

Nabokov at Twilight:
The Ludic Ontology of Fiction and Reality

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate School of Letters
Keio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Literature

by
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2024

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation could never be completed without the tremendous helps that I have received from many people. Among them, I would like to express my greatest gratitude to Professor Hisayo Ogushi of Keio University. She has been teaching me since I was an undergraduate student. To say the least, I was not a good student, but Professor Ogushi always supported me by kindly giving her insightful comments and advice to my drafts. Without her assistance, I would have been unable to complete my dissertation.

I owe another greatest debt to Professor Emeritus Takayuki Tatsumi of Keio University. After he supervised my master thesis, Professor Tatsumi always gave me numerous advice to my research and encouraged me to research at the New York Public Library. He had helped my research for quite a long time until his retirement. I also am grateful to the members of the graduate seminar at Keio University, where from 2014 to 2020 I had enjoyed discussing our themes uncountable times, even when I was not much motivated to do research about my subject. Especially, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Shogo Tanokuchi, Shunsuke Shiga, Yumiko Koizumi, Kaori Hosono, Ryohei Tomizuka, and Yuki Enomoto. Without their kind, informative, intriguing and acute comments and supports, I would not have been able to complete my dissertation.

Drafts of some chapters have been published as articles before. Part of Chapter 1 was originally published in *Geibun Kenkyu* (vol. 116) in 2019. The archive research at the New York Public Library for the second chapter was granted by the America-Japan Society's

“American Study Grant Program” in 2019. This research resulted in a Japanese article published in *America Bungaku Kenkyu* [*American Literature Studies*] (vol. 59) in 2021. Also, the fourth chapter appeared in *The Journal of American Literature Society of Japan* (no. 21) in 2022.

Finally, I want to say my thanks to my parents who have always supported me, and I could not be more grateful to my wife. Any word cannot be enough to express my gratitude for her.

Introduction

This dissertation will explore the ludic ontology of some English novels written by Russian émigré writer Vladimir Nabokov. In this dissertation, I will use the term “game” not only to refer to specific games, such as chess and cards, that appear in Nabokov’s works; it also refers to a metaphorical use of the word (e.g., “life is like a game”). In some of Nabokov’s works, specific games such as chess or card games are used to represent a larger system both within and without the text. Each chapter will focus on various “games” that Nabokov plays both inside and outside of his works that relate to his alien status in the United States, a country whose fauna and culture were thoroughly strange and unfamiliar but simultaneously fascinating to him.

Nabokov does not play any game alone. As a writer, he plays with literature itself in several ways that involve himself and the reader. One may think that he plays with language, frequently enjoying anagrams and parodies. Some critics have described Nabokov as what John Updike called “a verbal magician” who appears to indulge in his own linguistic game simply for fun (156). However, his language “game” is much more serious. In reality, he had to establish his game to maintain his position, and he managed to survive by playing someone else’s game. Conceptualizing literature as a game may appear to represent a catachresis, a dead metaphor that is excessively worn out and self-evident to remember that it is a metaphor or to

bother to claim that. Although ludic elements are more or less part of the nature of any literary works, this perspective has been frequently overlooked or neglected in literary studies, perhaps because it may appear overly trivial, casual, or frivolous compared to sociopolitical elements in literature. By examining Nabokov's ludic writing, this dissertation aims to shed light on the notion that to construct a fictional world is to play a game in diverse ways. In fact, for Nabokov, whether it is real or not, the entire world is a game. In 1925 in Berlin, soon after taking his first steps as a professional writer, Nabokov asserted in a lecture he delivered to an émigré literary circle that he places an emphasis on games in literature: "People have played ever since they came into being. There are eras . . . when people become especially enamored of games" (qtd in Karshan 1). Nabokov believed that life constitutes game-playing in which we all engage. In short, it is a mode of existence. As a fiction writer, he employed game-related motifs in various ways in his career.¹ For instance, *The Luzhin Defense*, published in 1930, describes the eponymous chess grandmaster. Even in his later career, he also asserted a ludic aspect of his works, stating that *Lolita* is full of "riddles with elegant solutions" and "the composition of a beautiful puzzle" (*Strong Opinions* 14, 17). Furthermore, in *Pale Fire*, he depicted John Shade, a tragic poet who suspects that the world is a game played by unknown powerful gamemasters somewhere beyond our recognition. Indeed, critics such as Mary McCarthy and Tony Tanner have acutely discovered that *Pale Fire* contains game-related themes. Game-playing is one of the most integral components of Nabokov's works.

Nabokov's game is largely associated with a sense of contingency and necessity. Alfred Appel, Jr. argues in his introduction to *Lolita* that the aim of Nabokov's game, in which both "[t]he author and the reader are the 'players,'" is to overturn the "unscrambling of pictures" by "reveal[ing] something totally different from what one had expected" (xx-xxi). Appel posits that Nabokov's game entails finding a chance event in literary texts that surprises readers. Thomas Karshan explores "play" in Nabokov's works, retracing it to German aesthetics in the late eighteenth century and defining it in contrast to games: While play "signif[ies] chance, what is entirely random or cannot be subdued to a system," gaming is "marked with conventions and rules" (8). Although Karshan admits that this difference is highly dependent upon context and is "gradual, not absolute" (8), given that a game is less random and contingent than play, its connection with necessity should not be overlooked. In other words, Nabokov's game involves coping with contingency and uncovering or inventing necessity where it seems to be missing. Therefore, the game is a kind of buffer for the inexplicable: it helps somehow understand and explain what seems to be unintelligible by installing rules to where there seems to be no regulation at all. Meanwhile, it suggests a moment when such an invention yields despair, evoking a terrifying vision that one can or will by no means have alternative possibilities. Thus, a game also refers to a sense of dilemma between necessity and contingency, some established system or regulation and sheer chaos, and incompetence and compromise both outside and inside Nabokov's works. These prompt a highly postmodernist ontological

question: How do subjects, specifically both Nabokov and his characters imprisoned in a system that has already been established too firmly to change, place themselves in, hold their scaffolds, and plan the next move?

As Ludwig Wittgenstein explains about “language-games” in his *Philosophical Investigations*, the use of language is a type of game that is regulated by certain rules. Using languages within certain grammatical or conventional rules technically constitutes game-playing, which he calls “the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’” (5). Nabokov was quite conscious of that kind of linguistic rules probably because he was pursuing his career as an exiled and multilingual writer. For Nabokov, who endured the historical turbulence in Europe in the early twentieth century, such as the Russian Revolution and World War II, language must have been one of the fewest things that he could control at will. He particularly struggled due to the differences between his “infinitely docile Russian” and “a second-rate brand of English” after he immigrated to the United States, while, in a way, it was this experience that served to him as the very material that he could write about in the US (*Lolita* 317).

Anyway, Nabokov had to manage to make a living from an unfamiliar language game. In this respect, Nabokov had to exercise what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls “*bricolage*” in *The Savage Mind*, which Lévi-Strauss defines as “the rules of [a] game . . . to make do with ‘what is at a hand,’ that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite” (17).

Furthermore, as Jacques Derrida argues, “if one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*” (360). What Nabokov had to do is what Michell de Certeau calls the art of “making do” in his *Practice of Everyday Life*, a kind of survival craft game form in which players access what may be available now and manage to survive with it in conditions that are unfamiliar and often hostile to them (29). Those French philosophers posit that gaming means playing along or within given parameters that designate the boundaries and provide a basic playground for games in which players somehow “make do” with what they have. If language is a realm that is regulated and demarcated by a limited number of words, grammar, and conventions, game-playing that is possible in it could be infinite as long as it stays within it. It is conceivable that it goes out of the rules, but such deviation may make the game impossible, because without rules the game can no longer be a game.

Literary critics have asserted that literature contains a ludic aspect. Roland Barthes argues that making a fiction is “to a high degree cultural” in that it is “the artifact created by rhetors, grammarians, linguists, teachers, writers, parents—this artifact is mimicked in a more or less ludic manner” (51). Writers sometimes inscribe sociopolitical messages or unfold metaphysical speculations in their literary works. While these “serious” aspects of literature are undeniable, it cannot be doubted that reading is more or less accompanied by what Barthes described as the “text of bliss,” a text that “brings to a crisis his [the reader’s] relation with

language” (14). Textual bliss that is aroused in a ludic manner, which is certainly quite fundamental in the practice of reading, should not be overlooked even if it may appear to be less serious than the sociopolitical impacts that some literary works have often exerted on our society, or even if such an aestheticist view may resemble an escapist fantasy. Rather, ludic practices are deeply rooted in our culture and undergird it. In the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov illustrates that he no doubt finds most crucial the “aesthetic bliss” that causes a thrilling sensation to race up through one’s spine—of course, this evokes Barthes’s use of the same word (*Lolita* 314). For him, literature is a realm of pleasure to its very end, whatever social or political impacts it may have.

Nabokov believes that literature is a game played between the author and the reader. In *Lectures on Literature*, which is a collection of lectures he delivered between the 1940s and the 1950s at universities, such as Cornell and Harvard, he discusses the relationship between fiction and its readers, stating the following: “for better or worse the reader enters into the spirit of the game. The effort to begin a book . . . is often difficult to make; but once it is made, rewards are various and abundant” (4). Nabokov has sometimes been regarded as a kind of escapist aestheticist who is not interested in society, history, or politics whatsoever. He imagines in fiction a country (*Bend Sinister* and *Lolita*), a kingdom (*Pale Fire*), and a planet (*Ada*). While those appear largely different from the ones that we know in reality, that does not necessarily mean that he attempts to escape from what he observed in real life, conjuring up a

fantasy world to seclude himself and his readers.² Instead, novels or texts, or to put it more accurately, the accumulation of alphabets inscribed on paper, consist of words, phrases, and sentences, which make a *novel* space have its own reality; this is not the kind of reality where we live but rather another kind where we playfully imagine everything—this is what Brian McHale calls a “zone,” where language serves as a tool for the writer and the reader to produce a space for game-playing with its particular rules (44-45).

Thus, Nabokov, as the writer, is a type of game master who develops a literary game while participating in it as a game player. He transitions between the two sides, transferring one to the other or standing on the vestibule between them at the same time. In doing so, he is portraying what Barthes describes as an encounter with one’s “individuality,” which is a “*historical subject* . . . at the conclusion of a very complex process of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements (education, social class, childhood configuration, etc.)” (62). In a ludic manner, Nabokov plays a make-believe of inventing what resembles identity through fiction-making.³ This is quite significant for Nabokov, who lost almost all of what he had at multiple junctures, because a game always assumes its own virtual space. It settles a small but individual territory within the larger territory in which it somehow preserves itself.

Nabokov’s preference for lepidopterology provides an apt example of the connection between his game and his art. Taking the liberty of lepidopterologist knowledge, he encourages readers to deep dive, or trance, into his work without any extraneous concerns. Butterflies and

moths are what he never tired of throughout his entire life. Nabokov always found the art of nature fascinating and never ceased devoting himself to it. He started working as a lepidopterologist at Harvard University in 1941, when he discovered a new species of butterfly in Colorado (Boyd, *The American Years* 38). Diana Butler argues that his professional knowledge of butterflies is reflected in some of his works; for instance, in *Lolita*, he parlays his passion for butterflies into Humbert's zeal for nymphets and writes that "as part of an elaborate literary game, little Dolores Haze is a butterfly" (60). However, the relationship between his passion for lepidopterology and his literary imagination is not merely personal; it is also a metaphor for how he understands literature and in what circumstances he produces his work. In *Speak, Memory*, he depicts the joy of perceiving similarities between nature and art: "I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception" (125). He undoubtedly made use of his lepidopterology expertise to vividly illustrate his characters and their thoughts; additionally, there was an element of literary game by which he could exercise his imagination at will and call readers to revel in it. Nabokov's game invokes the "nonutilitarian delights" for which he and readers produce their playground and in which they indulge themselves. From this perspective, his game only expresses his highly aestheticist view.

Most likely because of this tendency to seek a form of hedonistic joy in literature that tends to be regarded as a lack of seriousness and because of interviews in his later years,

Nabokov's playfulness has sometimes been negatively regarded as an indifference to anything other than art. In 1940, when he was still an obscure émigré writer shortly after immigrating to the United States, he was admonished by Edmund Wilson to not be excessively playful in his writing: "[D]o please refrain from puns, to which I see you have a slight propensity. They are pretty much excluded from serious journalism here" (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 34). Furthermore, Wilson stated the following: "I have never been able to understand how you manage, on the other hand, to study butterflies from the point of view of their habitat and, on the other, to pretend that it is possible to write about human beings and leave out of account all questions of society and environment. I have come to the conclusion that you simply took over in your youth the *fin de siècle* Art for Art's sake slogan and have never thought it out" (238). Nabokov viewed it as dangerous and abhorrent that literature was considered a mere medium that was secondary to sociopolitical ideology, and his art for art's sake view was derived from his belief that literature should not simply be a medium of communication but an autonomous object that is not subjected to any social or political influences. However, Wilson assumed that to be evidence of his ignorance and indifference in relation to society, politics, or history (Karlinsky, Introduction to *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 14, 21). For Wilson, Nabokov appeared to adhere to rather old-school values that Wilson believed that Nabokov embracingly adopted from late nineteenth-century Russia. As these comments from Wilson imply, Nabokov's playful propensity must have not been "slight"; instead, it was conspicuous, as

Wilson could hardly let go. In addition, in 1947, Wilson wrote the following about *Bend Sinister*: “You aren’t good at this kind of subject, which involves questions of politics and social change, because you are totally uninterested in these matters and have never taken the trouble to understand them” (210). It is clear that Wilson appeared to view playfulness not as a positive element that stylizes Nabokov’s writing but rather as his unfavorable indifference toward the reality that Nabokov did not comprehend and that underscores his lack of seriousness. However, can Nabokov’s playfulness never be serious? Are seriousness and playfulness incompatible to their very core in literature?

In general, it has been argued that games comprise another unique realm distinct from reality, constituting a kind of escapist fantasy without any relation to reality. They occupy a separate space demarcated as another dimension with certain rule characteristic of specific games, which makes each game possible. Games can be games insofar as they are somehow disconnected from the so-called real world. They envision realms distinct from reality in general, and they contain arbitrary parameters within them. In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga states that: “It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (8). Furthermore, another iconic predecessor of ludology, Roger Caillois, regards games as something superimposed on real life: “The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct

playing of the game” (7). Not unlike classical studies such as that by Huizinga and Caillois, de Certeau defines games as follows: “the condition of its possibility is that it be detached from actual social practices;” therefore, a game is severed from writing’s “strategic function,” whose chief goal is “social efficacy” (135). As these critics have argued, would a game truly have nothing to do with the ordinary world in which it is played? Since it is after all merely a game that is more or less separated from real life and only available in another realm, and thus, is it essentially irrelevant or ineffectual to a human life which should be necessarily social?

If a game is limited to a unique, arbitrary realm of playing, that does not necessarily mean that it is conducted simply for an autotelic purpose. We should consider what reflects the need for another realm. Even if games produce escapist fantasies into which players can dive, liberated from the social, then, the questions would be: Why is such a space needed and what can we do in it and with it? Miguel Sicart argues that playing games is “a mode of being human,” which means speculating how to make do with the world one lives in (1). Furthermore, he elaborates that the “playfulness” of a game is “a dance of resistance and appropriation, of creation and destruction of order” (98). As we have observed, games are often considered to be completely separate from real life and thus not to have any social effects, but this is not the case. Games as such register somewhat similar but different and unique spaces that imitate the real world, if in an imperfect manner, or to put it more accurately, game worlds cannot be constituted without being more or less similar to the real world, its original one, because

without it, game worlds cannot register themselves as such. This distinction, whether a minor or major slip from reality, is crucial to games to be games. The artificial world of a game contains a set of rules that are partly or entirely different from those in real life, by which it “reambiguous[s]” the existing world, making “it less formalized, less explained, open to interpretation and wonder and manipulation” (28). In other words, a game has a reflexive effect of foregrounding and questioning the structure of the world which includes it, through partial imitation and slight or whole discrepancies.

Thus, a game presupposes another territory for game-playing, but we should not carelessly conflate the severance from real life with escapism. Rather, apart from immediate “social efficacy,” at least a game can provide us with a new perspective regarding the pre-established system by reimagining a system with heterogeneous rules, which makes it difficult to assume that the game is entirely cut off from our reality and played within a limited realm of non-actuality. Even if it were made in a completely separate dimension, it would only be possible in relation to the actual reality. Brian Sutton-Smith portrays a playing world as that of realized possibility, that is, an “enacted subjunctive” world, where one can turn their eyes away from ordinary life by offering “experiences of otherness,” “alterity,” “altered states of consciousness,” and another realm of imagination and consciousness (29, 66-67). However, such a transcendental perspective does not mean the denial of or a departure from the real world; instead, it offers an ontological mode to reconsider everyday life by making and

emphasizing a contrast between reality and the game. The contrast presents a possibility that even the real world might be able to be regarded as another realm of a game. A game world is not an escape from reality but a scaled-down miniature to be speculatively conscious of one's own being in our world. Jean-François Lyotard views every enunciation made in any social system as a "move," as on a chess board, selected in a language-game (10).⁴ It is this invention of an unexpected maneuver in the accumulation of small narratives that regards its subject as a referential point in society; the pleasure of inventing such a move is rooted in the incessant incursions that literature continues directing against the established system of language, which Mark Seltzer calls "the official world" (3).⁵

The ontological perspective in Nabokov's game is intricately linked with creating a fictional world within text. In the context of Nabokov studies, the creation of another world has often been discussed as a primary topic. Vladimir E. Alexandrov draws attention to Nabokov's creation of an "otherworld" in his works: "This term is my (not wholly satisfactory) translation of the Russian word *potustoronnost'*, a noun derived from an adjective denoting a quality or state that pertains to the 'other side' of the boundary separating life and death; additional possible translations are 'the hereafter' and 'the beyond,'" which he argues derives from "an intuition about a transcendent realm of being" and "metaphysical beliefs" (3-4). Alexandrov notes that Nabokov may have adhered to a form of mystic transcendentalism that espouses the existence of another dimension of life after death: Nabokov held a mystical or

metaphysical belief about what is beyond the reality in which he lives, somewhere beyond life that appears to be irrelevant to social or political issues in reality. Instead, this dissertation aims to highlight that, in many of his writings, Nabokov speculates about the actual existence of another world beyond *this* supposedly sole reality,—that world is not that of the dead—and he seeks for *that* world over there, which has its own reality, whatever form it may take. This is not only the case with his fiction but also with his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, in which he identifies hidden patterns in his life that appear quite intricate and are no longer indistinguishable from those in fiction.⁶ For him, such a transcendental world is hardly mere afterlife; rather, it is a world of “unknown players of games” who toy with this world from the transcendental realm (*Speak, Memory* 240). Hinting at such an existence, he often describes what Alexandrov calls “textual patterning,” trivial but eye-opening coincidences for those who notice them (17). This is clearly a metafictional device as well. In so doing, Nabokov aims to remind his readers that a fictional world is a creation over which he, as the author, exerts the authority to determine anything as he likes. This form of metafictional consciousness toward both fiction and reality suggests that, like some postmodern American writers, he too held a paranoid worldview that the world he lives in does not naturally exist on its own but is deliberately oriented or manipulated.

Nabokov’s contemporary literary critics, such as Frank Kermode and Tony Tanner, also suggest a similar view of the ludic relation between reality and fiction-making. In *The Sense of*

an Ending in 1966, Frank Kermode examines “*kairos*,” a characteristic fictional time frame encompassing the beginning, middle, and end, contrasting it with “*chronos*,” a state of sheer chaos without any time frame to account for the history. “*Kairos*” rewrites “*chronos*” and ascribes significance to it “for our own game” (46, 50). He calls this game “a play of consciousness over history”: a form of game-playing that consists of an essential component of creating literature (57). In other words, Kermode regards reality as a fiction constructed by the time frame. Fiction must have a beginning and end; otherwise, readers cannot finish reading it without any of them, or they cannot understand it as a story in the first place. Therefore, the purpose of fiction-making is to add a frame and explain details. Without it, the end will never arrive, since it never begins. In short, Kermode argues that the production of literature is to play this game to designate the boundaries—an attempt to explain the inexplicable and comprehend the incomprehensible. Fiction is possible only within the parameters of a fictional time frame, and it occupies an arbitrary and finite virtual space. Tony Tanner also presents a similar view concerning the relationship between literature and games. In *City of Words*, published in 1971, he offers a vivid analysis of games in the works of Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges. He conceptualizes their works as a literary game that creates “a realm of twilight or penumbral knowledge,” an in-between space in which “they both share an awe for man’s fiction-making powers, and help to remind us that we live in fictions anyway, that the dividing line between dream and reality is not so easily drawn” (39-40). What Kermode and Tanner

have in common is that they are certain that our world is artificially constructed by certain rules of fiction and that we are imprisoned in it, producing and reproducing it within the rules to make it tangible.⁷ In short, history is a narrative game oriented by a certain form that arbitrarily affords logic and consistency to “*chronos*.” Both critics deny the escapist conception of ludic characteristics in literary works as an indicator of indifference about reality. Rather, they regard the creation of fiction as a practice of attributing meaning to our world, and they remind us that we more or less play a game of making a *hi/story* out of what we have experienced, whether it is personal or not.

Conventions and rules related to language, grammar, form, and style invariably influence the creation of stories. However, writers do not necessarily follow these rules. Nabokov often disobeys established rules or deliberately distorts them in his “*bricolage*” manner. It will become evident later that *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire* are the products of quite peculiar formal and style experiments. In his experimental style, Nabokov attempts to demonstrate what rule the reality is bound by. This reveals a scale-model relationship between reality and games or between reality and fiction, in what Seltzer calls the “autotropic” world that is artfully and playfully self-producing and observing itself to comprehend how it is designed (5-6). As games are played within their own rules, fiction is also constructed as a text with its own form and style. Games, fiction, and the world make themselves observe how they are produced and reproduced and how they are played and replayed, acting out in a literal sense

a metaphor in which reality resembles a game; this highlights that reality is indeed nothing but a game, an artificial fictional entity. What works in it is to offer players choices that are free but to some extent limited within the given rules of the game. In so doing, fiction provides us with “‘the sandbox elements’ that prolong the play—the gratuitous difficulties that ‘keep it going,’ and that seduce players to continue to play” (93). In this sense, there is no difference between our actual reality and characters’ fictional reality because both are placed in the sandbox, which provides a playground for the game to make sense of one’s life. Thus, the view that writing a story and producing a game are unrelated and that a game is a subject that serious literature does not address should be reconsidered. Instead, they both involve the vigorous exploration of how reality is constructed and of how we face and sometimes compromise it.

The ludic traits in fiction and reality not only afford us fun moments and possibilities encouraging us to continue our game but also make us notice and reconsider how the game underlies the basic system of reality. A game is not another sphere that is severed from real life and into which players depart for whatever purposes. Rather, it questions our sense of reality that we have long perceived in a rather empirical and conventional manner without substantial doubt; they suggest that our reality is nothing but a vague realm characterized by translucent but rigid boundaries of the game. The realm is neither real nor fictional, but it must be both: The real is only fictional, and vice versa. Thus, the ludic space reveals that oxymoronic state of being. It is quite interesting that McHale also views some of Nabokov’s works, such as

Lolita and *Pale Fire*, as involving a postmodernist “ontological game” in which readers catch the shimmering of authorial presence at the backdrop of the story (207). In terms of his works, Nabokov describes the figure of Vivian Darkbloom, an anagram and fictional embodiment of Vladimir Nabokov, who at times reminds readers of his authorial and celestial presence and who is consistently marionetting fictional worlds and characters. The literary hide-and-seek can most likely provide pleasure to readers when they discover such an easter egg. Again, it bridges Nabokov and his readers more rigidly, recalling an in-between realm of fiction and reality and of the author and readers. This foregrounds the view that literary texts are games, a chief trait that McHale argues is derived from the characteristics of postmodernist fiction: ontological suspicion and anxiety.

This postmodernist ontology reflected in Nabokov’s game is pivotal to bridging the division between the traditional mainstream Nabokov studies, including those by Alexandrov, Alfred Appel, Jr., Brian Boyd, and Donald Barton Johnson, who have focused on solving, rather than interpreting, the mysteries and riddles of Nabokov’s works, and relatively new historical studies, such as those by Steven Belletto, Will Norman, and Duncan White, which have proliferated particularly in the 2000s and 2010s, following the Cold War analysis of *Lolita* by Douglass Anderson in 1996. On the one hand, some critics have shed light on the playful Nabokov, who eschews engagement with sociopolitical topics. On the other hand, others have argued that Nabokov always subtly reveals his awareness of historical situations he

experienced and that he could not entirely avert his eyes from historical violence and cruelty resulting from the Holocaust, the Cold War, and nuclear destruction. In previous studies, these two critical strains have frequently been considered separately. However, these cannot be separated in terms of games; rather, they are intricately related matters in this dissertation. It cannot be denied that Nabokov's works contain various playful elements, such as wordplay, parody, riddle, and anagrams, seemingly to foster blissful moments that both the author and readers can enjoy. Nevertheless, his game is quite significant for him to strive to find his own voice in his economically and culturally constrained situation as a result of large historical events that transcended his individual capacities while he was pursuing his professional career as a writer and literary critic.

Nabokov's language-game does not constitute an autotelic, self-indulgent form of game-playing, even if it appears so at first glance. Rather, it is the art of "making do." Through insurmountable historical events, such as the Russian Revolution and World War II, Nabokov was compelled to start anew as an English writer in the United States. For him, fiction is the only realm in which he can gain autonomy and subjectivity and exercise his own will and power as the sole creator of his personal world. His game is what de Certeau calls a "tactic" to come to terms with his sense of being powerless in a larger system such as history, society, or politics, by cunningly reveling in the other's system and not entirely escaping from or devastating it.⁸

In his American years since 1940, Nabokov succeeded in forging his career as a professional

writer and critic in another country, another language, and another culture, even after he had lost what he as a Russian writer had accumulated in the 1920s and 1930s. Therefore, it is natural that after arriving in the United States, he apparently suffered from what Harold Bloom calls “the anxiety of influence” (6). The feeling inevitably accompanies works created in a “*bricolage*” manner, since Nabokov conducted his writing practice within existing systems by utilizing tools at hand. In fact, he had nothing that was not temporarily at hand in the United States; he had come to the country even without his own language. In 1941, when Nabokov had just become a Nabokov who was no longer Vladimir Sirin, but not yet the Nabokov who authored *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, he confided to Wilson that: “What tortures me when I try to write ‘imaginative’ prose in English is that I may be unconsciously copying the style of some second-rate English writer although I know, theoretically, that ‘form’ and ‘content’ are one” (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 57). Nabokov’s letter reveals a sense of precariousness about individuality or originality. He seems to be unable to believe in his own words when he writes in English, with which he does not appear to be satisfied. Moreover, he feels that he even no longer possesses what he writes; his fear is that his language-game is not his own but someone else’s.

