: 'Did my adolescence…secrete the possibility of producing a lawbreaker of genius?' (p.49). Hermann also exhibits a fervent disbelief in religion: 'So why then did I mention the name of a nonexistent God?' (p.63); 'All this divine business is, I presume, a huge hoax for which priests are certainly not to blame; priests themselves are its victims. The idea of God was invented in the small hours of history by a scamp who had genius; it somehow reeks too much of humanity' (p.90). Ruthlessness is also evident:

> Let us suppose I kill an ape. Nobody touches me. Suppose it is a particularly clever ape. Nobody touches me. Suppose it is a new ape – a hairless, speaking species. Nobody touches me. By ascending these subtle steps circumspectly, I may climb up to Leibnitz or Shakespeare and kill them, and nobody will touch me, as it is impossible to say where the border has been crossed, beyond which the sophist gets into trouble. (p.175)

[9] In a footnote referring to Raskolnikov's use of the phrase 'step across', David McDuff observes that 'The Russian word is *pereshagnut'*, closely related to *pertupat'* ('to step over', 'to transgress'), which in turn is closely related to the Russian word for 'crime' – *prestuplenie*. To a Russian reader the connection is immediately clear' (McDuff in Dostoevsky 2003 [1866], p.665). This adds strength to the idea that Nabokov did not view Dostoevsky's/Raskolnikov's idea of 'going beyond' in the same way as Nietzsche's.

The above passage allows us to see two things – that Nabokov has characterized Hermann as thinking of himself as being 'outside' conventional moral conduct (in the same way as Nietzsche's *Übermensch* would be), but also, perhaps more interestingly, that Hermann's thought process echoes that of Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

In his essay, 'Dostoevsky and Nabokov: The Morality of Structure in *Crime and Punishment* and *Despair*', Sergey Davydov claims that:

> Raskolnikov, in his moral depravity, constructs a theory according to which some extraordinary individuals are exempted from all civil and possibly also from all ethical laws. These extraordinary men have the "right to transgress" the taboos considered sacred by ordinary men (1982, p.159)

Davydov quotes Raskolnikov's idea in chapter five of part three of *Crime and Punishment* – 'if such a person [one of these extraordinary men] finds it necessary, for the sake of his idea, to step over a dead body, over a pool of blood, then he is able within his own conscience to give himself permission to do so' (Dostoevsky 2003 [1866], p.310) – and the following sentence from the opening of *Despair* apparently confirms the correlation between Hermann and Raskolnikov: 'At this point I should have compared the breaker of the law which makes such a fuss over a little spilled blood, with a poet or a stage performer' (p.3). For both Hermann and Raskolnikov, murder is permitted because of their supposed 'higher' status.[10]

[10] References to Dostoevsky in *Despair* occur at p.80, p.106, p.148, p.150, p.156, p.158, p.167, p.170 (London: Penguin, 2000). Davydov's claim, however, that Raskolnikov 'is a caricature of the Nietzschean '*Übermensch*' is anachronistic. *Crime and Punishment* was published in 1866 whilst the first published use of Nietzsche's term appeared in 1885 (with the publication of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

Nabokov, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky

Despite Dostoevsky's anticipation of Nietzschean preoccupations, the relationship between Nabokov and Dostoevsky, and that between Nabokov and Nietzsche, seem to be wholly different. In the former, Nabokov appears to take issue with Dostoevsky, specifically his 'moral and artistic stupidity' (Nabokov 1981, p.113 fn). In the latter, the relationship seems to be one of respectful silence. The contrast is revealing. In *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov states: 'My position in regard to Dostoevski is a curious and difficult one' (p.98). The one-sided feud, like his discipleship to Nietzsche, started young and carried on at length. In *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, Karshan notes that 'Nabokov had read Dostoevsky as a teenager, and though he became known for mocking and satirizing Dostoevsky, there is no other author in any language with whom Nabokov's novels engage more deeply, if only in a spirit of combat' (2011, p.40). In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov argues that Dostoevsky 'was a *prophet*, a claptrap journalist and a slapdash comedian' (1990 [1973], p.42). Although the latter two descriptions are quite obviously disparaging, the choice of 'prophet' is not wholly negative and links him to *Lectures on Literature* (see page 215 of this chapter) as well as to Zarathustra.[11] Commenting on *The Double*, Nabokov writes that 'it hardly exists for the followers of Dostoevski the Prophet…its imitation of Gogol is so striking as to seem at times almost a parody" (1981, p.104). Here, the implication is that 'prophet' *is* a disparaging term in that, because Nabokov thinks of *The Double* as both Dostoevsky's best work *and* his most underappreciated, the cult of Dostoevsky exalts a writer who

[11] This word is further emphasised in a passage from Nabokov's 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense', where he suggests that '*Stranger* always rhymes with *danger*. The meek prophet, the enchanter in his cave, the indignant artist, the nonconforming little schoolboy, all share in the same sacred danger. And this being so, let us bless them, let us bless the freak; for in the natural evolution of things, the ape would perhaps never have become man had not a freak appeared in the family' (1980, p.372). Here, prophet takes on a more admirable quality.

wallows in Christian teaching. It also suggests the idea that Nabokov values the idea of parody in seeing the work as 'striking' (this idea will be discussed later in the chapter).[12] Later still in his lecture, Nabokov writes:

> I am too little of an academic professor to teach subjects that I dislike. I am very eager to debunk Dostoevski. But I realize that readers who have not read much may be puzzled by the set of values implied. (1981, p.98)[13]

Nabokov's stance towards Dostoevsky was therefore complex. Nabokov devotes several paragraphs to the character of Raskolnikov and his inner workings:

> But he [Raskolnikov] also committed this murder in order to prove to himself that he was not an ordinary man abiding by the moral laws created by others, but capable of making his own law and of bearing the tremendous spiritual load of responsibility… Note the curiously fascist ideas developed by Raskolnikov in an 'article' he wrote: namely that mankind consists of two parts – the herd and the supermen– and that the majority should be bound by the established moral laws but that the few who are far above the majority ought to be at liberty to make their own law. (p.113)

This passage quite clearly expresses Nabokov's revulsion at Raskolnikov's act – as he quite rightly says shortly after, 'a healthy human nature would inevitably balk before the

[12] In Davydov's essay, he writes that 'For Nabokov, any socio-political or religious message would betray the nonutilitarian maxims of art which he so ardently defended in his works. It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that from Nabokov's point of view both Dostoevsky and Chernyshevskij would fall into a similar category if judged by the criteria of pure esthetics alone'. Revealingly, discussing his planned book about Chernyshevsky in *The Gift*, Fyodor states that 'I want to keep everything as it were on the very brink of parody' (p.184).

[13] Nabokov had planned to translate Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1950 but had to relinquish the project after being hospitalized (Nabokov 1991 [1989], p.97).

perpetration of a deliberate murder' (p.114). Yet, Dostoevsky's use of 'herd' and 'superman' inevitably recalls Nietzsche's philosophical concepts of both 'Master/Slave morality' (discussed in chapter two) and the subject of this chapter, the *Übermensch*. Of course, nowhere in his writings did Nietzsche advocate the killing of 'slaves' – his distinctions were to frame where our conceptions of 'good and evil' come from and to suggest the ways in which Christianity has perpetrated the 'greatest moral coup' (Tanner 2000, p.72) that the world has ever seen.

In fact, Nabokov's combined fascination and contempt for Dostoevsky may reveal his fears and anxieties about where his own Nietzschean tendencies could lead. For example, Nabokov's labelling of Raskolnikov's 'herd'/ 'superman' distinctions as 'fascist' is curious in that, to a certain extent, they seem to suggest what Nietzsche labels 'masters' and 'slaves'.[14] Nabokov stated that 'democracy is humanity at its best' (Boyd 1993, p.41), and was keen to distance himself from fascism and all of its convolutions (see the forewords to *Invitation* and *Bend, Sinister* for example). Yet the demarcation between 'two parts' of mankind is, in fact, close to Nabokov's own dichotomy between writers and readers; the genius and the lowly (see chapter two). Nabokov may be reacting against Raskolnikov's demarcation of 'humanity' because it potentially contaminates his own division between readers and writers.

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[14] Talking about mental illness in his lecture on Dostoevsky, Nabokov writes:

> Incidentally, scientists completely refute the notion advanced by some critics that Dostoevski anticipated Freud and Jung. It can be proved convincingly that Dostoevski used extensively in building his abnormal characters a book by a German, C.G. Carus, Psyche, published in 1846. The assumption that Dostoevski anticipated Freud arose from the fact that the terms and hypotheses in Carus' book resemble those of Freud, but actually the parallels between Carus and Freud are not those of central doctrine at all, but merely of linguistic terminology, which in the two authors has a different ideological content. (1981, p.109)

Alongside giving insight into Nabokov's own idea of influence, this quotation allows me to suggest that, although Raskolnikov and Nietzsche's terminology may be similar, their ideology seems not to be.

To further complicate the issue, Fredson Bowers includes a deleted footnote:

> VN deleted the next sentence: "It is further no accident that the rulers of Germany's recently fallen regime based on the theory of Superman and his special rights were, too, either neurotics or ordinary criminals, or both." Ed. (Nabokov 1981, p.114)[15]

The tone of the sentence preceding this, arguing that that Dostoevsky's criminal heroes are not quite sane, continues in the deleted passage on the Nazis as 'neurotics or ordinary criminals, or both'. And, although Nabokov describes Raskolnikov's ideas as 'absurd' (p.114), he suggests ways in which Dostoevsky's project could have been bettered: 'If you hate a book, you still may derive artistic delight from imagining other and better ways of looking at things, or, what is the same, expressing things, than the author you hate does' (p.105). To sum up, Nabokov's interest in Raskolnikov and his creator and, as I have demonstrated over the last four chapters, his seemingly greater knowledge of Nietzsche than he liked to admit, all suggest that the figure of the higher man preoccupied him. In *Despair*, I argue that he creates a Dostoevskian version of the '*Übermensch*'.

Despair and Parody

In an article entitled 'The Caning of Modernist Profaners: Parody in *Despair*', Alexander Dolinin argues that 'Dostoevsky is… [*Despair*'s] chief parodic target' (2008). There is agreement that parody of Dostoevsky is an integral part of the novel. But

[15] That Nabokov chose to delete the sentence (rather than, say, amend it) presents different possibilities. He reveals that he knows about the Nazis appropriation of the theory of the 'Superman' yet he does not attribute the appropriation specifically. Because he has been talking about Dostoevsky, and that no mention of Nietzsche is present, it may be that Nabokov thought that the Nazis appropriated *Dostoevsky*'s thinking rather than Nietzsche's. As mentioned in the introduction, it was actually Nietzsche's thought that Hitler misappropriated. Nabokov's discussion is, of course, linked to his discussion of mental illness contained in his lecture (1981, pp.107-109).

Hermann is not just another of Nabokov's unreliable narrators (it transpires that Hermann and Felix do not, in fact, look anything like one another). Hermann is unsuccessful in his murder attempt on Felix, which, if successful, would have meant Hermann getting his hands on an insurance payout as a result of their supposed likeness. He frequently questions his own capabilities, and what waits for him after death, apparently parodying Dostoevsky's protagonist:

> If I am not master of my life, not sultan of my own being, then no man's logic and no man's ecstatic fits may force me to find less silly my impossibly silly position…There are, however, grounds for anxiety: God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter, that second bogey being as easily disposed of as the first. (Nabokov 2000 [1965], p.91)

The pompous paraphrase of the first clause, 'sultan of my own being' and the repetition of the childish adjective 'silly' in talking about grand themes is highly suggestive of parody. Moreover, Hermann sees God and the afterlife as co-dependent; such lazy, or simplistic, thinking is unlikely to have been endorsed by Nabokov himself. It seems as though Nabokov takes issue with two features of Dostoevsky's figure. Firstly, that Raskolnikov has a 'criminal taint in his blood' (Nabokov 1991 [1989], p.17) and it is concentrated enough for him to commit murder. Secondly, although both Raskolnikov and Ivan Karamazov flirt with the idea of God not existing (the former claims 'But there may not be any God' (2003 [1866], p.382) whilst Smerdyakov voices what Ivan has preached to him: 'all things are lawful…if there is no infinite God' (2003 [1880], p.808)) they both eventually accept Christianity. This religious narrative arc, a kind of 'deliberate moralizing' (1991 [1989], p.56), was antithetical to Nabokov ideologically and again points to parody rather than a portrayal of Hermann as only a 'higher' type of person or a 'literary' genius (Nabokov 1989, p.19). The differences between Raskolnikov and

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* are quite extensive – where the latter is physically healthy, mentally sure, anti-utilitarian, and atheistic, Dostoevsky's anti-hero is physically unwell, mentally unstable, seeks to execute his actions for the 'good of humanity' and, by the end of the novel, has clear faith in God.[16] Thus, alongside the obvious reasons for objecting to Rasknolnikov, Nabokov may also be objecting to *utilitarian* views of Raskolnikov – although his views come out of the nihilism found in 1850s and 1860s (rejecting familial ties and the idea of the soul), his act can effectively be reduced to the idea of the 'benefit of society'. For Nietzsche, as he writes in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 'usefulness was none of their [the nobles] concern!' (1994 [1887], p.12).

