Nabokov's Humor: The Play of Consciousness

Matthew Brillinger

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English,

The University of Auckland, 2002

Abstract

As it develops, Nabokov's fiction becomes increasingly amusing, with more humor used to greater effect. Why is Nabokov so fond of humor?

One school of thought accounts for Nabokov's humor with reference to a perceived inability to take anything seriously. Although misguided, this explanation is by no means absurd, for Nabokov is more lighthearted than grave, and he certainly prefers play to ceremony. Nabokov's buoyancy and playfulness, however, reflect not a sense that nothing matters, but a belief that humor, as it counters one or another expectation, underscores the extent to which reality outstrips *all* expectations.

This thesis, drawing on formal humor theory when appropriate, explores in turn Nabokov's humor, Nabokov's theory of humor, and the metaphysics from which Nabokov's theory of humor emerges, ultimately presenting Nabokov as a purposeful humorist intent upon nurturing in readers an appreciation of life's generosity. Experiencing the world as enchantingly humorous, and discerning in the world's humor evidence of a playful designing force, Nabokov, it is argued, emulates as a writer playful "life," deploying particular kinds of humor as a means of developing the reader's capacity to perceive and appreciate the types of humor Nabokov most enjoys in his own life.

Following an introductory discussion of Nabokov's humor, Chapter One reviews attempts to explain Nabokov's joking. Chapter Two treats Nabokov's development as a humorist, crediting the increasing risibility of his fiction to mounting use of certain devices. Analyzing one scene in Lolita, Chapter Three identifies the effects of Nabokov's humor. Chapter Four, the first of two explanatory chapters, describes Nabokov's theory of humor, and Chapter Five, developing points made in Chapter Four, explores the relationship between Nabokov's theory of humor and metaphysics.

Acknowledgments

Many aspects of this work, not just its title, reflect the influence of Brian Boyd, my supervisor. My use of unpublished material, important in the bolstering of my argument, owes everything to Dr. Boyd's sharing of materials he uncovered while studying Nabokov's life. And many of my examples—of concealed jokes and subtle patterns in particular—were first called to my notice by Professor Boyd, one of Nabokov's most attentive readers. Finally, my argument incorporates a number of points made by Dr. Boyd in conversation I wish now to thank Brian Boyd for his patience and generosity.

This thesis is dedicated to Carol and to my parents, Lorie and David.

Contents

Abbreviations for Works by Nabokov

A	Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle
BS	Bend Sinister
C	Carrousel
Df	The Defense
D	Despair
EO (I, II, III)	Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse
Eye	The Eye
G	The Gift
Gl	Glory
IB	Invitation to a Beheading
KQK	King, Queen, Knave
LiD	Laughter in the Dark
LoDQ	Lectures on Don Quixote
LoL	Lectures on Literature
LoRL	Lectures on Russian Literature
LO	Lolita
LOSP	Lolita: A Screenplay
LaTH	Look at the Harlequins!
USSR	The Man from the USSR and Other Plays
M	Mary
NB	Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings
NG	Nikolai Gogol
PF	Pale Fire
RLSK	The Real Life of Sebastian Knight
SM	Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited
SoVN	The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov
SO	Strong Opinions
TT	Transparent Things

Introduction: Nabokov and Humor

Give me an example of a great writer who is not a humorist.
—Vladimir Nabokov (Meras)[1]

Nabokov is extraordinarily fond of humor. As a reader he celebrates it;[2] as a moviegoer he relishes it;[3] as a naturalist he cherishes it;[4] as a metaphysician he esteems it.[5] Most importantly, as a writer, Nabokov—in many fields—delights in humor, deploying it spiritedly in the creation of poetry, using it promiscuously in the production of fiction, exploiting it energetically in the advancing of criticism. Regardless of the task or topic at hand, no matter the setting or situation, a love of humor infuses Nabokov's behavior, informing his thoughts, shaping his actions, impacting on his responses.

Pale Fire is arguably Nabokov's funniest work.[6] Structurally, it represents something brand new in the way of fiction, a compelling novel in the guise of poem and impertinent commentary, and so a parodic redirecting of exegesis away from edification and towards amusement. Expecting a thoughtful foreword introducing poet and poem, we confront a slap-dash portrait of an unhinged

[1] In 1962 Phyllis Meras interviewed Nabokov for the Providence Sunday Journal. A clipping, without exact date or page numbers, reached Véra Nabokov, in whose files Brian Boyd found it.
[2] "All writers that are worth anything are humorists" (Meras).
[3] "In Europe I went to the corner cinema about once in a fortnight and the only kind of picture I liked, and still like, was and is comedy of the Laurel and Hardy type" (SO 163).
[4] "Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that humorous?" Nabokov asks, calling an interviewer's attention to a butterfly's mimetic disguise. (NB 334)
[5] "Authentic humor comes from the angels" (LoDQ 65).
[6] Laurie Clancy does argue otherwise: "Almost all of the humour arises from the king's habits of homosexuality and the manner in which he refers to them, and the repetition of this becomes tiresome, if not positively offensive, long before the end. There are moments which have a certain, limited kind of wit—Kinbote's description of the astonishment of the peasant girl whose advances he rejects, for instance—but the account of the relationship with Otar exhibits a humour that

commentator and his odd circumstances; anticipating purposeful notes explaining subtle aspects of John Shade's "Pale Fire," we find colorful descriptions of incidents and individuals neither mentioned nor alluded to in Shade's poem; foreseeing a well-arranged index directing us to germane passages of poem or commentary, we discover an alphabetized embodiment of our commentator's idiosyncrasies. Wholly mad, convinced his ostensible status as an undistinguished professor at a provincial college masks a vastly more exciting identity as the exiled king of "Zembla," a revolution-ravaged "distant northern land" (315), Charles Kinbote, having failed to convince poet Shade to devote a work to Zembla's dashing ex-monarch, brazenly co-opts (dead) Shade's "Pale Fire" as a draft-horse with which to pull a wagon overladen with relics of Zembla and its virile king. Having, as Shade puts it, turned "a new leaf with the left hand" (238), Kinbote, a lonely figure anathematized for both just and unjust reasons, hijacks "Pale Fire" as a vehicle in which he can—ideally bringing readers with him—revisit an imaginary homeland, a realm where all his defects are virtues, all his minuses pluses.

Pale Fire includes wonderful examples of Nabokov's humor. The originality of the novel's humor is evident in a note Kinbote attaches to line 80 of Shade's poem, a note which, completely ignoring its putative subject, zealously blazons disparate facets of Zemblan culture. Lines 80-85 of "Pale Fire"—a work aptly characterized by Kinbote as an "autobiographical, eminently Appalachian, rather old-fashioned narrative in a neo-Popian prosodic style" (296)—read (35):

80 Here was my bedroom, now reserved for guests.
Here, tucked away by the Canadian maid,
I listened to the buzz downstairs and prayed
For everybody to be always well,
Uncles and aunts, the maid, her niece Adèle
Who'd seen the Pope, people in books, and God.

---

is mannered and rather cheap" (The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov [London: Macmillan, 1984], 136).

While Kinbote's note to line 80—worth quoting at length as evidence of Nabokov's comedic inventiveness—runs (108-112)[7]:

Line 80: my bedroom

Our Prince was fond of Fleur as of a sister but with no soft shadow of incest or secondary homosexual complications. She had a small pale face with prominent cheekbones, luminous eyes, and curly dark hair. It was rumored that after going about with a porcelain cup and Cinderella's slipper for months, the society sculptor and poet Arnor had found in her what he sought and had used her breasts and feet for his Lilith Calling Back Adam; but I am certainly no expert in these tender matters. Otar, her lover, said that when you walked behind her, and she knew you were walking behind her, the swing and play of those slim haunches was something intensely artistic, something Arab girls were taught in special schools by special Parisian panders who were afterwards strangled. Her fragile ankles, he said, which she placed very close together in her dainty and wavy walk, were the "careful jewels" in Arnor's poem about a *miragarl* ("mirage girl"), for which "a dream king in the sandy wastes of time would give three hundred camels and three fountains."

/ / / /
On sagaren werem tremkin tri stana
/ / / /
Verbalala wod gev ut tri phantana

(I have marked the stress accents).

The Prince did not heed this rather kitschy prattle (all, probably, directed by her

[7] To set the stage: Zembla's queen having recently died, a prince awaits coronation. As-yet-unmarried, the prince is besieged by Fleur de Fyler, the alluring agent of a mother eager to orbit in Zembla's top social circles.

mother) and, let it be repeated, regarded her merely as a sibling, fragrant and fashionable, with a painted pout and a *maussade*, blurry, Gallic way of expressing the little she wished to express. Her unruffled rudeness toward the nervous and garrulous Countess amused him. He liked dancing with her—and only with her. He hardly squirmed at all when she stroked his hand or applied herself soundlessly with open lips to his cheek which the haggard after-the-ball dawn had already sooted. She did not seem to mind when he abandoned her for manlier pleasures; and she met him again in the dark of a car or in the half-glow of a cabaret with the subdued and ambiguous smile of a kissing cousin.

The forty days between Queen Blenda's death and his coronation was perhaps the most trying stretch of time in his life. He had had no love for his mother, and the hopeless and helpless remorse he now felt degenerated into a sickly physical fear of her phantom. The Countess, who seemed to be near him, to be rustling at his side, all the time, had him attend table-turning séances with an experienced American medium, séances at which the Queen's spirit, operating the same kind of planchette she had used in her lifetime to chat with Thormodus Torfaeus and A. R. Wallace, now briskly wrote in English: "Charles take take cherish love flower flower flower." An old psychiatrist so thoroughly bribed by the Countess as to look, even on the outside, like a putrid pear, assured him that his vices had subconsciously killed his mother and would continue "to kill her in him" if he did not renounce sodomy. A palace intrigue is a spectral spider that entangles you more nastily at every desperate jerk you try. Our Prince was young, inexperienced, and half-frenzied with insomnia. He hardly struggled at all. The Countess spent a fortune on buying his *kamergrum* (groom of the chamber), his bodyguard, and even the greater part of the Court Chamberlain. She took to sleeping in a small antechamber next to his bachelor bedroom, a splendid spacious circular apartment at the top of the high and massive South West Tower.

This had been his father's retreat and was still connected by a jolly chute in the wall with a round swimming pool in the hall below, so that the young Prince could start the day as his father used to start it by slipping open a panel beside his army cot and rolling into the shaft whence he whizzed down straight into bright water. For other needs than sleep Charles Xavier had installed in the middle of the Persian rug-covered floor a so-called patifolia, that is, a huge, oval, luxuriously flounced, swansdown pillow the size of a triple bed. It was in this ample nest that Fleur now slept, curled up in its central hollow, under a coverlet of genuine giant panda fur that had just been rushed from Tibet by a group of Asiatic well-wishers on the occasion of his ascension to the throne. The antechamber, where the Countess was ensconced, had its own inner staircase and bathroom, but also communicated by means of a sliding door with the East Gallery. I do not know what advice or command her mother had given Fleur; but the little thing proved a poor seducer. She kept trying, as one quietly insane, to mend a broken viola d'amore or sat in dolorous attitudes comparing two ancient flutes, both sad-tuned and feeble. Meantime, in Turkish garb, he lolled in his father's ample chair, his legs over its arm, flipping through a volume of Historia Zemblica, copying out passages and occasionally fishing out of the nether recesses of his seat a pair of old-fashioned motoring goggles, a black opal ring, a ball of silver chocolate wrapping, or the star of a foreign order.

It was warm in the evening sun. She wore on the second day of their ridiculous cohabitation nothing except a kind of buttonless and sleeveless pajama top. The sight of her four bare limbs and three mousepits (Zemblan anatomy) irritated him, and while pacing about and pondering his coronation speech, he would toss towards her, without looking, her shorts or a terrycloth robe. Sometimes, upon returning to the comfortable old chair he would find her in it contemplating sorrowfully the picture of a *bogtur* (ancient warrior) in the history book. He would sweep her out of his chair,

his eyes still on his writing pad, and stretching herself she would move over to the window seat and its dusty sunbeam; but after a while she tried to cuddle up to him, and he had to push away her burrowing dark curly head with one hand while writing with the other or detach one by one her little pink claws from his sleeve or sash.

Her presence at night did not kill insomnia, but at least kept at bay the strong ghost of Queen Blenda. Between exhaustion and drowsiness, he trifled with paltry fancies, such as getting up and pouring out a little cold water from a decanter onto Fleur's naked shoulder so as to extinguish upon it the weak gleam of a moonbeam. Stentoriously the Countess snored in her lair. And beyond the vestibule of his vigil (here he began falling asleep), in the dark cold gallery, lying all over the painted marble and piled three or four deep against the locked door, some dozing, some whimpering, were his new boy pages, a whole mountain of gift boys from Troth, and Tuscany, and Albanoland.

He awoke to find her standing with a comb in her hand before his—or rather his grandfather's—cheval glass, a triptych of bottomless light, a really fantastic mirror, signed with a diamond by its maker, Sudarg of Bokay. She turned about before it: a secret device of reflection gathered an infinite number of nudes in its depths, garlands of girls in graceful and sorrowful groups, diminishing in the limpid distance, or breaking into individual nymphs, some of whom, she murmured, must resemble her ancestors when they were young—little peasant *garlien* combing their hair in shallow water as far as they eye could reach, and then the wistful mermaid from an old tale, and then nothing.

On the third night a great stomping and ringing of arms came from the inner stairs, and there burst in the Prime Councilor, three Representatives of the People, and the chief of the new bodyguard. Amusingly, it was the Representatives of the People whom the idea of having for queen the granddaughter of a fiddler infuriated the most.

> That was the end of Charles Xavier's chaste romance with Fleur, who was pretty yet not repellent (as some cats are less repugnant than others to the good-natured dog told to endure the bitter effluvium of an alien genus). With their white suitcases and obsolete musical instruments the two ladies wandered back to the annex of the Palace. There followed a sweet tang of relief—and then the door of the anteroom slid open with a merry crash and the whole heap of *putti* tumbled in.

Within this passage humor is far more than a secondary feature of language or tone, being instead a structural component integrated at the most fundamental levels (story, setting, character). The passage thus provides an ideal peg on which to hang a number of questions raised by Nabokov's use of humor. Why is Nabokov so eager to amuse? Does he take nothing seriously? Is he addicted to cleverness? In short, why does Nabokov deploy so much humor? In addressing these questions, it is important to steer clear of facile and uninstructive answers premised on such things as an authorial compulsion to joke or inability to be serious.[8] For if Nabokov is a free-spirited humorist, the reasons relate not to his lacking self-control or considering everything a joke but to his seeing humor as a means of endowing his fiction with certain qualities he enjoys in life, deceptiveness, for instance, or unpredictability. Nabokov experiences the world as ceaselessly surprising, as containing many more facets, many more possibilities, than can be seen or foreseen; and humor, he feels, in countering one or another expectation, hints at the extent to which reality surpasses all mental representations. For Nabokov, the human mind, too, as it devises creative solutions or discerns subtle connections is a continual source of wonder; and humor, he believes, in disclosing original understandings, highlights a mind's ability adopt new and fruitful viewpoints. Confronting the world, Nabokov encounters, with amusement and awe, incalculable possibilities. Exploration of his humor identifies these possibilities as precursors to the innumerable surprises on offer in his art.

[8] Examples of such explanations are legion. Here, for instance, is Carol Johnson on Ada: "The consciousness of the scrabble addict, the crossword puzzle composer, the butterfly collector, the aristocrat created Ada and has constructed therein a diversion, a leisurely wordgame, but nothing so irreducibly vulgar, so tenaciously middle class as a novel" (qtd.

Kinbote's note to line 80 is filled with humor. In reading the note we are transported, and more than a little abruptly, to a markedly original setting, a zany kingdom where odd people interact in peculiar ways. As depicted in Kinbote's note, Zemblans are decidedly uninhibited: a sculptor is free to fit a tell-tale cup to no-matter-who's breast; a king is at liberty to install in his chambers a "jolly chute" linking bed and bath; a countess feels no compunction about thrusting a half-naked daughter at a bachelor-prince. In general, Zembla is a realm of caricature and exaggeration. More than just enticing, Zembla's maidens, if Fleur de Fyler is any indication, are preternaturally alluring, possessing, at least in Fleur's case, a way of walking so seductive as to invite mention of special schools staffed by panders initiated into something akin to a mystery cult. And more than just wealthy, Zembla's royal family, judging from the Prince's bedroom, possesses Medician riches, inhabiting a storybook castle furnished with panda-fur blankets, mirrors signed with a diamond, and gem-littered chairs. And more than just resolute, Zembla's political schemers, as represented by the Countess de Fyler, are Olympian in their obstinacy, hatching plot upon plot, each more outlandish than the last, in hopes of acquiring power and prestige. A knockabout kingdom of folly and farce, Zembla is a rich source of amusement. Yet Zembla's zaniness is neither the beginning nor the end of the humor in Kinbote's note to line 80.

Lines 80-85 of "Pale Fire" are both lively and informative. Through mention of a kind maid, a buzzing house, and an eavesdropping child with ranging concerns, the lines evoke a charged world, one which, although serene, invites a boy to wonder and worry. But what does young Shade wonder about? Is he puzzled by Zembla's past? And what fuels his anxiety? Concern for a harried prince? Impertinence may be the funniest aspect of Kinbote's note to line 80, for the note is offered neither as fiction, nor as a passage culled from, for instance, Historia Zemblica, but as explication of Shade's "eminently Appalachian" "Pale Fire." Given the claims made, if implicitly, for the note's relevance, how extraordinary is the disjunction between the note and "Pale Fire," a disjunction reflecting not just Shade's failing to mention any of the Zemblania depicted in the note but also qualitative

---

in Norman Page, Nabokov: The Critical Heritage [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982], 209).

discrepancies between the respective worlds of poem and note. "[M]y bedroom," writes poet Shade, referring to a modest cell in a humble house. "[M]y bedroom," flags critic Kinbote, alluding to a "splendid circular apartment" atop a royal castle's "South West tower." Zembla clearly eclipses New Wye in Kinbote's mind, raising a key question: What fuels Kinbote's preoccupation—indeed obsession—with Zembla?

A falsely furtive Kinbote, over the course of his commentary, gradually divulges the "secret" source of his familiarity with Zembla. He, we "inadvertently" learn, is Charles the Beloved, ex-king of Zembla (and the Prince of note to line 80). With this in mind, we can appreciate Zembla for what it really is, a "really fantastic mirror" (to quote Kinbote's description of the Prince's "cheval glass") whose polished surface transforms outcast Kinbote into the epitome of well-bred masculinity. In Zembla, for instance, homosexuality is, if not the only acceptable sexual orientation, that predilection from which others deviate. In Zembla, that is, homosexual desire is "straight" and heterosexuality twisted (being either incestuous or a "complication" of homosexuality). Zembla's celebrating of homosexuality—also evident in Kinbote's denoting homosexual activity a "manlier pleasure" (109)—is indicative of the strategy responsible for Kinbote's note, one involving creation of a realm whose ethos sanctions, even advocates, an array of conventionally-censured beliefs and behaviors. And so, as the strategy plays out, Kinbote describes a place where women—his own *bête noire*—are considered defective. Zembla's language, for instance, not only classifies a woman's armpit and pubic regions under one and the same rubric, "mousepits," the language also, by means of that rubric, associates both areas with a rodent. And Zembla's men, too, consider women verminous, treating them, even in garbled legend, not as helpmates to be welcomed but as annoyances to be scorned: whereas the Lilith of Jewish lore abandons her husband, Arnor's Lilith "calls back" a departing Adam. (Fleur suffers a similar rejection at the prince's hands while the Countess de Fyler is tossed out of her adjacent room.) In Zembla, it is masculinity which is of interest; and so it is fitting that Zembla's Crown Prince is an over-active homosexual who feels only irritation when pursued by fetching Fleur de Fyler.

Although much of the humor in Kinbote's note is obvious, some is not, meaning attention should be called to such subtle jokes as an American medium's using English to channel a Zemblan spirit, the pun ("de Fyler"-"defiler") with which Kinbote passes judgment on the Prince's suitress, and the anagram ("Sudarg of Bokay") through which killer Jacob Gradus is marked as the antithesis of an artist and genius.[9]

A delicate pattern hinting at the ancestry of Fleur de Fyler is also of interest. Fleur, we note, has a rather feline face, "a small pale face with prominent cheekbones, luminous eyes" (108); her way of walking, too, is cat-like, "ankles [. . .] placed very close together in her dainty and wavy walk" (108); also mentioned are the "little pink claws" with which she clings to the prince's sleeve (111); there is, moreover, a feline quality to Fleur's behavior when she is shooed away, "stretching herself she would move over to the window seat and its dusty sunbeam" (111). As this pattern hints, far from being woven from whole cloth, Zembla is pieced together from oddments of Kinbote's life in New Wye, and among those oddments is a cat, the once-pampered inhabitant of a rented house. That Fleur is a Zemblanized version of this cat is apparent from various clues. If Fleur's appearance calls to mind a cat, Kinbote's cat, studied closely, is reminiscent of Fleur. For example, the cat, like Fleur, becomes nuisance: "its movements," we read of the animal, "began to grate on my nerves" (84); moreover, the cat, too, is ultimately rejected, farmed out, if not to a Fyler, to a Finlay (Kinbote's cleaning woman).[10] Very different from obvious humor like the King's bed-side aqua-chute, the Fleur/cat pattern hints at the range of jokes worked into Kinbote's note.

Kinbote's eagerness to provide descriptions of Zembla reflects a belief that such descriptions flatter himself: outlandish if scrutinized from a conventional point of view, Kinbote's rash behavior is wholly orthodox when appraised from a Zemblan perspective—and so Kinbote labors to familiarize readers with such a perspective. Amusingly, however, Kinbote's note to line 80, even

[9] The anagram is noted by Andrew Field (Nabokov: His Life in Art [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967], 303). It is, writes Michael Wood, "not surprising perhaps that the mirror image of an assassin should be a craftsman" (The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction [London: Chatto & Windus, 1994], 201).

[10] Moreover, as Brian Boyd alerts me, "Fyler" and "feline" are phonetically similar. And yet another clue appears as Fleur is dismissed from the note: "Fleur (who was pretty yet not repellent (as some cats are less repugnant than others to the good-natured dog told to endure the bitter effluvium of an alien genus)" (112).

given a reader who believes its author to be an exiled king, is less generative of admiration than aversion. Is Zembla so marvelous? A slapstick realm populated by cuckoos and clowns? Is the Prince really to be envied? A lonely man surrounded by schemers and frauds? And what of the Prince himself—is he so noble? A promiscuous homosexual lolling about in "Turkish garb"? The final joke, too, is on Kinbote, for even those readers who take on trust his self-presentation as the ex-king of Zembla perceive him as a figure of fun. Kinbote, as fabulist, is simply too odd, too idiosyncratic, to conjure up a truly stirring past.

Built on foundations shot through with humor, Kinbote's note to line 80 tops its foundations like a fantasticated castle, turrets soaring in a star-dusted sky light—as a jester plunges, bells jingling, into a moat. Why is Nabokov's fiction so funny? Nabokov just enjoys humor, one might say. But to do so invites a second question: Why does Nabokov enjoy humor?

0.1 Nabokov's Understanding of Humor

No explanation for the humor in Kinbote's note to line 80 can ignore particularities of Pale Fire. For to expunge even a single instance of the note's humor is to alter the *story* told in the novel. Pared down to book-jacket essentials, Pale Fire is about this: Charles Kinbote, despondent over John Shade's failure to devote a poem to "Zembla the Fair" (296), attaches a fantastic commentary to the poet's last work as a means of revealing his own importance. Hinting at the originality of Pale Fire's story, this summary also explains much of the humor in Kinbote's note. For what is Fleur, with her sinuous walk and shapely bosom, but a means of disclosing the carnal riches Kinbote once forsook? And what is the Countess, with her misguided machinations, but a means of revealing the lengths to which attempts to woo Kinbote once went? And what is the Prince's bedroom, with its stray jewels and panda-fur blanket but a means of revealing Kinbote's lost wealth? In sum, what is Zembla, with its romantic relics (castles; warriors), lax mores (Arnor's cup; Fleur's pajamas), and exotic customs

("manlier" pleasures) but an attempt to justify odd beliefs and behaviors by reference to a wondrous realm? Could the themes explored in Pale Fire be probed earnestly? Maybe, maybe not, but in any case not with the same originality. Thus, in accounting for the humor within Kinbote's note, attention must first be paid to the *story* that the humor advances.

However, to account for the humor in Kinbote's note by looking *only* to the story told in Pale Fire is to ignore the possibility that the humor is related—in form or effect—to humor found in other Nabokov works. If each instance of the note's humor is important *only* insofar as it advances the tale told in Pale Fire, then no instance discloses anything about Nabokov's *general* propensity to deploy humor. Each of Nabokov's works is humorous to some extent; thus, while every comic episode in a given work advances a particular story, all episodes exemplify a medium—humor—Nabokov enjoys in the main. As we account for Nabokov's use of humor, we will attend less to how jokes advance particular stories than to what humor is *in general* for Nabokov, and to what humor, in his opinion, does, *generally*.

The key to explaining Nabokov's love of humor lies in identifying what humor is to him. Humor is a notoriously difficult notion to pin down,[11] not least because, as experience suggests and experimentation confirms, each person possesses a unique sense of humor. Humor, for Nabokov, could be any number of things. Humor could be inferiority (as for Hobbes); it could be disjunction between reality and preconception (as Schopenhauer maintains); it could even be "the mechanical encrusted on the living" (as Bergson asserts [Laughter 37]). As it turns out, humor is for Nabokov an unforeseen possibility—typically circumstantial or perspectival—indicative of reality's outstripping an expectation. In brief, Nabokov presents humor as an enthralling surprise, maybe an unexpected event, often an odd understanding of the world. "The unusual is funny in itself," he suggests in an interview" (Meras). As we scrutinize Nabokov's fictional and discursive writings, we will find this sentiment—that the "unusual" is innately amusing—expressed on many occasions, as Nabokov, as

[11] In Murray S. Davis's words, "Those convinced that humor is worth knowing still face the question of whether it is knowable. Many humor theorists—and many humorists—believe it isn't. They feel that humor, like some delicate insect under a magnifying glass, will be incinerated when touched by the sunlight over the investigator's shoulder" (What's so

both theorist and humorist, makes of humor a playful rebuke to prophecy and presumption.

Information regarding Nabokov's theory of humor comes from four sources. First, Nabokov often admits to being amused. "I find comic," he writes in Strong Opinions, "the amalgamation of certain writers under a common label of, say, 'Cape Codpiece Peace Resistance' or 'Welsh Working-Upperclass Rehabilitation' or 'New Hairwave School' "(113). "It is amusing," he suggests in a note to Eugene Onegin, "that Brodski says 'army of the tsar' when the Russians are beaten by Napoleon and 'army of the people' when Napoleon is beaten by the Russians" (EOIII 320). "Some of the reactions were very amusing," he recalls of early feedback on Lolita, "one reader suggested his firm might consider publication if I turned my Lolita into a twelve-year-old lad and had him seduced by Humbert, a farmer, in a barn" (LO 314). Anything but shy about owning up to amusement, Nabokov often invites readers to share in moments of mirth; and so, in studying his discursive writings, we are aware of a mind tickled by phenomena of a certain type. The above admissions imply a mind amused by outlandish beliefs, a belief, for instance, in the sameness of disparate authors or the pliability of a novel's narrative. Here is implied an understanding of humor as a medium in which untenable ideas are presented. Much can be learned from Nabokov's acknowledgments of amusement. Broadly speaking, most express a Hobbesian view of the comic as flawed or inadequate.[12] Yet Nabokov's public laughter expresses only one facet of an intricate theory of humor, one connecting humor not just with the ridiculous but also (and more often) with the sublime.

Explicit claims also reveal something of Nabokov's idea of humor. "Perhaps humor is simply seeing things in a singular, unique, extraordinary way" he suggests soon after publication of Pale Fire (Meras). Humor, Nabokov here suggests, is an *inspired* mode of thought or perception, one through which arrive, not fatuities, but insights. Again humor is perceived as surprising, but here the surprise is linked to transcendence of expectations, with funniness associated with phenomena superior to the average or quotidian. In other contexts Nabokov likewise links the amusing and the

---

Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993], 2).

[12] There are ten occasions in Strong Opinions where Nabokov expresses mirth (pp. 23; 57; 113; 114; 116; 119; 127; 136; 163; 180); in nine cases, his laughter is contemptuous (a celebration on p. 163 of "comedy of the Laurel and Hardy type"

extraordinary. “It gives one the sensation of something ludicrous and at the same time stellar, lurking constantly around the corner,” he writes of The Overcoat, “and one likes to recall that the difference between the comic side of things, and their cosmic side, depends upon one sibilant” (NG 142). “Authentic humor comes from the angels,” he tells his students (LoDQ 65). “Only through laughter do mortals get to heaven,” he claims in a letter to his fiancée.[13] In many contexts, then, Nabokov avows humor’s transcendence. Humor, he proposes, is quasi-cosmic, is angelic, is celestial. That Nabokov’s explicit theory of humor is so different from the notion implied by his public laughter reveals not that Nabokov’s idea of humor is incoherent but that it is intricate. So which conception of the comic—as ridiculous or as sublime—holds sway within Nabokov’s theory of humor? Studying certain of Nabokov’s fictive works, we intuit a considered vision of humor as sublime.

As a creative writer, Nabokov repeatedly makes of humor a point of thematic interest. And doing so he generally shows the comic in positive terms. The most important of the works expressive of Nabokov’s theory of humor is “Ultima Thule” (1940), a story in which humor, through association with an individual possessed of “absolute insight” (SoVN 522), is depicted as a source of paranormal knowledge. Other Nabokov works—notably The Gift, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Look at the Harlequins!—also depict humor in celebratory terms. Analyzing Nabokov’s art in terms of theme, looking at what works are *about*, we learn much about Nabokov’s idea of humor. Nevertheless, even more is learned when we study humor not as a topic Nabokov probes but as a medium he employs.

What kinds of humor does Nabokov use? And to what effect? Answers to these questions best reveal Nabokov’s understanding of humor.

---

being the exception).

0.2 Characterizing Nabokov's Humor

Humor is ubiquitous within Nabokov's late fiction. Each aspect of Kinbote's note to line 80—story, setting, language, form, character—amuses, as, for example, a series of comic developments advance a madcap story (two actually, one set in New Wye, one set in Zembla), or as, to touch on another area of comic playfulness, many puns and quips enliven the note's language. One impression conveyed by Kinbote's note is of an author eager to amuse as much as possible. In readying the note, Nabokov allows his sense of humor something like free rein, for each paragraph is an assemblage of jokes.

Yet the joking is never tiresome, for each example of humor offers something new in terms of form, content or effect. If Nabokov's humor suggests an author eager to amuse as much as possible, it also hints at an author anxious to amuse in as many ways as he can, for jokes are varied along not just a few axes (e.g. type of humor, centrality) but in many dimensions. Some jokes in Kinbote's note to line 80 (e.g., Arnor's tell-tale cup) are aimed at first-time readers, while others (e.g., the "Sudarg" anagram) are directed at rereaders; some jokes (e.g., the protest of the Representatives) have only local effect, while others (e.g., the transformation of Lilith) are integrated into expansive structures; some instances of humor, the word "mousepits," for example, are boldly comic, while others, like the cat pattern, are subtly amusing. Although an unflagging humorist, Nabokov is rarely a repetitive one. Only rarely does he recycle, or reuse in an altered form, a joke or jest.[14]

A third notable feature of Nabokov's humor is ingenuity. On the one hand, specific jokes contrive ingenious connections (between, for instance, a corrupt psychiatrist and a rotting pear); on the other hand, groups of jokes are linked in clever ways. Nabokov's comedic ingenuity is particularly apparent in the way examples of humor work together in Kinbote's note to line 80 to

---

[13] Unpublished letter to Véra Slonim (10 Sept. 1924). My thanks to Brian Boyd for directing me to this remark.
[14] Kinbote's lack of interest in Shade's poem *does* become routine. Among the notes disregarding "Pale Fire" are those to lines 12, 17, 29, 42, 62, 80, 149, 171, 408, 433-434, 469. 597-608. 697, 741, 768, and 949.

underscore an outcast's need for emotional succor. Although each of the germane jokes—Arnor's cup, Fleur's walk, the medium's message, etc.—is amusing on its own, each is funniest if grasped as one element in an elaborate and inadvertent self-portrait. Nabokov, as Kinbote's reference to Parisian panders reveals, can pull off the memorable one-liner. His best humor, however, forges links between numerous lines, some separated by many pages. For example, not only Gradus but another "Shadow," "Nodo," has a name mirroring that of a positive character (i.e. "Odon"); thus, the Sudarg anagram, like several other jokes ("Nodo" obviously, but also the statement that "mad Mandevil," yet-another Shadow, had "lost a leg in trying to make anti-matter" [150]), identifies the Shadows as parodically "opposed" to Kinbote's faction. Again, discrete instances of humor constitute an elaborate comedic structure.

Nabokov's humor is ubiquitous, varied, and ingenious. While all of these traits merit mention, each is best studied as a factor endowing Nabokov's humor—and so his art—with a fourth attribute: unpredictability. As used by Nabokov, humor is a means of presenting novelties, as joking introduces an array of surprising situations, developments, viewpoints and literary devices. For instance, through invention of a word, "mousepits" (itself a new linguistic possibility), Kinbote reveals an original understanding of the female form.[15] The understanding is crudely misogynistic, not only linking with language disparate parts of the female anatomy, but associating both areas with a bothersome rodent. In effect, the word "mousepits," as it creates a new linguistic category, posits a relationship between features of the world usually seen as, if not completely unrelated, so separate as to resist classification under a single rubric. Through a joke, then, Nabokov hints at a novel understanding of women, as an amusing word introduces an unforeseen viewpoint. Time and again Nabokov uses humor to similar effect: some instances of humor (e.g., Arnor's use of a cup) depict unexpected developments; others (e.g., Kinbote's characterization of heterosexuality) present novel perspectives; still others (e.g., the parodic form of Pale Fire) introduce original art forms. In each

[15] Original but not unanticipated: "Another example of concealed Russian in [Pale Fire] is Fleur's 'three mousepits,' which, although they may in fact be 'Zemblan anatomy' (p. 110), are also a playful variant of the Russian 'myshki,' which means both 'little mice' and 'armpits' " (Vladimir Alexandrov, Nabokov's Otherworld [Princeton: Princeton UP,

case, whatever the source of surprise, humor counters one or another expectation.

Yet humor typically presents something unforeseen not by *any* thinker (another Zemblan—were there another—would not be surprised by Kinbote's denigration of heterosexuality) but by a thinker possessed of an orthodox viewpoint. Seen from a commonsensical point of view, Kinbote's note to line 80 moves in a thoroughly eccentric way, a way wholly incompatible with conventional notions of literary scholarship. Proceeding as it does, the note—and its humor in particular—shows the world to contain many more possibilities than are acknowledged by orthodox belief. As this hints, humor, in highlighting the shortcomings of orthodoxy, expands for an audience the boundaries of the possible. Acquainted with Zembla and its customs, recognizing that life can be lived in many ways, we are less likely to make presumptions about the world.

As it rebukes complacency, humor cultivates an allegiance to creativity. No longer allied with commonsense, the aficionado of humor is primed for discernment of peculiar connections. Perception of the relationship between Fleur and Kinbote's cat, for instance, is anything but automatic, involving an interrelating of disparate passages within Pale Fire (an effort premised on a willingness to abandon ideas about how novels are organized). Humor usually invites its audience to link seemingly unrelated aspects of the world; doing so, humor renders a mind more independent.

Humor also nurtures curiosity and attentiveness to detail. Full appreciation of Kinbote's note to line 80, detection of all its humor, involves such things as the tracing of allusions, the following up of clues, and the piercing of facades.[16] In brief, full understanding of the note is possible only given a readiness to meticulously explore the note. Kinbote is obviously interested in something other than Shade's poem. But what is he interested in—and why? Acknowledging the unlikelihood of Kinbote's answering these questions himself, we probe his commentary, seeking signs of an inner logic, finally discerning a covert structure expressive of a man's need for solace and respect. Although robust, this structure will not be seen by a reader who skims the surface of Kinbote's

---

1995], 211).

[16] Introducing Pale Fire to readers of Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years [London: Vintage, 1993], Brian Boyd shows how rewarding it is to tackle the novel proactively, taking hints, pursuing leads, questioning claims (425-27).

commentary, accepting, for example, that apocryphal Adam rejected Lilith, or, more importantly, that Kinbote is "Zemblan." Only a mindful reader can grasp—humor and all—one of Kinbote's notes.

Using humor, Nabokov invites readers to adopt a certain mindset, one mindful of peculiarities and appreciative of possibilities. But why is Nabokov so eager that readers be alert and open-minded? This question can only be answered given an understanding of Nabokov's worldview.

0.3 Nabokov's World

Nabokov's world eludes understanding. "You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (SO 11). As this passage suggests, each feature of Nabokov's world is an inexhaustible source of information. "You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing" (SO 11). Making his way in the world, then, Nabokov is *overwhelmed by* sensory data. However, there is another reason why his world is hard to grasp.

"Nature always deceives," Nabokov suggests in a lecture. "From the simple deception of propagation to the prodigiously sophisticated illusion of protective colors in butterflies or birds, there is in Nature a marvelous system of spells and wiles" (LoL 5). Nabokov's world cannot be taken at face value: disguises must be pierced and order must be recovered from ostensible disorder. Thus, Nabokov's world is like a "cabaret" (C 20) or a "staged scene" (G 344), especially in its inclusion of trickery ("the popular enticements of procreation" [SO 11]) and disguise ("animal mimicry, protective patterns and shapes" [SO 153]).

It should now be clear that Nabokov's world is much like Kinbote's. Both worlds are replete with artful deception (i.e. "false bottoms"), whether in the form of subtle disguise (a leaf is a

butterfly; a de Fyler is a "defiler") or sly arrangement ("protective patterns;" a Gradus is an anti-Sudarg). Both worlds, moreover, are filled with surprise. If in Nabokov's world "every subject brims with mysteries and thrills" (qtd. in Boyd, American Years 109), in Kinbote's world surprise is the order of the day. Finally, both worlds invite the closest scrutiny, for in each a given surface feature is but the first of many steps.

Nabokov's use of humor is ultimately rooted in peculiarities of a metaphysics. Experiencing the world as filled with humor, and eager that readers should appreciate the world's humorousness, Nabokov creates his own playful surprises, endowing texts with parallels to the patterns, disguises, disruptions, and absurdities he enjoys in his own world. Broadly speaking, Nabokov's humor, as it counters one or another expectation, warns us against over-investment in *any* expectation. Must a society denigrate homosexuality? Must a king be dignified? Must a scholar be sane? These and other questions are raised (and answered in the negative) by Kinbote's note to line 80, as humor challenges an array of "givens" about human life.

This thesis, as it maps relationships between Nabokov's use and theory of humor, offers an explanation for much of the humor in Nabokov's fiction, justifying it with reference not only to its effects and implications but also to its significance in Nabokov's own eyes. At the heart of the thesis are two questions. What does Nabokov's humor do? And why is Nabokov interested in doing these things? In answering the first question, the thesis analyzes both what all humor does (Chapter One) and what Nabokov's humor does with particular force (Chapters Two and Three). In addressing the second question, the thesis explores both Nabokov's love of humor (Chapter Four) and the underlying reasons for that love (Chapter Five). Humor is an elusive phenomenon, and Nabokov's humor, since so varied, is particularly slippery. By focusing on just two questions, we can—hopefully—achieve a balance between under- and oversimplification.

Chapter One: Critical Interest in Nabokov's Humor

The main favor I ask of the serious critic is sufficient perceptiveness to understand that whatever term or trope I use, my purpose is not to be facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure but to express what I feel and think with the utmost truthfulness and perception.

—Strong Opinions 179

Surprisingly little, and almost nothing informed by humor theory, has been published on Nabokov's humor. A number of book reviewers comment on Nabokov's propensity for joking, often with disapproval; a dozen or so literary critics devote an article to some aspect of Nabokov's comedic playfulness, at times ingeniously, too often perfunctorily; several authors make of Nabokov's comedy matter for a chapter in a book (in one case a book). With scholars now very interested in Nabokov's metaphysics, humor may well be the most neglected area in Nabokov studies. What is missing? First, given that humor is central to Nabokov's art, not enough has been published on the form and purpose of his humor; second, given that Nabokov is among very few novelists whose comedy emerges from a manifest theory of humor,[17] objectionably little has been written on the philosophical underpinnings of his comic playfulness; third, despite the notable discoveries made in recent times by humor theorists (mainly psychologists and sociologists), minimal effort has been made to analyze Nabokov's humor within a theoretical framework. In sum, little has been published on Nabokov's use of humor, still less on his theory of humor, and those pieces which have appeared are mostly neglectful of humor theory.

[17] Luigi Pirandello is another prominent example.

Scholars need to take Nabokov's humor more seriously. Too many readers present Nabokov's playfulness as artistically counterproductive, arguing that his fiction succeeds *in spite of* its funniness. Such readers, we shall see, variously describe Nabokov's humor as distracting or insensitive, asserting either that it overshadows "serious" features in a given work or, alternately, that it trivializes "serious" aspects of life. The arguments advanced, in so far as they reveal an understanding of humor, rest on flippant notions of comedy as inherently frivolous. If only Nabokov could rein in his jocularity, the arguments imply, his artistry and intelligence would shine forth.[18]

Impetuous contrasting of humor and seriousness is widespread. Arthur Koestler, in The Act of Creation, depicts amusement as wholly unreflective, insisting "It is *emotion deserted by thought* which is discharged in laughter" (58), and dissociating humor from both art and science (24). In a similarly unconsidered fashion, Henri Bergson, in Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, contrasts comedy and "genuine art" (170), arguing that the former is suited only to presentation of generalities:

> Art always aims at what is *individual*. What the artist fixes on his canvas is something he had seen at a certain spot, on a certain day, at a certain hour, with a colouring that will never be seen again. [. . .]
>
> Altogether different is the object of comedy. Here it is in the work itself that the generality lies. Comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes. It even creates new types, if necessary. In this respect it forms a contrast to all the other arts. (161, 163)

In comparing comedy to other arts, both Koestler and Bergson insist on humor's incapacity to handle

[18] Arthur Mizener recalls "a distinguished critic saying casually that the author of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Bend Sinister would be the best novelist writing in English if he would stop playing games" ("The Seriousness of Vladimir Nabokov"[The Sewanee Review 76:4 (1968)], 655).

serious themes. Koestler likens the humorist's viewpoint to that of a "callous schoolboy" who seeing a man slip and fall on an icy pavement "will laugh at the spectacle" (46). Comedy, writes Bergson, "lies midway between life and art. [. . .] By organizing laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment, it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature" (170). If Koestler, then, considers humor childish and Bergson finds it socially conventional, they unite in contrasting laughter and mindfulness, with each linking the former to second-rate works of not-quite-art and the latter to first-rate works of universal significance. And these writers, unlike most literary critics, take humor seriously enough to explore it at length. Considering that Koestler and Bergson, two of humor's more thoughtful students, dissociate humor and thoughtfulness, it is no surprise that many critics, faced with joke-filled passages like Kinbote's note to line 80, disparage Nabokov as a literary jester.[19]

However "natural" is dissociation of humor and seriousness, contemporary humor theorists, to the extent they generalize about so mercurial a subject as the comic, depict humor as serious indeed, linking it not with frivolity but with insight and originality. As a first step toward appreciation of Nabokov's humor, let us review the state of the art in humor studies.

1.1 Incongruity and Resolution

"Trying to define humor," writes Saul Steinberg, "is one of the definitions of humor" (qtd. in Redfern 21). As cartoonist Steinberg wittily suggests, characterization of humor is an undertaking that, fraught with possibilities of self-exposure as a nincompoop, is not to be (or maybe only to be) entered into lightly. Traditionally, definitions of humor have run aground on the shoals of subjectivity, for laughter, as life reveals and theory recognizes, far from providing proof that a

[19] Pale Fire, writes William Peden, is "a long, involved, intricate and essentially dull joke" (qtd. in Page, Critical Heritage

feature of the world is inherently amusing, demonstrates only that someone, for some reason, finds it so. "Nothing is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone," write Lawrence LaFave, Jay Haddad and William Maesen. "Hence, not only is the presentation of a 'joke' neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of humor, there is also other evidence that a 'joke,' defined as a humorous stimulus (external to the observer) non-exists" (85). Many modern theorists join LaFave and his co-authors in condemning the joke, as an objective entity, to non-existence. "No event or character or actor is inherently comic or tragic," argues Andrew Horton (11). "[T]here is no such thing as an objective joke," avers Paul Lewis (11). "[T]oday," writes Murray S. Davis, describing the current situation in humor studies, "most comic theorists no longer regard the objective world as intrinsically funny but as somehow made funny by its human observers" (11). Given the impossibility of an "objective joke," no defining of humor can achieve more than qualified success, representing at best a description of those things a person of a certain (intellectual and emotional) temperament finds funny.[20] Yet theorists are by no means silent in the face of humor. While foregoing definition of an abstract "humor," theorists, pursuing a less ambitious program, offer considered explanations of how discrete stimuli impact on particular minds to provoke instances of amusement.[21]

Of the many theories conjecturing a relationship between laugher and laughable, just one has achieved anything approaching consensus support. Premised on recognition that all humor surprises and cohering around the idea that all humor makes sense, the "incongruity-resolution" theory of

---

28).

[20] "The parable about blind men describing an elephant is relevant. Their error was not that they studied separate parts of the beast but that they confused those parts with the whole" (Paul Lewis, Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature [Albany: State University of New York, 1989], 6).

[21] In Jerry Palmer's words, "All meaning resides in an interaction between the mind, culture and the empirical world—this is a banality [. . .]. Where humour is concerned, it at least indicates the sterility of seeking funniness either entirely in the mind of the laugher or entirely in the phenomenon which evokes mirth: it is in the interaction between the two that answers must be sought. This avoids two obvious shortcomings of many traditional conceptions of humour: on the one hand, variations in what is found funny lead to the argument that nothing is inherently funny; on the other, if we say that humour resides entirely in the mind of the laugher, it is difficult to explain collective humour and we would have to hypothesize that indices of mirth would appear random to outside observers, as there would be no framework for explaining why other people laugh. A valid theory of the structure of humour must therefore seek an explanation in the interaction between the laugher and the laughable object, where the object has some describable attributes which make it an appropriate object for mirth, and where the mind-set of the laugher has some feature(s) that produce mirth" (Taking Humor Seriously [London: Routledge, 1994], 93).

humor presents amusement as the culmination of a cognitive process in which puzzlement is replaced by understanding. In Jerry M. Suls's words:

> A joke or cartoon is found to be funny as the result of a two-stage process. In the first stage, the perceiver finds his expectations about the text disconfirmed by the ending of the joke or, in the case of a cartoon, his expectations about the picture disconfirmed by the caption. In other words, the recipient encounters an incongruity—the punch line. In the second stage, the perceiver engages in a form of problem solving to find a cognitive rule which makes the punch line follow from the main part of the joke and reconciles the incongruous parts. A cognitive rule is defined as a logical proposition, a definition, or a fact of experience. The retrieval of such information makes it possible to reconcile the incongruous parts of the joke. (Suls, "Two-stage Model" 82)

All humor,[22] according to incongruity-resolution theorists, is both surprising and sensible. Focusing not on what humor *is* but on what it *does*, the incongruity-resolution theory, while avoiding problems inherent in the defining of humor, provides a useful model for analysis of many instances of humor. Humor, the theory argues, is not grasped unproblematically but upon arrival at a new understanding. "The concept of incongruity refers to the notion that something unexpected happens in a joke which serves to arouse, surprise, or mystify the listener. The concept of resolution refers to the notion that the incongruity can be explained or rendered sensible" (Shultz and Robillard 60). Derived for the most part from study of verbal humor, the incongruity-resolution theory offers a credible explanation for the success of many jokes; e.g.:

> Do you believe in clubs for young people?

[22] All *thoughtful* humor. As we shall see, such theorists distinguish between "purely incongruity" and "incongruity-resolution" humor. "Purely incongruity" humor—a pie in the face, for instance—is silly, nonsensical and a scream for kids; "incongruity-resolution" humor is logical (albeit the logic may be funny) and a mystery to young children.

Only when kindness fails.

Analysis of this joke underscores the merits of the incongruity-resolution theory. Nonsensical at first glance, the punch line, reconsidered in the light of information retrieved from one's "storehouse of information" (Suls, "Cognitive Processes" 41) (i.e. that the expression "club" denotes a weapon as well as a social group) is seen to arise in a logical way from the body of the joke, is, in short, seen "to make sense at some level with the earlier information in the joke" (Suls, "Cognitive Processes" 41). Because so useful, the incongruity-resolution theory invites *mis*use, and some critics present it as a key for unlocking of all (or nearly all) of humor's mysteries. "While it may be somewhat extravagant to claim that the incongruity and resolution theory can account for the structure of every instance of humour, this author and others have found it to be of immense heuristic value in accounting for vast samples of humour. [. . .] Moreover, there has been no substantive body of humour which has proved intractable to an incongruity and resolution analysis" (Shultz 14). "Any humorous text will contain an element of incongruity and an element of resolution" (Attardo 143).

Nabokov's fiction is filled with instances of humor amenable to analysis within an incongruity-resolution framework. Headed "*Line 80:* my bedroom," Kinbote's note to line 80 is presented as a source of information about the background and meaning of Shade's "Pale Fire." Yet the note, its incandescence notwithstanding, reveals nothing of Shade's bedroom, illuminating instead a distant and very different chamber. Set within a commentary ostensibly explicating Shade's "Pale Fire," Kinbote's note to line 80 is clearly an incongruity. And just as clearly, the note, since intelligible as an expression of Kinbote's need to appear important, is a *resoluble* incongruity, one originating not in nonsense but in an appreciable (if eccentric) sense. If Pale Fire includes many elaborate examples of Nabokovian "incongruity-resolution" humor, other Nabokov works incorporate discrete examples of such humor, examples, that is, with affinities to the "standardized jokes" beloved by humor theorists.[23]

[23] The phrase "standardized joke," writes Michael Mulkay, "refers to a linguistic package with more or less stable content

> "You are not a lover of football?" said Pnin, and a look of dismay crept over his large expressive face. He pursed his lips. He opened them—but said nothing. In silence he ate his vanilla ice cream, which contained no vanilla and was not ice cream. (P 107)

> "And you really don't despise me?" she asked, smiling through her tears, which was difficult, seeing there were no tears to smile through. (LiD 100)

> "Well," he said, getting up, "I must be going. Good-bye, everybody. Good-bye, Ada. I guess it's your father under that oak, isn't it?"
>
> "No, it's an elm," said Ada. (A 92)

While instances could be multiplied, these examples reveal Nabokov's aptitude with humor of an incongruity-resolution type. More importantly, the examples together hint at the remarkable variation within incongruity-resolution humor, instances of which confound expectations regarding any and all aspects of existence. Does this mean, as many theorists argue, that all—or even most—examples of humor incorporates a resoluble incongruity? Is Salvatore Attardo right to claim "any humorous text will contain an element of incongruity and an element of resolution"?