Writing cannot avoid the use of an existing grammatical framework and lexicon, without which a language-game will not make sense whatsoever. Every single text is inevitably at least partly an aggregation of quotations of what has already been written. However,

Nabokov appears to be more cognizant of this than other writers, especially because of the transition of language and assimilation to the U.S. literary circle. This has resulted in attempts to create Richard Rorty's "final vocabulary," a language of one's own best that does not deny predecessors but repeatedly redescribes itself to seek a personal and private voice. It is quite difficult to thoroughly dismiss the anxiety of the influence of the accumulated lexicon in the language-game that has been created before, but writers strive to construct their own language-game by constantly registering their own vocabulary, even while they harbor the fear of merely utilizing clichés; they are "never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves" (73-74). Nabokov could not be more aware of this condition within the language-game that was clearly not his own or that he hardly felt a sense of familiarity with. In it, he strived to find and create his own voice. In this sense, Nabokov's game is also a desperate linguistic struggle to prove the possession of an artistic realm where he can become a monarch of his own game.

This dissertation primarily discusses four English novels that Nabokov wrote between the late 1930s and the early 1960s in which he once lost his native Russian and then managed to revive his career as an English/American writer in the United States. Part I focuses on Nabokov's biographical elements and his ludic tactics for surviving in onerous situations—the loss of his native language, his exile, and his assimilation to the United States. The first chapter

examines *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to trace Nabokov's career transition from V. Sirin to V. Nabokov, evolving from a well-known Russian writer to an anonymous English writer, investigating the significance of multilingual wordplay in the context of the imminent crisis in mid-1930s Europe. In those days, Nabokov was based in the émigré community in Berlin, where, under the menacing violence of the Nazis and war, he sensed an imminent danger of not only himself and his family but also his native language, a significant tool for his language-game and his career as a Russian writer. Nabokov wrote the novel in the late 1930s when he still was not entirely certain whether he would go to the United States. However, the novel anticipates the looming premonition of a great loss in the mirroring relationship between the protagonist V. and his older brother and English writer, Sebastian Knight, both of whom are born to a Russian family and whose initials clearly allude to the author's double identity as V. Sirin and V. Nabokov. The novel depicts V.'s quest for his late brother and his emphasis on Sebastian's implausible Russian-ness, which V. discovers by tracing his brother's life and investigating novels. As its title indicates, the real life of Sebastian and his fiction are connected in V.'s narrative like the Möbius strip. In it, the wordplay between Russian and English reflects the method of structuring and securing the subject within the grand narrative of history.

The second chapter will shed light on the connection between Nabokov and Allen Tate, one of the prominent New Critics, based on their unpublished correspondences that I have found through my archival research at the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library.

The chapter will focus on Tate's praise for *Bend Sinister*, which tends to be received negatively by critics such as Wilson. Nabokov and Tate have rarely been associated in the American literary history, but their meeting was the precise juncture when Nabokov was closest to New Criticism in his life. What brought them together was their association with the South and their aristocratic pride. Nabokov has not been discussed in relation to the South before, but his peculiar association with the South clarifies his contemporary reception in the literary circle in the mid-1940s United States. In addition, the association reveals the economic and industrial conflict between the North and the South from which New Criticism emerged and Nabokov and Tate's ambivalence and aversion to making money from literature. Both Nabokov and Tate were seeking their ideal literary styles. Their ideal styles are different in their origins but are homogenous in their beliefs and illustrate their ambivalence toward being professional writers and critics who should be truly artistic but who must simultaneously be businesspersons in the postwar literary industry. Against this cultural backdrop, their meeting marks a significant moment in the industrialization of literature and the rise of the institutionalization of New Criticism in the mid-twentieth century America in which they were suffering from the dilemma between the economic problems that they had to face and the creative independence that they idealized in theory.

Part II will devote closer attention to textual aspects of Nabokov's game in his creation of fictional worlds and elaborate upon metafictional perspectives and diegetic contingency.

The third chapter will analyze Humbert Humbert's "paranoid style" narrative in *Lolita* and illustrate how it constructs his deterministic worldview in alignment with his sense of necessity and contingency. Humbert's paranoid style represents a kind of aesthetics to observe and express how he comprehends the workings of his world. Through this style, Humbert attempts to explicate peculiar coincidences and abates his ominous premonition that something is working against him. This functions to explain away occurrences and secure individual autonomy in the postwar era when matters appear to be more complicated and unaccountable, a chaotic crucible of the indeterminate that seamlessly devours an individual presence. Humbert portrays his automobile travelogue with Lolita, in which he incessantly moves by car; however, his seemingly constant mobility described in his narrative in turn symbolizes his spiritual immobility in that he does not see what he can expect to see. The immobility illustrates his state of imprisonment by necessity, although he makes sense of it to explicate random chance in his life and to place it under his control. Thus, his paranoid style excludes the unexpected through the invention of necessity, because, if everything happens by necessity, unpredictability never remains; hence, the indeterminate can be eliminated, and he has full possession of his life. However, there remains a longing for it because, if the paranoid narrative attributes reasons to each coincidence and denies contingency, it in turn evokes the ontological anxiety characteristic of paranoid characters in postmodern novels: We all are controlled and manipulated by some larger system. If one's life is ruled by necessity, where are one's free will

or autonomous subjectivity? In this sense, contingency emerges in a hopeful manner, since it can invoke one's peculiarity, a sense of being on one's own, whereas sheer contingency still creates a terrifying vision that one is nothing more than a random presence without any purpose nor significance. Therefore, Humbert's paranoid style hints at the possibility of contingency, a vestige of the indeterminate, not to let necessity engulf everything. This mutual invention of necessity and contingency coincides with making do with one's existence in the postmodern world.

Finally, the fourth chapter will describe the interchangeability of the world and words in *Pale Fire* through the observation and observance of game rules in fiction-making. The chapter investigates each game that the two protagonists Charles Kinbote and John Shade play for the sake of their ontological security. Through his commentary on Shade's poem "Pale Fire," Kinbote not only adds annotations to the poem but also plays his game of commentary to the extent of its limit without completely deviating from the rules. Although there sometimes arises a doubt that his commentary is credible, he does not abandon the form. Rather, he adheres to it. He engages in the reconstruction and inscription of his memory through another's narrative. In commentary, he reconstructs his memory of Zembla, where he was once the king, by making his own realm in the game within the rules that he follows. Above all, it is important that his commentary resembles card-playing: He shuffles and arranges index cards on which Shade wrote fragments of his poem. The card-playing reveals that Kinbote's narrative observes the

rules of commentary, and, by doing so, the game should have certain rules, and the rules should be followed when playing in it in any fashion. Meanwhile, Shade has a metafictional realization; he is aware that he is controlled by someone beyond, powerful game players who rule the entire world and play it. The awareness instills in him a despair that he is nothing but an object for what appears chance game-playing to him, which does not mean anything significant. However, he also understands that, even if his world were an artificial creation, he could do the same as a composer of not only poetry but also a private world in which he could behave as if he were one of those game players of the world. In short, the words that both Kinbote and Shade count on to secure their own realms are for them the very worlds in which they can exercise their autonomous agency. Their awareness of game rules reveals ludic elements even in real life, which suggests that fiction and reality are not each a different realm of being but instead are a mixed playfield within which we fictionalize real life and realize fiction through ontological games.

Throughout my dissertation, the term “game” does not merely refer to games in the general sense; rather, it has a very wide range of reference. On the one hand, it alludes to a chess game or cat-and-mouse game; on the other hand, it signifies a metaphor, as when one states that life is like a game. It is significant that it is a quite comprehensive term to refer to various aspects of both reality and fiction in the postmodern era. However, in either case, the ludic nature of Nabokov’s works always accompanies his ontological, and thus linguistic,

anxiety. Nabokov's game is not a timorous flight from it but a desperate fight to face it. It involves survival tactics to challenge an overwhelming and not necessarily explicable entity when Nabokov or his characters are confronted with it and cannot come to terms with it with ease. Therefore, it is a means of *bricolage*—to make do with what one has within given parameters by inventing another realm of a linguistic game in which the connections among the signifier and the signified—by which this dissertation does not necessarily refer to merely signs and meanings—are disentangled in a playful manner. Through the analysis of Nabokov's game, our goal is to illustrate the significance of the ludic nature of literature and to showcase a model theory of literary ludology that can also be applied to other postmodern writers.

Part I

Chapter 1

Nabokov's Double Life:

The Loss of the Language-Game in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

I. Vladimir Nabokov, Who Was Once "V. Sirin"

In 1938, when the sense of imminent crisis was being gradually intensified under the rise of the Nazis, Huizinga, stressing the importance and essentiality of play in human history, lamented that various human practices were increasingly losing their connections with it:

Poiesis, in fact, is a play-function. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it. There things have a very different physiognomy from the one they wear in "ordinary life," and are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality. . . . It lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage and the seer belong, in the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter. (119)

Given that the book was published shortly before Nazi Germany began brutalizing European countries in 1939, this statement more or less implies that the world of games should be

regarded as entirely separate from Huizinga's historical consciousness. Huizinga was clearly aware of the contemporary historical situation in which he lived. He believes that play fosters fundamental and inseparable relations with the nature of our culture and society, and he may have also believed that it could represent an antithesis of and remedy for cultural decline under the rule of totalitarianism, which exemplified an extremity of cruelty and violence during modernization. Playfulness seems to be even more crucial in the very period when such playfulness is difficult to imagine.

Nabokov's playfulness appears to be not only his personal preference but also seemingly a form of compulsion that he wished to hide but was unable to eliminate in his writing: his historical consciousness. Those readers who are to some extent familiar with Nabokov's works may notice that "the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter" aligns with the traits of the very fictional space that Nabokov depicts or, to put it more correctly, where he imprisons his characters. In an interview in his later career, he stated: "I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure" (*Strong Opinions* 99). Obviously, playfulness is one of the most conspicuous and crucial themes in relation to his propensity for games such as riddles, quizzes, wordplay, and parody. Indeed, it is an indispensable component of Nabokov's style.

From the earlier 1920s to the 1930s, Nabokov was highly acclaimed in the Russian émigré community in Berlin. Compelled to leave his mother country after the Russian

Revolution in 1917, he received his B.A. degree in French and Russian at King's College at Cambridge University and moved to Berlin in 1922. Subsequently, he became highly acclaimed as V. Sirin for nearly two decades in the Russian émigré literary circle to the extent where Ivan Bunin, the first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize, envied him (Boyd, *The Russian Years* 433). Gleb Struve, who was a member of the émigré literary circle and a Russian literature researcher, claimed that "The most original and accomplished among them [several young writers of promise] is doubtless Vladimir Sirin" (47).

However, Nabokov had to fully renounce his identity as "Vladimir Sirin," his pseudonym during his "Russian years" in Berlin, where he spent most of the 1920s and the 1930s producing his novels, poems, plays, and critiques in the Russian émigré circle and where he became known as a young, energetic, and talented artist who his contemporary writer and editor Nina Berberova believed could be a symbol of their age; according to Berberova, he was "the answer to all the doubts of the exiled, the persecuted, the insulted and the injured, the 'unnoticed' and the 'lost'!" (227). Her words encapsulate the instability and anxiety of identity that Russian émigrés suffered from in their alienated situation. Sirin, however, dispelled that vague sense stemming from it, a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness in his generation, by imbuing it with meaning through art. Thus, even in his twenties, he was renowned as a top writer in his generation in the émigré literary circle. However, Berlin could not be his lifelong haven. In the mid-1930s, while living in Berlin with his Jewish wife and son, Véra and Dmitri,

Nabokov began to move, sensing an ominous zeitgeist enveloping Germany under the rise of the Nazis. He first hoped for a position as a university lecturer of literature in England, but after knowing that it was difficult, he also sought a teaching job in the United States. During this period, he experienced two strong anxieties: He felt a strong need to flee from Germany due to its racial policy, and he was anxious about the fate of his present and future career as a Russian writer if he immigrated to an English-speaking country. He wondered whether he could build and retain his professional career as a Russian writer in a country where people speak English and may not know Russian well (Boyd, *The Russian Years* 495).

Nabokov appeared to sense that he would have to renounce his career even before going to the United States, and in fact, he did. After he barely succeeded in fleeing the invasion of Nazi Germany to the United States in 1940, he had to start over as an American writer. Although he lost nearly everything except for his and his family's lives, he would eventually become well known as an American writer for the wide success of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, especially in association with Borges, who has often been referred to as one of the eminent earlier postmodernist writers in the history of American literature. However, his literary career involved a repetition of displacement not merely in a geographical sense but also in a psychological sense. In fact, even after he escaped from Europe and arrived in the United States, he always experienced fear and anxiety about his career as a writer and about how to make a living. He voiced the following complaint in a letter to a friend: "My position is maddeningly

undecided, so far nothing has worked out” (*Letters* 33). He at least seemed to be satisfied that nothing no longer physically threatened him or the freedom of art and creation in the United States, because, compared to Europe, where the war was imminent, the United States was “a genuine paradise” for him (*Letters* 33).

Since his arrival in the United States in 1940, Nabokov had transitioned from Russian to English to revive his literary career as an American writer. Before the escape from Europe, he attempted to delineate his life in Russia in English, which was titled *A Russian's Early Association with England*. A portion of that sketch would later be developed into *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, his first novel written in English in 1938 and published in the United States in 1941.¹ He wrote the novel to submit it for a literary prize in England, planning to transform himself into the English writer who he was most likely certain he had to be (Boyd, *The Russian Years* 469). However, since he could not publish it in Europe, he had to cross the Atlantic. After arriving in the United States, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was published by James Laughlin's New Directions publishing company.² While it did not elicit thunderous applause, it did grant him a certain level of recognition in the United States. In fact, after reading the novel, Wilson stated the following: “It's absolutely enchanting. It's amazing that you should write such fine English prose and not sound like any other English writer, but be able to do your own kind of thing so subtly and completely” (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 55). This appears to indicate a rather seamless debut in the American literary circle, and Wilson's praise

implies that Nabokov's English was not as poor as he thought. However, Nabokov revealed his agony to relinquish Russian: Unlike Europe where he and his family were exposed to the grave danger of war, the United States was a much safer "genuine paradise," but he still experienced an "interplanetary remoteness" (*Letters* 33). Additionally, lamenting that everything, including his own works, was being written in English, he openly expressed a sense of nostalgia for the Russian language: "[N]ever before have I had to work so much . . . all of it in English, nothing but English, so that the demon of my own language sits, enveloped in his wings, and only yawns from time to time with its dear black gullet gaping" (36).

The publication of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and its success (if modest) heralded the successful start of his new career in another language and another country, but the loss of his native language caused him unbearable pain. Particularly for him, the relationship with the language he once used was not merely confined to that of a writer and a tool. Rather, he compared it to an affair with language; he regarded language as a kind of organism and imagined a more intimate connection beyond a plain relation between a subject and an object. For instance, he writes in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" that *Lolita* is "the record of my love affair" with English (*Lolita* 316). This indicates that, almost after he spent a decade in the United States, Nabokov came to master English to the degree that he can say he had an affair with it. It should be recalled that Nabokov asserted a ludic aspect of such a "love affair" with a language, expressing that *Lolita* presents "riddles" and "the composition of a beautiful puzzle"

(*Strong Opinions* 14, 17). For Nabokov, it always means a language-game—one in which such a love affair can never be depicted without using a language.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight portrays this “love affair” with language in a metonymical way. In 1937, Nabokov indeed had an affair with a Russian émigré woman named Irina Guadanini.³ His relationship with Guadanini is reflected in that of the eponymous character and his *femme fatale*, Nina Rechnoy, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. When writing this novel, Nabokov sensed that he would nearly lose his entire identity, not only his entire professional career as a Russian writer. There is no doubt that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* serves as a significant milestone in his transition to becoming an English writer, and it should not be neglected that his affair with Guadanini overlapped with this period. Thus, this chapter will elaborate upon the theme of Nabokov’s linguistic affair with English and Russian in relation to this biographical event. In so doing, it clarifies that this novel represents an attempt to retain his own language, and thus, language-game, in the midst of the sweeping currents of history that were clearly beyond his individual capabilities, and it represents individuals struggling in the engulfing history.

II. Fiction, Reality, and History

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is a pseudo-biographical novel in which the narrator V. portrays his half-brother and English writer Sebastian Knight. V.’s final goal in his

biography is to explore the “absolute solution,” the truth of life and death, which his brother reached soon before his death, whereas V. does not expect what it is at all (*Sebastian Knight* 158). Sebastian was born in 1899 in St. Petersburg, the same year and city as Nabokov; he died in 1936 in France due to a disease, whose life V. explores as if he were a detective. V. visits places, interviews his acquaintances, and quotes his novels to support his interpretation about his brother’s life, but we cannot be certain whether it is appropriate. In fact, V. is a typical unreliable narrator; he knows barely anything about his brother. He has met him only three times, namely in 1924, 1929, and 1936, before his death since Sebastian entered Cambridge University in 1919. Furthermore, the encounter in 1936 was a product of V.’s misunderstanding; the person who he thought was his brother was someone else. While he is unfamiliar with Sebastian, he portrays him, or to put it in another way, adds commentary to his life, taking advantage of his position as his brother, which parallels *Pale Fire* in which Charles Kinbote as the annotator eloquently discusses John Shade. His narrative is imbued with his rather subjective imagination, not facts, about Sebastian, based on “the symbols of silence” that saturate Sebastian’s life (*Sebastian Knight* 179). He does not describe his brother’s real life; instead, he imagines something that resembles reality. Therefore, V. reconstructs Sebastian’s life not from concrete records about facts but from his subjective interpretations about diverse events, and, by doing so, he fills in the silent gaps that abound in his brother’s life or in what he believes is his life (Maddox 38-39). Accordingly, V’s narrative barely distinguishes reality

from fiction; rather, he has a strong tendency to fuse them together (Rimmon 115). In other words, “the real life” that he records largely relies upon his interpretation and imagination in relation to silence and absence in Sebastian’s life and words in his works.

The interplay between reality and fiction resonates with many parallels between Nabokov’s life and the novel. Siggy Frank argues that the worlds of V. and Sebastian are entangled with each other (171). The complexity and ambiguity of V.’s narrative align with the interplay between reality and fiction as his life gradually merges with Sebastian’s. In addition, the fact that Nabokov imbued this work with autobiographical elements signifies a transition from his demise as a Russian writer to his rebirth as an English writer. This deliberate coalescence of reality and fiction both inside and outside the story can be viewed as an attempt to assert authorial control over the fictional realm, which is nothing but the author’s own possession. By establishing a defined space governed by arbitrary rules and isolating it from the outside world, Nabokov transforms it into a virtually self-contained realm of his own. In so doing, this novel paradoxically challenges the power of grand history while embracing its integral components.

The identification of V. and Sebastian has been regarded as self-evident in previous studies. Many studies have mainly discussed the specular relationship between the narrator V. and his brother Sebastian Knight, who has already been dead at present in the story. Some critics have argued that Sebastian becomes a ghost, a spectral presence that obsesses V. and

leads him on behalf of his older brother to speak the way he wishes, rendering what is “reality” in the novel more nebulous or fluid (Rimmon 115; Boyd 499; Alexandrov 46-47). Their identification is not undeniable. However, in previous Nabokovian studies, critics have hardly shed light on the connection between this novel and its historical background both in a myopic and macroscopic sense, while the novel clearly marks the most significant period in Nabokov’s life.

Since around the late 2000s, some researchers have focused on the novel’s historical context. In fact, if Nabokov himself insists on the absence of any influence on or context in his works, this novel cannot be severed from his biographical and historical context in the late 1930s. As Andrzej Księżopolski argues, given that it was composed in the late 1930s when Nabokov was living in Berlin, it is impossible to thoroughly neglect the external situation in which it existed; rather, Nabokov’s ignorance of it in turn suggests that the novel is composed of strong awareness of this context (215-17). Thus, in recent studies, critics have explored the connection between V. and Sebastian in a different manner. Neil Cornwell compares it with that of Nabokov and Sirin (158). Stacy Schiff argues in her biography, *Véra: Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov*, that this biographical analogy can be applied to Nabokov and his brother Sergey, who died in a concentration camp.⁴ As Schiff’s biography illustrates, Nabokov’s rather covert consciousness of the Holocaust has often been foregrounded. Andrew Caulton notes that the novel delivers the strong but not necessarily obvious admonition about the deteriorating

political situation due to the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s when anti-Semitic sentiment was compounding (85-95).

Although we can find historical allusions in the novel relatively easily, V. never mentions such matters in his narration about Sebastian. Rather, he appears to believe that individual memory can transcend grand history, juxtaposing them and prioritizing the former. According to Książkowski, when speaking of individual memory, Nabokov's works imply an anxiety that one's life may turn into a mere tale, but there is also a potential dilemma wherein, without speaking of one's memory, it might be buried and lost in a grander memory of humanity (224). Robert Alter propounded the following argument: "The trauma of the murder of the writer's own father by Russian fascists, compounded by his brother's death at the hands of the Nazis, has haunted him throughout his career, and he may play with assassinations and related political acts, but he does not toy with them" (70). Given the major historical events occurring in Nabokov's life that a mere individual could hardly endure, it is rather impossible to affirm that Nabokov never had any historical consciousness, abiding by sheer indifference to anything but playing his literary game. However, this situation made him believe that only in his art—in his literary game—he could be allowed to attain the freedom of imagination and creation on his own.

III. An Exile in Russian or/and English

V. traces Sebastian's life, particularly his career as an English writer. For V., it appears to be almost impossible to imagine his brother as anything other than a writer. He believes that the only means to reconstruct his brother's life as it was entails exploring how Sebastian created his art and how it elaborately reflects his life. V. analyzes his brother's style, language, and themes, some of which are clear and others which are not, gradually drawing the portrait of the late mysterious English writer as in a detective novel. In so doing, he particularly draws attention to Sebastian's use of language. Refusing to admit that Sebastian was an English writer to his core, V. highlights his hidden nature, which derives from the Russian language and its influence on his works. He feels more certain of this when he happens to take a glance at part of a Russian sentence on a fragment of a letter being scorched by the flame:

But as I was burning them in the grate one sheet of the blue became loose, curving backwards under the torturing flame, and before the crumpling blackness had crept over it, a few words appeared in full radiance, then swooned and all was over. I sank down in an armchair and mused for some moments. The words I had seen were Russian words, part of a Russian sentence—quite insignificant in themselves, really (not that I might have expected from the flame of chance the slick intent of a novelist's plot). The literal English translation would be “thy manner always to find . . .”—and it was not the sense that struck me, but the mere fact of its being in my language. (*Sebastian Knight* 30-31)

In this moment, V. assures himself that Sebastian does not completely eschew the Russian language even though he adopted his English mother's surname rather than his father's (that is, the same as V.). What is important for V. here is not the meaning of the Russian sentence that he looks at but the fact that it is written in Russian. This fortuitous realization fosters a kind of spiritual connection with Sebastian, who has long been mysterious and unfamiliar to him.

Furthermore, V.'s ironic comment on the possibility of "the slick intent of a novelist's plot" implies that it is indeed the author's manipulation that caused such a coincidence to occur. In other words, the comment suggests that such a coincidence could occur, not by chance, but by imagination; that the fictional world serves as a playground where V. himself is the ruling game master who can easily and willingly manipulate it as he wishes; and that Nabokov, under the guise of the narrator, simply plays tricks on readers. These possibilities are each undeniable, but in either case, it is significant that V. draws attention not to the signified but the signifier, a formal side. V.'s attention to the signifier demarcates the outer framework of language with/in which the author struggles to find their own voice. Given that the content of V.'s narrative is not necessarily reliable, his emphasis on the formal side implies that his narrative might not intend to demonstrate the importance of meaning but that of form that is operated according to certain linguistic manners, such as grammatical and typographical conventions.

The unexpected discovery of Sebastian's use of the Russian language allows V. to suspect that Sebastian might have experienced a dormant sentiment regarding the loss of

Russian. As critics have noted, if V. stands for Vladimir and Sebastian signifies Sirin, the relationship between them easily prompts us to imagine that Nabokov, an English writer, recollects what he once was, a Russian writer. In fact, as its title obviously implies, it is not quite difficult to find in one of Sebastian's novels, *Lost Property*, the pain of losing what one once had:

[I]t is obvious that only one who has known what it is to leave a dear country could thus be tempted by the picture of nostalgia. I find it impossible to believe that Sebastian, no matter how gruesome the aspect Russia was at the time of our escape, did not feel the wrench we all experienced. All things considered, it had been his home, and the set of kindly, well-meaning, gentle-mannered people driven to death or exile for the sole crime of their existing, was the set to which he too belonged. His dark youthful broodings, the romantic—and let me add, somewhat artificial—passion for his mother's land, could not, I am sure, exclude real affection for the country where he had been born and bred. (*Sebastian Knight* 20–21)

V.'s description of Sebastian demonstrates the bifurcated nature of exile: a romanticized passion fit for art that derives from a sense of loss and a latent pain for it emanating from it. Edward Said, when defining "exile," argued that "while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements

of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever” (173). Additionally, George Steiner contends in *Extraterritorial* that multilingual and multinational writers such as Nabokov make use of a state of exile as a type of strategy to produce their unique works and in that regard, they are not unlike tourists (17).

However, this figure excessively romanticizes exile by representing it through an idealized individual who suffers from a state of exile but who simultaneously enjoys solitude, which the individual can make use of to produce something artistic. Caren Kaplan is quite perceptive of this problem: According to her, particularly in the modernist era, the idealized and romanticized “exile” refers to the “artist in exile” who “voluntarily” leaves their own country and offers “significant experimentations and insights” in solitude, displacement, and alienation; furthermore, this renders its essentially historical and political issues invisible, turning “exile” into “an ideology of artistic production” (28).⁵ These figures should be called “expatriates,” as in the case of modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway and T. S. Eliot, toward whom Nabokov expressed his detestation, who decided to leave their countries partly of their own volition and who created their unique narratives based on their experiences in other places, conferring a defamiliarization to their works. It should be stressed that Nabokov did not choose to be an exile by himself. However, after he earned his U.S. citizenship in 1945, Nabokov never settled anywhere and willingly opted to live a rootless life. Therefore, he also exploited the liberty of his status as an exile to create his works to demonstrate in his narrative

that he holds the freedom of will, liberated from external hardship that hurled him into such a situation (Wepler 81). However, this does not disprove that he directly or indirectly experienced the influences of historical contingency on his life during the Russian Revolution and the Holocaust, which clearly extended far beyond any given individual. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* reveals that the idealization of exile obfuscates the cruelty and violence accompanying such an experience. Nabokov indeed had to struggle to seek for his own language-game to assert his agency in the face of historical contingency.

