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Moral Systems in Nabokov's Fiction: Commentaries on Two Short Stories

Benjamin Yung Nathaniel Shaw
Bard College

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Moral Systems in Nabokov's Fiction: Commentaries on Two Short Stories

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Ben Shaw

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INTRODUCTION

The Good Reader

. . . a small handful of writers, among them the best talents of the present generation, have offered us, in comedy, our only relief from the long-prevalent mood of pessimism, discouragement and low seriousness (the degenerate effect of the ambition for high seriousness). Let us hope that, superfluity and solemn nonsense having been laughed and hooted away by the comic spirit, we may see the return of a genuine moral seriousness.

Saul Bellow¹

My grandmother has on several occasions expressed her distaste for Nabokov whose essay "Good Readers and Good Writers" was looked to as a kind of guidebook for proper academic reading in the English department at Wellesley in the 1990s. Nabokov, who taught at Wellesley in the 1940s, wrote the essay as an introduction to his *Lectures on Literature*, a collection of lectures on major works of authors as varied as Austen, Stevenson, and Joyce. In the essay, he posits four "definitions" of a reader that "combine to make a good reader."² These are as follows: 1. "The reader should have imagination"; 2. "The reader should have memory"; 3. "The reader should have a dictionary"; 4. "The reader should have some artistic sense."³ He also provides several definitions of a bad reader, including: "The reader should identify himself or herself with the hero or

¹ "Recent Fiction: A Tour of Introspection," in *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About: Collected Nonfiction*, ed. Benjamin Taylor (New York: Viking Press, 2015), 192.

² Vladimir Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

heroine" and "The reader should concentrate on the social-economic angle."⁴ In the lectures, Nabokov exemplifies his approach by focusing on the structure and style of the works rather than their ideological, historical, or symbolic content. My grandmother, who reads constantly and passionately, believes that it was the English department's insistence on the students' emulating Nabokov's critical stance that led a professor to deem one of her essays—in which my grandmother described a character as "good" and another as "evil"—"overly *moralistic*." According to Nabokov's admirers at Wellesley, ethical considerations did not figure into his model of reading.

The notion that Nabokov would place literature beyond good and evil, and possibly deny good and evil altogether, has to do with a misrepresentation of the author and his work. For a while, critics of Nabokov asserted that his fiction is essentially amoral, or immoral, depending on the critic's orientation. Some used the phrase "art for art's sake"; others more perceptively noted the author's literary gamesmanship. In 1979, Mark Lilly writes, "His novels actually become games in which the readers are players, their task being to 'solve' the problems set by the games[...]. It is in this sense that we can properly refer to Nabokov as *homo ludens*, man the player."⁵ Nabokov's constant dismissal of "the literature of social intent" and comments on his own reasons for writing seem to support Lilly's characterization of his work: "I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions."⁶ While Lilly was depicting Nabokov as a literary puzzle maker,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mark Lilly, "Nabokov: Homo Ludens," in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, ed. Peter Quennell (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), p. 89.

⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 16.

scholars also began recognizing the importance of the author's scientific inclinations, noting his "interest in combining the qualities of art with those of science."⁷ Indeed, Nabokov was an accomplished lepidopterist, and esoteric references to butterflies and entomological terms appear regularly in his fiction. These critics defined Nabokov's style as having a scientific precision, a maximalist preoccupation with details: placenames, surnames, dates, historical tidbits, technical terms, etc. In an interview, Nabokov states, "As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam."⁸ These two readings of Nabokov's work combined to produce the famous portrait of the author as a detached, aristocratic, albeit playful and sometimes even lighthearted aesthete.

The Wellesley professor probably had this image of Nabokov in mind as he scanned my grandmother's essay, now and then peeking at an open copy of "Good Readers and Good Writers" on his desk for reference. Little did he know of the author's prophecy, which in the nineties was already beginning to come true: "I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist: kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent and pride."⁹ The reappraisers have come and reappraised. As far back as the early eighties, a special knighthood of critics was forming and beginning to paint what their acolytes continue to color and shade today:

⁷ Timothy F. Flower, "The Scientific Art of Nabokov's 'Pale Fire,'" *Criticism* 17, no. 3 (1975): 223, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23099503>.

⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 7

⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

the revisionary portrait of "the moral Nabokov."¹⁰ In her 2021 study *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts*, Dana Dragunoiu lists the critics who came before her: "Brian Boyd, Ellen Pifer, David Rampton, Richard Rorty, Leona Toker, and Michael Wood"—and then the members of her generation: "Leland de la Durantaye, Michael Glynn, and Roy Groen."¹¹ If my grandmother's Wellesley professor were to take even a peripheral glance at Nabokovian scholarship today, he would be shocked.

Yet the earlier critics, whose equally loving portrait has been boxed up and stored away somewhere, were not bad scholars, and neither were my grandmother's professors at Wellesley. They read Nabokov's work closely, with great attention and sharp critical tools, and many of their observations remain truisms—e.g., Nabokov's aesthetics are highly literary, patterned, allusive, elusive, etc. How could these distinguished, trained readers have gone so wrong? That there had been a lack of data and scholarship on Nabokov is not a satisfactory answer. Those who referred to Nabokov as amoral were not merely misreading or misinterpreting but missing the point altogether. When we read Dostoevsky, we know that spiritual and ethical problems are at the heart of his novels. When we read *Moby-Dick*, we know that whales play an important role in the story. But in Nabokov's case, it was only after remarkable critical intuitions, stores of evidence, and the author's own suggestions that people began to agree that ethics are a central subject of his works.

¹⁰ Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, eds. *Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 1.

¹¹ Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 12-11.

Let us return to the loathed essay, "Good Readers and Good Writers." Nowhere in the essay does Nabokov condemn the idea that stories can have moral meaning. In fact, several lines hint at the contrary. He describes the writer of genius as someone "who sends planets spinning" and "tampers" with his character's "rib," and asserts that this writer "has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself."¹² Later, he says that the writer can be thought of as a "prophet."¹³ The allusive presence of the Judeo-Christian God and the words, "value" and "prophet," add a serious ethical or at least spiritual dimension to this discussion of writing and reading.¹⁴ Jumping off from this, what if we were to read "Good Reader" as not only meaning "good reader" but as also meaning "*good* reader"? What if we were to do the same with "Good Writer"? Furthermore, what if we were to read "reading" as meaning more than "reading a book." To reiterate, the Good Reader is someone who has an imagination, memory, a dictionary, and artistic sense. Nabokov suggests that the Good Writer has these qualities as well, and toward the conclusion of the essay, adds that writer should be a blend of "storyteller, teacher, enchanter."¹⁵

In my project, I am going to examine the protagonists of two short stories, hoping to show that the characters have several qualities of the Good Reader and the Good Writer. Nabokov says, "my favorite characters, my resplendent characters[...] are victors in the long run."¹⁶ On the surface, the characters I will be discussing may not appear victorious at the end of their tales. But I wish to demonstrate that in both stories we can

¹² Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 2.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 193.

discern strikingly similar moral systems that involve the protagonists acting on and being awarded for their virtues.

At the end of "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov describes the feeling of artistic appreciation:

In order to bask in that magic a wise reader reads the book of a genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof, a little detached when reading. Then 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.¹⁷

Perhaps earlier critics believed themselves "aloof" when they avoided considering that there could be moral aspects in Nabokov's work, and thereby hardly wrote about the desires, delights, and suffering of his characters.¹⁸ I think Nabokov's warning here has more to do with giving the author's world and characters space; the reader is ethically obliged not to project oneself onto or identify with a character lest the character be perversely reinvented. Indeed, in the stories I am going to discuss Nabokov engineers the possibility of misreading so that the story's moral dimensions are disguised. The stories work on two levels. On one level, the reader perceives a "castle of cards": a vacation in a dull seaside town starring a charmingly awkward tutor, or a tragicomedy following a quixotic dwarf.¹⁹ On another level, which the Good Reader perceives, these cards "become a castle of beautiful steel and glass," with the characters rising to heroic heights.²⁰ What I am concerned with in this project are feats of bravery, epiphanic

¹⁷ Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 6.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

visions, transcendent rewards, and those little, nameless, unremembered, acts of kindness and of love, which can be seen throughout Nabokov's corpus, with a Good eye.