Proponents of the incongruity-resolution theory, typically with the suspect hastiness experts use in acknowledging troubling counter-examples, concede the existence—if not the importance—of one type of non-incongruity-resolution humor, "purely incongruity" humor, wherein incongruities, to the annoyance of rational minds, go unresolved. Having argued that "*most* humor, particularly of a verbal kind, has an incongruity-resolution structure," Suls adds: "the incidence of (purely) incongruity humor is rarer and generally involves nonverbal, physical gags as in slapstick or

---

which can be passed from person to person for retelling at some other time" (On Humour: Its Nature and Its Place in

situations where a need to make sense of things may not be urgent [. . .] but such cases for adults are probably the exception rather than the rule" (Suls, "Cognitive Processes" 47). Thomas Shultz is also aware that not all humor is sensible. Shultz, describing the "more subtle" aspects of jokes that "render incongruity meaningful," writes, "The mechanism of resolution is apparently necessary to distinguish humor from nonsense" (12). As these remarks hint, although some incongruity-resolution theorists acknowledge limitations in their theory, in doing so they implicitly dismiss such limitations as unimportant. But is "purely incongruity" humor necessarily nonsensical? Nabokov, for one, seems not to think so, for his fiction is rife with slapstick moments.

> Another disappointment awaited Dreyer at the "laboratory." Instead of the three automannequins promised him, only two were available for the show—the initial elderly gentleman, wearing a replica of Dreyer's blue blazer, and a stiff-looking, bronze-wigged lady in a green dress with high cheekbones and a masculine chin.
>
> [. . .]
>
> The show started.
>
> Gyrating her angular hips, the woman passed across the stage more like a streetwalker than a sleepwalker. She was followed by the drunken viveur. Presently she jerked by again in a mink coat, reeled, recovered, completed her agonizing stretch, and the sound of a massive thud came from the wings.
>
> [. . .]
>
> White-gloved, in evening dress, one hand raised to his top hat, the old chap entered, looking refreshed and gay. He stopped in front of the spectators and started to remove his hat in a complicated, much too complicated, salute. Something crunched.
>
> "*Halt*," howled the Inventor with great presence of mind and darted toward the mechanical maniac. "Too late!" The hat was doffed with a flourish but the arm came

---

Modern Society [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988], 8).

off too.

A photographer's black curtain was mercifully drawn. (KQK 261-263).

As this sequence shows, Nabokov has no compunction about enlivening his fiction with slapstick episodes. (Anyone still in doubt need only look at Invitation to a Beheading.)

Shortcomings in the incongruity-resolution theory, however, are most starkly exposed, not by scrutiny of "purely incongruity" humor, but by analysis of what might be called "purely resolution" humor. In short, much humor generally, and a sizable proportion of Nabokov's humor in particular, never offers an incongruity, developing not through disruption of an interpretation but through the *overlaying* of one interpretation on another. Here the narrator of "Lance" ridicules generic science fiction:

> So the good guy grins, and the villain sneers, and a noble heart sports a slangy speech. Star tsars, directors of Galactic Unions, are practically replicas of those peppy, red-haired executives in earthy earth jobs, that illustrate with their little crinkles the human interest stories of the well-thumbed slicks in beauty parlors. Invaders of Denebola and Spica, Virgo's finest, bear names beginning with Mac; cold scientists are usually found under Steins; some of them share with the supergalactic gals such abstract labels as Biola or Vala. Inhabitants of foreign planets, "intelligent" beings, humanoid or of various mythic makes, have one remarkable trait in common: their intimate structure is never depicted. In a supreme concession to biped propriety, not only do centaurs wear loincloths; they wear them about their forelegs. (SoVN 633)

Concealed within this passage are several jokes arising from its use of the word "Stein." One joke exploits the ambiguous nature of the expression "Stein," evoking a German sense ("stone") to playfully offer a reason for the aforementioned scientists being "cold" (like salamanders, they live

under stones). A second joke, also discernible given knowledge of the German meaning of "Stein," invites readers to dub one of the cold scientists "a Stein," or as a German might say "Ein Stein."[24] Nabokov's prose is full of jokes like these, which prod the reader not into mastering a discrepancy but into seeing past an obvious sense to an additional meaning. If, for instance, in Kinbote's note to line 80, Fleur's surname hides a pun, the name of mirrormaker "Sudarg of Bokay" conceals an anagram. The incongruity-resolution theory reveals very little of "purely resolution" jokes, for such jokes lack a component the theory identifies as essential to funniness—an incongruity. The success of concealed humor belies, in stark fashion, claims that humor *must* include an incongruity. The efficacy of "purely resolution" humor, therefore, validates the views of more measured theorists, such as Murray Davis: "We can also locate humor in the congruous element that connects two opposing expectation systems or frames. In this second model, humorists proceed first by showing an element to be congruous with other elements in a system, and then by suddenly showing it to be congruous or even more congruous with those in another system" (Davis 16).[25]

Humor need not incorporate a resoluble incongruity. Although many jokes include such an incongruity, others contain an irresoluble incongruity, while still others are without any incongruity whatsoever. Does this mean the incongruity-resolution theory—the most considered humor theory—is unhelpful?

No, for there is a reason why so much humor includes a resoluble incongruity. A reason pointing to laughter's real cause.

[24] The passage also cuffs, as Nabokov might say, the stupidity of pulp fiction anti-Semitism.

[25] Davis is not alone: "It may be the case that not all riddles and jokes use incongruity and resolution in the same way. As an example, Shultz (1976) analyzes the following riddle: 'Why did the cookie cry? Because its mother had been a wafer (away for) so long.' He claims that the reader first interprets the ambiguous phonological string as 'a wafer,' and this produces incongruity that is resolved by reinterpreting the string as 'away for.' An informal study that we have carried out indicates, however, that most people first interpret the string as 'away for,' and only secondarily see 'a wafer' as a possibility. The reason that this informal finding is potentially interesting is that the initial interpretation as 'away for' should produce little or no incongruity. It therefore should require no resolution [. . .] and thus should not be seen as an effective riddle. The fact that this is an effective riddle seems to require reanalysis, or at least elaboration, on the part of theorists" (William J. Pepinello and Robert W. Weisberg, "Linguistics and Humor" [in Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein, eds., Handbook of Humor Research: Volume I Basic Issues (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983)], 81).

1.2 Humor and Bisociation

"The fact that reality is perceived as being incongruous," argues Christopher Wilson, "implies that the individual has failed to conceptualize the world in accurate or internally consistent ways" (168). As Wilson here observes, perception of an incongruity is often premised upon misinterpretation of a feature of the world, whether an object, person, text, utterance or something else. Discussing a schoolboy's joke ("Where did King John sign the Magna Carta? At the bottom") Delia Chiaro clarifies this point:

> Here the recipient is faced with a question and not unreasonably tries to respond to a request for information by remembering his/her history. However he/she will soon find that no city or town is the right one because King John signed the Magna Carta at the bottom. The question is intentionally misleading not only because of the many-sidedness of the item *where*, but above all else because of the insufficient information given [. . .] its obscurity [. . .] and its deception. Of course, the sender could equally well have asked "On which part of the Magna Carta did King John sign?" (44)

As Chiaro notes, the "Magna Carta" joke—an exemplary instance of incongruity-resolution humor—makes use of deception in the guiding of its audience toward misinterpretation of a question. As this joke suggests, incongruity is typically encountered because a feature of the world has been misread or, more precisely, has been read in a way incompatible with subsequent developments. "[A] joke or cartoon is constructed to lead the recipient astray and produce surprise," writes Jerry M. Suls, adding: "Furthermore, information-processing strategies and capabilities are such that initial information is usually processed with a single interpretation. [. . .] [T]he recipient cannot maintain a set of multiple interpretations, one of which may happen to be correct" ("Two-stage Model" 84).[26]

[26] Steven Pinker, discussing "garden-path" sentences (e.g. "The horse raced past the barn fell"), argues, "Garden path

Analysis of incongruity-resolution humor highlights humor's exploitation of ambiguity, its sly utilization, that is, of phenomena—whether linguistic, conceptual, or physical—compatible with two (or more) readings. Glory contains a telling example of such humor, as one character, querying another on the townscape of Cambridge, mistakes the aphoristic for the architectural:

> This was the first time that mother and daughter Zilanov had come to visit him, and he was in constant fear of derision from Sonia. [. . .] As she gazed over a stone parapet at the ripply Cam, at its mat-green banks and at the gray towers beyond, she suddenly narrowed her eyes and inquired of Martin if he were planning to join General Yudenich's anti-Bolshevist forces in the North. Martin answered with surprise that he was not.
>
> "And what's that pinkish house over there?" [asked Mrs. Zilanov]
>
> "That's the library building," Martin explained. A few minutes later, as he walked under an arcade beside Sonia and her mother, he said enigmatically, "One side is fighting for the ghost of the past and the other for the ghost of the future."
>
> "Yes, exactly," Mrs. Zilanov chimed in. "This contrast keeps me from really appreciating Cambridge. I'm bothered by the fact that alongside all these marvelous old buildings there are so many cars, bicycles, sporting-goods stores, footballs—" (66)

Purely resolution humor is even more exploitative of ambiguity. In such humor, distinct interpretations truly coexist, superimposed in palimpsest fashion. Discussing puns, Walter Redfern highlights this duality: "Like a bus or a sandwich, a pun is a double-decker. As in an air-jam, meanings are stratified, stacked vertically. As a result, we get simultaneous competing references in the same word" (26). Redfern's analysis is borne out by study of any number of Nabokov's jokes.

---

sentences show that people, unlike computers, do not build the possible [interpretative] trees as they go along; if they did the correct tree would be among them. Rather people mainly use a depth-first strategy, picking an analysis that seems to be working and pursuing it as long as possible" (The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind

For instance, Fleur is both a "de Fyler" and (from Kinbote's perspective) a "defiler." Purely incongruity humor, to recall Davis's words, "[shows] an element to be congruous with other elements in one system, and then [. . .] suddenly [shows] it to be congruous or even more congruous with those in another system" (16). Necessarily exploiting an ambiguity, purely resolution humor compels its audience to see past a plausible interpretation to a second, equally (or more) plausible, reading.

Thus, all humor invites its audience to juxtapose two interpretations. Or, to adopt Koestler's terminology, all humor "bisociates" two "matrices of thought" (38). Defining the term "bisociation," Koestler refers to a need "to make a distinction between the routine skills of thinking on a single 'plane,' as it were, and the creative act, which [. . .] always operates on more than one plane" (35). As characterized by Koestler, "bisociative" thinking is distinguished by its bringing together of seemingly unrelated frames of reference—"matrices of thought"—whose juxtaposition discloses a relationship between disparate features of the world. In the following joke, the juxtaposed matrices of thought are, to quote Robyn Skynner, "the twenty-four hour clock, and the way we express what year it is" (78).

> [Have you heard the one about] the woman doing research into sexual behavior who stops among other people, an airline pilot, and asks him when he last had sexual intercourse. And the airline pilot replies "Nineteen fifty-nine." And the researcher, knowing airline pilots, is surprised and queries this, whereupon the pilot glancing at his watch, says: "Well, it's only twenty-one fifteen, now." (Skynner and Cleese 78)

Koestler's "matrices of thought" have been, under various names, discussed by many theorists. "A necessary ingredient for humor," writes John Allen Paulos, "is that two incongruous ways of seeing something (a person, a statement, a situation) be juxtaposed" (24). "We can also locate humor's

---

[London: Penguin, 1995], 213).

epicenter," argues Davis, "in the congruous element that connects two opposing expectation systems or frames" (16). "[S]omething is 'funny'," argues John Cleese, "because two frameworks of reference that are normally quite separate are suddenly brought together in a way that seems, momentarily, to connect them" (Skynner and Cleese 78). "All humour," suggests Redfern, "entails an ability to think on two planes at once" (22). In varied ways, then, a number of theorists link amusement to perception of an element within two distinct "frameworks of reference" (to privilege a term). All humor, it is repeatedly claimed, asks its audience to combine two points of view.[27] Bisociation alone does not explain amusement, for, as Koestler notes, bisociative thinking is also used by artists and scientists (27). Yet all humor *is* bisociative; suggesting that in ascertaining what humor *does*—our next task—acknowledgment that all humor brings together dueling interpretations is a good first step.

And what does humor do? "A joke," writes Bohdan Dziemidok, "almost always makes an unexpected discovery, discloses contradictions between things which seem similar, or similarities between things distant, or unsuspected features in phenomena which are ostensibly very familiar to us" (150). Dziemidok here presents humor is an insightful medium, in which overlooked aspects of reality—differences, likenesses, subtle features—are brought to light. Dziemidok is not the only humor theorist to link humor and discovery. "Wit," writes Davis, "is the ability to rapidly discover and articulate the common ambiguous element in seemingly different systems" (20). "Humor," to quote Seymour and Rhoda Fisher, "often involves finding and exposing a secret meaning. The comic has a way of spotting an underlying, not easily detected, theme in a situation and then constructing a joke around the integration of the theme with more surface aspects of the situation" (74). "The comic experience," suggests Peter Berger, "sees through the facades of ideational and social order and discloses other realities lurking behind the superficial ones" (34). Bohdan Dziemidok associates humor with three types of discovery—of hidden differences, concealed similarities; and unsuspected

[27] Cf. D. C. Muecke on irony: "[I]rony is a double-layered or two-storey phenomenon. At the lower level is the situation either as it appears to the victim of irony (where there is a victim) or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist (where there is an ironist). [. . .] At the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer or the ironist" (The Compass of

features. Turning to Pnin, we find an example of each type. Pnin's "vanilla ice cream," which is, it turns out, anything but, exemplifies the first type. An extended metaphor, relating Pnin's feelings after having teeth pulled, illustrates the second: "It surprised him to realize how fond he had been of his teeth. His tongue, a fat sleek seal used to flop and slide so happily among the familiar rocks, checking the contours of a battered but still secure kingdom, plunging from cave to cove, climbing this jag, nuzzling that notch, finding a shred of sweet seaweed in the same old cleft" (38). And a quip Konstantin Chateau makes ("Good title for a bad novel") upon learning that x-rays of Pnin reveal "a shadow behind the heart" exemplifies the third kind of discovery (126).

Humor, piercing one or another facade, is a mode of discovery. Yet, the humorist, in sharing a discovery, does so in an unusual way, employing a discursive mode different from that used in earnest discourse. Not just riddles (e.g. about the Magna Carta), but most types of humor are deceitful. "The parodist," notes David Kiremidjian, "proceeds by imitating as closely as he can the formal conventions of the work being parodied in matters of style, diction, meter, rhythm, vocabulary" (16). "Regardless of how broadly or narrowly he defines irony," remarks Wayne Booth, "every reader learns that some statements cannot be understood without rejecting what they seem to say" (1). "Like 'theoretical' or 'abstract' jokes, all the 'practical' or *objectified jokes* sold in novelty shops are designed to annihilate expectation systems," writes Davis: "All are 'deceptive objects,' which visually set up an expectation about their nature that they unexpectedly explode—sometimes with a bang" (307). Deceit, then, is central to humor, as the audience is misinformed or misdirected. Yet humorous deceit is of an unusual kind, for if a humorist, like a liar, misleads, that humorist, unlike the liar, hopes to be caught out. Here the distinction is made clear:

> A boy, on his way out of school with his mother, points to another child's beautiful painting and says, "I did that picture." His mother is very pleased and praises him. In the *joking lie* story, the boy immediately directs his mother to the true artist's name on the picture, to show the mother that is was a girl who painted it and not him at all. In

---

Irony [London: Methuen, 1969], 19). Also cf. Walter Redfern on parody: "[P]arody superimposes two levels or schemes

the *deceitful lie* story the boy doesn't show his mother the girl's name. (Leekam 162)

The humorist, having made a discovery of one kind or another, mock-deceitfully "conceals" the discovery for the audience to uncover. In this way, humor serves as a means of both developing and disclosing the intelligence of an observer.[28]

Humor has implications regarding the act of perception itself. Bisociating viewpoints, humor compels the audience to bring together a familiar and an unfamiliar perspective, revealing as it does so the conventional viewpoint to be just one among several possible perspectives. "Typically," write the Fishers, "the comic takes a topic or theme; presents someone's perspective on it; and then comes up with a twist that highlights the relativity or absurdity of that perspective" (70). In relativizing viewpoints, humor discloses what Michael Mulkay calls the "multiplicity of the social world"—the "contradictions, incongruities and deviations" (214) inherent in "the unitary terms characteristic of ordinary, serious interaction" (217). In short, humor reveals that anything may be understood in many ways, thereby emphasizing the extent to which a particular understanding is contingent as opposed to inevitable. Reality, humor suggests, is a realm of ambiguity. "Everything," to quote Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver's discussion of "adhocist" thinking, "can always be something else" (27). In large measure, Nabokov's love of humor reflects its presentation of unsuspected possibilities. Struck by humor's ontological implications, Nabokov, as both humorist and theorist, makes of humor proof-positive of life's generosity.

Moreover, humor, whether Nabokov's or someone else's, is a mode of invention, in which links are forged between disparate features of the world. Bisociation, as Davis notes, "connects two opposing expectation systems or frames" (16), and doing so it necessarily calls attention to an element shared by those systems or frames. Jokes, to quote Mary Douglas, "connect widely differing fields" (102), and the more divergent the fields, the more unsettling the joke. Humor, then, can be

---

of reference, so that we hear or see double" (Puns [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984], 93).

[28] Writing on irony, Wayne Booth remarks, "The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes my capacity for dealing with it, and—most important—because he grants

graded, and in a not-entirely-subjective way. Whereas a poor joke (e.g., Where does electricity come from? The wall) discovers a trite or uninteresting link (here between a power station and a wall socket), a good joke (like the one linking Pnin's tongue and a seal) reveals a genuinely unexpected connection. Every example of linguistic humor, according to Attardo, incorporates a "connector," a "segment of text which can be given two distinct meanings" (96), and while verbal jokes include particularly visible "connectors," all instances of humor discover an unexpected relationship.[29] As Marshall Brickman—co-author with Woody Allen of several films—explains:

> A joke is something that has an element of surprise to it and some kind of truth and an as-yet-unforeseen connection between two things. Woody has a way of finding it. Here's an example. One time we were walking down the street and we saw somebody. And I said, "Isn't that Jack so-and-so?" And he said, "Yeah. He got divorced." And I said, "Didn't he used to have a mustache?" And Woody said, "Yeah, his wife sued for the whole face and settled for the mustache." It's a big talent to apply that way of thinking to problems of structure or character, to surprise and remain within the framework and also be interesting (qtd. in Lax 252).

1.3 Laughter and Novelty

Humor is not unique in provoking laughter. Tickling leads to laughter, as do other kinds of "mock-attack," chasing, for instance, or roughhouse play. "Peek-a-boo" causes infants to laugh,

---

me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built" (A Rhetoric of Irony [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974], 28).

[29] The "best" parodies, writes Davis, "suggest a secret similarity between realms presumed to be very different" (What's so Funny? 21).

while thrill-rides—rollercoasters, for example—produce near-hysterics in older children.[30] Akin to humor in their generation of laughter, then, are a number of rousingly playful experiences.

Common to all non-humorous laugh-provoking experiences is what might be called "false-danger." In brief, each such experience, although safe, simulates or is patterned after a genuinely dangerous situation, either a real attack or abandonment by the caregiver (in the case of peek-a-boo), or falling, stumbling or being thrown (with thrill-rides). Much laughter, it seems, and all laughter in the very young, arises from a sudden realization that a seemingly dangerous situation is in fact safe.[31]

There seem to be two reasons why "false-danger" situations provoke laughter. First, given that seemingly perilous situations arouse the nervous system, as adrenaline is released in preparation for "fight-or-flight," laughter, as it expends energy, returns the body to something approaching a normal state.[32] Second, given that a mock attack or mock abandonment can easily be misconstrued as a real attack or abandonment, laughter, which is a "play signal" (like the wagging of a dog's tail), indicates a participant's awareness that all is "in fun."[33] In false-danger situations, therefore, laughter relieves two types of tension, relaxing both the laugher's body and the social situation.

In general, all the experiences discussed above—tickling, peek-a-boo, thrill-rides—are enjoyable. (Although an overly-intense bout of tickling, like a too-boisterous mock-attack, is anything but fun.) If we accept that experiences which are actively sought out serve an adaptive purpose,[34] a desire to experience false-danger situations should be explicable by reference to our

---

[30] "Thrill-rides" need not be mechanical, nor for older children: "Perhaps the most notable feature of games in which parents swing and throw their children in the air is the remarkable amount of laughter and play-screaming that it generates. [. . .] Laughter of this intensity and duration is unusual in most other forms of play. It is only at amusement parks that I have seen comparable amounts of laughter" (Owen Aldis, Play-Fighting [New York: Academic Press, 1975], 228).

[31] Observations of peek-a-boo laughter support the claim that laughter reflects a sense of *safety*, not anxiety per say: "The baby generally laughs most when a face suddenly appears. Sometimes babies also laugh during disappearance, but this may be merely a carry-over effect" (Aldis, Play-Fighting 264).

[32] "[V]igorous laughter provides an average of over 75% increase in energy expenditure relative to a resting state. Given the many muscle systems involved in laughter, it should be an effective means of reducing arousal or felt tension" (Paul E. McGhee, "The Role of Arousal and Hemispheric Lateralization in Humor" [in McGhee and Goldstein, Volume I], 20).

[33] "The function of laughter in human play seems to be similar to the function of play signals in animal play. The main function of laughter is discriminative. Laughter signifies that the situation is not a serious one" (Aldis, Play-Fighting 272).

[34] In William Durham's words, "throughout the organic evolution of homonids there was a persistent, genetic selective advantage for a neurophysiology which rewarded with sensory reinforcements and a feeling of 'satisfaction' those acts likely to enhance survival" ("Toward a Coevolutionary Theory of Human Biology and Culture" [in Arthur Caplan, ed., The Sociobiology Debate: Readings on Ethical and Scientific Issues (New York: Harper & Row, 1978)], 431).

evolutionary past.

Evidence for how past experiencing of false-danger experiences contributes to present-day human survival comes from observation of animals. Not only humans, but many other species of animal, including nearly all mammals, play. As Michael J. Boulton and Peter K. Smith write:

> Play is a widespread behavior in the young of most mammalian species. It is a noticeable feature of behavior in primates, and although there are important within- and between-species differences in the actual forms of play behaviors, it very often appears as play fighting and play chasing, collectively known as rough-and-tumble. (429)

What selective advantage does play—in the form of mock-fighting—offer? Most answers to this question cohere around the notion of preparation. Play fighting, it is generally agreed, allows for the practice of behaviors useful in survival. As Marc Bekoff and Colin Allen write, "When animals play they typically use action patterns that are also used in other contexts, such as predatory behavior, antipredatory behavior, and mating" (105). Play fighting, then, offers animals a chance to practice, without serious consequences, important physical and strategic skills. This has implications for the study of humor.

Humor is both usefully and plausibly thought of as a false-danger experience. Usefully, because to think of humor this way is to account for many of its effects; and plausibly, because it is only logical that all laughter-provoking experiences have something in common. As noted, false-danger experiences (mock-attack, for instance) are initially unsettling, as something unexpected excites the nervous system and disturbs the mind. Many instances of humor are also experienced as initially disconcerting, as a punch line or caption leaves the audience off-balance and struggling to respond.[35] A second key aspect of false-danger experiences relates to their resolubility: a mock-

[35] "Investigators studying the relationship between arousal and humor have clearly shown that humor is associated with

attack, for example, is a bluff to be seen through.[36] Much humor, too, exploits pretense: an ironist pretends to hold a view; a parodist feigns to be a certain kind of author; a wit affects to misinterpret a word or phrase.[37] Just as a play-fighting lion cub wants its playmate to see through an aggressive subroutine, so a humorist wants an audience to see beyond apparent folly or clumsiness. In short, both cub and comedian are "playing" in a quasi-theatrical sense, as each adopts a role. Moreover, just as the victim of a mock-attack signals (e.g. a dog wags its tail, a primate makes a "play face"[38]) recognition that an "attack" is playful, so the recipient of a joke signals through laughter that the joke's humor has been perceived. In both cases, a signal carries the message, "continue, I am enjoying myself;" again a gesture reveals that all is well.

If humor is a false-danger experience, akin to play fighting and peek-a-boo, it should—like these experiences—develop adaptive behaviors. It may be that humor readies us for interactions with the unfamiliar. After all, most humor presents something unusual: humor introduces us to people who act in odd ways and harbor strange beliefs; it transports us to bizarre worlds; it presents us with new forms (and novel functions for old forms). If humor plays a part in human survival (and given humor's universality this *must* be the case), the reason probably relates to its readying us for encounters with the strange. Humor not only develops a capacity to make sense of peculiar modes of thought and behavior, it also conveys the message that the disconcerting can, with effort, be understood. Practiced at appreciation of humor, we are better able to interact with a strange person from a distant tribe.[39]

Humor is anything but trivial. Given the rigor with which theorists link humor and ingenuity,

---

increased activity of the sympathetic nervous system" (McGhee, "Arousal and Hemispheric Lateralization" 16).

[36] "In all play, both animal and human, there is an element of 'pretending.' One animal attacks or runs away from another, but we say 'he does not really mean it' or 'he is only pretending' " (Aldis, Play-Fighting 14).

[37] Much of Groucho Marx's humor arises from feigned misunderstandings; e.g.:

"When young Dick Cavett told Groucho, on the occasion of their first meeting on a hot afternoon in New York that he was a big fan of the older humorist, Groucho responded by saying 'I could *use* a big fan in weather like this' " (Davis, What's so Funny? 38).

[38] "When monkeys and apes play, among taxa widespread throughout the primate order, they typically display a facial configuration referred to as the *play face*. The display bears a striking resemblance to the threat display, but there are subtle differences" (Paul Ekman, Emotion in the Human Face [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982], 253).

[39] As Guy Cook writes of play in general: "It may be that human play, in addition to the function of the specific training which it shares with animal play, also performs an educational role by increasing *general* flexibility, thereby allowing humans to develop, both as individuals and societies, a greater understanding of their environment, and more creative

and given Nabokov's marked reverence for originality,[40] the outline of an explanation for Nabokov's humor is—it would seem—readily discernible. Yet many readers, most likely because unfamiliar with humor theory, disregard the relationship between Nabokov's use of humor and love of novelty.

1.4 Unstudied Reaction to Nabokov's Humor

Writers discussing Nabokov's use of humor can be placed into two broad groups. A first encompasses book reviewers who, assessing a work (typically a novel, although Speak, Memory, Strong Opinions and Eugene Onegin were also widely reviewed), touch in passing on Nabokov's use of humor. A second comprises scholars who, provoked by some aspect of Nabokov's humor, publish a considered article on the subject.

Surveying the efforts of the first group of writers—book reviewers—three trends emerge. Although many, if not most, reviewers appreciate Nabokov's humor, identifying it as both funny and important, others are dismissive, asserting either that Nabokov's humor is unfunny, or alternately that even if Nabokov's humor is funny, there is too much of it.

Many reviewers identify Nabokov's humor as amusing and important. Reviewing Look at the Harlequins!, Eric Korn posits the pun as a key authorial device: "Nabokov's puns, echoes and chimes are not inserted currants but the texture of poetry itself; and the resulting confection is a miraculous *millefeuille* or, if you prefer, a madeleine. [. . .] Polyglottery becomes not a stumbling-block but a springboard, and the pun is restored to a structural role in prose" (418). Assessing The Eye, Roderick Cook similarly insists on the significance of Nabokov's humor: "Nabokov is a great kidder. He kids his characters, he kids his situations, and he kids the English language. But he always kids for real, as the saying is. He has always given his novels the form of an elaborate joke while underneath there are real flesh and blood and problems" (qtd. in Page 34). In like fashion, Alfred

---

responses to it" (Language Play, Language Learning [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000], 107).

Kazin notes the relevance of Ada's word-play: "The babble of many tongues, the zanily insistent references, the sentences that are dizzyingly lucid despite their arcane jokes, all warn the reader that he is being laughed at in small matters but instructed in large ones" (qtd. in Page 205). Richard Poirier's review of Bend Sinister likewise depicts Nabokov's humor as something more than comic relief: "Nabokov is at his best in his bitterly humorous thrusts at the narrowness and stupidity of totalitarian thought and action and in his flights of satirical scorn" (qtd. in Page 72). F. W. Dupee is also appreciative of Nabokov's humor. Discussing Lolita. Dupee writes: "Mr. Nabokov's terrible infant circulates over here in its Paris format, gets itself reviewed in advanced periodicals and acquires a small celebrity. But this celebrity, if it is of the kind I think it is, could do the book a subtler injury than censorship can do, insisting as it mostly does that Lolita is no more than a joke or literary burlesque. [. . .] Lolita is very funny, very full of burlesque intentions, but the supreme laugh may be on the reviewers for failing to see how much of everyone's reality lurks in its shadow play" (qtd. in Page 84).

Significantly, the above-quoted reviewers touch only cursorily on what Nabokov's humor *does*. To label Nabokov's joking "informative" is to say nothing about those qualities making it funny. Humorous prose differs from earnest prose in identifiable ways. To disregard differences between the two discursive modes is to imply that the *funniness* of Nabokov's humor is beside the point.

Not all reviewers enjoy Nabokov's humor. Some find it unfunny while others see it as self-defeating, either because overwhelming or because thematically inappropriate.

"As well as moral and beautiful," writes Kingsley Amis, "[Lolita] is also held to be funny, often devastatingly so, and satirical. As for the funny part, all that registered with me were a few passages where irritation caused Humbert to drop the old style-scrambler for a moment and speak in clear. The satirical thing is a bit better, but it has been rather foisted on to Lolita as a result of the eagerness of Americans to hear the worst of themselves" (qtd. in Page 106). Alfred Chester's review

[40] E.g. "In fact, the true measure of genius is in what measure the world he has created is his own" (LoRL 106).

of Pale Fire also insists on the ineffectiveness of Nabokov's humor: "[Pale Fire] is a total wreck, and for only one reason: it isn't funny and it's supposed to be. [. . .] Nabokov hates like Swift, but unlike Swift he is without innocence. His comedy is a lie. It is dead. It is evil, like racial prejudice" (qtd. in Page 29). After this, it comes as a relief to find William Peden calmly dismissing Pale Fire as a "dull joke" (qtd. in Page 28). These passages hint at the extent to which certain readers tie the success of Nabokov's fiction to the funniness of his humor: for such reviewers, Nabokov is a humorist; if his fiction amuses, it works; if it does not, it fails. This view—of Nabokov as humorist—is an influential one; influential enough to elicit from Nabokov several disavowals of frivolity.

Other reviewers complain that Nabokov's art is overladen with puns and puzzles. Reviewing Lolita, Rebecca West argues that it is "too full of puns, which are [. . .] fatiguing in large quantities" (qtd. in Page 11). Voicing a similar complaint, Richard Poirier writes of Look at the Harlequins!, "The puzzles and teasers in the book are fun to figure out when they are broadly parodistic, and altogether less so (though in these instances the vanity of knowledge might pass for fun) when they require a detailed knowledge of the whole of Nabokov's *oeuvre* and the byways of his literary career" (qtd. in Page 238). Matthew Hodgart, reviewing Ada, makes a similar point in a more patronizing manner: "[D]espite a proliferation of puns and puzzles this book contains Nabokov's finest writing" (qtd. in Page 271).

A variation on claims that Nabokov's prose is too jokey is P. N. Furbank's assertion, advanced in a review of Bend Sinister, that Nabokov is funny precisely when he should be serious: "Nabokov has tried to exploit a kind of refugee humor, a resort to hysterical and self-lacerating comedy as the last refuge of political impotence, but the result is artistically perverse in a way that Lolita was not" (qtd. in Page 24). Malcolm Bradbury, too, presents the humor in Bend Sinister as unwelcome. "[T]he fable is handled with a rhetorical zest that is occasionally offensive; Nabokov plays with his tale, does tricks, stands on his head. The story hasn't quite evolved from the study, where the writer can put in personal jokes [. . .] yet the strain between style and fable is meaningful: it is a moral fable told in an amoral voice" (qtd. in Page 75). In general, writers describing

Nabokov's fiction as inappropriately funny do so in a sanctimonious way, presenting Nabokov's jocularity as evidence of moral obtuseness.

One more group merits mention. Like shell-shocked soldiers, uncertain from where the next missile will arrive, these reviewers are wary and untrusting. "Can parts of this work be intended as an elaborate joke, a commentary to end all commentaries?" writes Ronald Hingley, reviewing Nabokov's Eugene Onegin. "Can the author of Pnin perhaps be taking the mickey? The facsimile reproduction of volume four of the 1837 *editio optima* of Eugene Onegin (over 300 pages of print so small that you almost need a magnifying glass to read it) is an extravagance that would bear out such a suggestion" (qtd. in Page 171). Markedly entertaining is Gore Vidal's assertion, advanced in a review of Strong Opinions, that critic Alfred Appel is fictitious: "The best of the interviews are with Alfred Appel Jr.—plainly a Nabokovian invention—the 'Jr.' is one giveaway, another is that Mr. Appel's questions are often longer and wittier than the Professor's answers. Can this mean that an intellectual comedy team is being discreetly tried out in these pages. A brand-new Stravinsky and Croft" (63). While these comments are amusing, no one familiar with Nabokov's sense of humor should condemn out of hand a reader wary of leg pulls.[41]

Marginal comments on Nabokov's comedy, although interesting, reveal little about the point of that comedy. The writings of scholars closely studying Nabokov's humor are more informative.

1.5 Considered Studies of Nabokov's Humor

Clarence Brown's essay "Humor" in The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov suffers from its author's lackadaisical approach. "I simply wondered what might result from trying to recall examples of Nabokov's humor without the slightest new research. Given the single stimulus of the

[41] Vidal in particular is right to be suspicious—two of the interviews in Strong Opinions involve invented questioners (see Galya Diment, "Strong Opinions" [in Vladimir Alexandrov, ed., The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Garland, 1995)], 686-87).

subject, Nabokov's humor, what might be the immediate and unaided response?" (185) More ad-lib than analytical, Brown's essay, unsurprisingly, misrepresents in crucial ways both Nabokov's use and theory of humor. Nabokov's humor, we read, appears either as "wallpaper"—"the immediate layer beyond the foreground event" (185)—as a "residual hum"—"a jovial low humor of drollery" (186)—or as something even *less* perceptible: "What the French call *roi s'amuse* [. . .]. In the case of this humor, one never really finds out what the joke is, for the joke is never directly apprehended" (187). Brown's failure to appreciate the importance of Nabokov's humor is evident in his analysis of a comic episode culled from Pale Fire. Discussing a scene in which "the good if awfully distractible aviator King of Zembla, Alfin the Vague, [flies] his little Blenda into the scaffolding of a new hotel while smiling at the camera," Brown writes that the episode "is too delicately poised on the cusp between horror and hilarity to support anything more than mention" (185). Yet the episode *does* support more than mention, for had Brown invested more effort (nowhere is Alfin described as "smiling"), he would have seen that King Alfin's death is part of a pattern incorporating, among other things, the waxwing slain by the "false azure" of Shade's windowpane (proximity to fatally arrested flight links Shade and Kinbote). Even if its significance is unclear, the pattern exists, showing that Alfin's death is something other than "wallpaper." In closing, Brown writes that "the single title that sums up Nabokov's *mortal gaiety* is the novel from which that phrase derives: "Laughter in the Dark" (188). Seeing Nabokov as a pessimist ("Nabokov's humor, like perhaps all humor without exception, is ultimately dark" [187]), Brown presents his joking as a means of staving off despair. Nabokov's laughter is, we read, the bitter laugh of a king "enthroned upon the unhappiest of royal patrimonies, absolute loneliness" (188). But are Nabokov's fictive worlds so dark? Can Zembla—with its farcical past and slapstick present—be credited to a despondent author? Given its context, Brown's article represents a wasted opportunity.

More considered is Brian Boyd's "Nabokov and Humor," from the spring 1997 Nabokovian. According to Boyd, "Nabokov's humor springs (and here this is the *mot juste*) from his sense of the endless creativity of life, of the pleasures it plants, of the comedy of its mismatching our

expectations, from a sense that life's pleasure and plays might suggest bigger surprises behind and beyond life" (42). As Boyd sees him, Nabokov, sensing a playful force at work in the world, "tries to match life's own game by maximizing the play and the surprise ahead as we read, by inventing his own equivalents for the inexhaustibility of life's surprise" (41). Thus, Nabokov's humor is designed to awaken and display slumbering regions of the mind, offering us "a chance to see and savor the freedom of the mind: to see how easily we leap from invention to invention, how our minds can twist in midair" (40). Presenting surprising viewpoints and beliefs, Nabokov's humor, in Boyd's view, "show[s] us how active, how nimble, how unexpected our minds can be; how we can put our own spin on our world, when we put two things together, a joke, an image, and invent reality, when we become not the passive products of our immediate world, but its active shapers" (40).

Boyd sees Nabokov's humor as consequential for two reasons, one relating to its endowing of fictive worlds with certain qualities (e.g., surprise, trickery), one pertaining to its developing of the mind. Utilizing humor, Nabokov "invites an imagination to discovery as generously as doting parents wanting to foster the imagination of their little boy" (41), as jokes evoke worlds that challenge and reward readers in new ways. Mapping the relationship between Nabokov's humor and metaphysics, Boyd underlines the extent to which Nabokov uses humor in readying readers for appreciation of an elusive "real" world. "Nabokov wants his humor to connect us with the surprises that might lie behind the understanding of the world our minds trap us within" (40). For Boyd, then, Nabokov, struck by the surprises on offer in life, makes of humor a means of providing like surprises to readers. Making this point, Boyd touches on Nabokov's belief that humor, as it reveals the unpredictability of life, cautions us against complacency: "[He] wants to suggest that we should respond to our world not passively but actively, that we should not dully impose standard expectations on things, but notice with surprise and delight when they do not fit what we expect" (40).

Alfred Appel Jr.'s introduction to The Annotated Lolita is also valuable. At the heart of Appel's understanding of Lolita is a sense of the novel as "involuted": "An involuted work turns in

upon itself, is self-reflective, conscious of its status as a fiction, and '*allégorique de lui-même*'—allegorical of itself to use Mallarmé's description of one of his own poems" (xxiii). Conscious of its own fictiveness, an involuted work, Appel explains, anticipates the reader's expectations, treating them as potential moves in a game:

> The word "games" commonly denotes frivolity and an escape from the exigencies of the world, but Nabokov confronts the void by virtue of his play-concept. [. . .] The author and the reader are the "players," and when in Speak, Memory Nabokov describes the composition of chess problems he is also telescoping his fictional practices. If one responds to the author's "false scents" and "specious lines of play," best effected by parody, and believes, say, that Humbert's confession is "sincere" and that he exorcises his guilt, or that the narrator of Pnin is really perplexed by Pnin's animosity toward him, or that a Nabokov book is an illusion of reality proceeding under the natural laws of our world—then one not only has lost the game to the author but most likely is not faring too well in the "game of worlds," one's own unscrambling of pictures. (xxi)

Nabokov's "false scents" and "specious lines of play," we read here, are "best effected by parody;" and much of Appel's essay explores Nabokov's use of parody. Parody, Appel argues, "provides the main basis for Nabokov's involution, the 'springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion,' as the narrator of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight says of Knight's novels. Because its referents are either other works of art or itself, parody denies the possibility of naturalistic fiction. Only an authorial sensibility can be responsible for the texture of parody and self-parody; it is a verbal vaudeville, a series of literary impersonations performed by an author" (xxvii). Because self-conscious and mimetic, parody, according to Appel, never appears as other than make-believe. Thus, the reader of a parody develops a detachment akin to that of the author, the only person cognizant of

the human reality of which the work is an expression: "The ultimate detachment of an 'outside' view of a novel inspires our wonder and enlarges our potential for compassion because, 'in the spiral unwinding of things,' such compassion is extended to include the mind of an author whose deeply humanistic art affirms man's ability to confront and order chaos" (xxxiii).

In Appel's view, Nabokov's parodies, while amusing, evoke other emotions as well, empathy, for instance, or horror. "With the possible exception of Joyce, Nabokov is alone among modern writers in his ability to make parody and pathos converge and sometimes coincide. [. . .] Nabokov has gone beyond Joyce in developing parody as a novelistic form, for in Lolita and Pale Fire, which are totally parodic in form and may be the finest comic novels since Ulysses, the parody and pathos are always congruent, rather than adjacent to one another" (li, lii). In describing Nabokov's parodies as both funny and pathetic, Appel highlights the importance of Nabokov's humor. Lolita, we read— as Appel paraphrases Marianne Moore's description of poetry as "imaginary gardens with real toads in them"—is "a parody of death with real suffering in it" (lii).

As a discussion of Nabokov's humor, Appel's essay is notably instructive in three respects.[42] First, it emphasizes how Nabokov's novels offer experiences—intellectual and emotional—akin to those provided by the "real" world. Second, it links Nabokov's use of parody to the reader's acquiring a detachment upon which is premised communion with a "deeply humanistic" (xxxiii) author. Finally, it stresses the seriousness of Nabokov's parody, describing it as essential to Nabokov's enkindling of pathos and empathy.

Dabney Stuart's Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody also identifies Nabokov's humor as serious in intention and important in effect.

> Nabokov's novels do make one think, for what that is worth; the point is that they do

[42] Appel's idiosyncratic Nabokov's Dark Cinema [New York: Oxford UP, 1974] is also of interest, particularly for its proposing of a relationship between cinematic slapstick and Nabokov's art: "Whether or not film comedy has influenced Nabokov (and to what degree) is not the primary issue here. 'Influence,' of course, is a troublesome, controversial, and mysterious business; that comedy, after all, drew on the traditions of commedia dell' arte, of music hall and vaudeville. Unlike Joyce, however, the youthful creator of the Bluebird sketches [i.e., Nabokov] was no devotee of the popular stage, and classic film comedy stands alone as a visible source of Nabokov's inspiration" (170).

> not make one think in the terms to which one is habituated. [. . .] Nabokov uses the novel-as-game as a springboard to higher regions of emotion. He knows how to combine serious concerns with utter delight, which is to say he practices the substantial distinction between what is serious and what is solemn. The epithet "tragicomic" is at a slight distance from describing his fiction because he is too willfully perverse and bizarre. But always for a purpose, at least partly to jar his reader out of habitual modes of response to the world and lead him back into it with a fresh vision. (50)

Like Boyd, Stuart presents Nabokov's humor as highlighting the extent to which preconceptions (i.e. "standard expectations" [Boyd, "Nabokov and Humor" 40]) shape perceptions. "If it is commonplace today to say that the act of perception involves both perceiver and perceived, and that knowledge gained from perception is a combination of what one might call 'facts' (what is perceived) and imagination (the inventive disposition of the mind of the perceiver), it is not a popular one, even today. It is impossible to know anything as it is in itself, what one knows is his idea of the thing, a relationship" (Stuart 51). According to Stuart, Nabokov uses parody to explode the myth of a shared reality, thereby encouraging each reader to accept the validity of his or her own notion of reality, no matter how unusual.

As does Appel, Stuart emphasizes Nabokov's use of parody in the "involuting" of novels:

> The structure of almost all of Vladimir Nabokov's larger works (the *possible* exception is The Eye) is dependent on the use of modes of artistic perception not usually associated with the form we traditionally label "the novel." [. . .] The effect—and, because of the consistency with which Nabokov emphasizes the technique, I would guess the intention—of this is, broadly speaking, at least twofold: continually

> to remind the reader, through the form of the book he is reading, that he is reading a book, and to embody in the form of the book itself the possibilities of parody that are more immediately obvious in particular details, character gestures, and diction. In terms of the conception of fiction as a literary mode, the major implications of the use of this technique is that one can see fiction as nothing other than parody, regardless of how intensely the writer seems to be concerned with verisimilitude. (87)

Using parody, Nabokov, Stuart adds, highlights the fact that all fiction is infused with imagination, meaning none can justifiably be called "naturalistic." "[F]rom this perspective, a work—say Germinal or Sister Carrie, for instance—of the most obvious 'naturalistic' intentions is no less a parody than Lolita. One implication (among others) that I find central to Nabokov's fiction is that, since any fiction is a parody of life, the best fiction, or the fiction that is most consciously itself, is the fiction that acknowledges as completely as it can be made to do its own parodic nature" (87).

Intended as "readings in certain books by Nabokov, not an exhaustive study of his works" (ix), Stuart's book is less a cohesive analysis of Nabokov's use of parody than a description of the parodic devices present in various novels. Although Stuart's insightfulness justifies this approach, the book suffers from a lack of unity. In general, Stuart's judgments about Nabokov's parodies are reassuringly compatible with the claims of other authors. Like Boyd and Appel, Stuart presents Nabokov's humor as designed to highlight the mind's freedom; and like Boyd and Appel, Stuart argues that Nabokov uses humor to jar readers out of habitual ways of perceiving; finally, as do Boyd and Appel, Stuart insists on the seriousness of Nabokov's humor. Exploring Nabokov's humor from very different angles, Boyd, Appel and Stuart reach encouragingly similar conclusions.

Mark Lilly's article "Nabokov: Homo Ludens" describes a Nabokov whose humor takes the form of puzzles intended to delight (as opposed to educate) the reader. Recalling Aristotle's claim that literature should both enchant and edify, Lilly argues that Nabokov's fiction expresses a radical privileging of the former over the latter. Opening his article, Lilly, adopting Horace's description of

poetry as "*dulce et utile*" ("sweet and useful"), writes, "the proposition on which this essay is based is that Nabokov's work can profitably be viewed as an attempt to be rid of *utile* and to exalt *dulce* to spectacular heights. The ways in which this is achieved—so that the reader's enchantment and delight become the raison d'être of each novel—are richly diverse" (89). Among the ways in which Nabokov privileges *dulce* over *utile*, none, for Lilly, is more important than his investing of texts with games (of which each text is a meta-example): "[H]is novels actually become games in which the readers are players, their task being to 'solve' the problems set by the gamesmaster-novelist. It is in this sense that we can properly refer to Nabokov as homo ludens: man the player" (89).

Lilly divides the game-puzzles incorporated into Nabokov's texts into two broad categories:

> First, there are the hundreds of individual puns, acrostics, anagrams, and other verbal devices that are local and specific. Proper names are typical of this category, and allow immediate satirical force: bric-à-braques, Dusty (Dostoevsky), All Quiet on the Don ("a fusion of two cheap novels"). [. . .] Nabokov's non-satirical joke names are among his best: Dr V. V. Sector, Socrates Hemlocker, Mrs Arfour (that is R4, a chess notation). These are immensely comic surface characteristics; but it is the actual structure of the works—this is our second category—that most effectively illustrates the notion of game. Alfred Appel has shown in The Annotated Lolita how important it is for the reader to assume the guise of a painstaking detective looking for clues; on one matter alone, the identity of Clare Quilty, Appel lists over forty "references and hints" in the novel, some of which would only be picked up by a re-reader. (90)

As this passage suggests, humor, in Lilly's view, affords Nabokov a means of challenging the reader's attentiveness and ingenuity: "I have invited the reader to consider Nabokov's work as concerned with delight. The component of art that stirs men's consciences, or teaches them lessons, is suppressed. Nabokov achieves this delight by devising fictions that have the characteristics of

games: they are fun on a surface level—jokes, anagrams, polyglot puns; and, on a deeper structural level, they require 'players' to work out 'solutions'—the complex plotting of, for example, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Despair" (99).

Having identified Nabokov's humor as gameful, Lilly addresses the question of why Nabokov is so fond of games. Rejecting the view that play is trivial, Lilly, developing an argument made by Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens,[43] insists that playfulness—and so humor—enables Nabokov to offer experiences like those provided by the social world. Huizinga's aim, writes Lilly, is "not to define the place of play among all the other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play" (101). This view, adds Lilly, if accepted "would tend to make us less likely to equate the 'game' with the trivial; they also indicate how far the play-element in Nabokov is—ironically—useful in helping the reader to come to terms with his environment. For, if Huizinga is right, and culture is itself to some degree a game, then literary works rooted in playfulness—through their complex structures and their aesthetic assumptions—provide the reader with a valid notation for his inner experience" (101).

While Lilly may be mistaken about which world Nabokov simulates with his gameful texts (Boyd, for instance, argues that Nabokov imitates the *natural* as opposed to the *social* world), he is certainly right to highlight Nabokov's using humor to offer experiences akin to those provided by a tangible world. Sympathetic towards Huizinga's idea of culture as playful, Lilly celebrates Nabokov's humor as a welcome respite from literary solemnity. "Every aspect of Nabokov's play—the surface jokes, the structural complexity, or the deliberately misleading technical innovation—in so far as it is delightful, seems particularly welcome in a time so insistent on heavy seriousness. Nabokov unfashionably offers readers their own Forest of Arden in which to lose their anxieties for a

[43] "When speaking of the play-element in culture we do not mean that among the various activities of civilized life an important place is reserved for play, nor do we mean that civilization has arisen out of play by some evolutionary process, in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something which was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture. The view we take in the following pages is that culture arises in the from of play, that it is played from the very beginning. Even those activities which aim at the immediate satisfaction of vital needs—hunting, for instance—tend, in archaic society to take on the play-form. Social life is endued with supra-biological forms, in the shape of play, which enhance its value. It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world" (J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture [New York: Roy Publishers, 1950], 46).

while. Magus-like, he presides over an enchanted world whose individual details are sparklingly vivid, whose general mood is, typically, good-humoured, and whose labyrinths of guile provide a cherished holiday from care" (102).

James English's "Modernist Joke-Work: Pale Fire and the Mock Transcendence of Mockery" is of particular interest, being a commendable attempt to analyze Nabokov's humor within an overtly theoretical framework. English's piece opens with a characterization of modernist literature as "art for life's sake" (75), describing such literature as a project directed at creation of a realm "not simply of 'pure art' but of purified social intercourse where the alienating and divisive effects of the modern lifeworld might be transcended in the direction of, as Habermas puts it, [. . .] 'an experience of living in solidarity with others' " (75). Warming to his task, English presents Nabokov as placing humor in "the service of a yearning for community" (86), as jokes evoke imaginary realms where ostracized individuals are embraced.

For English, Nabokov's humor is designed to redefine outcast-characters—pariahs in a fictive world—as "insiders" in a wider community that includes Nabokov himself. "In any comic exchange, participants undergo a kind of slippage. As Freud's analysis suggests [. . .] the positions of joking subject, laughing subject, and comic object are curiously tenuous and interchangeable in the social economy of the joke. But in Nabokov's practice, such substitutions and reversals are strategically foregrounded, or we might say *simulated* on the level of the calculated narrative effect" (78). The "strategic function" of Nabokov's humor, we read, "is plainly to defeat or render inoperable the very categories of insider and outsider, to attain to a 'higher' level where everyone, even the most marginal man, even Charles Kinbote, is at the same time an 'insider' " (85). Using humor, Nabokov, English argues, tries to fulfill a modernist aim of "overturning" the "social categories of in-group and out-group" (77).

According to English, Nabokov, aware that each joke defines—if only by implication—"outsiders" and "insiders," uses humor to correct misapprehensions of a given character's status:

> A ready example is Jack Cockerell in Pnin (1957). Pnin, the hapless, émigré Russian professor, makes himself a classic object of in-group laughter through his wild irregularities of speech. [. . .] Funnier still is Professor Cockerell mimicking these "Pninisms" [. . .]. But the joke doesn't rest there. The "brilliant" Cockerell becomes so obsessively fond of his mimic routine, trots it out at so many faculty parties, that ultimately his colleagues begin to find him more peculiar and ridiculous than "the man he [has] been mimicking for almost ten years" (77, 78).

As English presents it, the Cockerell episode in Pnin is typical of Nabokov's use of humor in the redefining of insiders and outsiders. Ostensibly an insider, Jack Cockerell, having made himself ridiculous through mimicry of Pnin, ends up an outsider; while Pnin, his mimic now ridiculous, is seen as an insider. By means of humor, Nabokov, English argues, continually suggests that one or another character excluded from a peer group belongs to a broader and more-appealing community whose members include both Nabokov and the reader. "Like all humor, Nabokov's turns on the social categories of in-group and out-group; but its distinctive movement is an attempted overturning of these categories, a reordering of the participants by means of a quasi-dialectical deployment of subjects and objects" (77).