As the title of Sebastian's novel *Lost Property* implies, the most significant loss for Sebastian—at least according to V.—is the Russian language. V. indicates that, even though Sebastian writes his works in English, his English is not necessarily proficient. Comparing his English to his beautifully styled Russian, he reveals Sebastian's unshakable Russianness: "I know Sebastian's Russian was better and more natural to him than his English. . . . [H]e may have forced himself into thinking he had forgotten it. . . . [H]is English was as thin as mine" (*Sebastian Knight* 73).⁶ While this seems to indicate V.'s scheme to prompt his readers to identify him with Sebastian, V.'s analysis of his brother's linguistic skills may be precise. The notion that Sebastian is inept at writing in English is stressed by a supportive quote. V. introduces a book review about Sebastian's other novel *The Prismatic Bezel*, which sarcastically posits that "Mr. Knight is as good at splitting hairs as he is at splitting infinitives" (74). Again, V. draws our attention to the formal facet of language. The review insinuates the

incompetence of Sebastian's English, mentioning split infinitive, which is sometimes considered grammatically inappropriate. Interestingly, this grammatical error appears to be a signifier of non-native English for Nabokov. In 1936, shortly before he began writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, when he asked Struve whether one of his English-speaking students could check the English translation of *Despair*, he jokingly told him that the student would have to be "in search of the split infinitive" (qtd in Boyd, *The Russian Years* 430). This comment indicates a lack of confidence and perhaps a frustration with the language-game with which he was unfamiliar, as opposed to the content.

V. reveals that Sebastian, as with his creator, harbors a similar dissatisfaction with the chasm between his thoughts and his words:

His struggle with words was unusually painful and this for two reasons. One was the common one with writers of his type: the bridging of the abyss lying between expression and thought; the maddening feeling that the right words, the only words are awaiting you on the opposite bank in the misty distance, and the shudderings of the still unclothed thought clamoring for them on this side of the abyss. He had no use for ready-made phrases because the things he wanted to say were of an exceptional build and he knew moreover that no real idea can be said to exist without the words made to measure. So that (to use a closer simile) the thought which only seemed naked was but pleading for the clothes it wore to become visible, while the words lurking afar were not empty

shells as they seemed, but were only waiting for the thought they already concealed to set them aflame and in motion. (*Sebastian Knight* 72-73)

The aesthetic difficulty that there is a gap between thought and its verbalization may not necessarily be a problem that only Sebastian faces but as one that any writer faces. However, in Sebastian's case, this does not mean that he simply has difficulty finding "the right words" to verbalize what he imagines; rather, it means that he suffers due to the difference between the language for thought and that for writing. In short, he does not appear to suffer in the process of creating the content of his work, but he struggles to find the best vessels into which he can channel what he imagines. Finding words fit for imagination is most likely a basic process for writers, but the process may have been quite difficult and exasperating for Sebastian as well as Nabokov due to the linguistic discrepancy. The feeling that he cannot reach the other side of the shore where he can find "the right words" for expressing his thoughts appears to anticipate how his creator would feel after he went to the United States.

This may remind one of the crossword metaphor that Nabokov used to explain the process of creation. In an interview in 1967, Nabokov stated that: "The pattern of the thing precedes the thing. I fill in the gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose. These bits I write on index cards until the novel is done" (*Strong Opinions* 86). A crossword is a game in which one places correct words into blank cells. In other words, it already has the only words that should fit, but that is not evident initially, as they must be picked by the answerer. It is not

necessarily clear when Nabokov started thinking that his own creative style was similar to crossword, but this at least indicates how he constructed his works. For him, the process of creation seems to mean that he first conjured up a vague image of a fictional world and its characters in his mind and then verbalized these visions by seeking the most appropriate words to express it as if solving a crossword puzzle. Meanwhile, for Sebastian, the waiting words imply his annoyance about the difficulty of discovering them in another language, which V. believes he is more likely to do easily in his native tongue. In addition, what is even more difficult for him is that they must not be “ready-made phrases” waiting for him to pick them up; rather, they are waiting to be generated by him in his own manner, if that does not always mean that he must invent a completely new vocabulary or linguistic system. What he longs for is not passive clichés waiting to be found. Rather, it is an active endeavor to reach an ideal and unique language that has not yet been created. However, what he first must confront is the difficulty of being sufficiently familiar with the rules of the unfamiliar language-game in which he had to create his work.

IV. Language and The Subject

As he travels around to track his brother's steps, V. concludes that there are two women, Clare Bishop and Nina Rechnoy, who appeared to exert certain influences on Sebastian's life, and he decides to look for them.⁷ The descriptions of these two women can be considered to

be based on actual persons in Nabokov's life: Clare on his wife Véra and Nina on Irina Guadanini. The parallel between Clare and Véra is the supportive role they fulfill for their partners. While Véra helped his husband with typewriting and proofreading, Clare supports Sebastian with writing in English. The relationship between Sebastian and Clare partly reflects that between Nabokov and Véra:

Clare, who had not composed a single line of imaginative prose or poetry in her life, understood so well (and that was her private miracle) every detail of Sebastian's struggle, that the words she typed were to her not so much the conveyors of their natural sense, but the curves and gaps and zigzags showing Sebastian's groping along a certain ideal line of expression. . . .

I know too that as Clare took down the words he disentangled from his manuscript she sometimes would stop tapping and say with a little frown, slightly lifting the outer edge of the imprisoned sheet and re-reading the line: "No, my dear. You can't say it so in English." He would stare at her for an instant or two and then resume his prowl, reluctantly pondering on her observation, while she sat with her hands softly folded in her lap quietly waiting. "There is no other way of expressing it," he would mutter at last. "And if for instance," she would say—and then an exact suggestion would follow. (*Sebastian Knight* 73-74)

Clare works for Sebastian not only as a typist but also as a proofreader who can correct his awkward English expressions. Schiff notes that Clare's statement, "You can't say it so in English," alludes to when Zina tells Fyodor in *Gift* that "I'm not sure you can say it like that in Russian"; furthermore, Schiff argues that, in an interview in 1965, Nabokov told the interviewer that his wife said, "Oh, you can't say that, you can't say that" when she read his manuscript (*Gift* 204; Schiff 52).⁸ Again, it is connotated by Clare's statement that Sebastian's English is not quite precise in its grammar and that it barely sounds natural. However, if his writing is grammatically incorrect, what he attempts to say seems to make sense. The conversation suggests that in his mind, his English communicates meanings, but they are not necessarily natural in terms of their form in English. This demonstrates not merely his poor English but also that he appears to think not in English but in Russian when he composes sentences and that he strives to literally translate what he thinks in Russian in his mind into written sentences in English. That also supports the possibility that the entire narrative of this novel may have been translated from Russian. If V. and Sebastian were as symbolically identical as Nabokov and Sirin, representing two different aspects of a single individual's personality or persona and their linguistic deficiencies, it would be undeniable that V.'s English narration might be, like his brother's, the proofread English text that originally had to be corrected and revised to be more natural.

As Schiff vividly describes in her biography, Véra was an essential partner for Nabokov. However, Véra did not seem to think it was favorable that she appeared in public. Schiff notes that Véra's characteristic personality was "self-effacement"; this perhaps suggests that Nabokov exerted patriarchal power as a male writer who repressed his wife, but this does not always have a negative connotation because, although it is no longer clear how Véra conceptualized her supportive role for her husband, Schiff argues that at least Véra, who did not like to appear in public, could speak in her own voice through the mask of Vladimir Nabokov (73).⁹ In fact, Nabokov told his sister Elena in a letter that they were akin to "Siamese twins" (qtd in Schiff 46). For Nabokov, who prioritized artistic creation above all else, Véra was not only his beloved wife but also an important partner essential to his writing who helped him with typing and chores. In this sense, she was a truly inseparable and integral counterpart for him. Above all, he was not adept at memorizing complicated numbers and procedures, always struggled with communication services such as letters and telephone calls, and found it difficult to contact editors and agents without the assistance of his wife. From today's perspective, although their relationship might appear male-centric and patriarchal, at least Nabokov and Véra, as a writer and a proofreader and assistant, worked together on their works.

The relationship between Sebastian and Nina is based on that of Nabokov and Irina Guadanini, whom he met in 1937 in Paris. At that time, while planning to move from Berlin, Nabokov went alone to Paris to sell his work to publishers and to deliver lectures and public

readings, where he felt that he and his family would soon be in danger. On the other hand, Véra was working in Berlin and Plague, looking after their son. The Guadaninis were an upper-class family in St. Petersburg similar to the Nabokovs, and they belonged to the same political faction as Nabokov's father. After the Russian Revolution, Guadanini once married a Russian she met in Belgian but then divorced; subsequently, she lived in Paris. Guadanini was beautiful and well educated, and she could also recite poems. These attributes appeared to draw Nabokov's attention, and their affair began shortly thereafter. Véra first did not know of her husband's affair, but she soon learned of it from a letter written by a Russian in French.¹⁰ In 1937, Nabokov revealed to Véra his affair with Guadanini and promised never to see her again, but he lied to his wife and remained in contact with Guadanini. In this double life, he told Guadanini to use the pseudonym V. Korff, which was his paternal great-grandmother's surname; indeed, her first name was Nina (Schiff 88). However, Véra believed that her husband's affair was "what he had done was to have substituted for his passionate affair with the Russian language *un mariage de raison* which 'as it sometimes happens with a *marriage de raison*'—became in turn a tender love affair" (qtd in Schiff 98).

This substitution of the Russian language for a Russian woman is clearly reflected in the novel as well. Nabokov illustrates it by presenting a riddle in search of the true identity of the Russian woman, Nina. Sensing her identity, V. lies to Nina, who disguises herself as Madame Lecerf, in Russian "I thought there was a spider on your neck" (*Sebastian Knight* 151).

While she is supposed not to understand Russian, Nina unconsciously hears him and says that “[t]here’s something on my neck, I feel it” (152). Thus, V. is certain of her true identity:

“It was very clever of you,” I said, in our liberal grand Russian language, “it was very clever of you to make me believe you were talking about your friend when all the time you were talking about yourself. . . . So I made a little test. And when you subconsciously caught the Russian sentence I muttered aside . . .” (*Sebastian Knight* 152)

V. deceives her and proves, by playing with language, that her identity is as inseparable from Russian, just as Sebastian could not entirely conceal his longing for it. This conversation suggests the inseparable connection between the subject and language. As V. refers to it as “our” Russian, the language comprehensively encompasses both of them, implying an imagined community they unconsciously share. When he says “our,” he implies that they have in common the sense of belonging to the same community or group, which means V., Nina, and Sebastian are connected through the language. V.’s linguistic play reveals that, even though none of them seem to use it anymore, they cannot escape being part of the same language-game. In other words, language is described here not only as a mere practical tool for thoughts and expressions but also as a conveyor of one’s identity. Here, Nina and Russian are not casually associated but intricately linked, just like the sign and the meaning. Revealing the link, V. concludes the following: “Now the puzzle was solved. And as the meaning of all things

shone through their shapes” (157). Until the revelation, the meaning in Sebastian’s life is vague because it does not have any appropriate vessel to make sense. Both Sebastian and Nina share the struggle between the desire to conceal their longing for Russian and the unquenchable feeling for it and the painful feeling that their native language cannot be separated from their identity. It lies at the root of their mode of being.

It should also be noted that the representation of Nina recalls the historical context in which Nabokov composed the novel. According to Norman, Nina represents a typical figure of a flapper or *femme fatale*, a symbol that “super-modern things have a queer knack of dating much faster than others” (*Sebastian Knight* 22; Norman 45); such a representation embodies the accelerated time of modernity, the very “passage of time and history,” which is linked with a postwar and prewar “dawning realization” that people could not help making in 1930s Europe (Norman 46).¹¹ Nina’s representation appears to reflect the dark zeitgeist of the 1930s. Interestingly, she is associated with a spider in an ominous manner. She is described as “a water-spider which has just stopped and is floating backward,” which the painter depicts in Sebastian’s portrait “to hint at a woman somewhere behind him or over him—the shadow of a hand, perhaps . . . something” (104). Andrew Caulton notes that the spider image associated with Nina’s *femme fatale* characteristics implies the threat of the Nazi swastika, a symbol of racial eugenics that the Nazis supported as part of their political ideology; he also notes that

the “Lehmann’s disease” from which Sebastian dies has a racial connotation, which means Jewishness (89).

Although these criticisms are quite misogynic, it is remarkable that they note the importance of the historical background of the novel. As with some other works by Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* appears to focus solely on its internal world, neglecting to illuminate its external context. However, in so doing, it deals with the conflict between history and individuals, which demonstrates that personal memory can triumph over grand history (Książopolski 216-17). Despite the time in which the story unfolds, V. seems to be deliberately unaware of latent historical impacts on characters; thereby, he establishes an internal fictional realm as a unique playground that is distinct from the outside context. What matters there after all is not only the inseparability of the subject and its native language but also the helplessness that the subject experiences by losing opportunities to play his or her own language-game, that is, the helplessness wherein the subject cannot express their helplessness in their own words. If the subject has a sense of helplessness in mind, they do not find any words to express it nor a container to communicate the feeling or thought; therefore, the subject suffers from the loss of their voice. No one can have an identity without the language to identify himself or herself.

V. On the Other Shore

Nina's true identity is finally revealed via V.'s language trick. As Véra analyzed his husband's affair, Sebastian's love for Nina may be regarded as a kind of substitutive remedy for the loss of language. In this sense, it is not difficult to interpret Sebastian's love for her and his demise as a metaphorical death of V. Sirin and the loss of Russian. After his brother's death, V. claims that he is Sebastian himself and starts writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in English: "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (181). V.'s identification with Sebastian after his death represents a spiritual attempt to resurrect his brother, or to put it more accurately, to inherit his existence as Sebastian or who once was Sebastian. V. quotes the following from Sebastian's *The Doubtful Asphodel*, referring to death as the departure of the ship to the other shore:

In *The Doubtful Asphodel*, his method has attained perfection. It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations. . . . [O]nly one half of the notion of death can be said really to exist: *this* side of the question—the wrench, the parting, the quay of life gently moving away aflutter with handkerchiefs: ah! he was already on the other side, if he could see the beach receding; no, not quite—if he was still thinking." (Thus, one who has come to see a friend away, may stay on deck too late, but still not become a traveller.) . . . Instead of those thought-images which radiated fainter and fainter, as we followed them down blind alleys, it is now the slow assault of horrible uncouth visions

drawing upon us and hemming us in: . . . an exile's account of life in the cruel country
whence he fled (*Sebastian Knight* 155-56)

As Alexandrov argues, the connection between death and the departure of the ship is a clear metaphor for the “otherworld” theme, which demonstrates that V. attempts to overcome death by identifying himself with the late Sebastian (142). In this sense, V. is literally the ghostwriter of his brother. Furthermore, it is also evident that “the other side” is not a mere metaphor if one recalls that Nabokov indeed had to go to the other shore of the Atlantic with his manuscript of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which was not yet published then. For him, sailing for the other shore meant the death of Sirin and the loss of his native language and his rebirth as V. Nabokov and the transition to English. V. states that: “[T]he soul is but a manner of being—not a constant state—that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. Thus—I am Sebastian Knight” (*Sebastian Knight* 180). Here, it appears that V. strongly admonishes himself that he could be any soul because it is simply “a manner of being—not a constant state.” This statement springboards the transition and instability of one's existence or identity that the two V.s must deal with, synthesizing the cynical but optimistic view that if one lost something, she or he can become anyone hereafter.

The fusion of V. and Sebastian again highlights that V.'s exploration of Sebastian's life is a self-reflexive reference to himself. In short, V. talks about himself as if discussing another person in the same manner as Nina talks about herself as if talking about someone else. They might be behaving like someone else as if they were actors. Siggy Frank argues that theatricality is a key to Nabokov's life in the 1930s, and this implies the temporality and mobility that he experienced in his exiled life (169). In fact, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is described as a play performed by characters. V. feels "as if I were impersonating him [Sebastian] on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going—. . . the pale radiance of Clare's inclined head . . . and Nina sits on a table in the brightest corner of the stage . . . And then the masquerade draws to a close" (*Sebastian Knight* 180-81). The metafictional exaggeration highlights not only the inevitable artificiality of literary works; it also lifts the weight of reality or history. This may in turn anchor the desire to possess the fixation of missing identity in exile. One of the readers of Sebastian states that "Knight seemed to him to be constantly playing some game of his own invention, without telling his partners its rules" (159). Nevertheless, the game whose rules are only known to the creator is rather important, since it means that the demarcated space of the game is his and only his possession at his will. Whatever the rules are, the distinction between reality and fiction dissolves. Thus, they form a Moebius strip structure, which creates a playground bridged in an in-between space over which only Nabokov has control. For V., it is "a lighted stage" in which "the masquerade"

can be performed under certain parameters within the fictional world. To undo the existing rules of the language-game and knot them again in one's own manner are significant to produce a "final vocabulary," but in the first place, they may require the full knowledge of a certain language. How can one create one's own language in a "*bricolage*" manner—how can one play in a game whose rules one does not know?—without knowing the very rules, that is, the grammar, vocabulary, and conventions, in the language that the author chooses to write in?

Chapter 2

Two and Two No Longer Make Four:

New Criticism, “Commonsense,” and Totalitarianism in *Bend Sinister*

I. Nabokov and Tate

The 1940s was one of the most important periods in Nabokov’s life. He restarted his career as an English writer in the United States and had to consider his tactics for survival in the new environment. In other words, he struggled with the art of “making do” with his “move” in the language-game of various established narratives. *Bend Sinister*, which he finished in 1946, was his first novel he wrote in the United States since he had published *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in 1941. He sent the manuscript of the novel to Edmund Wilson, his friend and his gateway into the American literary industry, but Wilson offered an incisive response. In a letter in 1947, he wrote that:

I was rather disappointed in *Bend Sinister*, about which I had had some doubts when I was reading the parts you showed me, and I will give you my opinion, for what it is worth. Other people may very well think otherwise: I know, for example, that Allen Tate is tremendously excited about it—he told me that he considered it “a great book.”

(*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 209-10)¹

However, Wilson mentions enthusiastic praise from Allen Tate, an editor at Henry Holt and Company, whom Nabokov had already met through Wilson. In fact, Nabokov already knew this before Wilson told him because Tate had sent him a letter, saying that: “I have read your novel and I think it is magnificent. I very strongly urge you to submit it formally to Henry Holt and Company” (Letter to Nabokov, Sept. 3, 1946). This yet unpublished letter signifies the moment in which Nabokov encountered New Criticism when it was gradually becoming the new theoretical establishment in postwar America.

Previous studies have regarded the connection between these two as Nabokov’s point of contact with New Criticism, referring to Tate as one of the most prominent New Critics; in addition, they have argued that, whereas their historical and philosophical background were completely different, the connection could be made because they happened to share the same view that literary works had their own autonomy (Norman 91-92; White 35). However, their meeting was one of the significant moments solidifying the complicated socio-political relationship between literature and criticism at the backdrop of the gradual institutionalization of New Criticism. The 1940s, when Nabokov was reestablishing his professional career as an English/American writer and making do with a language which he could not feel comfortable with, coincided with the maturing of New Criticism. In this period, he landed a lecturer’s job at Wellesley College and later at Cornell University. Although he did not have a master’s or doctoral degree, he taught his literary theory that emphasizes not external contexts but rather

aesthetic autonomy in literary works. In *Lectures on Literature*, he argues that “the isms go; the ist dies; art remains then” (147). His theory even denies any “isms” in literature. However, its dogma clearly resembles New Criticism, an academic faction that can be regarded as a kind of “ism” whose view highlights the elimination of every external aspect regarding literary works and only focuses on aestheticism.

In the 1940s, when Nabokov joined the American literary industry as a perfect stranger and strove to be acknowledged and make a living, it may have been quite important to know what had been trendy and acclaimed. In other words, he must have more or less self-consciously learned what type of literature would have been more acceptable to the reader and planned how he would write thereon, if he had aspired to be a professional writer who made his living only from writing. However, there was a major gap between his ideal for literature and the demand for popular or bestselling books. While he longed for economic independence as a professional writer devoting himself to artistic creativity, he had to come to terms with the dilemma that he had to write a book that was somewhat promising in terms of sales numbers—which he was unwilling to do. Tate’s high praise for *Bend Sinister* indicates their similar attitudes toward their contemporary milieu in relation to literature. In fact, the connection between Nabokov and Tate has been discussed only minimally in the history of American literature, but their meeting should not be overlooked because it demonstrates that New Criticism is highly conscious of the socio-political and cultural conditions of literature, whereas

its fundamental dogma willingly excludes any contexts outside of each work. This chapter focuses on the Nabokov-Tate connection and clarifies that *Bend Sinister* reflects the nature of the American literary industry at that time. Above all, based on an archive of unpublished correspondences between them, which are collected in the Vladimir Nabokov Papers in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, this chapter will reveal the conflict between the idealized literary “style” that Nabokov and Tate long for and the capitalist dominance of the literary industry.²

II. Nabokov and New Criticism

Previous Nabokovean studies have sometimes mentioned the encounter between Nabokov and New Criticism. However, they have only viewed it as a historical coincidence occurring because of the theoretical affinity that he and New Critics happened to share and because of the historical simultaneity and adjacency between his career from the 1940s through the 1950s and the spreading institutionalization of New Criticism in the postwar era. For example, in his foreword to *Lectures on Literature*, John Updike underscores the coincidental similarity between Nabokov’s theory of reading and that of the 1950s literary trend:

The fifties, with their emphasis upon private space, their disdainful regard of public concerns, their sense of solitary, disengaged artistry, and their New Criticism faith that all essential information is contained within the work itself, were a more congenial

theater for Nabokov's ideas than the following decades might have been. But in any decade Nabokov's approach would have seemed radical in the degree of severance between reality and art that it supposes. (xxv)

Although he only had a bachelor's degree in French and Russian literature, Nabokov's theory that idealizes close reading and unmasking details inscribed in it had a certain theoretical association with the academic theory at that time. In fact, Nabokov had expressed his strong concerns about the formal aspect of literature since his Russian years and believed that the form was the sole means for writers to perform truly creative activity (Kaizawa 258). This idea, which he had forged and embraced in Russia and Berlin, must have played a crucial role in connecting him to New Criticism. Apart from Tate, Nabokov indeed met some New Critics, such as I. A. Richards, Ivor Winters, and John Crowe Ransome (Boyd, *The American Years* 33, 141).

Although it is uncertain how familiar Nabokov was with the theories and philosophies of New Critics, his thoughts shared much in common with them. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that he did not necessarily embrace such an idea only in this period of his life. His view of literature became most conspicuous in this period most likely because he had to more or less clarify it as a theory for class. As we have already seen in the first chapter, he had to continually flee from where he lived as a result of being influenced by grand history in a devastating manner beyond an individual level; therefore, it was quite significant for him to

secure his own world that is never influenced by any exterior interference and that he is free to play within. He felt that it was a real world in a true sense. In an interview in 1968, he stated that: “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” (*Strong Opinions* 97). In short, the autonomous creation and imagination of one’s subjective and personal world is the very significance of art for him, as opposed to imitating the modern world in real life; such a world might have felt rather real to him. There is no doubt that he placed an emphasis on the autonomy of that micro artistic world and held beliefs that aligned with New Criticism, which separates itself from the modern world in a macroscopic sense wherein he was suffering from immense historical movements.

In 1941, the next year Nabokov crossed the Atlantic, John Crowe Ransom published *The New Criticism*, which may demarcate the concurrence between Nabokov’s participation in the American literary industry and the increasing dissemination of New Criticism. The publication of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* from New Directions, which played a chief role in the modernist movement in the United States in alignment with the rise of New Criticism, indicates that the country was somewhat ready to accept European writers such as Nabokov (Akikusa). In this context, *Bend Sinister* also presented a quite experimental style similar to some other modernist writers; it portrayed the very problem of literary criticism, that concerning the difficulty with which literary works challenge the reader. Norman argues that

Bend Sinister poses “the value of modernist difficulty . . . that was still current in the United States during the 1940s as a crucial component of the debate surrounding the emergence of New Criticism” and that this problem may have stimulated Tate to have a critical interest in it (91-92). Additionally, according to Duncan White, regarding Nabokov’s lectures at Wellesley and Cornell, “[w]hat truly made Nabokov an important fellow traveler to the New Critical project was his shared commitment to aesthetic autonomy,” and he played a supportive role in encouraging the rise of New Criticism and the canonization of modernist works in institutions (35). Furthermore, analyzing the postwar formation of New Criticism and the modernist canonization in the postwar era, Mark McGurl notes Nabokov’s peculiarity as a professional writer and lecturer of literature (4-11).³

In short, the relationship between Nabokov and New Criticism is more or less interactive. He unwillingly accepted a teaching job because he could not make adequate money as a professional writer. However, in so doing, he partly joined the campaign to cultivate the theoretical soil that allowed him to be embraced as a writer in the United States. If consciously or not, at least he succeeded in making an effectual *move* within the American literary circle, and he could thus participate in a big game, a historic literary movement growing in the United States in that era. Although he never called himself a New Critic, New Criticism served as his theoretical guardian when he forged his professional career as a man of letters. On the one hand, the rise of New Criticism encouraged him to present his literary theory, and on the other hand,

Nabokov contributed to it through his supporting role as a university lecturer. In doing so, he continued to demonstrate a kind of private or personal approach to reading: the exclusion of the outer context and the affection for details. However, this reflects social and cultural contexts, and it exhibits his anxiety and disgust that literature was received not as an autonomous object for artistic joy but as a commodity or product within capitalism.

III. New Criticism as Economic Resistance

Tate played a pivotal role in developing New Criticism alongside Ransom and Robert Penn Warren since the 1930s, and he is now regarded as one of the most prominent New Critics. Those New Critics harbored various ideas about literature, but they shared a grave concern that the relationship between writers and readers was largely constructed by monetary issues in the market and that sales always interfered in and exerted a serious effect on the production of literary works. Mark Jancovich argued that:

For Tate, the problem with the cash-nexus as a mode of social organization is that writers become separated from their public, and can only reach a public through the market. Sales become the primary mode of social exchange between writers and their readerships, and to reach a public writers are forced to concentrate their efforts on the requirements of the market. (48)

In fact, financial matters are more or less always reflected in the literature in any time period. However, they were the most significant issue for Tate. This may have stemmed from his childhood memory; his parents, who were born in the South, told their son that he was born to an ex-aristocratic family, and he indeed believed that; therefore, he always experienced his financial hardship as a sense of losing the wealth that his family had once possessed. Even after he knew that was not true, he was even unable to renounce that idea and false pride (Underwood 22).

In the late 1940s, when he met Nabokov in New York, he managed to make a living by working as an editor at Henry Holt and teaching as a part-time lecturer at a university. His concern about the onerous economic situation that writers had to come to terms with is already evident in one of his earlier essays, "The Profession of Letters in the South," which was published in 1935 and in which he compares the United States with France; he presents a question about how professional writers will create literature in an autonomous manner in the American literary industry, which elevates material and commercial values more than artistic completion:

French letters are a profession, as law, medicine, and the army are professions. Good writers starve and lead sordid lives in France as elsewhere; yet the audience for high literature is larger in France than any other country; and a sufficient number of the best writers find a public large enough to sustain them as a class.