Yet Nabokov does incorporate *Nietzschean* traits into his parodied Dostoevskian figure. When Hermann refers to 'our eternal subjection to the circle in which we are all imprisoned' (Nabokov 2000 [1965], p.61), Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence is suggested. But it is not embraced in the way that Nietzsche would prescribe; it is not looked on favourably by a life-affirming *Übermensch*. Again, when Hermann asks 'Is it that I dare not make the leap?' (Nabokov 2000 [1965], p.13), Nabokov seems to be putting Nietzschean terminology in the mouth of a protagonist who is unable to fulfil Nietzsche's idea of 'going beyond'. Nietzsche's own declaration, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), that 'we must take a *bold leap* into a metaphysics of art, repeating our earlier assertion that existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon' (2003 [1872], p.115, my emphasis) triangulates Nabokov, his fiction, and Nietzsche, suggesting that Hermann is unable to 'go beyond'. Such a phrase reappears in Nabokov's own statement, in a letter to Katharine White in 1955, where he states that 'readers should learn to leap' (Nabokov 1991 [1989], p.158). Seeing these quotations together

[16] Also, it may be said that the novel's trajectory, especially its denouement, criticizes Raskolnikov's aspirations. See the conclusion of chapter four as well as Nabokov's comments in *Lectures on Russian Literature* (pp.109-115).

allows us to see that Hermann may be equated with a hesitant reader rather than the admired *Übermensch* figure that he sees himself as. *Despair* can therefore be seen to parody both the philosopher Nabokov respected and the novelist he lampooned. The authorial role of overcoming his predecessors can consist both of conflict and of tribute.

Nabokov and 'Anxiety of Influence'

In *Nabokov's Philosophy of Art*, Constantine Muravnik writes:

> It is only appropriate that Nabokov's playful admission of the only influence on him involved a philosopher. It is another story that this influence, the French philosopher Pierre Delalande, was the one whom Nabokov invented himself (SO 71) thus circumventing the annoying question of influence. (p.102)[17]

Muravnik's initial statement seems valid with reference to the relationship between German idealist philosophers and Nabokov. But Nabokov's playful claim can be read as much a ruse of distraction as it can a compliment to philosophy. Nabokov's anxiety over influence recalls that of another of his *bêtes noirs*, Sigmund Freud. In *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Richard Rorty argues that:

> Freud was the one person Nabokov resented in the same obsessive and intense way that Heidegger resented Nietzsche. In both cases, it was resentment of the precursor who may have already have written all one's best lines. (1989, pp.153-154)

[17] I agree with Muravnik's assertion that 'Nabokov's restraint in referring to Nietzsche directly and yet revealing an affinity to him on a number of essential points…may be accounted for not so much by Nabokov's oft-alleged "anxiety of influence" but rather by his direct following of Zarathustra's advice' (2010, p.79).

Interestingly, Leland de la Durantaye, in *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007), extends Rorty's point:

> Though this is something that Rorty does not discuss, there is a strong possibility that Freud believed that Nietzsche had already written all of *his* best lines – something that Freud was not unaware of and which motivated his refusal to reread Nietzsche later in life, or to approve of projected psychoanalytical analyses of Nietzsche proposed by his students. (2007, p.133)

Following on logically, there is a case for claiming that Nabokov feared *Nietzsche* may have written already written all of his best lines: that it is Nietzsche, for example, who was the 'rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel – and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride' (Nabokov 1990 [1973], p.193).

In *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), Harold Bloom writes that the Freud of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) carries out "'a double clinamen" which is "an ironic swerve away both from the pre-1919 Freud and from the visions of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche'" (1982, p. 129). In a similar fashion, Nabokov can be seen as carrying out his own 'double clinamen' in regard to Freud and Nietzsche's writings. The terminology is derived from Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry* (1973) yet he is by no means the only critic to highlight the possibilities, and burdens, of the past (T.S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1917) or Freud's *Principle* come to mind). Nabokov's relationship with Nietzsche however is not the same as that relationship with Dostoevsky or Freud. Where Nabokov openly lampoons Dostoevsky (as we have seen in *Despair* or in *Lectures on Russian Literature*) and incessantly attacks Freud, his relationship with Nietzsche seems to be one of respectful silence. Yet, as John

Burt Foster summarizes in *Heirs to Dionysus* (1981), influence is not to simply regurgitate what the 'precursor' poet has said:

> But both Bloom and the formalists have succeeded in showing that influence necessarily involves innovation. They ask that a number of critics consider how a writer transformed Nietzsche in any number of ways, such as revision or critique, the expansion or contraction of leading concepts, the absorption of motifs into new structures, and inspired misreadings or wilful failures of understanding. Hence my emphasis on metaphors of inheritance, which help to highlight these dynamic possibilities: if some people seek piously to preserve a legacy, others take possession of what a previous generation gives them and exploit it for their own purposes. Among those of Nietzsche's heirs who understood him best, this second attitude was to be almost mandatory. (1981, p.19)

Foster's suggestion that 'others take possession of what a previous generation gives them and exploit it for their own purposes' expresses what I take to be Nabokov's stance in regard to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. As we will see, rather than simply perpetuate the image of Falter (in 'Ultima Thule') as adhering exactly to the conception of Nietzsche's figure, I agree with Foster that '[Influence] must mean a great deal more than imitation and strict causality' (1981, p.23).

'Ultima Thule' – A Modification of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*

This position can be illustrated in an analysis of Nabokov's short story 'Ultima Thule' (1942). Again, Nabokov engages with the *Übermensch* but differently than in

Despair.[18] The character of Falter (meaning 'butterfly' in German) in the story is one of Nabokov's most intriguing characters, a figure who, it is claimed, has discovered 'the riddle of the universe' (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.509). The narrator-character of Sineusov, perhaps playing the part of the reader through his interrogation of Falter, is a learned man but envious of Falter's newly-acquired knowledge. One of the ironies of the story is whether or not Falter really *does* possess the secret of the universe or whether it is an elaborate hoax. It is this possibility of undiscovered knowledge that Sineusov is intrigued by, aided by Socratic responses from Falter that keep the narrator guessing and infuriated by his facetiousness.

Falter's characterization is very much in keeping with Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*. Before we are introduced to Falter properly, Sineusov tells us how Falter 'survived the bomb of truth [and] became a god' and how unlike he is to 'dust raised by the herd at sunset' (p.500). The Nietzschean terminology is evident not only in the use of 'herd'[19] but also because the suggestion of Nietzsche's 'death of God' coincides with Falter's newly-found *Übermensch* status. Sineusov talks of Falter being 'posthumously born' (p.501), something that Nietzsche himself describes in the section 'Why I Write Such Good Books' in *Ecce Homo*: 'My time has not yet come. Some are born posthumously' (p.39). Both figures, it is implied, have things to say that will not be understood in their lifetimes. Further, Sineusov describes himself as 'madly envious of Falter's basic trait: the passion and power of his "volitional substance" – poor Adolf put it in quite a different context' (p.504). Not only does this sentence invoke Nietzsche's idea of 'will to power' (something that the *Übermensch* must possess), but it may also be an allusion to Adolf Hitler – a figure known for his admiration of Nietzsche and

[18] The title of the short story refers to *Novaya Zemlya* - what ancient geographers thought of as the northernmost region of the habitable world as well as either a distant territory or remote goal or ideal.
[19] For more discussion of this term, see Peter R. Sedgwick's *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2009, pp.57-58).

misappropriation of his ideas.[20] Falter is also characterized as having 'seerhood' and is compared to a 'Tibetan sage' (p.509).[21] He does not believe in God - 'Since there is no need for God, no God exists' (p.517) – and thus foreshadows the lack of faith demonstrated by John Shade in *Pale Fire* ('My God died young. Theolatry I found / Degrading, and its premises, unsound. / No free man needs a God; but was I free?' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.32, lines 99-101).[22] Sineusov adds to Falter's *Übermensch* characterization by remarking, 'I think with envy that if my nerves were as *strong* as his, my soul as *resilient*, my *willpower as condensed*, he would have imparted to me nowadays the essence of the *superhuman* discovery he recently made' (p.505, my emphasis) and thinking that Falter 'stands *outside* our world, in the true reality' (p.500).[23] Such characteristics seem to place Falter in a higher order than the rest of humanity; a figure endowed with capacities not necessarily achievable to the rest of us. Indeed, Falter ridicules Sineusov's questioning procedure by saying that the interrogator's 'mind will construe any answer of mine exclusively from a *utilitarian* viewpoint' (p.520, my emphasis). Such a statement adds to Falter's characterization as a Nietzschean figure as well as stressing the marked difference between him and Sineusov.[24]

'Ultima Thule' seems to parallel *Despair* in parodying the *Übermensch* figure. The idea of Falter having 'found' or 'discovered' esoteric knowledge is an important example. For Nietzsche, the *Übermensch* is one who continually, and consciously, strives to overcome mankind and extreme difficulty in becoming who he is. The fact that Falter

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[20] See the general introduction, page 30, fn48 and page 197, fn15 for more detail regarding why Nabokov may have been reluctant to express an interest in Nietzsche.
[21] Nietzsche's derivation for Zarathustra comes from the figure of Zoroaster, an Iranian prophet who was the founder of Zoroastrianism.
[22] See p.132. See also Muravnik's *Nabokov's Philosophy of Art*, p.83, for more discussion of this comparison.
[23] In referring to 'humans' in the third person (p.515), Falter aligns himself with a higher order.
[24] See Zarathustra's mention of overcoming happiness of the greatest number in the 'Of the Higher Man' chapter in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (see page 187).

'*accidentally* solved the riddle of the universe' (p.509, my emphasis) seems at odds with Nietzsche's figure, suggesting that Falter has had no part to play in bringing about his own *Übermensch* status. Further, in describing himself as the monkey who pulls out the winning lottery numbers (p.514)[25] and remarking that 'it was by chance that it struck me' (p.515), Falter adds strength to the claim that his insight has not been obtained through will but by chance. Because this knowledge has seemingly been bestowed rather than 'earned' or worked at, Nabokov seems again to parody, or at least compromise, the representation of the *Übermensch* in suggesting that a figure has reached this status without being conscious of it. Further, after his revelation, Falter appears to have tremendous difficulty in carrying out simple tasks – he is unsteady on his feet, cannot open doors or operate light-switches, urinates on the floor, and inserts the wrong arm into his shirt (pp.507-522), suggesting that his newly-found knowledge results in catatonic states rather than a heightened sense of intellectual and physical being. Sentences such as 'found him [Falter] in the full glory of the life he had himself created by the power of his sculptitory will' (p.504) also seem too verbose not to suggest an

[25] The image of a 'monkey' seems to be a recurring image in Nabokov's fiction when talking about convention – we are reminded of Hermann's quote (see p.193), Nabokov's own statement (p.11, fn 8 of this chapter) as well as the 'bars of [Humbert's] cage' discussed in the last chapter (itself connoting Shade's statement in *Pale Fire* that 'we are most artistically caged' (Nabokov 2001 [1962], p.32). In 'Ultima Thule', the image is used on another three occasions: 'although you and I did have an inkling of why everything disintegrated at one furtive touch – words, conventions of everyday life, systems, persons – so, you know, I think laughter is some chance little ape of truth astray in our world' (p.503), 'chimpanzee' (p.512), and 'I happen to be that monkey' (p.514). This image is also included in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche writes: 'What is the ape to men? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And just so shall man be to the Superman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment' (Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], p.41). As will be discussed, it may be that Nabokov is suggesting the idea of Falter being both superhuman *and* backward; a mixture of extraordinary achievement and animal baseness. Such a mixture would arguably leave us in the realm of the 'human' but perhaps not in the typical sense. Interestingly, Kaufmann uses the same terminology in summating what Nietzsche thought of Plato: "the gulf separating Plato from the average man is greater than the cleft between the average man and a chimpanzee" (1974, p.151).

element of parody; too hyperbolic when connoting the underlying tenets of the *Übermensch*.

Despite the obvious ways in which Falter seems to personify, and parody, the *Übermensch* however, there are other signs that Nabokov is respectfully *modifying* Nietzsche's model. As we have seen, there are numerous instances of Falter being characterized as Nietzsche's figure. Sineusov claims that Falter 'did not aim high' (p.505). He describes him as a 'hard-nosed, not quite ordinary, but superficial man (for on the basis of our human core, we are divided into professionals and amateurs; Falter, like me, was an amateur)' (p.506). He wonders that 'a person like Falter, rather average when you come down to it, had actually and conclusively learned that at which no seer, no sorcerer had ever arrived' (p.510), and asks Falter 'How does superhuman knowledge of the ultimate truth combine in you with the adroitness of a banal sophist who knows nothing?' (p.521). The combined effect is of desperation to bring Falter down to his own level – that of the human – despite continuing to characterize him as different ('not quite ordinary', 'seer/sorcerer', 'superhuman'). It may be that Sineusov is intent on simply undermining Falter's supposed self-belief and wisdom because of envy – after all, Sineusov is 'attempt[ing] to go beyond' (p.520) whilst Falter has already achieved this. Yet it also brings about an image of a figure who blends the ideas of Nietzschean strength and, what could be called, Nabokovian weakness.

Falter is also shown as having both knowledge of social conventions and a distance from them. Sineusov's comment that Falter 'was like a man who had lost everything: respect for life, all interest in money and business, all customary and traditional feelings, everyday habits, manners, absolutely everything' (p.508). Yet, Falter's response to the fact that Sineusov partner is now dead - 'Oh well – may the kingdom of heaven be hers – isn't that what one is supposed to say in society?' (p.512) – is similar to Nietzsche's argument that the *Übermensch* will not function by the rules and regulations

that currently govern our world (2004 [1888], p.41). Such statements also suggest that Falter is living, and to some extent still governed, by a society not aligned with his new outlook. In a similar fashion, Falter does not seem to have completely thrown away his older conception of himself – in talking about his 'wretched humanity' (p.516), he seems at pains to reconcile his physical body, and older thinking, with the newly-found knowledge that he has acquired.