The balance of English's article analyzes a comic episode in Pale Fire:

> As usual, Dr. Kinbote is being tormented by his colleagues in the Wordsmith faculty, whose aggressively-masculine, American-academic style of "jesting and teasing" excludes the eccentric émigré from Zembla. One of these men steers the conversation towards the somewhat sensitive subject of two ping-pong tables which Kinbote has installed in his basement, and which he is correctly suspected of using to entertain groups of young boyfriends. [. . .] Put on the defensive, Kinbote responds, "Was it a crime?" No, says the other, but why two? "Is *that* a crime?" says Kinbote, who then

proudly informs us that "they all laughed" at this clever riposte. (78)

"There appear to be at least three ways to read the comic exchange," English writes, opening his analysis (78). Rejecting both a Kinbotian reading (where all laugh *with* Kinbote's clever riposte) and an ironic reading (where all laugh *at* Kinbote's clumsy defense), English offers another interpretation: "At some point one sees that Kinbote is in fact aware—quite painfully so—of his subordinate position in such exchanges. [. . .] From this vantage point, Kinbote is not the proper ironic butt, the naïf, but a more complex figure, a tormented outsider, continually punished with laughter for the 'crime' of social deviance, of abnormality, but determined to turn his story of exile inside out, to recast even the most humiliating episodes of exclusion as moments of fellowship and mutual recognition" (79). His status shown through a sophisticated comic exchange, Kinbote, we read, "is neither the subject of the joke here nor simply its object; like Pnin imitated by Cockerell, he can be seen as a victim as well as a victor of the transaction once its (shifting and negotiable) contextual boundaries are enlarged" (79).

An ambitious attempt to assess the implications of Nabokov's humor, English's article is finally unconvincing, as a case is advanced whose immediate difficulties hint at larger problems. An obvious problem with English's case relates to its portrait of Kinbote. The Kinbote of the ping-pong exchange is, we read, "aware—and quite painfully so—of his subordinate position in such exchanges" (79). Does Kinbote reveal such a degree of self-awareness? On the contrary, he seems convinced of his own superiority.[44] English's claim that Kinbote recasts "even the most humiliating episodes of exclusion as moments of fellowship and mutual recognition" (79) is also problematic. Again English provides no evidence for a claim difficult to reconcile with Kinbote's narrative.[45]

[44] "The thick venom of envy began squirting at me as soon as academic suburbia realized that John Shade valued my society above that of all other people" (PF 24).

[45] Kinbote disregards most put-downs. For instance, having recalled a moment of exclusion ("a week before Shade's death, a certain ferocious lady [. . .] said to me in the middle of a grocery store, 'You are a remarkably disagreeable person. I fail to see how John and Sybil can stand you' " [PF 25]), Kinbote adds, "let me not pursue this tabulation of nonsense. Whatever was thought, whatever was said, I had my full reward in John's friendship" (PF 25). As this reveals, Kinbote, basking in the warmth of Shade's imagined friendship, is unaffected by others' coolness. Nowhere does he reveal a need to "recast even the most humiliating episodes of exclusion as moments of fellowship".

Other aspects of English's article are more convincing. The "trilevel comedy" (80) of the ping-pong exchange, we read, "suggests a kind of syllogism. And indeed in a famous passage of Laughter in the Dark, Nabokov [. . .] links humor to the syllogism quite explicitly" (80). The syllogism referred to here—the "Hegelian syllogism of humor" (LiD 143)—iterates a "superhumor" in which a solution rejected by readers as too obvious to be correct, turns out—"fooling the reader" (LiD 143)—to be right. The most compelling—and frustrating—part of English's article links aspects of Pale Fire to the "Hegelian syllogism."

> The "Hegelian syllogism" captures the basic movement of Nabokov's own humor—a movement of the individual comic exchange which is reproduced by the narrative as a whole. Kinbote's attempt to recast the jokes that sustain his exclusion as moments of belonging follows from his larger purpose in writing the forward and commentary to John Shade's "Pale Fire": that is, to represent a poem that has nothing to do with him, by a poet who at best merely tolerates him, as a poetic version of his own personal history, produced by a "dear friend" in close collaboration with himself. (80)

This passage is both insightful and amiss, for while English is right to relate the "Hegelian syllogism" to Kinbote's "larger purpose"—presentation of "Pale Fire" as about Zembla—he is wrong to link the syllogism with the ping-pong exchange. On what basis does English associate Kinbote's commentary with the "trilevel comedy" (80) of the "Hegelian syllogism"? If at a "thetic" stage, the commentary is, in English's words, " 'dressed up' to amuse us" (80) in the guise of poem and scholarly commentary; and if at an "antithetic" stage, the promised imitation, we read, "appears not to materialize [. . .] in place of the expected pseudoacademic commentary on the poem we find a series of improbable and impertinent ravings (80); at the level of synthesis, we find, to quote English:

> [W]e have been mistaken (or misled) as to the true dual nature of the performance: the

> commentary is both eccentric *and* pertinent [. . .]. For, as a number of critics have observed, Kinbote's seemingly laughable attempts to transform "Pale Fire" into a Zemblan epic ultimately reinforce Shade's vision of "plexed artistry" (3.814) and make possible a realization of the "correlated pattern[s]" (3.813) that the poem itself can only describe. (81)

Supporting his claim that Kinbote's commentary is "both eccentric *and* pertinent," English highlights many connections between Kinbote's commentary and Shade's poem (81-85), advancing in the end a convincing case that Pale Fire is a syllogistic work.[46] Less convincing, however, is English's claim that the ping-pong episode—the "individual comic exchange" (80) representative of Pale Fire's humor—is syllogistic, for, as noted, the episode depicts, not a Kinbote victory, but a Kinbote defeat. Why does English's article go awry? It would seem that English, recognizing the "Hegelian syllogism of humor" has certain affinities with Kinbote's commentary, and convinced the syllogism can unlock all of Pale Fire's secrets, settled on an untenable reading of the ping-pong exchange in which Kinbote is a victor at the level of synthesis (as he is at the thetic level).

Closing his article, English argues that Nabokov's project ("to defeat or render inoperable the very categories of insider and outsider" [85]) was destined to fail. "Readers who assume the position of laughing recipient in the comic transactions involving Kinbote's sexual deviance, his social gaffes, his impertinent scholarship, and so forth are not mocking the cultural norms that construct the gay, the foreigner, or the unorthodox intellectual as an outsider; they are mocking the outsider himself" (88). Something other than an "unorthodox intellectual," Kinbote is a solipsist who believes himself the exiled king of a make-believe country. That readers are amused by him relates not to his being a vegetarian or a homosexual but to his being uniquely insane. Convinced that Nabokov does not want us to laugh at Kinbote, English chides Nabokov for creating a character we cannot help laughing at. The irony is that Nabokov, were he in fact a modernist intent on constructing an

[46] English is not alone in perceiving Pale Fire as syllogistic. See p. 150n.

inclusive community, would necessarily ridicule self-centered Kinbote. Far from failing in an attempt to have us laugh *with* Kinbote, Nabokov, in Pale Fire, succeeds in making us laugh *at* his self-obsessed commentator. Only by misunderstanding Nabokov's aims can English chide him for failing to achieve them.

Despite its flaws, English's analysis of Pale Fire is the most considered piece so far published on Nabokov's humor. If less than perfect, the analysis admirably links Nabokov's theory and practice of humor. Drawing on two theories of humor[47] and insisting on the significance of Nabokov's humor, English's article is of considerable interest.

Also influenced by Freud's conception of humor is Paul Benedict Grant, whose "Nabokov's last laugh" explores Nabokov's fondness for "gallows humor" (defined by Grant as "laughter in the face of death" [144]). Nabokov's fiction, as Grant notes, includes many instances of such humor, from the "swagger [. . .] and pluck" (143) Shade directs at a man sent to execute him in "Pale Fire," to the "Nijinski-esque theatricals" (145) Quilty performs for an unappreciative Humbert. Having reviewed many instances of Nabokovian gallows humor, Grant locates their genesis in Nabokov's "faith in the disabling power of humour" (144).

Nabokov, we read, "[uses] humour to refute the irrefutable fact of death and advance themes of immortality" (148), as joking offers characters a means of relativizing—if not dismissing—an intolerable reality. Analyzing the denouement of Bend Sinister, Grant writes, "The 'traumas of the external world'—Olga's death after her operation, David's murder at the hands of crazed convicts, the hostages whose lives hang in the balance—become, as Freud has it, 'no more than occasions [. . .] to gain pleasure' " (146). As this passage suggests, Grant's argument incorporates aspects of Freud's theory of humor, notably those elements presenting humor as a means of evading (in Freud's words) "provocations of reality" (qtd. in Grant 148). Seizing on the "interesting framework" (147) provided by Freud's theory, a framework identifying humor as (in Freud's words) "the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability" (qtd. in Grant 145), Grant presents Nabokov's own humor as

[47] Nabokov's and Freud's.

elevating the anticipated comforts of an "otherworld" over the demands of an unacceptable "real" world. By means of humor, Grant argues, Nabokov tries "to have the last laugh" in the face of "imminent death" (155).

While leaving no doubt that Nabokov is extraordinarily fond of "gallows humor," Grant is less convincing on Nabokov's motivations as a gallows humorist. Nabokov, he proposes, deploys gallows humor in hopes of underscoring the triviality of the "real" world, as characters reveal through joking awareness that what *really* matters is not death but the afterlife. Having quoted Kinbote's description of death as a releasing of one realm ("the world of timorous fools and trim blockheads" [PF 187]) and embracing ("in peals of healthy and triumphant laughter" [PF 187]) of another, exalted, realm, Grant links the description to Nabokov's belief in a transcendent "otherworld": "[This belief] is, in fact, what gives so many of Nabokov's condemned characters—real and imagined—the confidence to laugh in the face of death" (148).

Quilty, particularly in his last moments, scarcely seems the metaphysician of Grant's argument. Were he queried on the afterlife, Quilty, one suspects, would be less likely to speak of the "ego's invulnerability" than of the "eternal state of excruciating insanity" mentioned by Humbert (297). Context suggests that Quilty laughs and jokes, not because his eyes are on another and "higher" world, but because his own world—at least that part of it dubbed "Humbert Humbert"—is ludicrous. In short, Quilty's world is funny, so he laughs. Implied by Quilty's behavior, then, is not so much a belief in the triviality of this world as a conviction that life is to be enjoyed, and right to the end. Nabokov's gallows humor is not escapist bravado, is not, as an expression of "delusive fantasy" (Grant 155), but is instead a clear-sighted assertion of the world's inclusion of humor. This is not to say that Grant's argument cannot explain many instances of Nabokov's gallows humor (one thinks of Shade's scorn), but only to note that many of Nabokov's gallows humorists do not *invent* humor in the face of death, they *see* humor. Humbert is ridiculous, a fact recognized—without reference to a knotty metaphysics—by Quilty (as other Nabokov characters recognize other accidental clowns).

Many scholars touch on Nabokov's humor.[48] For this reason, the preceding survey should be seen not as documenting every stated position on Nabokov's use of humor but instead as summarizing conclusions reached by those readers interested enough to write an article.[49] That Nabokov's use of humor still awaits informed analysis likely relates to conventional notions regarding the importance (or lack of importance) of humor. Humor, orthodoxy insists, is necessarily escapist (a thesaurus built into Microsoft Word identifies "funny" and "serious" as antonyms).[50] By 1971, Nabokov had come to recognize the risks of playfulness. "I believe 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" (SO 193). Has Nabokov's faith been vindicated? Only partially, for while in recent years many critics have cogently reappraised Nabokov, highlighting his unyielding morality, such critics have been reluctant to reassess his humor. This is unfortunate, for humor is among the most serious components of Nabokov's art.

Study of Nabokov's humor is in its infancy. Few articles have been published, and of those exploring the subject, only three (by Boyd, English and Grant respectively) discuss Nabokov's theory of humor (while English and Grant alone draw upon the findings of another theorist). This situation is not unique. In general, the study of literary humor is, Paul Lewis notes, shaped by two approaches: "On one side are critics who derive their conceptual framework from an early universalist theory that has been either discredited or subsumed in the past thirty years. On the other side are critics who see no reason to refer to humor research or theory at all" (2). If in Nabokov's

[48] Nabokov's punning interests some humor theorists, e.g. Walter Redfern: "It is indeed the poets (Shakespeare, Donne, Hood, Hugo) or the writers of 'poetic' prose (Nabokov, Joyce, Flaubert) who have been most responsive to, and prolific in, punning" (Puns 101).

[49] Worth mentioning in this context is Leona Toker's chapter on Laughter in the Dark, whose last section contrasts several kinds of Nabokovian humor (The Mystery of Literary Structures [Ithaca: Cornell, 1989], 120-122).

[50] Daniel Wickberg traces the process by which the funny came to be distinguished from the serious. "By constructing laughter as an outcome of a process of tension and release—intellectual, emotional, and physical—the idea of comic relief provided a basis for the humorous/serious distinction. If tension was created in the realm of the serious, it could be released by laughter in the realm of the humorous; there could be no laughter without preceding tension, no punch line without a straight line, nothing humorous without the serious" (The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998], 173).

case, all critics save two (i.e. English and Grant) pay no attention to humor research, the renegades analyze Nabokov's humor within a discredited Freudian framework.[51]

A better approach is available—but only given willingness to take Nabokov's humor seriously. How does Nabokov's humor change over time? Do all examples of Nabokov's humor operate the same way? Appreciation of Nabokovian humor is premised on an interest in peculiarities. With this in mind, we turn to Nabokov's development as a humorist.

[51] "The model of the mind emerging from the cognitive sciences (and especially from the cognitive neurosciences) over the last twenty years or so seems to give little support to Freud's hydraulic metaphors and, specifically, to such notions as 'psychic energy' " (Robert Storey, Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation [Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996], 156).

Chapter Two: Nabokov's Evolving Use of Humor

Since the master artist used his imagination in creating his book,
it is natural and fair that the consumer of a book should use his imagination too.
—Lectures on Literature 4

As Nabokov develops as a writer, his humor changes in important ways. The nature of this process is hinted at when one compares the respective opening chapters of his first and last novels.

The opening chapter of Mary is by no means humorless. Set in a stalled and pitch-black elevator, the chapter introduces a mismatched pair of pension-dwellers, Ganin, young, taciturn and annoyed by his predicament, and Alfyorov, older, voluble and determined to discover the lighter side of an unpromising situation. If on an initial reading, the chapter provides a number of droll surprises, many arising from Alfyorov's attempts to draw out sulky Ganin (" 'Come, come, Lev Glebovich. Wouldn't it be better to play some party game? I know some splendid ones, I make them up myself. For instance: think of a two-figure number. Ready?' 'Count me out,' said Ganin, and thumped twice on the wall with his fist" [2]), reassessed in the light of later events the chapter discloses much humor. For, as later events reveal, Alfyorov—seen by Ganin of no account—is husband to Mary, Ganin's first (perhaps only) love.

Angered by the absurd situation in which he finds himself, and irritated by Alfyorov's chatter, Ganin repeatedly disregards the older man's allusions to a wife, Mary, soon to arrive from Russia.

"I didn't ask for your name and patronymic just out of idle curiosity, you know," [Alfyorov] went on undismayed. "I think every name—"

"Let me press the button again," Ganin interrupted him.

"Do press it. I'm afraid it won't do any good. As I was saying every name has its responsibilities. Lev and Gleb, now—that's a rare combination, and very demanding. It means you've got to be terse, firm and rather eccentric. My name is a more modest one and my wife's name is just plain Mary. By the way, let me introduce myself: Aleksey Ivanovich Alfyorov. Sorry, I think I trod on your foot—"

"How do you do," said Ganin, feeling in the dark for the hand that poked at his cuff. "Do you think we are going to be stuck here for long? It's time somebody did something. Hell." (1)

"Grubby place, this *pension*—even though it is Russian. I'm a very lucky man, you know—my wife's coming from Russia. Four years, that's no joke. Yes, sir. Not long now. It's Sunday today."

"Damned darkness," muttered Ganin, and cracked his fingers. "I wonder what time it is." (2)

"[T]he average eccentric is utterly baffled and bored by the adjacent tourist who boasts of his business connections," we read in Strong Opinions. "In that sense, I often feel lost; but then, other people feel lost in my presence too. And I also know, as a good eccentric should, that the dreary old fellow who has been telling me about the rise of mortgage interest rates may suddenly turn out to be the greatest living authority on springtails or tumblebugs" (132). Like an initially dull entomologist, Alfyorov turns out to be—from Ganin's viewpoint—possessed of invaluable knowledge, for his wife is Ganin's first love, lost when Ganin fled Russia during the civil war. Unaware of who Mary is, Ganin pays no attention to Alfyorov's talk, rudely ignoring the older man's attempts to corral his

interest. With this scene, Nabokov, who sees complacency as ultimately self-defeating, highlights the shortcomings of presumption.

> "Only six more days now. I assume she's coming on Saturday. I had a letter from her yesterday. She wrote the address in a very funny way. Pity it's so dark, or I'd show it to you. What are you fumbling for, my dear fellow? Those little vents don't open, you know."
>
> "For two pins I'd smash them," said Ganin. (2)

The opening chapter of Mary, then, is markedly humorous, incorporating such elements as an amusing setting, comically incompatible characters, and (upon rereading) a powerful undercurrent of irony. Yet the chapter's humor, assessed in the light of later developments, is almost Dreiserian in restraint. The dialogue is flat (Ganin's "Count me out" being a lone example of verbal playfulness[52]); the unfolding story, irony notwithstanding, provokes interest rather than hilarity; neither Ganin nor Alfyorov challenges one's sense of the humanly possible; and most importantly, the narratorial voice is undistinguished, neither sounding with a distinctive tone nor expressing an original take on the world. On balance, therefore, the first chapter of Mary, although fairly funny, hints at an authorial willingness to let slip as many opportunities to amuse as are seized on.

The opening chapter of Look at the Harlequins! is very different. "I met the first of my three or four successive wives in somewhat odd circumstances," the novel begins (3), prompting us to ask: what kind of man is unsure how many times he has been married? Reading on in the chapter, hearing of the aforementioned "odd circumstances," we discover what kind of man, as the narrator, through recollection of various farcical incidents, introduces his own morose and idiosyncratic self. By the

[52] Puns were not lost in translation. Mary, writes Jane Grayson, is a "minor reworking" of the Russian Mashen'ka. "[Nabokov] wants an accurate translation of his Russian original, and he commissions an outside translator to provide a literal version. In the corrections which he makes to the version submitted by his translator the Russian original is never lost sight of" (Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977], 31). Introducing Mary, Nabokov writes, "I realized as soon as my collaboration with Mr. Glenny started that our translation should be as faithful to the text as I would have insisted on its being had that text not been mine" (xiv).

time Nabokov comes to write Look at the Harlequins!, he has mastered the craft of concealing to the reader's amusement one story behind another, has perfected the art of hiding a fictive reality behind the obfuscating patter of a self-discrediting narrator. Yet Look at the Harlequins! constitutes more than one more journey along a well-trodden path, for here, and from the outset, Nabokov allows his own life, and so his own world, to merge with the fictive world obscured by a narrator's recollections. For readers cognizant of Nabokov's past, much in chapter one of Look at the Harlequins! is familiar (e.g. a Russian boyhood; an early interest in literature; a Cambridge education). Coming into focus, the narrator of Look at the Harlequins! seems to be, if not Nabokov, a travesty of Nabokov, a cut-rate knock-off pieced together from bits of his maker's past. As the novelty of its narratorial strategy hints, Look at the Harlequins! is in its use of humor vastly more sophisticated than Mary, providing not just more laughs but more *challenging* laughs, laughs, that is, asking more—in terms of knowledge and astuteness—of the laugher. And it is not in allusiveness alone that Look at the Harlequins! surpasses Mary in funniness: the language of the later work is more playful (Gogol's Inspector General is to be performed by the alliteratively-named "Glowworm Group" (3); a friend of the narrator finds a job in "Cannice" [5]); its imagery is wittier ("The left side of my head was now a bowling alley of pain," the narrator recalls at one point [5]); and its story includes funnier events ("Shortly after that, I met Ivor Black a second time—at some party or other, in the course of which he invited me and five other men to spend the summer at a Côte d'Azur villa he had just inherited, he said, from an old aunt. He was very drunk at the moment and seemed surprised when a week or so later on the eve of his departure I reminded him of his exuberant invitation, which, it so happened, I alone had accepted" [4]). In large part, Nabokov's art, as comparison of Mary and Look at the Harlequins! suggests, develops through mounting use of humor, as the textual areas segregated as "earnest'' (e.g., narrative voice in Mary) shrink in size until—arguably in 1938 with The Real Life of Sebastian Knight—they vanish altogether.

"Gogol was always good at creating his reader, which is the privilege of great writers," we read in Nikolai Gogol (41). If Nabokov, too, is good at creating his reader, his being so reflects in

large measure a facility with humor. Possessed of an increasing confidence in his readers' capacities, Nabokov as time passes uses humor in the overturning of more and more expectations, precluding through joking a reader's taking much for granted. A great deal can be taken on trust by a reader of Mary: Ganin remains glum, Alfyorov bubbly; sentences do not disclose inconspicuous meanings; the unnamed narrator is not unmasked as a lunatic or ghost. With Look at the Harlequins! things are very different. Does a name ("Ivor Black"; "Carnavaux") possess an alternate sense? To what extent—if any—is the narrator's world like our own? Questions like these, whose answers typically arrive with a jolt of amusement, bedevil the reader of Nabokov's later novels.

Three trends hint at Nabokov's mounting faith in the reader. First, Nabokov is increasingly reluctant to write "in earnest," showing a marked disinclination to write in a straightforward manner about a "normal" world; second, he is increasingly eager to endow characters (particularly narrators) with a degree of his own comedic genius; third, he is increasingly driven to compose "gameful" texts, that is, texts inviting (through inclusion of such devices as parody, allusion and deception) the reader to anticipate and respond to various authorial "moves." Operating in conjunction, these trends make Nabokov's fiction not just more humorous, but more *engagingly* humorous, as a range of devices are employed whose amassed effect is to get the reader's mind operating at full capacity. "I have the greatest readers any author has ever had," Nabokov writes in Strong Opinions (192); and if Nabokov is right to admire his readers, his being so has much to do with his provision of challenges—challenges that are, more often than not, humorous.

2.1 Nabokov's Abandonment of Earnestness

Just as each of Nabokov's works is amusing to some degree, so at each point in his career Nabokov is primed to compose an extravagantly comic piece. Initially, Nabokov's fiction takes the form of short stories, of which he publishes some twenty before Mary appears. Characteristic of the

opening stage of Nabokov's career is an alternation of two compositional modes, as humorous and "earnest" works are intermittently composed, often in short order. In the last months of 1924, for instance, Nabokov writes "The Dragon" and "Christmas," stories that, although sharing a thematic point of interest, are very different in intention and effect. Somewhat heavy-handed in its satirical jousting, "The Dragon" juxtaposes a marvel-filled world of hoary myth and the crass world of 1920s industry. A thousand-year-old dragon, prodded by hunger, emerges from his cave to wander the modern world—where he becomes one more device exploited in an ongoing commercial struggle between rival tobacconists. Vividly described by the narrator ("His satiny belly, white as a water lily, nearly touched the ground, crimson blotches stood out on his bloated green flanks, and the sturdy scales merged, on his back, into a jagged conflagration, a ridge of double ruddy humps, diminishing in size toward the potently, flexibly twitching tail" [126]), the dragon savors of the miraculous, emerging from his cave possessed not only of hunger but also of recollections of castles, steeds, and knights. Yet the dragon, for all its beauty, is viewed by the twinned protagonists of "The Dragon," not as a pointer to a fabulous world, but as a serviceable prop for the peddling of cigarettes. As it juxtaposes two worlds—one mythical, one modern—"The Dragon" sounds a series of riffs on the idea of the "miraculous." The dragon, issuing from legend into the contemporary world, is a miracle along the lines of centaurs and unicorns, is, in short, a prodigy hinting at unsuspected wonders in the world. Another notion of the miraculous, a degraded one passing off the pleasurable for the prodigious, is found in the name of one of the rival tobacco firms, "Miracle Tobacco Company." And yet another idea of the miraculous, as the technically ingenious, is expressed in the townspeople's cries that the lumbering dragon is "a miracle [. . .] and how is it done—is it a machine or are there people inside?" (128) Thematically, then, "The Dragon" highlights the debasement of the notion of the "miraculous," exploring with regret the extent to which a word once used to refer to the prodigious now denotes the cleverly contrived. However serious is its theme, though, "The Dragon" explores that theme in wholly comic fashion, sketching the modern world in farcical strokes and making the dragon a stimulus for a series of absurd responses. The tobacconists' relentless pursuit of

commercial dominance generates much of the story's humor. "The arrival of a live dragon," we read of one tobacconist, "aroused in him no other feelings than the passionate desire that guided him in every instance—the desire to inflict a defeat on the rival firm" (127); and so this tobacconist plasters the dragon with advertising posters ("MIRACLE TOBACCO TURNS AIR INTO HONEY" [128]). By way of (little) contrast, the second tobacconist, confronted by a poster-bedecked dragon, seeks a way to turn the prodigy to his own advantage; and so he dresses an actor in armor and pits faux-knight against fuddled dragon. The fun Nabokov has with reactions to the dragon is also enjoyable (and also silly): "A little auto speeding along the highway had all four of its tires blow out from fright, bounced, and ended up in the ditch. [. . .] [A] policeman [was] standing on his head in the middle of the pavement. It turned out later that, while making his nightly rounds, he had come upon the dragon and had such a fright that he turned upside down and remained petrified in that attitude" [126-28]). Although its theme is serious, "The Dragon" is mirthful in its contents, expressing as it unfolds a vaudevillian's belief in the merits of slapstick.

Nabokov's other story from late 1924, "Christmas," exemplifies a very different compositional mode. His young son having died, a widower returns at Christmastime to his summer manor, within whose churchyard his son is buried. Through brief vignettes, "Christmas" depicts Sleptsov's actions subsequent to the son's funeral, following the widower as he visits an evocative footbridge, his child's room, and the nearby churchyard. As we read, cognizance of the widower's present seems to convey knowledge of his future: heartbroken and alone, Sleptsov will take his own life. But then, as Sleptsov rejects earthly existence—"ghastly in its sadness, humiliatingly pointless, sterile, devoid of miracles" (136)—a charged event changes everything. A large chrysalis, heated by transferal to a warm room, releases a "great *Attacus* moth" (136) whose "almost human happiness" (136) betokens not just birth but rebirth (of Sleptsov's son, a butterfly collector). As presented in "Christmas," the miraculous, far from being mythical or contrived, is palpable and divine, being those aspects of our world hinting at other, immortal, worlds. As in "The Dragon," orthodox thought is presented as circumscribed. Here, though, such thought is not ridiculed but pitied. "Christmas" is a

somber work, dark with but a burst of light at the end. In terms of its mood, then, the story is antithetical to "The Dragon."

Comparing "The Dragon" and "Christmas," works written within weeks (perhaps days) of each other, we find Nabokov writing in two modes, one wholly comic, one thoroughly "straight." The former of the modes is of especial interest, for over time Nabokov is increasingly prone to compose works resembling—in the ubiquity of their humor—"The Dragon." While no generalization regarding Nabokov's artistic development is beyond challenge, his career, with a few backward glances, evolves through displacement of one compositional mode (exemplified by "Christmas") by another (evident in "The Dragon"). Midway through his career, Nabokov stops composing "straight" fiction;[53] and soon after—to anticipate further developments—he relinquishes artistic earnestness altogether.

Given the number of "earnest" works Nabokov produces as an apprentice author, it is easy to misrepresent as new the interest in humor evident in later works. Yet, as comparison of "The Dragon" and "Christmas" suggests, Nabokov's apprenticeship is characterized by production of *both* funny and earnest works. A key point to be made about Nabokov's use of humor in this initial period relates to the success of that use. A capacity to amuse, far from being a skill Nabokov acquires at a certain point in his career, is evident in his art from the beginning. So while his humor certainly evolves, to link this evolution too closely with production of wholly funny works is misguided. As "The Dragon" reveals, Nabokov is always capable of creating robust and varied humor; a difference in later years is that this capacity, initially on intermittent display, is apparent in all his fiction.

Characteristic of a long middle stage of Nabokov's career is a blending in works of humorous and earnest elements, as a piece includes, for instance, a "straight" protagonist surrounded by farcical foils (Invitation to a Beheading; "Tyrants Destroyed"), a comical protagonist living through poignant events ("Lips to Lips;" The Defense), or ludicrous events transpiring in a conventional setting (The Eye; Despair). The middle stage of Nabokov's career, then, is characterized, not by composition of

[53] Conclusive Evidence and Speak, Memory attest to Nabokov's continuing interest in "straight" prose.

works classifiable as "humorous" or "earnest," but by production of complex pieces integrating the ludic and the solemn.

A good example of such composite works is "The Admiralty Spire" (1933). Narrated by a hard-shelled Russian émigré who softens on immersion in a lachrymose past, the story juxtaposes two versions of a single romantic relationship, one provided by its nostalgic narrator, another hinted at in that narrator's condemnation of a tawdry novel, The Admiralty Spire. Unsettling in its blending of the picturesque and the risible, "The Admiralty Spire" alternates passages of stirring beauty[54] and extracts of distressing awfulness,[55] commingling styles as the narrator tries to prove that The Admiralty Spire represents an unforgivable exercise in the belittling of passion. As it juxtaposes the poignant and the absurd in story (the narrator's calm departure from Russia is fictionalized in The Admiralty Spire as a heroic death at the hands of the Red Army) and character (delicate Katya, heroine of the narrator's recollections, reappears in The Admiralty Spire as sturdy Olga, "a stately maiden with contralto tones in her voice" [350]), "The Admiralty Spire" offers evidence of Nabokov's developing ability to blend humor and earnestness in the evocation of worlds both alien and familiar.

But is it not the case that Nabokov always mixes humor and solemnity? No, for at two points in his career he eschews—or is markedly reluctant to engage in—such blending. As noted, early on Nabokov sorts humor and solemnity into separate works, variously composing funny and straight pieces. And late in his career, Nabokov, to an extent only appreciable by reference to earlier periods, foregoes altogether deployment of a "serious" compositional mode, composing works where each ingredient is spiced with humor. It is with The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1938) that Nabokov (with three exceptions, "Signs and Symbols" (1948), "The Vane Sisters" (1951) and—arguably—

[54] The best anticipate Speak, Memory, e.g. "Katya and I also would have liked to reminisce, but, since we had nothing yet to reminisce about, we would counterfeit the remoteness of time and push back into it our immediate happiness. We transformed everything we saw into monuments to our still nonexistent past by trying to look at a garden path, at the moon, at the weeping willows, with the same eyes with which *now*—when fully conscious of irreparable losses—we might have looked at that old, waterlogged raft on the pond, at that moon above the black cow shed" (SoVN 352).
[55] The worst are reminiscent of the "Nausicaa" chapter in Ulysses, e.g. "Olga began to understand that she was sensual rather than passionate, while for Leonid it was the opposite. Their risky caresses understandably inebriated her, but deep inside there always remained a little unmelted piece" (SoVN 354).

"Lance" (1951)[56]) relinquishes artistic earnestness. Following publication of Sebastian Knight arrive a series of works—"Solus Rex," "The Assistant Producer," " 'That in Aleppo once. . .'," "A Forgotten Poet," "Time and Ebb," "Conversation Piece, 1945," "Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster," Lolita, Pnin, Pale Fire, Ada, Transparent Things, Look at the Harlequins!—that are comprehensively funny. Evidence of Nabokov's plunge into the playful, however, is best gained, not though scrutiny of knotty Sebastian Knight, but through study of the compact "Solus Rex" (1940), a work that, intriguingly, arrives as adjunct to "Ultima Thule," one of four Nabokov stories devoted to exploration of humor.

A proto-Pale Fire,[57] "Solus Rex," like its more considered successor, depicts a farcical kingdom conjured up as compensatory fantasy by a man unable to cope with the exigencies of a bleak here-and-now. Moreover, like Pale Fire, "Solus Rex" energetically deploys humor in both the presentation and individuation of its compensatory kingdom, as a funny realm is described in a funny way. "As always happened, the king was awakened by the clash between the predawn watch and the midmorning one (*morndammer wagh* and *erldag wagh*)," opens "Solus Rex" in a passage looking towards Pale Fire. "The former, unduly punctual, would leave its post at the prescribed minute, while the latter would be late by a constant number of seconds, not because of negligence, but probably because somebody's gouty timepiece was habitually slow" (SoVN 523). To the extent it tells a cohesive story, "Solus Rex" describes an intrigue aimed at discrediting the fun-loving crown prince of a zany kingdom.[58] Verbose, lecherous, dissolute—Quilty's forefather, to be sure!—Crown Prince Adulf, whose future kingship infuriates a coven of counselors, is a memorable character, a "paunch proud" (529) center of gravity around which components of Solus Rex's plot orbit.[59] As a focus of attention, Adulf is most important not as a person in his own right but as a model—moral and

[56] Although "Lance" includes marvelously funny passages (see p. 29 above), the work is more cryptic than amusing.
[57] D. Barton Johnson identifies the parallels between "Solus Rex" and Pale Fire (Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov [Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985], 209-10).
[58] Distressed by his island's lack of a mountain, an engineer considers using "subterranean inflation" to transform an insular plain into a mountain massif: "Slowly the meadows swelled; boulders moved their round backs; a lethargic stream tumbled out of bed and, to its own surprise, turned into an alpine waterfall" (524).
[59] Adulf, writes Nabokov in an afterword, "remains one of my favorite characters in the private museum of stuffed people that every grateful writer has somewhere on the premises" (SoVN 658).

behavioral—emulated by an anti-royalist agent engaged in an absurd (and unsuccessful) scheme. We are—to borrow a line from "Solus Rex"—referring to "the celebrated trial of Dr. Onze":

> That trial presented something unparalleled even in the unparalleled annals of Thulean justice. A man renowned for his virtue, a lecturer and writer on civic and philosophical questions, a personality so highly regarded, endowed with such strictness of views and principles, in a word, such a dazzlingly unstained character that, in comparison, the reputation of anyone else appeared spotty, was accused of various crimes against morals, defended himself with the clumsiness of despair, and finally acknowledged his guilt. So far there was nothing very unusual about it: goodness knows into what furuncles the mamillae of merit may turn under scrutiny! The unusual and subtle part of the matter lay in the fact that the indictment and the evidence formed practically a replica of all that could be imputed to the crown prince. (539)

Introducing "Solus Rex" some thirty years later, Nabokov writes of the (abandoned) novel it was to have been part of: "[W]hat really makes me regret its noncompletion is that it promised to differ radically, by the quality of its coloration, by the amplitude of its style, by something undefinable about its powerful underflow, from all my other works in Russian" (658). Among the signal features of the story's "coloration," "style," and "underflow" is inclusion of humor; and while it would be wrong to

assert that comic force alone distinguishes "Solus Rex" from Nabokov's previous works, it is a vital feature of the story's peculiarity. Each aspect of "Solus Rex" is amusing—story, setting, character, language (soon convicted, Dr. Onze is sentenced to "eleven years hard labor" (543), a linguistically apt punishment)— and having written "Solus Rex" (and Sebastian Knight), Nabokov, developing into an American author, draws without interruption on the resources responsible for the work's

funniness, laboring to achieve not the somber realism of works like "Christmas" but a playful anti-realism akin to that found in "The Dragon." Nabokov may or may not have pondered at a specific moment whether to plunge into fully ludic writing, but at some point—arguably in the late 1930s[60]—a plunge is made, one whose ripples surge through each of Nabokov's subsequent works.

Ada, most obviously. Ada is unique even among Nabokov's later novels, being a work whose every line seems to incorporate a joke (or three).

> "All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike," says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel (Anna Arkadievitch Karenina, transfigured into English by R. G. Stonelower, Mount Tabor, Ltd., 1880). That pronouncement has little if any relation to the story to be unfolded now, a family chronicle, the first part of which is, perhaps, closer to another Tolstoy work, Detstvo i Otrochestvo (Childhood and Fatherland, Pontius Press, 1858). (3)

Ada opens in unsettling fashion, immediately locating the reader in a thicket of humorous allusion. As its opening paragraph suggests, Ada is not just challenging, but challenging in a playfully humorous way. Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, a novel Nabokov preferred to call "Anna Karenin,"[61] opens not by averring, as is here claimed, that all happy families are dissimilar, but rather by declaring that all happy families are *alike*. Thus, assuming the "famous novel" here mentioned is in fact Anna Karenina, "R. G. Stonelower," as he "transfigures" Tolstoy's novel, makes rather a mess of things. But who is "R. G. Stonelower"? The name "R. G. Stonelower," as Boyd observes in a note on the passage (Novels: 1969-1974 786), rebukes both critic George Steiner and poet Robert Lowell, the former for his belief (voiced in an essay "To Traduce or Transfigure: On Modern Verse Translation" [Encounter 27:2 (1966): 48-54]) that the translator of a poem should be most concerned

[60] "Arguably" because The Gift, its patina of old-fashioned earnestness notwithstanding, is extremely witty.
[61] "In Russian a surname ending in a consonant acquires a final 'a' [. . .] when designating a woman; but only when the reference is to a female stage performer should English feminize a Russian surname (following a French custom: *la*

not with faithfulness but with poeticality, the latter for his poetical but unfaithful translations of canonical Russian poems. Artfully allusive, "Stonelower" is a fusion in which the root of German "Steiner" ("Stein") is translated into an English analog ("stone"), and where the surname "Lowell" appears as the epithetic "lower." Many jokes are hidden in Ada's first paragraph (Mount Tabor is the site of Christ's transfiguration; Pontius Pilate the paradigmatic betrayer), most adding to a mocking attack on mistranslation.[62] At its most concentrated, as in Ada, Nabokov's humor is nearly overwhelming, as jokes arrive in discomfiting bursts. The language of Ada, for instance, is strikingly playful (a number of real-world writers appear pseudonymously: "Heinrich Müller" (Henry Miller; 136), "Sig Leymanski" (Kingsley Amis; 340), "Osberg" (Borges; 344), "Falknermann" (Faulkner meets Thomas Mann; 371), "Beckstein" (Steinbeck; 403), "Eelmann" (Mann meets O'Neill; 403), "Floeberg" (Flaubert; 128); the novel's setting is wonderfully original (Ada is set on "Antiterra," a world without electricity but with magic carpets); and story and incident are consistently funny (Ada juxtaposes a happily incestuous affair to other amatory episodes, nearly all comical; e.g. "[Van] had possessed Marion Armborough behind her uncle's back in much more complex circumstances, what with the motorboat jumping like a flying fish and his host keeping a shotgun near the steering wheel" [478]). No paragraph in Ada is without humor; humor ascribable, not to self-indulgence run amok, but to ingenuity unleashed.

We have traced Nabokov's eschewal of earnestness through three loosely-defined periods. First comes an early stage when Nabokov segregates the ludic and the earnest into separate works; next comes a long middle stage during which ludic and earnest elements coexist in the same work; finally arrives a still-longer period of unflagging playfulness. Although Nabokov's declining interest in earnestness may seem sufficient to account for the increasing funniness of his art, other developments are of equal importance—most notably his mounting willingness to endow characters with a measure of his own comedic genius and his increasing eagerness to engage readers in games of concealment and discovery.

Pavlova, 'the Pavlova')" (LoRL 137).

2.2 Nabokov's Invented Humorists

Aimed at fleshing out the barebones claim that over time Nabokov uses more humor, this section and the next describe two developments. As we shall see, Nabokov, recognizing humor's value in the shaping of a reader's experience, adopts two complementary strategies: first, he endows more characters with a measure of his own comedic genius; second, he composes increasingly "gameful" texts. Operating in conjunction, these strategies make humor a key means by which Nabokov "creates" readers.

Prior to 1932, Nabokov's funny characters amuse because flawed or defective. A character is stupid (Erwin in "A Nursery Tale;" Franz in King, Queen, Knave); or deluded (Tal in "Lips to Lips;" Smurov in The Eye); or vulgar (Konstantin in "A Dashing Fellow;" Alfyorov in Mary); or conformist (Anton in "An Affair of Honor;" Martha in King, Queen, Knave). Early on, Nabokov seldom depicts true wits; individuals, that is, with a capacity to combine ideas in amusingly original ways.

Nabokov's first genuine wit is Axel Rex (Laughter in the Dark [1932[63]]).[64] Rex is a cartoonist, "a very fine artist indeed" (143), and, we learn, an aficionado of humor. "It amused him immensely to see life made to look silly as it slid helplessly into caricature. He despised practical jokes: he liked them to happen by themselves with perchance now and then just that little touch on his part which would send the wheel running downhill. He loved to fool people; and the less trouble the process

---

[62] "[M[istranslations of Russian classics are ridiculed here," Vivian Darkbloom writes in her "Notes to Ada" (A 591).
[63] Camera obscura (Laughter in the Dark) was serialized in 1932-33. A Russian-language book appeared in 1932.
[64] My discussion of Axel Rex, particularly its identifying him as prior to Despair's Hermann, is premised on his close similarity to Robert Horn (Rex's analog in the Camera obscura). Although with Camera obscura's translation into English, more weight is [to quote Jane Grayson] given to the character's "dangerous and macabre taste in humor" (Nabokov Translated 46), Axel Rex evolves into the clever rogue of Laughter in the Dark not from a wet blanket but from coarser kind of rogue: "Rex's sense of comedy is made more subtle. Nabokov suppresses two of the more slapstick illustrations: the idea of watching a woman in bed trustfully devouring some pâté which he had concocted out of refuse; the idea of leaving a smouldering cigarette end to eat its way through some costly English silks" (Nabokov Translated 46).

entailed, the more the joke pleased him" (143). Rex's robust (and cruel) sense of humor is on display whenever the cartoonist makes an appearance. Time and again Rex bluffs, teases, or fools someone—taking a mistress under another name, passing as homosexual to disarm a rival, imitating a settling fly to torment a blind man. That Rex fails to stamp his personality on Laughter in the Dark relates less to the force of that personality than to its being rationed to readers in small doses. Whenever Rex acts, he acts in a memorable way—but his actions are circumscribed. Whenever Rex speaks, he speaks in a lively way—but his lines are limited. Had Rex been not simply a character in Laughter in the Dark but the novel's narrator, then, one suspects, his wittiness would have rendered the work something like Nabokov's later and funnier books. As it was, contemporary readers would have to wait several years until Nabokov produced a narrative principally shaped by the antic mind of a brilliantly funny narrator.

Despair (1936[65]) is Nabokov's first novel of sustained comic genius. Voiced in the manic tones of a mad industrialist ("My business was chocolate. Chocolate is a good thing. There are damsels who like only the bitter kind. . . fastidious little prigs. (Don't quite see why I write in this vein)" [4]), Despair purports to describe a crime of unprecedented genius: the immaculately-crafted murder of its narrator's physical double. Although flawed at times by a too-heavy overlay of irony, Despair is of interest for the unpredictability of its narrative voice. "If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness. . . So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale" (3). Hermann, as this opening suggests, is a capricious person, forever of two minds, prone to abruptly recant what he stated moments before. The major consequence of Hermann's detachment lies in its providing a bird's-eye viewpoint for scrutiny of various phenomena—himself included—of a risible nature. By means of humor, Hermann variously informs us of his wife's absentmindedness ("Giving her a letter to post was equal to throwing it into the river, leaving the rest to the acumen of the stream and the recipient's

[65] Otchayanie (Despair) was serialized in Sovremennye zapiski in 1934 and appeared as a (Russian) book in 1936. Comparing Otchayanie and Despair, Grayson emphasizes Hermann's consistency. "Otchayanie is already a powerful and well-constructed piece of writing. Hermann's style is brilliantly individualized, a blend of vulgar colloquialisms and

piscatorial leisure" [26]), plumpness ("She laughed and she gamboled, for all the world like a croquet ball in her beige bathing costume with that double, red and blue stripe round the middle" [39]), and excitability ("The train glided off. Beaming and bawling, Ardalion all but tumbled out of the window. Lydia, a lamb in leopard's clothes, trotted alongside the carriage almost as far as Switzerland" [137]). Describing his own nature, Hermann writes "I liked, as I like still, to make words look self-conscious and foolish, to bind them by the mock marriage of a pun, to turn them inside out, to come upon them unawares. What is this jest in majesty? This ass in passion? How do God and Devil combine to form a live dog?" (46) Possessing not simply a desire but a capacity to come upon words (and other things) "unawares," Hermann, unhinged and impetuous,[66] has a preternaturally keen mind, one forever ready to dart off in an unexpected direction—a mind, that is, not unlike Nabokov's own.[67] In terms of its humor, Despair is clearly a key work for Nabokov. Composing Despair, Nabokov for the first time endows a narrator with a measure of his own comic genius. Later works will introduce other geniuses, some mad, some sane, but all amusingly unpredictable.

The most lucid of Nabokov's invented wits is Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, whose well-structured narrative renders The Gift a telling contrast to Despair.[68] Always primed for delivery of a quip (a street, for example, is described as "beginning with a post office and ending with a church, like an epistolary novel" (4), Fyodor is at his funniest in his boisterous Life of Chernyshevski (whose inclusion makes The Gift a uniquely convincing *Bildungsroman*[69]). As portrayed by Fyodor,[70]

---

high-flown conceits, with a wealth of literary allusion. [. . .] Another feature of [Despair] is the successful handling of the word-play which abounds in the Russian version" (Nabokov Translated 60).

[66] Hermann's capitulation to Marxist dogma is the least credible aspect of his character.

[67] Particularly amusing is Hermann's description of Ardalion, a painter and his wife's (mock) cousin: "He was always behind with his rent, and when he did pay it, he paid it in kind. In still life to be precise. . . square apples on a slanting cloth, or phallic tulips in a leaning vase. All this his landlady would frame at her own cost, so that her dining room made one think of an avant-garde, Philistine exhibition. He fed at a little Russian restaurant which, he said, he had once 'slapped up' (meaning that he had decorated its walls) [. . .]. The funny part was, that in spite of his poverty, he had somehow managed to purchase a piece of ground, a three hours' drive from Berlin—that is, he had somehow managed to make a down payment of a hundred marks, and did not bother about the rest; in fact, never meant to disgorge another penny, as he considered that the land, fertilized by his first payment, was henceforth his own till doomsday" (32-33).

[68] Dar was translated by Michael Scammell, to whom, Grayson writes, "Nabokov made it clear [. . .] that what was required was an accurate, faithful rendering" (Nabokov Translated 119n).

[69] Or "*Künstlerroman*," as Johnson calls it (Worlds in Regression 94).

[70] In partisan fashion (see David Rampton, Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels [Cambridge: Cambridge

Nikolai Chernyshevski, patriarch of a philosophical materialism presenting consciousness as wholly shaped by environment, is an ironic figure, a man wholly incognizant of the implications—indeed the facts—of his own life, and so a dubious thinker with whom to wander into the thorny thickets of ontological speculation. However colorless it sounds in summary, Fyodor's portrait of Chernyshevski is anything but pallid, proceeding less through refutation of his opponent's claims than through recall of events incompatible with that opponent's philosophy. Here Fyodor recalls his subject's youthful "pottering with perpetual motion":

> What if, he muses in 1848, one attached a pencil to a mercury thermometer, so that it moved according to the changes in temperature? Starting with the premise that temperature is something eternal—But excuse me, who is this, who is this making laborious notes in cipher of his laborious speculations? A young inventor, no doubt, with an infallible eye, with an innate ability to fasten, to attach, to solder inert parts together, having them give birth in result to the miracle of movement—and lo! a loom is already humming, or an engine with a tall smokestack and a top-hatted driver is overtaking a thoroughbred trotter. Right here is the chink with the nidus of revenge, since this sensible young man, who—let us not forget—is only concerned with the good of all mankind, has eyes like a mole, while his blind, white hands move on a different plane from his faulty but obstinate and muscular mind. Everything that he touches falls to pieces. It is sad to read in his diary about the appliances of which he tries to make use—scale-arms, bobs, corks, basins—and nothing revolves, or if it does, then according to unwelcome laws, in the reverse direction to what he wants: an eternal motor going in reverse—why, this is an absolute nightmare, the abstraction to end all abstractions, infinity with a minus sign, plus a broken jug into the bargain. (217)

UP, 1984], 64-100).

Fyodor's Life is both amusing and iconoclastic, as humor continually undermines its subject's claims to insight and understanding. Time and again, Fyodor playfully—through isolation of a telling detail—brings whole areas of Chernyshevski's philosophy crashing to the ground. For instance, after quoting Chernyshevski's avowal that "[it] is sufficient to take a look at the trinkets fabricated in Paris, at those elegant articles of bronze, porcelain and wood, in order to understand how impossible it is nowadays to draw a line between an artistic and an inartistic product," Fyodor quietly observes, "this elegant bronze explains a lot" (239). After The Gift, Nabokov's tendency is to furnish each work with a central character (a narrator, typically) whose mind is conducive to continuous joking. Evidently at some point, Nabokov decides there is much to be gained by lending voice to his own comedic genius; and while many factors contribute to (for example) Pnin's funniness, none plays so large a part as the novel's being narrated by a keen-eyed wit:

> The 1954 Fall Term had begun. Again the marble neck of a homely Venus in the vestibule of Humanities Hall received the vermilion imprint, in applied lipstick, of a mimicked kiss. Again the Waindell Reporter discussed the Parking Problem. Again in the margins of library books earnest freshmen inscribed such helpful glosses as "Description of nature," or "Irony"; and in a pretty edition of Mallarmé's poems an especially able scholiast had already underlined in violet ink the difficult word *oiseaux* and scrawled above it "birds." (137)

Boldly expressed in Pnin, Nabokov's increasing willingness to endow characters with a measure of his own comic genius is a key factor in the increasing funniness of his fiction. If Nabokov's early works amuse through depiction of people we laugh *at*, his later works, to mounting effect, introduce us to individuals we unabashedly laugh *with*.

2.3 Challenging the Reader

Increasing gamefulness also contributes to the rising comic charge of Nabokov's fiction. "Gamefulness" is distinguished from playfulness in being a *type* of play, one engaging an audience in something like a rule-governed contest.[71] To argue that over time Nabokov's art is more gameful is to link its evolution with increasing anticipation and manipulation of expectations.[72] A truly multifarious phenomenon, gamefulness, whether in Nabokov's art or elsewhere, is evident in an author's use of such devices as deceit, parody, allusion and hidden humor; devices that, emphasizing the artificiality of a fictive world, encourage the reader to relinquish the role of observer and adopt that of participant.

Its title underworld slang for a counterfeiter, "The Leonardo" (1936) is a quintessentially gameful piece. Staged rather than set in a seedy German boarding house, "The Leonardo" pits a sensitive recluse, Romantovski, against two coarse German brothers, Gustav and Anton, finally dispatching Romantovski as precursor to the exegetic equivalent of a morgue identification. Who is Romantovski? Around this question "The Leonardo" coheres.

"From the very moment he had appeared, rolling his pushcart into the yard, Romantovski had provoked a mixture of irritation and curiosity in the two brothers. Their infallible flair let them sense that here was someone different from other people. Normally, one would not discern anything special in him at a casual glance, but the brothers did" (359-360). What disturbs the brothers?

---

[71] In Peter Hutchinson's words: "A 'game' traditionally suggests 'rules' or 'conventions'; such concepts are indeed recognizable in certain literary games, but 'play' does *not* imply such conventions. [. . .] 'Games' may involve sustained or intricate play, but they may also be seen as specific examples of play where some sort of rule can be seen in operation—such devices as allegory, parody, prefiguration—in which a clear method is adhered to" (Games Authors Play [London: Methuen, 1983], 13-14).