Ivanov's Arete

Here and there one does now find a man who knows, as of old, that this world is a Truth, and no Plausibility and Falsity; that he himself is alive, not dead or paralytic; and that the world is alive, instinct with Godhood, beautiful and awful, even as in the beginning of days! One man once knowing this, many men, all men, must by and by come to know it. It lies there clear, for whosoever will take the *spectacles* off his eyes and honestly look, to know!

Thomas Carlyle

The story "Perfection" (written in Berlin in June 1932 and originally titled "*Sovershenstvo*") has one of the more explicit transcendental episodes in Nabokov's short fiction. At the end of the story, the protagonist, Ivanov, a Russian tutor, is looking after his German student, David, on their vacation. While sitting on the beach, Ivanov suddenly hears David calling for help. He frantically looks around and spots the boy flailing his arms in the water. Without hesitation, Ivanov rushes into the ocean to save him but is disoriented by the rough surf. As he desperately searches for the boy, spluttering and groping, he is pulled under by the waves and drowns. Then something bizarre happens. Ivanov arrives in a mysterious purgatorial space, apparently still conscious and perceptive: "he looked around once more and saw himself in the desolate mist all alone."²¹ Seeing that David is not with him, he understands that David is not dead. The mist disperses and in a burst of "marvelous colors" Ivanov rises from his watery grave and from an omnipresent vantage learns that David had been playing a trick, that he was not in fact drowning.²²

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, "Perfection," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 347.

²² *Ibid.*

In *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Alexandrov suggests that Nabokov's "positive characters all lov[e] and loath[e] the same things."²³ He cites "Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Fyodor in *The Gift*, Krug in *Bend Sinister*, Pnin in the eponymous novel, and Shade in *Pale Fire*" as some of Nabokov's "favorite positive characters."²⁴ He uses the phrase several times per chapter and generally sticks to the formula of "loving and loathing" as the basis of his judgment.²⁵ ²⁶ He says that these positive characters have positive experiences, the penultimate example of which is a character's vision of or entrance into "a transcendent dimension."²⁷ As an overt case of transcendence, I will use "Perfection" to test the lens of Alexandrov's typological approach to Nabokov's characters.²⁸ In Ivanov's final act, he appears positive but also ridiculous. He runs into the ocean to save his student from drowning—a laudable effort—but alas, his student was pulling his leg, and where the swimming child managed to put on his show, Ivanov, an adult, perishes rather quickly. Several tensions like this one arise when we consider Ivanov's characteristics: his loves, qualities, actions, and modes of relating to the world.

In my reading, I will adjust Alexandrov's concept by replacing the term "positive character" with the heftier word "hero." I will justify this by identifying and tracking a correspondence between "Perfection" and certain traditions of the hero-narrative. These correspondences do not include instances of intertextuality or direct allusion; rather,

²³ Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁶ For instance, in his third chapter on *The Luzhin Defense*, he argues that Luzhin is a positive character because his pursuit of chess is associated with 'art' via the "linked motif" of chess and music. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

they are correspondences of generic themes, images, and tropes. I will then explore the irony of this correspondence (for example, the irony of Ivanov's heroism being undercut by the absurdity of his death), consider why this irony is present, what its effect is, and conclude by examining the moral system that pervades "Perfection." Though this moral system includes certain features of the positive character criteria, my reading will ultimately shift the focus to qualities Alexandrov overlooked—namely, courage and compassion.

The word hero has a rich history. It is derived from the Greek "hērōs," meaning "demi-god," the origin of which has been traced back to the proto-Indo-European root "ser," though in his *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, R.S.P. Beekes suggests that the word probably has proto-Greek origin.²⁹ Aristotle gestures toward a modern sense by describing the hero as a man of "virtue superior to us, a heroic, indeed divine, sort of virtue."³⁰ The "superhuman" element carries over to the 14th century Old French "heroe," meaning "hero, demi-god, illustrious man," but in the late 16th century, the English "hero" adopts a secular definition: "a man (or occasionally a woman) distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions."³¹ ³² Around the same time, a more general sense appears: "A man (or occasionally a woman) generally

²⁹ Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, (Tupelo, Mississippi, 2000) s.v. "hero, n.1.," <https://www.etymonline.com/word/hero>.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 99.