'Ultima Thule' also seems both to invoke Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati* and negate it. Where Zarathustra asks his potential followers 'To redeem the past and to transform every "It was" into an "I wanted it thus!"' (Nietzsche 1883-1885, p.161), Falter talks about uttering a 'distinct "Yes"' (p.504), having 'All your nerves answer Yes!' (p.515), living 'every moment like a cocked pistol', and 'unfailingly achieving today's aim, and tomorrow's' (p.505). However, in claiming that 'Yet, all I do is deny' (p.518), Falter also disclaims the possession of *amor fati*, recalling the dilemmas of Pnin and Luzhin discussed in chapter one. The same paradox surrounds the issue of death. Sineusov remarks:

> I received a note from Falter himself, from the hospital: he wrote, in a clear hand, that he would die on Tuesday, and that in parting he ventured to inform me that – here followed two lines which had been painstakingly and, it seemed, ironically, blacked out. I replied that I was grateful for his thoughtfulness and that I wished him interesting posthumous impressions and a pleasant eternity. (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.522)

Sineusov thinks of the 'blacked out' part of the letter as ironic given that he thinks that Falter may finally have conceded and revealed the 'riddle of the universe' after their exchange. Yet, it may in fact suggest the opposite. It may be that the blacked-out lines *are* Falter's point: where Sineusov thinks that the missing words are what matters, Falter may

be suggesting that darkness/nothingness may be *all* that such an 'afterworld' consists of. The blacked-out lines serve to undermine both Sineusov idea of some kind of Christian eternity *and* the kind of endless, infinite cycle invoked by Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence.

Nabokov's rewriting of the *Übermensch* figure, foibles and all, relates to a problem identified by Sineusov himself, that this 'type has been done to death' (2001 [1995], p.504). As we have seen with Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, the *Übermensch* figure has indeed been reincarnated throughout literature, whether in the Prometheus legend, Goethe's *Faust* (1808), Byron's 'Manfred' (1817), or Bill Hopkins' *The Leap* (1957). Nabokov chooses instead to appropriate, and undermine, the characteristics of the figure. Although his characters perpetuate the Nietzschean values of pride, daring, intelligence, or aestheticism, they are never exactly in line with Nietzsche's views.

The following passage from 'Ultima Thule' shows a particular way in which Nabokov's characters do not share all of the *Übermensch*'s values:

> One look at Falter was sufficient to understand that one need not expect from him any of the human feelings common in everyday life, that Falter had utterly lost the knack of loving anyone, *of feeling pity*, if only for himself, of experiencing kindness and, on occasion, compassion for the soul of another, of habitually serving, as best he could, the cause of good, if only that of his own standard, just as he had lost the knack of shaking hands or using his handkerchief. And yet he did not strike one as a madman – oh, no, quite the contrary! (pp.511-512, my emphasis)

The role of pity, so prominent here, clearly differentiates from Nietzsche. I want to argue that this difference over pity is not a marked departure from Nietzsche but an enactment of the very activity of 'overcoming' that Nietzsche recommends.

Pity

Nietzsche's views on pity are undeniably strong. Pity negates the 'Yes-saying' of life and encourages a looking back rather than a concentration of effort and energy into tasks of 'overcoming'. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche answers the questions '*What does your conscience say?*' and '*Where are your greatest dangers*?' with conspicuous brevity: 'You shall become the person you are' and 'In pity' (2001 [1882], pp.219-220) respectively. The idea of pity as an obstacle to 'becoming' oneself continues in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche portrays pity as something to be overcome, something which brought the downfall of God: 'Woe to all lovers who cannot surmount pity. God is dead; God has died of his pity for man' (p.114). Nietzsche's sustained attack on pity arises at least in part from its importance to Christian thought: 'What good is my pity? Is not pity the cross upon which he who loves man is nailed? But my pity is no crucifixion!' (p.238).[26]

If pity is generally a negative trait in Nietzsche's writings, it plays a more complex role in Nabokov's. Richard Rorty deliberates at length over the role of pity in Nabokov in suggesting reasons as to why the latter assembled general ideas only to attack them:

> The first, and most important, was an oversize sense of pity. His eccentrically large capacity for joy, his idiosyncratic ability to experience bliss so great as to seem incommensurable with the existence of suffering and cruelty, made him unable to tolerate the reality of suffering. Nabokov's capacity to pity others was as great as Proust's capacity to pity himself – a capacity which Proust was, amazingly, able to harness to his attempt at self-creation. Bliss began early for

[26] *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'pity' as: '1/ a feeling of sorrow and compassion caused by the sufferings of others. 2/ a cause for regret or disappointment; origin: ME: from OFr. *pite* 'compassion', from L. *pietas* 'piety" (p.1093). The derivation of the concept seems as abrasive to Nietzsche as the actual act.

> Nabokov. He had no occasion for self-pity and no need for self-creation. (1989, pp.154-155)[27]

Central to Rorty's case is that, although pity permeates Nabokov's work, there is no occasion where the latter appears to indulge in self-pity: '[Nabokov] seems never to have suffered a loss for which he blamed himself, never to have despised, distrusted, or doubted himself' (1989, pp.154-155). This persona relates both to chapter one's discussion of survivor guilt and chapter two's argument that Nabokov presented an implausibly imperturbable façade. In his lecture on Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), for example, Nabokov writes: '*Beauty plus pity* – that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual' (1980, p.251). His claim seems to refute the possibility of us experiencing pity in the way that we normally would. Instead, Nabokov describes pity in a rhetorical fashion in order to suggest that it is the death of beauty that we pity rather than death itself. The distinction is crucial; it is the difference between 'pity that' and the presumably more virtuous 'pity for'.

The ambiguity can act as a fault line in the criticism on Nabokov's moral outlook which I discussed in chapter four. For example, Leona Toker summarizes Nabokov as showing that 'the education of the senses means learning to perceive not only the "useless" beauty but also the "irrelevant" pain of another human being, that which

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[27] Rorty continues:

> [Nabokov's] otherworldly metaphysics is what one might imagine being written by a contemporary of Plato's, writing in partial imitation of, and partial reaction against, the *Phaedo* – a contemporary who did not share Plato's need for a world in which he could not feel shame, *but did need a world in which he would not have to feel pity*. (1989, p.156, my emphasis)

appeals to pity' (Toker in Connolly 2005, p.236).[28] Other Nabokov scholars argue that small clues (such as the curiosity or details that Rorty mentions) reveal his true, if sometimes carefully concealed, respect for pity as conventionally understood. For example, Durantaye, drawing on Nabokov's own praise for the 'divine throb of pity' (1980, p.87) which is necessary for an understanding of Dickens, claims: 'The activities Nabokov imagined proper to the artist were curiosity, empathy, pity' (2007, p.55). As would be expected in Nabokov, there are links to pity and 'divine details' strewn amongst his work if we look hard enough (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.152). Boyd, similarly, claims that Nabokov 'sought pity in particulars' (1990, p.92). Yet it is hard to square these accounts with Nabokov's approach to pity elsewhere, for example in his comments on Dostoevsky's 'gloating pity for people – pity for the humble and the humiliated – this pity was purely emotional and his special lurid brand of the Christian faith by no means prevented him leading a life extremely removed from his teachings' (1981, p.138). It seems as if Nabokov engages with pity but not in the accepted way of other novelists or indeed other people in general; that he criticises the exercise of pity while admiring the concept itself.

Nietzsche's own writings offer a way to simultaneously conquer and develop pity. In *The Gay Science*, he suggests the possibility of cultivating pity rather than simply eradicating it: '*What we are at liberty to do*. – One can dispose of one's drives like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis' (2001 [1882], p.225). Nabokov's instrument of Nietzschean striving is 'verbal art' and he uses this instrument

[28] Toker's suggestion effectively argues against Nabokov's supposed solipsistic side. In describing another's pain as 'irrelevant' is true insofar as it is not actually *our* pain. Yet the capacity to pity demonstrates an awareness of the pain of those outside our immediate being.

to overcome Nietzsche himself, effectively transfiguring the latter through revision and, as we shall see, resolving the ambiguous status of pity in Nabokov's art.

Pity as an abstract idea has a high status in Nabokov's art (Nabokov 1980, p.251) but a low status when manifested by real readers in their emotional engagement with characters (Nabokov 1980, p.4). Whether through the bullying narrator of *Pnin*, the feeling of loss that Fyodor experiences in *The Gift*, or the hopeless predicament of Cincinnatus in *Invitation*, Nabokov frequently arouses feelings of pity in his fiction but in a peculiar fashion. In *Bend, Sinister*, for example, Krug is a unique philosopher who is pitted against the 'party of the average man', led by Paduk (disparagingly referred to as the Toad) and subjugated to the realm of '*poshlust*' and horrifying egalitarianism.[29] Muravnik believes that 'Krug is Nietzschean in his being deliberately non-systematic, "so good at creative destruction"' of existing philosophical systems and at the same time so far from insisting on his own new system, which would replace the old and thus lay hold on unalterable truth' (2010, p.415). At the end of the novel, Nabokov alludes to the horrific suffering of Adam Krug's son through a case of mistaken identity caused by a misplaced file. Yet, the narrator of *Bend, Sinister* opts to relieve Krug senior of his suffering by intruding into the narrative: 'it was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light – causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate' (Nabokov 2010 [1947], p.171). Krug's madness is induced as if to relieve him of the horror of reflecting on the death of his own son. Further, the presence of the 'anthropomorphic deity' that saves Krug from suffering suggests a unique instance of Nabokov displaying

[29] The opening of *Bend, Sinister*, with its 'sentence fragments for mental fragments' (Rampton 1984, p.36), suggests Krug's deviant language mimics his own individual experience. The only other professional philosopher in Nabokov's fiction is Van Veen in *Ada, or Ardor* yet Fyodor in *The Gift*, John Shade in *Pale Fire*, Vadim Vadimovich in *Look at the Harlequins!* and Hugh Person in *Transparent Things* are very much philosophically-engaged characters.

pity in person. Yet, his intervening presence prevents readers from fully pitying Krug by bringing the narrative to a close rather than allowing time for readers to pity the protagonist's suffering. Nabokov rescues Krug both from his own sorrow *and* from the reader's pity. The pity of the reader in fact is merely an addition to the character's sufferings, one which the author, through his own pity, may wish to have spared the character. As Ellen Pifer writes, 'the techniques of self-declared artifice prevent us from identifying with Adam Krug and his world' (1980, p.95). Something similar occurs at the end of Nabokov's short story 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia' (see chapter one, pp.73-75). In both cases the apparent subjugation of pity to aestheticism recalls Nietzsche's idea of life being justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon; that suffering cannot only be used for aesthetic means but (apparently) diffused by it also. In this way, art is an expression both of 'pity that' and 'pity for'; through artistic means the author, motivated by pity, can spare the character the humiliation of the reader's pity.

In *Lolita*, our pity, at least in the final sections and in part, is directed at the figure who has *caused* the suffering of an innocent victim rather than the victim. Again, Nabokov does not allow us to pity in the way that it would normally happen in fiction or in 'real life'. Nabokov's own intense pity for Dolores [Nabokov 2000 [1955], p.14, p.30, p.38) drives him to protect her from the reader's more sentimental and intrusive pity and diverts us to the more challenging task of deciding if, or how much, to pity Humbert.[30] This puts the reader in a difficult, even frustrating, position - especially when we see Dolores pitying Humbert.

Nabokov thus denies us some of the responses that we would normally look for in literature. Characters such as Hazel Shade in *Pale Fire*, Lucette in *Ada* or, indeed, the barber of Kasbeam in *Lolita*, for example, are relatively minor in terms of narrative space but particularly major in that our 'normal' responses to them are not allowed to be fully

[30] See chapter four, pages 157-158, 174, and 182.

indulged. In Nabokov's world, it seems pity is both an essential condition of life and a barrier to affirming it. For example, if humans were to pity every human death (not to mention those of animals), our constant grieving would act as a barrier to us living, and enjoying, life.[31] Thus, it seems that limitation of pity is necessary for survival (yet it is hard to discuss this without appearing to suggest that human beings are cruel or 'immoral').[32] In denying the full extent of pity, it allows more chance for life-affirmation; more time to experience wonder and uniqueness rather than to dwell on regrets or those that we have lost. Ironically, although Nietzsche's *Übermensch* cannot allow for pity, Nabokov's conception of the *Übermensch can* sometimes have this response. Indeed, for Nabokov as author figure, pity for characters is integral and a strength – something that the narrator of *The Defense* alludes to in when 'that it seemed as if without this pity inside her there would be no life either' (1964, p.118).[33] In opposition to Muravnik's claim that, in presenting 'otherwise sympathetic and often even admirable characters as solipsistic, escapist, and ultimately self-destructive', Nabokov 'makes his reader face an ethical conundrum requiring a truly Zarathustrian resolve to overcome pity' (2010, p.95), I argue that Nabokov actively engages with the topic rather than overcome it, but in a highly original and unexpected way.