[72] "Games, "writes Guy Cook, "often involve deception and a subtle calculation and monitoring not only of what each player is thinking, but also an estimation of what each player *thinks* that the other thinks. It is this which makes what are structurally quite simple procedures, such as betting in poker or bidding in bridge, inordinately psychologically complex, as each player reasons along the lines of: 'I think she thinks I think she thinks' or 'I know he knows I know he knows'. In evolutionary psychology, this ability is known as 'theory of mind' [. . .]. One function of games may be to develop or maintain this faculty of assessing the thoughts of others, for even if it is largely an innate skill, it presumably needs environmental stimulation to develop, and be capable of improvement through practice" (Language Play, Language Learning 128).

Romantovski, we learn, walks differently: "at every step he rose on a buoyant toe in a peculiar manner, stepping and flying up as if the mere act of treading allowed him a chance to perceive something uncommon over the common heads" (360). And Romantovski not only "[goes] out and [comes] home at unpredictable hours" (360), he also reads books and is "oddly unsociable" (360). Possessing a childlike faith in first impressions, the coarsest of "realists," Gustav and Anton conclude that Romantovski avoids them, not because they are repulsive, but because he has something to hide. In the brothers' view, "honest folks" are artless (i.e. are "understood [. .] at the first word" to quote Invitation to a Beheading [26]). By way of contrast, Romantovski "poisons the life of honest folks. [. . .] It is not enough that he moves and breathes differently from other people; the trouble is that we just cannot put our finger upon the difference, cannot catch the tip of the ear by which to pull out the rabbit" (363). "Hateful," they muse, "is everything that cannot be palpated, measured, counted" (363). Troubled by their neighbor's self-sufficiency and unable to imagine a reason why a person might embrace solitude, the brothers resolve the puzzle of Romantovski in the most hamfistedly "realistic" way: given that honest folks are open and sociable, Romantovski's privateness is *ipso facto* proof of criminality. Childlike in its conflation of reticence and dishonesty, this view represents a "thetic" reading of Romantovski.

Most readers of "The Leonardo" entertain another reading of Romantovski, an "antithetic" solution to the puzzle posed by the recluse's identity. Seeing reticence as innocent—even admirable—and associating bookishness with scholarship, these readers credit Romantovski's furtiveness not to criminality but to sensitivity, explaining it with reference to a psyche too delicate to endure prolonged exposure to the brothers' personalities. Inclined to presume Romantovski's goodness, these readers are also tricked into admiration of the recluse. Romantovski's name, for instance, because reminiscent of the words "romance" and "romanticism," invites readers to link the boarder with aestheticism (as do his nocturnal lifestyle and fondness for books—evidence, surely, of a poetic spirit). Moreover, the brother's viewpoint, since so crude, is unattractive: how could these dimwits possibly be correct?

Yet they are. With poor Romantovski dead, murdered by Gustav, "The Leonardo" springs its surprise:

> Early next morning police agents arrived; they searched the murdered man's room and briefly questioned Anton, who had come out into the passage. Gustav stayed in bed, replete and somnolent, his face the color of Westphalian ham, in contrast to the whitish tufts of his eyebrows.
>
> Presently, the police left and Anton returned. He was in an unusual state of elation, choking with laughter, flexing his knees, noiselessly hitting his palm with his fist.
>
> "What fun!" he said. "Do you know who the fellow was? A leonardo!"
>
> In their lingo a leonardo (from the name of the painter) meant a maker of counterfeit bills. (366)

Thus Romantovski is exposed as not unlike the crudely-sketched bogey of the brothers' complaints: deceitful, criminal, an enemy of "honest folks." Amusingly, the childish view is found to be correct, the sophisticated interpretation revealed as flawed. Implicit in Nabokov's fondness for "syllogistic" works[73] is a notion of literature as a game in which a reader's presumptions are inferred (or shaped) and then contradicted.

If, as Nabokov knows, deception affords one means of challenging and rewarding readers, other devices are equally useful—humorous allusion, for instance. Not all allusions, indeed not all of Nabokov's allusions, are amusing, although no strict line can be drawn between funny and unfunny examples of a device that is playful by definition.[74] To take a non-humorous instance, if Nabokov, in recalling a childhood slideshow, writes "one ribald and agile boy (could it be I after all—the Hyde of my Jekyll?) managed to silhouette his foot" (SM 165), in doing so, he provides, not a puzzle to be

[73] A syllogistic work is one in which an initial "solution," dismissed by the sophisticated reader as too obvious to be plausible, turns out, following a detour through an "antithetic inferno" (SM 291), to be correct.
[74] As revealed in the etymology of "allusion," a word derived from (Latin) *ludere*, to play.

solved (or an incongruity to be resolved), but a straightforward pointer to a paradigmatic work. This allusion is very different from most of Nabokov's allusions, which operate, not transparently, but by means of disguise or misdirection. Again, no strict line can be drawn between a funny and an unfunny allusion. An amusing allusion, to suggest a distinction, is a puzzle: while Speak, Memory's "Hyde" is undisguised, "Borges" and "Kingsley Amis" appear in Ada under invented names (i.e. "Osberg" and "Sig Leymanski").

Over time humorous allusion becomes a distinguishing feature of Nabokov's art. Although certain middle-period Nabokov works (Despair, for instance[75]) are notably allusive, such works are *straightforwardly* allusive in the sense that few, if any, allusions take the form of puzzles. Beginning with Bend Sinister (1947) things are different. Incorporating such elements as a boot-remover in the shape of "Gregoire, a stag beetle" (34), a party-political emblem "bearing a remarkable resemblance to a crushed dislocated but still writhing spider" (35), a mock-Joycean novel called "Winnipeg Lake" (114), and a raft of less erudite faux-novels ("Straight Flush" and "Through Towns and Villages" (29); "Flung Roses" and "All Quiet on the Don" [86]), Bend Sinister is the first Nabokov work characterized in large measure by *comic* allusiveness.

Depending on one's viewpoint, Nabokov's use of humorous allusion culminates either in Ada or Look at the Harlequins!. Opening in a barrage of allusions, Ada is relentless in its use of pointers, from the very subtle ("the romantic mansion appeared on the gentle eminence of old novels" (35) (see Ulysses, a not so old novel [633]), to the relatively straightforward (" philistine Art [. . .] the polished log with the polished hole à la Heinrich Heideland" (462) (see Moore, Henry).[76] Yet in a sense Look at the Harlequins! surpasses Ada in allusiveness, comprising for readers familiar with Nabokov's life and *oeuvre* nothing less than a series of (mostly humorous) allusions. Even before its

[75] Despair's allusions are discussed by William Carroll ("The Cartesian Nightmare of Despair" [in J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on his Life's Work (Austin: University of Texas, 1982)], 83-95).

[76] Carl Proffer has published a glossary of many of Ada's allusions ("Ada as Wonderland: A Glossary of Allusions to Russian Literature" [in Carl Proffer, ed., A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974)]). Many more have been noted by Boyd in a series of "Annotations to Ada" in The Nabokovian.

narrative opens, Look at the Harlequins!, through inclusion of a list of "OTHER BOOKS BY THE NARRATOR," offers a challenging array of references, for each of the "OTHER BOOKS," though known only by title, evokes one or more of Nabokov's works, with Tamara, for instance, conjuring up both Mary and Speak, Memory, and See Under Real suggesting both The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Pale Fire. As its opening suggests, Look at the Harlequins! is a humorous revisitation of Nabokov's life, a comic retrospective of its author's career. As such, the novel continually alludes to stray moments in Nabokov's life and/or works, incorporating, for example, not only a Russian émigré narrator whose name and patronymic are much like Nabokov's, but one whose father is named "Demon" (like Van's in Ada) and whose works appear in a sophisticated magazine called The Beau and the Butterfly (a nod towards The New Yorker whose cover annually features a monocled dandy). No Nabokov novel is as gameful as Look at the Harlequins!, a work only appreciable by a reader readied (through familiarity with Nabokov's life and art) for discernment of the source and significance of innumerable humorous pointers. Consider Vadim's visit to a Russian-language library (92-95):

> "I am deeply honored," finished at last Oks, "to welcome to this historic house the author of Camera Obscura, your finest book in my modest opinion!"
>
> "It ought to be modest," I said, controlling myself (opal ice in Nepal before the avalanche), "because, you idiot, the title of *my* novel is Camera Lucida."
>
> "There, there," said Oks [. . .].

> "Look," he cried, "how many copies are out. All of Princess Mary is out, I mean Mary—damn it, I mean Tamara. I love Tamara, I mean your Tamara, not Lermontov's or Rubinstein's. Forgive me. One gets so confused among so many damned masterpieces" [. . .].

> "Let me take advantage of this pleasant stroll to describe my two meetings with your celebrated father. The first was at the opera in the days of the First Duma. I knew, of course, the portraits of its most prominent members. From high up in the gods I, a poor student, saw him appear in a rosy loge with his wife and two little boys, one of which must have been you. The other time was at a public discussion of current politics in the auroral period of the Revolution; he spoke immediately after Kerenski, and the contrast between our fiery friend and your father, with his English *sangfroid* and absence of gesticulation—"
>
> "My father," I said, "died six months before I was born."
>
> "Well, I seem to have goofed again (*opyat' oskandalisya*)," observed Oks [. . .].

Like bookseller Oks, we readily conflate Vadim Vadimovich and Vladimir Nabokov, fusing the two in mind until uncertain who wrote what. In its allusiveness, Look at the Harlequins! is—to reiterate the extent to which Nabokov's humor changes over time—much more complex than Mary, incorporating many more (and much more significant) allusions than does the earlier novel.

Parody, too, is a gameful device. As a kind of "literary mimicry" (Kiremidjian 16), parody imitates formal characteristics as a means of raising expectations in the reader, only to shatter those expectations—to the reader's amusement—through presentation of incongruous contents.[77] Bemused by natural mimicry and fond of artistic playfulness, Nabokov is a born parodist, and as a mature artist he expresses his inclination in many works.

"Time and Ebb" (1944) merits classification among Nabokov's best parodies. Set in 2024, the story borrows not only its future setting from science fiction but other formal characteristics as well, including odd names, special jargon, and references to technological advances. With its opening line, "Time and Ebb" locates us in a quintessentially science fiction world: "In the first

[77] "The parodist," writes David Kiremidjian, "proceeds by imitating as closely as he can the formal conventions of the work being parodied in matters of style, diction, meter, rhythm, vocabulary and the countless other elements subsumed under the word 'form.' But at the same time he substitutes subject matter, or content, or in an Aristotelian context actions

floriform days of convalescence after a severe illness, which nobody, least of all the patient himself, expected a ninety-year-old organism to survive, I was admonished by my dear friends Norman and Nura Stone to prolong the lull in my scientific studies and relax in the midst of some innocent occupation such as brazzle or solitaire" (SoVN 580). Rejecting brazzle as too strenuous, the narrator settles for solitaire, albeit a novel form of the game: "the setting down of one's reminiscences [. . .] wherein events and emotions are dealt to oneself in leisurely retrospection" (580). With the narrator's decision to revisit his past, "Time and Ebb" begins to metamorphose from a straight to a parodic narrative, for science fiction, as we know, is never nostalgic.

Typically devoted to exploring the possible—possible developments in science or technology, possible changes in social relations, possible life-forms—science fiction favors future settings because such settings allow for exploration of many types of possibility. In science fiction, a future setting can be an excuse for such things as portrayal of the consequences of current developments or depiction of as-yet-unseen modes of social life. With "Time and Ebb" Nabokov does something enchantingly new, seizing on a future setting less as a vehicle for exploration of a possible world than as a platform from which to assess an actual world, the world of 1940s America.[78] Retaining many formal characteristics of generic science fiction—the futuristic setting, the novel devices—Nabokov replaces the expected contents (exploration of a possible world) with new and surprising contents (exploration of an actual world). Thus, retaining a generic form but eschewing that form's typical contents, Nabokov parodies conventional science fiction.

> I am also old enough to remember the coach trains: as a babe I worshipped them; as a boy I turned away to improved editions of speed. With their haggard windows and

---

or objects, which are entirely alien to that form. He thus establishes a jarring incongruity between form and content" (A Study of Modern Parody: James Joyce's Ulysses and Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus [New York: Garland, 1985], 16).

[78] As Robert Grossmith writes, " 'Time and Ebb' is ostensibly one of Nabokov's rare ventures into futuristic fiction. This appearance is deceptive, however, for aside from elliptical references to 'the South American war' or 'the staggering discoveries of the seventies,' we learn little about the future (i.e. post 1944) world. Instead, what the story provides is the occasion for a series of deft and dazzling evocations of a forties America" ("The Future Perfect of the Mind: 'Time and Ebb' and 'A Guide to Berlin' " [in Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo, eds., A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction (New York: Garland, 1993)], 149).

> dim lights they still lumber sometimes through my dreams. Their hue might have passed for the ripeness of distance, for a blending succession of conquered miles, had it not surrendered its plum-bloom to the action of coal dust so as to match the walls of workshops and slums which preceded a city as inevitably as a rule of grammar and a blot precede the acquisition of conventional knowledge. Dwarf dunce caps were stored at one end of the car and could flabbily cup (with the transmission of a diaphanous chill to the fingers) the grottolike water of an obedient fountain which reared its head at one's touch. (584)

A purposive parody, "Time and Ebb" is intended to reveal that an actual world—the world of 1940s America—is as fascinating as any that might be imagined, with familiar trains and factories shown as no less marvelous than the robots and ray-guns of stock science fiction. An assessment of Nabokov's world from a distant and detached perspective, "Time and Ebb" resembles an ethnographer's report on that world, a report which, taking for granted the reader's unfamiliarity with its subject, must not only reveal but justify the ethnographer's interest in his subject. That "Time and Ebb" has a serious purpose in no way precludes its being parodic: whereas stock science fiction describes disintegrating rays and intergalactic fleets, the story depicts soda fountains and Central Park; whereas stock science fiction presents interplanetary wars, the story portrays cross-yard apple fights. Parodically gameful, the story's playfulness is mostly a function of the discrepancy between its extraordinary setting and ordinary tale: while set in a world where people play "brazzle" and read "newsbooks" (580), "Time and Ebb" describes little outside the purview of its most unadventurous (1940s) reader.

Parody, writes Nabokov, "is a game" (SO 75). The game Nabokov plays with "Time and Ebb" is a singular one in which a vision of the contemporary world is disguised as a premonition of the future. All parody, as Kiremidjian observes, exploits disguise, as one type of work mimics

another. Yet if all parody uses disguise, Nabokov's parodies, as some critics recognize,[79] is distinguished in its incorporation of a second level of pretense, a level where the parodic is (also) the exemplary. As a humorist, Nabokov particularly enjoys a peculiar kind of "syllogistic" humor aimed at the creation of syntheses—amalgams beyond the ken of those readers who read his joking as diversionary. One such synthesis makes of "Time and Ebb" something more than a send-up of science fiction.

However interesting it is as a parody of science fiction, "Time and Ebb" also invites attention as an *example* of science fiction. That is to say, although a parody of future-oriented fiction, the story *does* present a vision of the future, *does* provide a vision of the "possible." Writing in the year 2024, the narrator of "Time and Ebb" inhabits a different and better world:

> [T]he beings that peopled the world in the days of my childhood seem to the present generation more remote than the nineteenth century seemed to them. They were still up to their waists in its prudery and prejudice. They clung to tradition as a vine still clings to a dead tree. [. . .] More than other generations, they tended to overlook outstanding men, leaving to us the honor of discovering their classics (thus Richard Sinatra remained, while he lived, an anonymous "ranger" dreaming under a Telluride pine, or reading his prodigious verse to the squirrels of San Isabel Forest, whereas everybody knew another Sinatra, a minor writer, also of Oriental descent). (581)

Reading passages like this, where the narrator recalls aspects of 1940s America he considers alien to readers, we discern Nabokov's vision of life in 2024: no longer prejudiced, less attached to tradition, quicker to recognize outstanding individuals, the people of 2024 are more admirable beings than those of the 1940s. If only hazily, a future world can be seen. Thus, "Time and Ebb" is both a parody and an example of science fiction; donning not one but two disguises, the story offers two distinct

[79] Notably Alfred Appel (The Annotated Lolita [London: Vintage, 1991], li-lii) and Dabney Stuart (Nabokov: The

surprises.

Although not a late development, Nabokov's use of parody accelerates at the midpoint of his career. Each of Nabokov's English-language novels can be characterized as parodic, with—to set out an array of nutshells— Sebastian Knight constituting a send-up of literary biography, Bend Sinister caricaturing the dystopic novel, Lolita comprising a playful reimagining of the murder mystery, Pnin spoofing the novel of academia, Pale Fire exploding the literary exegesis, Ada having fun with the nineteenth-century family-history novel, Look at the Harlequins! lending parodic voice to a writer's misfiring memory, and Transparent Things being the oddest of all "thrillers" ("whose ghost will keep intruding upon the plot?" Nabokov asks in an interview [SO 196]). Needless to say, to array nutshells is to say little of their contents, and each of Nabokov's late novels is at once both more than a parody and, to the extent it is parodic, parodic in a unique way. Comparing, for instance, Pnin and Pale Fire, each a parody of the campus novel, the latter work is vastly more complicated in its use of parody, as not just one but a battery of expressive genres are spoofed: literary exegesis, narrative history, literary biography, and, as in Pnin, the academic novel. As time passes, Nabokov's use of parody becomes more multifaceted, as globally parodic works increasingly incorporate discrete local parodies—at times merely a line or two in length—of particular works or authors. This process, like many others discernible in Nabokov's fiction, reaches its apotheosis in Ada, where almost every page includes a thumb-nail parody, perhaps of an author (Flaubert, Joyce, James), often of a discursive genre (the scholarly monograph or medical tract), at times (through description) of a genre of the pictorial arts (the erotic print) or a feature of social life (the brothel). And Lolita, too, spoofs a number of genres, the murder mystery most obviously, but also the pornographic novel, the Hollywood Western, the "symbolic" play (of Maeterlinckian extraction), and the Gothic novel. Parody, in which ostensible misshapenness occludes hidden design, playfully pits author against audience, as author challenges audience to recognize the source and significance of a parodic

---

Dimensions of Parody [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1978], 50).

passage. Thus, as Nabokov knows, parody is ideally suited to the gameful engaging of an audience.[80]

Nabokov's heightening interest in gameful texts is also evident in his use of concealed humor. Awaiting trial for murder, Humbert, when not writing a justification for his actions, distracts himself with the ephemera of a prison library, whose motley collection includes such books as the Bible, a children's encyclopedia, Dickens's collected works, and—fortuitously—a 1946 edition of Who's Who in the Limelight, a reference work roll-calling various actors, producers and so on, including a certain

> Quilty, Clare, American Dramatist. Born in Ocean City, N. J., 1911. Educated at Columbia University. Started on a commercial career but turned to playwriting. Author of The Little Nymph, The Lady who Loved Lightning (in collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom), Dark Age, The Strange Mushroom, Fatherly Love, and others. His many
> plays for children are notable. Little Nymph (1940) traveled 14,000 miles and played 280 performances on the road during the winter before ending in New York. Hobbies: fast cars, photography, pets. (31)

Conspicuously informing us that Clare Quilty has written many dramatic works for young audiences, the sentence "His many plays for children are notable" more subtly reveals that Quilty is notorious for his many attempts to seduce children. Read one way, then, the biographical entry informs us of one thing; read another way, it tells us something else.

Conceiving of imagination as a specifically human attribute, Nabokov uses humor as a means of encouraging his readers to read creatively, to approach a text from various angles, to probe even a seemingly straightforward text for concealed meaning. Both Humbert and Quilty seduce Lolita; both are monstrous pedophiles; but perceiving the pun concealed within the Who's Who entry on Quilty,

[80] Booth touches on the gameful aspect of parody: "Though parody is not ordinarily thought of as 'irony,' it is ironic in our definition: the surface meaning must be rejected, and another, incongruous, and 'higher' meaning must be found by reconstruction" (A Rhetoric of Irony 72).

learning that Quilty is notorious for his *many* attempts to seduce children, we not only realize that Quilty's "plays for" (theatrical works) children are actually "plays for" (attempts to seduce) children,[81] we also recognize a key difference between Humbert and Quilty. Whereas Humbert experiences (and presents) his relationship with Lolita as unique, Quilty experiences (and presents[82]) his relationship with Lolita as just one among numerous flings. Often hiding one sense behind another, humor allows an author to endow a text with additional meanings, affording a means of composing prose (literally) saying two things at once. "In the middle thirties a German actor whose name was Fritz Kortner, a most famous and gifted artist of his day, wanted to make a film of Camera Obscura," writes Nabokov, referring to a novel whose protagonist loses his eyesight in a car crash. "I went to London to see him, nothing came of it, but a few years later another firm, this one in Paris, bought an option which ended in a blind alley too" (SO 162). In the following passage, Nabokov alludes to Othello by means of a pun, artfully suggesting the fate awaiting the narrator of " 'That in Aleppo Once. . .' ." "*Yet the pity of it.* Curse your art, I am hideously unhappy. She keeps on walking to and fro where the brown nets are spread to dry on the hot stone slabs and the dappled light of the water plays on the side of a moored fishing boat" (SoVN 564). Seeing each aspect of reality as stratified, as having "levels of perception, false bottoms" (SO 11), Nabokov playfully imbues texts with hidden layers, concealed tiers designed to challenge and reward creative readers. "It occurs to me," Nabokov writes near the end of Speak, Memory, "that the closest reproduction of the mind's birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird" (298). In a sense, the good reader of Nabokov's prose is born the moment an ordinary reader, spotting a hidden meaning, realizes that what seemed a straightforward piece of prose includes a marvelously disguised joke. For discovering one of

[81] What Johnson writes of Nabokov's anagrams applies equally well to his puns: "In many of the novels the anagram is paradigmatic. The letters of a word which apparently reflects a bit of fictional reality are suddenly transposed and 'reality' is reordered. The signifier is reshuffled and the signified transmuted. A new fictive cosmology is created, altering the reader's perception of events in much the same way that the line drawing of a goblet suddenly becomes the profile of two human faces *en regard*: the artist as magus. Anagrams reveal (in the sense of Revelation) the master hand of the creator in many of Nabokov's works" (Worlds in Regression 47).

Nabokov's hidden jokes, the reader is wary of other such jokes, meaning a text is treated as a potentially deceptive composition any of whose features may conceal as much as it reveals.

Over time Nabokov uses more humor to greater effect. Eschewing earnestness, he embraces playfulness, endowing characters with a measure of his own wit and composing increasingly gameful texts. Augmenting one another, these developments render Nabokov's art not only more amusing but amusing in more challenging ways. Like Gogol, Nabokov "creates" readers, engendering in his case a readership whose members are curious, attentive and imaginative. Yet humor is (to borrow a term from Koestler's Act of Creation [27]) a "tri-valent" phenomenon—one whose impact is felt in three areas—for a given joke not only discloses something of an audience, it also reveals something of the humorist and the world. Having in this chapter touched on what humor reveals of an audience, we will now explore what humor divulges of a humorist. And who will be our model humorist? Clare Quilty.

[82] "That joy ride, I grant you, was a silly stunt but you got her back didn't you?" (LO 298)

Chapter Three: Quilty's Death, a Case-Study

I doubt that any strict line can be drawn between the tragic and the burlesque, fatality and chance, casual subjection and the caprice of free will.

—USSR 341

The thirty-fifth chapter of Lolita's second part continually juxtaposes the humorous and the horrific, finally entombing Clare Quilty's gory remains in a narratological coffin built of Nabokov's most brightly inventive prose.[83] Entering Pavor Manor with murder on his mind, Humbert is possessed of and by a "program," one culminating—certain preliminaries having transpired—in his rival's death. According to Humbert's program, a terrified Quilty, having acknowledged guilt and delivered a *vers libre* death sentence, is to be dispatched by an executioner deputized by poetical justice.

However.

Incapable for a grab-bag of reasons of adhering to another's plans, the condemned man—"Clare the Impredictable" (302)[84]—continually thwarts his uninvited guest, juggling in turn each of the hoops Humbert prods him to jump through.

> "Quilty," I said, "do you recall a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo.?"

[83] Appel calls the chapter "[o]ne of the most comical scenes in modern literature" (Dark Cinema 149).
[84] "A portmanteau word; *unpredictable* plus *impredicable* (from *predicated*): 'incapable of being categorized' " (Appel, Annotated 449).

"Sure [. . .]. Who cares?"

"I do, Quilty. You see, I am her father."

"Nonsense," he said, "You are not. You are some foreign literary agent. A Frenchman once translated my Proud Flesh as La Fierté de la Chair. Absurd."

"She was my child, Quilty."

In the state he was in he could not really be taken aback by anything, but his blustering manner was not quite convincing. A sort of wary inkling kindled his eyes into a semblance of life. They were immediately dulled again.

"I'm very fond of children myself," he said, "and fathers are among my best friends." (296)

Perhaps for the reason here suggested (the "state" he is in), perhaps for another reason, Quilty cannot be unsettled, cannot be put on the back foot. Informed by Humbert that his death is imminent, he jeers, "Oh, chucks [. . .]. You begin to bore me" (296); told to concentrate on "what is happening to him," he jibes, "I am willing to try [. . .]. You are either Australian, or a German refugee" (297); charged to read his own "sentence," he punctuates his reading with evaluative wisecracks: "That's good, you know. That's damned good. [. . .] Oh, grand stuff!" (299-300). As his joking shows, Quilty takes neither Humbert nor the program on offer seriously, seeing the former as a fraud ("You're all wet!" [298]), the latter as a farce ("My dear sir [. . .] stop trifling with life and death" [298]). But how—given the situation—could Quilty take events seriously?

Humbert—having "overdone the alcoholic stimulation business" (293)—arrives at Pavor Manor enfeebled by drink. Moreover, unfamiliar with firearms,[85] he makes a decidedly unconvincing assassin. His weapon is coated with oil ("the wrong product, it was black and awfully messy" [295]); his gun-play is inept ("I pointed Chum at his slippered foot and crushed the trigger. It clicked" [297]); and his marksmanship is less than stellar ("*Feu.* This time I hit something hard. I hit the back

[85] Except as portrayed in psychoanalytic theory: "We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-

of a black rocking chair" [302]). Intoxication and ineptitude notwithstanding, Humbert is most hindered by an adamantine mental rigidity. Having contrived a "program" (299), he is determined, contingencies be damned, to enact it. And so, not only must a menacing atmosphere be established but Quilty must acknowledge guilt, accept annihilation, and recite his own death sentence.

What is Nabokov's humor like when the brakes are off ? And where does this surging humor take us? Suggestive of a new type of funfair ride—a prodigious ratcheting together of rollercoaster and haunted castle—Lolita II.35 shows Nabokov's comic playfulness operating at full tilt. In doing so, the chapter raises a number of questions, some answered here, others addressed in later chapters.

3.1 Prior Events

Lolita II.35 must be read in context. While dramatic as a first prolonged meeting between two rivals, the chapter is of even more interest as the denouement of an extended game of cat-and-mouse. Entering Pavor Manor, Humbert, enraged at having been Quilty's plaything, is determined to not just destroy but also humiliate his rival. What, prior to events in Pavor Manor, does Humbert know of the man he intends to murder? Not a lot, but something.

> I cannot tell you, ladies and gentlemen, the exact day when I first knew with utter certainty that the red convertible was following us. I do remember, however, the first time I saw its driver quite clearly. I was proceeding slowly one afternoon through torrents of rain and kept seeing the red ghost swimming and shivering with lust in my mirror, when presently the deluge dwindled to a patter, and then was suspended altogether. With a swishing sound a sunburst swept the highway, and needing a pair of new sunglasses, I pulled up at a filling station. [. . .] As I was in the act of signing a

father's central forelimb," Humbert writes facetiously of "Chum" (216).

> traveller's check and wondered about my exact whereabouts, I happened to glance through a side window, and saw a terrible thing. A broad-backed man, baldish, in an oatmeal coat and dark-brown trousers, was listening to Lo who was leaning out of the car and talking to him very rapidly, her hand with outspread fingers going up and down as it did when she was very serious and emphatic. What struck me with sickening force was—how should I put it?—the voluble familiarity of her way, as if they had known each other—oh, for weeks and weeks. I saw him scratch his cheek and nod, and turn, and walk back to his convertible, a broad and thickish man of my age, somewhat resembling Gustave Trapp, a cousin of my father's in Switzerland—same smoothly tanned face, fuller than mine, with a small dark mustache and a rosebud degenerate mouth. (217)

Aptly dubbed "Trapp" by Humbert, Quilty, more or less visible, shadows Lolita and Humbert during their second tour of America, amusing the former with his antics, while causing the latter to groan and curse in despair: "We were many times weaker than his splendid, lacquered machine, so that I did not even attempt to outspeed him. *O lente currite noctis equi!* O softly run, nightmares" (219). If Quilty, "swimming and shivering with lust" in a rearview mirror, shapes Humbert's mood, the playwright, through his agent Lolita, directs Humbert's movements, steering him first to Wace, (where one of Quilty's plays is being performed), then to Champion, Colorado (where Quilty, having duped his rival with a bogus phone-call, joins Lolita on a tennis court), finally to Elphinstone (where Lolita is spirited away). In the aftermath of Lolita's flight, Humbert revisits events, bemoaning the extent to which a seemingly unmapped junket had been planned: "The journey had taken up most of June for we had seldom made more than a hundred and fifty miles per traveling day, spending the rest of the time, up to five days in one case, at various stopping places, all of them also prearranged, no doubt" (247). With hindsight, Humbert will come to appreciate the extent to which he had been a dupe, a dummy in a remote-controlled car. Recalling a morning in Wace when

Lolita went briefly missing, he muses, "I have often wondered why she did *not* go for ever that day. [. . .] Was it some unripe particle in some general plan? Was it simply because, all things considered, I might as well be used to convey her to Elphinstone—the secret terminus, anyway?" (223) Here and elsewhere, Humbert, reviewing events, recognizes how strictly his movements had been controlled. As a result, learning from Lolita the identity of "Trapp," he vows to subjugate his rival.[86]

Two passages hint at Humbert's mindset prior to his confrontation with Quilty. One darkens a paragraph recalling Humbert's purposeful visit to Ivor Quilty ("—I am on my way to his uncle and walking fast—" [290]): "In the methodical manner on which I have always prided myself, I had been keeping Clare Quilty's face masked in my dark dungeon, where he was waiting for me to come with barber and priest: '*Réveillez-vous, Laqueue, il est temps de mourir!*' "(290). Anticipating his visit to Pavor Manor, then, Humbert envisions Quilty as a condemned man, that is as someone both doomed and helpless. A passage describing Humbert's entry into Pavor Manor is also revealing: "A happy thought struck me. If and when master returned from his constitutional in the woods, or emerged from some secret lair, it might be wise for an unsteady gunman with a long job before him to prevent his playmate from locking himself up in a room" (294). A mouse no longer, Humbert—setting traps for an unsuspecting "playmate"—is now the cat.

Context also shapes the reader's feelings about predatory Humbert. Recent chapters have introduced the reader to a more sympathetic Humbert, one deserving of, if not unqualified praise, a measure of admiration. Having lost Lolita, Humbert falls into a more-or-less normal relationship with a woman who, although dissolute and scatterbrained ("one day she proposed playing Russian roulette with my sacred automatic; I said you couldn't, it was not a revolver, and we struggled for it" [259]), is at least of an acceptable age. As a partner ("for two dim years" [258]) to Rita, Humbert is both amiable and affectionate: he appreciates his partner's kindness, extricates her from

[86] Boyd clarifies the relationship between Humbert's wounded pride and desire to dominate Quilty. Discussing Quilty's toying with Humbert, Boyd writes, "it seems almost as if Quilty has Humbert completely in control, as if Humbert were no more than a character in one of Quilty's plays, a figment of his imagination. To anyone such an idea is repellent; to Humbert, doubly so. He prides himself in transforming and molding Lolita according to the dictates of his imagination: now he finds someone else has usurped the role and made *him* a plaything of his fancy. He seethes at the very thought. [. . .] As soon as Lolita divulges Quilty's identity, Humbert heads off to stage a murder in which Quilty will play the role *he*

predicaments, and is amused, not enraged, by her foibles.

The Humbert of the Rita episode is a genuinely sympathetic character. As is the Humbert who confronts Dolly Schiller in Coalmont. Meeting a "hopelessly worn" (277) and hugely pregnant Lolita, Humbert is surprised—as are we—by his feelings: "I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else" (277). This Humbert—the man able to relinquish a selfish fantasy—is quite unlike the villain who "solipsized" (60) and assaulted a twelve-year-old.

Which is important for, having left Coalmont, Humbert basically pits himself against the world, casually tearing up a parking ticket ("two, four, eight pieces" [289]), needlessly shocking a Ramsdale acquaintance ("I remember Phyllis. Phyllis and Camp Q. Yes, of course. By the way, did she ever tell you how Charlie Holmes debauched there his mother's little charges" [290]), and gleefully abusing a harmless dentist ("On second thoughts, I shall have it all done by Dr. Molnar. His price is higher, but he is of course a much better dentist than you" [291]). With Lolita lost, Humbert adopts a devil-may-care attitude. Yet he remains a character the reader is more likely to laugh *with* than *at*.

As Lolita II.35 opens, then, the reader harbors certain expectations. Influenced by Humbert's recent self-presentation—as a renegade "anti-hero" determined to cut a cunning rival down to size—the reader expects Humbert to achieve, if not the latest in a string of victories (for in giving up Lolita, he exorcises a demon or two), a result compatible with his new-sprung maturity. In brief, anticipating Humbert's killing of Quilty, the reader foresees a reformed outlaw turning the tables on an unfeeling degenerate. As it turns out, this expectation, like so many harbored by Nabokov's readers, crumbles as events unfold, for the world of Lolita II.35 is a realm not of confirmation but of contradiction.

---

wants" (American Years 247-48).

3.2 Inside Pavor Manor

Lolita II.35 is notable for its blending of horror and humor. The chapter, to touch on its horrific aspect, ends in carnage, as Quilty, having bled upon ("anointed with his thick gore" [303]) much of the furniture in Pavor Manor, finally climbs—a "burst of royal purple where his ear had been" (304)—into bed to die. Although gruesome, the chapter (to acknowledge its other aspect) is more mirthful than macabre, for its tide of horror is diluted by a surging undercurrent of comedy. Quilty, the "clownish" (303) "nightmare" (302) of Humbert's deepest fears, is an inexhaustible source of humor, being someone who, to quote Michael Wood, "wisecracks the way Groucho Marx does, and the point in both cases is less that the gags are funny (some are, some aren't, and some don't even get near) than that they are made, and made constantly, as if the determination to make jokes was a habit and a vow and a disease and a victory all at once" (130). With Clare Quilty at center stage (and with Humbert his usual acerbic self) Lolita II.35 is bound to amuse. Funniness, however, whether in this chapter or elsewhere, is embodied in particular jokes and devices.

Lolita II.35 depicts two very comical characters. "The house, being an old one," recalls Humbert early on, "had more planned privacy than have more modern glamour boxes, where the bathroom, the only lockable locus, has to be used for the furtive needs of planned parenthood" (294). Elsewhere in the chapter, Humbert calls himself an "enchanted and very tight hunter" (294) (a play on the name of the hotel where he first possessed Lolita), and describes his automatic as "again ready for use on the person" (301) (alluding to a catalog description of the weapon as "Particularly well adapted for use in the home and car as well as on the person" [216]). Humbert is a notably witty narrator, one for whom words and phrases exist as props in a mesmerizing stage act ("I have only words to play with," he writes at one point [32]). But Humbert's funniness in Lolita II.35 reflects more than just positive traits like ingenuity and a sophisticated sense of humor. As an *actor* in the chapter, he amuses because he is unthinking. This aspect of his character, too, merits discussion.

Anticipating events moving in a certain direction, Humbert cannot cope with the unexpected.

Faced by an unforeseen protest ("I'm not responsible for the rapes of others. Absurd!" [298]), he can only reply with redoubled bluster: "I asked him whether he wanted to be executed sitting or standing" (298); meeting an unchoreographed act of physical resistance ("with a tremendous lurch he fell over me, sending the pistol hurtling under a chest of drawer" [298]), he can only respond with an ersatz version of a cowboy's fisticuffs: "We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children" (299); encountering unscripted ridicule ("this is certainly a fine poem" [300]), he has no answer but reimplementation of his program: "I asked him if he had anything serious to say before dying" (301). If Quilty continually jibes his visitor, he acts with reason, for Humbert—drunk, clumsy and unthinking—is an inept assassin (anticipatory visions of "bungling the execution" (293) are not unwarranted). Confronting Humbert, Quilty certainly laughs in the face of death (as the cliché has it); but death, as a presence in Lolita II.35, wields not a scythe but a rubber sword (at one point Humbert writes of "Chum," his handgun, "the weapon felt limp and clumsy in my hand" [297]).

As a provocation to mirth, Humbert is a complex stimulus, being someone we laugh both with and at (often at the same time). Time and again, narrator-Humbert, juggling words, wrings additional laughs from recollection of his own antics: "I see myself following him through the hall, with a kind of double, triple, kangaroo jump, remaining quite straight on straight legs while bouncing up twice in his wake, and then bouncing between him and the front door in a ballet-like stiff bounce" (303). Humbert, then, is a very funny person. Funnier still is Humbert's nemesis.

Humbert rightly sees Quilty as dissolute, a libertine, someone for whom the pleasure principle is a guiding precept. After all, the playwright not only consumes cigarettes (through mastication if necessary), alcohol and Herculanita (a strong type of heroin), but also indulges in sexual horseplay of Heliogobulan proportions. Long familiar with our narrator's proclivities, we may feel such perversity cannot be outstripped. Such a view, Quilty's past and present behavior reveals ("I have made private movies out of Justine and other eighteenth-century sexcapades" [298]), is dangerously naïve, for sexual self-indulgence can readily move from the abnormal to the demented.

"I can offer you, also gratis, as house pet, a rather exciting little freak, a young lady with three breasts, one a dandy [. . .]. Oh, another thing—you are going to like this. I have an absolutely unique collection of erotica upstairs. Just to mention one item: the in folio deluxe Bagration Island [. . .] with photographs of eight hundred and something male organs" (301, 302).

Yet Quilty, too, is someone we also laugh *with*. Possessing a preternaturally agile mind, the playwright is always primed for discharge of a quip: "you know it's absurd the way people invade this house without even knocking. They use the *vaterre*, they use the kitchen, they use the telephone. Phil calls Philadelphia. Pat calls Patagonia" (296). While fond of punning (more fond of than adept at, as his dubious "to borrow and to borrow and to borrow" suggests[87]), Quilty is at his best as an ironist and impersonator. Mockery, sarcasm (irony at its most pointed), and play-acting are his ideas of fun. At various times, Quilty feigns to be a drawling gangster ("Say [. . .] that's a swell little gun you've got there" [297]), an Elizabethan undergoing torture ("Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist" [303]), and—most farfetched of all—an enraptured reader of Humbert's poem ("That's good, you know. That's damned good" [299]). Like Humbert, Quilty is funnier as a wit than as a fool, suggesting that for Nabokov, although slapstick is well-worth watching, *jeux d'esprit* are of far more interest.

Within Lolita II.35, then, Humbert and Quilty are conspicuous sources of humor. Directing them, though, and endowing the chapter with many other comic effects, is another spirited humorist: Nabokov himself.

3.3 Gamefulness in Lolita II.35

Lolita II.35 is typical of Nabokov's later fiction in its gamefulness. A protean narrative,

[87] The full line (which misquotes Macbeth V. v. 19) reads, "I have not much at the bank right now but I propose to borrow—you know, as the Bard said, with that cold in his head, to borrow and to borrow and to borrow" (301). Appel, for one, considers the pun more than dubious: "for this pun Quilty deserves to die" (Annotated 448).

altering in aspect with each turn of events, the chapter is most stable in its incorporation of two parodic threads, one Hollywood-Western, one pornographic.[88]

If a stock Western pits two "roughriders" (LO 170) in single-combat ("the stupendous fist fight, the crashing mountain of dusty old fashioned furniture" [LO 170]), Lolita II.35 sets a drunken scholar against a drug-addled playwright. "I could not help realizing, as my feet touched the springy and insecure ground, that I had overdone the alcoholic stimulation business," Humbert writes of his arrival at Pavor Manor (293). If Humbert is drunk on "pin" (a favored blend of pineapple juice and gin) and unfamiliar with his gun—is no roughrider—his rival is even less like the rugged gunslingers of Hollywood fancy. "[F]luffily disheveled in a scanty balding way, but still perfectly recognizable, he swept by me in a purple bathrobe, very like one I had. He either did not notice me, or else dismissed me as some familiar and innocuous hallucination" (294). Variously described as "baggy-eyed" (294), "in a fog" (295), and "utterly disorganized by a drug" (299), Quilty is as ill-suited as Humbert to a sagebrush tale, representing a mock-target for jester-cum-gunfighter Humbert's over-oiled automatic.

> I pointed Chum at his slippered foot and crushed the trigger. It clicked. He looked at his foot, at the pistol, again at his foot. I made another awful effort, and with a ridiculously feeble and juvenile sound, it went off. The bullet entered the thick pink rug, and I had the paralyzing impression that it had merely trickled in and might come out again.
>
> "See what I mean?" said Quilty. "You should be a little more careful. Give me that thing for Christ's sake." (297)

"[T]his book is being read, I assume, in the first years of 2000 AD," we soon read, "and elderly readers will surely recall at this point the obligatory scene in the Westerns of their childhood. Our tussle, however, lacked the ox-stunning fisticuffs, the flying furniture. He and I were two large

[88] A more-localized thread parodies Poe's Gothic tales (see below).

dummies, stuffed with dirty cotton and rags. It was a silent, soft, formless tussle on the part of two literati" (299). As is here noted, Humbert and Quilty are parodic stand-ins, are clumsy copies of hard-punching cowboys. Retaining the form of the "showdown" narrative, Nabokov changes the contents associated with that form, sabotaging the aggressor's gun, making the victim a wisecracker, ultimately transforming grim violence into grotesque farce:[89]

> I fired three or four times in quick succession, wounding him at every blaze; and every time I did it to him, that horrible thing to him, his face would twitch in an absurd clownish manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain; he slowed down, rolled his eyes half closing them and made a feminine "ah!" and he shivered every time a bullet hit him as if I were tickling him, and every time I got him with those slow, clumsy, blind bullets of mine, he would say under his breath, with a phoney British accent—all the while dreadfully twitching, shivering, smirking, but withal talking in a curiously detached and even amiable manner: "Ah, that hurts, sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow I pray you, desist. Ah—very painful, very painful indeed" (303).

Lolita II.35 also parodies certain features of a lewd novel. Described by Lolita as "a complete freak in sex matters" (276), Clare Quilty, waiting in the wings, is central to Nabokov's spoofing of pornography.[90] In short, given Quilty's general sexual freakiness, a Quilty surprised at home should offer a titillating surprise or two. And indeed this proves to be the case. But if Quilty, disturbed in his "secret lair" (294), offers a number of lewd surprises, the surprises are as preposterous as Humbert's

[89] Appel touches on other Western clichés spoofed in the chapter. "The chapter's initial pages similarly toy with a well-established grammar, upending the clichéd American conjunction of manhood, sexuality, and guns that is celebrated in our literature and lore, and in countless Westerns and thrillers such as Gun Crazy (1949), an early salute to Bonnie and Clyde; The Gunfighter (1950) with its 'virginal,' ingenue killer (Skip Homeier); and The Fastest Gun Alive (1949), an epic in which shopkeeper Glenn Ford, the son of a famous marshal, is a fancy marksman but no killer, pretending to be a 'fast gun' now in retirement (with six spurious notches on his gun butt)" ("Tristram in Movielove: Lolita at the Movies" [in Proffer, ed., A Book of Things], 165).

[90] Asked for details, Lolita mentions a film Quilty hoped to make: "I mean, he had two girls and two boys, and three or

gunplay. In short, having enkindled expectations of lewdness, Nabokov explodes those expectations by providing an embarrassment of riches. If it's breasts you want, it's breasts you'll get—three on one woman. If it's male organs you're after, it's male organs you'll get—eight hundred and something. Aware that readers identify Quilty with *outré* forms of eroticism, Nabokov tweaks that association, not by having Quilty turn out a monk or a moralist, but by making him a caricature of a sensualist. Cornered, Quilty disappoints, not by offering too little in the way of sexual novelty, but by offering too much.[91]

Gamefulness in a literary work may include patterning, and Lolita II.35 includes one markedly sly pattern. Discovered by Edmond Bernhard and discussed by Andrew Field,[92] the pattern makes of the chapter what Field calls a "chess simile" (Life in Art 326). Reviewing Bernhard's findings, Field writes:

> The death scene with Quilty is compared to a King blocked by his own guard—proposing in vain a series of exchanges, which amount to all his powers, for the opportunity of slipping out of his own fortress. Humbert keeps "Chum" the murder weapon in a chess box given him by Gaston, and the poem he gives Quilty to read before shooting him contains a play on chess terminology ("because you took advantage of my disadvantage"). (Life in Art 327)

This passage maps only part of the chess pattern within Lolita II.35 (Field acknowledges that his discussion of Bernhard's article is rudimentary [326]), failing to note many relevant details. For

---

four men, and the idea was for all of us to tangle in the nude while an old woman took movie pictures" (LO 276).

[91] Kiremidjian posits a relationship between parody and caricature: "In Beerbohm's parody of Shaw, for example, the parodist has not only imitated Shaw's style but also Shaw's subject matter. [. . .] What Beerbohm did, with great finesse and delicacy, was to exaggerate very slightly certain essential characteristics of the Shaw preface [. . .]. This type of parody approaches caricature, since the caricaturist will always exaggerate, in a very obvious and extreme way, that one salient feature in his subject which tends towards the grotesque anyway. In the case of the caricaturist, the exaggeration is usually gross and extreme, in Beerbohm it is subtle and minimal. Yet in one sense the problem of form in relation to content is still present, since the feature to be exaggerated is always that particular one which even in its natural content refuses to be harmonized by the discipline of line and form which will to some extent at least be present in any phenomenon" (A Study of Modern Parody 21).

[92] Bernhard's article appeared in L'Arc 24, 1964. Lacking access to this publication, I depend on Andrew Field's

instance, if Quilty's behavior—specifically his profligate offering of exchanges (house, money, sexual partners)—marks him as a King, so too do certain epithets Humbert attaches to his target. "I reloaded [Chum] with hands that were black and bloody," we read at one point, "I had touched something he had anointed with his thick gore" (303). Humbert soon describes Quilty as "trudging from room to room, bleeding majestically" (303), and still later he recalls the wounded playwright "retir[ing] to the master bedroom with a burst of royal purple where his ear had been" (303). Quilty is clearly meant to be seen as a king of some kind,[93] and his being a *chess* King makes the most sense. Supporting this reading is not only Quilty's willingness to "exchange" pieces but also the playwright's understanding of "what is happening" (to quote Humbert 297). Meeting Humbert in a parlor, Quilty immediately settles into a chair, facing an also-seated Humbert. Quilty seems to be preparing for a game. That the game is chess is suggested when the playwright, employing the language of the chess world, says "Let us postpone the matter" (301). Quilty appears to see his confrontation with Humbert as a game of chess, hinting—to say the least—that Bernhard's reading of the meeting as a chess game is correct.

Bernhard's reading is also supported by certain details of Humbert's appearance and behavior, details identifying Humbert as a second chess-King. Arriving at Pavor Manor, Humbert is dressed in black, "black suit, black shirt, no tie" (295).[94] Later, pursuing a fleeing Quilty, Humbert moves chess-

King fashion (i.e. a square at a time) literally bouncing along Quilty's hallway while "remaining quite straight on straight legs" (303). As these details imply, the meeting of Humbert and Quilty figuratively brings together two chess Kings, a white King who blanches as his blood seeps out, and a black King who, steeped in his rival's gore, darkens as events proceed.

The chess pattern serves an important purpose. Humbert often likens himself to royalty. As a child, enamored of Annabel, he inhabits a "princedom by the sea" (9), where, one heated moment, he

---

discussion of the piece (Life in Art 326-27).

[93] Chris Ackerley (p.c.), noting Quilty's agility and surnominal initial, plausibly identifies the playwright as a Queen.

[94] Humbert's appearance recalls chess-playing Gaston Godin's: "He always wore black, even his tie was black" (181). It

offers his love "the scepter of [his] passion" (15). As an adult, greedy for Lolita, he imagines himself a tyrant possessed of a most desirable bondschild ("I was a radiant and robust Turk [. . .] postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves" [60]). Humbert's self-image clearly reflects the company he keeps. Valeria, Charlotte, Lolita, Rita: each is too unlearned to offer much of an intellectual challenge. Through use of the chess pattern, Nabokov hints that in taking on Quilty, Humbert for the first time invites a genuine rival into his life, someone equally commanding. What happens when Humbert crosses swords with a rival king? He is defeated. "[W]ith a heavy heart I left the house" (305). Using a chess pattern, Nabokov shows that Humbert's apparent powers were never anything but relative: set beside a pawn (Valeria, for instance) he is impressive; pitted against another King, he is ridiculous.

Another index of gamefulness is allusiveness. Allusions arrive early in Lolita II.35, for Pavor Manor—tellingly located on "Grimm Road"—recalls the mansion in Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher. As is the mansion in Poe's tale, Pavor Manor is an ornate, decaying structure surrounded by shrieking birds and rotting trees; and as does Usher's mansion, Pavor Manor stands in a mist (albeit one owing more to Humbert's mental condition than to local topography). Usher's house is depicted this way: "[A]bout the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (143); while of Quilty's mansion, we read, "[W]hen I reached Pavor Manor, the sun was visible again, burning like a man, and the birds screamed in the drenched and steaming trees. The elaborate and decrepit house seemed to stand in a kind of daze, reflecting as it were my own state" (293).

Other allusions evoke Poe's "William Wilson," wherein a malign narrator—whose repetitious (and pseudonymous) name certainly influences Humbert's choice of pen name—confronts an insidious double determined to vex him. A number of passages in Lolita II.35 evoke

---

is interesting that Humbert's killing of Quilty, like his most memorable chess game with Gaston, lasts about an hour.