³¹ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. "hero, n.1.," <https://www.etymonline.com/word/hero>.

³² *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press, 2021) s.v. "hero, n.1.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/86297>.

admired or acclaimed for great qualities or achievements in any field."³³ This becomes the common English meaning, and in the 19th century, the British historian Thomas Carlyle includes The Hero as Poet and The Hero as Man of Letters in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (1841). Carlyle's thesis is the nub of the modern great man theory: "all sorts of Heroes are intrinsically of the same material; that given a great soul, open to the Divine Significance of Life, then there is given a man fit to speak of this, to sing of this, to fight and work for this, in a great, victorious, enduring manner; there is given a Hero,—the outward shape of whom will depend on the time and the environment he finds himself in."³⁴ Across the Atlantic, Emerson gives his account of the hero in the essay "Heroism" from *Essays: First Series*, published the same year as Carlyle's *On Heroes*. He says that the hero "advances to his own music" and "his living is natural and poetic."³⁵ He adds a Platonic dimension—"Heroism, like Plotinus, is almost ashamed of its body"—and amplifies Carlyle's mention of the heroes' relationship to his locale by declaring triumphantly: "Why should these words, Athenian, Roman, Asia, and England, so tingle the ear? Where the heart is, there the muses, there the gods sojourn, and not in any geography of fame. Massachusetts, Connecticut River, and Boston Bay, you think paltry places, and the ear loves names of foreign and classic topography. But here we are; and if we will tarry a little, we may come to learn that here is best."³⁶ We see that the criterion for "hero" expands with

³³ Ibid., s.v. "hero, n.2."

³⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 99.

³⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Heroism," in *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage Books: Library of America, 1990), 144, 146.

³⁶ Ibid., 145, 148

etymological growth and philosophers' writings. The hero doesn't have to be the son of a God or a warrior king; the hero might hail from Concord and wield a pen rather than a sword. Yet, when we hear the word "hero," the earlier meanings, which draw a connection between virtue and divinity, are still evoked. The hero is someone who exemplifies courage and kindness, embodies the ideals and characteristics that we hold most dear, someone we look to for a moral example.

In the tradition of literary heroes, Ivanov—a poor Russian expatriate living in Berlin, the tutor of a “gentle but dullish” German boy, degreed in “the special knowledge” of geography, a “formal” and “outdated” dresser, an invalid with a “long-ailing heart,” a romantic dreamer who desires “to experience everything”—is neither a single kind of hero nor just any kind of hero.³⁷ Rather, he is an amalgamation of two specific types of heroes: the classical epic hero and the medieval chivalric hero.³⁸ Despite Edmund Wilson's “insinuation that Nabokov had read neither Theocritus nor Virgil” (this was during their publicized row), Nabokov demonstrates a grasp of classical

³⁷ Nabokov, “Perfection,” 338-40.

³⁸ In the mid 20th century, the idea of the hero-as-model became an important topic for an emerging school of comparative mythologists and folklorists who pointed out common patterns in myths and fables across various cultures. James George Frazer (famous for *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*) was a pioneer of this movement. The ‘hero archetype’ concept (an unpopular term on “JSTOR,” and a very popular term on “SparkNotes”), which Joseph Campbell famously employs in his macroseismic study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, was introduced by the retired Major and amateur anthropologist Fitzroy Richard Somerset, 4th Baron Raglan, in his book, *The Hero, A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*. His theory was basically that the heroness of mythic (Greek) heroes can be determined by a checklist of traits (twenty-two), such as “(1) The hero's mother is a royal virgin,” “(4) The circumstances of his conception are unusual,” “(8) He is spirited away,” “(13) Becomes king,” “(15) Prescribes laws,” and “(18) He meets with a mysterious death, (19) Often at the top of a hill”. As you will see, my methodology is not totally dissimilar to the Baron's. Fitzroy Richard Somerset, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 179.

literature in the many allusions and references to Ancient Greek and Roman myth, poetry, and tragedy in his novels.³⁹ In Trinity College at Cambridge, Nabokov studied Slavic and Romance languages, the latter leading him to the medieval chivalric romance. Two examples of this genre are the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Old French *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*.⁴⁰ Nabokov alludes to *Perceval* in several works, while Dana Dragunoiu, in her study *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts*, makes a strong case for the presence of *Sir Gawain's* "central moral problematic" in *Pale Fire* and *Ada*.⁴¹ I will investigate the elements of "Perfection" that connect the story to these literary traditions.