Author as the *next Übermensch*: Nabokov's Enchanter

In 'Good Readers and Good Writers', an essay included in *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov argues that there are 'three points of view from which a writer can be considered' (p.5) – as a storyteller, a teacher, and an enchanter. The storyteller he defines as someone we turn to for entertainment or emotional excitement, whereas the teacher,

[31] See Stanley Cohen's *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).
[32] We are reminded of Toker's use of 'irrelevant' here (see page 211, fn28).
[33] Being asked 'And so the password is - ?' by Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, Shade replies, 'Pity' (Nabokov 2000 [1962], p.179).

who has 'a slightly different though not necessarily higher mind', gives us moral education and direct knowledge, and is subcategorised further as 'Propagandist, moralist, prophet – this is the rising sequence' (Nabokov 1980, p.5).

This is interesting not only in that it invokes the prophet figure reminiscent of Zarathustra, but that the figure comes *after* 'moralist'. Yet, the teacher is only the second of the triad. The last view, Nabokov claims, is that of an enchanter - 'Finally, and above all, a great writer is always a great enchanter' (1980, p.5). Nabokov goes on to describe the 'enchanter' as the highest form of storyteller. For Zarathustra, the *Übermensch* is the highest form that mankind can take. An amalgam is created between Nabokov himself, his idea of the enchanter, and the figure of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*:

> Finally, and above all, a great writer is always a great enchanter and it is here that we come to the really exciting part when we try to grasp the individual magic of his genius and to study his style, the imagery, the pattern of his novels. (Nabokov 1980, p.6)

The great writer, enchanter and *Übermensch* all seem to question conventionality, privilege the great individual and aesthetic perspective, emphasise the importance of raising ourselves 'higher', and treat art as the ultimate action. Yet the three are not identical – Nabokov may be suggesting that his character goes further than Nietzsche's figure in unifying strength *and* weakness.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered Nabokov as Nietzsche's obediently rebellious disciple, with a selection of his texts interpreted as in dialogue with the 'master'. Specifically, I aimed to show both the similarities, and the divergences, between Nabokov's protagonists and Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*. In doing so, I

have demonstrated that Nabokov seems to continually reproduce figures aligned, to some extent, with the values of Nietzsche's figure yet almost always lacking the complete embodiment of all Nietzschean tenets. In one of his protagonists' divergence, I argued that Nabokov appears to be parodying the figure of the *Übermensch*. In another, the divergence is more like modification. These characters' creation corresponds to the way Nabokov also both attends to, and departs from, Nietzsche in his representation of pity. For Nietzsche, pity was incompatible with *Übermensch* status. But for Nabokov himself, pity is central, to the extent that the author's pity for the character protects the character from, and denies the reader the sentimental pleasure of, the reader's pity. Nabokov's world is continually engaged with pity, in contrast to Rorty's view that Nabokov's world is somehow bereft of it (see page 211, fn 27). It is an engagement that seems antithetical to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. In his divergence from Nietzsche, Nabokov surpasses him in a very Nietzschean fashion by pointing to a new kind of *Übermensch* – someone combining Nietzschean values with Nabokovian weaknesses. Nabokov and Nietzsche share (in the depiction of protagonists and the *Übermensch* respectively) a will to 'go beyond' the everyday customs of man. As R.J. Hollingdale claims:

> Nietzsche embodied this conception of a non-metaphysical transcendence in the *Übermensch*: the 'superman' who is at once the actuality and symbol of sublimated will to power and thus the supreme advocate of life-affirmation through acceptance of the totality of life. (Hollingdale in Nietzsche 2003, p.11).

Hollingdale neatly summarizes the importance of the *Übermensch* as the embodiment of all of Nietzsche's philosophy; a figure who is able to subsume all of what Nietzsche thought as value-laden. As we have seen, Nabokov's protagonists are sometimes unable to uphold all of these values and so are stricken with what I have called Nabokovian

weaknesses. Hollingdale also raises the notion of 'non-metaphysical transcendence'; an ability to 'go beyond' but firmly in the realms of the material world. This will now be explored in the final chapter where I challenge the notion that Nabokov's 'otherworld' is a spiritual realm and, instead, argue that it is fixed resolutely in the material.

Chapter Six: 'The Other World'

'This belief in ghosts seems to me something earthly, linked with the very lowest earthly sensations and not at all the discovery of a heavenly America' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.283)

It is easy to see why some critics identify the idea of an 'otherworld' as one of Nabokov's preoccupations. Studies such as W.W. Rowe's *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (1981) or Vladimir E. Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1995), for example, demonstrate the extent of Nabokov's engagement. Already a difficult term in Russian, *potustoronnost* has been anglicized into various terms such as 'the hereafter', 'transcendence', and 'the beyond'.[1] Yet one of the main problems with Nabokov's interest is the assumption of readers and critics that it points to another realm, distanced from ours in both time and space (often coming *after* the time in which we experience this life). In addition, references to an 'otherworld' of some sort or another are widely dispersed and varied, even conflicting. In texts such as 'The Vane Sisters' (1959) and *Transparent Things* (1972), the presence of ghosts is a distinct possibility. Yet, in *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938), doubts over whether Cincinnatus has been executed or not - '[he] made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him' (Nabokov 2001 [1959], p.191) - suggest that he has entered a more mysterious, spiritual dimension. Timofey Pnin's feelings of being 'porous and pregnable' (p.17), mentioned in chapter one, and of having 'an awful feeling of sinking and melting into one's physical surroundings' (p.109) suggest yet another kind of otherworldliness. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Bend,*

[1] In Russian, потусторонный мир means 'the other world' (*The Oxford Russian Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.390). Nabokov's wife, Vera, claimed that it not only 'saturated everything he wrote' but 'gave him his imperturbable love of life [*zhizneradostnost*] and lucidity even during life's most difficult trials' (Alexandrov 1995, p.4). This 'imperturbable love of life' is reminiscent of Nietzsche's concept of '*amor fati*' (discussed in chapter one).

Sinister's Adam Krug is saved from the pain of losing his son by an 'anthropomorphic deity' (p.171) from an 'otherworld' where his fictional creator resides. So, Nabokov's concept of *potustoronnost* may be a blending of heterogeneous ideas – such as dualism, reality, consciousness, language, and death – rather than a straightforward account of the supernatural.

In a review of Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Brian Boyd shows how focussing on Nabokov's otherworldly references can be misleading: 'He [Nabokov] was interested in the physical world, in the world of heart and imagination, *and* in whatever might lie beyond the human mind. To stress one of these as fundamental distorts and reduces Nabokov' (1992, pp.477-78). Boyd continues, 'Readers admire Nabokov's gift for vivid detail, his evident love of the things of *this world*' (ibid, my emphasis). But critical work often concentrates on trying to construct a coherent metaphysics of Nabokov's otherworld. Ellen Pifer, for example, remarks 'how vociferously Nabokov rejected theological notions of a 'Next-Installment World' (1980, p.155), while Alexandrov claims that Nabokov had some kind of '*sui generis* faith in a transcendent, timeless, and beneficent realm that appears to affect everything in the material world and to provide for personal immortality' (Alexandrov in Connolly 1997, p.93). No critic that I am aware of tries to reconcile these contradictory positions.

This chapter attempts to fill this gap between Nabokov the materialist and Nabokov the otherworldly by exploring the idea of the 'otherworld' in his work in light of the Nietzschean notion of *earthly* value. For Nietzsche, the concept of an otherworld, like the concept of pity discussed in the last chapter, was disturbing, one that diminished value for things earthly with deplorable effect on the actions and ambitions of people in *this* life as a result. Looking predominantly at Nabokov's last Russian novel *The Gift* (1938), this chapter will examine the extent to which perception affords the protagonist Fyodor a chance to experience what I call a 'transformed world' through conscious

contemplation of the material world around him. I argue that Nabokov's deep love of the material, through the experiences of perception, makes fresh, defamiliarizes and thereby transforms *our* material world so far as to turn it into an 'other' world, rather than an afterworld or afterlife.[2]

I do not gloss over the fact that Nabokov's writings and own remarks seem to suggest an interest, or even a belief, in ghosts and the ghostly.[3] But I suggest that this blended with Nietzsche's wholehearted belief in this world. Nabokov, I argue, introduces the spiritual as a way to critique materialist scepticism and everyday understanding of perception, 'debased coins' of twentieth-century thought. Nabokov asks his reader to look within, not beyond, the everyday; this is where the pinnacle of consciousness resides. Nabokov's modification of the Nietzschean view of the 'other world' again both follows and surpasses the master. Nabokov combines the material *and* the transcendent through perception as an act of artistic will, surpassing his predecessor as Nietzsche himself commands in *Ecce Homo*: 'one repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil' (p.6).

The Gift

For English-speaking readers, *The Gift*, composed in Russian, is the least well known and discussed of Nabokov's major novels. Ostensibly, *The Gift* is a traditional realist narrative; a *Künstlerroman* concerned with the development of the young Russian émigré writer in Berlin, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev. Split into five chapters, the novel

[2] Similarly, Muravnik argues that 'Nabokov offers "material transcendence" as the alternative to the otherworldly approach' (p.18), albeit in just one poem, 'Fame'. See p.27 of Muravnik's thesis also.

[3] One such example exists in Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1967), where he mentions a 'thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal' (2000 [1967], p.110). Brian Boyd's argument that Hazel's ghost and the Atalanta butterflies in *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* is a further example of Nabokov's interest in spirits.

deals initially with Fyodor's childhood and his early poetry, as well as his planned attempt to write a biography of his father, the famous explorer and naturalist Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev. *The Gift* also introduces us to Fyodor's friendship with Alexander and Mme. Chernyshevski and his thoughts on their deceased son Yasha (whose ghost appears to haunt his father) and his development as a writer, moving from 'Pushkin Avenue to Gogol Street' (Nabokov 2000 [1963], p.136). Then, in apparent opposition to Fyodor's literary and moral leanings, he embarks on a biography of the real-life nineteenth-century materialist writer and philosopher N.G. Chernyshevski, which serves as chapter four of the novel. The last chapter deals with Fyodor's ambition to write his own novel about all this, a self-reflexive element that runs through the entire text, and his developing relationship with Zina Mertz, the daughter of his second landlady.

Although all of the events described in *The Gift* are compatible with realist narrative, the novel continually engages with the theme of the 'otherworld'. Nabokov's foreword to the novel describes it 'as much of a phantasm as most of my other worlds' (2001 [1963], p.9). It is interesting that Nabokov describes his texts as 'other worlds' rather than evoke the one-word phrase 'otherworld'. Splitting the latter term into two has interpretational consequences in that it suggests other *continuous* worlds rather than a spiritual world or a world that comes after ours. This has lead critics such as Neil Cornwell to claim that the novel has 'various dealings with a putative spirit world', one where 'Modernist epistemological preoccupation brushes against 'ontological flickers, glimpses of the unusual lining of life, or perhaps the beyond' (2002). The idea of ghostly or unreal conversation, for example, permeates the text, whether it be imagined conversations with those no longer living (Fyodor imagining Alexander Chernyshevski imagining Yasha in chapter one for example or the conversation between Yasha's ghost and Alexander Chernyshevski, the "Chairman of the Society for Struggle With the Other World'" (pp.88-89)) or Fyodor's imagining of a conversation between himself and the

writer Koncheyev (pp.70-75). The otherworldly is also consistently evoked through the evocation of Fyodor's late father, a figure who his son continually imagines returning to his family.

This blend of the real and the imaginary is realised in the narration. *The Gift* switches quickly from direct speech to free indirect speech, from first person to third person, often without warning.[4] For some critics, this complicates the relative status of reality and imagination in the novel. Alexandrov, for example, claims that

> Such unsignalled transitions between events that are real on the one hand, and dreamed or imagined on the other have the important ancillary effect of blurring the distinction between imagination and reality. By initially placing both on the same level in the text, and by describing what happens in his mind's eye in the same detail as what he actually perceives, Fyodor grants a mode of reality to imagined events that persists even when their true nature is revealed. (1991, p.129)

I develop this suggestion that, in *The Gift*, Nabokov asks readers to question the rigidity with which they are able to discern the real from the imagined; the everyday from the 'otherworldly'. Criticism on the subject of the otherworld in Nabokov's fiction is usually quick to differentiate between the everyday and the otherworld – the latter being a spiritual realm coming after our time spent on earth.[5] Yet, *The Gift* seems to revolve around 'The living connection between my [Fyodor's] divine excitement and my human world' (p.143), something connected to Fyodor's constant concern of perception of the

[4] See chapter one of *The Gift*, pp.70-75. The imagined conversation happens again whilst Fyodor is in the *Grunewald* (this time with a young German). The style of narration acts to blend our world with the imaginary through its lack of demarcation. Such playful blurring of fiction and reality is one of the main tropes of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*.
[5] Donald Barton Johnson, for example, asks whether 'Nabokov's 'two-world' cosmology is something that suggests incommensurable realms' (1985, p.155).

natural and manmade worlds (Cornwell 2002). I will look at how Nabokov consciously creates an 'other' world through heightened perception. In doing so, he can combine otherworldliness with Nietzschean materialism. For Nietzsche, the concept of the 'otherworld' negates the value of all the things in this world: 'I entreat you, my brothers, *remain true to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak of superterrestrial hopes!' (1969 [1883-1885], p.42). Yet the concept arises a number of times in his work, suggesting, as some critics have argued, that it let him refute and resist the cultural and religious interpretations of the otherworld, just as he uses biblical rhetoric to ironically undermine Christian beliefs. For Nietzsche, the otherworld is that of the immaterial; for Nabokov, the otherworld is that of the material. This is how Nabokov manages to create other worlds in a Nietzschean fashion; his other worlds are materially continuous with this one.