Poe's story. For instance, Humbert's remark that Quilty wore a robe "very like one I had" (294), identifies the playwright as—if not the physical copy that narrator-Wilson's double is ("we were of the same height, and I perceived that we were even singularly alike in general contour of person and outline of feature. [. . .] His cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admiredly did he play his part" [224])—not unlike Humbert in appearance. Moreover, if Humbert, in his poem and elsewhere, disclaims any ethical resemblance to Quilty (seeing himself as highly moral and his rival as scurrilous), the narrator of "William Wilson" distinguishes in a likewise rigid way between self and double: "[H]is moral sense, at least, if not his general talents and worldly wisdom, was far keener than my own; and [. . .] I might, to-day, have been a better, and thus a happier, man had I less frequently rejected the counsels embodied in those meaning whispers which I then but too cordially hated" (225). In Lolita II.35, therefore, as in "William Wilson," a narrator is harassed by a physical double allied (it is claimed) to an alien ethos. Where the works differ, and parody enters the picture, is in the moral nature of the despised double: if Wilson sees his double as Jekyll to his own Hyde, Humbert sees Quilty as a "semi-animated, subhuman trickster" (295). Also notable is the fact that both Lolita II.35 and "William Wilson" end in murder—unsurprisingly given their respective narrators' anger at being "doubled." Humbert's killing of Quilty is bloody and brutal; so is Wilson's dispatch of Wilson. "I was frantic with every species of wild excitement, and felt within my single arm the energy and power of a multitude. In a few seconds I forced him by sheer strength against the wainscoting, and thus, getting him at mercy, plunged my sword, with brute ferocity, repeatedly through and through his bosom" (233). Comparison reveals many similarities between Lolita II.35 and "William Wilson." The most important, however, may be the failure of each work's narrator to vanquish his nemesis. In Poe's tale, Wilson's dying double says, in words an expiring Quilty might have echoed (with modifications, no doubt): "You have conquered me, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead—dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope!" (234)

T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday"[95] is also alluded to for comic effect. In Eliot's poem is heard, sounding and re-sounding, the phrase "Because I,"[96] a phrase echoed—with static—in Humbert's poem ("Because you took advantage of a sinner / Because you took advantage / Because you took"). Humbert's redirecting of attention from self to other (i.e. from "I" to "you") is telling: whereas "Ash Wednesday" is, as its title suggests, a versified *mea culpa*, Humbert's work is a lyrical transferal of guilt. Humbert's selective mimicry is funny for a number of reasons. First, it underscores Humbert's dullness: penning the most important poem of his life, he shamelessly copies another poet's manner; second, the mimicry shows Humbert to possess a pietistic mindset similar to that responsible for "Ash Wednesday": both Eliot and Humbert refuse to let certain words go ("because," obviously), as if the words were so freighted with meaning as to have an incantatory effect. Nabokov's linking of Humbert and Eliot is amusing for several other reasons. For one because Humbert, unlike the narrator of "Ash Wednesday," is anything but penitent (Humbert would not write "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death" (56). For another because Humbert, notwithstanding his lack of remorse, adopts the judgmental tenor of "Ash Wednesday." Clearly Nabokov wants us to see something like Eliot's heavy-handed pietism in Humbert's sudden interest in sin, and so has his murderer mimic the solemn language of "Ash Wednesday." Yet Nabokov has Humbert adopt Eliot's tone not straightforwardly, as a precursor to self-scrutiny, but with a number of comic twists.

Lolita II.35 also includes many internal allusions. Several of these, including those quoted earlier as examples of narratorial wittiness (e.g. Humbert's description of himself as an "enchanted and very tight hunter" [294]), have only a local effect. Other such allusions, however, reveal Lolita's inner structure. Quilty's purple bathrobe, for instance, as a pointer back to Humbert's "royal robes" (61), implies not just a convergence of tastes but a merging of identities, as if Humbert and Quilty, at last face-to-face, are both looking at a mirror. By means of Quilty's robe, Nabokov hints at important affinities between Humbert and Quilty: while Humbert sees himself as utterly unlike his rival, the

[95] As noted by Appel (Annotated 448).
[96] E.g. "Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope / Because I do not hope to turn" (55).

two clearly have certain tastes—both sartorial and sexual—in common.[97]

Deceit and concealed humor also contribute to the gamefulness of Lolita II.35. As in his personal relations, Humbert is as a writer thoroughly deceptive. Especially misleading is his self-presentation in Lolita II.35. Humbert, as his use of such terms as "executed" (298) and "sentence" (299) reveals, would have us believe his killing of Quilty is warranted (is "poetical justice" [299]). More elaborately deceitful is Humbert's dupery about his victim. Two paragraphs into Humbert's story we know our narrator is a murderer. What we don't know, and won't know for almost three hundred pages, is the name of his victim. At times we are led to believe the victim is (respectively) Charlotte, Lolita, and Richard Schiller.[98] Only late in the story, II.33 (290), does a target come into sharp focus, as a gleeful Humbert writes of "keeping Clare Quilty's face masked in my dark dungeon" (290). Humbert's description of Quilty's death, then, although not misleading in and of itself (save for its "spinning" of the death as deserved), concludes a drawn-out game in which Humbert repeatedly misleads us regarding his crime.

Concealed humor is another important feature of Lolita II.35. And while Humbert's narrative includes many hidden jokes, most of the concealed humor in Lolita II.35 is found in a single passage, Quilty's wandering appeal to Humbert's "so-called mercy" (295):

> Now look here, Mac [. . .]. You are drunk and I am a sick man. Let us postpone the matter. I need quiet. I have to nurse my impotence. Friends are coming in the afternoon to take me to a game. This pistol-packing farce is becoming a frightful nuisance. We are men of the world, in everything—sex, free verse, marksmanship. If you bear me a grudge, I am ready to make unusual amends. Even an old-fashioned *rencontre*, sword or pistol, in Rio or elsewhere—is not excluded. My memory and my

[97] Later in the chapter, as Humbert wrestles with Quilty, a sense of identities merging becomes stronger: "I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (299).
[98] Both Carl Proffer (Keys to Lolita [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968], 50) and Brian Boyd (American Years 243) discuss

eloquence are not at their best today but really, my dear Mr. Humbert, you were not an ideal stepfather, and I did not force your little protégée to join me. It was she made me remove her to a happier home. This house is not as modern as that ranch we shared with dear friends. But it is roomy, cool in summer and winter, and in a word comfortable, so, since I intend retiring to England or Florence forever, I suggest you move in. It is yours, gratis. Under the condition you stop pointing at me that [he swore disgustingly] gun. By the way, I do not know if you care for the bizarre, but if you do, I can offer you, also gratis, as house pet, a rather exciting little freak, a young lady with three breasts, one a dandy, this is a rare and delightful marvel of nature. Now, *soyon raisonnables*. You will only wound me hideously and then rot in jail while I recuperate in a tropical setting. I promise you, Brewster, you will be happy here, with a magnificent cellar, and all the royalties from my next play—I have not much at the bank right now but I propose to borrow—you know, as the Bard said, with that cold in his head, to borrow and to borrow and to borrow. There are other advantages. We have here a most reliable and bribable charwoman, a Mrs. Vibrissa—curious name—who comes from the village twice a week, alas not today, she has daughters, granddaughters, a thing or two I know about the chief of police makes him my slave. I am a playwright. I have been called the American Maeterlinck. Maeterlinck-Schmetterling, says I. Come on! All this is very humiliating, and I am not sure I am doing the right thing. Never use herculanita with rum. Now drop that pistol like a good fellow. I knew your dear wife slightly. You may use my wardrobe. Oh, another thing—you are going to like this. I have an absolutely unique collection of erotica upstairs. Just to mention one item: the in folio de-luxe Bagration Island by the explorer and psychoanalyst Melanie Weiss, a remarkable lady, a remarkable work—drop that gun—with photographs of eight hundred and something male organs

---

Humbert's trickery regarding the identity of his victim.

> she examined and measured in 1932 on Bagration, in the Barda Sea, very illuminating graphs, plotted with love under pleasant skies—drop that gun—and moreover I can arrange for you to attend executions, not everybody knows that the chair is painted yellow—(301)

Much of this appeal—Quilty's need to "nurse" his impotence, Weiss's fieldwork—is boldly funny. Coinciding with examples of obvious humor, however, are a number of hidden jokes. Many of Nabokov's invented names possess a comic aspect, and each name dropped by Quilty carries a comic punch of some kind.[99] A "vibrissa," for example, is a cat's whisker, hinting that Quilty's relations with his charwoman are brutishly intimate. (A whiskery name, moreover, is aptly labeled "curious"). The names "Melanie Weiss" and "Bagration Island" are also amusing. Translatable (from ancient Greek and German respectively) as "Black White," Dr. Weiss's name mocks all psychologists who depict reality as made up of but a few elements variously arranged (Melanie Klein, for whom all play is an attempt at anxiety-reduction, is a specific target.) As for Bagration Island, "Potage Bagration," named for a prominent Russian family, is a cream dish swimming with asparagus tips—a telling ingredient given Weiss's interest in male organs.[100] Dr. Weiss's work, moreover, is, as Appel notes (Annotated 449), reminiscent of that undertaken by Margaret Mead in the 1930s.[101] (Barda, incidentally, is a slop Russians feed farm animals). "Schmetterling," too, is a joke, being both a quasi-Yiddish dismissal of Maurice Maeterlinck and a portentous uttering of the German word for "butterfly."[102] While concealed humor is found everywhere in Lolita II.35, it features (to risk an oxymoron) particularly prominently in Quilty's speech, a minefield of buried allusions and linguistic booby-traps.

Lolita II.35 is a model instance of Nabokov's mature humor. Filled with humor of many

[99] Appel (Annotated 448-49) glosses many names in the speech (e.g. "Vibrissa," "Melanie Weiss," "Barda Sea").
[100] "Bagration," Brian Boyd suggests to me, also plays off vulgar "buggeration."
[101] For instance, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935).
[102] Why portentous? Quilty's death-throes have something lepidopterological about them. Having retreated to his cocoon-like bed, Quilty emerges in a butterfly-like manner: "Quilty of all people had managed to crawl out onto the landing, and there we could see him, flapping and heaving" (305). Does Nabokov conceive of death as analogous to a caterpillar's

types, the chapter suggests an author eager to amuse as often and as engagingly as he can. Having touched on the kinds of humor found in Lolita II.35, we will now explore what the chapter's humor *does*.

3.4 Conflicting Truths

Humor need not be a leavening agent, whose mere presence renders the weighty light and the substantial airy. For while some examples of humor are frivolous, producing only a good (or not-so-good) laugh, other instances of humor are very serious. Why is there so much humor in Lolita II. 35?

A portion of the chapter's humor, including that arising from Humbert's drunkenness and difficulties with Chum, reflects the story advanced in Lolita II.35, with Humbert behaving—to our amusement—as he has acted in the past.[103] Other jokes hint at thematic concerns. One issue explored in Lolita is the relationship between obsession and cruelty. Richard Rorty, noting links between Pale Fire and Lolita, writes, "Both Kinbote and Humbert are exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for their own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything that affects anyone else. These characters dramatize, as it has never before been dramatized, the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most—incuriosity" (158). As Rorty observes, Humbert is a mixture of astuteness and myopia: while certain things get his senses tingling, others leave him flat (and blind to the obvious). Certain examples of humor in Lolita II.35 highlight Humbert's duality, his obtuse poem, for instance, or, to take a more localized example, his self-pitying gripe about having to maneuver out of dead Quilty's driveway ("I left the house and walked through the spotted blaze of the sun to my car. Two other cars were parked on both sides of it, and I

---

metamorphosis?

[103] Humbert often drinks when anxious: for instance, having decided to caress Charlotte, he gets drunk to avert "any embarrassment that my indifference might incur when called upon to display a strong and impatient flame" (72). As for his difficulties with "Chum," "not very mechanically minded" (208) Humbert at one point recalls an energetic neighbor in these terms: "My west-door neighbor [. . .] would speak to me once in a while as he barbered some late garden blooms or watered his car or, at a later date, defrosted his driveway" (LO 179).

had some trouble squeezing out" (305). Given the resonance of certain jokes in Lolita II.35, no explanation of the chapter's humor can ignore thematic concerns.

Some examples of humor in Lolita II.35, then, arise from aspects of story or characterization, while others reflect an authorial interest in certain themes. Most of the chapter's humor, however, is inascribable to particularities of story or theme. There is, for instance, something extravagant, almost profligate, about Quilty's personality, something Wood highlights in noting that, for the playwright, cracking jokes is "a vow and a disease" (130). The chapter's gamefulness is also hard to explain. In brief, much of the humor in Lolita II.35 invites analysis as a means by which Nabokov explores issues only tangentially related to specifics of Lolita. What are those issues?

As noted, Humbert arrives at Pavor Manor with more than murder on his mind. While Quilty has to die (as Humbert's poem puts it [300]), the playwright's death will be less an end in itself than a means by which Humbert turns the tables on a once-dominant rival. Humbert, then, plans to subjugate Quilty. This subjugation is to transpire in two dimensions. First, armed and dangerous, Humbert plans to direct his rival's actions, with Quilty forced to do certain things (e.g. recite a "death sentence;" utter a suitable last statement). Second, and more importantly, harboring a particular understanding of events, Humbert means to shape Quilty's worldview, with the playwright compelled to adopt certain beliefs. A writer not a roughneck, Quilty could quickly be killed. How, then, to explain Humbert's "program"? Most obviously reference to Humbert's need to deliver a fitting punishment: furious at having been "enmeshed" in Quilty's "demoniacal game" (249), Humbert plans to bedevil the devil.

Of the two realms in which Humbert intends to subjugate Quilty—the physical and the conceptual—the latter is more important. The worldview which Quilty is expected to adopt coheres around three beliefs. A first belief identifies Humbert as Lolita's benefactor: "I am her father," he says in response to a comment questioning his interest in Dolores Haze (296). "She was my child," he adds as Quilty doubts *this* (296). With these two claims, Humbert arrogates to himself the role of guardian, implicitly presenting himself as concerned with Lolita's well-being. In his poem, too,

Humbert depicts himself as a benefactor: "[B]ecause you stole her / from her wax-browed and dignified protector / spitting into his heavy-lidded eye / ripping his flavid toga" (300). Determined to shape Quilty's notion of events, Humbert first presents himself as a caring, and wronged, father.

A second belief relates to Quilty's self-image. "Concentrate on the thought of Dolly Haze whom you kidnaped," Humbert says (297), inviting the playwright to see himself as a child-snatcher. Humbert's poem is also condemnatory, especially in its branding Quilty a despoiler: "you / took a dull doll to pieces / and threw its head away" (300). Humbert's poem, as this image hints, is manichean in its assigning of good and evil to separate camps. Living with Humbert, Lolita was "a little downy girl still wearing poppies / still eating popcorn in the colored gloam" (300); under Quilty's "care," she was irreparably damaged—a decapitated doll.

A third belief concerns the nature of Quilty's death. As Humbert presents it, the death will be not a murder but an execution: "I asked him whether he wanted to be executed sitting or standing" (298). Moreover, if Humbert calls his tendentious poem a "sentence" ("I proposed he read his own sentence—in the poetical form I had given it" [299]), he refers to his rival's unhappy fate as "poetical justice" (299). Humbert clearly sees Quilty's death as sanctioned, if not by a court of law, by a higher tribunal. Anything but a crime of passion, the death delivers well-deserved justice.

Humbert intends to impose on Quilty a certain understanding of events. Or, to put it another way, Humbert means for Quilty to willingly play a starring role (i.e. the "subhuman trickster" [295]) in a prescripted narrative ("*Réveillez-vous, Laqueue, il est temps de mourir!*" [290"]).

Humbert's version of events is, of course, ridiculous. A brute and a bully, Humbert never had any real interest in Lolita's well-being. And while Quilty may be a wretch, Lolita suffered less in his hands than when under Humbert's thumb. Lastly, an unsanctioned revenge killing is—regardless of any claims the killer may make—murder. In brief, the worldview Humbert intends Quilty to adopt is not just untenable but obviously so, comprising a trio of conspicuously spurious beliefs. In ordering his rival to accept—to "buy into"—such a ridiculous version of events Humbert asks the impossible. Knowing what he does ("my dear Mr. Humbert, you were not an ideal stepfather, and I did not force

your little protégée to join me" [301]), Quilty cannot play in earnest the part assigned to him. But what form will Quilty's resistance take?

In espousing an untenable and self-serving worldview, Humbert acts not with any originality but as innumerable figures of fun have acted in the past (and will act in the future). Comedy, argues Henry Jenkins (building on work by Harry Levin), has traditionally made use of three types of comic antagonist: the dupe, the killjoy, and the counterfeit. If the dupe is "completely bound by conventional patterns of thought" (232), and if the killjoy "seek[s] to remove all possibility of pleasure from the general environment" (233), the counterfeit—that figure in whom we are interested—"suggests the bankruptcy of the conformist's demands for social status" (234):

> Counterfeits claim an unearned respectability and hold others accountable to standards they themselves refuse to obey. The colonel in Half Shot at Sunrise forces Wheeler and Woolsey to fulfill their duties as soldiers rather than pursue their own pleasures in the carnal carnival of Paris; the colonel, however, is so distracted by his own amorous feelings toward his mistress that he incompetently fulfills his own duties. He sends a perfume-soaked love letter to the frontlines rather than the important orders upon which the lives of his men depend and the clowns brave danger to deliver it. (234)

Insofar as Humbert claims an unearned respectability (as Lolita's "dignified protector") and holds another person accountable to standards he himself ignores ("because of all you did / because of all I did not"), he is an exemplary counterfeit. In certain respects, then, the Humbert of Lolita II.35 is a familiar figure. Broadly familiar, too, are the repercussions of Humbert's falseness. Developing his argument, Jenkins notes that "Although [counterfeits] endlessly assert their dignity and prestige, the clowns' antics strip away false dignity. The clown, sometimes intentionally, sometimes accidentally, uncovers the counterfeit's deceit and hypocrisy, exposing covert schemes to public scrutiny"

(235).[104] How does Quilty—a model clown[105]—"uncover" Humbert's "deceit and hypocrisy"? How does he expose "covert schemes to public scrutiny"? The playwright's approach is hinted at in his responses to Humbert's gunplay.

> He saw the little dark weapon lying in my palm as if I were offering it to him.
>
> "Say!" he drawled (now imitating the underworld numbskull of movies), "that's a swell gun you've got there. What d'you want for her?" (297)

In refusing to take Humbert's gun seriously, Quilty, here and elsewhere, precludes the weapon's being used to elicit obedience. Thus, while Humbert's dominion in the physical realm would seem assured, Quilty's joking exposes it as illusory. "With a tremendous lurch," recalls Humbert, "he fell all over me, sending the pistol hurtling under a chest of drawers" (298).

> [Quilty] puffed a little and folded his arms on his chest.
>
> "Now you've done it," he said. "*Vous voilà dans de beaux draps, mon vieux.*"
>
> His French was improving.
>
> I looked around. Perhaps, if—Perhaps I could—On my hands and knees? Risk it?
>
> "*Alors, que fait-on*?" he asked watching me closely.
>
> I stooped. He did not move. I stooped lower.
>
> "My dear sir," he said, "stop trifling with life and death. I am a playwright. I have written tragedies, comedies, fantasies. I have made private movies out of Justine and other eighteenth-century sexcapades. I'm the author of fifty-two successful scenarios.

[104] Davis also presents humor as a means of unmasking. "We assess the authenticity of actors' identity by evaluating the *relation between* their *external and internal aspects*, by judging whether their presented identity reflects their inner self accurately. [. . .] Humor reveals the discrepancy between essence and appearance, between inner self and outer identity claims—in short, inauthenticity" (What's so Funny? 251).

[105] According to Jenkins's own definition. "The clowns' greater mental flexibility ensures that they will always be able to outsmart more sluggish counterparts" (What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and The Vaudeville Aesthetic [New York: Columbia UP, 1992], 233). Note also that for Jenkins clowns "respond to an irresistible urge to pull everything down to its most biologically basic level, to read every statement in terms of its relationship to the body"

> I know all the ropes. Let me handle this. There should be a poker somewhere, why don't I fetch it, and then we'll fish out your property." (298)

Anything but a puppet on strings, it is Quilty who knows "all the ropes." Utilizing humor, the playwright asserts his own physical freedom; evoking through play a cartoonish world of magic guns and enchanted bullets: "[I]n dismay, I understood that far from killing him I was injecting spurts of energy into the poor fellow, as if the bullets had been capsules wherein a heady elixir danced"(303).

Quilty also uses humor to undermine Humbert's definition of reality. Mocking Humbert's self-presentation as a benefactor ("I am her father"), he scoffs, "Nonsense [. . .]. You are some foreign literary agent" (296). Ridiculing Humbert's assigning of guilt ("Concentrate on the thought of Dolly Haze whom you kidnapped"), he jeers, "You're all wet. I saved her from a beastly pervert. Show me your badge instead of shooting at my foot, you ape" (298). Deriding Humbert's arrogation of judicial authority ("I asked him whether he wanted to be executed sitting or standing"), he taunts, "Ah, let me think [. . .]. It is not an easy question. Incidentally—I made a mistake. Which I sincerely regret. You see, I had no fun with your Dolly. I am practically impotent, to tell the melancholy truth" (298). Each time Humbert advances a definition, the playwright reacts with a wisecrack. The quips interjected into Quilty's reading of his "sentence" are particularly revealing: "That's damned good [. . .] grand stuff! [. . .] Well, sir, this is certainly a fine poem. Your best as far as I am concerned" (299-300). Exposed to a picture of reality that bears no resemblance to his own, Quilty reacts not with protest or argument but with ridicule, subverting though humor the alien version of events. Using humor, Quilty asserts a need and a capacity to live in a world of his own shaping: "This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty" (305).

One critic sees Lolita II.35 as "keatonesque" (Olsen 77). While this epithet usefully highlights the chapter's affinities to early film comedy, Humbert's killing of Quilty is best linked, not to Keaton's soundless antics, but to the garrulous rompings of a Marx Brothers film. Discussing

---

(What Made Pistachio Nuts? 228).

the philosophical underpinnings of Duck Soup (and other films), Jenkins writes:

> Conformity to the rules of normal conduct dulls the mind, robs the individual of pleasure, and deprives the social order of innovation. Besides, the social order's values are corrupt and self-serving; the system demands respect for persons who do not merit it. Within such a world, personal expression can only come through comic disruption, only through transgression of social norms and violation of structured relationships. A stifling order must give way for a liberating disorder, a topsy-turveydom where the clown's values reign and the efforts of the comic antagonist to restore order are constantly thwarted. (235)

Jenkins here juxtaposes two modes of behavior, one dull and self-serving, the other lively and liberating. Essential to Jenkins's argument is the idea that, in classic comedy, the livelier of the two modes *disrupts* the other, as joking precludes the comic antagonist's imposing order. Quilty clearly resembles the clown of Jenkins's argument, for the playwright's joking is mostly aimed at—if this expression is compatible with such scattershot behavior—disturbing Humbert's ill-conceived plans. "The comic antagonist," adds Jenkins, in words wonderfully pertinent to Lolita II.35, "seeks to exercise control over the clown; the clown resists, creating confusion and chaos, eluding control and escaping the demands for conformity" (235).

Particular features of humor allow it to challenge an imposition of order. From the simplest joke ("Where does electricity come from? The wall") to the most elaborate parody (Pale Fire comes to mind), humor presents an idiosyncratic "reading" of some feature of the world (the phrase "come from," the exegesis). If one theorist writes of the "refreshing" of "schemata" (Cook, Discourse 84), and another of the "rehearsal" of "categories" (Miller 11), and still another of the "negotiating" of "understandings" (Powell 99), many theorists identify humor as a medium through which "default" interpretations are shown as anything but self-evident. "All of us remember [Chaplin's] The Gold

Rush," writes Jonathan Miller:

> In that movie, there is a scene in which Charlie is starving in a hut and is forced to eat his boots. The audience becomes hysterical at certain points only, and these are points where the categories are in danger. The audience laughs at the moment when Charlie twists his bootlaces around his fork and treats them as spaghetti, and again at the point when he tentatively cuts the sole, tries a small piece of it, and savours it. Once again a discrepancy is the source of the joke. It is in the nature of boots that they are in the domain of the inedible. Here, however, someone is applying to the radically inedible the demeanour, the decorum and the finesse which normally apply to something that is the epitome of the edible; in this case, spaghetti and finely broiled steak. In this scene, we are brought face to face with categories by which we live. (14)

Through presentation of odd interpretations, humor exposes conventional interpretations as neither inevitable nor all-encompassing. Consider Quilty's enthusiasm for executions. Here, as a conventional distaste for the details of state-sponsored killing is displaced by an unconventional liking, executions are redefined as spectacle, to be enjoyed in the same way as a boxing match.[106] Quilty constantly reclassifies aspects of the world, assigning things to new grades and groupings. To assert that he is a heterodox thinker is mainly to highlight his having no respect for, perhaps no knowledge of, orthodox distinctions and classifications. In brief, Quilty labels things in unexpected ways, styling, for instance, Humbert's deadly efforts a "pistol-packing farce," designating his own identity (house; wardrobe; friends) a bargaining chip, linking, to take a last case, sophistication with enjoyment of free verse. As Lolita II.35 demonstrates, humor is an ideal medium for presentation of alternatives to rote thinking. Is Humbert a pervert? If orthodoxy says yes, Quilty, possessed of a

[106] Quilty's redefinition is, in a sense, a return to an older definition. Prior to the twentieth century, executions were in many places treated as entertainment. (In 1881, Dmitri Nabokov, Vladimir's grandfather and the Tsar's Minister of Justice, succeeded in having executions moved inside prison walls. See Brian Boyd, Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian

novel understanding of the word "bizarre" (another redefinition), says not necessarily. Are the sorrows of Macbeth incompatible with humor? Quilty, feigning a head-cold, says not inherently.

Quilty possesses an extraordinary mental freedom, being someone open to odd viewpoints, alert to ambiguities, and sensitive to subtle connections. "Each person," writes Howard Pollio:

> is beset by a number of personal and social constraints—conformity, inferiority, normality, rationality, naiveté, egotism, and so forth—that serve to limit his or her freedom. These constraints are adhered to largely because the person has little choice in the matter if he or she is to remain a member of society. Given this state of affairs, humor serves periodically to liberate the person from such constraints by rendering them meaningless or absurd. [. . .] On an experiential basis, laughter provides a continuing body metaphor for freedom in which the person experiences himself as free of the constraints imposed by others, society, time, and even his own body. (215)

Unbound by many of the constraints mentioned by Pollio—conformity, normality, naiveté and so on—Quilty enjoys many freedoms: the freedom to adopt idiosyncratic viewpoints, the freedom to reject commonsensical ideas, the freedom to recognize the absurdity of one or another aspect of his own world. As is Pollio's laughing person, Quilty is unbound by most of the restraints inherent in social life. Thus, to the extent that certain freedoms are desirable, Quilty is someone to be not derided but emulated.

In Lolita II.35, Nabokov repeatedly opposes Humbert's inelasticity[107] to Quilty's spontaneity.

Years [London: Vintage, 1993], 34.

[107] Henri Bergson was the first theorist to use this term in the context of humor: "From the runner who falls to the simpleton who is hoaxed, from a state of being hoaxed to one of absentmindedness, from absentmindedness to wild enthusiasm, from wild enthusiasm to various distortions of character and will, we have followed the line of progress along which the comic becomes more and more deeply imbedded in the person, yet without ceasing, in its subtler manifestations, to recall to us some trace of what we noticed in its grosser forms, an effect of automaticism and of inelasticity" (Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic [trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1911)], 17).

Most humor presents a new behavioral or interpretative possibility. Given that the typical ideologue privileges a particular understanding of a situation—that sanctioned by his or her worldview—over all others,[108] humor, in offering an alternative to the privileged understanding, reveals the ideologue's viewpoint as overly narrow. Humbert may wholeheartedly believe that Quilty's death is sanctioned by a higher law, but Quilty's antics—his demanding to see a badge, his ridiculing of Humbert's gun, his mocking of Humbert's verse "sentence"—hint at other possible viewpoints and "matters of fact."

Quilty is not the only disruptive force loosed in Lolita II.35. Within the chapter, Humbert, too, confronts a domineering mindset, although in his case the mindset is abstract and commonsensical, rather than individual and idiosyncratic. In short, if Quilty uses humor to challenge Humbert's attempt to impose an unjust order, Humbert—as a narrator—makes of humor a means of questioning certain tenets of conventional wisdom. "I may have lost contact with reality for a second or two," he writes near the end of Lolita II.35, "oh, nothing of the I-just-blacked-out sort that your common criminal enacts" (304). With characteristic scorn, Humbert here attacks the notion that a murderer may not be responsible for his or her actions, humorously challenging a stock notion of popular psychology.[109] Humor is an effective means of both exposing and attacking the taken-for-granted. As Miller writes, "In all procedures of life there are rules of thumb which enable us to go on 'automatic pilot.' I am not suggesting that these rules of thumb are bad. Far from it, they are necessary labour-saving devices which give our activities some sort of momentum. We depend on the existence of these categories in order to go about our everyday business. Jokes allow us to stand back from these rules and inspect them" (16). Miller's claim notwithstanding, a given assumption (or "rule of thumb") may be other than a benign "labour-saving device," for to the extent we rely on rote-thinking we suppress our sensitivity and responsiveness. Thus, humor, in allowing us to "stand

[108] Explaining why "dogmatists, ideologues, and others with one-track minds are often notoriously humorless," John Allen Paulos writes: "People whose lives are dominated by one system or one set of rules are stuck, in a manner of speaking, in the object level of their system. Whether they are political radicals mouthing some party line or bureaucrats blindly enforcing some set of petty regulations, they lack the ability to step outside themselves and their systems" (Mathematics and Humor [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980], 26).

[109] A notion Nabokov is horrified by: "I also suggest that the Freudian faith leads to dangerous ethical consequences, such as when a filthy murderer with the brain of a tape worm is given a lighter sentence because his mother spanked him too much or too little—it works both ways" (SO 116).

back [. . .] and inspect" things we take for granted, nurtures independent thought. "The comic in general, and wit as its most cerebral expression in particular establish distance from the world and its official legitimations," notes Berger. "The marginal individual, through the magic of his wit, in turn marginalizes the world that he targets. It is now no longer *the* world, but *a* world—and a ridiculous one at that. The marginalization—or, one should say—relativization—of the world is what makes wit dangerous, potentially subversive, even if the individual practicing it has no such thing in mind" (151).

The gamefulness in Lolita II.35 is also aimed at disruption. By means of gamefulness, several critics note, Nabokov foregrounds the reading process. As Alfred Appel writes of Lolita:

> Lolita is a great novel to the same extent as Nabokov is able to have it both ways, involving the reader on the one hand in a deeply moving yet outrageously comic story, rich in verisimilitude, and on the other engaging him in a game made possible by the interlacings of verbal figurations which undermine the novel's realistic base and
> distance the reader from its dappled surface, which then assumes the aspect of a gameboard (lvi).

Gamefulness, then, allows Nabokov to distance readers from the "dappled surfaces" of his works, affording him a way to (in Stuart's words) "remind the reader, through the form of the book he is reading, that he is reading a book" (87). Nabokov's eagerness to detach reader from novel reflects the fact that a distanced reader is better positioned to see and question the conventions of story-telling.[110] As Appel explains, "In Nabokov's hands the novel thus becomes a gameboard on which, through parody, he assaults his readers' worst assumptions, pretensions, and intellectual conventions" (lviii). Nabokov's spoofing of Poe's House of Usher, for example, alerts us to the ease

with which emotions can be manipulated: a sinister house on a grim road, some screaming birds, and—presto—foreboding. If Quilty playfully disrupts Humbert's plans, and if Humbert humorously challenges commonsensical beliefs, Nabokov gamefully reinvigorates the act of reading. In each case, humor foregrounds the expected. All humor is surprising; and surprise, to quote Jerome Bruner, "is an extraordinarily useful phenomenon for students of mind for it allows us to probe what people take for granted. It provides a window on presupposition: surprise is a response to violated presupposition. Presupposition, of course, is what is taken for granted. What is expected to be the case" (46).

3.5 The Skeptical Joker

Henry Jenkins clearly admires the clown. The clown not only possesses a more "flexible" mind than do sluggish dupes and killjoys, but his or her "quick mind" (232) coexists with (or contributes to) a predisposition to "original perceptions" (232). For Jenkins, therefore, the clown is quick-witted and creative, with ingenuity used to challenge misguided attempts to impose order: "The clown opens his mouth and jokes spring forth, jokes that disorganize cultural categories, fracture normal logic, and defy the rules of everyday discourse" (229). By building on Jenkins's argument, it is possible to see Clare Quilty as worthy of emulation.

Certain aspects of Quilty's behavior are anything but admirable. His dissipation is pathetic, while his cynicism and self-absorption are monstrous. Yet if Quilty's values are contemptible, and his ambitions despicable, their being so should not blind us—as it blinds Humbert[111]—to admirable aspects of the playwright's personality.

Faced by a counterfeit, Quilty (as a clown will) jokes as a way of subverting the counterfeit's

---

[110] Discussing folly, Enid Welsford writes, "The fool knows the truth because he is a social outcast, and spectators see most of the game" (The Fool: His Social and Literary History [Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1966], 323).
[111] And others. Nina Allen, too, sees Quilty as deserving of death: "Quilty deliberately embodies all the monstrousness of

version of events. And so the playwright, challenging one or another claim, compares Humbert to an unscrupulous literary agent, asks to see a badge, and pronounces Humbert's poem "grand stuff!" While Quilty's behavior is impressive for many reasons (unpredictability, energy, courageousness), it is most admirable in its sensitivity to subtlety and subtext. Whereas Humbert, during his confrontation with Quilty, views events in a simple way (as good visiting justice upon evil), Quilty experiences the confrontation—in general and at each moment—in a nuanced way, discerning as events unfold many complexities disregarded by his single-minded rival. Lost to Humbert but not to Quilty, for instance, are not only the farcical aspects of the meeting, but also its resemblance to certain stock scenes in movies and plays. Humbert's world is one-dimensional: he is wholly good, Quilty all bad, and words mean only what they are intended to mean. Quilty, by way of contrast, discovers everywhere nuance and ambiguity. Sure, he has behaved badly ("If you bear me a grudge, I am prepared to make unusual amends" [301]), but Humbert has hardly been a paragon. And, yes, he and Humbert have been at odds in the past, but now—with Lolita lost to both of them—times have changed and cooperation is in order ("Come, let's have a drink" [298]). Unlike Humbert, Quilty appreciates complexity: a man may be both a pervert and a prude; a word may possess both an obvious and an inconspicuous meaning;[112] that which was true may now be false. In all his actions, Quilty expresses one and the same distrust of habitude; the world is surprising, his behavior implies, so we must be responsive.

Underpinning Quilty's sensitivity to nuance is a distrust of generalizations. Unlike murderous Humbert, who traffics in platitudes (fathers are good, libertines are bad), Quilty prefers the mindful assessment to the sweeping estimation. Where Humbert is hell-bent on enacting a corny script, Quilty eagerly greets each situation on its own terms, appreciating—to some degree at least—the singularity of a given moment. In rejecting Humbert's script, in refusing to play the role assigned to him, Quilty also undermines Humbert's misguided attempt to foster concord (regarding the nature

---

Humbert undiluted by his sensitivity, perception and artistry, and we unreservedly want him murdered" (Madness, Death and Disease in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov [Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1994], 41). We do?

[112] "Getting smutty, eh?" he asks when Humbert's poem mentions "lads / play[ing] with erector sets" (300).

and merits of justice). "A joke," writes Mary Douglas, is an "anti-rite":

> The rite imposes order and harmony, while the joke disorganizes. From the physical to the personal, to the social, to the cosmic, great rituals create unity in experience. They assert hierarchy and order. In doing so, they affirm the value of the symbolic patterning of the universe. Each level of patterning is validated and enriched by association with the rest. But jokes have the opposite effect. They connect widely differing fields, but the connection destroys hierarchy and order. They do not affirm the dominant values, but denigrate and devalue. (155)

Humbert intends events within Pavor Manor to have a ritualistic aspect. Participants are to affirm certain beliefs; specific words are to be spoken; a sentence is to be executed. In short, Humbert desires what Douglas calls "unity in experience," i.e. he wants agreement between himself and Quilty. But Quilty has other ideas. Contemptuous of Humbert's thoughts and plans, he continually denigrates and devalues Humbert's pompous ritual. As Douglas would predict, the playwright eagerly destroys "hierarchy and order." But Quilty is not alone in his distrust of agreement.

Lolita II.35 reveals that Nabokov, too, sees humor as an ideal means of challenging dubious "truths." Were Quilty, cornered at last, to turn out the menacing villain of Humbert's premonitions—"a sinister adult with penile cigar, drugs, bodyguards" (293)—the development would be artistically crude (Humbert's vision is borrowed from "Troubled Teens," a story in one of Lolita's magazines [292]). By sketching Quilty in broad strokes, by making his dissoluteness manifest through mention of such things as third breasts and heroin, Nabokov makes of Lolita a work in which the clichés of hard-boiled fiction are reworked in a chastising of complacency. Also surprising is Nabokov's transforming of murder into farce, a transformation effected through the creation of irrepressible Clare Quilty, and aimed at least in part at ridiculing the very idea of murder. Time and again, Nabokov—and not least in Lolita II.35—humorously overturns expectations regarding an aspect of

life. Expecting Humbert to exact revenge (and be sympathetic), we find him foiled at every turn (and exposed as a ridiculous villain); expecting Quilty to retreat into earnestness (or give way to fear), we find him erupting into banter (and anything but frightened). Nabokov follows few artistic rules and takes little for granted. As a result, his works—and their humor in particular—deny the unity Douglas associates with ritual. Wary of generalizations, Nabokov wants to undermine received wisdom. And humor is ideally suited to the exploding of orthodoxy. As Davis notes, "By suddenly dismantling our social systems, comedy reminds us that they are not given but created by ourselves. After organizing elements into the larger systems of our social world, we forget that we have done so. Jokes jolt us into remembering (at least momentarily) that we are responsible for their organization—and, consequently, can change them" (311). In presenting comedy as destructive of social systems, Davis hints at the extent to which reality is grasped through the very conceptualizations—clichés, stereotypes, stock ideas—most vulnerable to humor's effects.

Central to Michael Mulkay's On Humour is a distinction between two discursive modes, one "serious," one "humorous."

> In the serious realm, we normally employ a unitary mode of discourse which takes for granted the existence of one real world, and within which ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative diversity are potential problems. In contrast, humour depends on the active creation and display of interpretative multiplicity. When people engage in humour, they are obliged to collaborate in the production of a kind of "controlled nonsense." They temporarily inhabit, not a single, coherent world, but a world in which whatever is said and done necessarily has more than one meaning. (3)

As do many theorists, Mulkay dissociates humor and consensus, arguing that if serious discourse is premised on a conceptual sharing of "one real world," humorous discourse depends on a *dissimilarity* of experiences.[113] Unlike most theorists, however, Mulkay argues for the superiority of

[113] "In the realm of serious discourse, it is assumed not only that each speaker will maintain a firm boundary between the

the "humorous mode" of discourse. The "interpretative openness of humor," he writes, "seems more accurately to reflect or reproduce or allow for the multiple realities of the social world. In this important respect, humor seems to be superior to ordinary serious discourse, which is premised on implicit denial of the fact that we live in a world of multiple meanings and multiple realities" (219).

No one is more "serious" than is murderous Humbert, and Humbert is particularly serious—quintessentially so, Mulkay might say—when insisting that his own views are all-encompassing. To be "serious," Mulkay suggests (and Lolita II.35 affirms) is often to ignore contradiction and complexity. In highlighting such (necessary) features of an unruly world, and so reminding us that "the world in which we live is not exhausted by any one set of meanings" (Mulkay 222), humor—as Lolita II.35 also affirms—hints at the folly of stolid smugness.

Having (in Chapter Two) explored the evolution of Nabokov's humor, and having (in this chapter) linked the fruits of this evolution to certain effects and implications, we have a good notion of what Nabokov's humor is and does. As it evolves, Nabokov's humor acquires certain qualities, ubiquity obviously, but also variegation and an importance irreconcilable with flippant notions about humor's frivolity. In brief, over time Nabokov uses more humor to increasingly important ends. At its most developed, Nabokov's humor questions many "givens" about human existence, as new readings and explanations spotlight unnoticed aspects of seemingly understood phenomena. At its best, then, Nabokov's humor reveals the world as knottier and more unpredictable than was

---

real and the unreal, but also that the boundaries of different speakers will coincide. This expectation follows from the assumption that speakers are representing in their speech one and the same, knowable-in-common world. [. . .] The basic principles and practices of the humorous mode are the reverse of those operative within serious discourse. Whereas ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative diversity are often treated as problems during serious discourse, and attempts are regularly made to remove them or to reduce their impact, they are necessary features of the humorous mode" (Mulkay, On Humour 23, 26).

surmised.

In the next chapter, analyzing Nabokov's theory of humor, we will come to appreciate the extent to which Nabokov is a purposeful humorist.

Chapter Four: Nabokov's Theory of Humor

Humor is really a loss of balance—and appreciation of losing it.
—Vladimir Nabokov ("Lolita's Creator" 54)

While The Gift is only loosely autobiographical (a foreword warns the reader not to "identify the designer with the design"), the work resembles Speak, Memory in its enrolling of humor among the key forces shaping a protagonist's worldview. A telling scene occurs near the beginning of the novel's second chapter. As the scene opens, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, a dispossessed Russian émigré who survives by tutoring Germans in French and English, is traveling by streetcar to a lesson. Behind schedule, already in a foul mood, Fyodor becomes enraged when another passenger, settling onto a seat, accidentally bumps his knee with the corner of a briefcase. The incident, we read,

> turned Fyodor's irritation into a kind of pure fury, so that, staring fixedly at the sitter, reading his features, he instantly concentrated on him all his sinful hatred (for this poor, pitiful, expiring nation) and knew precisely why he hated him: for that low forehead, for those pale eyes; for *Vollmilch* and *Extrastark*, implying the lawful existence of the diluted and the artificial; for the Punchinello-like system of gestures (threatening children not as we do—with an upright finger, a standing reminder of Divine Judgement—but with a horizontal digit imitating a waving stick); for a love of fences, rows, mediocrity; for the cult of the office; for the fact that if you listen to his inner voice (or to any conversation on the street) you will inevitably hear figures,

money (81).

Furious, Fyodor condemns his seatmate for many defects with which a middle-class German of the 1920s might be associated—complacency, materialism, falseness—contemptuously burying the man beneath a mountain of churlish disapproval. Already unfair, for clumsiness is commonplace, Fyodor's denunciation is exposed as inane when his seatmate, opening an émigré newspaper, "cough[s] unconcernedly with a Russian intonation" (82).

> That's wonderful, thought Fyodor, almost smiling with delight. How clever, how gracefully sly and how essentially good life is! Now he made out in the newspaper reader's features such a compatriotic softness—in the corners of the eyes, large nostrils, a Russian-cut mustache—that it became at once both funny and incomprehensible how anyone could have been deceived. (82)

Fyodor is no less invigorated than amused by his mistake, finding in the error license to reassess the morning. Suddenly cheerful, thoughts turning from duties to desires, from problems to possibilities, he revises his plans. "[T]he unpleasant feeling of lateness was replaced in Fyodor's soul by a distinct and somehow outrageously joyful decision not to appear at all for the lesson—to get off at the next stop and return home to his half-read book, to his unworldly cares, to the blissful mist in which his real life floated, to the complex happy devout work which had occupied him for about a year already" (83).

How might one account for the impact this seemingly trivial incident has on Fyodor? For the transformation it effects on his mood and intentions? One way is by reference to the implications of humor. Even as Fyodor silently seethes, arraigning his seatmate for an array of perceived defects, he recognizes his own indictment as "biased" (82), acknowledges his own hatred as "sinful" (81). For as Fyodor knows, to link a man's clumsiness with national failings and cultural defects is unjustifiable.

That Fyodor views his indictment as biased, and his hatred as sinful, reflects his recognizing both indictment and hatred as products of a mind too lazy to make distinctions and too indolent to attend to detail. Aware of his own failings, Fyodor, to his credit, is pleased to have those failings rebuked: "That's wonderful," he muses in the wake of his seatmate's cough, "how essentially good life is!"

As Fyodor is aware, "life" is too generous to produce a stock situation, one whose contours are readily discernible and whose outcome is visible far in advance. As he knows, "life," when looked at closely, is characterized not by confirmation of prejudice, nor by provision of what is expected, but by disconfirmation and surprise. Optimistic by inclination and upbringing, Fyodor usually experiences the world—"life"—as replete with possibilities, none predetermined, but a fraction predictable. On the streetcar, his sense of life's generosity rekindled through disproof of an assumption, Fyodor suddenly appreciates the extent to which a seemingly unpromising situation overflows with possibilities (among them the possibility, soon seized upon, of abandoning a lesson and returning home to write). The least vicious of circles, Fyodor's optimism is as a rule nourished by an openness to possibilities that is itself fed by optimism.

In a sense, Fyodor's streetcar affirmation of life's "essential goodness" is rooted in a well-considered metaphysics, one that, associating nature with "gifts" (328) and "rewards" (328), credits the world to a beneficent force eager to reward mindfulness. In another sense, though, the affirmation springs from a more immediate experience: amusement. "Now he made out in the newspaper reader's features such a compatriotic softness [. . .] that it became at once both funny and incomprehensible that anyone could have been deceived" (82). Amused by his own prior obtuseness, Fyodor chides himself for having adopted such a blinkered perspective (after all, his seatmate might have been from anywhere, and if German could have been clumsy but kind). In general, Fyodor is a wholehearted optimist (he later considers writing a book called How to be Happy) whose world is characterized by playfulness and surprise. If at times a joke is needed to reawaken Fyodor's optimism the reason relates not to his optimism's fragility but to the impact of humor. All humor offers an unforeseen possibility and so all humor energizes a mind looking to be astonished. Read as

a parable, the streetcar episode makes of humor a transformative force. Half-blinded by pessimism,[114] perceiving but a fraction of a situation's possibilities, Fyodor, touched by humor, has his sight restored and once again senses life's generosity. Naive? Farfetched? Not for Nabokov.[115]

Previous chapters have highlighted the extent to which humor presents the unanticipated, underscoring its use in the upsetting of expectations. This chapter explores not humor itself but Nabokov's understanding of humor.

4.1 An Undisguised Fondness for Humor

That Nabokov even has a "theory of humor" is of more than passing interest. For few literary artists—funny or otherwise—advance in print a considered and coherent appraisal of humor's nature or effects. Of those creative writers advancing measured ideas about humor, two merit discussion. In On Humor, Luigi Pirandello offers, albeit in scattershot fashion, a new characterization of wittiness, wherein creation of humor is linked with a "feeling of the opposite" (112). Describing this "feeling," Pirandello avers, "Every feeling, every thought, or every impulse that arises in a humorist immediately splits into its contrary: every affirmative into a negative, which finally ends up assuming the same value as the affirmative" (125).[116] And in The Act of Creation, Arthur Koestler—author of Darkness at Noon—presents wittiness as one of three "bisociative" activities (science and art being the others), with "bisociation" defined in this way: "[W]hen two independent matrices of perception or reasoning interact with each other the result [. . .] is either a collision ending in

[114] Of a character in "An Affair of Honor" we read, "Actually he was a pessimist and, like all pessimists, a ridiculously unobservant man" (SoVN 218).
[115] Ellen Pifer discusses the streetcar scene in detail, contrasting Fyodor's momentary obtuseness to his characteristic open-mindedness, and relating the contrast to Nabokov's aversion to orthodoxy ("Nabokov and the Art of Exile" [in Phillis Roth, ed., Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984)], 216-218).
[116] Pirandello continues, "At times perhaps, the humorist can pretend to have only one feeling; meanwhile, inside him, the other feeling speaks to him, a feeling that at first seems to lack the courage to expose itself; it speaks to him and it begins to advance now a timid excuse, now an attenuation, which reduce the warmth of the original feeling, now an acute reflection which deflates its seriousness and induces laughter" (On Humor [trans. Antonio Illiano and Daniel Testa (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1974)], 125).

laughter, or their fusion in a new intellectual synthesis, or their confrontation in an aesthetic experience" (45).[117] Although many literary artists advance in print ideas about humor,[118] only three—Pirandello, Koestler and Nabokov—develop a well-rounded theory of humor. And interestingly of the three, it is Nabokov—odd man out in never publishing a book or essay on humor[119]—who offers a comprehensive model of humor, one including ideas regarding not only humor's nature but also its effects and metaphysical implications.

Nabokov develops his theory of humor in a range of contexts. Four of his shorter works—"Ultima Thule," "Tyrants Destroyed," "The Passenger," and "The Leonardo"—make of humor a key point of thematic interest. Denoting laughter a "chance little ape of truth" (SoVN 503), "Ultima Thule" (1940) presents humor as a source of otherworldly information. Culminating in a narrator's assertion that "Laughter, actually, saved me" (SoVN 459), "Tyrants Destroyed" (1938) identifies humor as a means of opposing malevolent ideas. Each an iteration of Nabokov's "Hegelian syllogism of humor" (LiD 143), both "The Passenger" (1927) and "The Leonardo" (1933) associate humor with a purposeful countering of expectations. Much of this chapter constitutes justification for these précis. In what sense does "Ultima Thule" make of humor a source of esoteric knowledge? How precisely does laughter "save" the narrator of "Tyrants Destroyed"?

Three Nabokov novels treat humor less directly. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, through characterization of Knight's art, presents Nabokov's views on the effect and value of parody. The Gift is also of interest. As it reveals Fyodor's worldview, The Gift hints at Nabokov's experience of life as amusingly playful. Finally, Look at the Harlequins!, through introduction of Vadim's "extraordinary grand-aunt" (8), affords Nabokov a means of linking humor and intellectual self-sufficiency. While other Nabokov novels also express ideas about humor, these three are of

[117] Koestler later reduces analysis of humor to a procedural matter: "The tools have now been assembled which should enable the reader to dissect any specimen of humour. The procedure to be followed is: first, determine the nature of [matrix 1] and [matrix 2] by discovering the type of logic, the rules of the game, which govern each matrix. Often these rules are implied, as hidden axioms, and taken for granted—the code must be de-coded. The rest is easy: find the 'link'—the focal concept, word , or situation which is bisociated with both mental planes" (The Act of Creation [New York: Macmillan, 1964], 64).
[118] Davis (What's so Funny?) quotes a number of apposite passages.
[119] Most editions of The Act of Creation run to about 650 pages, about one hundred of which discuss humor.

particular interest.[120]

Certain of Nabokov's discursive works also explore humor. A study of Nikolai Gogol (1944) is flush with parenthetical (and not so parenthetical) remarks about humor, as are various "lectures on literature."[121] Moreover, interviewers at times elicit from Nabokov comments on humor. Nabokov not only enjoys creating humor, he also likes talking about it, and while most of this chapter is devoted to study of fictive works, discursive writings are discussed as well.

As he argues for humor's importance, Nabokov credits humor with a range of properties and powers. Speaking through one or another character, he diversely presents humor as a source of truth, as a means of salvation, as a medium through which reality is invented. Writing in his own voice, he variously describes the comic as kin to the cosmic, as emanating from angels, as essential to original art. Nabokov's theory of humor is both intricate and original. Thus, in exploring the theory, we will—at least initially—resist simplification, favoring thoroughness over schematization, as a dozen tenets are discussed in turn. Full appreciation of Nabokov's theory of humor depends on familiarity with *all* its components. For this reason, our discussion of the theory advances through two stages, one aimed at identifying the tenets of the theory, one devoted to grasping the theory's underlying logic.

4.2 Humor and Eccentricity

A story in the guise of an undeliverable love letter, "Ultima Thule" was conceived of as the first chapter of a novel depicting a widower's disappearance into grief and subsequent reemergence in a world of his own invention.[122] In a letter to his (deceased) wife, Sineusov, the widower,

[120] Laughter in the Dark is treated below (section 4.4).
[121] Much of Nikolai Gogol reappears in lectures Nabokov delivered at Wellesley College.
[122] Introducing "Ultima Thule" (and its companion piece, "Solus Rex") in 1973, Nabokov recalls the abandoned novel it would have opened: "In the course of evolving an imaginary country (which at first merely diverted him from his grief, but then grew into a self-contained artistic obsession), the widower becomes so engrossed in Thule that the latter starts to develop its own reality. Sineusov mentions in chapter 1 that he is moving from the Riviera to his former apartment in

introduces us to a key figure in "Ultima Thule," Adam Falter, a businessman whose flourishing career was cut short by a flash of enlightenment, a cognitive explosion whose detonation transformed him into one of two things, either a "*kvak*" (as Sineusov's wife would Russianize an English synonym for charlatan [500]) or a visionary with access to otherworldly information. Although Sineusov cannot commit to either of these views (while clearly favoring the first), close reading of "Ultima Thule" shows that Falter does possess knowledge of paranormal origin. The significance of Falter's insight, his access to "Truth with a capital *T*" (SoVN 515), relates to its expressing an authorial belief in humor's profundity.