It goes somewhat differently with us. The American public sees the writer as a businessman because it cannot see any other kind of man, and respects him according to his income. And, alas, most writers themselves respect chiefly and fear only their competitors' sales. A big sale is "success." How could it be otherwise? Our books are sold on a competitive market; it is a book market, but it is a luxury market; and luxury market must be fiercely competitive. (*Reactionary Essays* 145)

Tate might excessively idealize France here, whereas this view illustrates his yearning for modernist literature in interwar Europe. He emphasizes that literature should occupy a professional position and that it should form "a class" in a social hierarchy. As he argues here, the context of literature as an economic matter is inevitably associated with a capitalist industry in which literature is imbued with commercial values and professional writers have to form a social class, which means that they can make a living in the same manner as in other professions. Meanwhile, in the case of American literature, this seems to present a terrifying vision to him that the image of writers is entirely separated from a solitary genius, or an ideal romantic figure, and is transformed into that of the American "businessman" who believes in the virtue of making money. For Tate, the expression "businessman" does not seem to correspond to a profession. The word refers not to the creative and artistic effort to produce serious literature but the commercialist devotion to achieve a major sale in the market, an entirely different purpose from what he believes is the contemporary situation in France. However, just as Paul

de Man argues about the inseparability of “the dancer” and “the dance” in William Butler Yeats’ “Among School Children,” his rhetorical question “How could it be otherwise?” should be understood in a direct manner. Not that he wonders how he could be a game changer in the current situation of U.S. literature business; rather, he highlights the utter inseparability between literature and business in the United States. In so doing, he finds it rather self-evident that writers cannot be independent as professionals without financial security and stability, and he wonders how literature can reclaim their aesthetic autonomy and come to terms with/in such a system.

As is clearly demonstrated in Tate’s essay, the philosophical nucleus of New Criticism is formed by the resisting mind to the economic and industrial rupture of the North and the South. In fact, when it was being theorized by Southern critics based in Vanderbilt University, one of the chief driving forces was the economic resentment that the traditional Southern feudalism harbored against the North. Terry Eagleton describes it as follows: “In the period of American New Criticism, the South was in fact undergoing rapid industrialization, invaded by Northern capitalist monopolies; but ‘traditional’ Southern intellectuals like John Crowe Ransom . . . could still discover in it an ‘aesthetic’ alternative to the sterile scientific rationalism of the industrial North” (40). The New Critical purpose was arguably achieved via its wide institutionalization after the postwar era by becoming a formal academic discipline that would exert a strong influence on the subsequent generation, such as structuralism and

poststructuralism. Ironically, in so doing, it reproduced a technocratic system that it had once harshly criticized.

The main purpose wherein New Criticism excludes any outer contexts and specifies its focus only on the internal space of literary works represents, as the name “Fugitives” implies, not only aesthetic seclusion from the invasion of the Northern industry and capitalism but also a pursuit of an alternative approach to literature and the critical discipline, which was a socioeconomic challenge to the dominance of the Northern capitalist industry. New Criticism is often regarded as a theory that considers a literary work as a closed autonomous entity perfectly severed from society, politics, or economy, but its disciplinary root comes from the strong sense of crisis and resentment toward the underdevelopment of the Southern economy and the invasion of the Northern industry. In these situations, Tate longed for the “communion” of humanitarian “communication” that he believed people could reach through literature; he resisted the dominance of “mass communication,” such as pulp fiction, radio, and television, over the contemporary literary conditions and the restoration of humane connections among people (*The Man of the Letters in the Modern World* 17). Thus, he explored how to redeem humanities once again and sought for a way to somehow reappropriate literature within the established commercialist system.

IV. Nabokov, Tate, and the South

Interestingly, Nabokov was sometimes connected with the American South, but this has not been discussed in previous studies. Nevertheless, the Southern connection is quite significant in observing the relationship between Nabokov and Tate. It especially highlights how Nabokov was received in the United States. In a reply to a letter from Wilson in 1948, Nabokov refutes Wilson's analogy of the American North/South and Soviet /Imperial Russia:

You naively compare my (and the "old Liberals") attitude towards the Soviet regime (*sensu lato* [in a broad sense]) to that of a "ruined and humiliated" American southerner towards the "wicked" North. You must know me and "Russian Liberals" very little if you fail to realize the amusement and contempt with which I regard Russian émigrés whose "hatred" of the Bolsheviks is based on a sense of financial loss or class *degringolade* [loss of class position]. (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 221)⁴

The reply clearly demonstrates that Wilson conceived of Nabokov's acrimony against the Soviet Russia as reminiscent of that of the Southerners to the North: a sense of resentment toward the "financial loss or class *degringolade*" that the Soviet Revolution caused. As one of the "old Liberals," Nabokov denies Wilson's view, claiming that his critical attitude is not based on his resentment. However, given his economic hardship while making a living as a professional writer in the United States (e.g., he had to teach at colleges when he wished to be devoted only to writing), his refutation may not seem tenable. Nonetheless, in his letter, Wilson appeared to connect Nabokov and the old South in his historical and political analogy based on

the fact that they shared a similar sense of “financial loss” caused by the demise of aristocratic society. In fact, Wilson may not have been the only one to perceive the connection. Instead, the view implies a peculiar tendency toward finding the Southern connection.

Nabokov himself refers to the parallels between Imperial Russia and the American South in the sixteenth chapter of *Speak, Memory*, where through the persona of a fictional American reviewer, he writes a book review of his own book:

American readers of today, whose information concerning Tsarist Russia is thoroughly permeated by Communist propaganda and pro-Soviet accounts that were spread here in the twenties, will be surprised to learn from various passages in *Conclusive Evidence* how freely opinions could be expressed and how much could be done by civilized people in pre-Revolution Russia.

Life in the wealthy, landowning upper stratum to which the Nabokovs belonged had some affinities with Southern opulence in this country. (*Speak, Memory* 240-41)⁵

In this chapter, Nabokov analyzes himself from an American reviewer’s perspective, which indicates that the pseudo-review reveals what Nabokov imagined his contemporary Americans thought of him. It is quite interesting that the reviewer mentions the freedom of speech before the Russian Revolution, which he expects may surprise American readers. Moreover, the reviewer also identifies the same similarity that Wilson did. Wilson might be the exemplar of this American reviewer. This view may arise from the exotic image of Nabokov among his

contemporaries as an ex-aristocratic exile who came in from the old Russia. “[S]ome affinities” that the reviewer mentions here appear to invoke a sense of financial loss. In addition, Nabokov might have intended that the review would preliminarily prevent readers from making such an analogy. However, in so doing, the review reveals Nabokov’s strong consciousness of the Southern connection and similarity and his unwillingness to admit it. In fact, the analogy may have been somewhat accurate. He could not relinquish his ex-aristocratic pride nor grievance against the Bolsheviks, which caused him to lose everything. Arguably, his hatred toward the commodification of literature was based on his class consciousness (Cohen 336). In this sense, what both Nabokov and Tate shared was their class consciousness as professional writers who were born to once-wealthy ex-aristocratic families.⁶

New Criticism was being established as being conscious of its historical context while it was excluding other perspectives. This is clear in Lionel Trilling’s analysis that “they [the New Critics] were exercising their historical sense. . . . [W]e can only question the mere implicitness of their historical sense, their attitude of making the historical sense irrelevant to their aesthetic” (187-88). Trilling makes the point quite clear; that is, the New Critical disinterest is the very embodiment of its interest. Tate tended to nostalgically idealize the aristocratic feudalistic society in the old South. He may have been quite conscious of it when he sent an applause to *Bend Sinister*, sensing some bonds with him. This is most likely one of the factors that encouraged him to be close to and sympathize with Nabokov, who also placed

an emphasis on the internal autonomous structure of literature. The unwavering elitist pride and detestation against the dominance of commercialism must have integrated them. In other words, they conceal their historical sensibilities by expressing their indifference to history.

What is Tate's implicit historical sensibility? Tate felt unsatisfied with the current Southern situation wherein, after the Civil War, the North developed industrial capitalism and shaped the technocratic society, whereas the South was far behind it and had to abide by the values imposed on it by Northern capitalism. Particularly, he struggled with the literary conditions in the South in which literature was only valued in terms of its sales, and he criticized the cultural and economic subordination to the Northern literary industry centered around New York, which caused difficulties professional Southern writers could not evade:

[T]he Southern writers who are too fastidious to become conscious of their profession have not refused to write best sellers when they could, and to profit by a cash nexus with New York. I would fain believe that matters are otherwise than so: but facts are facts. If there is such a person as a Southern writer, if there could be such a profession as letters in the South, the profession would require the speaking of unpleasant words and the violation of good literary manners. . . . Because there is no city in the South where writers may gather, write, and live, and no Southern publisher to print their books, the Southern writer, of my generation at least, went to New York. There he was

influenced not only by the necessity to live but by theories and movements drifting over from Europe. (*Reactionary Essays* 161-62)

Tate feared that the Southern writers was forced to adhere to industrial rules in New York, a hub of literature and the economy. The influx of literary theories and movements from Europe to New York coincided with the transition of the cultural capital from Paris to New York in the interwar and postwar period; it also changed the publishing industry (Casanova 164-65). It is evident that the catalyst behind the cultural transition was the invasion of the Nazis in France and the Holocaust.

In the interwar period in Paris, the literary market was limited to relatively small communities of intellectuals. However, it grew substantially larger in alignment with popular culture, such as films and radio in the postwar era. It then increasingly placed an emphasis on the commercial demand from consumers, which Tate was highly anxious about. In that industry in New York whose game rules were nothing but obstacles for their literary views, both Tate and Nabokov had to seek out a way of making do. In this historical contingency, Nabokov's career dovetailed with the transatlantic shift of the mid-twentieth century literary market. He forged his way through his imagination and creation and managed to make do as a professional writer and critic. Their relationship was, if coincidentally, constructed in this transatlantic network of culture and politics in alignment with their Southern affinity.

V. Making One's Own "Move" under the Violence of "Commonsense"

Before arriving in the United States, Nabokov had intimately experienced the governmental oppression and threats within the Soviet Union and Germany. Thus, it is probable that he was sensitive enough to realize a totalitarian tendency in society. In 1935, when he lived in the émigré community in Berlin and the rise of the Nazis was palpable, he published a dystopian novel titled *Invitation to a Beheading*.⁷ This novel imagines a fictional totalitarian society in which the protagonist Cincinnatus C. is waiting for his execution in prison after being arrested due to anti-government activities and is sentenced to death by the government. Through these experiences and knowledge, Nabokov was certain that he had enough acuity to identify a similar atmosphere in the United States.⁸ After coming to the United States, he seemed to strongly feel the ethos of cultural totalitarianism imposed by American commercialism, which was structurally quite similar to its political counterpart in Europe and which he believed suppressed and disturbed writers' free imagination and artistic creation. This paralleled other exile intellectuals from Europe, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as clarified in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Foster 225; Norman 95). As to the cultural totalitarian climate in the United States, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that: "Although operation only with effects, it [the culture industry] subdues their unruliness and subordinates them to the formula which supplants the work" (99).

Similar to Nabokov and Horkheimer and Adorno, Tate also identified the same tendency in the American literary market in the 1930s. For example, sensing the domestic rise of cultural totalitarianism, he stated that: “Our neo-communism is the new form in which the writer from all sections is to be dominated by capitalism, or ‘economic society’” (*Reactionary Essays* 166). In addition, he argued in an essay in 1940 that “[t]he tradition of free ideas is as dead in the United States as it is in Germany,” expressing his fears regarding the future of literature by suggesting that capitalism exerted a strong influence on the literary conditions at that time and that the dominance of the middle-class culture was helping to increasingly fortify the totalitarian industrial system in American society (“The Present Function of Criticism” 4-8). Although their backgrounds were substantially different and might have appeared to be unlikely to share any affinities, Tate and Nabokov harbored a mutual sense of anxiety toward the grave atmosphere surrounding serious literature. Cultural totalitarianism is characterized not by the physical violence that political totalitarianism often inflicts on those who refuse to obey but by economic inconvenience. Referring to Alexis de Tocqueville, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that “[a]nyone who does not conform is condemned to an economic impotence which is prolonged in the intellectual powerlessness of the eccentric loner” (106). In this sense, both Nabokov and Tate were literally displaced persons in the American cultural industry. Suffering from financially impoverished circumstances, they groped for survival “tactics” to open up their own realms when one “cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or

institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” (De Certeau xix). As a result, they had to make a “move” within the system.

In 1942, when Nabokov was composing *Bend Sinister*, he delivered lectures at several universities. In August in the same year, after he delivered a lecture at Coker College in South Carolina, he wrote in a letter to Véra that: “I spoke on ‘common sense’ and it turned out—well, even better I normally expect” (*Letters to Véra* 464).⁹ This would later become “The Art and Commonsense” collected in *Lectures on Literature*, in which he describes the totalitarian tendency of the cultural industry as the distorted “commonsense” that it imposes on writers. In the lecture, he exhibits his concern about the commercialist-oriented “commonsense” in the literary industry that unduly values the scale of sales rather than the content of books, and laments its negative effects on writers:

[T]he monster of grim commonsense that is lumbering up the steps to whine that the book is not for the general public, that the book will never, never—And right then, just before it blurts out the word s, e, double-l, false commonsense must be shot dead. (*Lectures on Literature* 380)

He criticizes “the monster of grim commonsense,” which whispers into writers’ ears “s, e, double-l”—which alludes to whether a book will make a good sale or if it will be appreciated by mass consumers; this emphasizes the value of literary works as a commodity. In other words, his greatest fear of “false commonsense” is that sales are the most significant point in assessing

the value of books and that books that accurately understand the demands of the masses will be highly acclaimed. In so doing, the “[c]ommonsense has trampled down many a gentle genius whose eyes had delighted in a too early moonbeam of some too early truth” (372).

Adam Krug, the protagonist of *Bend Sinister*, epitomizes the genius who commonsense “has trampled down.” Nevertheless, it should also be noted that it confers a certain reputation on him as well. He is an in-between figure:

The trouble with Krug, thought Krug, was that for long summer years and with enormous success he had delicately taken apart the systems of others and had acquired thereby a reputation for an impish sense of humor and delightful common sense whereas in fact he was a big sad hog of a man and the “common sense” affair turned out to be the gradual digging of a pit to accommodate pure smiling madness. (172)

He benefits from “common sense” that the social or political systems in his country impose upon him while also suffering from it. His third-person narration about himself here implies his schizophrenic state of existence: adhering to commonsense and acquiring a reputation while resisting it in contradiction and near insanity caused by it. As “a beloved and world-famous former playmate” of the ruler Paduk, he is highly regarded as one of the most prominent individuals in his country, and he enjoys esteem in the totalitarian society that is supposed to never allow it (50).¹⁰ While he refuses to “in the service of the State” and insists that the government should not “make me interested in it,” his resistant behavior is enabled because he

gains a reputation in “the systems of others” that he expresses no interest in (145, 147). In brief, he is permitted to live (exactly in its literal sense) in the very “common sense” he detests. In these systems, he is respected because he is believed to be an old friend of Paduk and to be “commercially valuable” (57). Thus, he is privileged as “one of the very few celebrities our country has produced in modern times” (90). However, it is quite ironic and contradictory that this privilege enables him to publicly defy the government. As an aberrant figure in society, he enjoys his privileged status, which he leverages to resist the government that gives it to him and views him as special. De Certeau views this as playing “the other’s game,” that is, to “get along in a network of already established forces and representations” (18). In so doing, Krug manages to find his “tactics,” securing his own liminal realm without which he is nobody but “mad Adam” (145).

VI. Do Two and Two Make Four?

Nabokov believed that art should not be a mere communicative medium to help disseminate any political ideology nor that it should excessively fawn on the masses; he expressed his detestation toward such an idea (Toker 95). For him, literature is the pursuit of pure artistic creation. If it succumbs to the “commonsense,” it can no longer be called literature.¹¹ However, the hostility toward the totalitarian conformist culture in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* derives from his elitist pretention that he was born to an

aristocratic family (Rampton 39, 47). Such a resistant attitude is possible for those who hold certain privileges in society, such as wealth, power, or authority, but he no longer enjoyed such privileges in the United States, where he was no one but a penniless exile who had lost his former career and language. Thus, he was well aware that he must make money in the literary business to live as a professional writer and devote himself to writing. The main reason he initially brought *Bend Sinister* to Tate was because he was unsatisfied with the payment New Directions offered him.¹² Tate's praise and the two thousand dollars as advance payment that Henry Holt offered him were decisive. However, it is ironic that most of the letters they wrote from March 1946 to December 1947 included precisely what they criticized, insignificant matters regarding the very literary business—royalties, the budget for advertisements and promotions, and the contents of contracts. Although he lamented the commodification of literature, he simultaneously understood it: "After all, literature is not only fun, it is also business" (*Selected Letters* 100).

Whether literature sells matters to Tate as well. He was aware that poor sales were one of the greatest problems with Southern modernism groping for literature as pure art insubordinate to commercialism (Ochi 68). Regarding the dominance of the literary market, he posited that "the market . . . dictates the style" (*Reactionary* 164). The commercialism in the publishing industry that he criticizes and the cultural totalitarianism that Nabokov detests are fused with the matter of literary "style" in this respect. Tate's expression indicates that he

understands the system of the market as a microcosm of the oppressive structure of a totalitarian society, which rules writers and their creation, as the word “dictate” implies.

This reverberates in the ending of *Bend Sinister*, where the author or the personae of Nabokov suddenly intervenes in the story and saves Krug, who was nearly shot to death by the soldiers ordered by “the abject dictator” (*Bend Sinister* xiii). However, Krug barely escaped his death in “just a fraction of an instant before another and better bullet hit him, . . . the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I [the author] stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages . . .” (240). The narrator denies the imminent death of Krug and shuts, or shutters, the fictional world and claims that “death was but a question of style” (241). This seems to be another playful metafictional joke quite characteristic of Nabokov. If it is a joke or not, at least it is uncertain whether this sudden destruction of the diegetic frame is a form of salvation for Krug. The subversion caused by the sudden disruption of the story and the vandalization of “style” could not better embody “the speaking of unpleasant words and the violation of good literary manners” that Tate requires from “the Southern writers”: the style to write what the market will find detestable (*Reactionary Essays* 162).

Given Nabokov’s association with Tate and the South, we can regard Nabokov as one of “the Southern writers,” an idealized writer who resist the Northern literary industry and what it defines as “good manners.” He could not tolerate the requirement of conventional formulas

and banal clichés to be easily accepted and bought by consumers; such a commercialist style was utterly antithetical to the ludic and experimental one in his language-game. He was certain that *Bend Sinister*'s style was experimental. He told Wilson about the novel that he unfolds "[t]owards the end of the book the looming and development of an idea which had *never* been treated before" (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 136). In the closing scene of the novel, the entirely unexpected happens. It may be quite difficult to argue that the avant-garde style is conventional and positive within the criteria of the publishing industry. In a sense, one may view the salvation of Krug at the ending as the triumph of the subversive style of "the Southern writers." Furthermore, Nabokov argues in "The Art and Commonsense" that "Commonsense is square whereas all the most essential visions and values of life are beautifully round" (*Lectures on Literature* 372). The protagonist's name "Krug" indeed means "circle" in Russian (Boyd, *The American Years* 104). Krug might be saved, but the textual world is destroyed by the author. That may appear overly absurd; however, what remains is not the "square commonsense" but the "round" Krug.¹³

Nabokov's ideal world in which he can enjoy the freedom of creation and imagination is where two and two do not have to make four:

When commonsense is ejected together with its calculating machine, numbers cease to trouble the mind. . . . Two and two no longer make four, because it is no longer necessary for them to make four. If they had done so in the artificial logical world which we have

left, it had been merely a matter of habit: two and two used to make four in the same way as guests invited to dinner expect to make an even number. But I invite my numbers to a giddy picnic and then nobody minds whether two and two make five or five minus some quaint fraction. . . . Instead of having numbers based on certain phenomena that they happened to fit because we ourselves happened to fit into the pattern we apprehended, the whole world gradually turned out to be based on numbers, and nobody seems to have been surprised at the queer fact of the outer network becoming an inner skeleton. (*Lectures on Literature* 374)

That two and two make four appears self-evident, but he insists that, in art, such “commonsense” should and can be reimagined and recreated in an ingenious manner. He wonders why numbers that were secondarily utilized to measure and observe the world have now become a primary metric to which the world conforms. In other words, these numbers refer to the connections between signs and meanings that are commonsensically regarded as inseparable and fixed. Yet, it is these static semiotic associations that Nabokov targets. As a game player, he plays with and seeks to find his “final vocabulary” out of them. Accordingly, this is not simply a matter of free imagination or aesthetic creation but also that of the signifier and the signified, which Nabokov is always keen to play. He questions the nascent arbitrariness “commonsense” possesses and claims that the purpose of art is not to adhere to it but to play with them in its rules. He fears most that art becomes an obedient servant to it, and therefore, strives to

disentangle the connection by reinventing it in an alternative manner through his own language-game, which is different from the established one.

It should also be noted that the numbers he mentions echo George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published in 1949, in which the protagonist Winston Smith writes the same equation in his diary: "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four" (286). In *Nineteen Eight-Four*, the equation expresses that one cannot say the truth if the government does not allow it, even though anybody knows it is true. While Nabokov cautions against the danger of free imagination in literature in which the author can imagine that two and two even make five, Orwell describes the nightmare of governmental distortion that can change the self-evident rule that "two plus two make four." They provide a clear contrast, but it is remarkable that both authors refer to ideological oppression under totalitarianism through the same expression in nearly the same period. What they share is that both are aware of the violence associated with the official "commonsense" that controls people, their voices, and their ideas. Orwell's "two plus two" expression presents a gruesome vision of the totalitarian world that controls everything and changes it as desired, whereas Nabokov's "two and two" vision evokes the playful liberty of the artistic world, in which the author can imagine anything as he or she wishes, even if his or her imagination could be detested by many readers.

Via their apparently coincidental numerical association, Nabokov and Orwell shed light on both negative and positive sides of the notion that two and two do not make four. In Orwell's

vision, Nabokov could be an execrable ruler similar to Big Brother, who keeps his eyes on his world and controls it, because he can make anything possible according to his will therein. Nabokov can make events transpire in any manner in his fiction. In fact, he was clearly aware of this: “I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth!” (*Strong Opinions* 59). This sounds quite ambivalent because the fictional world is his own unique private realm in which he can assert his agency and autonomy while, as a dictator of his fictional world, he deprives his characters of such agency or autonomy. However, he must have been aware of this. According to Rorty, Nabokov feared the cruelty of the author who is indifferent to his characters while prioritizing the pleasure of artistic imagination: “It is clear from his autobiography [*Speak, Memory*] that the only thing which could really get Nabokov down was the fear of being, or having been, cruel”; in short, Nabokov continued creating and recreating his own style and exploring his “final vocabulary,” but at the same time, he suffers from his “incuriosity” (157-58). The experimental style that Nabokov displays at the end of *Bend Sinister* also hints at his cruel profile as “the perfect dictator” in his fictional world, a game master who can control a character’s life or death even just “a matter of style.” In this sense, the saving of Krug might be a form of atonement for his cruelty.

VII. As a Literary Businessman

Unfortunately, *Bend Sinister* was not accepted well, most likely because it dismissed the “commonsense” too blatantly.¹⁴ Its sale was unsuccessful, and it immediately went out of print. The prospect of its commercial success was terminated when Tate wrote to Nabokov that he had resigned from Henry and Holt in 1947:

I have resigned from Holt and I think I ought to notify you. . . . I was no longer consulted; the young writers I wanted to bring in were rejected in favor of tried (but not actually salable) mediocrities; and this strategy would have forced me to leave in frustration and disgust. I was not able to do for *Bend Sinister* what was promised you the day we had lunch at the Plaza, and I have thus been, with you, a false position. . . .

I confess that I had a severe struggle to keep *Bend Sinister* as it is. The mild suggestions that I passed on to you were only a tenth of the things that people in the office thought ought to be done to the novel to make it confirm to some conventional pattern. I have written you very frankly, and I know it will be kept confidential. (Letter to Nabokov, Dec. 19, 1947)

Just as he wants Nabokov to keep it private, the letter reveals his complicated situation and his unwillingness to recognize what actually matters in the publishing industry. Surprisingly, it reveals that *Bend Sinister* had been required to be revised according to “some conventional pattern” while Tate partly ignored the requirements from his colleagues. Although Tate does not specify exactly what the pattern means in this letter, given *Bend Sinister*’s experimental

ending and Tate's abhorrence toward the commercial-oriented industry, he refers to a popular formula which the publisher believes will be promising in terms of sales numbers.

However, it is clear that he harbors an ambivalent feeling toward his situation when he complains that the works that he introduced to his company were not highly regarded compared to other works, which he affirms are not necessarily "salable." He has expressed his concerns that the publishing industry attaches excessive importance only to sales, whereas he cannot help referring to sales as a criterion. This sounds quite ironic, but, as he once wrote to Nabokov that "as long as we live under capitalism, a book is considered a capital asset by a publisher," he could not entirely ignore the commercial aspect of literature, although he theoretically resisted it (Letter to Nabokov, Nov. 6, 1946). In fact, this must have aggrieved him for quite a long time since the 1930s. After observing the current situation of the "Southern writers" under the control of the New York literary industry, he revealed his dissatisfaction:

I wish this were the whole story: only cranks and talents the quiet, first order maintain themselves against fashion and prosperity. But even these desperate persons must live, and they cannot live in the South without an "independent income." We must respect the source of our income, that is, we ought to; and if we cannot respect it we are likely to fear it. (*Reactionary Essays* 162)

Tate never positively regarded the idea that literature requires an ideology, such as a universal philosophy or moral instructions for the future generation; he argued that: "The greater poets

give us knowledge, not of the new programs, but of ourselves,” (*Reactionary Essays* xii). However, it is ironic that, after the resignation of Henry Holt, he accepted a teaching job at Chicago University in 1949 and at Minnesota University in 1951. Just as Nabokov worked for nearly two decades as a university lecturer and professor, Tate also could not cease his connections with a new literary business—modernist literature and critical theories as an institutional program in what Ransom calls “New Criticism, Inc.”