Perception as gift *and* burden

Perception, I suggest, is the vehicle which makes this possible. It is a constant motif in Nabokov's writing – whether in Smurov's preoccupation with eyesight in the novelette *The Eye* (1930) or his account of Gogol's vision in *Lectures on Russian Literature*.[6] In *The Gift*, Nabokov bestows Fyodor an unusually keen eye for detail; a 'gift of sight' (p.15) that Fyodor lets us know about throughout the novel: 'What vision the author has!' (p.32), 'Everything that had just been imagined with such pictorial clarity' (p.78), 'he saw with ineffable vividness' (p.81), 'I can conjure up with particular clarity' (p.111), 'the

[6] The anecdote in *The Gift* concerning the Kirghiz fairy tale – '"That", she said, "is a human eye – it wants to encompass everything in the world"' (pp.126-127) – is reminiscent of the hubristic desire of Smurov in *The Eye*. In his *Nikolai Gogol* (1961), Nabokov remarks: 'As in the scaling of insects the wonderful color effect may be due not to the pigment of the scales but to their position and refractive power, so Gogol's genius deals not in the intrinsic qualities of computable chemical matter ... but in the mimetic capacities of the physical phenomena produced by almost intangible particles of recreated life' (p.56).

rays of a sun that is my own and yet is incomprehensible to me, strike them and equalize them in the same burst of light' (p.45). This gift of vision cannot be broken down into real and metaphorical vision. For example, it is claimed of Fyodor's youthful attempts at Georgian poetry at the start of the novel that they are:

> miniatures, but they are executed with a phenomenally delicate mastery that brings out clearly every hair, not because everything is delineated with an excessively selective touch, but because the presence of the smallest features is involuntarily conveyed to the reader by the integrity and reliability of a talent that assures the author's observance of all the articles of the artistic covenant. (p.32)

The perception of 'every hair' cannot be distinguished here from the artistic perception which lets him render this experience in words. Fyodor's nascent talent is equated with an 'artistic covenant', something that recalls Hermann's comment in *Despair* that 'what the artist perceives is, primarily, the *difference* between things' (Nabokov 2000 [1936], p.44). Through the lens of artistic contemplation, Fyodor's ability to see and comprehend is equated with viewing the world differently, a gift. When noticing a shopkeeper's buttons and bald spot whilst buying tobacco in chapter one for example, Fyodor remarks that 'Yes, all my life I shall be getting that extra little payment in kind to compensate my regular overpayment for merchandize foisted on me' (p.13). Later in the novel, perpetuating the idea that his sight affords him a new way of looking at the world, Fyodor asks:

> Where shall I put all these gifts with which the summer morning rewards me – and only me? Save them up for future books? Use them immediately for a practical handbook: *How to Be Happy?* Or getting

> deeper, to the bottom of things, behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green grease-paint of the foliage? For there really is something, there is something! And one wants to offer thanks but there is no one to thank. The list of donations already made: 10,000 days – from Person Unknown. (p.299)

Although Fyodor links his perception to reward and happiness, the passage also suggests Vladimir Propp's idea of a 'donor' – someone who has given Fyodor his perceptual abilities.[7] At the beginning of chapter two, Fyodor remarks that 'he got the impression that all these cold, slippery eyes [were] looking at him as if he were carrying an illegal treasure (which his gift was effectively)' (p.79). The idea that Fyodor possesses something rare and precious ('treasure'), as well as something not sanctioned by others ('illegal'), serves to suggest that his gift has value. This gift is his *perception* – an idea strengthened by the mention of others' 'cold, slippery, eyes' in the passage above. Similarly, when Fyodor remarks that he 'was already looking for the creation of something new, something still unknown, genuine, corresponding fully to the gift which he felt like a burden inside himself' (p.91), it appears that 'looking' and 'gift' is exactly the correspondence he is referring to. Fyodor's thinking is that 'destiny enriches the life of observant men' (p.184) - a group to which he feels he fully belongs.[8] In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov revisits the idea that through thorough, conscious perception, his verbal art is able to render the earthly as both beautiful and 'otherly':

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[7] The hidden implied donor of Fyodor's gift is obviously Nabokov himself – something that Fyodor is never made aware of (unlike Krug in *Bend, Sinister*). Nabokov's own interest in perceptual matters strengthens the idea that he has bestowed Fyodor with his own perceptual talents.

[8] Fyodor's disparaging comments towards the 'unobservant' suggest that their lack of vision prevents them from experiencing the world fully (see p.32 and p.288 of *The Gift*). Similarly, in Nabokov's short story 'An Affair of Honour', Leontiev is referred to as 'A pessimist and, like all pessimists, a ridiculously unobservant man' (2001 [1995], p.218).

> As I focused my eyes upon a kidney-shaped flower bed (and noted one pink petal lying on the loam and a small ant investigating its decayed edge) or considered the tanned midriff of a birch trunk where some hoodlum had stripped it of its papery, pepper-and-salt bark, I really believed that all this would be perceived by the reader through the magic veil of my words such as *utrachennïe rozï* or *zadumchivoy beryozï*. (2000 [1967], pp.171-172)[9]

Yet Fyodor also describes this gift as a burden. Rather than be completely happy with the way in which he comprehends the things that he sees, it is as if he incurs a responsibility because of it. It may be that viewing suffering is worse with heightened perception or it may be that comprehending the intricacy of his perceptible world implies design and therefore a creative's obligations to his creator. For example, Fyodor's meticulous observation at times leads to speculation over a Maker's hand, for example nature's mimicry as 'precisely for the intelligent eyes of man' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.105). Fyodor's comment that he 'suddenly felt – in this glassy darkness – the strangeness of life, the strangeness of its magic, as if a corner of it had been turned back for an instant and he had glimpsed its unusual lining' (p.169) illustrates a kind of reluctant belief in something (not necessarily religious) but existing simultaneously in the same material fabric he is conscious of inhabiting. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes: 'But that 'other world', that inhuman, dehumanized world which is a heavenly Nothing, is well hidden from men' (p.59). Zarathustra plays on the common idea of there being only being glimpses of the otherworld available to us. For Nietzsche, this fosters more searching which perpetuates the error. Nietzsche elaborates on this in *The Gay Science*:

[9] The English translations of the Russian phrases here are 'lost roses' and 'thoughtful/pensive birch trees'. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov mentions that 'Poetry involves the mysteries of the irrational perceived through rational words' (1990 [1973], p.55) – something closely aligned to his overall project of perception and the 'otherly'.

> Under the rule of religious ideas, one has got used to the idea of 'another world (behind, below, above)'... But what led to the belief in 'another world' in primordial times was *not* a drive or need, but an *error* in the interpretation of certain natural events, an embarrassing lapse of the intellect. (2001 [1882], p.131)

For Nabokov, speculation on another world returns to this primordial phase but arises not from an error of interpretation but from an overly developed sense of perception.

The earthly as sole source of the ineffable

This approach can be seen as an ironic, and Nietzschean, affirmation of the wonder of physicality or materiality. In the introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, R.J. Hollingdale claims that Nietzsche's task is 'to undermine morality by exposing its non-moral basis and rationality by exposing its irrational basis; likewise to abolish the 'higher' world, the metaphysical, by accounting for all its supposed manifestations in terms of the human, phenomenal, and even animal world' (Hollingdale in Nietzsche 1969 [1883-1885], p.13). Similarly, as we progress through *The Gift*, a tendency for the otherworld to be described in materialist metaphors becomes increasingly obvious. In chapter one, Fyodor describes 'a certain extraordinary thing that happened to me as I was recovering from a particularly severe case of pneumonia' (p.28). Reflecting that he felt himself 'evolving an incredible lucidity' (p.28), Fyodor imagines a scenario involving his mother going to the shop and buying him an ordinary Faber pencil. It transpires that, in rousing Fyodor from his sickly slumber, his mother had indeed been to the shop and bought him a Faber pencil - albeit a 'display giant' a yard long. Fyodor reveals his wonder at this 'clairvoyant spell' – something he seems keen not to entertain given that he had 'plugged up certain chinks with bread' (p.29). This phrase, however, equates his ability to see into

the future with the idea of seeing through a long or narrow crack or opening.[10] Thus, although Fyodor describes an 'otherworldly' dimension, he does so by using the material metaphors of 'chink' and 'bread'. Fyodor uses similar metaphors in describing the effect that Yasha's death has on his father:

> the partition dividing the room temperature of reason from the infinitely ugly, cold, ghostly world into which Yasha had passed suddenly crumbled, and to restore it was impossible, so that the gap had to be draped in makeshift fashion and one tried not to look at the stirring folds. Ever since that day the other world had begun to seep into his life… (p.52)

The immaterial and ghostly world is associated with the words 'ugly', 'cold', 'crumbled', 'gap', 'draped', 'stirring', 'folds', and 'seep'. These material metaphors combine the natural and manmade,[11] while the use of 'partition', 'crumbled', 'draped' and 'seep' suggests both division and an unwelcome continuity between worlds.[12] In addition, Fyodor claims that

> he felt that all this skein of random thoughts, like everything else as well – the seams and sleaziness of the spring day, the ruffle of the air, the coarse, variously intercrossing threads of confused sounds – was but the

[10] This idea is revisited in *Speak, Memory* where Nabokov describes 'our existence… [as] a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness' (2001 [1967], p.17).
[11] It is perhaps obvious that tangibility informs the thinking of the materialist philosopher Alexander Chernyshevski – in chapter four of the novel, we are told that Chernyshevski thinks tangible objects act 'much more strongly than the abstract concept of it' (p.223). The idea of articulating the otherworld through the material is strengthened by the idea of Alexander Chernyshevski being 'afraid of space, or more exactly, he was afraid of slipping into a different dimension – and in order to avoid perishing he clung continuously to the safe, solid – with Euclidean pleats – skirt of Pelageya Nikolaevna Fanderflit (nee Pypin)' (p.271).
[12] Fyodor's negative description of the otherworld as 'infinitely cold, ugly' suggests something that he is fearful of.

> reverse side of a magnificent fabric, on the front of which there gradually formed and became alive images invisible to him. (p.287)

The material metaphor of fabric seems to indicate that the two 'worlds' are woven from the same physical thread but with two different patterns.[13] The idea of the two worlds seeping into one another is referred to again by Fyodor towards the end of the novel:

> the unfortunate image of a 'road' to which the human mind has become accustomed (life as a kind of journey) is a stupid allusion: we are not going anywhere, we are sitting at home. The other world surrounds us always and is not at all the end of some pilgrimage. In our earthly house, windows are replaced by mirrors; the door, until a given time, is closed; but air comes in through the cracks. (Nabokov 2001 [1963], pp.282-283)

There are several instances here that show the earthly and what has, from Fyodor's viewpoint, mistakenly been called the spiritual, dovetailing. The 'house' image suggests that our world and the otherworld can be represented as concentric circles (with the former on the inside and the latter on the outside). The fact that, in our 'house', 'windows are replaced by mirrors' implies that the other is found by looking *in* rather than out. The claim that 'we are not going anywhere' further undermines the notion that we are on some kind of linear journey. The claim that the 'other world surrounds us always' again shows the earthly and spiritual as continuous. The 'door' and 'cracks'

[13] See the metaphors of 'corner' and 'lining' quoted earlier. In his essay 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense', Nabokov writes: 'The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible' (1980, p.379).

metaphors, however, seem to suggest the blurring of these two worlds, perhaps an indication that the concealed can eventually be *revealed* if contemplated sufficiently.[14]

Yet, the phrase 'until a given time' raises problems with this theory. Ostensibly, 'given time' refers to an afterlife – a change of location occurring at our death. This would suggest that Nabokov's conception is related to the aspect of progressive time.[15] Yet, it may be possible that we are able to consciously open the door for ourselves *before* death in permitting ourselves to contemplate the outside from within through aesthetic perception in an effort of will. Fyodor is explicit that the otherworld surrounds us always, and echoes his previous remarks on how it makes its presence known (note the use of tangibility again – 'windows', 'mirrors', 'door', 'air', 'cracks'). Fyodor's talk of the otherworld may seem profoundly anti-Nietzschean. Yet his rejection of outworn metaphors for the otherworld, recalls Nietzsche, especially in the following passage from *Human, All Too Human*:

> *Metaphysical world.* It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; one can hardly dispute the absolute possibility of it. We see all things by means of our human head, and cannot chop it off; though it remains to wonder what would be left of the world if indeed it had been cut off…But all that has produced metaphysical assumptions and made them *valuable*, *horrible*, *pleasurable* to men thus far is passion, error, and self-deception. The very worst methods of knowledge, not the very best, have taught us to believe in them. When one has disclosed these methods to be the foundation of

[14] Nabokov's rendering of the spiritual through nature elements - 'but air comes in through the cracks' – appears to be rather crude pathetic fallacy yet may simply be, for him, the closest earthly analogue to the spiritual/unearthly.

[15] Nabokov's relationship with time is treated similarly – in asking us to jettison our habitual belief and contemplate timelessness rather than an afterlife, he appears to view the concept as banal or clichéd. See *Speak, Memory* (2001 [1967], pp.109-110).

> all extant religions and metaphysical systems, one has refuted them! (p.18)[16]

Nabokov, like Nietzsche, draws attention to the blind customs that shape our metaphysics.