As do those sets of engravings depicting a man at three stages of development (slight boy, strapping adult, slumping oldster), "Ultima Thule" depicts its central figure in a trio of forms. We first meet Adam Falter ("a poor, wiry student with animated night-dark eyes" [503]) as a tutor engaged in one-sided debates with the authors of textbooks assigned to his pupil Sineusov. We next encounter him as a prosperous merchant, a "dignified, rather corpulent" man with "black hairs encircling a sun-bronzed bald spot akin to a tonsure" (503). Finally, we meet Falter as an ethereal seer:

> Mr. L. had said that he looked as if his bones had been removed; I, on the other hand, had the impression that his soul had been extracted but his mind intensified tenfold in recompense. [. . .] In his oddly bloated features, in his unpleasant, satiated gaze, even in his flat feet, shod no longer in fashionable Oxfords but in cheap espadrilles, one could sense some concentrated power, and this power was not in the least interested in the flabbiness and inevitable decay of the flesh that it squeamishly controlled. (511)

It is in his third manifestation that Falter is interviewed by Sineusov, a man desperate to discover if his wife, dead of cancer, survives in some form. Falter, conveyed by a sister and brother-

---

Paris; actually, he moves into a bleak palace on a remote northern island. His art helps him to resurrect his wife in the

in-law, arrives at Sineusov's apartment and, limbs akimbo, settles into a chair: "They seated him in an armchair, and he spread his limbs strangely, as a chimpanzee might do when its keeper makes him parody a Sybarite in a recumbent position" (512). With Falter comfortable, an interview begins, a slapstick catechism that leaves the catechist writhing in frustration, convinced that even if Falter knows certain esoteric facts he is resolved to hoard his knowledge (some time earlier, a psychiatrist, having asked Falter for the solution to the "riddle of the universe," received an answer and "died of astonishment" [509]). Taking his leave, Falter, sensing Sineusov's frustration, assures his ex-pupil that their conversation had been something more than banter: "[E]ven if I did browbeat you a little, let me console you: amid the piffle and prate I inadvertently gave myself away—only two or three words, but in them flashed a fringe of absolute insight" (522).

Anything but easy, isolation of the two or three words that reveal Falter's "absolute insight" involves revisitation of an earlier and seemingly unrelated passage where Sineusov, an illustrator, reminds his wife of a project he was working on at the time of her death. In the context of Nabokov's abandoned novel the project would have played a central role; within "Ultima Thule," though, the project is but a distraction (for us and Sineusov). Here Sineusov prods his wife's memory regarding employer and task:

> You remember him, don't you, that strange Swede or Dane—or Icelander, for all I know—anyway that lanky orange-tanned blond fellow with the eyelashes of an old horse, who introduced himself to me as "a well-known writer," and, for a price that gladdened you (you were already confined to your bed and unable to speak, but would write me funny trifles with colored chalk on slate—for instance, that the things you liked most in life were "verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency"), commissioned me to make a series of illustrations for the epic poem, Ultima Thule, which he had just composed in his language. (510)

---

disguise of Queen Belinda" (SoVN 658).

Buried within this paragraph, entombed in a parenthesis, are the several words identifying Falter as anything but a *kvak*.[123]

Taking leave of Sineusov, Falter, consoling his ex-pupil with mention of words imbued with "absolute insight," says the words were uttered "inadvertently". In fact, the relevant words are spoken twice, implicating intention rather than accident in their emergence. One "slip" occurs as Falter is characterizing the "truth" to which his transformation has made him privy. Unlike discrete truths (dubbed "truthlets" by Falter [515]), which must be gathered one by one like fallen acorns, Falter's truth arrived with the force and bounty of an axed oak tree: "What, then, would you say about a Truth with a capital *T* that comprises in itself the explanation and the proof of all possible mental affirmations? One can believe in the poetry of a wildflower or the power of money, but neither belief predetermines faith in homeopathy or in the necessity to exterminate antelope on the islands of Lake Victoria Nyanza" (515). In distinguishing "Truth" from "truthlet," therefore, Falter not only alludes to each of the dead woman's "favorite things" ("verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency"), he alludes to them in sequence—suggesting (to say the least) that he has access to otherworldly information. Unsurprisingly, such an extrasensory *tour de force* proves impossible to repeat, and a second display of absolute insight—incorporated into Falter's description of his own present circumstances—is more modest: "[T]he possible knowledge of all things, consequent to the knowledge of the fundamental one, did not dispose in me of a sufficiently solid apparatus. I am training myself by willpower not to leave the vivarium, to observe the rules of your mentality as if nothing had happened; in other words, I act like a beggar, a versifier, who has received a million in foreign currency, but goes on living in his basement, for he knows that the least concession to luxury would ruin his liver" (516).

In a foreword to "Ultima Thule," written as the story was being prepared for republication, Nabokov both hints at the story's secret and—a bit disingenuously—downplays the secret's value.

[123] Field (Life in Art 308) first highlighted the significance of the relevant words.

"Perhaps, had I finished my book, readers would not have been left wondering about a few things: was Falter a quack? Was he a true seer? Was he a medium whom the narrator's dead wife might have been using to come through with the blurry outline of a phrase which her husband did or did not recognize?" (657) This passage, with its note of uncertainty regarding Falter's powers, is misleading, for unless there was an undisclosed episode of window-peeping (as Sineusov's wife wrote her trifles), Falter's claims to seerhood are incontestable.[124] Although Falter's powers invite attention as evidence of Nabokov's belief in an "otherworld," their importance for us lies in what they reveal of Nabokov's theory of humor. As it turns out, Falter, although utterly humorless (" 'Theoretically, you are leading me into a clumsy trap,' said Falter, shaking slightly as another might do when laughing" [517]), is, through a series of subtle links, associated with laughter, humor's boon companion.

"Ultima Thule" takes the form of a letter Sineusov writes to his dead wife. If many passages—those detailing Falter's visit, for example—are coldly descriptive, other passages have the warmth of a love letter. As one might suspect, passages of the second type, in which Sineusov's wife is a powerful presence, are particularly poignant, suggesting a writer struggling to convince himself that, yes, his wife still exists, and that, yes, she is aware of his thoughts and emotions. Particularly revealing of the epistolary template of "Ultima Thule" is the following passage, in which Sineusov, surmising how human existence might appear to the dead, entertains the idea of its being a "pun":

> My angel, oh my angel, perhaps our whole earthly existence is now but a pun to you, or a grotesque rhyme, something like "dental" and "transcendental" (remember?), and the true meaning of reality, of that piercing term, purged of all our strange, dreamy, masquerade interpretations, now sounds so pure and sweet that you, angel, find it amusing that we could have taken the dream seriously (although you and I did have

[124] A point not all critics recognize. Leona Toker, for instance, writes of "deranged" Falter, the "would-be adept who believes that the Mystery has been revealed to him" (" 'The dead are good mixers': Nabokov's Versions of Individualism" [in Julian Connolly, ed., Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999)],

> 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 astray in our world). (503)

Puzzling in isolation, this passage is lucid when read in context, constituting a reverberative call to which Adam Falter, in his person and message, will be a response.

Sineusov's interview with Falter is full of signposts directing us back to the above description of laughter. A first appears as Falter arrives for his interview. "They seated him in an armchair, and he spread his limbs strangely, as a chimpanzee might do when his keeper makes him parody a Sybarite in a recumbent position" (512). Thus, if laughter is a "chance little ape," Falter is at times a lounging chimpanzee. A second signpost brightens Falter's response to a query regarding how he knows the truth to which he was exposed is, in fact, true. Adroitly sidestepping the question, Falter instead explains how he came to be singled our for enlightenment. "You see [. . .] in Indochina, at the lottery drawings, the numbers are extracted by a monkey. I happen to be that monkey" (514). Falter's self-characterization as a number-drawing monkey is portentous in several respects, for by calling to mind the idea of randomness, the characterization links Falter not just to an ape but to what might be called a "chance little ape." And Falter soon emphasizes the role of chance in his acquiring absolute insight: "It was by chance that it did not kill me, just as it was by chance that it struck me" (515). Other links between Falter and Sineusov's apish laughter cohere around the idea of "truth." For instance, while laughter is said to be an ape "of truth," Falter describes himself as privy to a "Truth with a capital *T* that comprises in itself the explanation and proof of all possible mental affirmations." (515). Sineusov, moreover, denotes Falter "a person who [. . .] because he survived the bomb of truth that exploded in him. . . became a god!" (500)

Falter and Sineusov's laughter also share an antipathy to orthodox thought. If laughter, to quote Sineusov, disintegrates "conventions of everyday life," Falter, following his transformation, is

---

100).

"like a man who had lost everything: respect for life, all interest in money and business, all customary and traditional feelings, everyday habits, manners" (508). Falter's disregard for a range of quotidian things (i.e. "customary and traditional feelings," "everyday habits," "manners") is especially notable. "It was unsafe to let him go anywhere alone," Sineusov adds, "for, with a curiosity quite superficial and quickly forgotten but offensive to others, he would address chance passerby, to discuss the origin of a scar on someone's face or a statement, not addressed to him, that he had overheard in a conversation between strangers" (508). Both laughter and Falter, then, are without respect for the commonalities of social life.

Nabokov clearly intends readers to associate Adam Falter with Sineusov's apish laughter.[125] Yet at first glance the association is oddly banal. Finding Falter linked with a force that disintegrates the conventional and everyday tells us nothing about the seer we do not learn elsewhere. As it is, only by reversing the equation, by realizing that *laughter* not Falter is the protagonist of "Ultima Thule" can we invigorate the link. In short, while Falter's prominence within Sineusov's narrative leads us to believe that laughter is like him (in the sense that he is the original and laughter the copy), it is in fact Falter who is like laughter. Rather than reading Sineusov's parenthetical characterization of laughter as a gloss on Falter, we must discern in Falter a lucid exegesis on Sineusov's chance little ape.

Falter's person and message express three aspects of Nabokov's theory of humor. First, given Falter's disinterest in propriety, one implication is that Nabokov sees humor as outside of, or opposed to, the social world. Falter, recall, cares not a wit for etiquette, has absolutely no interest in decorum. He bluntly questions passersby on the origins of scars; he "would take an orange from a fruit stand as he passed, and eat it unpeeled, responding with an indifferent half-smile to the jabber of the fruit-woman who had run after him. When he grew tired or bored he would squat on the sidewalk Turkish fashion and, for something to do, try to catch girls' heels in his fist like flies" (508). In sum, Falter favors impulse over orthodoxy, as the proddings of curiosity overrun the

[125] It is interesting that "falter" can be anagrammaticized into "lafter".

constraints of correctitude. Humor, Falter's impetuosity suggests, is for Nabokov spontaneous and heterodox, being a medium without respect for such forces as etiquette and tradition. Humor, "Ultima Thule" implies, has no regard for shared beliefs about proper thought and behavior.

A second implication is that Nabokov sees "truth" as inherently amusing. While much about Falter is laughable (his taking oranges; his sitting on sidewalks; his grabbing heels) he is in everything he does merely being "himself," indicating that Falter's inner being—that being cognizant of "Truth with a capital *T*"—is innately amusing. To be sure, the implication is not that everything funny is true, but rather that everything truthful is, for the average person, tinctured with humor. Sineusov, certain passages reveal, sees Falter as incessantly teasing. Falter's parting remark, inviting his ex-pupil to seek out in memory words fringed with "absolute insight," Sineusov dismisses as "as much of a mockery as all the preceding ones" (522). And Falter's last message, a handwritten note in which several lines had been "painstakingly and, it seemed, ironically" (522) blacked out, Sineusov credits to a joker. For the most part, Sineusov dismisses Falter as clownish, suggesting that aspects of "Ultima Thule" are meant to highlight our inability to appreciate—that is, to take seriously—"truth." Suggestive in this context is Falter's killing of an inquisitor. Told by Falter the answer to the "riddle of the universe" (509), Dr. Bonimini, a "well-known Italian psychiatrist" (508), dies "of astonishment" (509), showing that Falter knows something so disconcerting as to be deadly. While the relevant passage is unclear on this point, more than likely Dr. Bonimini's fatal astonishment included a measure of amusement.[126]

A third implication relates to the seriousness of humor. Although amusing, indeed ridiculous from an orthodox perspective, Falter, as his mentionings of verse, wildflowers and foreign currency reveal, is possessed of "absolute insight." This implies that humor, for Nabokov, may be infused with insight. Again the suggestion is not that *all* humor is insightful, but rather that any particular instance of humor *may be* so, meaning no instance should be dismissed as diversion. While Falter on

[126] The dead man's posture is suggestive: "sprawled half on a chair and half on the carpet, with a gab of linen showing between waistcoat and trousers, his short legs spread wide and his pale café-au-lait face thrown back" (509). Thrown back in laughter?

occasion acts in a truly silly way (one thinks of his grabbing at heels), at other times his actions clearly reflect an unprecedented awareness of truth.[127] To belittle humor, this suggests, may be to disregard truth.

"Ultima Thule" is a key source of information about Nabokov's theory of humor. Implicit in the story is an understanding of humor as characterized by three signal qualities: an incompatibility with orthodoxy, an affinity with truth, and a profound seriousness. While Sineusov's conception of laughter should not be mechanistically conflated with Nabokov's, the notions are, we shall see, much alike.

4.3 The Best Pesticide

"Tyrants Destroyed" (1938) is a second important source of information about Nabokov's theory of humor. Set in an unnamed totalitarian state, and relating one man's psychological escape from the grasping "tentacles" (441) of that state, the story portrays humor as a means of establishing psychic distance from oppressive modes of thought and behavior. If "Ultima Thule" identifies laughter as disintegrating "words, conventions of everyday life, systems, persons" (503), "Tyrants Destroyed" depicts this disintegratory process, as the story's narrator, through "destruction" of one person—the despotic Ruler of his country—lays waste to a myriad empty words ("He has just given a speech at the groundbreaking ceremony for a new, multistoried greenhouse, and, while he was at it, he touched on the equality of men and the equality of wheat ears in the field, using Latin or dog-Latin, for the sake of poetry, *arista, aristifer*, and even 'aristize' (meaning 'to ear')" [454][128]), idiotic conventions ("The schools' curriculum now includes Gypsy wrestling, which, in rare moments of cold playfulness, he used to practice on the floor with my brother twenty-five years ago" [441]), and

[127] Falter possesses, writes Johnson, "the solution to the mystery of consciousness. The crucial issue is whether consciousness is inherently limited, somehow circumscribed, or whether it is infinite" (Worlds in Regression 211).
[128] Boyd (p. c.) sees in this passage a satirizing of Lysenkoist principles. (Trofim Lysenko, a Soviet agronomist, advanced

imbecilic systems ("On occasion he appears before the people [. . .] and everyone is watched by a guard of incalculable proportions (to say nothing of the secret agents and the secret agents watching the secret agents)" [448]). Why is the Ruler's demise so consequential? Because, to paraphrase, *l'état, c'est lui*:

> [A]s his power grew, I began to notice that the obligations of citizens, admonitions, restrictions, decrees, and all the other forms of pressure put on us were coming to resemble the man himself more and more closely, displaying an unmistakable resemblance to certain traits of his character and details of his past, so that on the basis of those admonitions and decrees one could reconstruct his personality like an octopus by its tentacles [. . .]. In other words, everything around him began taking on his appearance. Legislation began to show a ridiculous resemblance to his gait and gestures. Greengrocers began stocking a remarkable abundance of cucumbers, which he had so greedily consumed in his youth. (441)

As his world darkens, the narrator begins to feel that "he, he as I remembered him, was penetrating everywhere, infecting with his presence the way of thinking and the everyday life of every person, so that his mediocrity, his tediousness, his gray habitude, were becoming the very life of my country" (442).

Transience characterizes the narrator's responses to the tyrant: unhappiness turns to outrage; dislike becomes loathing; incredulity is superseded by horror. Towards the end of the story the pace of change accelerates, as emotions assail the narrator from all directions. Drowning in despair ("How can I get rid of him? I cannot stand it any longer. Everything is full of him, everything I love has been besmirched" [457]), the narrator erupts in misguided joy, convinced his own soul is so engorged with the Ruler that the tyrant's existence depends on his own: "By killing myself I would

---

a radical form of environmental determinism: for instance, he argued that wheat plants grown in the appropriate

kill him, as he was totally inside me, fattened on the intensity of my hatred" (457). This emotion also passes, as the narrator, seduced by festivities outside his window (it is the Ruler's birthday), feels a welling up of affection and remorse: "it caused a crimson wave of tenderness to surge within me, and I understood my sin against our great and merciful Master. Is it not he who manured our fields, who directed the poor to be shod, he whom we must thank for every second of our civic being? Tears of repentance, hot, good tears, gushed from my eyes onto the windowsill when I thought how I had been repudiating the kindness of the Master" (458). Ultimately, the narrator's remorse proves as transient as did his rage and despair:

> Laughter, actually, saved me. Having experienced all the degrees of hatred and despair, I achieved those heights from which one obtains a bird's-eye view of the ludicrous. A roar of hearty mirth cured me, as it did, in a children's storybook, the gentleman "in whose throat an abscess burst at the sight of a poodle's hilarious tricks." Rereading my chronicle, I see that, in my efforts to make him terrifying, I have only made him ridiculous, thereby destroying him—an old, proven method. (459)

Arriving at amusement, the narrator appears ready to settle there, and his chronicle closes with a wish that his tale will be of value to future citizens confronting other "tyrants, tigroid monsters, half-witted torturers of man" (460).

"Tyrants Destroyed" reveals key aspects of Nabokov's conception of humor. A first point relates to the narrator's initial solemnity. Although very dangerous ("a most highly concentrated, undiluted evil, in a huge vessel filled to the neck and sealed" [440]), the Ruler is, as Duce, a ludicrous figure. A repetitious speaker ("every minted phrase repeats in a different key one and the same official truism" [441]), with peculiar interests ("Gypsy wrestling"), and trailing behind himself

---

environment produce seeds of rye.)

an ignoble past ("He gave off a goatish smell. He was hard up, and indiscriminate as to sleeping quarters" [443]), the Ruler is an unlikely Caesar. Yet the narrator, despite an awareness of the tyrant's defects, is for a long time not amused by but afraid of the Ruler. The manner in which "Tyrants Destroyed" explains this enduring solemnity is of vital interest.

The narrator credits his laughter to adoption of a "bird's-eye view of the ludicrous." Implicit in this is an ascribing of fear to possession of an overly-circumscribed perspective. Justifiably focused on immediate concerns, and so unable to see the funny side of a disheartening situation, the narrator can at first only be horrified (as opposed to amused) by the Ruler. The narrator is certainly in danger: possessing knowledge of the Ruler's past he is one of few people in a position to discredit the tyrant. For this reason, the narrator's adoption of a wider viewpoint *is* an "achievement," revealing as it does a determination to take in *all* aspects of a situation, not only the frightening but the funny as well.

"Tyrants Destroyed" also advances claims about humor's place in social life. Rereading his chronicle, the narrator sees that "in my efforts to make [the Ruler] terrifying, I have only made him ridiculous, thereby destroying him—an old, proven method" (459). Authority in the social world, this passage suggests, depends upon being taken seriously. Thus, to become ridiculous in others' eyes is to lose one's authority (perhaps one's position). While other theorists—Bergson most obviously[129]—identify ridicule as a social sanction, Nabokov in "Tyrants Destroyed" goes further in proclaiming it a sanction with real-world consequences:

> This is an incantation, an exorcism, so that henceforth any man can exorcise bondage. I believe in miracles. I believe that in some way, unknown to me, this chronicle will

[129] "Society will be suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind, and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common center round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity. And yet, society cannot intervene at this stage by material repression, since it is not affected in a material fashion. It is confronted with something that makes it uneasy, but only as a symptom—scarcely a threat, at the very most a gesture. A gesture, therefore, will be its reply. Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of social gesture. By the fear that it inspires, it restrains eccentricity, keeps constantly awake and in mutual contact certain activities of a secondary order which might retire into their shell and go to sleep, and, in short, softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity"

> reach other men [. . .]. And who knows—I may be right not to rule out the thought that my chance labor may prove immortal, and may accompany the ages, now persecuted, now exalted, often dangerous, and always useful. While I, a "boneless shadow," *un fantôme sans os*, will be content if the fruit of my forgotten insomnious nights serves for a long time as a kind of secret remedy. (460)

Humor, "Tyrants Destroyed" suggests, is a means of neutralizing malign forces.[130]

Like "Ultima Thule," "Tyrants Destroyed" explores humor in celebratory fashion. If "Ultima Thule" links humor with various freedoms, "Tyrants Destroyed" presents such freedoms as available to anyone able to transcend him- or herself. If the work is finally unconvincing, the reason relates not to the force with which its thesis is stated but to that thesis itself: just as the narrator does not actually destroy a tyrant, so laughter directed at a problem, however satisfying, does not make the problem disappear. Nevertheless, "Tyrants Destroyed," especially in its stressing of links between amusement and detachment, reveals something important of Nabokov's theory of humor.

4.4 The Gamefulness of Humor

Although Laughter in the Dark is not a first-rate novel, its cast of characters includes a first-rate villain. Something of a Renaissance figure (Machiavelli's magistrates come to mind), Axel Rex is a compulsive liar, a cold-blooded sadist, and an artist of some ability. Nabokov's introductory

---

(Bergson, Laughter 19).

[130] Among contemporary writers on humor, only Steven Pinker credits ridicule with the power Nabokov assigns it. "In humans, dominance is not just the spoil of victor in fighting but a nebulous aura earned by a recognition of effectiveness in any of the arenas in which humans interact: prowess, expertise, intelligence, skill, wisdom, diplomacy, alliances, beauty, or wealth. Many of these claims to stature are partly in the eye of the beholder and would disintegrate if the beholders changed their weightings of the strengths and weaknesses that sum to yield the person's worth. Humor, then, may be an anti-dominance weapon. A challenger calls attention to one of the many less-than-exalted qualities that any mortal, no matter how high and mighty, is saddled with. [. . .] Dominance is often enforceable one-on-one but impotent before a united mob. [. . .] This may be the dynamic that brought laughter—that involuntary, disruptive, and contagious signal—into the service of humor. When scattered titters swell into a chorus of hilarity like a nuclear chain reaction, people are acknowledging that they have noticed the same infirmity in an exalted target" (How the Mind Works [New

sketch is memorable, touching on his character's cowardice ("When, as a youth, he had first left Germany (very quickly, in order to avoid the war)" [142]), callousness ("He had abandoned a poor half-witted mother, and the day after his departure for Montevideo she had fallen downstairs and injured herself fatally"[142]), and cruelty ("As a child he had poured oil over live mice, set fire to them and watched them dart about for a few seconds like flaming meteors"[142]). Also described is Rex's sense of humor, which turns out to be closely related to his aesthetic sensibilities:

> [I]n riper years, when his artistic talent developed, he tried in more subtle ways to satiate his curiosity, for it was not anything morbid with a medical name—oh, not at all—just cold, wide-eyed curiosity, just the marginal notes supplied by life to his art. It amused him immensely to see life made to look silly, as it slid helplessly into caricature. He despised practical jokes: he liked them to happen by themselves with perchance now and then just that little touch on his part which would send the wheel running downhill. He loved to fool people; and the less trouble the process entailed, the more the joke pleased him. And at the same time this dangerous man was, with pencil in hand, a very fine artist indeed. (142)

That Nabokov also loves to "fool people"[131] should not be seen as evidence that Rex constitutes a self-portrait. Nonetheless, the following "syllogism of humor," although credited to Axel Rex, has been smuggled out of Nabokov's own storehouse of ideas:

> Uncle alone in the house with the children said he'd dress up to amuse them. After a long wait, as he did not appear, they went down and saw a masked man putting the table silver into a bag. "Oh, Uncle," they cried in delight. "Yes, isn't my make up

---

York: Norton, 1997], 551).

[131] "Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy," he writes, describing his approach to the design of chess problems. (SM 289)

> good?" said Uncle, taking his mask off. Thus goes the Hegelian syllogism of humor. Thesis: Uncle made himself up as a burglar (a laugh for the children); antithesis: it *was* a burglar (a laugh for the reader); synthesis: it still was Uncle (fooling the reader). This was the super-humor Rex liked to put into his work; and this, he claimed, was quite new. (143)[132]

Two works reveal Nabokov's own fondness for "super-humor." "The Passenger" relates a conversation between a "middlebrow author"[133] and a decidedly highbrow critic. Comparing "Life" to literature, the men contrast the ingenious plots constructed by Life to the derivative plots dreamed up by creative writers. In arguing for the preeminence of Life, the author recounts an experience he had during a night journey on an express train. As the author was settling into the lower berth of a two-bed compartment, another passenger entered the compartment. Taking off his shoes, the newcomer mounted a ladder to the upper berth, displaying as he climbed a repellent, diabolical, foot: "It was a man's foot, a foot of considerable size, in a coarse sock, through which the bluish toenail had worked a hole. [. . .] I had ample time to inspect that foot in its gray, black-checkered sock and also part of the leg: the violet vee of the garter on the side of the stout calf and its little hairs nastily sticking out through the mesh of the long underwear. It was altogether a most repellent limb" (SoVN 184). As the train rolls through the night, recollection of the grotesque foot haunts the author, ruining his chances of sleep: "I don't know how to explain it to you, but that limb anguished me most oppressively. A resilient varicolored reptile. I found it disturbing that all I knew of the man was that evil-looking leg. His figure, his face, I never saw. His berth, which formed a low, dark ceiling over me, now seemed to have come lower" (184).

With the passenger in bed the wheels of the plot turn more quickly. Amazed, the author listens in silence as his berth-mate begins to sob uncontrollably, his weeping punctuated with "unintelligible words which he uttered in a kind of sepulchral, belly-deep voice between convulsive

[132] As Grayson notes (Nabokov Translated 46), the "Hegelian syllogism of humor" is not found in Camera Obscura.

sighs" (185). Troubled yet curious, the author lies awake, wondering what could have reduced a grown man to a state of overwhelming grief. "I lay motionless and listened—and felt, incidentally, that my face in the dark looked awfully silly, for it is always embarrassing to hear a stranger sobbing" (185). A possible solution to the mystery of the passenger's grief arrives in the morning when, during an unexpected stop at a remote whistle-stop, policemen board the train, searching, it turns out, for a fleeing killer: "a betrayed husband had shot his wife and her lover" (186). Suddenly the import of the repellent limb seems revealed: like the devil's cloven hoof, the foot is emblematic of a bestial nature, for the sobbing passenger is surely the fleeing murderer, nerves shattered by his wife's betrayal and his own rash act. Only the shoe doesn't fit and the man's not a killer. "The detective shook him by the shoulder. [. . .] And imagine, I heard absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. The man on the upper berth sleepily mumbled something, the detective distinctly demanded his passport, distinctly thanked him, then went out and entered another compartment" (186-87). The passenger's sobbing is not, and never will be, explained.

Having recalled his experience, the author starts to analyze it, tugging at its loose ends, complaining that the tale lacks the narratological coherence any competent writer would have given a comparable sequence of events: "[T]hink only how nice it would have seemed—from the writer's viewpoint, naturally—if the evil-footed, weeping passenger had turned out to be a murderer, how nicely his tears in the night could have been explained, and, what is more, how nicely all that would have fitted into the frame of my night journey, the frame of a short story" (187). That this scenario, far from being "nice," is hopelessly trite is underscored by a challenge the author soon lays down: "Confess [. . .] that beginning with the moment when I mentioned the police and the unscheduled stop, you were sure my sobbing passenger was a criminal?" (187) This question is of interest because the relationship between events as the author here rearranges them (where the obvious "solution" is correct) and events as they really were (in which the obvious "solution" is incorrect) is identical to

[133] So described in Nabokov's introductory note (SoVN 649).

the relationship between the thetic and antithetic solutions in Axel Rex's "syllogism of humor."[134] Given that "The Passenger" contains a thetic and an antithetic solution can we discern a "synthetic" solution as well? Yes, in the critic's response to the author's challenge.

Confessing nothing, the critic replies: "I know your manner [. . .]. If you were writing a detective story, your villain would have turned out to be not the person whom none of the characters suspect but the person whom everybody suspects from the very beginning, thus fooling the experienced reader who is used to solutions proving to be *not* the obvious ones" (187). In other words, had the author invented rather than experienced the incident on the train the sobbing passenger would have been the murderer of the "thetic" solution. Together, then, a trio of narratives—the simple scenario of the author's complaint, the actual incident, and events as envisioned in the critic's reply—constitute a reiteration of Rex's humor syllogism. Once again a naive "thetic" solution, following displacement by a sophisticated "antithetic" solution, reappears as an ultrasophisticated "synthetic" resolution.[135]

Although aspects of "The Passenger" suggest that Nabokov is an afficionado of "super humor," the work is best considered in tandem with another piece, "The Leonardo," a story that does not describe but embodies the "quite new" humor enjoyed by Rex. As noted in Chapter Two, "The Leonardo" is designed in such a way that an experienced reader—the reader who (to quote the critic in "The Passenger") "is used to solutions proving to be *not* the obvious ones" (187)—misidentifies Romantovski, the boarder tormented by Anton and Gustav. The brothers, recall, are perturbed by Romantovski's reclusiveness, his late-night activity and unsociability, seeing it not as evidence of

---

[134] Both "thetic" solutions are childishly simple; both "antithetic" solutions are unexpectedly elaborate.

[135] The word "ultrasophisticated" is borrowed from Nabokov's description of a chess problem: "The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and discover its fairly simple, 'thetic,' solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme (exposing White's King to checks), which the composer had taken the greatest pains to 'plant' (with only one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having passed through the 'antithetic' inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia, and the Azores" (SM 291).

Chris Ackerley sees in this problem a model for composition of Pale Fire: "This note proposes that the structure of Pale Fire is similar—no, delete this craven 'similar'—*identical* to that of the chess problem discussed above and that the problem acted as a conscious paradigm in the novel's composition" ("Pale Fire: Three Notes Towards a Thetic Solution" [Nabokov Studies 2 (1995)], 94).

sensitivity but as proof of criminality. Romantovski, they feel, "poisons the life of honest folks. [. . .] It is not enough that he moves and breathes differently from other people; the trouble is that we just cannot put our finger upon the difference, cannot catch the tip of the ear by which to pull out the rabbit" (363). Of course, as sophisticated readers we lend no credence to the brothers' beliefs, reading, as directed by the narrator, Romantovski's secrecy as evidence of a refined nature. With the narrator we believe Romantovski "a remarkable poet whom poverty obliged to dwell in that sinister district" (367); with the narrator, we conclude, "on the strength of certain indices, that every night, by working on a line of verse or nursing a growing idea, [Romantovski] celebrate[s] an invulnerable victory over the brothers" (367); and with the narrator ("I who believed [. . .] that you were indeed someone exceptional" [367]), learning that Romantovski is a forger, we feel more than a little foolish.

Offering in turn three readings of Romantovski, a childish one equating secrecy and criminality, a sophisticated one identifying (on the strength of certain indices) Romantovski as a poet (or some such), and an ultrasophisticated reading recognizing in Romantovski the asocial criminal of obtuse mistrust, "The Leonardo" is, like "The Passenger," a "syllogistic" work. The two stories, then, when read in conjunction, underscore Nabokov's interest in "super-humor." What does this interest reveal of Nabokov's theory of humor?

One implication is that humor for Nabokov constitutes a game, resembling hide-and-seek, in which one person, aware of another's expectations, conceals something in a way the other person does not anticipate. In short, humor is for Nabokov a sociable medium. The humorist, this suggests, must know his or her audience, specifically must know what that audience expects (a sophisticated reader, encountering an expected burglar, is not amused but bored). Moreover, the humorist—"The Leonardo" in particular suggests—does not just discern but also *shapes* expectations, planting clues, genuine or misleading, as a means of coaxing an audience into entertaining particular expectations (as Nabokov does with the name "Romantovski"). Humor for Nabokov clearly has a competitive aspect, as humorist pits self against an audience of a specific type, perhaps naïve, perhaps wary,

perhaps smug or cynical. There is, Nabokov feels, a deceitful quality to the humorist's efforts, as the audience is either misled or allowed to misinterpret. In brief, the humorist's audience, like the reader within the "Hegelian syllogism of humor," is "fooled" through the setting and springing of playful traps.

Nabokov's fondness for super-humor, then, hints at a view of humor as a means of developing readers. There are, the Hegelian syllogism of humor intimates, different kinds of readers, of differing levels of sophistication. Needless to say, such identities are not fixed, for surely a naive reader, fooled often enough, becomes sophisticated, maybe as precursor to acquisition of ultrasophistication. Since so useful in the "fooling" of readers, humor is, as Nabokov recognizes, of value to an author keen to develop the minds of readers. Curiosity, attentiveness to detail, mental flexibility: all these attributes are exercised through humor, as jokes, in countering expectations, shape a sense of what is possible. A reader familiar with "The Leonardo," for instance, can anticipate certain features of Pale Fire, for, as English and Ackerley argue, Pale Fire is "syllogistic" in its inclusion of a narrator who, having appeared informative then impertinent, is revealed to be informative.[136] Viewing humor as a sociable medium, gamelike in its challenging of an audience, Nabokov, with his "syllogism of humor," links humor with certain types of mind-reading. If an author, devising new ways to explode expectations, hones an ability to anticipate a reader's thoughts, a reader, avoiding one or another textual landmine, becomes familiar with an author's favorite "moves." Self-exposure as a "fool," it turns out, is both fun and profitable.

Each of the works studied thus far makes of humor a key point of thematic interest. Other Nabokov works treat humor less directly. Of these works, three novels—The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Look at the Harlequins! and The Gift—are of particular interest.

[136] Ackerley's argument, however, differs from English's. "[B]y a process of what Nabokov has frequently called 'a knight move of the mind' (i.e., the sense of ghostly consequence which the Knight, standing on a marginal file, might 'feel' in phantom extensions beyond the board [Pale Fire, 276]), a reader may arrive at the intuition that Kinbote is Shade's creation, that Shade has artistically staged his own 'death,' and that the Poem, graced by vestiges of opal and the pale phosphorescence of Kinbote's Solus Rex theme, has taken on a greater poignancy and beauty as Shade explores through the looking-glass his life and the things that make it both tragic and a delight" (Ackerley, "Three Notes" 96).

4.5 Indirect Explorations of Humor

"As often was the way with Sebastian Knight," we read as V. discusses Knight's The Prismatic Bezel, "he used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion" (89). Humor, this passage suggests, is at times very serious, constituting, at least for Sebastian Knight, a means of evoking moods vastly more reflective than hilarity. How does Knight's springboard operate? The Prismatic Bezel, V. adds, is "based cunningly on a parody of certain tricks of the literary trade" (89), tricks so hackneyed as to be, in V's words, "dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds unaware of the fraud" (89). Describing The Prismatic Bezel, V. hints at the "dead things" parodied by Knight.

> Twelve persons are staying at a boarding-house; the house is very carefully depicted but in order to stress the "island" note, the rest of the town is casually shown as a secondary cross between natural mist and a primary cross between stage-properties and a real-estate agent's nightmare. [. . .] One of the lodgers, a certain G. Abeson, art-dealer, is found murdered in his room. The local police-officer, who is described solely in terms of boots, rings up a London detective, asking him to come at once. Owing to a combination of mishaps (his car runs over an old woman and then he takes the wrong train) he is very long in arriving. In the meantime the inhabitants of the boarding house plus a chance passer-by, old Nosebag, who happened to be in the lobby when the crime was discovered, are thoroughly examined. All of them except the last named, a mild old gentleman with a white beard yellowish about the mouth, and a harmless passion for collecting snuffboxes, are more or less open to suspicion; and one of them, a fishy art-student, seems particularly so: half a dozen blood-stained

handkerchiefs are found under his bed. (90)

Here are parodied many clichés of the golden-age detective novel: the isolated setting; the sequestered group; the obvious suspect. Knight's achievement lies in enkindling serious emotion with such charred materials. "It gradually transpires that all the lodgers are in various ways connected with one another. The old lady in No. 3 turns out to be the mother of the violinist in No. 11. The novelist occupying the front bedroom is really the husband of the young lady in the third floor back. The fishy art student is no less than this lady's brother" (91). Making of his tale a fabric of coincidence, Knight endows it with "a strange beauty. [. . .] Now the lives of the characters shine forth with a real and human significance and G. Abeson's sealed door is but that of a forgotten lumber-room. A new plot, a new drama utterly unconnected with the opening of the story, which is thus thrust back into the region of dreams, seems to struggle for existence and break into light" (92). Reading this, we intuit parody's value as a springboard. In The Prismatic Bezel, the hoary set-up represents a pretext; of primary interest is not "Who killed G. Abeson?" (nobody, it turns out) but "What kind of world do we inhabit?",[137] for the novel's setting is an eerie realm wherein, to quote V., "The idea of time, which was made to look comic, now seems to curl up and fall asleep" (92).

Implicit in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is a vision of the humorist discovering novelty in the ostensibly known.[138] Through presentation of odd viewpoints—and Knight's view of the detective story is certainly odd—humor calls attention to previously unnoticed aspects of familiar phenomena, revealing overlooked features of "things [. . .] now worn to a thread" (89). Even "dead things," the novel suggests, let alone those still alive to the mind, are enlivened through perception in

[137] For Stuart, the relevant question is "Who am I?": "In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight the highest region of serious emotion is the region in which man searches for his identity [. . .] and the book is therefore both a game and a quest for self-knowledge. It is no secret, of course, that in Nabokov's novels the line between game and serious quest is never clearly drawn, because his belief seems to be that the point at which the one merges with the other is never precise. The game of detection and the quest for knowledge of one's self are both puzzles, and in both the greatest demand is made on one's attention; in both the minutest detail, the detail that seems to be of least importance, may hold the key to the solution" (Dimensions of Parody 17).

[138] In Julia Bader's words, "The theme of the banality of stock characters and situations is only the starting point. The precise, lucid, uniquely glinting style points to the more important theme: that a vision of beauty can be achieved through a freedom from trite preconceptions and ready-made metaphors" (Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels [Berkeley: University of California, 1972], 17).

a new way. Reading of Knight, we gain the impression of an author aware there is always another viewpoint to be adopted or another facet to explore. Moreover, reading of Knight, we intuit an author whose love of originality, and whose sense of the world's complexity, are expressed in and justified by his use of humor.[139]

Certain passages in Look at the Harlequins! also link humor and discovery. A key exchange is found in the novel's second chapter, as young Vadim, a "sulky and indolent child" (8), is chastised by an "extraordinary grand-aunt, Baroness Bredow, born Tolstoy" (8) for his woeful solemnity.

> "Stop moping! [. . .] Look at the harlequins!"
>
> "What harlequins? Where?"
>
> "Oh, everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together—jokes, images—and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!" (8)

A decidedly pregnant passage (a novel's title is among its offspring), this exchange is heavy with claims for humor's importance. Like imagery (understood to comprise metaphor and simile), humor, Vadim's grand-aunt remarks, is a constructive medium in which things are "put together" to create conceptual novelties. Humor, the passage asserts, is, if not *ipso facto* poetic, akin to poetry in its constructive originality. Moreover, if humor is like poetry in its creation of novelties, humor also resembles poetry in devising not just striking concepts but entire worlds. Vadim, needless to say, already inhabits a world; therefore, his grand-aunt's exhortation to invent the world is not so much incitement to wholesale fabrication (like that engaged in by Kinbote) as an invitation to personalize an existent world.

As it "puts two things together," humor discovers relationships between seemingly unrelated aspects of the world. Humor, therefore, reveals the world to be other than was believed—to be a new

[139] V. writes of Clare Bishop, Knight's long-time muse, "she was blest with a keen sense of humor. No wonder she fitted

world. Humor, Look at the Harlequins! suggests, is useful in, perhaps essential to, discernment of a world of one's own. Like poetry, humor penetrates the haze of received wisdom to disclose subtle aspects of reality.[140]

Another instructive work is The Gift. Playfulness, the novel suggests, characterizes not only the human but also the natural world. Coincidence, mimicry, theatricality—each is in The Gift seen as evidence of a playful force at work in nature. Fyodor's world is a magical realm, a "thralldom" (362), of deceit and waggery. Studying his own past, Fyodor often finds evidence of an active "fate" shaping events to bring about (or make likely) certain outcomes. "Think how fate started it three and a half odd years ago," Fyodor muses, inviting his fiancée to revisit their past. "The first attempt to bring us together was crude and heavy! [. . .] [F]ate blundered. [. . .] Fate made a second attempt, simpler this time, but promising better success [. . .] but this also failed. [. . .] Then finally after this failure, fate decided to take no chances, to install me directly in the place where you lived" (363). And Fyodor sees fate acting not just in his own life but in distant lives as well. Nikolai Chernyshevski's "exciting wedding," we read in Fyodor's Life of Chernyshevski, "was celebrated on May 19, 1848; that same day, sixteen years later, Chernyshevski's civil execution was carried out. A coincidence of anniversaries, a card index of dates. That is how fate sorts them in anticipation of the researcher's needs" (220). In this and other passages, Fyodor expresses a notion of fate as a force that, arranging coincidences, makes of each human life a (to borrow a phrase from John Shade [PF 63]) "web of sense."[141]

Natural mimicry, too, The Gift credits to a playful force loosed in the world. Of his father, a prominent naturalist, Fyodor writes, "He told me about the incredible artistic wit of mimetic disguise, which [. . .] seemed to have been invented by some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man" (110). Mimicry, this passage asserts, is not just as an amusing phenomenon,

---

into his life so well" (RLSK 81).

[140] "Genius," a character in Look at the Harlequins! later says, is "seeing things others don't see. Or rather the invisible links between things" (LATH 40).

[141] Alexandrov explores this point in depth. "One of the most significant parallels between The Gift and Speak, Memory is the extent to which patterning in life, nature, and art function as manifestations of the otherworld" (Nabokov's Otherworld 124). Alexandrov goes on to discuss a number of such "fatidic" (125) patterns, focusing upon Fyodor's

but a phenomenon which, because *designed* to amuse, hints at the existence of a force eager to entertain sapient beings. Filled with trickery and disguise, the natural world is presented in The Gift as no less amusing than the most polished piece of comic theater.

Which makes sense given that, in Fyodor's opinion, the natural world *is* a piece of comic theater. Few aspects of Fyodor's metaphysics are as distinctive as his vision of life as an entrancing performance. Watching two postmen at play—"stealing up from behind the jasmine, one behind the other, one imitating the other's gestures, toward a third [. . .] in order to tickle his nose with a flower" (328)—Fyodor aspires to understand "what is concealed behind all this, behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green greasepaint of the foliage?" (328) Also informed by the language of the theater is a later passage relating Fyodor's thoughts as he observes a group of nuns collecting flowers: "it all looked so much like a staged scene—and how much skill there was in everything, what an infinity of grace and art, what a director lurked behind the pines" (344). Confronting his world, Fyodor discerns lighthearted theatricality, as if a joyous work were being performed. Expressed everywhere in The Gift is a notion of humor as a ubiquitous feature of life. Moreover, because omnipresent, humor is presented in The Gift as evidence of a playful prime mover, a ludic force keen to enchant and amuse human beings. As do other Nabokov works, The Gift presents humor as a medium perfectly matched to the capacities of the human mind.

We can derive from Nabokov's fiction a compelling theory of humor incorporating twelve interrelated tenets:

1. Humor exists outside of or in opposition to the conventional world.
2. "Truth" is often, in and of itself, amusing.
3. Amusement is premised on detachment from pressing concerns.
4. Humor is a valuable weapon in struggles against pernicious ideas.
5. Humor is competitive in its pitting of humorist against audience.

---

notion of them as pointers to a "hidden maker" (Nabokov's Otherworld 126).

6. Humor develops the minds of readers.
7. Finding new uses for old things, humor reanimates lifeless features of the world.
8. Humor resembles imagery in its bringing together of disparate aspects of reality.
9. Humor personalizes an impersonal world.
10. The natural world is rife with playful humor.
11. In its inclusion of humor, the natural world hints at the existence of a playful prime mover.
12. Humor is deeply serious.

In general, Nabokov's fiction depicts humor as a liberating medium: humor frees us from the shackles of presupposition; humor releases us from the torments of tyrannical thought; humor loosens us from the bonds of an imprisoning ego. Turning to Nabokov's discursive writings, we will find humor linked to freedom in more explicit fashion, as Nabokov, in various lectures, interviews and critical writings, explores the nature and implications of humor.

4.6 Nabokov's Explicit Theory of Humor

In his lectures, Nabokov often celebrates one or another author's use of humor. Chekhov's books, he argues, "are sad books for humorous people: that is, only a reader with a sense of humor can appreciate their sadness" (LoRL 252). Dostoevsky's "best scenes," he insists, are "comedy mixed with tragedy [. . .] with the humor always on the verge of hysterics and people hurting each other in a wild exchange of insults" (LoRL 122).[142] Joyce, he claims, "manages to build up something real—pathos, pity, compassion—out of the dead formulas which he parodies" (LoL 347). Moreover, it is not just as a critic that Nabokov celebrates humor. Adopting for the nonce the role of social scientist, describing "the one improvement that quite unwittingly a real writer does bring to the world

[142] In an interview, Nabokov remarks that "Dostoevsky's slapstick is wonderful, but in his tragedy he's a journalist"

around him," he asserts the corrective power of ridicule:

> The turning of the villain into a buffoon is not a set purpose with your authentic writer: crime is a sorry farce no matter whether the stressing of this may help the community or not; it generally does, but that is not the author's direct purpose or duty. The twinkle in the author's eye as he notes the imbecile drooping of a murderer's underlip, or watches the stumpy forefinger of a professional tyrant exploring a profitable nostril in the solitude of his sumptuous bedroom, this twinkle is what punishes your man more surely than the pistol of a tiptoeing conspirator. (LoL 376)

What is Nabokov's explicit (as opposed to implicit) theory of humor? In various contexts, Nabokov depicts humor as presenting ideas that, although insightful, strike those who accept received wisdom as disconcerting surprises. Dissociating the funny and the trite, Nabokov writings links humor with penetrating originality, associating it with much that defines intelligence.

Underpinning Nabokov's explicit theory of humor is an exultation of amusement. Nabokov sees human beings as distinguished by certain capabilities, including awareness of time and—equally importantly—openness to humor.

> [T]he beginning of reflexive consciousness in the brain of our remotest ancestor must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time.
>
> Thus, when the newly disclosed, fresh and trim formula of my own age, four, was confronted with the parental formulas, thirty-three and twenty-seven, something happened to me. [. . .] I felt myself plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time. [. . .]
>
> I see my diminutive self as celebrating, on that August day 1903, the birth of

(Meras).

> sentient life. If my [mother] and my [father] had both been present before in my vague infant world, they had been so under the mask of tender incognito; but now my father's attire, the resplendent uniform of the Horse Guards, with that smooth golden swell of cuirass burning upon his chest and back, came out like the sun, and for several years afterward I remained keenly interested in the age of my parents and kept myself informed about it, like a nervous passenger asking the time in order to check a new watch.
>
> My father, let it be noted, had served his term of military training long before I was born, so I suppose he had that day put on the trappings of his old regiment as a festive joke. To a joke, then, I owe my first gleam of complete consciousness—which again has recapitulatory implications, since the first creatures on earth to become aware of time were also the first creatures to smile. (SM 22)

Of the capacities allowing for appreciation of this "festive joke," the most important is an ability to juxtapose appearance and reality, an ability Nabokov sees as uniquely human.[143] In brief, while appearing to be a Horse Guard, Nabokov's father is in fact a civilian in costume, and it is in the gap between appearance and reality that humor—with its playful surprise—takes root. To be amused is for Nabokov to see past the apparent to the actual, is to be able to relinquish an automatic reading for an active interpretation.

One tenet of Nabokov's explicit theory of humor, then, credits amusement to a capacity to see beyond the expected. A second related tenet links humor and surprise. "The unusual is funny in itself," Nabokov tells an interviewer, adding, "A man slips and falls down. It is the contrary of gravity in both senses" (Meras). In Nabokov's view it is not just unusual events that are amusing but odd viewpoints as well: "Perhaps humor is simply seeing things in a singular, unique, extraordinary way. This always sounds funny to the average person." (Meras). As he links humor and surprise,

[143] See p. 92.

Nabokov is something of a thesaurus: "unusual;" "singular;" "unique;" "extraordinary"—all these epithets he associates with humor. Yet as the above reference to an amused "average person" suggests, an odd perspective is for Nabokov less innately funny than funny in comparison to a normal or conventional—an "average"—viewpoint. A key tenet of Nabokov's explicit theory of humor identifies humor as incompatible with orthodox expectations. Gogol is for Nabokov a paradigmatically humorous writer,[144] and the funniness of Gogol's art reflects its ceaseless undermining of assumptions. As portrayed by Nabokov, Gogol, because so odd,[145] is temperamentally bound to produce amusing works. "So what is that queer world, glimpses of which we keep catching through the gaps of the harmless looking sentences?" Nabokov asks regarding The Overcoat. "It is in a way the *real* one but it looks wildly absurd to us, accustomed as we are to the stage setting that screens it" (NG 143). As this reference to an obstructive "stage setting" hints, Nabokov allies Gogol's humorousness with an evocation of alternatives to the world of orthodox belief. Humor, this hints, is for Nabokov a function of incompatibility with conventionality. "Gogol was a strange creature, but genius is always strange; it is only your healthy second-rater who seems to the grateful reader to be a wise old friend, nicely developing the reader's own notions of life" (NG 140). Unlike the "healthy second-rater," Gogol *explodes* the reader's notions of life, revealing them to be just that—notions—and not truths. In Nabokov's view, Gogol's comedy springs from his displacing of stock ideas by "strange" (NG 140) or "eccentric" (NG 12) beliefs.

Nabokov's discussion of Gogol explicitly opposes the comical to the customary. Conditioned by custom to expect certain things (e.g., the wearing of a right shoe on a right foot), we are amused when something else transpires. Nabokov, as his punning reference to "gravity" reveals, recognizes that some expectations arise from direct observation of nature; other expectations, however, Nabokov sees as derived from social life. Thus, in characterizing humor as peculiar, Nabokov for the most part expresses a view of the funny as incompatible with commonsensical thought: "[Humor]

[144] Although, for reasons to be discussed, not a "humorist": "When a person tells me that Gogol is a 'humorist' I know at once that person does not understand much in literature" (NG 30).
[145] "As a schoolboy he would walk with perverse perseverance on the wrong side of the street, would wear the right shoe

involves a fast and free association of values" ("Lolita's Creator" 54).

Other discursive writings identify humor as a source of esoteric knowledge. While enjoying Gogol's prose, with its blending of the "ludicrous" and the "stellar," one likes, Nabokov writes, "to recall that the difference between the comic side of things, and their cosmic side, depends upon one sibilant" (NG 142). Gogol's humor is for Nabokov a form of metaphysical speculation in which other worlds are evoked, "dream worlds" (NG 142) whose oddness and poetry serve to relativize—if not trivialize—the "crudely painted screens" (NG 142) of the familiar world. In Nabokov's view, humor, in presenting compelling alternatives to the conventional world, awakens in the audience a sense that there is more to life than orthodoxy allows for. "Only through laughter do mortals get to heaven," he writes in a 1924 letter to his fiancée, expressing, not a view that amusement unlocks the pearly gates of Sunday school theology, but a belief that laughter is premised on a sloughing off of everyday cares.