Nabokov made adequate money to be devoted to his fiction writing only after the publication of *Lolita*. Until then, teaching had been an important source of income for him to make a living. He could thus continue producing unconventional novels that were unlikely to sell or even to be published; this is because he maintained his income by participating in the process of the institutionalization of criticism, an emerging literary business of “New Criticism, Inc.” Before the publication of *Lolita* brought him a reputation and money, he had barely had any commercial success. The crisis of serious literature under the influence of commercial demands indicates his strong consciousness of his financial hardship, which bothered him. McGurl posited that: “Perhaps because the novels leading up to *Lolita* sold so poorly, Nabokov was able to perceive with great acuity what the fundamental threat to traditional literary culture in the postwar U.S. would be: distraction” (8). The formation of “commonsense” that Nabokov found detestable was clearly influenced by the rise of postwar popular culture. The awareness of it connected him with Tate through *Bend Sinister*, which practiced a style that resisted

conventions and patterns that the literary industry regarded as “commonsense.” In short, they experienced a sense of crisis under the commercialist literary industry centered in New York, as if it had been an abominable dictator. However, despite their emphasis on the creation of a unique style, they did not aim to construct an entirely new paradigm; rather, they transferred to another literary industry functioning in another manner. In this respect, not unlike Southern intellectuals such as Tate, Nabokov was one of the New Critics who succeeded in holding authority and privilege in the period of the institutional industrialization of 1940s and 1950s America.¹⁵

The connection between Nabokov and Tate has been regarded as merely a chance parallel with their emphasis on close reading and formal elements. However, their meeting vividly illustrates their complicated figures as New Critics and professional writers and the socio-economic impacts on the emergence of New Criticism, which denies such impacts on literature in theory. Their conversation about *Bend Sinister*—its publication and failure—demarcates an exemplary socio-economic juncture in the literary market, where literature is considered to be nothing more than business, whereas it also specifies a sense of crisis in literature and an ambivalence toward the need to earn a certain income to make a living as a professional writer. Their meeting illustrates the economy of literature in the age of cultural totalitarianism. Nabokov partly represented the rise of New Criticism by teaching its basic methods of reading and illustrating his belief in aesthetic autonomy regardless of the external

context. On the other hand, he could not help being aware of the commercial demand of the literary market in that he was restarting his professional career in exile and poverty in another country. Nabokov's Southern connection clarifies his survival tactics in the literary industrial system, where Nabokov was a perfect stranger but where he had to be a game master to make do as an artist who seeks a "final vocabulary." *Bend Sinister* illustrates his struggle with "a matter of style" that he could hardly pursue without being ludic but cruel.

Part II

Chapter 3

The Paranoid Translation:

The Unravelling of Fate and Contingency in *Lolita*

I. Playing Fate

Part I focused on the survival “tactics” by which Nabokov made do in unfamiliar and not necessarily favorable cultural situations. Both *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Bend Sinister* describe the rupture of identity that he had to face, reconcile, or compromise, while he made a living as a professional writer who once lost his native language, career, and identity. He had to constantly endure the pain of losing what he once had, the difficulty of redeeming it, and the terrifying possibility that he might have been unable to start over as a writer. In that challenging situation, he was compelled to make do with his financial issues to rebuild his professional career, thus transforming himself into an American writer. However, Part II describes him as someone who has succeeded in becoming an American writer who is highly acclaimed not merely in the United States but worldwide, the one whom Updike called “a verbal magician” who is “the best writer of English prose at present holding American citizenship” (154-56).

Since the 1950s, particularly after the publication of *Lolita*, Nabokov became widely known as a professor of literature at Cornell and the author of *Lolita*.¹ Nabokov already had a strong reputation after forging his professional career as a writer and critic. Thus, he succeeded in gradually overcoming monetary and linguistic issues from which he had long suffered since the first day he came to the United States. Subsequently, in 1959, thanks to the immense success of *Lolita*, he resigned from his job at Cornell and then secluded himself in Switzerland “to devote himself wholly to his art, to maintain his distance from the world round him” (Boyd, *The American Years* 388-89). At the same time, deviating from the sociopolitical or cultural issues occurring in and around his life that he both directly or indirectly referred to in his works, he shifted toward writing works that focused more purely on his own creativity or artificiality; that is, he focused more on constructing his own fictional world. In this respect, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* are most peculiar. They stress the ludic nature of the fictional world, and, in so doing, they present an ontological proposition: What if the fictional world is a game? In other words, if the fictional world had an authorial design, the fates of characters’ lives would be part of the game. Does this mean that those events or characters in fiction are mere jokes to be laughed at and meaningless or that they are no more than the mere objects of tricks? These two works delve into these ludic and ontological questions.

Nabokov believed that life consists of hidden patterns arranged by someone beyond the earthly realm. Reflecting on his earlier life, he states in *Speak, Memory* that:

The unravelling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind. All thematic lines mentioned are gradually brought together, are seen to interweave or converge, in a subtle but natural form of contact which is as much a function of art as it is a discoverable process in the evolution of a personal destiny. (239-40)

This ludic spirit is intricately connected with a sense of fate and contingency. He believes that he can know how fate works, even if he did not notice it for the first time, by bringing it to his consciousness later again—that is, by reviewing it through recollection and recognizing “a personal destiny” hidden in his life by someone or something transcendent (though he did not say “god”). For him, an individual life is filled with riddles, which are a disguised form of fate; the purpose of art is to reveal and solve those riddles of fate and chance. Human nature is essentially ludic for him. In this sense, life is not like a game but a game itself for him. However, this does not indicate that art is a mere game and that it has no actual effect on real life. Rather, this ludic characteristic presupposes that the world is deterministic and that predictability can be applied to everything in it, because, if it is registered as a game, events can be anticipated according to its rules.

Many characters in Nabokov’s works appear to be highly aware that they might be characters in created worlds. Therefore, they frequently suspect that the trajectories of their lives might not be paved in each moment; their lives are not en route. Instead, they fear that the paths have already been paved, and they are simply proceeding in directions predetermined by

someone else; however, they do not forgo the belief that they have made their choices by their own will. There always remains an ontological anxiety for them that they cannot deviate from the paths that led them to reach their destinations, because their lives are governed by “unknown players of games” who control them “never to swerve from that plan” (*Speak, Memory* 240). For instance, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the ending of *Bend Sinister* evokes the sense of despair that the life of a character could be playfully and willfully manipulated by such an unknown game player. However, this simultaneously implies a nihilistic optimism: if the life of a character were simply a playful object for the author, it might be unnecessary for readers or characters to care about their life or death because it is, after all, merely a game. However, Nabokov struggles with this view in his works.² As is clear in *Speak, Memory*, he himself was certain that such a supernatural force permeated and ruled his real life as well. The conviction compelled him to describe figures who wonder whether a game master beyond or behind the fictional world truly toys with their existence. In a sense, it might be possible to say that Nabokov feared resembling a character in a book who is toyed with by the author, who serves as the dictator who exerts absolute control over their fictional world like the one in a totalitarian society.

Lolita vividly illustrates this spirit by representing it in alignment with a paranoid narrative. Critics have discussed the notion that the novel portrays the postwar paranoid mentality of the United States from the 1940s to 1950s.³ In fact, Nabokov was influenced by

various materials he encountered for the sake of “inventing America,” into which he poured “a modicum of average ‘reality’” (*Lolita* 312). Although we can hardly know what specific social issues he refers to as part of “average reality,” it cannot be denied that *Lolita* more or less reflects the historical context. However, if the novel was set in the United States in the late 1940s to 1950s, it would be rather difficult not to find any historical hints that Nabokov may mingle in the text to create the fictional world. After all, the same can be applied to some extent to the works of his other contemporary writers, since they all lived in the age of the Cold War. Therefore, if our main purpose were to note that *Lolita* contains many Cold War references, we might not necessarily have to read it. Unless one discovers a completely new aspect in the context, it would be ideal to shift our focus toward a work that deals with the topic in a more direct way. Thus, what we wish to shed light on in this chapter is the paranoid invention of necessity and contingency as a ludic and ontological mode of being.

In this chapter, following the definition of “paranoid style” that Richard Hofstadter elaborates upon, we will discuss paranoia not in a clinical or historical sense but as an aesthetic style to observe how one comprehends their own reality. Hofstadter argues that the “paranoid style” is an aesthetic style illustrating “a way of seeing the world and expressing oneself,” while one has “the feeling of persecution . . . systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy” (4).⁴ In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert narrates his story in this style. He feels that something or someone controls and works against his life and that he is victimized in a conspiracy; he questions

himself: “Is it Fate scheming?” (*Lolita* 50).⁵ For him, fate is a plotting entity, like an unknown game player who jokingly but wickedly or entirely innocently maneuvers him in “his demoniacal game” (249). Humbert personifies the inexplicable scheming power of fate as “Aubrey McFate (as I would like to dub that devil of mine),” an anthropomorphic embodiment of determining power “leaving me with a dull pain in the very root of my being,” who Humbert believes has sent Quilty to him to thwart his plan to possess Lolita (55, 56). McFate never appears in person in the story, but some critics have argued that McFate is a metafictional symbol hinting at the author’s absolute control over the fictional world (Alexandrov 175; Boyd 239-40). The embodied figure of fate encapsulates the presence of authorial design. As the story proceeds, Humbert senses the imminent and inevitable force of McFate against him and believes that the surrounding world somehow conspires to victimize him. If everything were ordained by such a determining entity, there would be no room for free will. This is the all-fixed world in which two plus two must make four, an entirely controlled space where there is only one possible destination for him and in which arriving there is inevitable.

Harold Bloom observes that *Lolita* “is a book written to be reread” (Introduction 1). This is not only the case for the reader but also for Humbert. *Lolita* is “the Confession of a White Widowed Male” written by Humbert, who was in prison, to defend himself in court, which means that he recalls his journey with Lolita to review and represent it to the jury (*Lolita* 3). In a sense, he is a rereader of his own life. He writes it to reread his own past. Recalling his

past, he is now certain that Quilty unnoticeably followed him, abducted Lolita, and brought ruin to him. In so doing, Humbert presents his paranoid vision that everything was already determined to work in a specific manner. In other words, he suggests a deterministic view of life by finding signs that hint at how fate has covertly operated in his whole life. David Porush argues that “the belief in a conspiracy or plot is a sort of determinism and connects the entire project of structuring a fiction with the paranoid imagination” (106). Humbert rereads what once appears to be “recurrent images based on coincidence and chance resemblance” and translates it into the determinate (*Lolita* 238). Whether it looks real or fictional, fiction is an artificial creation by an author. Possibly, readers might read it in a way that the author does not intend, but, at least during the process of creation, the author can assert authority on his or her own creation. The translation of chance into fate is a tactic to face two types of ontological anxieties. On the one hand, it presents an impeding desire to explicate the unaccountability and unpredictability of contingency, and, on the other hand, it suggests the fear of the inevitable power of necessity controlling everything. This is the ambivalence that Humbert’s paranoid style illustrates. In a sense, Humbert’s narrative plays a make-believe game of necessity and contingency. Focusing on this, this chapter first observes how Humbert’s paranoid style describes fate and contingency; it then clarifies that those two are alternating manners of observing and expressing the world and the self through their mutual invention.

II. Fate and Contingency in Designed Worlds

As Brian Boyd notes, “Fate seems to have toyed with Humbert ever since he decided to spend a summer in Ramsdale” (*The American Years* 239). Humbert has a skeptical view of life because he feels or wishes to believe that what seems to happen merely by chance does not look like it does so at all. Humbert’s narrative attempts to explain away this skepticism, connecting it with his belief in fate and eliminating coincidental occurrences in his life. He believes that the mysterious entity controls his life and governs the direction in which it proceeds. He then develops an obsession that he is always being followed, watched, and manipulated, and that all that has happened, is happening, and will happen to him has somehow been predetermined. Thus, he suffers from the anxiety that nothing can be done differently from the very way it has been done or it will have been done and that he hardly has the freedom to do anything according to his own will. Although he cannot be entirely certain about the plausibility of his own view since he has no means to confirm it, such skepticism makes him lose confidence in his mental clarity. Nevertheless, he abides by this view of life, or at least it seems that he wants to believe in it. The trajectory of his life, along which he is supposed to move forward, has already been determined. Therefore, he can do nothing but proceed to the end of his journey as fate directs him. It is a one-way path in which he cannot change where he goes; to put it more correctly, he is compelled to simply proceed to one and only one goal, and he has no alternative to choose.

Humbert succumbs to a dilemma between the desire to dispel his uneasiness by viewing coincidences as mere coincidences and the obsession to compulsively adopt meanings here and there. Therefore, he suffers from two anxieties: one that occurrences around him seem to be inexplicable, as suggested by the term “chance,” and the other that if those events did not occur by chance, his entire life might be controlled by some external force. It is plausible that these anxieties stem from the structure of *Lolita*. As Richard H. Bullock argues, the tautological name Humbert Humbert indicates two subjects, namely the character and the narrator: the first Humbert, “who performs the actions of the novel,” and the second Humbert, who is “the narrator and novelist” (90).⁶ Additionally, Adam Lipszyc clarifies that he has two subjects in his narrative recollection: “the remembered and the remembering one” (168). In other words, the former are portrayed as uncertain of whether events are truly predetermined or merely incidental, even suffering from an uncertainty with his own mental clarity, whereas the latter recall the past that he has experienced, retrospectively drawing connections between elements that once seemed unrelated insofar as they make sense to him. Furthermore, Alexandrov argues that Humbert’s idea that coincidences are all predestined presents “a literary model of fate,” and in so doing, it stresses “the author’s underscoring the artificiality of his text” (Alexandrov 17, 176-77). Humbert’s sense of being manipulated derives from his status as a character in the story; to put it more precisely, Humbert as the narrator describes himself as the character who

suffers from an ontological anxiety that he is a character. This self-reflexive structure characterizes his narrative.

Apart from Humbert, Nabokov depicts some characters, such as V. in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, and himself as the narrator in *Invitation of a Beulah*, who attempt to read the workings of fate against the backdrop of coincidental events. Such a state of mind is both an epistemological and ontological mode for those characters to comprehend how their worlds are composed and how their lives are transpiring. In his works, the specific and the general correspond to each other: something larger always lies in something trivial. Transforming the specific to the general and vice versa, Nabokov forms teleological worlds in which he describes characters who feel the presence of imminent schemes, even if they do not know exactly what they are. In *Invitation of a Beulah*, he writes that: “There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic” (125).⁷ He makes his characters have the same feeling; there are hidden patterns in the world that only they are aware of. This may be a desperate attempt to explain away somehow the world that perhaps does not function by any rules. In other words, it provides a means to account for a contingent world. This attempt constructs what Timothy Melley calls “a ‘master narrative,’ a grand scheme capable of explaining numerous complex events,” with which postwar American novels grapple with the anxiety that some very powerful

system or ruler might control everything and that individual autonomy is being threatened (3, 8). The master narrative sometimes appears indistinguishable from a mere delusion of insanity. However, that does not matter because the paranoid style illustrates “the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather than the truth or falsity of their content” (Hofstadter 5). Thus, the master narrative reterritorializes what seems impossible to explain by somehow explaining it away in its subsumption.

The notion that the world does not exist on its own but that it is rather conceived as a deliberately constructed entity has something in common with cybernetics. Porush discusses the similarities between Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics*, published in 1948, and the worldview of contemporary American literature. He refers to the term “referential mania” in Nabokov’s short story “Signs and Symbols,” published in the same year as *Cybernetics*, and he argues that it demonstrates the paranoid mind that cannot refrain from perceiving hidden meanings in everything; in addition, he suggests that both cybernetics and literature share the same paranoid worldview, that is, “the ubiquity of information” that every single bit of information in the world is a message to be read (“Signs and Symbols” 599; Porush 107-08).⁸ Although it is uncertain whether Nabokov knew Wiener or *Cybernetics*, their worldviews are quite similar.

Above all, what they share is that they view the world as a programmed entity and assume that what happens in it is already determined in a certain way, even if it may not always be obvious to the observer. Such a world is regulated by specific rules in it; the program

registers events in this or that way. It is a ludic space where matters occur according to specific artificial rules. This can imply a highly metafictional view; the world is similar to cyberspace in the sense that it is an arrangement of information that is arbitrarily organized. If this were the case, it would be possible to say that navigating through it means exploring messages in the sea of information based on the premise that one can find them therein. In short, literary texts and cyberspace are supposed to be a playground to unravel an intention whose presence is unconditionally assumed. According to Yuri Leving, we should not overlook Nabokov's imagining of a fictional world not merely as the simple mimesis of the local reality it represents but also as a "textualized space" in which both the characters and the reader read "the logic of fate" by exploring covert meanings and plots hinted at by the details (198, 208). Some protagonists in Nabokov's works naturally seek the function of such a logic without questioning its presence, as they somehow understand how their fictional worlds work. Humbert is also quite conscious of the logic, through which he invents necessity to account for his life in his narrative.

III. The Prison of the Determinate

Humbert is the ardent rereader of his own life. He traces his own life while writing it into a story, as he "leaf[s] again and again through these miserable memories" and discovers in "a sort of retrospective imagination" that irrelevant occurrences and seemingly simple

coincidences can be connected by leafing through “an atrociously crippled tour book in three volumes, almost a symbol of my torn and tattered past, in which to check these recollections” (*Lolita* 13, 154). He constructs relations between events transpiring in his “torn and tattered past” that he cannot be certain were mere coincidences. In so doing, he affirms that past coincidences are not coincidences but predetermined. Reviewing and reconstructing his life, he attempts to explain away minor details in his life by relating them in what he believes is “a hard, twisted, teleological growth” in his life (154). In other words, he discovers a network of meanings among the details, translating them into something that ought to be deciphered. What Humbert does is exactly what Tim Ingold defines as “to *relate*, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own” (93). He transcribes what appears coincidental into what is designed. In short, he suggests the workings of determinism in his narrative by reviewing coincidental events in the past and connotating a predestination that his narrative will reach in due time: “It is easy for him [the reader] and me to decipher *now* a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues” (*Lolita* 210-11).

Here again, we would like to recall Nabokov’s crossword metaphor that he discussed in an interview in 1967. He told the interviewer that he used index cards when writing and explained its features: “The pattern of the thing precedes the thing. I fill in the gaps of the

crossword at any spot I happen to choose. These bits I write on index cards until the novel is done” (*Strong Opinions* 86).⁹ As the author states, “the pattern” is predetermined before he writes. It is the blueprint of a story under construction. In other words, it only has its frame and is yet to be built. Humbert’s narrative contains many parallels; it dovetails with “the pattern of the thing” that is being constructed, but it does not easily reveal what the whole structure looks like, as it simply anticipates it. Therefore, a pattern first appears to be a sign that refers to anything, which in turn means it refers to nothing. However, it hints at what it will be in a vague manner, as with blank cells in a crossword. The answer is predetermined, but the solver does not know it, simply predicting it from the pattern of the grid. Until the answer is revealed, the solver arbitrarily fills in the blank according to the game’s rules; for instance, the answer must be an English word, or the answer must fill in the blank cells succinctly, etc.

Humbert’s world resembles the crossword grid. It has no room for what Karshan defines as “play,” which “signif[ies] chance, what is entirely random or cannot be subdued to a system” (8). Rather, it is like a crossword puzzle in which the game system preliminarily registers the completed form: The blank cells should be filled in by specific words. The crossword metaphor suggests that there is a frame of reference in which the pattern is created to refer to its meaning. In other words, the relationship between chance and fate is that of the signifier and the signified. Chance is what can or cannot be interpreted in any way. However, Humbert as the narrator presupposes the meanings of chance in his narrative. Humbert’s narrative attempts to facilitate

the convergence of chance signs into what he believes are fated meanings in his life. Thus, he writes the following: “There was no shock, no surprise. Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment” (*Lolita* 272).¹⁰ This statement reveals that there is an intertwined thread of events. Each minor event does not occur sporadically or coincidentally if it appears to be so. It happens as a part of the larger whole.

Referring to Derrida’s “*futur*” and “*l’avenir*,” Will Norman argues that Humbert’s narrative is “incapable of openness to *l’avenir*, the indeterminate” and that his world “is the one in which the possibility of a dynamic, unforeseeable future has been erased, replaced by an endlessly homogeneous serial time” in which Humbert captures Lolita (114).¹¹ The fixed temporality that Humbert’s deterministic narrative archives is for him “the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (*Lolita* 309). His psychological fixation is also evident in that he denies Lolita’s autonomy and personality and possesses her by transforming her into an ideal object of his desire, which indicates that the nature of his mind is to see what he wants to see or has already seen, as opposed to what he does not yet know or what is unfamiliar to him (Whiting 847; Blackwell 21).¹² He only allows for the determinate in his world, which means that it only contains matters that can be predicted before they occur. In so doing, he exercises his control and power over his world and Lolita. In other

words, his paranoid style uses a deterministic view to make *Lolita* an ideal and tractable object that enables his possession of her.

Meanwhile, this time frame also imprisons Humbert, though he seems to forget it or pretends to do so while he also appears to be fully aware of it. It should be noted again that *Lolita* is the confession he writes in prison and that he is a psychologically immobile figure. Nabokov likened him to an ape in a cage. He recollects when he first had a vague image of *Lolita*: “the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who . . . produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (*Lolita* 311). The ape in the zoo clearly refers to Humbert, who repeatedly uses the word “ape” to describe himself: “my aging ape eyes,” “my ape-ear,” “my ape paw” (39, 48, 258). Moreover, the imprisoned ape metaphor implies his awareness of not only being confined in prison but also being bound by the determinate. He removes contingency by rationalizing it, but necessity cannot be liberating for him because it does not provide him with any alternative: He becomes entangled in its dominating power. The determining network of meaning allows him to explicate the incomprehensible by eliminating the indeterminate. However, it imprisons him under its controlling force, which he might hope to escape.

IV. The Unmoving Mind in Speed

Humbert's paranoid logic is constructed as he travels with Lolita by car. He gives "a clear, frank account of the itinerary" to represent his past and to defend himself in court (*Lolita* 153). A large part of this novel records where and how he travels around with her and what happens to them during their journey, in which he repeatedly speaks of the appearances of Quilty's car. However, this does not simply mean that *Lolita* is a mere automobile travelogue. Rather, the automobile also serves as a metaphor to represent the significance of his mobility. Mobility has long been discussed as one of the chief themes of *Lolita*, and it is crucial that, for Humbert, mobility, or to put it more precisely, forward movement on the road, is linked to his sense of being fated. The road on which he runs is implied as a metaphor for the course he is destined to follow. Frederick Wilcox Dupee, in his foreword to an excerpt of *Lolita* published in *the Anchor Review* in 1957, states that: "His fate hangs on the godlike motions of the motorcar" (7). Elizabeth Susan Sweeney argues, *Lolita* is "an automobile novel" (329). Leving argues that Humbert shapes "an autodiegetic narrative structure;" he literally "steers his novel" (195). Morris Dickstein, comparing *Lolita* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, argues that *Lolita* satirizes the longing for motion and its association with freedom depicted in the youth culture of the time (123-24). However, he in fact does not necessarily go anywhere; instead, he only gives "the impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination" (*Lolita* 152). In fact, in an interview in 1967, Nabokov himself posits that "the design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him" (*Strong Opinions*

59). This denial excludes a contingent view of life in his works and stresses his absolute control over his own creation. Humbert follows the very “course” Nabokov draws, but it does not necessarily mean that he is in motion.

The high mobility that automobiles often imply does not offer freedom but imprisonment. Humbert moves by car, but his mind is fixated on what he already has in his mind: his obsession with the car that follows him. The determinism that Humbert senses in relation to his motion is relevant to his fear of a fatalistic or fatal plot set in motion by McFate, particularly the fear of a conspiracy involving a mysterious pursuer (Quilty), whom he barely recognizes until he finally notices that Quilty follows him all the way. He cannot be certain about how real the conspiracy against him is or who the person following him is, and he wonders whether he is experiencing delusions due to his excessive fear of such a fatalistic view of life. He hints at the presence of Quilty’s car behind him but is skeptical about whether the car following him is the same one he has seen before. He views recurrent patterns as a hint that he is being followed, since he “[keeps] seeing that red ghost swimming and shivering with lust in my mirror” (*Lolita* 217). No matter how uncertain he is, he finds the shadow of the pursuer’s car behind him:

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. . . . [T]hat person has been following us all day, and his car was at the motel yesterday. (*Lolita* 217-18)

He repeatedly alludes to him not as an identifiable individual but as a red car: “There it was again behind us, that glossy red beast” (219). For Humbert, the car is a synecdoche representing the pursuer. Eventually, he starts to feel that “[m]aybe they were more than hallucinations,” as if “an invisible rope of silent silk connected it with our shabby vehicle” (217, 219). Since he himself does not know the pursuer’s identity, Humbert does not reveal that name until the very end of the story. In so doing, he provides the reader with the same experience as his: an unfamiliar presence constantly fluttering in the margins of his consciousness.

In this respect, the identity of Quilty is a riddle that *Lolita* challenges the reader to solve by picking up those hints that the author places in the story. His presence is repeatedly alluded to as “recurrent images based on coincidence and chance resemblance” (238). At the same time, Humbert hints at his conspiracy theory that the surrounding world is somehow operating covertly against him. Boyd observes that “Humbert wonders whether that unshakable image in his rearview mirror is a detective, a rival, or the product of his own paranoia” (245). Once Humbert starts to be suspicious, any car could appear to him as belonging to the pursuer. Wood, referring to similarities between *Lolita* and some of Alfred Hitchcock’s films, argues that “apparently innocent landscapes are infested with suspicion. Any car on the roads of America might contain a pursuing Quilty” (126). It is significant here that his uneasiness derives from a

threatened sense of coincidence. In other words, he not only fears the pursuer himself; he also fears that the coincidental does not start to look coincidental, and he then attempts to account for that. He discovers in his rearview mirror that something was fated.

The window or mirror through which Humbert glances at the red car illustrates not the true identity of the pursuer or his figure itself but his representation, which affords the possibility of it being true. In this sense, it serves as what Paul Virilio calls an “interface” to observe the surrounding world (*Polar Inertia* 33). The world consists of units of signs containing information. In a sense, what he looks at is the icon continuously displayed on the interface. This implies the cyberspace-like artificiality of what Humbert’s narrative describes. What is occurring there is not so much his own movement so much as the illusion of movement caused by watching the following images projected on the interfacial screen. Virilio also observes that the car window “only transmits what is to come For the driver-prospecter of the trip, the driver’s seat is *a seat of prevision*, a control tower of the future of the trajectory. . . . [W]hat counts for the controller of the trip is the anticipation, the prior knowledge”; that is, the car driver plays “a video game of speed” by waiting for what is to be projected onto the window screen (*Negative Horizon* 107). In this sense, the driver is a game player who is watching the rendered images of the world on the screen. In other words, what the driver sees is predictable; events transpire how they are supposed to happen in the game because they are operated according to its rules. The car window shows the virtual landscape in which even small details

have meanings and in which coincidences refer to the arrangement of necessity; hence, everything is necessarily expectable. What the car window reveals is nothing but images displayed on the interface. Humbert describes what is passively projected onto it. Thus, he keeps observing the projection from which he believes he is supposed to uncover what should be deciphered.