Otherworld – Doubt and Belief

Nabokov can also be seen as a Nietzschean in the matter of metaphysical doubt or belief. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche makes the following remark in the paragraph entitled 'Have I Been Understood?':

> The concept 'God' invented as the antithetical concept to life – everything harmful, noxious, slanderous, the whole mortal enmity against life brought into one terrible unity! The concept of 'the Beyond', 'real world' invented so as to deprive of value the *only* world which exists – so as to leave over no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality! (p.103)

Here, and elsewhere, Nietzsche makes a clear correlation between a belief in a religious otherworld and the negation of life and the material.[17] By believing in a spiritual realm, Nietzsche claims, our belief in this world is nullified; our ability to perceive the value of the material world masked by a spurious understanding of what happens after we die. Using 'God' as a metonym for 'the Beyond', his project is to expose the shaky foundations of such a belief in order to emphasise earthly value. In *The Gift*, Fyodor is

[16] Nietzsche's passage is reminiscent of Cincinnatus' predicament in *Invitation to a Beheading* – only once he is decapitated is he able to move towards 'beings akin to him' (apparently residing in some kind of spiritual world). Both writers seem to suggest that losing the human head may actually be a beneficial thing.
[17] See, for example, *Human, All Too Human* (pp.90-94), *Daybreak* (pp.39-42), *The Gay Science* (p.131) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (pp.86-87).

often uncertain about whether an otherworld exists or not, recalling the kind of crises of religious faith which formed a background to Nietzsche's thought. His doubts appear, for example, over resurrection. Fyodor describes a past love, asking 'what would happen now if she were resurrected', but quickly interrupts himself to say 'I don't know, you should not ask stupid questions' (p.140). Imagining how it would be to meet his father again, Fyodor asks:

> Was it admissible that life could perform not only miracles, but miracles necessarily deprived (otherwise they would be unbearable) of even the tiniest hint of the supernatural? The miracle of this return would consist in its earthly nature, in its compatibility with reason, in the swift introduction of an incredible event into the accepted and comprehensible linkage of ordinary days. (p.85)[18]

Here, Fyodor's discussion of his father extends into a dialogue of how the everyday and the supernatural interact so that the supernatural in fact becomes the natural. In asking whether certain miracles are 'admissible', he is contemplating the validity of miracles; trying to impose rational thought on instances that seem completely *ir*rational. But he describes the possibility of such 'supernatural' miracles as 'unbearable'. Fyodor's reluctance to fully believe is qualified by one instance in the text rich in dramatic irony. Towards the end of the novel, when Alexander Chernyshevski has been admitted to hospital, we learn that:

[18] British mathematician J.E. Littlewood argued that miracles are such events that happen one in a million times. Because, Littlewood argues, humans are witness to one event per second, the likelihood of perceiving a 'miracle' is actually quite common – around once a month. This is known as 'Littlewood's Law'.

> The following day he died, but before that he had a moment of lucidity, complaining of pains and then saying (it was darkish in the room because of the lowered blinds): "What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards." He sighed, listened to the trickling and drumming outside the window and repeated with extreme distinctness: "There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining." And meanwhile outside the spring sun was playing on the roof tiles, the sky was dreamy and cloudless, the tenant upstairs was watering the flowers on the edge of her balcony, and the water trickled down with a drumming sound. (p.285)

The passage appears to be one of hope. Chernyshevski, in a 'moment of lucidity', reveals his own belief in there being nothing to follow his earthly existence. Equating the certainty of this assertion with the 'certainty' of it raining at the time of his utterance, Nabokov suggests that there *might* be something afterwards through irony. Chernyshevski's conviction that it is raining has actually been caused by the interplay between the dark room and the occurrence of the 'drumming sound' (caused by water trickling on the window from somebody watering their flowers). Because Chernyshevski's certainty is questioned as a result of his erroneous belief in it raining, Nabokov suggests that the dying man may yet meet Yasha or may have already encountered the dead Yasha. The distanced narration taking place in the passage – the use of third-person pronouns and omniscient description – adds weight to this suggestion in allowing readers to deduce that Chernyshevski is wrong (and that a meeting with the dead Yasha may be a distinct possibility) with the last of the four omniscient clauses. Chernyshevski's scepticism, rather than Fyodor's belief, is the position vulnerable to commonsense refutation simply by looking outside and checking the weather.

Fyodor's uncertainty then is not about the existence of the otherworld but about how it operates. His position is similar to that taken by Nabokov in his fiction and non-fiction, where he makes it clear that the idea that life carries on after death is only speculation, yet almost impossible to resist. Durantaye, for example, claims that 'It is a curious fact that though Nabokov rejected the idea of a heaven, purgatory, and hell for men, he accepted it for literary characters' (p.49). In 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense', Nabokov makes it clear that the latter term is something vulgar: 'commonsense at its worst is sense made common, and so everything is comfortably cheapened by its touch' (1980, p.372). Further in the essay, he revealingly claims that 'only commonsense rules immortality out' (1980, p.377). Similarly, Nabokov opens *Speak, Memory* with the following claim:

> The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for' (p.17)

In the first quotation, Nabokov's dismissal of commonsense is apparent. Yet, in the following two quotations, Nabokov's coy inversion of a (traditionally positive) trait is linked to his thoughts of an afterworld.[19] Effectively, Nabokov is hinting that an afterworld may exist without explicitly saying so – it is only the reader's knowledge of his dismissal of commonsense that allows for such a reading:

> Whenever in my dreams, I see the dead, they always appear silent, bothered, strangely depressed, quite unlike their dear, bright selves. I

[19] In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov refers to the literary technique of elision in referring to death being crossed out (this seems to refer to the fact that Cincinnatus' death has both happened and not happened) (2001 [1959], p.176).

> am aware of them, without any astonishment, in surroundings they never visited during their earthly existence, in the house of some friend of mine they never knew. They sit apart, frowning at the floor, as if death were a dark taint, a shameful family secret. It is certainly not then – not in dreams – but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction. (Nabokov 2000 [1967], p.41)

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche claims that 'those things which mankind has hitherto pondered seriously are not even realities, merely imaginings, more strictly speaking lies from the bad instincts of sick, in the profoundest sense of injurious natures – all the concepts 'God', 'soul', 'virtue', 'sin', 'the Beyond', 'truth', 'eternal life'…But the greatness of human nature, its 'divinity', has been sought in them. (p.36). Yet, the fact that Nietzsche admits that 'We cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be' (2001 [1882], p.374), suggests that Nabokov's 'fault' boils down to curiosity – a trait he associated with virtue and an aesthetic elite.

Transformative Perception as Compensation for Doubt

So Fyodor's vision of an alternate world is one of material cohabitation with this one. I have already described his 'gift' of vision, and its blend of material with artistic perception. Here I hope to show that it is this gift which creates, and makes visible, the

otherworld on the other side of this world's fabric. The opening of *The Gift* shows us how Nabokov renders the ostensibly banal in minute detail, challenging conventional perception[20], and suggesting ways of seeing the world that might only arise from conscious physical contemplation.[21] The opening paragraph describes how:

> One cloudy but luminous day, towards four in the afternoon on April the first, 192- … a moving van, very long and very yellow, hitched to a tractor that was also yellow, with hypertrophied rear wheels and a shamelessly exposed anatomy, pulled up in front of Number Seven Tannenberg Street, in the west part of Berlin. The van's forehead bore a star-shaped ventilator. Running along its entire side was the name of the moving company in yard-high blue letters, each of which (including a square dot) was shaded laterally with black paint: a dishonest attempt to climb into the next dimension. On the sidewalk, before the house (in which I too shall dwell), stood two people who had obviously come out to meet their furniture (in *my* suitcase there are more manuscripts than shirts). The man, arrayed in a rough greenish-brown overcoat to which the wind imparted a ripple of life, was tall, beetle-browed and old, with the grey of his whiskers turning to a russet in the area of the mouth, in which he insensitively held a cold, half-defoliated cigar butt. The woman, thickset and no longer young, with bowlegs and a rather attractive pseudo-Chinese face, wore an astrakhan jacket; the wind, having rounded

[20] *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definitions of 'perception' : '1/ the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses; the state of being or process of becoming aware of something in such a way, 2/ a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; intuitive understanding and insight' (p.1063).
[21] Fyodor remarks: 'I don't know why this happens – one writes an address heaps of times, automatically and correctly, and then all of a sudden one hesitates, one looks at it consciously, and one sees you're not sure of it, it seems unfamiliar – very queer' (p.318).

> her, brought a whiff of rather good but slightly stale perfume. They both stood motionless and watched fixedly, with such attentiveness that one might think they were about to be short-changed, as three red-necked husky fellows in blue aprons wrestled with their furniture. (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.11)

At least three main ideas mark this passage: the use of colour; the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism; and the idea of cognitive dissonance or contradiction. Each idea is expressed through the everyday yet they upset our traditional understanding. Firstly, Nabokov is keen to specify the colours of the scene. Words such as 'blue' (twice), 'yellow' (twice), 'black' and 'grey' belong to the same semantic field and are used here to describe inanimate things like vehicles and letters. The colours are not difficult to imagine and neither are the familiar objects that the colours describe. Words like 'greenish-brown', 'russet', and 'red-necked', however, operate slightly differently. The first two are far more specific, both used to describe a person's appearance rather than an everyday object. The latter, although evoking colour, can also imply a disparaging metonym for a kind of person from a rural area engaged in manual labour. Further, words like 'cloudy' and 'luminous', although not direct referents to colour, obliquely invoke colours such as 'grey' and 'yellow' or 'orange' respectively. We can already start to see the emergence of a pattern whereby inanimate and animate objects are given different treatment.

This pattern continues in the second structured idea. The scene depicts a removal van attached to a tractor with the name of the company on its side. Nabokov's word choice, however, uses anthropomorphic and zoomorphic descriptors respectively in a notably consistent way. For the inanimate objects (the van, tractor, letters on the van, cigar, wind and furniture), Nabokov uses words like 'hitched', 'hypertrophied',

'shamelessly', 'anatomy', 'forehead', 'dishonest', 'climb', 'meet', 'imparted', 'rounded', 'brought', and 'wrestled', all suggesting that these objects seem to have a life or personality of their own. The 'half-defoliated' cigar is not a human descriptor but connotes something living nonetheless (the man is described as being 'insensitive' to the fact that the cigar is both 'cold' and 'half-defoliated').

On the other hand, Nabokov uses words like 'beetle-browed', 'whiskers', 'motionless' ('неподвижно') and 'fixedly' ('пристально') in describing the couple, words that suggest *both* animal characteristics and rigidity/lifelessness.[22] The idea that the woman wears an 'astrakhan jacket' furthers this idea ('astrakhan' being the name of the fleece of young karakul lambs found in central Asia). Again, Nabokov presents the reader with a defamiliarizing perspective on how we view the objects in our world, one where our conventional notion of human/animal distinctions is disturbed. Interestingly, the 'three red-necked fellows' are described as 'husky', a word that seems to mean both that they have low, hoarse voices but also that they are in some way relatable to a type of dog (typically used to doing labour).[23]

The last idea is that of cognitive dissonance where two or more conflicting ideas compete simultaneously.[24] The fact that the sky is 'cloudy but luminous', for example, appears to be contradictory. Yet, Nabokov combines these adjectives to give a unique picture of a sky that could be near to a lambent grey; a sky that could most certainly exist in the 'real world' but one which is not normally described by defying our normal

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[22] Although there is a distinction between animate and inanimate nouns in Russian, humans and animals form one grammatical categorisation. It is interesting that, in the Russian, Nabokov opts for 'бороде' ('wattles') rather than the 'whiskers' in the English translation. The former however, meaning the fleshy lobes that hang from chickens or turkeys, leads to the same interpretation as the latter.

[23] In the Russian, the 'three red-necked husky fellows' is 'трое красновыйных молодцов'. Although the English sense of 'husky' in Russian is 'эскимосская лайка' (literally Eskimo husky), 'молодняка' can mean 'young animals' (*The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary*, p.112).

[24] See chapter four, p.151.

semantic categories, or oppositions used to structure our experience of reality (both 'cloudy' and 'bright' are common, and complementary, descriptions of the sky). Phrases like the 'square dot' and 'moving company' work in a similar fashion: squares combined with circles; the unclear subject of 'moving'; the 'pseudo-Chinese face' as if the lady does not simply look Chinese (but is somehow inauthentically Chinese). This approach is developed in the mysterious pattern of presupposition. What is the oblique meaning of 'in my suitcase there are more manuscripts than shirts'? Why is the man accused of being 'insensitive'? How is the idea of honesty changed when it refers to a (consciously missed) digit?

These ideas show how Fyodor inhabits a world which is consistent with ours yet organised by different semantic categories, categories which are realised by the twin acts of perception and visual description. Whether through connections between things, the ideas that colours evoke, or the ability to entertain conflicting or confusing ideas simultaneously, Fyodor has the ability to perceive an alternative in the fabric of the world that we inhabit. This ability to absorb, comprehend, and rearticulate the data of his senses seems to be the 'gift' that is consistently referred to throughout the novel. Although conventional otherworldliness ('arrayed', 'next dimension') is present in this passage, Nabokov also evokes an 'other world' contained within the material. Where Nietzsche puts value on the earthly realm and asks us not to forget the value inherent in it, Nabokov realises that value through a perceptual, aesthetic and verbal reorganisation of it. When Fyodor remarks that, 'Some day…I must use such a scene to start a good thick old-fashioned novel' (p.11), the most obvious response is to note the self-reflexive, metafictive implications of his words. But Nabokov also appears to be questioning the way we comprehend the quotidian events in our world. The irony is that, although the scene may be generally like other openings to novels in their description of concrete context in the realist tradition, the description is far from 'old fashioned' and, in fact,

undermines the realist project to create an illusionary counterpart to the world as we would normally experience it.