Although impassioned, Nabokov's fondness for humor is not unconditional. Why, given a view of Gogol's works as richly funny does Nabokov impugn the judgment of those who tell him "that Gogol is a 'humorist' " (NG 30)? As a theorist, Nabokov distinguishes between "comedies"—works which are wholly humorous—and works blending comic and solemn elements, with the former dismissed as fatuous. Gogol's Government Inspector, we read

> is not a "comedy" at all, just as Shakespeare's dream-plays Hamlet or Lear cannot be called "tragedies." A bad play is more apt to be good comedy or good tragedy than the incredibly complicated creations of such men as Shakespeare or Gogol. In this sense Molière's stuff (for what it is worth) is comedy i.e. something as readily assimilated as a hot dog at a football game, something of one dimension and absolutely devoid of the huge, seething, prodigiously poetic background that makes true drama. (NG 54)

---

on the left foot, emit courtyard morning sounds in the middle of the night and distribute the furniture in his room

Belittling "comedies," Nabokov concurrently exalts another type of work, an "incredibly complicated" type possessing a "prodigiously poetic background". This type necessarily incorporates humor, mixing it, however, with other elements. A well-rounded work, Nabokov adds, provokes "not laughter and not tears—but a radiant smile of perfect satisfaction, a purr of beatitude" (NG 55). Distinguishing between one-dimensional "comedies" and prodigious works incorporating comic elements, Nabokov presents humor as an essential to "true drama." Importantly, Nabokov, in arguing for humor's role in true drama, stakes his claim not on humor's value as diversion—its generation of belly-laughs—but on its evocation of wonder. Anything but a strict comedian in his own art,[146] Nabokov uses humor, not to the exclusion of other elements, but in conjunction with such things as eeriness or solemnity. Doing so he both keeps us on our toes and underscores the versatility of humor.

Analysis of Nabokov's fiction discloses a considered theory of humor. So too does study of his discursive writings. In closing, we will compare Nabokov's implicit and explicit theories of humor, noting differences but focusing on points of similarity.

4.7 A Compelling Vision of Humor

The key point of difference between Nabokov's implicit and explicit theories of humor relates to the roundedness of the former. Nabokov is particularly thoughtful and prolific as a creative writer. It is therefore unsurprising to find his most considered comments on humor featuring in fictive works, as narratorial musings or sentiments voiced by a character. Nabokov's implicit and explicit theories of humor, then, differ most in degree of complexity, with the implied theory incorporating more tenets explored in more detail. The theories, however, are vastly more alike than

---

according to a kind of Alice-in-the-Looking-Glass logic" (NG 11).

dissimilar, are so alike in fact as to constitute a single theory taking two forms, one expansive, one concise.

Juxtaposition of Nabokov's implicit and explicit theories of humor often reveals one idea voiced twice, once by intimation and at length, once candidly and succinctly. For instance, "Tyrants Destroyed," with its demolished Ruler, is (among other things) a fictional iteration of Nabokov's belief that "a good laugh is the best pesticide" (SO 117).[147] And Knight's The Prismatic Bezel, a novel devoted (in V.'s description) to the hunting out of "things which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread" (89), seems much like the Ulysses of Nabokov's lectures, a work in which Joyce, using parody, builds something real by dismantling the formulaic. As these examples suggest, Nabokov's fiction often explores at length ideas voiced without elaboration in lectures and interviews. This suggests that Nabokov's implicit and explicit theories of humor are one and the same theory. What are the key tenets of this theory?

First, humor for Nabokov displays and develops important qualities of the human mind. If in Speak, Memory Nabokov celebrates human beings as "the first creatures to smile" (22), in "Tyrants Destroyed" he identifies amusement as an achievement. However one defines a "bird's-eye view," the adoption of such a view clearly constitutes an accomplishment, one requiring a willingness to mentally detach from immediate circumstances. Nabokov sees human beings as uniquely able to reflect upon self and world.[148] And amusement, in his view, starkly reveals human uniqueness—as, for example, laughter discloses an individual's ability to see beyond the terrifying to the ludicrous.

A second tenet identifies humor as a rebuke to complacency. In Nabokov's opinion, the amusing always differs from the expected, necessarily offering something unforeseen in the way of event or outlook. And if for Nabokov humor surprises, the reason relates to its incompatibility with received wisdom: whereas second-rate art "nicely develop[s] the reader's own notions of life" (NG 140), first-rate art, as exemplified by Gogol's Overcoat, evokes "weird worlds" (NG 141) in which

---

[146] As he recognizes: "I'm not P. G. Wodehouse. I'm not a funny man" (Meras).
[147] And of his conviction that "Tyrants and torturers will never manage to hide their comic stumbles behind their cosmic acrobatics" (SO 58).

"parallel lines not only may meet, but [. . .] wriggle and get most extravagantly entangled" (NG 145). Nabokov's dissociating of humor and orthodoxy, evident in his discussions of Gogol, sustains many of his fictional explorations of humor. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, for example, links parody with reanimation of "dead things [. . .] accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud" (89), while Look at the Harlequins!, through its exhortation to "Invent reality!" (8), depicts humor as a means by which an inherited world is displaced by a invented one. "Ultima Thule" links humor and heterodoxy with particular forcefulness. Utterly unlike others, "a man who had lost everything" (508), Falter, as human analog to Sineusov's ape of truth, boldly expresses Nabokov's notion of humor as originating somewhere beyond the social world, in a realm ungoverned by rules regarding appropriate thought or behavior. Time and again, Nabokov depicts the humorist[149] as someone who, because uncommitted to hoary notions, is able to entertain odd ideas. Like Falter, the humorist has no respect for "traditional feelings," and like Falter, the humorist alerts us to possibilities denied by shopworn philosophies.

Nabokov's explicit and implicit theories of humor also coincide in presenting the comic as allied with the "cosmic." Openly voiced in Nikolai Gogol, this idea is hinted at in two other discursive pieces, namely a lecture on Don Quixote crediting authentic laughter to the "angels" (LoDQ 65), and a 1924 letter describing laughter as a mortal's only way of reaching heaven. These texts share a vision of humor as disclosing more exalted worlds. Seeing rational thought as limited in certain respects, Nabokov insists on the value of irrational thought, particularly as a means of piercing life's mystery. "Commonsense is fundamentally immoral," he argues in a lecture, "for the natural morals of mankind are as irrational as the magic rites that they evolved since the immemorial dimness of time" (LoL 372). Considering humor anything but commonsensical, Nabokov links it to the irrational magic of a pre-civilized humankind. In his fiction, too, Nabokov identifies humor as a window on the inner workings of the universe. Struck by the "play" and "sparkle" of life, Fyodor

---

[148] "[If] I not only know that I *am* but also know that I know it, then I belong to the human species" (SO 142).
[149] As envisioned in Nabokov's challenge "Give me an example of a great writer who is not a humorist" (Meras), not as presented in his denial that Gogol is a "humorist."

aspires to "understand what is behind all this [. . .]. For there really is something, there is something! And one wants to offer thanks but there is no one to thank" (328). Humor is again depicted as rich with meaning, as hinting in its essence at the existence of a force eager to amuse intelligent beings. Fyodor's father too sees humor as pregnant with meaning, crediting the "artistic wit" of natural mimicry to a "waggish artist" eager to enchant humankind (110). As it features in The Gift, humor is a medium—and an important one—through which arrives information regarding the forces responsible for the universe. Perception of humor, it is suggested, is a first step toward understanding the origin and meaning of life (toward achieving "absolute insight," Falter might say). Other Nabokov works also link the comic and the cosmic, "Ultima Thule" obviously, but also "A Busy Man"[150] and Pale Fire.[151] Each of these works

expresses by implication a sentiment spoken aloud in Speak, Memory: "The world was made on a Sunday" (298).

Finally, Nabokov's explicit and implicit theories of humor converge in insisting on humor's seriousness. Humor for Nabokov is important for three reasons. First, and least importantly, humor is a useful corrective. Described in Strong Opinions as the best pesticide,[152] and celebrated in a lecture on "commonsense" as more punishing than the pistol of a tiptoeing conspirator, laughter is in "Tyrants Destroyed" a means of psychological salvation. But humor's import, in Nabokov's view, does not rest on its use by satirists.[153] For humor, he believes, is more consequential as a creative than a destructive medium, being a way in which a thoughtful person can, to quote Look at the Harlequins!, "Invent the world!" Nabokov associates—almost equates—humor and originality. "All writers that are worth anything are humorists," he tells an interviewer (Meras), arguing not that, for instance, Tolstoy and Saltykov are artistic brethren, but that each original author evokes worlds of amusing novelty. Gogol, Nabokov elsewhere writes, discovered in nature a new and (at first glance)

[150] In the narrator's assertion that "The folly of chance is the logic of fate" (SoVN 293).
[151] "Life Everlasting—based on a misprint! / I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint / And stop investigating my abyss? / But all at once it dawned on me that *this* / Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme / Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream / But topsy-turvical coincidence / Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense" ("Pale Fire" 62).
[152] The "best" perhaps, but less than perfect: "Contemptuous laughter is all right, but is not enough in the way of moral relief" (SO 58).

nonsensical color scheme. Before Gogol

> Russian literature was purblind. What form it perceived was an outline directed by reason: it did not see color for itself but merely used the hackneyed combinations of blind noun and dog-like adjective that Europe had inherited from the ancients. The sky was blue, the dawn red, the foliage green, the eyes of beauty black, the clouds grey, and so on. It was Gogol [. . .] who first saw yellow and violet at all. That the sky could be pale green at sunrise, or the snow a rich blue on a cloudless day, would have sounded like heretical nonsense to your so-called "classical writer" (NG 86).

Nabokov here presents originality as both insightful and unsettling. Because eccentric, Gogol notices undetected aspects of his own world, aspects which, reappearing in fictive worlds, provoke in readers wonder not untempered by amusement (whose outward sign, another passage suggests, is a "smile of perfect satisfaction" [NG 55]). Here and elsewhere, Nabokov presents the relationship between originality and funniness as close and reciprocal: to be original is to amuse, to amuse is to be original.

Finally, humor, to touch on a third aspect of its seriousness in Nabokov's eyes, alerts its audience to the many possibilities on offer at each moment. Recall Fyodor on the streetcar. Pitying himself for the grimness of his situation and the bleakness of his destination, he sees the world in a limited and lazy way, acknowledging few distinctions (all Germans are alike), discerning few options (I'm condemned to my duties), experiencing life as offering distressingly few possibilities. Thus, when his knee is bumped, Fyodor, predisposed to interpret the incident in a certain way, overlooks details as he directs his rage at yet another example of German insensitivity. Blind to detail, Fyodor apprehends his environment in only the haziest of ways, discerning not what is there but what his prejudices insist is there: a prison-like streetcar; a multitude of unpleasant Germans; an

[153] "Satire is a lesson" (SO 75).

insensate Teuton sharing his seat. Hinting at the harmful effects of prejudice and pessimism, Fyodor's initial mindset represents a "before" to which is contrasted an "after" suggestive of the transforming effects of humor. If through a joke played by "sly" life, Fyodor recognizes the hazards of presupposition, through that joke he also rediscovers the "goodness" of life. Thus, at one and the same time, humor rebukes Fyodor for the paucity of his expectations and reminds him of the extent to which reality exceeds *all* expectations. Invariably unleashing something unexpected, humor, as Nabokov is aware, highlights gaps between belief and actuality, underscoring the degree to which we sell reality short.[154] Associating amusement and surprise, Nabokov celebrates humor for its intimation that novelties, if sought out, are all around.

Lest Nabokov appear naive, it should be noted that his theory of humor derives not from consideration of all humor, but only from reflection on "authentic humor," that humor he sees as coming "from the angels." (LoDQ 65). Discussing a late scene in Don Quixote (II.43), during which Quixote, one hand tied to a hay loft door, balances uneasily in a horse's stirrups, Nabokov points out both the cruelty of the scene's humor and a human tendency to laugh at suffering: "Don Quixote is left suspended, in which position he remains for two hours, despairing, bewildered, and bellowing like a bull, while the maid servant and the innkeeper's daughter, and presumably millions of readers, are doubled up with laughter, as probably were many in the crowd sixteen centuries earlier when the martyred God of those people was given vinegar instead of water" (LoDQ 55). The episode, we read, "is very medieval, coarse, and stupid fun, as is all fun that comes from the devil" (LoDQ 65). While Nabokov nowhere lays out the characteristics distinguishing devilish and angelic humor, he clearly associates the former with insensitivity to suffering. Among the more memorable characters in Speak, Memory ("the most vivid figure I find when sorting out in memory the meager stack of my non-Russian and non-Jewish acquaintances in the years between the two wars" [278]) is "Dietrich," a timid German student, "well-bred, quiet, bespectacled," whose "hobby" (278) is capital punishment:

[154] As Davis (summarizing Schopenhauer's view) writes, "The incongruity between objects actually *perceived* and the

> At our second meeting he showed me a collection of photographs among which was a purchased series ("*Ein bischen retouchiert*," he said wrinkling his freckled nose) that depicted the successive stages of a routine execution in China; he commented, very expertly, on the splendor of the lethal sword and on the spirit of perfect cooperation between headsman and victim, which culminated in a veritable geyser of mist-gray blood spouting from the very clearly photographed neck of the decapitated party. (278).

Nabokov's discussion of the hobbyist culminates in a horrendous vision: "Although I have lost track of Dietrich long ago, I can well imagine the look of calm satisfaction in his fish-blue eyes as he shows, nowadays (perhaps at the very minute I am writing this), a never-expected profusion of treasures to his thigh-clapping, guffawing co-veterans—the absolutely *wunderbar* pictures he took during Hitler's reign" (279). Nabokov is too thoughtful to see all comedy as allied to the cosmic. As he develops a theory of humor, he is most interested in that humor attesting to curiosity and creativity.[155]

Discussing humor Nabokov displays the unalloyed excitement of an evangelist. Laughter, he suggests, emerges from truth. The comic, he asserts, is twinned with the cosmic. Only by amusement, he insists, do mortals get to heaven. Given his enjoyment of humor, it is unsurprising that Nabokov continually seeks to amuse readers as much as he can. More important than Nabokov's enjoyment of humor, however, are the reasons for that enjoyment, many of which have been touched on in this chapter. In the next chapter we will, exploring Nabokov's worldview, touch on still other reasons. As the next chapter shows, Nabokov's theory of humor is just one part (although an

---

same objects abstractly *conceived*, in short, produces laughter" (What's so Funny? 97).

[155] Many of Nabokov's villains enjoy devilish humor. Axel and Margot amuse themselves tormenting blind Albinus (LiD 258); Rodrig and M'sieur Pierre tease Cincinnatus by tunneling into his cell (IB 158); Martha and Franz "chok[e] with laughter" over Dreyer's imagined death (KQK 137); Humbert laughs "happily" at Lolita's dismay at a broken promise (LO 169); Izumrudov, a Shadow, "shak[es] with laughter" while condemning Charles Xavier to death (PF 256).

important one) of an expansive metaphysics—a metaphysics that, in describing reality, justifies by implication a reverence for humor.

Chapter Five: Nabokov's Playful Cosmos

Laughter. Running. Let-down hair. That is all there is to life.
—"Gods" (SoVN 46)

Nabokov's theory of humor resounds with metaphysical overtones. This is not surprising, for every theory of humor expresses beliefs about the origin and nature of the universe.

Bergson's theory, for instance, whose key tenet identifies humor as introducing "a mechanical element [. . .] into nature" (47),[156] reflects a view of the natural world as ever-changing and infinitely-differentiated. "Life," writes Bergson

> presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space. Regarded in time, it is the continuous evolution of a being ever growing older; it never goes backwards and never repeats anything. Considered in space, it exhibits certain coexisting elements so closely interdependent, so exclusively made for one another, that not one of them could, at the same time, belong to two different organisms [. . .]. A continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics [. . .] which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical. (Laughter 88)

[156] "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (Bergson, Laughter 69).

Emerging from this conception of the natural world, Bergson's theory of humor describes the comic as antithetical in all particulars to life:

> [A] really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living. Analyze the impression you get from two faces that are too much alike, and you will find that you are thinking of two copies cast in the same mould, or two impressions of the same seal, or two reproductions of the same negative,—in a word, of some manufacturing process or other. This deflection of life towards the mechanical is here the real cause of laughter. (Laughter 34)

Humor, Bergson argues, exploits familiarity with life, offering mechanization where spontaneity is expected. Reflecting a certain notion of nature, Bergson's theory of humor is best analyzed as one part of an expansive metaphysics; a metaphysics that, in describing "life," concurrently identifies (in a mirror, as it were) the features of the comical: "Let us now ascertain in which essential characteristics life, when viewed from without, seems to contrast with mere mechanism. We shall only have, then, to turn to the opposite characteristic, in order to discover the abstract formula, this time a general and complete one, for every real and possible method of comedy" (Laughter 88).

The metaphysical roots of Nabokov's theory of humor are more tangled. Whereas Bergson's conceptions of "life" and humor are as closely related as a photograph and its negative, Nabokov's understanding of humor is shaped by three aspects of a metaphysics: a belief in the unattainability of reality; a radical subjectivism; and a vision of a playful prime mover.

5.1 Generous Life

Because so abounding with detail, Nabokov's world eludes understanding. "You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless" (SO 10). Central to Nabokov's metaphysics is a notion of reality as *overwhelmingly* luxuriant. Consisting of a myriad particularities, each endowed with limitless detail, Nabokov's world can only be partially grasped. "Whichever subject you have chosen, you must realize that knowledge in it is limitless. Every subject brims with mysteries and thrills" (qtd. in Boyd, American Years 109). In brief, due to its luxuriance, Nabokov's world is a realm of mystery. "[T]he greater one's science, the deeper one's sense of mystery. [. . .] We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature" (SO 44, 45).

Where another person might be vexed by the world's luxuriance, Nabokov is inspired. For in his view, the inexhaustibility of reality, as it renders full knowledge of a present moment impossible, guarantees that each person's lifetime begins with, ends with, and is continually marked by surprise.[157] Among the more interesting props in Invitation to a Beheading, is a "photohoroscope," a photo-album containing not only pictures of an individual's past, but also doctored images anticipating that individual's future: "[E]xtensively retouched snapshots of Emmie's present face were supplemented by shots of other people—for the sake of costume, furniture and surroundings—so as to create the entire décor and stage properties of her future life" (IB 170). An ingenious analog for a world whose future can be known, the photohoroscope is denounced by Invitation's narrator as a clumsy failure:

> [O]ne had only to look closer and it became repulsively obvious how trite was this parody of the work of time. The Emmie who was leaving by the stage door, in furs, with flowers pressed to her shoulder, had limbs that had never danced; while in the next shot, showing her already in her bridal veil, the groom at her side was tall and slender, but had the round little face of M'sieur Pierre. At thirty she already had what was supposed to look like wrinkles, drawn in without meaning, without life, without knowledge of their true significance. (IB 170)

Nabokov's experience of reality as inexhaustible, with its consequent sense of complacency as self-defeating, influences many features of his thought—including, we shall see, his understanding of humor.[158]

5.2 Nabokov's Subjectivism

Nabokov's world is infused with imagination. Nabokov is a radical subjectivist, with his subjectivism incorporating two core beliefs: first, a conviction that each person inhabits a singular reality; and second, a belief that the nature of someone's reality reflects not only "what is out there" but also peculiarities of that person's consciousness. "I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of *all* events as a form of impure imagination," we read in Strong Opinions. "Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism" (154).

Stressing the importance of personality, the first tenet of Nabokov's subjectivism insists that

[157] Sharing Nabokov's belief that life's radiance depends upon the future's unforeseeability is Van Veen, who writes, "the determinate scheme, by stripping the sunrise of its surprise would erase all sunrays" (A 561).
[158] Many implications of Nabokov's indeterminacy have been analyzed by Brian Boyd (Nabokov's Ada: The Place of

everyone inhabits a unique reality:

> Let us take three types of men walking through the same landscape. Number One is a city man on a well-deserved vacation. Number Two is a professional botanist. Number Three is a local farmer. Number One, the city man, is what is called a realistic, commonsensical, matter-of-fact type: he sees trees as *trees* and knows from his map that the road he is following is a nice new road leading to Newton, where there is a nice eating place recommended to him by a friend in his office. The botanist looks around and sees his environment in the very exact terms of plant life, precise biological and classified units such as specific trees and grasses, flowers and ferns, and for him *this* is reality; to him the world of the stolid tourist (who cannot distinguish an oak from an elm) seems a fantastic, vague, dreamy, never-never world. Finally, the world of the local farmer differs from the two others in that his world is intensely emotional and personal since he has been born and bred there, and knows every trail and individual tree, and every shadow from every tree across every trail, all in warm connection with his everyday work, and his childhood, and a thousand small things and patterns which the other two—the humdrum tourist and the botanical taxonomist—simply cannot know in the given place at the given time. Our farmer will not know the relation of the surrounding vegetation to a botanical conception of the world, and the botanist will know nothing of any importance to him about that barn or that old field or that old house under its cottonwoods, which are afloat, as it were, in a medium of personal memories for one who was born there. (LoL 252)

"Here we have three different worlds," adds Nabokov, "different *realities*" (253). Each possessing a unique notion of what is relevant, botanist, tourist and farmer attend to different aspects of the world: the botanist notices a flower, the tourist a road to a diner, the farmer a place where he skinned a

---

Consciousness [Christchurch, New Zealand: Cybereditions, 2001], 71-74).

knee. Clearly none of the realities composed of such details is more authentic or "truthful" than the others; all are authentic, all are truthful—from a particular viewpoint. Central to Nabokov's worldview is a sense that "our" world is multiple worlds, one for each of us and each in some way authentic. "All reality is comparative reality since any given reality, the window you see, the smells you perceive, the sounds you hear, are not only dependent on a crude give-and-take of the senses but also depend upon various levels of information" (LoL 146).

A second tenet of Nabokov's subjectivism links the quality—lush or barren, exciting or dull—of a person's world to peculiarities of his or her consciousness. "[A] lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with the botanist who is a specialist in lilies" (SO 11). Kinbote, in his foreword to "Pale Fire," recalls watching, one subdued evening, Shade gaze down at a lake. "I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse" (PF 27). Looking over a lake, Shade "transforms" a scene anyone can see into a sensation he alone experiences and a memory only he can access. While accepting the existence of an objective world, a world of "brute facts,"[159] Nabokov, as we have seen, regards this world as "unattainable;" all that can be perceived—i.e. "attained"—is imperfect knowledge of parts and an idiosyncratic sense of the whole. "What I feel to be the real modern world is the world the artist creates, his own mirage, which becomes a new *mir* ('world' in Russian) by the very act of his shedding, as it were, the age he lives in" (SO 112).[160] Reality, Nabokov maintains, is as delightful (or as unpleasant) as we make it.

Nabokov's subjectivism is usefully juxtaposed to an antithetical view. If Nabokov considers reality a "very subjective affair" (SO 10), Nikolay Chernyshevski, a philosophical "materialist,"

[159] A "brute fact," writes John Searle, is "totally independent of human opinions" (The Construction of Social Reality [New York: Free Press], 1).

[160] Stephen Blackwell summarizes Nabokov's views: "Elusive reality, for Nabokov, is clearly not something to which human beings have direct and full access. Nabokov implies not that there is no reality, nor that we have no knowledge of it, but that the depths of reality go much farther than anyone could possibly perceive, and hence 'objective reality' is for the most part unknown" ("Nabokov, Mach and Monism" [in Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin and Priscilla Meyer, eds.,

views it very differently, perceiving the world as offering the same experience to all observers. Quoted in The Gift, Chernyshevski comments, "We see a tree; another man looks at the same object. We see by the reflection in his eyes that his image of the tree looks exactly the same as our tree. Thus we all see objects as they really exist" (243).[161] Unlike Nabokov (whose agent Fyodor dismisses the above claim as "wild rubbish" [243]), Chernyshevski disjoins particularities of experience and consciousness. In Chernyshevski's opinion, a tree (or anything else) is perceived by all observers in one and the same way: as it "really exist[s]." Notable more for its influence than its logic, Chernyshevski's materialism, because so different, throws an illuminating light on Nabokov's subjectivism.

Given his subjectivism, Nabokov is necessarily critical of people who conflate their own and others' experiences. "To be sure there is an average reality, perceived by all of us," he concedes in response to question premised on the existence of a shared reality, "but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials" (SO 118). Discussing a rival biography of Sebastian Knight, V. hints at Nabokov's position: "Mr. Goodman's method is as simple as his philosophy. His sole object is to show 'poor Knight' as a product and victim of what he calls 'our time'—though why some people are so keen to make others share in their chronometric concepts, has always been a mystery to me" (RLSK 60). Voiced here by V., Nabokov's disdain for shared reality also shapes his response to an interviewer's (1930) question on whether he considers Proust the "most powerful spokesman of our epoch": "[A]n epoch is never 'ours.' I don't know into what sort of epoch the future historian will place us and what its characteristics will be. I have a skeptical attitude towards those characteristics which are proclaimed by contemporaries" (qtd. in Field, Life in Art 265). Also disputative is Nabokov's reply to a question asking if he sees Proust's "heroes" in "contemporary life": "Once again it is difficult for me to imagine *en bloc* 'contemporary'

Nabokov's World: Volume I The Shape of Nabokov's World (Houndsmills, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002)], 124).

[161] Compare Paduk in Bend Sinister: "Whatever I have thought and written in the past, one thing is clear to me now: no matter to whom they belong, two pairs of eyes looking at a boot see the same boot since it is identically reflected in both"

life. Each country has its own life, and each man has his own life" (qtd. in Field, Life in Art 265).[162] One consequence of Nabokov's subjectivism, then, is a distrust of generalizations about experience; seeing experience as shaped by consciousness, he considers such generalizations fatuous and solipsistic.

Subjectivism also fuels Nabokov's aversion to mental laziness. Nearing the end of a train trip, Martha Dreyer watches in horror as her husband leafs through a book of poetry: "An elegant book is all right on a drawing-room table. In a railway car, to allay boredom, one can leaf through some trashy magazine. But to imbibe and relish. . . poems, if you please. . . in an expensive binding. . . a person who calls himself a businessman cannot, must not, dare not act like that" (KQK 10). Credulous faith in received wisdom, in Nabokov's view, shackles the mind. "A philistine," he writes, "is a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group and time" (LoRL 309). Mentality formed of platitudinous notions, the philistine, we read, prefers "set phrases, clichés, banalities expressed in faded words" (LoRL 310). The narrator of "Lance," as he struggles *not* to adopt a ready-made style, recognizes "how much easier writing must have been in former days when one's imagination was not hemmed in by innumerable visual aids, and a frontiersman looking at his first giant cactus or his first high snows was not necessarily reminded of a tire company's pictorial advertisement" (SoVN 635).

Flowing from Nabokov's subjectivism, then, is a sense of conventionality as self-defeating. Given that consciousness and perception are intimately related, to switch off one's mind—through unquestioning adoption of a stock notion, for instance—is to disengage one's imagination from the world. If, for Nabokov, "average reality, perceived by all of us [. . .] is not true reality" (SO 118), it follows that "true reality" is some reality *not* perceived by all: "Paradoxically, the only real,

---

(150).

[162] In a 1926 essay, Nabokov writes: "There is a very seductive and very harmful demon, the demon of generalities. He captivates human thought by labeling every phenomenon and carefully shelving it side by side with other thoroughly wrapped and numbered items. Thanks to him, such a turbid field of human knowledge as history turns into a tidy cubicle with so many wars and so many revolutions [. . .] [W]orst comes to worst when we succumb to the temptation of comfortable generalities regarding not only times past and spent but also the time in which we live" (qtd. in Alexander

authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual" (SO 118).

5.3 A Humorous World

Nabokov's world is filled with uncontrived humor. "He told me about the incredible artistic wit of mimetic disguise," Fyodor recalls of his father, "which was not explainable by the struggle for existence (the rough haste of evolution's unskilled forces), was too refined for the mere deceiving of accidental predators, feathered, scaled and otherwise (not very fastidious, but then not too fond of butterflies), and seemed to have been invented by some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man" (G 110). Rejecting one explanation for mimetic disguise—a Darwinian account premised on winnowing by natural selection—Count Godunov-Cherdyntsev offers another explanation, proposing, first, that mimetic disguise appears not by chance but by design, and, second, that mimetic disguise is fashioned not to deceive predators but to delight human beings. That Nabokov shares his character's beliefs about mimicry is confirmed in Speak, Memory, in a chapter called "Butterflies":

> The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things. Consider the imitation of oozing poison by bubblelike macules an a wing (complete with pseudo-refraction) or by glossy yellow knobs on a chrysalis ("Don't eat me—I have already been squashed, sampled and rejected"). Consider the tricks of an acrobatic caterpillar (of the Lobster Moth) which in infancy looks like bird's dung, but after molting develops scrabbly hymenopteroid appendages and baroque characteristics, allowing the extraordinary fellow to play two parts at once (like the actor in Oriental shows who

Dolinin, "Clio Laughs Last: Nabokov's Answer to Historicism" [in Connolly, ed., Nabokov and his Fiction], 203).

> *becomes* a pair of intertwisted wrestlers): that of a writhing larva and that of a big ant seemingly harrowing it. When a certain moth resembles a certain wasp in shape and color, it also walks and moves its antennae in a waspish, unmothlike manner. When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in. "Natural selection," in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of "the struggle for life" when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. (124-125)

Like Fyodor's father, Nabokov explicitly rejects an explanation for mimicry premised on winnowing by natural selection, favoring instead an account portraying such disguise as deliberately fashioned to enchant attentive and appreciative beings. The natural world, Nabokov suggests in his discussions of mimicry, reflects not happenstance but intent.[163] Moreover, if for Nabokov a designing consciousness has fashioned the natural world, that consciousness is motivated by a desire to create a suitable home for intelligent beings. Analyzing these two beliefs we find Nabokov proposing a certain type of prime mover, a playful one who tricks and teases not out of spitefulness but from affection and respect.

Having described a typical Russian cabaret ("the spectator is made to laugh and dream alternatively. Wooden soldiers, ruddy-faced dolls, moujiks looking like bearded samovars pass and dance before his eyes, and, then, pale-faced Romance sweeps by singing of sleepless nights and distant lands"), Nabokov adds: "And what is life itself—if not another 'cabaret' where tears and smiles are weaved into one wonderful many-colored tissue?" (C 20). Sustaining Nabokov's vision of

[163] In Robert Michael Pyle's words, "Perhaps because the subterfuges of mimicry so resembled his own favorite tools as literary trickster, Nabokov was loath to consign their wonderment to strictly mechanical causes. He suspected a subtle intelligence was at work" (NB 65).

a playful prime mover is a sense of life as theater. Near the end of The Gift, Fyodor, ambling toward Berlin's Grunewald, revels in the liveliness of his world:

> Crossing the bridge [. . .] Fyodor, as usual, was gladdened by the wonderful poetry of railroad banks, by their free and diversified nature: a growth of locusts and sallows, wild grass, bees, butterflies—all this lived in isolation and unconcern in the harsh vicinity of coal dust glistening below between the five streams of rails, and in blissful estrangement from the city coulisses above, from the peeled walls of old houses toasting their tattooed backs in the morning sunshine. Beyond the bridge, near the small public garden, two elderly postal workers, having completed their check of a stamp machine and grown suddenly playful, were stealing up from behind the jasmine, one behind the other, one imitating the other's gestures, toward a third—who with eyes closed was humbly and briefly relaxing on a bench before his working day—in order to tickle his nose with a flower. (328)

Walking along an ordinary street, observing matter-of-fact things, Fyodor confronts an extraordinary world, one rife with poetry and play, a world which, like Nabokov's own, is reminiscent of a colorful cabaret. If Nabokov's metaphysics describes a detectable prime mover, subtly evident in the natural world, it also allows for a *playful* prime mover, one whose manifestations imply a desire to amuse and enchant. Relaxing in the Grunewald, enthralled by a group of nuns,[164] Fyodor muses, "How it had been mounted! How much labor had gone into this light, swift scene, into this deft traverse, what muscles there were beneath that heavy-looking, black cloth, which would be exchanged after the intermission for gossamer ballet skirts" (344). Mindfulness of the world is, for Nabokov, typically rewarded by recognition of the world as ordered, arranged, *directed*.

[164] "A little song sounded among the trees, and presently there came into view, walking at a brisk pace, five nuns—round-faced, wearing black dresses and white coifs—and the little song, half schoolgirlish, half angelic, hovered about them the whole time, while first one and then another bent down on the move to pluck a modest flower" (G 344).

In Nabokov's world, uncontrived humor—humor inascribable to a human agent—generally appears as either mimetic disguise or portentous coincidence. "This one is an Angle Wing. It has a curiously formed letter C. It mimics a chink of light through a dead leaf," he says, calling a reporter's attention to a butterfly's wing. "Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that humorous?" (NB 334). Also amused
by mimicry is Fyodor's father who speaks of the phenomenon's "artistic wit" (G 110). Too subtle to be appreciated by a predator, mimetic disguise is, in Nabokov's view, part of life's theatricality.[165]

Coincidence, too, suggests to Nabokov the existence of a playful prime mover.[166] Describing in Speak, Memory "the true purpose of autobiography," Nabokov identifies that purpose as the noting in a lived life of "thematic designs" (27). Having recalled an occasion on which a family friend, General Kuropatkin, diverted him with a match trick, Nabokov relates the occasion's "special sequel":

> [A]t a certain point of my father's flight from Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg to southern Russia he was accosted while crossing a bridge, by an old man who looked like a gray-bearded peasant in his sheepskin coat. He asked my father for a light. The next moment each recognized the other. I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment, but that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through. (26-27)

Assessing this and other coincidences, Nabokov ascribes them to a ludic prime mover. "One

[165] Alexandrov sees not only Nabokov's metaphysics, but his artistry as well, as rooted in this notion of mimicry: "all of the characteristics of his art that are adduced in discussions of its self-conscious artifice, might best be understood as Nabokov's imitation of the fundamental principle he discerned in nature. This, in turn, implies that the reader of Nabokov's texts can be seen as occupying a position with regard to them that is analogous to that which Nabokov assumes with regard to his real world" (Nabokov's Otherworld 46).

[166] Many implications of Nabokov's understanding of coincidence have been analyzed by Boyd (Nabokov's Ada 94-

cannot," he writes, reviewing his own autobiography, "but respect the amount of retrospective acumen and creative concentration that the author had to summon in order to plan his book according to the way his life had been planned by unknown players of games" ("Conclusive Evidence: A Review" 126). Another "theme" sounds at a later point in Speak, Memory. Of an aristocratic ancestress, Christina von Korrf, Nabokov writes, "it was she who, in Paris, in 1791, lent her passport and her brand-new custom-made traveling coach (a sumptuous affair on high red wheels, upholstered in white Utrecht velvet, with dark green curtains and all kinds of gadgets, then modern, such as a *vase de voyage*) to the royal family for their escape to Varennes" (56). Here introduced, the "escape" theme resounds in a later chapter as Nabokov remembers the end of the Russian monarchy: "[I]n the gloom of a tragic autumn, with the Bolsheviks gaining the upper hand, one of Kerenski's aides asked my father for a sturdy car the premier might use if forced to leave in a hurry [. . .] and if I treasure the recollection of that request (recently denied by my eminent friend, but certainly made by his aide-de-camp), it is only from a compositional viewpoint—because of the amusing thematic echo of Christina von Korrf's part in the Varennes episode of 1791" (183). Conceived of as a composer stating and restating "themes," the prime mover, for Nabokov, weaves patterns into the fabric of a life, adding embellishments which, once perceived, amuse and enchant. "As so often happens with well-studied lives," we read in a note to Eugene Onegin, "an artistically satisfying pattern appears at this point of our inquiry" (EOIII 201).

Studying his world, Nabokov finds not accident but order. "[T]he folly of chance is the logic of fate," we read in "A Busy Man." "How not to believe in fate, in the infallibility of its promptings, in the obstinacy of its purpose, when its black lines persistently show through the handwriting of life?" (SoVN 293) Here and elsewhere, the notion of "fate"—conceived of as a playful force loosed in the world—represents Nabokov's favored means of introducing readers to the idea of a playful prime mover. "In common with Pushkin," he writes, "I am fascinated by fatidic dates" (SO 75). Shaping individual lives, fate imbues the world with humor, as subtle patterns are woven into the

---

108).

rough fabric of existence. Recalling in Speak, Memory a seaside outing during which his son collected pieces of broken pottery, Nabokov writes, "I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scroll-work fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by *her* mother a hundred years ago" (308).

In a mock-review of Conclusive Evidence, Nabokov credits the orderliness of his life to "unknown players of games" (126). As this attribution hints, Nabokov, seeing the world as ordered, enjoys speculating about the identity of the forces responsible for its orderliness. At various times, he labels these implicit rule-makers not only "unknown players of games," but "Person Unknown" (G 328), "commentators of [a] destiny" (A 38), a "committee of ghosts" (P 136), "tender ghosts" (SM 139), and, in Shade's poem "Pale Fire," "aloof and mute" players of a "game of worlds" (PF 63). As these many attributions suggest, Nabokov never stops pondering the nature of the forces responsible for the order in his world, never ceases characterizing the anonymous rule-makers who decide when the game begins and ends, how it is played, and what must be done to succeed.[167]

Nabokov's prime mover invites us to share in the fun. As Shade writes, "It sufficed that I in life could find / Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind / Of correlated pattern in the game / Plexed artistry, and something of the same / Pleasure in it as they who played it found" (63). While for Nabokov no mortal can identify with precision the forces responsible for our world,[168] a thoughtful person intuits something like a benevolent power interested in human happiness. "The quietly carefree and even somehow childish rhythm of this gathering was particularly reassuring to K. [. . .] [T]he simplicity, the serenity, all of it denoted in its own way that kindliness which K, who himself did not possess it, recognized in all of life's phenomena, be it the smile of a bonbon in its

[167] Boyd first explicated the relationship between Nabokov's intuiting of design and belief in a playful prime mover (Nabokov's Ada 94-108), a relationship explored by Alexandrov in some detail: "Nabokov's conception of his life as filled with patterning extends to his view of the world of nature as 'made.' His description of natural phenomena in terms of artifice in Speak, Memory and elsewhere thus implies not merely that they have been transformed by being incorporated into an autobiography or other text, but that they too were fashioned by an occult agent transcending the material world of heredity and environment" (Nabokov's Otherworld 45).

goffered bonnet, or the echo of an old friendship divined in another's small talk" (SoVN 535). Neither contest nor chaos (" 'Struggle for life' indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar, to the grunting beast's crazy obsession with the search for food" [SM 298]), life, for Nabokov, is a joyous production staged by a generous prime mover.

5.4 Elusive Reality

At the heart of Nabokov's metaphysics is a vision of reality as both overwhelming and artful. Why, to review, is Nabokov's world so difficult to grasp?

Some reasons lie outside an observer's control. For Nabokov, particularization is the key external hindrance to apprehension of reality. As noted, each feature of Nabokov's world is intricate and unique, meaning all features demand scrupulous attention. Within Nabokov's world, little can be assumed or predicted, for knowledge is always less than perfect.

Theatricality, too, Nabokov sees as hindering apprehension of reality. Reflecting in large part the designs of a playful prime mover, Nabokov's world abounds with witty deceit and sly patterning, making it a realm where much is not what it appears. As a "good cheat" (SO 11), the prime mover (i.e. "nature") amiably exploits human complacency. As a result, perception of reality involves far more than a gathering of sense impressions.

Nabokov also finds within himself obstacles to knowledge of the world. Arising in part from crudities of language, generalization, with its lumping together of unlike things, ignores detail in the stuffing of pigeonholes. "Generalizations," we read in Strong Opinions, "are full of loopholes and traps" (142). Also hampering perception of the world is conventionality, for to be conventional is to cease to imaginatively animate the world. Finally, Nabokov considers each deterministic philosophy—whether social, genetic or economic—an impediment to perception of reality, for every

[168] "No sound / No furtive light came from their involute / Abode" ("Pale Fire," lines 817-819).

determinism defines certain developments as impossible.[169]

For Nabokov, discernment of reality is anything but easy. Yet the rewards warrant all the labor involved—the noting of details, the appreciating of connections, the probing of facades. Moreover, if certain factors hinder apprehension of the world, other factors are of assistance.

One such factor is individuality. Provided he or she is neither "a born Marxist or a corpse," there is, Nabokov writes, "in every child the essentially human urge to reshape the earth, to act upon a friable environment" (SM 302). Harboring this urge, children create worlds of their own, whether by digging in sand or by arranging blocks to form make-believe skyscrapers. Unlike the born Marxist or corpse who, in Nabokov's words, "meekly waits for the environment to fashion *him*" (SM 302), the healthy child imposes him or herself on the world, resisting the unwanted and augmenting the desired. Implicit in Nabokov's celebration of individuality is a sense that conformity is antipathetic to human nature. To relinquish one's own ideas is, he feels, not only ungratifying but unnatural, for to do so is to override an innate drive to remake the world.

Convinced that the only "authentic" worlds are those that "seem unusual" (SO 118), Nabokov links perception of "true reality" (SO 118), not with allegiance to "general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery" (SO 118), but with fealty to one's peculiarity. "Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture" (SO 118). There are two reasons for Nabokov's linking of individuality and discernment of "true reality." First, individuality often takes the form of a strongly-held interest, pursuit of which brings reality closer. "An eccentric is a person whose mind and senses are excited by things the average citizen does not even notice" (SO 132).[170] Second, to cultivate individuality is to renounce conformity, and so to distance oneself from many clichés and generalizations:

[169] Nabokov has a keen eye for the solitary event that disproves a determinism. "As I was about to board the train, it gave a jerk and started to move; my foot slipped and my cane was sent flying under the wheels. [. . .] I waited for one, two, three, four cars to pass (Russian trains were notoriously slow in gaining momentum) and when, at last, the rails were revealed, I picked up my cane from between them and raced after the nighmarishly receding bumpers. A sturdy proletarian arm conformed to the rules of sentimental fiction (rather than to those of Marxism) by helping me to swarm up" (SM 243).

> Anybody whose mind is proud enough not to breed true, secretly carries a bomb at the back of his brain; and so I suggest, just for the fun of the thing, taking that private bomb and carefully dropping it upon the model city of commonsense. In the brilliant light of the ensuing explosion many curious things will appear; our rarer senses will supplant for a brief spell the dominant vulgarian that squeezes Sinbad's neck in the catch-as-catch-can match between the adopted self and the inner one. (LoL 372)[171]

Although Nabokov here describes the *bona fide* eccentric—"the enchanter in his cave, the indignant artist" (LoL 372)—his privileging of eccentricity over conformity expresses more than just a love of idiosyncrasy. Everyone, in his view, possesses both an "adopted" and an "inner" self, embraces both conventional and unconventional views. And it is, he maintains, precisely in those areas of our lives and thought where we are unconventional that we are primed for perception of a real world. Every person, not just the freak, is possessed of uncommon qualities,[172] and for this reason all people—even philistines—are capable of discerning previously unnoticed aspects of reality.

In Nabokov's opinion, creativity, too, allows for better knowledge of the world. A reverence for creativity infuses Nabokov's lectures on literature. "There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer" (LoL 5). In Nabokov's view, an enchanter is recognized by his or her creation of original worlds. The enchanter's stories, Nabokov argues, are "fairy tales," each of which—like Madame Bovary or Anna Karenina ("supreme fairy tales" [LoDQ 1])—evokes an "original world" (LoDQ 1), "one that has not been here before" (LoRL 106). For Nabokov, then, the enchanter—the major writer—invents new worlds, worlds whose values are "not traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of

[170] Nabokov's poem "To My Soul" identifies a "provincial naturalist" as "eccentric" (SO 132).
[171] Nabokov adds, "I am triumphantly mixing metaphors because that is exactly what they are intended for when they follow the course of their secret connections" (LoL 373).

unique surprises" (LoL 2). Nabokov clearly appreciates creativity. But in what sense does he link it with discernment of a "real" world?

The "fairy tale" worlds of original novels are unreal, Nabokov argues, not by reference to the world of objective observation, but in comparison to the bogus world of lazy generalization. "We shall do our best to avoid the fatal error of looking for so-called 'real life' in novels," he writes in a lecture on Don Quixote, (1), adding:

> On the other hand, what is this vaunted 'real life,' what are these solid 'facts'? One is suspicious of them when one sees biologists stalking each other with loaded genes, or battling historians, locked in each other's arms as they roll in the dust of centuries. [. . .] The notion of 'real life,' then, is based on a system of generalities, and it is only as generalities that the so-called 'facts' of so-called 'real life' are in contrast with a work of fiction. The less general a world of fiction is, then, the less recognizable it is in terms of 'real life.' Or, to put it the other way around, the more vivid and new details in a work of fiction, then the more it departs from so-called 'real life,' since 'real life' is the generalized epithet, the average emotion, the advertised multitude, the commonsensical world. (LoDQ 1)

For Nabokov, an enchanting novel, although it offers an alternative to the world of received wisdom, need not evoke a fantastic realm. For often such novels depict genuine features of the objective world, features overlooked by (to quote Nabokov's dismissal of "average reality" [SO 118]) "conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials". Praising The Overcoat, Nabokov credits the work with depiction of *objective* reality, arguing that if Akaky Akakyevich's world is "queer" the reason relates, not to any fancied irreality, but to a dissimilarity to a "stage setting" mistaken for the objective world. "So what is that queer world, glimpses of which we keep catching through the gaps

[172] "[F]ortunately [. . .] the average man himself is but a piece of fiction, a tissue of statistics" (LoDQ 1).

of the harmless looking sentences? It is in a way the *real* one but it looks wildly absurd to us, accustomed as we are to the stage setting that screens it" (NG 143). A truly original work, Nabokov asserts, while certainly incompatible with conventional wisdom, may not be at odds with objective reality; for such works often depict unnoticed features of the real world, features too delicate to be caught in the coarse mesh of generalization. In brief, independent thinkers, because unhindered by preconception, *notice* things; and noticing things, such thinkers come to know reality. "There is no science without fancy" (SO 79).

Curiosity, too, Nabokov sees as essential to understanding of the world. Reality, he insists, should be questioned and probed, from a range of angles and to the greatest possible depth. While creativity is essential to both art and science, "Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art, the child's scrawl on the fence, and the crank's message in the market place" (SO 32). The artist, Nabokov suggests, "should *know* the world" (SO 32), meaning he or she must not only note how things are arranged, but must also adopt that "childishly speculative state of mind" (LoL 374) which asks *why* things are arranged in a particular way. The "true artist," we read elsewhere, "is the person who never takes anything for granted" (LoRL 113). Moreover, to cultivate curiosity is to reject conformity. "[C]uriosity [. . .] is insubordination in its purest form," remarks a character in Bend Sinister (46), speaking for an author stirred by all those who send their thoughts clambering into areas marked with "No Trespassing" signs. Unrelenting curious himself,[173] Nabokov repeatedly insists on the value of mindful exploration: "The more things we know the better equipped we are to understand any one thing and it is a burning pity that our lives are not long enough and not sufficiently free of annoying obstacles, to study all things with the same care and depth as the one we now devote to some favorite subject or period" (qtd. in Boyd, American Years 110). As a character in "The Passenger" asks, "is not every writer precisely a person who bothers about trifles?" (SoVN 184)

In Nabokov's view, an elusive world demands a pliant mind, one able to adapt and adjust. As

[173] Something Appel highlights: "[T]o have known Nabokov at all personally was first to be impressed by his intense and

both a writer and a teacher, Nabokov encourages in others an expectant mindfulness. Surfaces should be probed and differences noted, with an observer always ready to reassess and reconsider. Nabokov hates complacency, on the one hand for its unprofitability, on the other hand for its wasting of much that distinguishes a human mind. Suited to life in a dynamic world, a human mind, he feels, need not be overwhelmed by the exigencies of a present moment. But all too often, as rote thinking replaces imaginative awareness, people lose touch with reality, grasping not the peculiarities of an object but the crudities of a preconception. In Nabokov's view, such situations need not develop, for adoption of a mindful outlook precludes such mental laziness. Mindfulness, however, must be developed.

5.5 Humor and Deliberation

Many humorists are notably mindful individuals. To amuse by design one must ask questions of life. Are there hidden aspects to this situation? Is this expression ambiguous? How else can this object be used? A close relationship exists between funniness and thoughtfulness.[174] Only by exploring this relationship can we understand Nabokov's love of humor.

What, to recall, does Kinbote's note to line 80—that describing Charles Xavier's luxurious bedroom—reveal of humor's nature and effects? First, humor invariably presents the unexpected, typically offering something new in the way of behavior, outlook or event: Kinbote's note to line 80 is thoroughly surprising, not only for a first-time reader unused to Kinbote's madness and methodology, but also for a rereader unpracticed at reading with eyes open for ambiguity and patterning. Second, humor rebukes complacency: Kinbote's note, in presenting a series of novelties, reveals the folly of taking *anything* for granted. In sum, humor, in countering expectations,

---

immense curiosity, his uninhibited and imaginative response to everything around him" (Annotated xl).

[174] In the words of Seymour and Rhoda Fisher, "[C]omics are wary about surface appearances and facades. They seem to anticipate hidden significance and implicit meanings. It is their assumption that there is more in every situation than first meets the eye. Their distrust does not typically seem to be of paranoid or pathological proportions. Rather, it appears to be a moderate and even considered uneasiness with assuming that one can naively accept communications from the world without questioning whether they are truthful or oversimplified" (Pretend the World is Funny and Forever: A

discourages presupposition. In doing so, humor promotes mindfulness.

To be mindful is in part to think for oneself, to take on the responsibility of assessing the world. Humor encourages individuality in two ways. First, humor foregrounds limitations in orthodox thought, emphasizing the extent to which shared expectations sell reality short. Second, humor reveals the fun to be had in looking at things in new ways. In short, humor, stealthily and enjoyably, redefines what individuals (and objects and words) *do*, broadening expectations as generalizations crumble in the face of counter-examples.[175] Humor, it is often argued, is anarchistic;[176] and although the anarchist need not be a non-conformist, he or she necessarily privileges private understanding over orthodoxy.

A second aspect of mindfulness is creativity. Few settings are as original as Zembla: language, custom, aesthetics, society—all are strikingly new. And Zembla's novelty is almost always *humorous* novelty, as amusing new uses are found for familiar things (a porcelain cup; a literary exegesis);[177] or as amusing links are forged between disparate features of the world (a psychiatrist and a pear; manliness and homosexuality). Few theorists deny the humorist a measure of originality. Most, however, ignore the ingenuity of the audience, an ingenuity on display each time humor is grasped. In general, humor invites its audience to imaginatively solve a puzzle of some kind.[178] Laughter, then, is the culmination of a creative process. If a humorless person is rigidly unimaginative, is locked into a single viewpoint, the humorful (not necessarily funny) person

---

Psychological Analysis of Comedians, Clowns, and Actors [Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981], 77).

[175] Jenkins, expanding on the work of Douglas, writes: "[J]okes work by inserting into popular discourse unstated beliefs and attitudes, repressed desires, unspeakable tensions, social instabilities that otherwise would be denied expression, although these counterdiscourses gain exposure at the expense of no longer being taken seriously. The radical force of jokes is still potentially great since jokes challenge the ability of cultural institutions to naturalize their meanings, questioning the reception community's 'common sense' understandings" (What Made Pistachio Nuts? 49).

[176] The Fishers emphasize this point: "[The comic] declares in his funny relentless way that nothing is right, nothing is wrong, nothing is sacred. He is a genuine anarchist. In fact, he is perhaps more of an anarchist than the anarchist because he does not ground what he does in any theory or organized program of action. His comedy insists that all social facades and explanations are suspect and essentially laughable" (Pretend the World is Funny and Forever 213).