This ludic nature of the car driving signifies Humbert's unmoving mind. If he is the driving game player, he indeed stays where he is. His driving is simply a virtual simulation if he appears to be incessantly moving around. Dickstein notes his "inward fixation," which characterizes Humbert's ambivalent mentality wherein he longs for physical motion while he is psychologically fixated (123). This longing clearly stems from Humbert's current situation: he writes this story in prison, where his body is physically immobile. Moreover, it is important that his mind has stagnated as well. He is one of the figures that Virilio calls "reviewers," one who is "most insidiously imprisoned" in a postmodern world replete with signs and symbols, where contingency is no longer valid because matters are controlled by "a system of commands" in which everything can be "labelled, listed, recorded" (*Negative Horizon* 34-35). The postwar American landscape that he depicts forms such a highway network of meaning, wherein what cannot be accounted for is unimaginable.

Therefore, there should not be any surprises because one cannot anticipate contingencies therein. Accordingly, he never happens to encounter anything unexpected, which

implies that Humbert's narrative excludes what is novel. To put it in a tautological manner, it consists of a fictional world of fate in the novel, while it cannot allow for anything novel. Everything is simply static, expected, and therefore necessary. In this world of necessity, he experiences what he expects wherever he goes:

We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep. (*Lolita* 175-76)

Given that he frequently consults his old “Baedeker’s Guide” to decide where to take and how to distract his fastidious girl, what he implies is that they see nothing newer than what is introduced in the tour guide, even though they visit tourist sites. However, what is more significant is that he appears incredibly indifferent to Lolita’s tears. His mind is never moving or moved. While he keeps writing the narrative of motion, Humbert’s mind is characterized by immobility in contrast to it. Moreover, as Virilio argues, if the controlling power of speed transformed space from real to digital and obliterated the sense of being in one place, Humbert’s incessant mobility implies his alienation as a subject because high mobility obscures the boundary between being everywhere and being nowhere (*Polar Inertia* 83). This spatial prevalence of existence repudiates individual autonomy that needs an anchor to fix it with and

renders him an alienated subject.¹³ He is imprisoned in the game of speed, which removes contingency but takes him nowhere.

V. Contingency Revisited

The paranoid style attempts to somehow rationalize reality, which seems to be quite difficult to explicate, and it functions as a narrative device that encompasses and addresses the reality by imposing fiction on it—that is, by giving a certain coherency to it. In other words, the nature of the paranoid style is the denial of contingency or the elimination of the indeterminate, since it attempts to explain everything away within its own logic. This paranoid logic does not allow matters to be contingent. Rather, it assumes that events are preliminarily scripted. As Wood argues, “Coincidence is the word we reach for when reason can’t cope and won’t let go, but many of Nabokov’s arrangements are only half coincidences, or no coincidences at all” (123-24). In fact, Nabokov states that: “Toward the end of the book, the theme of mimicry, of the ‘cryptic disguise’ . . . comes to a punctual rendezvous with the ‘riddle’ theme To the same point of convergence other thematic lines arrive in haste, as if consciously yearning for the blissful anastomosis provided jointly by art and fate” (*Speak, Memory* 240). Literary texts are artifices, and what is written in them is placed in them because the author has written it. Chance occurrences converge toward the ending of the story because they are supposed to do so: “Whatever evolution this or that popular character has gone through

between the book covers, his fate is fixed in our minds” (*Lolita* 265). There are designs in inscribed information there—words, phrases, and sentences on pages. In light of this, it may be impossible to casually dismiss Humbert’s paranoid style merely as an expression of his insanity, a mere delusion of a middle-aged man who appears mad and sick. As Kermode argues, the completion of the plot is not “imminent” but “immanent” in literary texts (25). Therefore, Humbert’s narrative reveals that the paranoid logic of fate is intrinsically included in any narrative form.

However, the negation of contingency in turn implies the absence of free will or individual autonomy. Humbert’s paranoid narrative reveals this by emphasizing his “persecution mania,” a sense of oppression and victimization in a deterministic conspiracy against him, while he repeatedly emphasizes a hidden logic of fate in “recurrent images based on coincidence and chance resemblance” (238).¹⁴ In other words, the paranoid style contains a paradox: it shapes the logic of necessity, while it also seems to fear it. Through that logic, it assures one of their individual autonomy and ontological significance in the postwar world, which is excessively complicated or chaotic to account for and where an individual is overly small and powerless to maintain autonomy or agency. However, it should not be neglected that whether contingency exists cannot be judged. Wood argues that contingency cannot be entirely eliminated even if it appears so, because “the peculiar, agnostic sense of fate” remains, which “makes the joking artist (Humbert, Quilty, life as an arranger of material events, Nabokov as

the arranger of that life and the inventor of those who live it) somehow the servant of his own jokes, . . . addicted to the coincidences fiction can't afford" (129). In other words, even if it seems that contingency is entirely eradicated and that only necessity works, it is impossible to thoroughly discard the sense that contingency still exists beyond the realm that necessity rules.

In fact, Humbert never completely denies the plausibility of contingency; he can never be certain that only the logic of fate operates in his life. Although he repeatedly insists that something teleological works against him, and he even affirms that "[a]ny deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical," he still does not give up the workings of contingency and hints at a small possibility of it, suggesting that "[i]t may all have been a coincidence—due to atmospheric conditions"; he also even denies his own deterministic vision: "the radiant foreglimpse, the promise of reality, a promise not only to be simulated seductively but also to be nobly held—all this, chance denied me" (*Lolita* 217, 264, 265). It is uncertain whether this statement expresses his hope that contingency might exist or his despair that it is completely impossible. There is no means of judging the plausibility and validity of the plot. Therefore, he needs the paranoid style to elucidate the equivocal condition and to clarify the unaccountable. What he can do is to refer to bizarre occurrences that connote something fatalistic so that he sounds highfalutin. He does not fully deny contingency in the story, but he himself cannot be certain of his vision. Boyd argues that "Humbert himself almost holds up a hint for his first-time readers, but quickly palms it again" (245). Even if the goal of

his narrative is determined, as with a crossword—the blank part will be filled after completing all the parts of the game— he keeps suspending his narrative between contingency and necessity. His narrative translates chance into fate and anticipates the inevitable accord between them, while it delays the moment of its occurrence. This may imply a wishful belief that, even if it does not appear to do so, contingency somehow functions in his life because its absence in turn leads to the despair of total determinism in which he is imprisoned, as the caged ape metaphor clearly suggests.

The randomness of contingency can warrant unique individuality or personality because, as Rorty argues, to recognize contingency is to recognize the particularity of one's own existence, making "each of us 'I' rather than a copy or replica of somebody else" (25).¹⁵ Hence, the recognition of contingency allows one to be certain about the solidity of their own self; in addition, it suggests an anti-conspiratorial relief that the self is not completely controlled or manipulated by anything. Humbert's narrative attempts to somehow scale down the unaccountable into the controllable. However, in so doing, it evokes the postmodern ontological anxiety that everything is inexorably controlled. In other words, Humbert's paranoid narrative attempts to rationalize the inexplicability and randomness of contingency, whereas it in turn suggests a fear of the deprivation of individual autonomy under the control of such excessively exaggerated necessity (i.e., the fear of being fully imprisoned in it without any conviction that Humbert does something on his own). Thus, the translation of chance and

fate is not unidirectional but bidirectional: they are related to each other as the whole and the part, but their relation is not hierarchical. Rather, the recognition of necessity inevitably leads to that of contingency, even if the latter seems to be impossible in literary texts. These are two poles of observing and self-registering one's own existence.

The translation of the paranoid style is complicated. It copes with the incomprehensible—what is overly difficult to judge as either coincidental or planned—by presupposing meaning and finding destiny in chance, demonstrating a teleological view of the world. However, the paranoid style inevitably faces the ambivalence of exploring something teleological where, if there truly is something teleological, ontological anxiety will be evoked. In this respect, *Lolita* presents what Jean Baudrillard calls “a giant hologram” of the United States, in which contingency and necessity form a cyberspace-like artificial arrangement where “information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements” (29). In short, it creates a fractal space in which the smaller refers to the larger, and vice versa, which implies a parallel relation between chance and fate. The paranoid translation of these produces a playfield of random chance and ruling fate.¹⁶ In the previous chapters, we have conceptualized Nabokov's game as involving the tactics of survival in already established rules—or perhaps conventions—, which means assimilation not only to a country to which Nabokov was an alien coming from a faraway planet but also to the rules of games in which he was well aware that he had to carefully consider his moves without defying them. However, his game has changed;

it is quite conscious of itself, questioning the notion that those rules could strictly limit and regulate its realm. In that moment, the rules are not to be followed but to be questioned or resisted in a ludic manner.

The random chance and ruling fate play a make-believe game. Whether they actually exist does not matter; they are arbitrarily invented for the game in which their prevalences are suspended in balance to ascribe meanings to one's own world. In *Lolita*, fate functions as the grand narrative to comprehend seemingly random events. In other words, "McFate's way" is not only Nabokov's authorial design but also the embodiment of Humbert's paranoid style (*Lolita* 211). It reveals that there must be teleological progress toward the ending because it is, after all, a story that contains the ending, the goal at which events in the story somehow converge. When a fictional world is regarded as such, it also clarifies the intrinsic impossibility of contingency in literary texts. The sense of contingency that conflicts with that of necessity is essentially incongruous with such texts. However, Humbert's paranoid narrative highlights the coexistence of these two senses and sheds light on the practice of translating one into the other: playing with fate in the hopefully contingent world and playing with chance in the strictly fated world.

Chapter 4

Game Players at Twilight:

Observing Rules in *Pale Fire*

I. “A Realm of Twilight”

For Nabokov, both writing and reading involve game-playing. Although Nabokov’s game involved desperate “tactics” to come to terms with personal or historical hardships, he still enjoyed creating a literary game in such situations. Wordplay or easter eggs, such as “Vivian Darkbloom” (an anagram of “Vladimir Nabokov”) and a plethora of parodies and intertextual allusions, vividly illustrate how important playfulness was for him. He never eschewed his belief that texts were a playground for both him and his readers: “for better or worse the reader enters into the spirit of the game. The effort to begin a book...is often difficult to make; but once it is made, rewards are various and abundant” (*Lectures on Literature* 4). He believed that fiction is a kind of game into which the author entices the reader. In a sense, both the author and the reader are game players. *Pale Fire*, which was published in 1962 after his long, tough, and vigorous struggle through the 1950s with the translation of Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* into English, reflects this view in various ways. This work is regarded as a parody of academicism; it may satirize university scholars interpreting literary works as an indication of social or political issues, to whom Nabokov sometimes expressed

aversion. He stated in an interview that “parody is a game” (*Strong Opinions* 65). *Pale Fire* was inspired by Nabokov’s own uncompleted novel *Solus Rex*, which discusses a man named K. This initial would certainly recall the protagonist Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, and its title may evoke a chess game.¹ *Solus rex* is Latin for “the lone king,” indicating a situation in which there remains only the king in a chess problem.

Thus, *Pale Fire* can be viewed as a challenge Nabokov presents to his readers; he requires them to explore the text, pick up hints, and solve a riddle. In this sense, it is a kind of competition between Nabokov and his readers; therefore, it is as if Nabokov tests them regarding what he hides in his text, which he believed could be uncovered by anyone by closely reading it in detail. As was evident in the third chapter, he holds the belief that there are hidden messages and meanings in one’s life to be unmasked through an astute awareness of chance details cunningly placed in a manner that can by no means be considered mere chance. In particular, *Speak, Memory*, and *Lolita* are the most significant and obvious examples of that. Some critics discovered ludic features in *Pale Fire* shortly after its publication. For instance, Mary McCarthy, interpreting *Pale Fire* as “a chess problem” and “a cat-and-mouse game,” argued that Nabokov inserts “clues and cross-references, which must be hunted down as in a paper-chase” (McCarthy). Tanner suggested that *Pale Fire* is “a beautiful game” (34). Additionally, it is not difficult to see in *Pale Fire* what Tanner calls “a realm of twilight” (40), a vague space where fiction and reality are intricately combined. Tanner uses the phrase to

explain Borges's works; nonetheless, given that he underscores similarities in playfulness between the two authors, *Pale Fire* arguably opens up such "a realm of twilight," where the narratives offered by the two protagonists John Shade and Charles Kinbote complicatedly crisscross. However, there always remains some mystery: who is the true author, and how reliable are their narratives? To where can we assume the true reality of the fictional world expands? What part is Shade's or Kinbote's illusion? The reader must examine these questions, but they cannot determine which is more dominant throughout the text. Such indeterminacy may also provide the very opportunity for game-playing because one can find a wide playground of meaning there.

Since McCarthy and Tanner, researchers have observed *Pale Fire* to self-evidently present an aesthetic game. Nabokov denied the notion that fiction should be a medium to refer to politics or society; instead, he preferred to consider it an autonomous object to be enjoyed for its own sake: "A work of art has no importance whatever to society" (*Strong Opinions* 28). We have already discussed that this New Critical perspective served him well when he participated in the American literary industry in the 1940s. It was a macroscopic game to hold his position to forge his professional career. However, he hardly seems to care about that in *Pale Fire*, which he wrote as the author of *Lolita*. Rather, he literally plays games in it, such as chess and cards; furthermore, he encourages the reader to join an interactive or competitive game in which they indulge in what Barthes calls the "text of bliss" (14). However, if one can

discover a game-like motif in the work or if the novel is the very game Nabokov encourages the reader to join, what kind of game is it?

Nabokov's game does not necessarily indicate that he seduces the reader with playful objects, such as chess and wordplay, into a kind of escapism, diverting their attention from everything other than game-playing. As quoted above, Nabokov's conception of fiction as a game clarifies that reading, to him, is an interactive experience for the reader to participate in the author's imagination. The game they play in whatever manner forms a playground that can produce various meanings. This is not merely the case with the author and the reader but also with fictional characters. They also play games according to certain rules. Shade writes his poem by observing in detail the world in which he lives, and Kinbote makes his commentary about the poem by incessantly referring to his own life in it, albeit without entirely abandoning his position as the annotator. In other words, their practices are based on "observing" in a double sense: observing their own worlds and observing the rules of their games. These various means of observing are performed with/in games. From this perspective, this chapter, focusing on games played in/with *Pale Fire*, conceptualizes games as practices through which to revel and rebel under given rules, and, in so doing, it will clarify that fiction is practiced at the threshold of the observation and the observance of the rules of games.

II. Game in *Pale Fire*

Pale Fire is a four-part work that consists of a 999-line long poem containing heroic couplets titled “Pale Fire” written by a fictional American poet John Shade and a foreword, commentary, and index by Charles Kinbote, a professor of literature at Wordsmith University. Of course, Nabokov wrote all these parts himself, and what is narrated is all fiction. In the work, Kinbote claims that he was once the king of a country somewhere in northern Europe. Allegedly, he had told Shade about his country, Zembla, which later became a source of inspiration behind Shade’s “Pale Fire.” Therefore, as an annotator, Kinbote insists that he is its subject, repeatedly emphasizing that Shade is referring to him as well as how vividly Shade depicts Zemblan imagery. Kinbote is a highly unreliable annotator, and it is impossible to determine whether Kinbote’s declarations are true in the context of the novel, as Shade was wrongfully shot to death by Jack Gradus, who Kinbote insists was actually attempting to assassinate him, and no one can confirm whether Kinbote is correct in this assumption.

Thus, Shade’s and Kinbote’s texts are intricately intertwined, and one always fights against the other for dominance in the narrative. Therefore, one can hardly attribute any authority to either. Some critics have argued that Shade is the very author who wrote all the text, including the foreword, commentary, and index, disguising his own death and creating Kinbote as an alternative persona (Alexandrov 187; Boyd *The American Years* 451). However, Michael Wood argues that it is also impossible to decide whether Shade or Kinbote is the true author; therefore, attempts to discover the true author are futile (189). It is improbable that one

will ever terminate such a discussion, but the ambiguity regarding which is the dominant narrative is also significant when considering *Pale Fire*'s unique structure, an amalgamation of multilayered and fragmented texts. This multilayered structure shapes the incessant recombination of each element narrated in Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary and renders the whole book plastic. Therefore, *Pale Fire* is quite elusive and contains parallels with electronic writing. Even if one presumes its temporary fixation, it will start to flow in the next moment. It is "in a perpetual state of reorganization" by breaking "patterns, constellations . . . and combining into new patterns" (Bolter 9).

The perpetual recombination is the nature of art, that is, "the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world" (*Strong Opinions* 27). It is most likely impossible to create a whole new world in which everything is new in the sense that no one has ever seen it or in which nothing evokes what they have seen somewhere before, because such a creation must imagine the unimaginable. A game space must be produced and recognized as such in relation with but in contrast with real life and precedent works. Nabokov's game does not completely deviate from the existing world; it is more or less isolated, but it has a synecdochical relationship with the one it is subsumed in.² This subsumptive relationship between the game and the world that includes it is quite important to explore the ludic structure of *Pale Fire*.

Researchers have highlighted several specific themes of games in *Pale Fire*. Some

have discovered chess symbols in it, as one finds in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire* 9; Eichelberger 181; McCarthy). Eichelberger states that “the figures casting shadows through the glimmer of *Pale Fire* are chess pieces manipulated by the masterful hand of Nabokov across the black and white board of typography” (181).³ For instance, Kinbote behaves as if he were a chess king himself, adding after his signature “a black chess-king crown” (*Pale Fire* 107). Boyd affirms that *Pale Fire* resembles a chess problem; Nabokov is the questioner, and the reader is the answerer (*Nabokov's Pale Fire* 8-9).⁴

One can easily observe wordplay, anagrams, and allusions, which are the most obvious characteristics across Nabokov's works.⁵ Tanner, focusing on these linguistically playful elements, suggests that *Pale Fire* unfolds “lexical playfields,” in which one “enjoys a flexibility, indeed a mastery, that he[/she] cannot hope to gain in the world of material fact” (38). Donald Burton Johnson argues that the reader faces “novelistic games and puzzles” (66–67). Furthermore, Alter notes that objects we find relevant to games, such as chess or playing cards in *Pale Fire*, do not simply demonstrate Nabokov's personal preference; they also function as ideograms to create wordplay (58). Meanwhile, from a metafictional perspective, McHale argues that *Pale Fire* presents “an ontological game” in which the reader glances at the flickering shadow of the authorial presence (i.e., Nabokov himself) in the backdrop of the novel (207). Maurice Couturier further asserts that the endless conflict between Shade and Kinbote over the dominance of authority poses a “specular game” (61).

These prior discussions offered by critics can be divided into two primary factions: first, those who identify specific game motifs such as chess and cards and interpret them as symbols to indicate characters' personalities and roles they play in the story; and second, those who regard the entire story of *Pale Fire* as an aesthetic game in terms of its intricately multifaceted narrative structure and lexical distortions. However, despite these interpretations, Nabokov once denied the connection between his works and games. In an interview in 1968, when he was asked whether chess or cards had served as a metaphor for "a fatalistic view of life," he responded, "I'm not interested in games as such. Games refer to the participation of other persons. I'm interested in the lone performance..." (*Strong Opinions* 101). This answer recalls what Wood named "Nabokov the Mandarin" (22), or the later Nabokov, particularly after he resigned Cornell University to live in Switzerland in 1961 following the major success of *Lolita*, who was regarded as quite pretentious, stubborn, and fastidious and who was apt to contest almost every criticism of his work.

Although Nabokov denied the link between his works and competitive games and claimed that he plays games in solitude in his works, his denial instead reveals the significance of games in literature; games in literature presuppose and highlight the reader's active participation. Games and their rules are essentially arbitrary. They do not naturally emerge from nowhere. They must be artificially invented, and game players must join. As a critic and reader, Nabokov understands that he is a participant because it is impossible to participate in literary

games without being a game player. However, in this interview, he seems to forget a crucial element of literature, to which he draws attention when he states that he prefers to play alone. Despite “the spirit of the game” of fiction with which a reader should ardently dive into a work, as Nabokov claimed in his lecture, it appears that he neglected that literature more or less entails an interactive experience between the author and the reader. Perhaps he was unconscious of this since it was too transparent to notice, or “Nabokov the Mandarin” might have intentionally denied this even while he was fully aware of it. Perhaps he attempted to convey his ideal that any works of literature have no relation to any external context.

However, in either case, not only Nabokov but also the above-mentioned previous studies, miss this point: games require the participation of players and a space demarcated and regulated by certain rules. Rather, their focus is on how Nabokov or Shade and Kinbote write or narrate their stories in either an overt or covert manner. However, this chapter highlights the importance of paying attention to how they read what surrounds them—their own reality. If fiction requires the participation of others, it has a homological similarity to games. By playing games, *Pale Fire* makes this point visible. As Couturier claims, a text bridges the author and the reader, who desire each other but simultaneously feel a sense of alienation, and it becomes an “interface” to facilitate the interaction of these two poles (66). As the front window is an interface for Humbert, a metaphorical screen to view the surrounding virtual world, and as the pages of *Lolita* are also, for the reader, one to access its artistic world, *Pale Fire* serves as an

interface, similar to a computer display on which we are free to browse what constitutes the entire text.

III. The Game of Commentary

As the annotator, Kinbote exerts a kind of authority over Shade's poem. He almost unjustly picks up fragments of Shade's description of Zembla in the poem and represents them to the reader in the commentary, while he enjoys an annotator's liberty of giving himself credence: "My commentary to this poem, now in the hands of my readers, represents an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me" (*Pale Fire* 297). Thus, he claims that "Pale Fire" was inspired by details he told Shade about Zembla, such as the scenery, the castle, the king, and his exile, and that "he [Shade] was reassembling my Zembla!" (260). Therefore, his annotations are not necessarily relevant to the poem; instead, he finds in them what he desires to read. He may refute the definition of "good readers" that Nabokov elaborates upon: "the reader must know when and where to curb his imagination and this he does by trying to get clear the specific world the author places at his disposal" (*Lectures on Literature* 4). For Nabokov, "good readers" partly suppress their imaginations, but Kinbote dares not to. Although he is an academic scholar, his notes are full of imagination; they hardly include statements supported with sufficient evidence. Thus, despite Kinbote's numerous notes, it may be a bit difficult to discover an

explicit tribute to Zembla in the poem because Shade seems to be chiefly concerned about his private life. In this sense, Kinbote, who makes use of his scholarly position to annotate this version of the poem with his biased views as well as to convince the reader with his commentary, is a parodical figure of academia in which Nabokov himself had worked for about two decades in the United States.⁶

Moreover, Kinbote's commentary undermines the hierarchy of the text and what Gerard Genette calls "paratext," what makes a book a book (1-2).⁷ In *Pale Fire*, his commentary transforms the single poem "Pale Fire" into the annotated *Pale Fire*, a scholarly version. Assuming the conventional echelons of textual elements, commentary tends to hold a subordinated position in relation to the main text. However, Kinbote's claim that he is Shade's neighbor and that he allegedly knows much about how he composed the poem gives Kinbote scholarly authority over the poem. In so doing, he appropriates Shade's text. Kinbote, in a sense, appears to insist that "Pale Fire" adds annotations to his commentary rather than vice versa. Thus, one can no longer argue that his commentary is a supplementary text. Not that *Pale Fire* makes itself a book by adding commentary to a poem; rather, Humbert needs a literary work to comment on his life—to interpret it in the manner that makes sense to him. This is the game Kinbote plays.

By observing Shade's poem, he reconstitutes his own past, the memory of Zembla. Although he almost distorts the poem to ensure that it aligns with his own interpretation at

times, he refrains from entirely abandoning the form of commentary. He relentlessly reads in the text what he wishes to read. This form of reading comprises what de Certeau calls “a play of spaces”:

He [The reader] insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one’s body. Ruse, metaphor, arrangement, this production is also an “invention” of the memory. Words become the outlet or product of silent histories. The readable transforms into the memorable . . . The thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces. A different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place.” (xxi)

Consuming “Pale Fire” in his own readings, Kinbote thus inscribes within the text his own memory through his annotations. He makes loud “silent histories” that indicate that he was the king of Zembla but was sequestered in solitude as a prisoner after the revolution, losing everything he had, and that he barely managed to flee to the United States. However, he incorporates those memories and engraves them in his commentary. He provides the commentary with a subversive undertone against the poem. Although Kinbote’s assertions and insertions might seem less convincing at times, that is not unnatural, since he does not necessarily record his life but invents his memory. Kinbote enjoys reconstructing Shade’s composition process and the days prior to his death, stating that “I confess it has been a

wonderful game—this looking up in the WUL [the Wordsmith University Library] of various ephemerides over the shadow of a padded shoulder” (*Pale Fire* 275). What was “a wonderful game” to him? It appears that he does not mean enjoying annotating Shade’s poem. Rather, what he enjoyed as a game is inventing his memory and, to use de Certeau’s words above again, making “the outlet or product of silent histories.” For him, commenting on the poem means playing a game of memory reconstruction to reassemble his own life.

Pale Fire deviates from the linear structure that has the typical Aristotelian beginning, middle, and ending. This effect is not simply the product of Kinbote’s disruptions but also because *Pale Fire* is written fragmentarily on index cards both inside and outside of the book. Nabokov often wrote his works on small index cards. He explained his compositional process: “The pattern of the thing precedes the thing. I fill in the gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose. These bits I write on index cards until the novel is done” (*Strong Opinions* 86). In the previous chapter, I mentioned this statement, noting that a crossword puzzle implies a built-in design under construction. However, what is more important here is the fact that Nabokov wrote his story fragmentarily on index cards. He randomly built his literary worlds fragment by fragment, similar to solving a crossword puzzle rather than writing in a linear manner from the beginning to the end. Like his creator, Shade also uses index cards to write his poem, which “consists of eighty medium-sized index cards” (*Pale Fire* 13). This peculiar means of writing is in parallel with the rather strange gameplay in Kinbote’s commentary.

When Kinbote discusses Zembla, cardplaying often manifests around him (*Pale Fire* 123, 132, 163).⁸ However, he never plays; he is always merely an observer, providing a clue to the game of commentary. These references to cardplaying look very casual, but they imply what Kinbote does as an annotator. He recollects in his commentary that, one day, when he observes Shade writing and revising his poem on index cards, he misunderstands that Shade is playing cards:

[H]e seemed to be slowly collecting and stacking scattered playing cards left after a game of patience Not being aware at the time of the exact type of writing paper my friend used, I could not help wondering what on earth could be so tear-provoking about the outcome of a game of cards. (90)

Despite his pompous attitude as an all-knowing annotator, Kinbote did not even know about the index cards until Shade's death, and he wonders why Shade appears to be suffering so woefully from cardplaying. At this juncture, this misunderstanding links the cards. Furthermore, this misunderstanding reveals their collocational similarity; that is, both Shade and Kinbote are, in different ways, engaged in "collecting and stacking" scattered playing and index cards (90). Cardplaying is not merely what Shade does but also what Kinbote does. After Shade's death, Kinbote rearranges the scattered index cards that Shade left based on their dates and contents. In short, he makes his commentary by "collecting and stacking" them as if he plays cards. This is not a game-like practice but the very game itself. Shade's index cards are shuffled and

rearranged according to the rules of Kinbote's game, insofar as it makes sense to him. This implies that Kinbote plays his own game by certain rules. A deviation from the rules is easy to imagine, but the game would collapse immediately because "[r]ules specify *limitations* and *affordances*" of a game (Juul 58). In other words, they indicate what players are allowed to do, delineating the boundary between the inside and the outside of game. Thus, Kinbote's work remains within the boundary afforded to him by the rules of his game. Whatever his annotations say, he never violates the rules and abides by the form of commentary. He occupies the threshold between deviation and observance. Even if he goes astray, he remains within the boundary that the rules indicate, by which he plays as a game player and wedges his narrative into that of Shade. This is a maneuver that he makes on the gameboard of commentary to make sense of Shade's poem.