Another example of Fyodor's 'other worldly' perception occurs in the last chapter where he enters Zina's room for the first time:

> Cautiously pushing the door, Fyodor visited Zina's room, where he had never been before, and with the bizarre sensation of a glad moving in he looked for a long time at the briskly ticking alarm clock, at the rose in a glass with its stem all studded with bubbles, at the divan that became a bed at night and at the stockings drying on the radiator. (p.325)

Again Fyodor experiences the other world through perception with no hint at all, this time, of the conventional 'otherworld'. Fyodor opens Zina's door 'cautiously' entering a place we are told that 'he had never been before', hinting that he holds it in wonder and trepidation. Nabokov reifies Fyodor's description in choosing to describe four objects (clock, rose, divan, stockings) rather than having a panoramic description of the room at large. The alarm clock that Fyodor sees is 'briskly' ticking – an adjective marked by liveliness and vigour, an anthropomorphised mechanical ticking. It is opposed to 'the rose in a glass with its stem all studded with bubbles', a symbol of love but one that seems oddly static or frozen (we are used to seeing bubbles moving). The 'divan that became a bed at night' evokes metamorphosis or transformation, as well as the humbleness of the apartment that acts as Zina's living quarters. Fyodor sees the object in two categories at once, suggesting his perceptual gift more broadly. Finally, the 'stockings drying on the radiator' combine the warmth being emitted in Zina's room with his clandestine observation. The stockings are taken out of their erotic context and subsumed with other articles of clothing. But the fact that he spends a 'long time' observing these simple objects, each an indicator of Zina, serves not only to articulate the

presence of the woman he now loves through composite parts, but also illustrates how the other world is present in the everyday. Through localised, and defamiliarizing, description. Zina is both present and absent, realised through material and perceptive means.

A third example shows the same method in a short story 'Beneficence'. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov talks about fighting the 'utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence' (p.227), something that relates to his striving to 'distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life' (p.17).[25] In 'Beneficence', one such possible glimmer exists, yet fully in the material world. The narrator is watching the actions of an old lady manning a postcard stall near a guardhouse. Her already slow trade is being made worse by the blustery day. She is suddenly given an unlikely offering from a soldier, who hands her a 'streaming mug' of coffee. After drinking the contents with 'utter, profound, concentrated relish', we are told that the old woman 'rose and headed for the window to return the mug' only to stop halfway, 'her lips gathered into a little smile' (p.77), as she grabs two of her postcards as a thank you for the coffee. It is here that the narrator becomes

> aware of the world's tenderness, the profound beneficence of all that surrounded me, the blissful bond between me and all of creation, and I realized that the joy I had sought in you was not only secreted within you, but breathed around me everywhere, in the speeding street sounds, in the hem of a comically lifted skirt, in the metallic yet tender drone of the wind, in the autumn clouds bloated with rain. I realized that the world

[25] Referring to Nabokov's impersonal darkness, Donald B. Johnson claims that 'these probings led Nabokov, like his creature, the doomed poet John Shade, to take solace and find ecstasy in the intricately patterned game of art' (1985, p.219)

> does not represent a struggle at all, or a predaceous sequence of chance events, but shimmering bliss, beneficent trepidation, a gift bestowed on us and unappreciated. (Nabokov 2001 [1995], p.77)

This passage, as with those from *The Gift*, seems to be concerned with the notion of undervalued endowment; with people not bestowing enough time or reflection on the instances in life where human tenderness can be perceived. In articulating what the narrator perceives, Nabokov invites his reader to contemplate one tender act depicting the scene through both the tangible and explicit ('secreted', 'breathed', 'hem', 'metallic', 'bloated') *and* the implied (it appears that the guard welcomes the lady's offering given that he shuts the sash 'slowly'). Nabokov wants to articulate an unarticulated bond between these two people, one all the more poignant given their difference in social standing. This scene is arguably the kind of 'miracle' that Fyodor speaks about (Nabokov 2000 [1963], p.85)

Conclusion

Brian Boyd claims that Nabokov's 'interest in the beyond stems not from any denigration or repudiation of the here and now. Quite the contrary' (1990, p.10). I have argued that Nabokov had two models in dealing with the 'beyond': one of a quasi-religious nature, concerned with ghosts and crude manifestations of the otherworld and one that presented Nabokov's alternate worldview; the ability to see the metaphorical 'beyond' in the everyday by transforming physical perception through an act of aesthetic will. Although both models seem to exist simultaneously, I privilege the latter model not because the first is untrue but because the latter seems far more important in evoking both the secular *and* the spiritual.

I have looked at the ways in which Nabokov reveals, suggests, or even creates, an 'other world' through his writing, looking predominantly at the figure of Fyodor in *The*

Gift – a character who attains 'a fine balance between respect for the autonomy of others and the capacity to perceive, reshape, and arrange impressions derived from living experience to create new, unique works of art' (Connolly 2005, p.149). I have argued that the lucidity of Nabokov's writing, the disorientating perspectives with which Fyodor conjures up the material world, allows for 'other' worlds to occur.

Such an engagement with the physical is consistent with Nietzsche's celebration of the value of this world rather than the 'otherworldly'. Yet, Nabokov also appears to go beyond Nietzsche's stance by engaging, simultaneously, with the metaphysical. Yet this too can be seen as a challenge to the debased coin of twentieth-century scepticism, just as Nietzsche reacted to the debased coin of nineteenth-century religious, and philosophical, discourses. Nabokov shows the almost ineffable wonder that this world can offer through rendering perception in vivid but unfamiliar ways.

For Nabokov, verbal art was the highest manifestation of consciousness. In *Speak, Memory*, for example, he says: 'How small the cosmos (a kangaroo's pouch would hold it), how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words' (2000 [1967], p.21). This is the way for readers to gain a better understanding of this world through its re-rendering. Such a reconfiguration allows for a metaphorical 'beyond' to be experienced, akin to Fyodor's remark that 'Anything which comes into the focus of human thinking is spiritualized' (Nabokov 2001 [1963], p.257). Such thinking recalls Nietzsche, for one last time:

> For only that conscious thinking *takes* place in words, that is to say in communication symbols, and this fact discloses the origin of consciousness. In short, the development of language and the development of consciousness…go hand in hand. (2001 [1882], p.213)

Conclusion

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov wrote that 'Across the dark sky of exile, Sirin passed, to use a simile of a more conservative nature, like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness' (2000 [1967], p.221). The uneasiness that Nabokov suggests seems to have been threefold: the uncertainty as to whom this figure was; the arguable superiority of his prose in relation to his contemporaries; and perhaps most importantly, the way in which he engaged with certain ideas contained in his fiction. Such uneasiness, however, did not really disappear after Nabokov jettisoned his *nom de plume* – we only need to think of our subjugated position as readers in works like *Invitation to a Beheading* or 'The Vane Sisters', Humbert Humbert's laudable qualities in *Lolita*, or Fyodor's perception of the world in *The Gift* for example to see that Nabokov continued making readers feel uncertain about how to engage with his texts, and their content, far past the name change. Although this thesis has specifically focused on both long-standing and newer problems in Nabokov studies, I wish to look back at the many issues that I have covered in the thesis under the single heading of 'uneasiness'. In particular, I want to look at two sources of uneasiness in Nabokov's work, both of which have clear counterparts in Nietzsche: ethics and aesthetics. First of all, there is a system of disconcerting antonyms which Nabokov uses to structure this relationship, creating a system of aesthetic and ethical values which cannot be mapped onto any comparable system that the reader might share. Yet, entertaining these impossible antonyms has a payoff for the reader which can be characterised as Nietzschean. The second source of uneasiness I discuss is Nabokov's approach to the idea that the world is a work of fiction. Entertaining this concept takes us to an uncomfortable understanding of the reader as monster and artist, again recalling

Nietzsche very forcefully. Once more, however, there is a reward for the reader in entertaining this vision, even if only for the duration of the text.

In *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, Leland de la Durantaye addresses the following paradox: 'If *Lolita* has "no moral in tow," how could Nabokov claim that it is a "moral book"?' (2007, p.189). Durantaye makes a persuasive, and sensible, case as to how to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Firstly, he agrees with Nabokov's assertion that *Lolita* does, indeed, not contain 'ideological freight' (p.188) and so is not of the 'deliberate moralizing' camp that Nabokov so frequently derided. Secondly, he claims that because *Lolita* engages with moral questions and themes throughout – asking the reader to decide what is proper and what is not, for example – it is, of course, intrinsically moral. Nabokov's statements on *Lolita*'s morality produce uneasiness specifically because of the ambiguity in how to respond to the text appropriately.

It appears that Nabokov's engagement with morality is paradigmatic of what Michael Wood labels the many 'forms of contradiction or difficulty Nabokov wants to *sustain* rather than do away with' (Wood in Norman and White 2009, p.232, my emphasis). Such enduring difficulty can be seen in a statement that the author gave seventeen years after his afterword to *Lolita*:

> one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel – and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride. (1990 [1973], p.193)

This proclamation has frequently been used to nullify the accusation that Nabokov was some sort of amoral, or immoral, aesthete; that, if we look closely enough, we should be

able to discern a robust sense of morality in his fiction aligning him with something equivalent to 'goodness'.[26] Leona Toker observes that 'that day dawned earlier than Nabokov had expected. It was already heralded by the work of Andrew Field and Alfred Appel, whose analysis of Nabokov's themes and intricate texture proceeded from the assumption that the author's heart was, so to say, in the right place' (1989, p.3).[27] Rather than retain such discomfort as a way to avoid 'worn-out coins' then, critics, or reappraisers, such as Rorty, Toker, and McGinn, have transformed such difficult and contradictory assertions by making Nabokov's writings 'safe', supposedly aligned with the values of virtuous Christian morality. Entertaining a system of antonyms in art and ethics that we cannot map on to our own can lead to some uneasy responses, but it can also lead to a Nietzschean experience of thinking and living the world anew. We are reminded of Wood's observation that Nabokov was 'neither the aesthete that he himself and his early readers kept making out he was, nor the plodding moralist that recent criticism, *with an audible sigh of relief*, has wheeled on to the page' (1994, p.7, my emphasis). If we accept Wood's positioning of Nabokov and explore the consequences of such middle ground, it suggests an uneasiness that not only permeates Nabokov's works in general but is integral to our understanding of it. Through acknowledging that Nabokov makes such topics uneasy, I wish to ask present-day critics to reconsider his questioning of value sites and embrace the positive discomforts of reading his work with bated breath.

[26] Julian Connolly claims that Nabokov's 'prediction came true', observing critics that were to deem him 'if not [a] "rigid moralist," then [a] "highly ethical" writer' (2005, p.1).
[27] Dana Dragunoiu, similarly, claims that the 'reappraisers of the kind imagined by Nabokov…have focused on the powerful moral vision of [his] fiction' (2011, p.28). The reappraisers that she claims Nabokov imagines include Brian Boyd, Leland de la Durantaye, Zoran Kuzmanovich, Ellen Pifer, David Rampton, Leona Toker, and Michael Wood.

In the statement from *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov appears to quaff at the notion of being characterised as a 'frivolous firebird', instead supplying a term at the opposite end of the ethical spectrum: 'rigid moralist'. In looking at the syntactic similarity of adjective and noun, Nabokov refashions playfulness as robustness; aesthete as someone concerned with, and conscious of, moral considerations. By remodelling himself as a 'moralist', and taking issue with 'sin', Nabokov engages explicitly with the semantics of Christian thought – yet, like Nietzsche, he adopts biblical rhetoric whilst not furthering its agenda.[28] The concepts that then follow and are belittled – 'stupidity', 'vulgarity', and 'cruelty' – are processed through this Christian lens and also deemed antithetical to that system. Yet, Nabokov's choice of verbs in establishing his moral remit – 'kicking' sin, 'cuffing' stupidity, 'ridiculing' the vulgar and cruel – appear to violate his initial label in that no 'rigid moralist', in a traditional sense, would advocate such violence when tackling the things that he or she wants to banish. Rather than 'forgiving' sin, as taught in Scripture, Nabokov invites readers to view 'kicking sin' as an oxymoron. We may find this phrasing humorous given the explicit irony, but may still be left uneasy if desiring clarification on Nabokov's moral schema. What can be said is that sin is not being used in the traditional sense here: if, as Nabokov seems to suggest, we should view sin, or moralist, as something not necessarily aligned with Christian thought, it has a disquieting effect in that particular words and concepts may not adhere to our own definitions. In this respect, Nabokov can be seen to echo Nietzsche's idea that our use of traditional language mimics 'metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins' (Nietzsche in Magnus et al. 1993, p.15).[29] Knowing that readers will bring their moral

[28] See chapter five, pp.188-189.

[29] Of course, 'morality' is just one concept that Nabokov seems to take issue with: 'reality' (1990 [1973], pp.10-11), 'goodness' (1980, p.375), and 'commonsense' (1980, p.372) are a sample of others. As Nabokov reminds us, 'Commonsense is fundamentally

understanding to the interpretative table, Nabokov can be seen to smuggle in deviant definitions through the cloak of familiarity, exploiting readers' '*traditional* way of behaving and evaluating' (1982 [1881], p.10) through using cliché and custom to his own advantage.[30] By prescribing values that may not be concomitant with their own, Nabokov's tactics are reminiscent of dialectical works like Nietzsche's. Paraphrasing Stanley Fish, Magnus et al. claim that:

> it is characteristic of dialectical works to involve the reader in discursive activities – to involve the reader in attempting to arrive at "the meaning of the text" – and then to declare invalid or premature the conclusions of such discursive undertakings. (1993, p.22)

For some, such as Julian Connolly, we may choose to recognise the humour in the statement rather than the uneasiness.[31] Humour, of course, is present (*Nabokov* is this reappraiser; the jump from 'firebird' to 'moralist' is long, but perhaps laughably long to '*rigid* moralist'). But an alternative approach to viewing Nabokov as a humourist, or a traditionally virtuous moralist, is to look for pattern evoked in his statements. Seeing such pattern, in turn, transforms ostensibly irreverent humour into uncomfortable laughter.