[177] Pepinello and Weisberg argue that "traditional riddles arose when it was noticed that an utterance like 'Don't move, I've got you covered,' which was typically applied in a particular context, could also be applied to rugs and floors (i.e., What did the rug say to the floor? Don't move, I've got you covered)" ("Linguistics and Humor" 79).

[178] In Gricean terms, humor is "uncooperative." As Salvatore Attardo explains, "It has been frequently noted that some part of the information in jokes must be left implicit. Explication of the mechanisms involved in the humorous effect of the text results in the destruction of the humorous effect: i.e. a joke loses its humor when the joke teller explains the punch line. [. . .] In other words, for the joke to 'function' as such, some information must be left unsaid" (Linguistic Theories of Humor [New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994], 289).

possesses a flexible and creative mind.[179]

Humor also develops aspects of mindfulness related to curiosity and attentiveness to detail. Unsatisfied with rote explanations, the typical humorist wants to know what is *really* going on. Are politicians actually devoted to the public good? Is a companionable fellow in fact my friend? Because distrustful of generalizations and public truths, the humorist focuses on intrinsic features, looking at what is undeniably present as opposed to what should be there.[180] For the most part, the humorist's curiosity reflects a sense that surface features often mislead. Convinced more awaits discovery, the humorist is motivated to dig[181] (by way of contrast, those certain they stand on bedrock feel no need to pick up a shovel). In writing Pale Fire, Nabokov had to consider not just how a straitlaced society might appear to a homosexual outcast, but along what lines that outcast's fantasy life might move. Curiosity takes many forms; yet in each case it stems from a desire to know more—a desire premised on a belief that more remains to be known.

Humor—Nabokov's in particular—also *promotes* curiosity, a point illustrated by Kinbote's note to line 80. First, there are the allusions, external and internal, hidden and undisguised, awaiting investigation. Who is Lilith? What do we know of Sudarg of Bokay? Second, there are the delicate patterns of detail. Why does Fleur de Fyler have luminous eyes and a wavy walk? Why are so many women in Kinbote's note rebuffed? Explored attentively, such patterns reveal—to the reader's amusement—aspects of the inner structure of a work. Third, there are the concealed word-games. Fleur's surname, "de Fyler," harbors two hidden jokes, one relating to Kinbote's misogyny, another pertaining to Fleur's feline origins. Also inconspicuously funny is Sudarg of Bokay's name, which

---

[179] The possibility of humor, writes Neil Schaeffer, "alerts us to be ready to receive the incongruity with the widest possible latitude of association and permits the most idiosyncratic linkages or significances to be discovered between the associations polarized by the incongruity" (The Art of Laughter [New York: Columbia UP, 1981], 18).

[180] Fisher and Fisher observe: "[The comic] tries harder than most people to ignore social constraints on his perceptions and to get down to the 'real' object. His scepticism about the social definition of the object would presumably lead him to move closer to its physical properties as a basis for identifying it. In other words, the comic's anticipation that today's social assumption is tomorrow's laugh leads him to anchor his perceptions to a greater degree than usual in nonsocial attributes like shape, physiognomic appearance, size, location in space, speed, and position in time" (Pretend the World is Funny and Forever 214).

[181] Comedian Joey Bishop explains: "You look at all good comedians [. . .]. They will walk into a house and pick up articles and look at them. It's curiosity. It's curiosity about the news, about science, it's curiosity about everything that develops material. Unless you have a curious mind, you cannot be a comedian" (qtd. in Fisher and Fisher, Pretend the World is Funny and Forever 9).

likewise invites the reader to see past an intended meaning.

Humor develops in its audience an expectant wariness, a sense that any given feature may, examined closely enough, release—jack-in-the-box-like—a surprise. The possibility of humor implies that nothing should be taken for granted: apparent disorder may conceal subtle order, and meaning may not be restricted to a single sense. Because weighted with this implication, humor inspires its audience to pose questions, to seek links, to pursue leads. An incurious reader will not be unpleased by Nabokov's novels for each is endowed with attractive surface features;[182] but an active reader receives many more rewards.

The humorist—creative, curious and possessing an idiosyncratic viewpoint—both exemplifies and encourages mindfulness. Thus, the humorist readies his or her audience for perception of nuance and uniqueness. Expectations influence perception,[183] meaning—all else being equal—people holding a wider range of expectations are more perceptive. If conversancy with humor results in a better grasp of reality, the reason relates not just to humor's exercising of certain mental attributes but also to its widening of expectations. After reading Nabokov one's eyes may (to paraphrase Nikolai Gogol [144]) become nabokovized and one is apt to see bits of his world in the most unexpected places. No doubt every reader of Pale Fire has come across real-world scholarship of a Kinbotian cast.[184]

Nabokov, too, associates humor with better understanding of the world. Humor, for Nabokov, is a mindful medium, one at odds with conformity and resistant to generalization, a medium reflecting a willingness to assess the world from a range of viewpoints. Nabokov's enjoyment of humor is best understood by reference to this perceived mindfulness, for, associating humor with deliberation, and linking deliberation with better apprehension of elusive reality, Nabokov

[182] Martin Amis writes that Nabokov "spins a jolly good yarn, with believable characters, a strong story-line, and vivid, humorous prose" ("The Sublime and the Ridiculous" [in Peter Quennell, ed., Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979)], 73).
[183] This point is explored at length by R. L. Gregory; e.g.: "If all perceiving of objects requires some guessing, we may think of sensory stimulation as providing data for hypotheses concerning the state of the external world. The selected hypotheses, following this view, are perceptions" ("The Confounded Eye" [in R. L. Gregory and E. H. Gombrich, eds., Illusion in Nature and Art (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1973)], 61).
[184] Nabokov certainly has. "The purpose of the present review is not to answer a critic but to ask him to remove his

unsurprisingly sees in humor a means of exercising important mental attributes. Features of Nabokov's world resist classification, being too particularized to fit comfortably in pigeonholes. Yet Nabokov's world can be grasped—to a large degree—given an observer unhindered by preconception. Relevant in this context is a passage in "Father's Butterflies" (a satellite story to The Gift), where an invented naturalist assesses a heterodox article on butterflies (by Count Godunov-Cherdyntsev):

> I quite realize that the effort required to comprehend the basic tenets of this paper is not immediately accessible to a mind that has constructed, alongside the rules of logical thought, certain idols or habits of thought that, having rooted themselves and developed more by the rules of secondary mechanics than initial inspiration, have nevertheless acquired legislative power, leaving to logic only the executive. . . . One must renounce habit, one must have one's thought assume an uncommon pose that might, *a priori*, appear as difficult to achieve as the unnatural arm-and-leg motions of a floating human are to a beginner (*tyro*) at a swimming pool. (NB 215-16).

Like hamstrung "Murchison," struggling to grasp the novelties of an article on butterflies, we are all, making our way in the world, hampered by fealty to "habits of thought".[185] Only by renouncing habit, by having our thoughts "assume an uncommon pose," can we grasp a complexity far exceeding that allowed for by language and custom. Usually ascribable to adoption of an uncommon pose,[186] humor frees us from the restraints of lazy thought, as clichés and platitudes are jettisoned like excess ballast.

Key aspects of Nabokov's metaphysics reflect experiences of and with humor. Whereas

---

belongings," he writes in words John Shade—spared by a miracle—might have embraced (SO 304).

[185] Count Godunov-Cherdyntsev is himself aware of this problem: "I like to recall [Fyodor tells us] what my father wrote: 'When closely—no matter how closely—observing events in nature we must, in the very process of observation, beware of letting our reason—that garrulous dragoman who always runs ahead—prompt us with explanations which then begin imperceptibly to influence the very course of observation and distort it' " (G 330).

[186] The pose may be physical: "If you have ever tried to stand and bend your head so as to look back between your knees, with your face upside down, you will see the world in a totally different light. Try it on the beach: it is very funny to see people walking when you look at them upside down" (LoL 289).

many people see humor as childish or trivial, useful only as a respite from serious affairs, Nabokov views it as momentous in both effect and implication. His exaltations of humor are considered expressions of deeply held beliefs about our world and other possible worlds, and about how we acquire knowledge of these varied worlds.

Conclusion

And all tomorrows in my funnybone.
—Pale Fire 38

Nabokov's humor can be approached from many directions. That this dissertation varies its angle of attack—focusing in turn on what Nabokov's humor reveals of audience, of humorist, and of world—is a tribute to the wide-ranging implications of his playfulness. His humor is exciting not just because it identifies the reader as curious and creative, and not just because it implies an author able to anticipate and explode that reader's expectations, and not just because it shows the world to be a realm of unsuspected playfulness, but because, in simultaneously doing these things, it nurtures a sense that all aspects of life (self, others, nature) exceed expectations. To focus on only one realm in which Nabokov's humor has an impact, to concentrate just upon what his humor reveals of audience, humorist or world, is not just to diminish the humor's importance, but also—and more importantly—to advance an explanation only loosely related to Nabokov's own conception of humor.

Nabokov's enjoyment of humor, and so his liveliness as a humorist, emerge from a sense that humor—the angelic kind at least—reveals auspicious properties of both world and mind. Therefore, if this dissertation presents Nabokov as purposefully using humor in the evoking of worlds akin to his own in their beguiling playfulness, in doing so it acknowledges those aspects of Nabokov's theory of humor linking amusement and discovery.

Using humor, Nabokov endows invented worlds with the qualities he most enjoys in his own world: depth, playful deceptiveness and unpredictability. Therefore, through use of humor Nabokov

develops in readers those mental attributes he considers essential to appreciation of the "real" world: curiosity, creativity and a hunger for detail. Nabokov hates complacency, seeing it as unprofitable and unwarranted. Using humor, he invites readers to reject presupposition and embrace open-mindedness, as joking encourages imaginative scrutiny of a beneficent—and unappreciated—reality.

The process is less tendentious than this summary suggests, preceding not through the mass production of puns and allusions but through mindful (meaning suggestive of curiosity and alertness) contrivance of distinctive (meaning ingenious and memorable) jokes. Adopting still another angle of attack, we will in closing explore how the process works.

6.1 Homo Ludens

Thus far we have been concerned almost exclusively with Nabokov's fiction, and rightly so, for although Nabokov's poetry can be funny, and although his criticism is often humorous, it is as a novelist that Nabokov is at his best and will be best remembered. Yet there is something to be gained by exploring—if only briefly—other realms in which Nabokov's sense of humor is manifest, for every occasion on which Nabokov uses humor reveals something of his motivations as a humorist.

Humor was important to Nabokov's day-to-day relations with others. An essay by Alfred Appel Jr., "Remembering Nabokov," hints at *how* important it was. Recalling many examples of the "abundant fun [Nabokov] made for himself and others" (20), Appel's essay celebrates Nabokov's "transcendent sense of humor" (29). Nabokov, we learn, was "homo ludens" (12), a "fun animal" (11), a "great and most resilient celebrant of life" (11), someone who "loved badinage" (25):

> Nabokov in conversation toyed with language continuously; and, though he worked slowly and carefully on his prose, his written puns must have come to him quickly and easily. Two examples: when my wife and I visited Montreux in 1970 Nabokov

> was most interested to know if my classes at Northwestern University had been disrupted by demonstrations. No, nothing very dramatic, I replied, apart from one male student who expressed his disapproval of the war in Vietnam by calling me a eunuch. "Oh, no, Alfred, you misunderstood him," Nabokov said quickly. "He called you 'a unique' ". "My classroom problems are not political," I continued. I told him about a nun who sat in the back row of one of my lecture courses, and who one day complained after class that a couple near her were always spooning. "Sister," I had said, "in these troubled times we should be grateful if that's all they were doing"; and I related this to Nabokov rather smugly, proud of what I deemed to be my quick wit. "Ohhh," moaned Nabokov, mourning my lost opportunity, clapping his hand to his head in mock anguish. "You should have said, 'Sister, be grateful that they were not forking.' " (21)

Other people also comment on Nabokov's robust sense of humor. Interviewed years later, Nabokov's assistant at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology remembered, in Brian Boyd's words, "his playfulness, his jokes, his word games and puzzles, his uproarious delight at oddities, his loud hearty laugh, the explosions of hilarity that would fill his eyes with tears" (American Years 82). As a teacher, too, Nabokov was alert to humor. As Boyd explains:

> Nabokov's sense of humor was a key to the charm of his lectures. He had running gags: the dusty blackboards were "greyboards," his lectures "monologues." He could give the plainest instruction a comic twist: "And simultaneously, that is in the first days of October, you will dive before I push you into the Dickens novel." Toward the end of a lecture he might start reading again from the beginning, and watch how some students' heads took a minute or two to rise from their notes while others had already caught on and waited in an expectant hush. Occasionally he would find something so

> uproarious in Gogol or Dickens or Flaubert that his laughter would infiltrate his lecturing until his wife would have to signal to him from her front-row seat that no one could understand what he was saying. (American Years 180-181)

To interact with Nabokov, then, was to be continually amused and challenged.[187] Must we rely on anecdotal evidence to know this? Not if we read Speak, Memory.

6.2 Humor in Speak, Memory

Speak, Memory is quite amusing. Not as funny, certainly, as Lolita or Pale Fire but funnier than most autobiographies. Enlivening the work, for instance, are a number of hidden allusions. Long-winded Freud appears as "Sigismond Lejoyeux, a local aeronaut" inflating "a huge custard-colored balloon" (156); estranged Edmund Wilson (vocal critic of Nabokov's translation of Eugene Onegin) turns up as "world-famous grandmaster Wilhelm Edmundson" who "during a simultaneous display in a Minsk café [. . .] lost his rook, by an absurd oversight" (133); cartoonist Otto Soglow, famous for images of bemedaled generals and massed men, is playfully evoked as Nabokov recollects a poem: "The ranks of words I reviewed were again so glowing, with their puffed-out little chests and trim uniforms, that I put down to mere fancy the sagging I had noticed out of the corner of my eye" (219); while Nabokov materializes in the anagrammatic guise of "Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend" (218).

Subtlety characterizes much but not all of the humor in Speak, Memory. One openly amusing passage recalls the effect a butterfly net had on rustics in the Pyrenees ("I would see in my wake the villagers frozen in the various attitudes my passage had caught them in, as if I were Sodom and they Lot's wife" [131]); another wittily celebrates independent thought ("Since, in my metaphysics, I am

[187] "[W]hen he tells you the truth he winks at you to confuse you," remarks Elena Levin (qtd. in Boyd, American Years

a confirmed non-unionist and have no use for organized tours through anthropomorphic paradises, I am left to my own, not negligible devices when I think of the best things in life" [297]); while still another half-heartedly defers to the findings of certain students of human sexuality ("Our innocence seems to me now almost monstrous, in the light of various 'sexual confessions' (to be found in Havelock Ellis and elsewhere) which involve tiny tots mating like mad" [203]).

In Speak, Memory, then, humor is present in many forms, appearing now as allusion, now as anagram, now as image or pun. The most exciting thing about Speak, Memory's humor is that certain of the book's jokes allow us to glimpse—if only for a moment—the world through Nabokov's eyes.

In a foreword, Nabokov touches on the difficulties he faced in composing Speak, Memory. While certain of the problems he mentions—a faulty memory, for example ("Mnemosyne [. . .] has shown herself to be a very careless girl" [13])—bedevil all memoirists, other problems rankle only autobiographers of a certain stripe—for instance, Russian émigrés whose subject-matter spans the twentieth-century.

> All dates are given in the New Style: we lagged twelve days behind the rest of the civilized world in the nineteenth century, and thirteen in the beginning of the twentieth. By the Old Style I was born on April 10, at daybreak, in the last year of the last century, and that was (if I could have been whisked across the border at once) April 22 in, say, Germany; but since all my birthdays were celebrated, with diminishing pomp, in the twentieth century, everybody, including myself, upon being shifted by revolution and expatriation from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian, used to add thirteen, instead of twelve days to the 10th of April. The error is serious. What is to be done? I find "April 23" under "birth date" in my most recent passport, which is also the birth date of Shakespeare, my nephew Vladimir Sikorski, Shirley Temple

---

71).

> and Hazel Brown (who, moreover, shares my passport). This, then, is the problem. Calculatory ineptitude prevents me from trying to solve it. (13)

The key joke in this passage transforms a bureaucrat's description of a passport holder into someone worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as William Shakespeare and Shirley Temple.[188] This joke has three important characteristics.

First, the joke is easily missed.[189] Reading the relevant line, one tends to dismiss Hazel Brown as either a lesser celebrity or another Nabokov relative, for the name is plausible and the context, we are told, "serious." Only the parenthetical reference to a shared passport disrupts an earnest reading, since children alone can share a passport (and then only with a guardian). At a certain point—given a mind troubled enough to mull things over—a reader just sees the joke, perceiving in a flash Hazel Brown's colorful ancestry.

Second, the joke is opportunistic. In conjuring up Hazel Brown, Nabokov seizes on an unconstrued linguistic accident. Which is not to say that wit plays no part in the process, but only to note that Nabokov's joke-making begins with an act of perception, as opposed to one of invention.

Third and most importantly, the joke is amiable. Some theorists credit all humor to hostile or negative feelings. Koestler, for instance, argues that joking always expresses "the aggressive-defensive or self-asserting tendency" (52), defined as "an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension. It may be manifested in the guise of malice, derision, the veiled cruelty of condescension, or merely as an absence of sympathy with the victim of the joke" (52). Also linking humor and aggression are Dolf Zillmann and Joanne Cantor, who write, "something malicious or potentially harmful must happen, or at least the inferiority of someone or something must be implied, before a humor response can occur" (101).[190] Among theorists, "superiority" theories—theories

[188] A lesser joke alludes to Nikolai Chernyshevski's best-known work.
[189] Brian Boyd directed me to the passage quoted above.
[190] Victor Raskin goes so far as to belittle those unwilling to acknowledge humor's hostility: "Laughter was born out of hostility. If there had been no hostility in man, there had been no laughter (and, incidentally, no need for laughter). All the current types of wit and humor retain evidence of this hostile origin. Some more clearly than others. But in all it is

arguing that all humor expresses contempt or disdain—are very influential, shaping the thinking of many writers, including Hobbes and Bergson.[191] Indeed, some students of Nabokov's humor draw on such theories, with one arguing that "Nabokov's humor, like perhaps all humor without exception, is ultimately dark" (Brown 187).

Nabokov's Hazel Brown joke (or *trouvaille*) is anything but "self-asserting." Who does the joke ridicule? What fear does it express? Even studied closely, the joke most reveals a lighthearted desire to divert. No "message" is delivered, no "lesson" imparted, for what message or lesson could inhere in a linguistic oddity like that enlivening Nabokov's passport? In sharing with readers the Hazel Brown *trouvaille*, Nabokov enters into a spirit of benign fun, a spirit he associates with nature itself. The idea is not to diminish, but rather to celebrate, both life (for its playfulness and generosity) and the human mind (for its capacity to marvel at and enjoy life). In brief, Nabokov brings Hazel Brown to life from an amiable desire to awaken in readers a spirit of playful expectancy.

6.3 Through Nabokov's Eyes

As we have seen, humor is central to Nabokov's metaphysics. To reiterate, Nabokov's world is filled with delicate jokes hinting at the existence of a playfully benevolent designing force. On what basis does Nabokov contrive such an idiosyncratic worldview?

In general, Nabokov justifies (to lend an air of rigor to an informal process) his metaphysics with reference to the instances of uncontrived humor he encounters in daily life, instances which, if at times pathetic (one thinks of the ironies in Chernyshevski's life), are usually felicitous and heartening. Many of the latter instances resemble, in effect and implications, the Hazel Brown

---

there to see, if you are willing and able. Particularly, willing. Which a great many are not" (Semantic Mechanisms of Humor [Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985], 11).

[191] All "superiority theorists" pay homage to Hobbes, whose Leviathan includes this passage: "Sudden Glory is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called laughter; and it is caused by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."

trouvaille.

There are two reasons why readers of Speak, Memory are well-placed to grasp the extent to which Nabokov's worldview reflects experiences with humor. If certain passages (for instance, that recalling Nabokov's "first gleam of complete consciousness") *present* humor as important, others—including that quoted above—*provide experiences* like those underpinning Nabokov's metaphysics. What does a reader feel in "getting" the Hazel Brown joke? First, a sense of discovery, as something hidden is detected. Second, a feeling of wariness, sparked by knowledge that the seemingly simple may hide unsuspected complexity. Third, a savoring of pleasure, born not just in amusement but also in appreciation of a joke's originality. In brief, a reader "getting" the Hazel Brown joke experiences pleasure mixed with expectancy, as joy and admiration together shape expectations regarding what Nabokov *now* has up his sleeve.

Joy, admiration and an expectant wariness—these are the very emotions Nabokov enjoys in daily life. That a reader of Speak, Memory, meeting Hazel Brown, should savor the same emotions nourishing Nabokov's worldview is not surprising, for, as noted, the Hazel Brown joke is less devised than *passed along* by Nabokov. In effect, Nabokov, in presenting the Hazel Brown joke, shares with readers the experience of living in his own world. What is life in Nabokov's world like?

On the one hand, exciting, for any feature may provoke amusement, either because playfully deceitful or because part of a bewitching pattern. On the other hand, humbling, because the wonders on offer are so sly that they invite recognition of an ingenious designer. Is this reading too much into the Hazel Brown *trouvaille*? Perhaps, but if Nabokov contrives a humor-centric metaphysics, he does so in the face of not one, or many, but innumerable amusing curiosities.

Nabokov's love of humor is ascribable to many causes. A first relates to humor's effect on an audience, for joking develops in the mind a speculative wariness conducive to insight and discovery. A second concerns what humor reveals of the humorist, for joking divulges a capacity to create new combinations. Lastly, Nabokov's fondness for humor reflects humor's metaphysical implications, for humor depends on the existence of unsuspected complexity. As noted in an earlier chapter, Nabokov

is aware of humor's effects: markedly interested in humor, he gradually develops an intricate theory of humor centered on the idea that humor highlights various types of freedom. Within Nabokov's works, humor is used in a considered and intelligible way.

Hopefully, Nabokov's enjoyment of humor has been explained. But even now another possible explanation comes to mind. Whatever else it may be, humor is *pleasurable*, and Nabokov's love of humor may ultimately reflect a partiality to fun. In any case, a reverence for humor is among the key factors shaping Nabokov's understanding of life.

"Laughter"[192]

Wandering through an overgrown garden,
I saw, at midday, in the blind air,
two eyespotted butterflies, ready to fall
down laughing over the velvety navel
of a sunflower. And in town once
I saw a house: it looked
as if it was trying not to laugh; twice
I went past, and then waved
my hand and laughed myself; but the house
did not erupt; only a sly little light
in the windows winked. My soul
recalls all this; this is all a hint to her,
that God in heaven chortles childishly,
looking down at a barefoot seraph

[192] By Vladimir Nabokov. Originally published in Rul' on April 3, 1924. Translated by Brian Boyd. A different

bent down to tickle our world

with one of his little blue feathers.

translation of “Smekh” (by Dmitri Nabokov) is in NB 111.

Appendix: Humor in Ada

If some readers find Nabokov's humor "perverse" (to quote P. N. Furbank on Bend Sinister [qtd. in. Page 24]) or "amoral" (to cite Malcolm Bradbury's review of the same novel [qtd. in Page 75]), seeing it as inappropriately used in exploration of disturbing themes, the most common criticism leveled at Nabokov's humor is that it is excessive. For Rebecca West, Lolita is "too full of puns" (qtd. in Page 16). Pale Fire, in Dwight Macdonald's opinion, is damaged by its "pervasive archness and whimsicality" (qtd. in Page 138). Look at the Harlequins!, according to Richard Poirier, is disfigured by inclusion of too many arcane "puzzles and teasers" (qtd. in Page 238). For critics displeased by the persistence of Nabokov's joking, Ada, with its myriad puns, patterns and coded allusions, offers an irresistible target; and so, reviewing the novel, such critics vocally censure its playfulness, variously describing Ada as "an idyll of aristocratic incest decked out with enough word games to stock an ocean liner" (unsigned reviewer qtd. in Page 221), "a mountain of words giv[ing] birth to a mouse" (D. J. Enright qtd. in Page 36), and "confectionary archaeology" (Carol Johnson qtd. in Page 209).

Feeding critical displeasure with Ada's jokiness is a belief that many of the novel's jokes are superfluous. To quote Robert Alter: "One begins to feel [Nabokov] is playing his games of anagrams, trilingual puns, coded hints, and conflated allusions for their own sake, not because they have any imaginative necessity in a larger design" (Alter 179).[193] But are the jokes in Ada diversionary? Is the anonymous reviewer who described Ada as "the author's Waterloo" (qtd. in Page 221), right to imply that Nabokov figures as Napoleon?

[193] Alter's unhappiness with Ada's humor stands out in an enthusiastic review. Likewise pleased with Ada but unhappy with the novel's playfulness is Matthew Hodgart, who likes Ada "despite a proliferation of puns and puzzles" (qtd. in Page, Critical Heritage 211).

Chapter Fourteen of Ada's part I locates the Veens in a garden having tea. As tea is served, the Veens' neighbor Greg Erminin arrives, his arrival a spur that kick-starts a wide-ranging discussion of religion. As the conversation leaps between topics—from Judaism to dietary laws to crucifixion—eight-year-old Lucette grows increasingly confused. Finally, unfamiliar with a difficult word, she turns to her older cousin for help:

> Lucette was puzzled by a verb Greg had used. To illustrate it for her, Van joined his ankles, spread both arms horizontally, and rolled up his eyes.
>
> "When I was a little girl," said Marina crossly, "Mesopotamian history was taught practically in the nursery."
>
> "Not all little girls can learn what they are taught," observed Ada.
>
> "Are we Mesopatamians?" asked Lucette.
>
> "We are Hippopotamians," said Van. (91)

Ada is rife with quips like Van's portmanteau "Hippopotamians," and one suspects that critics unhappy with the novel's humor have such jokes in mind. Yet if at first—or second—glance, Van's quip appears a silly cast-off, revealing only a compulsion to juggle sounds, placed in a broader context the quip not only identifies a key metaphorical structure in Ada, it also locates Van, Ada and Lucette within that structure.

A mesh of interwoven details locates Van and Ada, as lovers, in the Mesopotamia mentioned by Marina. If Mesopotamia is, etymologically, the "land between two rivers," Van and Ada, in their efforts to thwart Lucette's curiosity, repeatedly visit "Caliph Island"(406), a lush island in the middle of the bifurcating Ladore River. Moreover, if Mesopotamia, where Babylon was situated, is often referred to as Babylonia, not only are three "Babylonian Willows" growing on Caliph Island (216), but a "Babylonian butterfly" appears at the "forest fork" where Van and Ada separate following their first summer together (158). And finally, if the Biblical Garden of Eden is placed by tradition in

Mesopotamia, beside the Shattal River (formed where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet), Van and Ada share their first intimate moment while Ada is climbing a "Shattal Tree," (78), a tree later referred to as both the "tree of Eden," (401) and as a "Tree of Knowledge" brought from "Eden national park" (95).[194] In the world of Ada, then, the word "Mesopotamia" resonates powerfully, alluding not only to the Edenic love of Van and Ada, but also to the lovers' removal from mundane affairs. Our concern, however, is less with Mesopotamians than with Hippopotamians. What might a "Hippopotamian" be?

In old Greek, "hippopotamus" means "river horse." And just as a web of detail locates Van and Ada in Edenic Mesopotamia, so various details place Lucette, like an ungainly hippopotamus, in an archetypal river. One pattern of details presents Lucette as a mermaid;[195] a second pattern associates her with Shakespeare's drowned Ophelia[196] (moreover, the Ophelia pattern incorporates a mishap from 1884, when Lucette, a redhead, has a red-haired doll taken by the current as she is bathing it in the Ladore River [143]). Just as Van and Ada are, when together, "Mesopotamians" alone in the Garden of Eden, so Lucette is, certain details suggest, a "Hippopotamus," immersed in an aqueous, potentially fatal, environment. Having discerned two textual patterns, one placing Van and Ada in the Garden of Eden, one plunging Lucette into an archetypal river, we sense the textual fabric incorporating Van's "Hippopotamians" pun. Yet full appreciation of the pun requires a

---

[194] Bobbie Ann Mason discusses and—with Ada's help—challenges Van's attempt to portray his early relationship with Ada as Edenic: "Van insists that this apple tree is the Tree of Knowledge, in his attempt to describe his youth with Ada as a paradise. But Ada, whose adolescence made her vulnerable to Van, does not share Van's romanticization of their past or his comparison of Ardis to the Garden of Eden. In a paranthetical commentary written in their old age, she declares that he has made up some of the information in that [Shattal Tree] scene. Van remembers her saying that the tree was imported from the Eden National Park, but she insists 'there was no National Park in Iraq eighty years ago' (95) " (Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada [Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974], 38).

[195] For example, Van, apologizing to Lucette after an attempt to enroll her in a sexual game, writes, "*We are sorry you left so soon. We are even sorrier to have inveigled our Esmerelda and mermaid in a naughty prank*" (421). Moreover, referring to Lucette's successful attempt to induce Ada to return to Van, Van writes of "a mermaid's message" (562). In her "Notes to Ada," Vivian Darkbloom identifies Lucette as a mermaid (A 606). Boyd traces the mermaid pattern in great detail (Nabokov's Ada 203-206), ultimately relating it to Lucette's survival after death and posthumous delivery of a message to Ada: "[T]he image of [Lucette as] a 'mermaid'—quite alive, and moving in a different medium—hint strongly at her immortality and recall the messages sent by the 'micromermaid' from 'Terra' just when Ada rescinds her own rejection of the past and drives back to Mont Roux to make possible the restoration of her love for Van and at the same time the perfect culmination of the pattern of their past" (Nabokov's Ada 205).

[196] " 'For the sweet all is sweet,' "quips Van when Lucette recalls a waiter's kindness (481). Moreover, in a letter to his father written after Lucette's death, Van compares his cousin to Ophelia: "*As a psychologist, I know the unsoundness of speculations as to whether Ophelia would not have drowned herself after all, without the help of a treacherous sliver, even if she had married her Voltemand*" (497). This pattern, too, is explored by Boyd (Nabokov's Ada 274).

relating of each pattern to the other.

A key link is topographical. If Van and Ada are associated with Mesopotamia (the land between two rivers), Lucette is immersed in a figurative river. What this suggests is that Lucette, struggling to join Van and Ada in Eden, is floundering towards a destination where she may not belong. Evidence for this reading arrives late in the novel, as Lucette, alone with Van aboard the ocean liner Admiral Tobakoff, seems to arrive in Eden, only to find paradise befouled:

> They were now reclining on a poolside mat face to face, in symmetrical attitudes, he leaning his head on his right hand, she propped on her left elbow. The strap of her green breast-cups had slipped down her slender arm, disclosing drops and streaks of water at the base of one nipple. An abyss of a few inches separated the jersey he wore from her bare midriff, the black wool of his trunks from her soaked green pubic mask. The sun glazed her hipbone; a shadowed dip led to the five-year-old trace of an appendectomy. Her half-veiled gaze dwelt upon him with heavy, opaque greed, and she was right, they were really quite alone [. . .]. He accepted the touch of her blind hand working its way up his thigh and cursed nature for having planted a gnarled tree bursting with vile sap within a man's crotch. Suddenly Lucette drew away, exhaling a genteel "*merde*." Eden was full of people.
>
> Two half-naked children in shrill glee came running toward the pool. A Negro nurse brandished their diminutive bras in angry pursuit. Out of the water a bald head emerged by spontaneous generation and snorted. (478)

The emergence of a bald and snorting head, spontaneously generated beneath the surface of a swimming pool, underscores the fact that Van and Lucette will remain "Hippopotamians," river-beings swimming towards Eden but never arriving. And indeed, immediately after the emergence of the hippopotamus-like head, a "tall splendid creature" (479) appears poolside, "Miss Condor" (481),

the punningly-named temptress with whom Van later fends off Lucette's last, desperate advance. As it turns out, of Ada's three protagonists, only two, Van and Ada, belong in Eden. Seemingly a frivolous conflux of words, Van's pun, analyzed in a broader context, is a precise iteration of the lopsided love-triangle sketched in Ada. Just as "Hippopotamians" fuses "hippopotami" and "Mesopotamians," so Lucette, struggling to join Van and Ada in a figurative Garden of Eden, has one foot in Mesopotamia and one in a river.

Particularly Nabokovian is a tendency to explore serious issues in amusing ways. Tracing the patterns fused in Van's seemingly silly pun reveals the risks inherent in dismissing one of Nabokov's jokes as frivolous. If not all of his jokes resonate as powerfully as does Van's pun, very few sound within a vacuum.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Nabokov: Works

Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle. 1969. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Bend Sinister. 1947. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Carrousel. Aartswoud, Netherlands: Spectatorpers, 1987.

"Conclusive Evidence: A Review." The New Yorker, December 28, 1998 & January 4, 1999.

The Defense. Trans. Michael Scammell with Vladimir Nabokov. 1930/1964. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Despair. 1936/1966. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse. By Aleksandr Pushkin. Trans. with commentary by Vladimir Nabokov (four volumes). New York: Bollingen, 1964.

The Eye. Trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov. 1930/1965. New York: Vintage, 1990.

The Gift. Trans. Michael Scammell with Vladimir Nabokov. 1952/1963. New York: Vintage, 1991.

Glory. Trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov. 1932/1971. New York: Vintage, 1991.

Invitation to a Beheading. Trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov. 1938/1959. New York: Vintage, 1989.

King, Queen, Knave. Trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov. 1928/1968. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Laughter in the Dark. 1932/1938. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Lectures on Don Quixote. Ed. Fredson Bowers: New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Lectures on Literature. Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.

Lectures on Russian Literature. Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

Lolita. 1955. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Lolita: A Screenplay. 1974. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

Look at the Harlequins!. 1974. New York: Vintage, 1990.

The Man from the USSR and Other Plays. Trans. and ed. Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

Mary. Trans. Michael Glenny with Vladimir Nabokov. 1926/1970. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings. Eds. Brian Boyd and Robert Michael Pyle. Boston: Beacon, 2000.

Nikolai Gogol. 1944. New York: New Directions, 1961.

Pale Fire. 1962. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Poems and Problems. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.

"Prof. Woodbridge in an Essay on Nature Postulates the Reality of the World" [review of J. E. Woodbridge's An Essay on Nature]. New York Sun. 10 Dec. 1940: 15.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. 1941. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited. New York: Vintage, 1989.

The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Vintage, 1997.

Strong Opinions. 1973. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Transparent Things. 1972. New York: Vintage, 1989.

The Waltz Invention. 1938. Trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Phaedra, 1966.

Secondary Materials

Ackerley, Chris. "Pale Fire: Three Notes Towards a Thetic Solution." Nabokov Studies 2 (1995): 87-103.

Aldis, Owen. Play-Fighting. New York: Academic Press, 1975.

Alexandrov, Vladimir E., ed. The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Garland, 1995.

_____. Nabokov's Otherworld. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.

Allen, Nina. Madness, Death and Disease in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1994.

Alter, Robert. "Ada, or the Perils of Paradise." In Bloom 175-189.

Amis, Martin. "The Sublime and the Ridiculous: Nabokov's Black Farces." In Quennell 73-87.

Andrews, David. Aestheticism, Nabokov, and Lolita. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1999.

Appel, Alfred Jr., ed. The Annotated Lolita. London: Vintage Books, 1991.

_____. "Remembering Nabokov." In Quennell 11-34.

_____. Nabokov's Dark Cinema. New York: Oxford UP, 1974.

_____. "Tristram in Movielove: Lolita at the Movies." In Proffer 122-170.

Attardo, Salvatore. Linguistic Theories of Humor. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994

Auerbach, Erich. Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953.

Bader, Julia. Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels. Berkeley: University of California,

1972.

Bakhtin, M. M. The Dialogic Imagination. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

_____. Speech Genres and Other Late Essays. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Barkow, Jerome H., Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds. The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Bekoff, Marc, and Colin Allen. "Intentional Communications and Social Play: How and Why Animals Negotiate and Agree to Play." In Bekoff and Byers 97-114.

Bekoff, Marc, and John A. Byers, eds. Animal Play: Evolutionary, Comparative, and Ecological Perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Berger, Peter L. Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997.

_____ and Thomas Luckmann. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

Bergson, Henri. Creative Evolution. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. London: Macmillan, 1911.

_____. Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. London: Macmillan, 1911.

_____. Time and Free Will. Trans. F. L. Pogson. New York: Macmillan & Co, 1910.

Black, Max. Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962.

_____. Perplexities: Rational Choice, the Prisoner's Dilemma, Metaphor, Poetic Ambiguity, and Other Puzzles. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990.

Blackwell, Stephen H. "Nabokov, Mach and Monism." In Grayson, McMillin and Meyer 121-131.

Bloom, Harold, ed. Vladimir Nabokov: Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.

Boden, Margaret, ed. Dimensions of Creativity. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994.

Booth, Wayne C. A Rhetoric of Irony. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974.

Boskin, Joseph, ed. The Humor Prism in 20th Century America. Detroit: Wayne State, 1997.

Boulton, M. J., and P. K. Smith. "The Social Nature of Play Fighting and Play Chasing: Mechanisms and Strategies Underlying Cooperation and Compromise." In Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby 429-449.

Boyd, Brian. "Nabokov and Humor." The Nabokovian 38 (1997): 38-42.

_____. Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness. Christchurch, New Zealand: Cybereditions, 2001.

_____. Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

_____. Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years. London: Vintage, 1993.

_____. Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years. London: Vintage, 1993.

_____, ed. Vladimir Nabokov: Novels 1969-1974. New York: Library of America, 1996.

Boyd, Brian, and Kurt Johnson. "Nabokov, Scientist." Natural History 7/99-8/99.

Bremmer, Jan, and Herman Roodenburg, eds. A Cultural History of Humor. Cambridge: Polity Press,

1997.

Brown, Clarence, "Humor." in Alexandrov, Garland Companion 184-188.

Brownell, Hiram H. and Howard Gardner. "Neuropsychological Insights into Humour." In Durant and Miller 17-34.

Bruner, Jerome. Actual Minds, Possible Worlds. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986.

Caillois, Roger. Man, Play, and Games. London: Thames and Hudson, 1962.

Caplan, Arthur L., ed. The Sociobiology Debate: Readings on Ethical and Scientific Issues. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

Carroll, Joseph. Evolution and Literary Theory. Columbia: University of Missouri, 1995.

Carroll, William. "The Cartesian Nightmare of Despair." In Rivers and Nicol 82-104.

Chapman, Antony J., and Hugh C. Foot, eds. Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Applications. London: John Wiley & Sons, 1976.

Chiaro, Delia. The Language of Jokes: Analyzing Verbal Play. London: Routledge, 1992.

Clancy, Laurie. The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov. London: Macmillan, 1984.

Cohen, Ted. Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999.

Connery, Brian A., and Kirk Combe, eds. Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism. London: Macmillan Press, 1995.

Connolly, Julian W., ed. Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Cook, Guy. Discourse and Literature. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

_____. Language Play, Language Learning. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Corballis, Michael C. The Lopsided Ape: Evolution of the Generative Mind. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Crystal, David. Language Play. London: Penguin, 1998.

Cummins, Denise Dellarosa, and Colin Allen, eds. The Evolution of Mind. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

Davis, Murray S. What's so Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993.

Deacon, Terrence. W. The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and Brain. New York: Norton, 1997.

Dembo, L. S., ed. Nabokov: The Man and his Work. Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1967.

Diment, Galya. "Strong Opinions." In Alexandrov, Garland Companion 685-695.

Dolinin, Alexander. "Clio laughs last: Nabokov's answer to historicism." In Connolly 197-215.

Douglas, Mary. Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology. London: Routledge, 1993.

Draitser, Emil A. Techniques of Satire: The Case of Saltykov-Scedrin. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.

Duchartre, Pierre Louis. The Italian Comedy: The Improvisation Scenarios, Lives, Attributes,

Portraits, and Masks of the Illustrious Characters of the Commedia dell' Arte. Trans. Randolph T. Weaver. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1966.

Duncker, Karl. On Problem Solving. Psychological Monographs (v. 58, n. 5) Trans. Lynne S. Lees. Washington: The American Psychological Association, 1945.

Durant, John, and Jonathan Miller, eds. Laughing Matters: A Serious Look at Humour. Harlow: Longman, 1984.

Durgnat, Raymond. The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the American Image. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.

Durham, William H. "Toward a Coevolutionary Theory of Human Biology and Culture." In Caplan 428-448.

Dziemidok, Bohdan. The Comical: A Philosophical Analysis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1993.

Ekman, Paul, ed. Emotion in the Human Face. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.

Eliot, T. S. The Waste Land and Other Poems. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.

Ellis, John. Language, Thought, and Logic. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1993.

English, James F. "Modernist Joke-Work: Pale Fire and the Mock Transcendence of Mockery." Contemporary Literature, Volume 33, Number 1 (Spring 1992): 74-90.

Festinger, Leon. A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson and Company, 1957.

Field, Andrew. Nabokov: His Life in Art. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967.

_____. Nabokov: His Life in Part. New York: Viking, 1977.

Fisher, Seymour, and Rhoda L. Fisher. Pretend the World is Funny and Forever: A Psychological Analysis of Comedians, Clowns, and Actors. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981.

Fowler, Douglas. Reading Nabokov. Ithaca: Cornell, 1974.

Freud, Sigmund. Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious. Trans. James Strachey London: The Hogarth Press, 1960.

Geertz, Clifford: Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology. New York: Basic

Books, 1983.

Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid. Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion. London: Routledge, 1997.

Glascow, R. D. V. Madness, Masks, and Laughter: An Essay on Comedy. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1995.

Goffman, Erving. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1973.

Goldsmith, Robert Hillis. Wise Fools in Shakespeare. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1974.

Goldstein, Jeffrey H. and Paul E. McGhee, eds. The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues. New York: Academic Press, 1972.

Gombrich, E. H. Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and Art. Oxford: Phaidon, 1979.

Gould, Stephen Jay. Ever Since Darwin: Reflections on Natural History. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.

Grant, Paul Benedict. "Nabokov's Last Laughs." In Grayson, McMillin, and Meyer 141-158.

Grayson, Jane. Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.

Grayson Jane, Arnold McMillin, and Priscilla Meyer, eds. Nabokov's World: Volume 1 The Shape of

Nabokov's World. Houndsmills, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002.

Gregory, R. L. "The Confounded Eye." In Gregory and Gombrich 49-96.

Gregory, R. L., and E. H. Gombrich, eds. Illusion in Nature and Art. London: Gerald Duckworth & Company Limited, 1973.

Griffin, Dustin. Satire: A Critical Reintroduction. Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1994.

Grossmith, Robert. "The Future Perfect of the Mind: 'Time and Ebb' and 'A Guide to Berlin'." In Nicol and Barabtarlo 149-154.

Guthke, Karl S. Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre. New York: Random House, 1966.

Heyes, Cecilia and Ludwig Huber, eds. The Evolution of Cognition. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

Horton, Andrew. Introduction. Buster Keaton's 'Sherlock Jr.' Ed. Horton. Cambridge Film Handbooks. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Huizinga, J. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. New York: Roy Publishers, a.n., 1950.

Hutchinson, Peter. Games Authors Play. London: Methuen, 1983.

Jackendoff, Ray. Languages of the Mind: Essays on Mental Representation. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

Jencks, Charles and Nathan Silver. Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation. London: Secker & Warburg, 1972.

Jenkins, Henry. What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic. New York: Columbia UP, 1992.

Johnson, D. Barton. Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985.

Joyce, James. Ulysses. London: Penguin, 1975.

Karnick, Kristine Brunovska, and Henry Jenkins, eds. Classical Hollywood Comedy. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Kiremidjian, David. A Study of Modern Parody: James Joyce's Ulysses and Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1985.

Koestler, Arthur. The Act of Creation. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964.

Korn, Eric. "Optical Illusions." Times Literary Supplement, 18 April, 1975.

LaFave, Lawrence, Jay Haddad, and William A. Maesen. "Superiority, Enhanced Self-Esteem, and Perceived Incongruity Humour Theory." In Chapman and Foot, Humour and Laughter 63-92.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980.

Lax, Eric. Woody Allen: A Biography. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

Leech, Geoffrey N. A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry. London: Longman, 1969.

Leekam, Susan R. "Jokes and Lies: Children's Understanding of Intentional Falsehood." In Whiten, Natural Theories 159-174.

Levin, Harry. Playboys & Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory & Practice of Comedy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

Lewis, Paul. Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature. Albany: State University of New York, 1989.

Lilly, Mark. "Nabokov: Homo Ludens." In Quennell 88-102.

Lodge, David. The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.

"Lolita's Creator—Author Nabokov, a 'Cosmic Joker'. " Newsweek 25 June 1962: 51-54.

Lyons, John. Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Mason, Bobbie Ann. Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974.

Mast, Gerald. The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973.

Maynard Smith, John. Games, Sex and Evolution. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.

McCaffrey, Donald H., ed. Focus on Chaplin. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

McGhee, Paul E. "The Role of Arousal and Hemispheric Lateralization in Humor." In McGhee and Goldstein, Volume I 13-38.

McGhee, Paul E., and Jeffrey Goldstein, eds. Handbook of Humor Research: Volume I Basic Issues. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983.

McGhee, Paul E., and Jeffrey Goldstein, eds. Handbook of Humor Research: Volume II Applied Studies. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983.

McGhee, Paul E., and Antony J. Chapman, eds. Children's Humour. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1980.

Meras, Phillis. "V. Nabokov Unresting." Providence Sunday Journal 13 May 1962.

Miller, Jonathan. “Jokes and Joking: A Serious Laughing Matter.” In Durant and Miller 5-16.

Mizener, Arthur. “The Seriousness of Vladimir Nabokov.” The Sewanee Review 76.4 (1968): 655-664.

Morreall, John. The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor. Albany: State University of New York, 1987.

Morson, Gary Saul. Narrative and Freedom. New Haven: Yale UP, 1994.

Muecke, D. C. The Compass of Irony. London: Methuen, 1969.

Mulkay, Michael. On Humour: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

Nash, Walter. The Language of Humor: Style and Technique in Comic Discourse. London: Longman, 1985.

Nerhardt, Goran. “Incongruity and Funniness: Towards a New Descriptive Model.” In Chapman and Foot 55-62.

Nicol, Charles, and Gennady Barabtarlo, eds. A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov’s Short Fiction. New York: Garland, 1993.

Norman, Donald. The Invisible Computer. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

O’Neil, Paul. [Interview with VN] Life International 13 Apr. 1959: 63-69.

Page, Norman, ed. Nabokov: The Critical Heritage. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

Palmer, Jerry. Taking Humor Seriously. London: Routledge, 1994.

Paulos, John Allen. Mathematics and Humor. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980.

Pepinello, William J., and Robert W. Weisberg. “Linguistics and Humor.” In McGhee and Goldstein,

Volume I 59-84.

Pien, Diana, and Mary K. Rothbart. “Incongruity, Humour, Play, and Self-Regulation of Arousal in Young Children.” In McGhee and Chapman, Children’s Humour 1-26.

Pifer, Ellen. “Nabokov and the Art of Exile.” In Roth 215-221.

Pinker, Steven. The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind. London: Penguin Books, 1995.

_____. How the Mind Works. New York: Norton, 1997.

Pirandello, Luigi. On Humor. Trans. Antonio Illiano and Daniel P. Testa. Chapel Hill: The University

of North Carolina Press, 1974.

Poe, Edgar Allen. The Centenary Poe. Ed. Montagu Slater. London: The Bodley Head, 1949.

Pollio, Howard R. "Notes Toward a Field Theory of Humor." In McGhee and Goldstein, Volume I 213-230.

Popper, K. R. Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972.

Powell, Chris. "A Phenomenological Analysis of Humour in Society." In Powell and Paton 86-105.

Powell, Chris, and George E. C. Paton, eds. Humour in Society: Resistance and Control. London: Macmillan, 1988.

Proffer, Carl, ed. A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974.

_____. "Ada as Wonderland: A Glossary of Allusions to Russian Literature." In Proffer 249-279.

_____. Keys to Lolita. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968.

Purdie, Susan. Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993.

Quennell, Peter, ed. Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979.

Rahner, Hugo S. J. Man at Play or Did you ever practice eutrapelia? London: Burns & Oates, 1965.

Rampton, David. Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.

Raskin, Victor. Semantic Mechanisms of Humor. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985.

Redfern, Walter. Puns. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.

Rivers, J. E., and Charles Nicol, eds. Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on his Life's Work. Austin: University of Texas, 1982.

Rorty, Richard. Contingency, Irony, Solidarity. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

Ross, Alison. The Language of Humor. London: Routledge, 1998.

Roth, Phillis A., ed. Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984.

Rothbart, Mary K. "Incongruity: Problem-Solving and Laughter." In Chapman 37-54.

Salter, James. "An Old Magician Named Nabokov Writes and Lives in Splendid Exile." People 17 Mar. 1975: 60-64.

Schaeffer, Neil. The Art of Laughter. New York: Columbia UP, 1981.

Schutz, Alfred. Collected Papers, v. 1: The Problem of Social Reality. Ed. Maurice Natanson. The Hague: Martinus, Nijhoff, 1971.

Schutz, Alfred, and Thomas Luckmann. The Structures of the Life-World. Trans. Richard M. Zaner and Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973.

Searle, John. The Construction of Social Reality. New York: The Free Press, 1995.

Shklovsky, Viktor. Theory of Prose. Trans. Benjamin Sher. Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

Shultz, Thomas R. "Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humor." In Chapman and Foot, Humour and Laughter 11-36.

Shultz, Thomas R., and Judith Robillard. "The Development of Linguistic Humor in Children: Incongruity Through Rule Violation." In McGhee and Chapman, Children's Humour 59-90.

Shultz, Thomas R., and Maureen B. Scott. "The Creation of Verbal Humor." Canadian Journal of Psychology, 28.4 (1974): 421-425.

Skynner, Robin, and John Cleese. Life and How to Survive It. London: Metheun, 1993.

Smith, Euclid O., ed. Social Play in Primates. New York: Academic Press, 1978.

Smith, Peter K., ed. Play in Animals and Humans. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.

Sobkowiak, Wlodzimierz. Metaphonology of English Paronomasic Puns. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991.

Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. Relevance: Communication and Cognition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Stegner, Page. Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967.

Storey, Robert. Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996.

Stuart, Dabney. Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1978.

Suls, Jerry M. "A Two-stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis." In Goldstein and McGhee, Psychology 81-100.

_____. "Cognitive Processes in Humor Appreciation." In McGhee and Goldstein, Volume I 39-58.

Marc J. Swartz, and David K. Jordan. Culture: An Anthropological Perspective. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980.

Thompson, G. R. Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1973.

Toker, Leona. Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures. Ithaca: Cornell, 1989.

_____. " 'The dead are good mixers': Nabokov's versions of individualism." In Connolly 92-108.

Turner, Mark. Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.

Vidal, Gore. Matters of Fact and Fiction. New York: Random House, 1977.

Welsford, Enid. The Fool: His Social and Literary History. Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1966.

Whitehouse, Harvey, ed. The Debated Mind: Evolutionary Psychology Versus Ethnography. Oxford: Berg, 2001.

Whiten, Andrew, ed. Natural Theories of the Mind: Evolution, Development and Simulation of Everyday Mindreading. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

Wickberg, Daniel. The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America. Ithaca: Cornell UP,

1998.

Willeford, William. The Fool and his Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and their Audience. London: Edward Arnold, 1969.

Wilson, Christopher. Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function. London: Academic, 1979.

Winokur, Mark. American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and the 1930s Hollywood Comedy. London: Macmillan, 1996.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Philosophical Investigations. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974.

Wood, Michael. The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.

Zillmann, Dolf, and Joanne R. Cantor. "A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth." In Chapman and Foot 93-117.