Games need rules and regulations to define themselves. Without them, they cannot demarcate their own realm or space from the surrounding world. In short, rules not only indicate behaviors in games; they also inform players that a game is a game in which only a simulation is possible as far as the rules register. Nabokov himself compared writing to cardplaying: "with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass" (*Lectures on Literature* 6). For him, creation is a game, and its purpose is the sublimation

of it into art. Kinbote literally faces such a castle of cards that Shade built on index cards, and Kinbote also plays cards as the annotator as if he was shuffling (index) them.

Games are “autotropic”: it is self-containing, self-observing, and self-reporting (Seltzer 5). Seltzer argues that parlor games are “contingent in the sense that the rules of the game are neither necessary nor impossible. It’s self-conditioned in that rules, measure, and outcome are defined by the ‘sort of game’ chosen and by what’s possible, or impossible, in it” (93). Parlor games register their own rules, which are arbitrary and demarcate what they can do. In so doing, they witness their own boundaries established by rules that simultaneously define themselves. Parlor games such as cards and chess, which repeatedly appear around Kinbote, metaphorically imply that he also plays a game within the arbitrary boundary. Kinbote’s mistaking Shade’s manuscript index cards for playing cards demonstrates with what rules those cards are played. Kinbote interprets Shade’s poem as he wishes, and it is difficult to say whether his annotations are valid. Kinbote arguably engages in a kind of authorial appropriation.

Nevertheless, he never stops providing at least what he believes is commentary; he does not fully deviate from or jettison the rules of his game. Karshan argues that Nabokov’s works shifted to the Derridean “free play” of signifiers as he aged, but Nabokov has a moral: “neither the world nor an artwork could hold together without rules” (151). There always remains a fear of completely losing rules and devolving into chaos. Nevertheless, Kinbote

pushes his own game to the very edge, which imbues his commentary with a subversive force. He is conscious of the outcome that a complete deviation from rules produces: “a chess knight (that skip-space piece), standing on a marginal file, ‘feels’ in phantom extensions beyond the board, but which have no effect whatever on his real moves, on the real play” (*Pale Fire* 276). He can imagine that he transcends it, but such a maneuver would not make any sense in the game because what “all games have in common is that they occupy a distinct symbolic space which is organized by fixed rules which do not apply outside the playfield” (Tanner 38). The rule must be observed, or the game cannot be playable. Kinbote’s game aims, without defying the rules, to transform Shade’s “Pale Fire” into his *Pale Fire* by playing his game.

IV. A Game of Worlds/Words

Unlike Kinbote, who holds a rather myopic view, adhering thoroughly to his own story and his own life, Shade harbors a metafictional view of life. Through his poetic speculation about the world and art, although uncertain initially, he senses that he is a character in a kind of game played by those whose identity is unknowable to him. However, he manages to feel, one day, the presence of those who play “a game of worlds,” an unidentifiable presence manipulating the entire world from somewhere beyond:

It did not matter who they were. No sound,

No furtive light came from their involute

Abode, but there they were, aloof and mute.

Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns

To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns;

Kindling a long life here, extinguishing

A short one there; killing a Balkan king;

Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-

Flying airplane to plummet from the sky

And strike a farmer dead; hiding my keys. (63, lines 816-25)

In his commentary, Kinbote guesses that Shade's mention of "He" signifies a Christian God-like presence: "When the soul adores Him Who guides it through mortal life, when it distinguishes His sign at every turn of the trail, painted on the boulder and notched in the fir trunk, when every page in the book of one's personal fate bears His watermark, how can one doubt that He will also preserve us through all eternity?" (221-22). However, to recall McHale's discussion, this presence is not considered to signify a religious god but instead Nabokov himself; this kind of figure suggests "an ontological game" in which "we may well wonder whether what we have glimpsed is the 'real' Nabokov" (207). Nonetheless, despite his realization and Kinbote's explanation, Shade never expresses his concern about who the presence is. What Shade comprehends is only that "they" play a game by some rule, which he hardly recognizes, and that the world is a mere artifice "they" seem to design. He is uncertain

about who “they” are; however, what is more crucial to him is the fact that “they” exist. The world where he lives is an object of play.

It should not be overlooked that “a game of worlds” is described as interchangeable with “a game of words.” Interestingly, Kinbote misreads “a game of worlds” in Shade’s poem for “a game of words,” commenting, “My illustrious friend showed a childish predilection for all sorts of word games” (262).⁹ One might conceive of this as a blatant example revealing the nonsensical nature of Kinbote’s commentary; however, he indeed makes a pertinent remark about their homogeneity because this annotation grasps “the allegorical relationship” in terms of not simply the orthographical proximity of the two words, “world” and “word,” but also their metonymical interchangeability in this game (Norman 144). In short, “world” itself is a word, merely a set of letters on paper. Kinbote makes what is taken for granted visible again; that is, a fictional world is composed of words on paper, as are the characters. As Nabokov states, “[w]e should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world” (*Lectures on Literature* 1). What Shade perceives as “[a] game of worlds” played somewhere can be paraphrased as “a game of words,” which the author plays on paper, which characters such as Shade cannot reach since they cannot touch words that register them on pages. Words construct the world; to put it more precisely, words are the world itself.

This revelation causes Shade to suffer from the anxiety of being manipulated by the game players. He is quite conscious of his own existential condition: “we are most artistically

caged” (*Pale Fire* 37, line 114). He fears that both his life and death might be what the game players play, and that even if he dies, that is because he is only “tugged at by playful death” (38, line 140). This recognition produces an ontological doubt that if he were a mere character in a game, his life would be nothing more than a joke (Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire* 29). Manipulated by the game players, everything in his life, including his death, which for him is yet to come, is predestined and irrelevant to whatever effort he makes to possess them as his own. The ontological anxiety from which Shade suffers resembles that of Humbert. Both feel that their lives are controlled and manipulated by an invisible but powerful presence and that the directions in which they will advance forward are predetermined as well. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, determinism evokes a paranoid view that has a striking similarity to the digital design in cyberspace, which makes a detailed and powerful arrangement. The ontological anxiety of being regulated in such an artificial arrangement implies that how he lives and dies might make any sense in relation to certain rules known only to the players. However, nothing will be known to Shade because they are beyond his reach. As a result, he cannot help but descend into despair that his life might be meaningless.

However, the game, in turn, gives Shade insight into how to explore the meaning of his life. The repetition, reversion, and similarity of words lead him to more than a postmodernist doubt that he is just a fictional character. As we have seen in *Lolita*, some objects often appear repeatedly throughout the story in Nabokov’s works as if they do so merely by chance, although

they do not arise by chance because Nabokov intends them. The placement of words is fate wearing the mask of contingency. After his daughter Hazel dies in her teens, suffering from a strong sense of loss, Shade explores the possibility of what Alexandrov calls the “otherworld” (3). Shade seems to be unable to bear that his daughter’s life has just terminated, nothing more and nothing less; there seems to remain no specific meanings in his eyes.

Thus, Shade believes that if he proves the existence of the world beyond, he could deny the possibility that his daughter died in vain. When he almost dies of a heart attack, he envisions “a tall white fountain” in what he believes to be the world after death (*Pale Fire* 59, line 758). Subsequently, he seeks someone who has also seen the same fountain. He then happens to find a newspaper article reporting on a woman who saw the fountain in her near-death experience:

I was a story in a magazine
 About a Mrs. Z. whose heart had been
 Rubbed back to life by a prompt surgeon’s hand.
 She told her interviewer of “The Land
 Beyond the Veil” and the account contained
 A hint of angels, and a glint of stained
 Windows, and some soft music, and a choice
 Of hymnal items, and her mother’s voice;
 But at the end she mentioned a remote

Landscape, a hazy orchard—and I quote:

“Beyond that orchard through a kind of smoke

I glimpsed a tall white fountain—and awoke.” (60-61, lines 747-58)

It is later revealed that it is not a fountain but a mountain that she saw and that a typographical error in the newspaper caused him to misunderstand: “There’s one misprint—not that it matters much: / *Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch. // Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!” (62, lines 801-03). This farcical misprint, however, helps Shade grasp that the world is nothing but texture and that contingency is illusory. He feels that the world “[c]ould be grasped only by whoever dwelt / In the strange world where I was a mere stray” (59, lines 718-19). He then notices how the rules of the world work: “Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream / But topsy-turvical coincidence, / Not filmy nonsense, but a web of sense” (63, lines 808-10). In other words, he comprehends that everything in his life is not contingent but planned through what Alexandrov calls “textual patterning” and “the same ‘coincidences’ of meaning and detail” by the author (17).¹⁰ He then proudly declares the following: “Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find / Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind / Of correlated pattern in the game” (*Pale Fire* 63, line 811-13).¹¹ Written words have plasticity, since they can easily be transformed and linked to each other in various ways at the hands of the author, as the case of the fountain/mountain error demonstrates.

According to Alter, wordplay and patterns in Nabokov's works demonstrate "how the universal elements of written language can be manipulated by the artificer through a constant chain of shifting patterns" (65). Such artificiality inherent in any literary text also suggests that a fictional world is an author's tightly woven design. Nabokov posits that an artistic creation "animate[s] a subjectively perceived texture" (*Strong Opinions* 102). Wordplay or "patterning" does not merely provide entertaining moments for the reader to discover; it also foregrounds the artificiality of a world and reveals its rigidity and fragility. The wordplay here reveals that the world of a game has a highly intensified structure composed by only one person, the author whose imagination produces all. Meanwhile, it is no more than an individual creation, no matter how meticulous it appears.

Hence, the author is responsible for everything, but this may not necessarily mean that the author must know what they are doing in every part of the story or that they control everything. In this sense, such a world could be quite plastic and arbitrary in that it does not have to be necessary or contingent. It could be variable in terms of not simply each word but also how it is read. For Nabokov, designing a story means weaving a texture of words and meanings, which form a new world, or to put it more precisely, what McHale calls a "zone" (44-45). Shade contends that the world is a game that has its own unique rules and specific realms or boundaries in which it imagines a "zone," or an in-between space composed of the combination and fusion of *his* world and *their* world (this can also be expressed as the

characters' world and that of the author's).¹² Thus, a fictional world is not ruled by mere contingency because it is an author's creation. Accordingly, everything in it must be firmly placed according to the author's design. However, such a world is also merely an artifice, an amalgamation of words on paper, which Shade perceives to be a game.

This dual nature evokes an ontological anxiety, while it also provides Shade with a glimmer of hope. "They" play "a game of worlds" by ". . . [m]aking ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities" (*Pale Fire* 63, lines 828-29), which suggests to him that "even the most cruel scheme might be seen as preferable to no scheme at all" (Wood 191).¹³ That the world is a game spares Shade from the despair that, if nothing is schemed, the world has no rules, which implies to him that everything happens just as it happens—nothing more or nothing less. However, events transpire in fiction *as if* they occurred by chance, since an author designs a fictional world to work in that manner. In this sense, contingency is an alias of inevitability, as fate and chance are one and the same for Humbert. In short, there is always a scheme. Shade prefers such a world over the one that operates merely by chance because if everything in the world happens by chance, he cannot know what his life means.

He seems to suffer from the triviality of his existence and the power of the players beyond. However, he does not descend into sheer despair. Instead, he discovers the analogical relationship between the game and his poetics. As an artist, he can also construct a world

through his own words, which he can organize as a lexical game, as “they” toyed with him through the fountain/mountain wordplay:

I feel I understand

Existence, or at least a minute part

Of my existence, only through my art,

In terms of combinational delight;

And if my private universe scans right,

So does the verse of galaxies divine

Which I suspect is an iambic line. (*Pale Fire* 68-69, lines 971-76)

Shade notices that the world in which he lives is what is written on paper and that it parallels the smaller one he creates. He is certain that he can also be a player through his art by highlighting that the relationship between the players and the game has the same structure as the one between Shade and his art. He is an author, which means that he also plays a game of worlds/words on paper. Thus, he attempts to revel in his own game while rebelling against the players, or against Nabokov the author, by refusing to remain merely a character to reclaim his own life.

His view of such a congruency between creation and life seems to reflect Nabokov’s own view. Again, it should be recalled that Nabokov stated that: “One cannot 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, and never to swerve from that plan” (*Speak, Memory* 240). If one’s life cannot evade the control of “unknown players of games,” it does not necessarily mean that they can do nothing about it because they can resist such control, at least in a covert manner. A game itself has no meaning; rather, it makes sense of how players play it through given rules. Sicart states that: “Playing is negotiating a wiggle space between rules, systems, contexts, preferences, appropriation, and submission” (90).¹⁴

Shade does not aim to change or destroy established rules or paradigms. Rather, he accepts them the way they are and strives to come to terms with them, by which he becomes a game player who can arbitrarily make sense of the game he joins. Even after sensing that he is locked in an artificial world played as a game of worlds/words, Shade does not lose hope or fall into despair. Instead, he makes use of the frame of the game within which he plays his own game. In other words, he plays a miniature version of a game of worlds/words played by those who are somewhere beyond, or Nabokov the author. In making the miniature, he witnesses the game in which he is played and which he plays. Shade stands on the threshold where worlds meld into words, and vice versa. He states that “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky” (*Pale Fire* 33, lines 1-4).¹⁵ He might be just a gray “smudge” made by

“the waxwing” crashing on the window, similar to ink on a page, but this does not mean that he is meaningless. Rather, his game reveals that games bridge worlds and words.

V. A Hypertextual Playground

In *Pale Fire*, the reader must navigate through “several levels...where words, facts, and numbers were stored till wanted” (McCarthy). These strata consist of what Shade views as the “texture” of words and meanings. While referring to such a structure, Kinbote expresses that:

[T]he reader is advised to consult them [notes] first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture. I find it wise in such cases as this to eliminate the bother of back-and-forth leafings by either cutting out and clipping together the pages with the text of the thing, or, even more simply, purchasing two copies of the same work which can then be placed in adjacent positions on a comfortable table.... (*Pale Fire* 28)

Considering that Kinbote makes it his top priority to discuss Zembla, this suggestion sounds quite logical. However, his words question the linearity of reading: Which plays a more central role, the poem or the commentary? In so doing, the conventional manner of reading from left to right along pages is put into question, as Shade asks himself: “Whose spurred feet have crossed / From left to right the blank page of the road?” (33, lines 20-21). This means that the

very act of reading *Pale Fire* necessarily questions itself (Alter 65). In short, it makes the reader observe how they read by reading the fragmented text consisting of the (index) cards on which and with which both Shade and Kinbote play. At the same time, the reader passes through “A system of cells interlinked within / Cells interlinked within cells interlinked / Within one stem” (*Pale Fire* 59, lines 704-06). The reader does not explore a single text but rather a series of texts that are interlinked as if they were small cells. In other words, one can assume multiple beginnings and endings in parallel, not simply a linear route from the first page to the last.

The fluctuating structure with different beginnings and endings evokes textual characteristics, which George P. Landow argues that some critics have described with terms such as “link,” “web,” “node,” “network,” and “path”—what is called “hypertext” (2-3). Nabokov, though, may not have heard about hypertext when he wrote *Pale Fire*, in that he could not even use a typewriter. However, consisting of numerous fragments of text and providing different channels in and out, *Pale Fire* clearly features a similar trait. The juxtaposition between multi-authored texts with which one can consult anticipates the digital age and the rapid shift in textual forms beginning shortly after the publication of *Pale Fire*. Moreover, considering Janet H. Murray’s view that hypertext is the twentieth-century version of “the classic American quest—a charting of wilderness” (91), the structure of *Pale Fire* also arguably reflects such a traditional American vision in a postmodern manner. In other words, it suggests possibilities to explore textual fields that are still uncharted. The geographical and

spatial metaphor of the twentieth-century version of the traditional American frontier spirit indicates what Bolter calls “topographic writing,” a means of composing texts topographically or visually using a writing style based on “topic” or topos (as its Ancient Greek origin indicates) (25). In short, the nature of hypertext is the juxtaposition and fluidity of each textual component in space that its rhizomatic structure forms. Notably, Kinbote arranges Shade’s index cards, and Nabokov wrote the story fragmentarily on index cards, not starting straight from the beginning to the end. The text is not structured as a single line or stream, but it is instead arranged as a cluster of fragments or parts. Those fragments are interconnected but not in an inseparable manner. Rather, they are tied loosely and offer open choices to the reader, allowing for a ludic interaction.¹⁶

Hypertextuality makes visible what appears invisible at the root of literary texts: the dynamic participation of the reader and the linearity of reading. Multiplied openings and outlets with many possible channels between them imply another terminus somewhere to which a route one did not choose may lead. Espen J. Aarseth argues that this could be an aporia for the reader in that they must experience it in the sense of loss, longing for “what is missed” (3). Hypertextuality always implies that there are initially many choices for the reader to make, but there is none after a decision has been made. The reader makes a choice, which simultaneously means that they cannot make any other possible choice at that time. In short, selecting one choice entails abandoning every other choice. Kinbote’s vision of “[a] chess knight” that jumps

“in phantom extensions beyond the board” may have another connotation now (*Pale Fire* 276).

Regardless of the move one chooses, all other possible choices must be excluded. Of course, not adhering to rules can also be considered since, while rules prohibit such a move, it does not necessarily mean that the possibility of the choice is excluded. Once they choose, the reader decides in which direction they will advance. However, *Pale Fire*'s hypertextual structure implies that the maneuver is, in fact, not an inevitable but arbitrary one dictated by the rules of the game, which means that the move may be repeated in another manner.

Games have a dual nature. They do not matter in reality or fiction because, after all, they are merely games. Johnson argues that “at their most abstract level games are artificial constructs whose play is governed by rules which are internal to the game (and indeed are the game) and which have no necessary connection with the external world. They are hermetic worlds” (66). However, this never means that games are a thoroughly escapist fantasy in which players indulge in a make-believe magic circle with arbitrarily registered rules that they are supposed to obey. If they have nothing to do with the reality or, to put it more correctly, the sociopolitical reality or history, that irrelevance—unrealizability and ineffectuality in it—offers unlimited simulations in a synecdochical small world of game-playing. In other words, games could be restarted repeatedly because they are merely games. Due to their nature, games can offer an infinite number of opportunities to start over and to make simulations repeatedly.

Pale Fire provides such a textual playfield between what has been realized and what has been unrealized, wherein fiction is sustained in playing and replaying. A game has rules, and the given options might be finite, but a realized reading and other unrealized ones can be infinitely simulated and navigated. Thus, a hypertextual game is always open to rereadings. The game always offers the possibility of rereading. To put it more precisely, if it cannot do so, it is not a game, because it makes a world of possibility or a world in which possibility has become reality—it is what Sutton-Smith calls “enacted subjunctive” (29). It creates a ludic space where the indeterminate, such as *if*, *perhaps*, or *maybe*, becomes temporarily real and “two and two make five” can be simulated. In other words, it enables players to play with signs and meanings by untying their knots. Any statement could become indicative, and the subjunctive is no longer subjunctive. This reveals the arbitrariness and contingency of rules. *Pale Fire* questions its whole structure or its coherence as an entity by being suspended between the incredibility of Kinbote’s commentary and Shade’s identity and death. While it is a highly contradictory and unassembled medium, a novel composed of a fictional poem and its fictional commentary, it remains in the incessant deterritorialization and reterritorialization of defining. This allows the reader to simulate multiple courses of reading each time they read it and to chance their view on the whole structure. This game suggests a pleasure of inventing contingency, an agnostic sense of what happens this time.¹⁷

Shade believes “*Man’s life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem . . .*” (67, lines 939–40). Writing about this line, Richard Rorty argues that “[w]e shall see the conscious need of the strong poet to *demonstrate . . .* the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own” (43). Shade plays a small game of words within a grand “game of worlds” regulated by rules dictated by the presence beyond. In so doing, he “display[s] in the very texture of his text the intricacies of the ‘game’ in which he seeks the key to life and death” (*Pale Fire* 254). Although Kinbote is not a poet, his practice of commentary resembles Shade’s poetics. In the commentary, he also demonstrates what he is/was by reinventing his own life in it. Nonetheless, neither the poem nor the commentary produces an escapist fantasy, nor do they bring a sense of desperation. Rather, they represent attempts to repossess their own lives through each game they somehow discover and the tactics to come to terms with what surrounds them or what has already been realized.

Pale Fire illustrates that reading is not a game-like experience but a game itself. Its hypertextual structure causes a kind of feedback loop between the reader and the manner of reading. The reader exists on the threshold of the observance and observation of rules. This also evokes what Kermode calls, in the age of the war game between the US and USSR, a “play of consciousness over history” (57). People come to terms with various crises materializing in real life by discovering “the rules of a game,” specifically the beginning, middle, and end, as

in fiction (149). Fiction does not necessarily mean unreality, although this other realm is generally distinguished from reality. Instead, it forms what Tanner calls a “realm of twilight” (40), a liminal space in which fiction is indistinguishable from reality. Both fiction and reality blend and incorporate each other, and the realized possibility always dovetails with the unrealized one. Therefore, the reader always needs to observe “the rules of a game” while they continue observing what the game provides.

Coda

Nabokov's game is not played merely for fun as for escapist or humorous purposes. Yet, this dissertation does not intend to deny these elements of games. On the one hand, Nabokov's game is concerned with a serious and impending sense of crisis in individual autonomy, aesthetic style, and historical sense; on the other hand, this does not necessarily suggest that his game abandons preference for playfulness. His game derives from these ambivalent feelings toward a non-specific enemy. Rather, these feelings arise because of the absence of a concrete presence of hostility. His game encompasses survival tactics to face what can be called a "system" in general—nation, industry, contingency, history, language. Nabokov's game is a struggle to assert one's autonomy and agency in the face of those larger networks of rules which an individual cannot easily tamper with. It instead invents the manner by which one attempts to construct a subject or agency in relation to those systems. Thus, as we have seen in each chapter, it attempts to produce its own language-game that revels, but simultaneously partly rebels, in the connections between the signifiers and the signified, such as language and identity, style and convention, chance and fate, and word and world. However, it does not aim to completely devastate them; rather, its chief goal is to play a trick on them, to insert in the established systems a personal and private realm for games, through which tactics for survival are somehow invented. In that ludic realm, a game space for one's own, the player can behave

as a controlling monarch. They can imagine anything as they wish within its boundaries (i.e., the given rules of the game). Beyond the realm spreads the larger and powerful realm of the other's system, which it is rather difficult to meddle in.

As Nabokov found “interplanetary distance” between the North America and Europe after his exile to the United States, the transatlantic journey was literally a form of space travel for him. He most likely felt as if he had been an alien, a lonely space traveler who happened to land on a strange and mysterious planet in outer space. The geographical or astronomical feeling finally bloomed in his longest and only sci-fi novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, published in 1969, wherein he invents Antiterra, a twin planet with a largely different history and geography that exists at the other side of the dimension, though it appears quite similar to our earth, which is called Terra in the novel:

For, indeed, none can deny the presence of something highly ludicrous in the very configurations that were solemnly purported to represent a varicolored map of Terra. *Ved'* (“it is, isn't it”) sidesplitting to imagine that “Russia,” instead of being a quaint synonym of Estoty, the American province extending from the Arctic no-longer-vicious Circle to the United States proper, was on Terra the name of a country, transferred as if by some sleight of *land* across the ha-ha of a doubled ocean to the opposite hemisphere where it sprawled over all of today's Tartary, from Kurland to the Kuriles! But (even more absurdly), if, in Terrestrial spatial terms, the Amerussia of Abram Milton was

split into its components, with tangible water and ice separating the political, rather than poetical, notions of “America” and “Russia,” a more complicated and even more preposterous discrepancy arose in regard to time—not only because the history of each part of the amalgam did not quite match the history of each counterpart in its discrete condition, but because a gap of up to a hundred years one way or another existed between the two earths (*Ada* 17-18)

The “interplanetary distance” that Nabokov experienced is overcome in *Ada* by combining the North American continent with Russia. In the background of this geographical combination is probably not only his longing for his mother country but also his complicated feeling in the era of the Cold War when these two nations were mutual enemies. Nabokov invents an entire country and kingdom in, for example, *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire*. However, in *Ada*, he exercises his hemispheric imagination, which embodies, as we have seen in the previous chapters, his beliefs in the nature of art: “the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world” (*Strong Opinions* 27). For people in Antiterra, Terra, the real earth is merely a delusion that only those in madness hallucinate in their dreams. Antiterra is where phenomena that are unimaginable in our world can be imagined. However, the protagonist Van Veen “wonder[s] what really kept him alive on terrible Antiterra, with Terra a myth and all art a game” (452). Van’s suspicion self-reflexively reminds us of the fact that our planet is only a myth, just as his Antiterra is so generated by the game of literature.

Kingsley Amis argues in *New Maps of Hell* that sci-fi is “a fascinating game that gives you great knowledge of the world,” and that, in so doing, it shows that it “is interested in the future, which is ready . . . to treat as variables what are usually taken to be constants” (117). The specular relationship between the twin planets reveals that *Ada* fictionalizes the fictionalization of history, portraying how Van and Ada reconstruct their lives as a chronicle with the help of their reminiscence and interpretation of various events. In so doing, it questions how our world is shaped in the first place. If making fiction is the invention of the temporal frame, history is the product of plot-making through the translation of what Frank Kermode calls “*chronos*” and “*kairos*,” a necessary formula and “the rule of a game” for history/fiction-making. (Kermode 49). *Ada* fictionalizes this fictionalization process by tracing another planet’s different history. In short, it parodies the fictionalization essential to history in fiction. It points its accusatory finger at “[e]mpty formulas befitting the solemn novelists of former days who thought they could explain everything” (*Ada* 475). As we have especially seen in Humbert’s narrative, the belief in explaining everything away makes sense of necessity, a sense of everything being determined, regulated, and interpreted according to certain rules, without which matters are contingent—overly random and chaotic to be explicated. However, the superimposition of fiction in an aesthetic sense upon the fictionalization of history denies the synchronic temporality, that is, that of “*kairos*.” Van asserts a more diachronic view of time: “If the Past is perceived as a storage of Time, and if the Present is the process of that perception,

the future, on the other hand, is not an item of Time, has nothing to do with Time and with the dim gauze of its physical texture. The future is but a quack at the court of Chronos” (*Ada* 560). The negation of *the* future, the only possible and necessary outcome, opens up the possibilities of alternative outcomes that are not yet determined or predestined. However, time is en route at this juncture; therefore, it has no beginning or end: It always stays in middle. Thus, history is also a product of fiction-making, merely a game in the art of making do. It is a fiction by our limited knowledge and by the need to somehow produce a story, the need to make sense in where no sense seems to be conceivable.