Looking at the antonyms of the capacities Nabokov takes issue with in *Strong Opinions* ('virtue', intelligence, decency, kindness) broadens the scope of what we know he

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immoral, for *the natural morals of mankind are as irrational as the magic rites that they evolved since the immemorial dimness of time*' (1980, p.372, my emphasis).

[30] Nabokov's lamenting of tradition can be seen in his view of 'minor authors' who 'merely try to squeeze the best they can out of a given order of things, out of traditional patterns of fiction' (1980, p.2). For more on Nabokov's use of cliché, see David Rutledge's *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery: The Expression of Metaphysics in His Work* (McFarland: North Carolina, 2011, pp.15-33).

[31] See Connolly (1997, p.37).

privileged alongside 'tenderness, talent, and pride'. Such traits, in turn, take us back to Nabokov's afterword to *Lolita*:

> Despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (2000 [1955], pp.314-315)

It is hard to object here to Nabokov's definition of art given its precise articulation of intrinsic ideas about what art is and how it operates: one's desire to know about the world, to recognise and depict those around us, and by foregrounding readers' utmost delight when intellectually stimulated. His pithy definition of such a nebulous topic is simultaneously valid, fresh and unique. As Nabokov warns in 'Good Readers and Good Writers', things such as 'time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds…are not traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way' (1980, p.2). Yet, his list of moral values in *Strong Opinions* may be less palatable: we are more familiar with existing moral directives (such as the Ten Commandments or the Deadly Sins, for example), than what art might constitute. Consequently, Nabokov's ideas about what we should value morally, rather than artistically, invite provocation. Such a response, however, can be seen as a 'positive discomfort' in facilitating debate on issues thought of as fixed or lapidary and inviting readers to entertain a viewpoint perhaps radically different to their own.

At a surface level, I have conflated two different realms: in *Lolita*, Nabokov's idealized view of art and, in *Strong Opinions*, his idealized view of morality. Yet, the description of each reveals continuity. In both *Lolita* ('no moral in tow' and 'idiotic

accusation of immorality') and *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov does not perpetuate traditional, imbibed notions of what 'moral' may mean to the Western reader. Similarly, given the idea of a work that 'exists only insofar' (2000 [1955], p.314), it suggests that Nabokov rearticulates art *as* morality – analogous to Wittgenstein's idea that 'ethics and aesthetics are one' (2009 [1922], p.105). Instead, Nabokov forges *his* version of what art and morality consist of; asking readers not only to question their conception of what such topics but to, at least momentarily, unlearn and re-learn their thinking. Such a process upsets how, and where, to place his thinking in existing, or recognizable, moral systems and forces us to recognise that our values may not be identical to others'. In evoking what should, and should not, be given 'sovereign' power for example, Nabokov asks readers to engage with a moral outlook very hard to condone – just like in his definition of art in *Lolita*'s afterword. Similar to Humbert's role as a Nietzschean vehicle in *Lolita*, Nabokov's stance questions both readers' moral certainty by dovetailing their traditional responses to both literature and life and questioning what they choose to privilege, both as readers and people.

As Wood claims, 'Nabokov changed his topics and his angles, but he scarcely changed his mind at all' (Wood in Norman and White 2009, p.231). We can see such stability if we compare what is privileged in each quotation: in *Lolita*, 'curiosity', 'tenderness', 'kindness', and 'ecstasy' and, in *Strong Opinions*, 'tenderness', 'talent', 'pride' and, by implication, 'virtue', 'intelligence', 'decency' and 'kindness'. Although values concerning human decency are abound, so are those concerned with the capacities of the self. In other words, he implores readers to question existing value sites whilst advocating values relative to both the individual *and* others. While such hybridization, or coexistence,

has been observed by several critics already[32], it is arguably more important to think about why Nabokov opts to reveal what he privileges in such a way as well as what such strategies *engender*. For example, 'pride' is deemed worthy enough to be included as one of only three explicit examples given for what Nabokov values. This term, of course, is antithetical to Christianity's teaching yet Nietzsche's definition of pride adheres to that of the ancients': 'the deification of passion, of revenge, of cunning, of anger, of voluptuousness, of adventure, of knowledge' (1968 [1901], p.221). Problematizing accepted conceptual thinking whilst furthering notions of the self, enables Nietzsche to inject vitality into such a concept. Nabokov seems to employ the same strategy.

Accepting Nabokov's values as harmonious with one another is difficult because of their ostensible incompatibility. Yet, in seeing them *as* compatible, we glimpse a system that makes the striving for explicit self-development as paramount as a marked concern for others. In this respect, Nabokov may not necessarily be adhering to Nietzsche's 'transvaluation of all values' but rather echoing his remit of the 'aestheticization of morality', albeit in a modified sense. Nabokov does not jettison, or 'go beyond', the themes of human decency but, instead, gives them equal status to more aestheticized values. Authors' emphases, of course, are normally associated with aspects of human relationships: the duplication of 'tenderness' in the *Lolita* and *Strong Opinions*' excerpts explicitly indicates his commitment to such things. Similarly, in 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense', Nabokov makes this clear in saying 'he must be a pretty foolish and shortsighted author who renounces the treasures of observation, humor, and pity which may be professionally obtained through closer contact with his fellow men'

[32] Leona Toker labels this as Nabokov's 'rational individualism' (Toker in Connolly 2005, p.237) whilst Durantaye claims that Nabokov asks us to 'balance fierce independence of vision with the necessity of seeing the world from the standpoint of others' (2007, p.182).

(1980, p.371). Yet, Nabokov also includes discomforting, typically Nietzschean, values in his fiction – pushing the capacities of what 'great authors' should be in making proud, intelligent creations in a world surrounded by the wonders of human relations. Such a strategy furthers the boundaries of the novelistic form, and the limits of his readership, in hybridizing two (traditionally) divergent realms. Including himself as one of the 'writers of genius' referred to in 'Good Readers and Good Writers' for example, Nabokov warns that 'that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself' (1980, p.2). Such a process reminds us of Zarathustra's observation of how people react to the challenging of value in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 'Behold the good and the just! Whom do they hate most? Him who smashes their tables of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker – but he is the creator' (1969 [1883-1885], p.51). The reason for such hatred of the *Übermensch* figure seems to be down to his upsetting of such customary ways of thinking.

One further permutation of such uneasiness is worth exploring briefly – that of the world as a fiction. In *Lolita*, Humbert illustrates how uneasy it is to embrace this concept as it is arguably *because* he mistakes reality for art that he perpetrates some of his worst cruelties. In this respect, he can be seen as worryingly close to the monster artist-reader cherished by both Nabokov and Nietzsche. But, again, there is a payoff for the reader in seeing the world, and literature, in ways that are otherwise impossible. In 'Good Readers and Good Writers', Nabokov claimed that 'the art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction' (1980, p.2). Durantaye expands on this idea, claiming that 'Nabokov has Humbert fail to observe the line that divides art from life – that same line that Nabokov's compatriot Khodasevich identified decades before *Lolita* was lying at the heart of the burgeoning writer's aesthetics' (2007, p.182). In asking students to think of

the world as literature, and by providing his version of what should be privileged in literature, he effectively projects literary values onto the real world. Such an idea is intent on its transformative possibilities: after all, Nabokov is keen to express his dismay at 'minor authors' who are only concerned with 'the ornamentation of the commonplace' and 'do not bother about any reinventing of the world' (1980, p.2).[33] Alexander Nehamas argues that such a process also resides in Nietzsche's work: '[he] looks at the world in general as if it were some kind of artwork; in particular, he looks at it as if it were a literary text' (1985, p.3). Such a process relates to what Nabokov, later in *Lectures on Literature*, calls '*vostorg* and *vdokhnovenie*, which can be paraphrased as "rapture" and "recapture". *Vostorg* 'has no conscious purpose in view but…is all-important in linking the breaking up of the old world with the building up of the new one'. When the writer goes about writing, he relies on *vdokhnovenie* to 'recapture and reconstruct the world' (1980, pp.378-379). Such a destructive process is, of course, discomforting, yet it is more than compensated for in the creation of the new.[34] Whereas Rorty defines Nabokov's hypothetical reader as 'a sort of genius-monster - a monster of incuriosity' (1989, p.161), Nietzsche claims that 'When I picture a perfect reader, I always picture a monster of courage and curiosity, also something supple, cunning, cautious, a born adventurer and discoverer' (2004 [1888], p.43). Although Rorty and Nietzsche imagine those at opposite ends of the reading spectrum, both privilege 'curiosity' but also opt for the same label:

[33] We are reminded of Nietzsche's claim that 'As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be *able* to make such a phenomenon of ourselves' (2001 [1882], p.104). See pages 74-75 of the thesis.

[34] Nabokov furthers this idea: 'Lunatics are lunatics just because they have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power – or have lost the power – to create a new one as harmonious as the old' (1980, p.377). The most important word here, 'harmonious', links back to Nabokov's description of himself as a '*rigid* moralist' as well as Wood's observation that Nabokov rarely changed his mind.

'monster'. The uneasiness of what the label traditionally connotes may be superseded in the 'new' idea of rebuilding the term as something positive.

This uneasy quality of Nabokov's works has been addressed in each chapter of the thesis. Chapter one's concern with Nabokov's representation of memory discussed both the possibilities of the capacity, and the burdens that it bestows, through Nietzsche's concepts of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*. In doing so, it problematized the customary notion of the positive connotations of memory but gave us a more robust account of the facility in doing so. As we saw in the analysis of Nabokov's short story 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia', tragedy is transformed into an affirmation of life through viewing the world as an 'aesthetic phenomenon'. In not depicting suffering in the ways that readers may want, such an act is perturbing. Yet it allows Nabokov a way to circumvent the recurrence of suffering by allowing both him, and his readers, to engage differently with horrifying phenomena through representing it aesthetically. Chapter two questioned the readerly position of compliantly solving puzzles in which it is impossible for us to embrace Nabokov on the mountain top. Asking 'why' rather than 'how' in regard to Nabokov's textual games however, allows us to resist subjugation yet it may also create a strained relationship whereby it is difficult to read Nabokov without looking over our shoulders or deliberately resisting distressed responses. Yet, in adopting a Nietzschean position, it engenders more fertile readings as well as 'panting and happy' readers who are both exercised and made to feel uneasy, but who undoubtedly benefit from such an experience.

Chapter three's discussion of *Pale Fire*'s internal authorship problem strived to push past the interpretative impasse that seems to exist with the novel, opening new doors of enquiry through looking at how readers' responses, and what they choose to privilege, dictate how the novel is read. Such a strategy, however, comparable to a Litmus

or Rorschach test for readers, may reveal privileging techniques that are difficult to accept by changing the way they think about themselves as readers. The chapter's methodology and findings, of course, ultimately impact on more general problems of narrative voice, truth and interpretation in literature beyond Nabokov studies. As has been mentioned in the conclusion, chapter four's discussion of *Lolita* is uneasy in that it not only presents certain values of the paedophilic narrator as hard to condone, but even as laudable. The chapter suggested that the reader's stance is crucial in understanding *Lolita* and that Nietzsche's philosophy allows just one way to change our stance when thinking of the interplay between morality and fiction. As has been seen, such moral disorientation should be seen as beneficial in that it asks us not to be as exclusive when thinking about how to engage with such topics. As Noël Carroll reminds us, texts like this 'give us moral insight into behaviours that we might not otherwise comprehend and, for lack of comprehension, morally condemn out of hand' (Carroll in Kivy 2004, p.133).

Nabokov's engagement with pity, looked at in chapter five, allowed us to see how typical responses to such a concept were thwarted by narrative technique. Although he frequently invokes such a concept, Nabokov plays with his readers' expectations and undermines anticipated scenarios. It is a concept that seems to have intrigued him however and his own conflicted responses to the topic are arguably reflected in the readers'. Finally, chapter six's discussion of how Nabokov is able to defamiliarize what he perceives in the world as to render it as transcendental as a traditional 'otherworld' not only challenges the abundance of 'otherworldly' criticism on Nabokov but suggests what readers may be missing out on when perceiving their worlds. By evoking the same kind of response however, even those of a religious bent do not suffer immeasurably from my argument - by embracing Fyodor's thinking, in other words, readers are afforded proximity to the 'gift' described by Nabokov.

I have hopefully illuminated some of the ways in which Nabokov makes us uneasy through both his narrative technique and philosophical associations with Nietzsche's often uncomfortable thought. Addressing such problems through the philosophy of Nietzsche – a frequently discomforting companion to socialists, feminists, and Christians for example – has been fruitfully analogous in trying to understand such quandaries. I hope also to have shown that this discomfort can wrestle power from Nabokov's hands and into the reader's, 'arguing back' rather than asking him to pat our heads for simply solving puzzles. In numerous ways, he offers us unique opportunities to experience the uneasy but exhilarating vision of a Nietzschean man. Indeed, Nabokov's questioning of how, why, and where we derive value from in life are just some of the positive and rewarding discomforts in reading his work.

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