Nabokov’s game reflects the longing and despair for capricious contingency and powerful necessity of both fiction and reality. In the works before *Ada*, characters find the workings of necessity in their lives whose presence they happen to notice through odd and whimsical details that abound around them. The despair is a sense of being contingent, a possibility that they cannot be someone who has nothing because their existences are a mere chance. In Nabokov’s case, this is intricately related to the sense of loss caused by being displaced and alienated by historical violence, such as that inflicted during the Russian Revolution and the persecution by Nazi Germany, in which he lost almost everything that he believed made his career as an artist. In his earlier life, he was almost always toyed with in large-scale historical contingency, which was far beyond the hand of one individual and which he could not endure without his survival “tactics” that were quite cunning but desperate. The

ludic ontology in Nabokov's works reflects how one makes do or discovers how to live as an autonomous individual in spite of the cruelty of a larger system that already maintains its own realm, a distinct and peculiar space ruled by its own rules; games can occupy a small but specific place therein. If it is merely a game, it at least has its own rules, by which one is assured of their agency: a sense of being an autonomous subject who can exercise their own will and who is not merely bound by others' rules.

The presence of game rules warrants necessity if events are supposed to happen within specific rules. Its consequences can be anticipated—is supposed to be anticipated and to occur according to the anticipation, at least if players intend to continue the game. Such a regulated world evokes a sense of generality wherein players can feel that they are connected to other players through common rules, a shared sense of belonging to the same game, an inclusive system in which they are all participants, whatever the game could be called—reality or fiction. However, the ludic ontology simultaneously cautions against the possible imprisonment within the rules of a game system in which one is a mere component of the game manipulated by the game master, who observes the entire plot. Excessive necessity could deprive one of subjectivity because, if one's behavior (that they believe is a product of their own will) were preordained by someone beyond, there would be no proof that one can have their own subject, not a mere object of ludic manipulation. In this respect, Nabokov's ludic ontology reveals the referential relationship between contingency and necessity. The fear of sheer contingency,

especially when it is felt in a large-scale manner as with a historical event, invents necessity and finds temporary comfort within it. However, nightmarishly exaggerated solid connections between random occurrences and their destined meanings chart a linear plot from the past through the present to the future.

The plot-making itself is a game that consists of essential elements of both fiction and reality (although the distinction may no longer be valid in our discussion). In a sense, the fiction of such synchronic linearity exaggerates the sense of causality; events occur according to rules that regulate them to ensure they occur in a certain manner. Nabokov's game is keen to uncover such logic, while it simultaneously warns of its drubbing effect on personal imagination. Thus, if fiction and, hence, reality requires linear temporality, such as the beginning, middle, and end or the floating signs of chance and the static meanings of fate, the logical causality from the past to the future, it revels and rebels within its ludic, ontological "tactics" to seek a "final vocabulary" that cannot help but be related to the preceding language, both grammar and vocabulary in a broader sense. It can never be separated from established systems in any manner, without which it will not make sense at all, since it means that no one knows the rules of language-games. It attempts to invent one's own voice at the same time in the language-game while making a move but resisting being entirely subsumed by it. The attempt is essentially and inevitably contradictory, and it is possible in games that are both fictional and real, a simulated reality and a realized simulation.

Notes

Introduction

¹ It is suggestive that, back in 1923, Nabokov's earlier career includes the Russian translation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in which Alice encounters living playing cards.

² In general, Nabokov had been regarded as what Michael Wood calls "Nabokov the Mandarin" (Wood 22). Especially in his later years, as he stated in interviews in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov intentionally constructed a self-image as a kind of recluse who appears to be presumptuous, fastidious, and ironical, exuding disinterest in society.

³ Barthes argues that "our pleasure is individual but not personal;" he suggests that the pleasure of the text implies the generalization of the subject by underscoring "the fictive identity" by which one stages his or her identity, not separate from the surrounding world, but *in* it (61-62). However ludic reading the text could be, that does not always mean that it is entirely private. Rather, it is more important to know that one is not alienated by feeling a sense of pleasure.

⁴ It is evident that Lyotard comprehends the modern and postmodern world as a game, given how frequently he uses the term to elaborate upon his postmodern theory in his iconic *Postmodern Condition*, in whose very first paragraph in the introduction, he argues that the postmodern world "ha[s] altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (xxiii).

⁵ In *The Official World*, Seltzer argues that the modern world is a self-reporting world that has been reproducing itself by self-registering its own norms and ideas through communicative media. It only understands its form by self-reflexively observing what it posits it should be and will be (5-9).

⁶ *Speak, Memory* is regarded as an autobiography, but it also contains novel-like characteristics. In fact, Tatiana Ponomereva, the director of the Vladimir Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg, calls it "the autobiographical novel" (331).

⁷ One may recall Hayden White's "metahistory," according to which writing history is conducted by "explanation by emplotment," presenting a narrative prose form to what has not yet become history (7).

⁸ De Certeau argues that a “tactic” is neither “proper” nor “a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality,” while “strategy” is something possible in which “a subject of will and power . . . can be isolated from an ‘environment’” (xix). His definition of “tactic” is quite similar to “game,” and de Certeau repeatedly uses “game” to explicate his terminology, in that both can be conducted within the other’s rules, a “proper” (meaning the same as in “proper noun”) realm of power and system.

Chapter 1

¹ *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was finished before Nabokov went to the United States in 1940; therefore, the novel is not the first novel he wrote in the United States. *Bend Sinister* was his first English novel after coming to the United States. In addition, a part of his early sketch was also included in his autobiographical novel, *Speak, Memory* (originally published as *Conclusive Evidence*) in 1951 (Boyd, *The Russian Years* 420, 435).

² Wilson helped Nabokov with the publication of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. He advised Nabokov to send the draft of the novel to Laughlin (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 44-45).

³ The Guadaninis belonged to the same political circle in St. Petersburg; Irina’s mother introduced her daughter to Nabokov, and they started having an affair (Boyd, *The Russian Years* 432-44).

⁴ According to Schiff, Vladimir and Sergey had a complicated relationship because Sergey was what Vladimir had difficulty easily accepting: “a stutter, a music lover, a homosexual, . . . a practicing Catholic” (99). Considering that in 1936, the year Sebastian died in the novel, Nuremberg Laws were enacted in Germany, the symbolical identification of Sebastian and Sergey may be possible, but it is quite difficult to accept this identification because while Nabokov was writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Sergey was still alive even though Vladimir spoke harshly about his brother’s homosexuality. Vladimir did not know until 1945 that Sergey had died in a German concentration camp (Boyd, *The American Years* 88-89).

⁵ Kaplan quite consciously questions the ideal figure of exile that has been traditionally romanticized by critics such as Said and Steiner. She also questions the notion that those heroic exile figures are generally male, as if they were the idealized symbol of the whole exiled people or refugees.

⁶ In addition to the emphasis on poor English, what Sebastian and Nabokov as Sirin have in common is the denial of Russianness. While his contemporary critics regarded Nabokov as an iconic Russian writer of his generation, they underscored his non-Russian or west European feature: As Struve stressed, “he is very un-Russian” (55); Berberova argued that “Nabokov is the only Russian writer (both within Russia and in emigration) who belongs to the *entire* Western world (or the world in general), not Russia alone. . . . Mere language effects related to native parlance and dialectisms that do not rest on other elements of a work are of no paramount interest and value, either for the author himself or for the reader, in modern literature” (227-28). However, although it appeared so, Nabokov always strongly longed for and alluded to what he lost, which is quite similar to Sebastian. In other words, both Nabokov and Sebastian share the combination of Russianness and un-Russianness (Cornwell 157).

⁷ According to Alexandrov, Nina’s maiden name Toorovetz evokes “toora” or “tura,” which means “castle” or “rook” in chess in Russian; Sebastian means knight, and Clare is bishop; these connections indicate that they are intricately linked with each other as if the novel itself was played like a chess board (152).

⁸ Schiff indicates in her biography of Véra that Nabokov stated this in a 1965 interview with Robert Hughes, but it is impossible to find it in the scripted version that Nabokov edited and cut in *Strong Opinions*. This statement can be seen only in the video version.

⁹ Nabokov frequently asked Véra to reply to letters to him on his behalf. In such cases, she wrote not only as Véra or Mrs. Nabokov but also as “Vladimir Nabokov” himself. In this sense, the name “Vladimir Nabokov” was her penname as well, even if she used it in rather limited situations.

¹⁰ The affair with Guadanini exerted an impact on the relationship between Nabokov and Véra, and its impact on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which was being composed in the same period, cannot be easily dismissed (Boyd, *The Russian Years* 433-38; Schiff 85-94). Although Boyd does not mention

who sent this letter, Schiff suggests that Véra believed it was Guadanini's mother Vera Kokoshkin and that there were other possible candidates, such as Ilya Fondaminsky, who knew both Vladimir and Véra and seemed to have feelings for her (96). Nevertheless, it is unclear who sent it.

¹¹ It should be noted that Irina Guadanini was also regarded as a "*femme fatale*" by one of Nabokov's émigré friends, namely Mark Aldanov (qtd in Schiff 87).

Chapter 2

¹ In a 1942 letter, Nabokov wrote to Wilson that: "I made a (rather silly, I'm afraid) synopsis or description of the novel I am working at ('The Person from Porlock'). I gave you as reference" (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 95). This was the working title of the novel, and it later became *Bend Sinister*.

² The Vladimir Nabokov papers include unpublished correspondences between Nabokov and Tate. Those letters span from May 24, 1946 to July 2, 1959, but most of them were written in the late 1940s. They discussed matters regarding the publication of *Bend Sinister*, such as the cover, advertisements, money, and sales.

³ Nabokov was arguably, as it were, the precursor of writers-in-residence at the rise of creative writing, who generally lived in or around universities and made their works while they taught students writing techniques as a university program. Nabokov never settled in one place, moving one place to another by renting houses from his colleagues at Cornell who were on sabbatical.

⁴ The letter from Wilson to which Nabokov replied appears to have been lost or to be unpublished. However, at least Nabokov seemed to have opportunities to discuss Russia with Wilson, most likely multiple times, both via letters and in person.

⁵ Nabokov sent the last chapter (the sixteenth chapter) of *Speak, Memory* (originally titled *Conclusive Evidence*, which was first published in 1951) to John Fischer of Harper and Brothers:

I am enclosing with this letter a last chapter (XVI) which I find difficult to decide whether to add or not to my book. I am sending it to you mainly because it contains, among other matter,

all that is necessary to say in the blurb. . . . I like this chapter XVI well enough but for some reasons I still hesitate to include it. (*Selected Letters* 104-105)

After all, the chapter was not included in the published version, and it had not been published until *The New Yorker* did so in 1998. It is uncertain to determine precisely what he deemed “necessary to say in the blurb,” but it should not be neglected that he refers to the analogy between the old South and the old Russia.

⁶ Nabokov and Tate’s ex-aristocratic pride might remind one of Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, performed in 1947 and released as a film in 1951. This kind of sentiment might have vaguely permeated the zeitgeist in this era.

⁷ In the preface to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov refers to *Invitation to a Beheading*, stating that: “No doubt, there do exist certain stylistic links between this book [*Invitation to a Beheading*] and, say, my earlier stories (or my later *Bend Sinister*)” (*Invitation to a Beheading* vii); “*Invitation to a Beheading* . . . with which this book [*Bend Sinister*] has obvious affinities” (*Bend Sinister* xii).

⁸ The letter on December 15 in 1940 emphasizes this point: As to Wilson’s *To the Finland Station*, Nabokov criticizes, in a very long letter, Wilson’s misunderstanding and his lack of knowledge about the social context in the era of the Russian Empire and the oppression of the Soviets over the freedom of artistic activities (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 36-38).

⁹ In the letter, Nabokov also writes that he noticed the wealth that plantations brought and appears to hint at a slight detestation toward it:

[T]he prosperity of the numerous Cokers who seem to own half of Hartsville is founded on this very cotton industry. It is picking time now—and the “darkies” (an expression that jars on me, reminding me distantly of the patriarchal “Yid” of western Russian landowners) pick out in the fields, getting a dollar for a hundred “bushels”—I am reporting this interesting data because it stuck mechanically in my ears. (*Letters to Véra* 465-66)

The reason why he found it interesting and remembered it well is uncertain, but this letter at least indicates that he was quite aware of the similarity between the slavery system and the wealth of the South and that of imperial Russia.

¹⁰ Almost throughout the entire story, Krug behaves jokingly and arrogantly even before Paduk, the absolute dictator of the country, whom nobody can defy. For example, in a meeting with Paduk, Krug is repeatedly warned by officials:

“I am the only person who can stand on the other end of the seesaw and make your end rise.”

Knuckles briskly rapped on the door and the *zemberl* [chamberlain] marched in with a tinkling tray. He deftly served the two friends and presented a letter to Krug. Krug took a sip and read that note. “Professor,” it said, “this is still not the right manner. You should bear in mind that notwithstanding the narrow and fragile bridge of school memories uniting the two sides, these are separated in depth by an abyss of power and dignity which even a great philosopher (and that is what *you* are—yes, sir!) cannot hope to measure. You must not indulge in this atrocious familiarity. One has to warn you again. One beseeches you. (*Bend Sinister* 145)

Krug’s behavior and words are quite dangerous—in fact, he is targeted by many rifles behind the walls. However, as the chamberlain’s note suggests, he is regarded as an excellent scholar and an old friend of Paduk, which keeps him alive.

¹¹ Nabokov agrees with the efficacy of works that present to readers questions about social movements and moral issues; nevertheless, he is unwilling to call those works literature (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 239-40).

¹² Laughlin did not think much of sales and did not pay much. As to the relationship between Nabokov and Laughlin, see Shun’ichiro Akikusa, “Nabokov and Laughlin: A Making of an American Writer.” Additionally, Duncan White, noting that Laughlin published Ransom’s *The New Criticism* in the year before the publication of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, argues that at the very beginning of his

career, Nabokov was more or less incorporated into the initial surge of New Criticism in the United States (145).

¹³ One might recall E. M. Forster's definition of "round" character, who is more human and vivid than a "flat" character. Although Nabokov's characters can typically be regarded as "flat" in Forster's sense, not as a real human-like character but as a rather artificial and superficial one, round characters have "the incalculability of life" around them (75).

¹⁴ In 1946, Nabokov wrote to Wilson in a letter that Kenneth D. McCormick, an editor of Doubleday, told him that: "[N]ovels about 'dictators' have no appeal at present, that the public wants 'escapist' books and that therefore my novel would come out at the 'wrong' moment" (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 198).

¹⁵ In 1947, Nabokov was offered a post of professor through Morris Bishop, a professor of Romance language at Cornell, who had read and admired his earlier works published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Boyd, *The American Years* 123). Bishop stated that he was "fascinated not only by the range and depth of Vladimir's knowledge but by his exclusions. He had small interest in politics, none in society's economic concerns . . . His study was rather of human behavior and misbehavior than of the pratings of men in power" (236-37). In brief, Nabokov's New Critical attitude indeed helped him secure tenure at a university.

Chapter 3

¹ In an interview in 1966, Nabokov stated to the interviewer that "I shall be remembered by *Lolita* and my work on *Eugene Onegin*" (*Strong Opinions* 91).

² Nabokov seemed not to completely accept this nihilistic view. According to Rorty, Nabokov cannot help being conscious of his own cruelty toward his characters, or more precisely, he fears that he does not notice that he is cruel and incurious about others' sufferings (157-58). While he detests any violence or cruelty inflicted on an individual by a power that far exceeds him or her, such as history, politics, or society, he himself exercises such a superpower as "the perfect dictator" of his creation.

³ *Lolita* was written and published in an age when a skeptical atmosphere toward conspiracies was intensifying. For instance, in 1950, Joseph McCarthy proclaimed that Soviet Communists had already invaded the heart of the government and secretly plotted to control the country. Although he kept denying any exterior influence on his creation, Nabokov did not necessarily avoid this sociopolitical influence. At the time, McCarthy proclaimed that the Soviet Union was an imminent threat to the United States, and Nabokov hardly criticized him. In fact, he did not doubt that some conspiratorial plot was truly being executed in the United States (Pitzer 212-13). Additionally, some critics argue that the manner in which the protagonist, Humbert Humbert, represents Lolita reflects contemporary American concerns about the competition against the Soviet Union over the preemptive acquisition of nuclear energy (Anderson 85; Piette 311-12). Piette argues that Humbert's obsession with possessing Lolita as an object for sexual abuse and his rival Clare Quilty's secret pursuit can be viewed as an allegory for the American fear of the potential threat that the Soviet Union could outpace the United States and achieve global sovereignty. This sociopolitical background is "what Nabokov does not tell us, but which would have been clearer to his contemporaries" (317). Furthermore, Morris Dickstein, noting that "*Lolita* foreshadows both the dark, scabrous comedy of the novels of the sixties and the paranoid vision that makes them so intricate, so rich with menace," asserts that *Lolita* is the prototype of the paranoid vision that was often described in postwar novels after the 1960s (127).

⁴ While he admits that they exaggerated their "overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic" view, Hofstadter distinguishes "the paranoid style" from "the clinical paranoid:" the former claims that the conspiratorial world is against the nation, culture, or everyone's life; the latter believes that it is right against himself or herself (4). In this sense, one might think that Humbert resembles the latter type, but given that he writes *Lolita* to read in front of people in court and that the book was widely read, as it earned Nabokov an international reputation, it is sufficient to view him as employing the paranoid style.

⁵ Humbert first feels that he is plotted by someone or something that has a domineering power when he failed to kill Charlotte, Lolita's mother, by accidentally drowning her at the Hourglass Lake because of

poor weather conditions: “Clouds again interfered with that picnic on that unattainable lake. Is it Fate scheming? Yesterday I tried on before the mirror a new pair of bathing trunks” (48-50).

⁶ Richard Bullock suggests “the careful split between the actor on the stage and writer feeding him his lines”; the former Humbert, who does not have adequate information, can do nothing but be skeptical of each occurrence, while the latter Humbert, who knows the whole story, displays “his (feigned) ignorance of Quilty” and portrays his paranoid mind to show how he deals with his past (102).

⁷ It should not be overlooked that Nabokov’s life was largely influenced by the contingency of history in the early twentieth century. In *Speak, Memory*, he suggests through the art of “the unravelling of a riddle” that seemingly coincidental events in his early life were in fact destined, most likely because he was placed in a cumbersome situation that, if he had not presupposed that, he might have been unable to deal with the violence or cruelty in real life that he had suffered from, especially since 1917 (239). In this sense, the paranoid style might help him compromise his hardship by comprehending what is far beyond an individual’s power.

⁸ Porush refers to many of Nabokov’s contemporary writers who also harbor this paranoid worldview, such as Thomas Pynchon, Ralph Ellison, Joseph Heller, Robert Coover, Ken Kesey, and Norman Mailer; whether or not these writers knew the cybernetic idea of the world is unclear, but it should be remarkable that many contemporary writers expressed a similar worldview in the same period; in addition, he argues that paranoia in literature is connected with a sense of the apocalypse and grandiosity. The former indicates a teleological view that we are always on the way to the end of the world; the latter means a kind of gothic fear of some presence beyond our understanding (105-06).

⁹ Nabokov seemed to start writing his manuscripts on index cards in the late 1940s when he was often composing *Lolita* in his car seat where he could write alone and in silence (Boyd, *The American Years* 201). Subsequently, he continued this writing approach when composing later works, such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada*.

¹⁰ Although he repeatedly implies that there is a hidden pattern that alludes to Quilty’s presence, Humbert finally reveals the following in the conversation he had with the Farlows: “fat old Ivor . . .

Last time he told me a completely indecent story about his nephew. It appears—” (89). The nephew of Ivor Quilty is Clare Quilty, but this conversation ends here. However, Humbert recalls it two hundred pages later, when Lolita tells him who Quilty is, and he understands that Quilty has always been around him (272).

¹¹ James Tweedie, referring to Peter Brooks, notes that Humbert’s narrative subverts time and constructs an inverted circulation of time from the ending to the beginning of the story (157). Brooks argues the following: “The sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to read present moments—in literature and, by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot” (99).

¹² Humbert also sees “ancient Europe,” which he embraces in his mind and superimposes on what he observes in the American landscape (*Lolita* 163).

¹³ Virilio argues in *Speed and Politics* that “speed” controls modern society; logistics including transportation and travel technology obliterates a sense of spatial distance and the efficacy of place in the order of speed and the postmodern or postwar society is buried in “the strategic value of non-place of speed”; for instance, this high mobility, represented by the beat generation, automobiles, tourism, and travel agents, is apt examples of the loss of the validity of place (*Speed and Politics* 136-37, 149).

¹⁴ It should be remarkable that Humbert has the feeling of “persecution” when he mentions “coincidence and chance resemblance” meaningfully materializing around him, just as the paranoid style that Hofstadter defines also has “the feeling of persecution . . . systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy” (*Lolita* 238; Hofstadter 4).

¹⁵ As Rorty alludes to, the recognition of contingency is intricately linked to what Bloom calls “the anxiety of influence”: he argues that “strong poets” who can appropriate for themselves has “the immense anxieties of indebtedness” and “the horror of finding [one]self to be only a copy or a replica” (Bloom 5, 80).

¹⁶ We should again recall Karshan's definitions of "play" characterized by chance and randomness and "game" by strict rules and regulations (8).

Chapter 4

¹ Nabokov, however, could not complete *Solus Rex* but did complete two short stories, namely "Solus Rex" and "Ultima Thule." In 1957, Nabokov wrote to his editor, Jason Epstein, that "My main creature, an ex-king, is engaged throughout PALE FIRE in a certain quest. . . . The story starts in Ultima Thule, an insular kingdom . . ." (*Selected Letters* 212).

² Juul clarifies the relation between the true reality (also called our reality or the reality) and the game's (fictional) reality as follows: First, the former includes the latter; second, the latter is created in a different world, separated from the former (202-04). According to Nabokov's definition, literary works are the second case, since they create their own fictional realities distinct from the true reality; however, given that *Pale Fire* plays with the medium of a "book" or "novel" at the level of the true reality, it may not be that easy to determine whether it operates in the real reality or the fictional reality. Juul's distinction might be too simplified, in that it appears to overlook the possibility that any fictional reality is produced in the true reality.

³ According to Eichelberger, Shade is a knight, Kinbote is the king, and Gradus is a pawn (181).

⁴ Boyd argues that chess problems are less competitive than chess games. However, given that chess problems suppose the participation of the questioner and the solver, they arguably have a competitive and cooperative nature.

⁵ Nabokov implies that Kinbote's true identity is Professor Botkin, who is "American scholar of Russian descent" teaching at Wordsmith College (*Pale Fire* 306). Kinbote could be an anagram of Botkin, as one of his colleagues inquires that: "I was under the impression that you were born in Russia, and that your name was a kind of anagram of Botkin or Botkine?" (267).

⁶ In fact, Wordsmith University, where Shade works as a writer-in-residence and Kinbote works as a professor of literature, seems to be derived from Cornell University, Nabokov's main workplace from the late 1940s to the late 1950s (*Strong Opinions* 47).

⁷ Genette calls the paratext "a threshold" or, to use Borges's word, "a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (2). It is highly similar to Tanner's "a realm of twilight," where one stands at both the inside and the outside of the book, constructing an in-between space that is either fictional or real.

⁸ For instance, when he was still in the castle, he saw through the casement that "two soldiers on a stone bench were playing lansquenet," and then, "[t]he King yawned, and the illumined card players shivered and dissolved in the prism of his tears" (*Pale Fire* 122-23).

⁹ Kinbote explains that Shade preferred "word golf," a game of associating antonyms: "Some of my records are: hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five (with 'lend' in the middle)" (262).

¹⁰ Alexandrov argues that patterns through wordplay give a door to the "otherworld," "the hereafter," or "the afterlife" in Nabokov's works (3). They literally open a door for Shade to another level of existence where those who are playing stand.

¹¹ For Nabokov, a sense of correlated patterns abounding in his life is not merely limited to fiction. He was highly conscious of such patterns as well; for example, he believed that his birth year (1899) being the same as Pushkin (born in 1799) was destined (Shapiro 16-17). He tended to see some design work in contingencies even in his real life.

¹² McHale argues that the "zone" is a form of what Foucault calls "heterotopia" and identifies *Ada* as an example of a "zone," in which Nabokov imagines Antiterra, a twin planet of earth (called Terra in the story), where North America and Russia are superimposed and merged into Amerussia (McHale 47). In McHale's sense, *Ada* is a highly postmodernist novel, since it devises an alternative history of the nineteenth and twentieth century by literally making another world.

¹³ Cruelty and destiny have a relationship as both sides of a coin. As Wood argues, even if the subject were controlled and imprisoned in a deterministic world, having nothing to do by one's own will, that

might be better than a world of total contingency, since being controlled does not always mean that the world or its creator is incurious about the subject. However, pure contingency implies indifference. For instance, the saving of Krug at the ending of *Bend Sinister* denies the cruelty of indifference toward an individual's life or death by interfering with the fictional reality in a conventionally unimaginable manner and by emphasizing that the world is not contingent.

¹⁴ Sicart defines two features of games, namely “appropriation” and “resistance,” which means “playing systems and playing with systems” (98). Shade resists the system that appropriates him, but he partly accepts the game system itself without completely destroying or denying it, and he is determined to play his own game of world/word in it. Thus, he performs what Sicart calls “a dance of resistance and appropriation” (98).

¹⁵ Alter points out ideograms, such as mirrors and a lemniscate, that keep appearing throughout the story. Through the self-reflective structure, these two ideograms indicate that “[t]he Commentary and Index play their own cryptographic games . . .” (59).

¹⁶ The text game may embody “the death of the author” in that it does not simply suggest the diversity of interpretations but also free choices for the reader. In *Pale Fire*, the text that the author presents and the one that the reader grasps have a spatially different structure. The author is indeed dead in that the reader creates what he or she reads.

¹⁷ Juul analyzes the “improvising nature” of games in terms of “emergence:” players forms their own “emergent gameplay” by associating and reshaping some given rules (102-03). In *Pale Fire*, the conventional categories in literature, such as poetry, commentary, forewords, and indexes, are combined within the given game rules or forms to create an “emergent gameplay” in which the reader is a player.

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