Classical and medieval hero-narratives often have prophetic dream or vision scenes. In the *Aeneid*, Hector, dirty and covered in blood, enters Aeneas' dream to warn him that Troy will fall; in the Homeric epic, the gods communicate their messages to humans via interpretable dreams—e.g., the avian dreams of Helen and Penelope. In the Middle Ages, dreams were a fashionable narrative frame in poetry. A well-known example of the "dream vision" genre is Chaucer's *Book of the Duchesse* (dated between 1368 and 1372), in which an insomniac poet prays to Juno, is put to bed by the goddess, and dreams of an encounter with a despairing widowed knight. Likewise, the medieval

³⁹ Jeffrey Meyers, "The Bulldog and the Butterfly: The Friendship of Edmund Wilson and Vladimir Nabokov," *The American Scholar* 63, no. 3 (1994): 393, JSTOR.

⁴⁰ In Nabokov's *Pnin*, an imaginary American adventurer is named "Percival Blake." Wagner's opera *Parsifal* (based on the 13th century German epic by the enigmatic Bavarian knight and poet, Wolfram Von Eschenbach) is the backbone of Nabokov's short story, "The Return of Chorb" (1925), which, like *Perfection*, was composed in Berlin. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage Books 1989) 86. Vladimir Nabokov, "The Return of Chorb," *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 149.

⁴¹ Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts*, 193.

wizard Merlin, who appears in French, German, and English texts, is famous for his prophecies and visions. In "Perfection," Ivanov has a premonition in the third sentence of the story, where he is introduced by name: "Ivanov foresaw he would often appear in David's dreams, thirty or forty years hence."⁴² Like the enchanter, Ivanov experiences his own vision; and like Hector and Chaucer's knight, he will appear in someone else's dream. Compared to these epic examples, however, Ivanov's vision is remarkably banal. No city is presaged to fall; no marital dilemma resolved. The tutor merely observes David's reddening ears during their math lesson and reasonably reflects: "human dreams do not easily forget old grudges."⁴³

This ironic juxtaposition of the hero-narrative and modern mundanity permeates the story. Heroic epics and chivalric romances are centered around a quest. The heroes traverse great spaces and visit famous landmarks. Book I of the *Aeneid* opens: "his fate/had made him fugitive; he was the first/to journey from the coasts of Troy as far/as Italy and the Lavinian shores."⁴⁴ In the chivalric romance spatial representation is murkier than in the classical epic, but take for instance any of Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romances and you find the mood of the poem is largely dependent on a sense of movement: "for he who travels the straight road passes him who turns aside; therefore I do not wish to tarry" (*Erec Et Enide*); "For thy part, do not delay, for I have a

⁴² Nabokov, "Perfection," 338.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2007), 1.

long road to travel" (*Yvain or, The Knight with the Lion*).⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ In the third paragraph of "Perfection," Ivanov's interest in geography is explained by his love of "ancient charts."⁴⁷ He cites the "Viatic maps of the Romans" and "those drawn in ancient Alexandria," and "again, maps of medieval Christendom."⁴⁸ The OED classifies "viatic" as "*Obsolete. rare exc. for revived nonce-uses.*"⁴⁹ It cites Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* for the definition: "*Viatick*, pertaining to a journey, or travelling by the way." The examples of nonce uses are Nabokov's final novel *Invitation to a Beheading* and early short story "Details of a Sunset."⁵⁰ The adjective modifies the geographic list, emphasizing journeying and questing, as well as auguring Ivanov's death with the association of "viaticum." Ivanov cherishes ideas of travel and discovery: "The islet of the known universe keeps growing: new hesitant contours emerge from the fabulous mists, slowly the globe disrobes—and lo, out of the remoteness beyond the seas, looms South America's shoulder and from their four corners blow fat-cheeked winds, one of them wearing spectacles."⁵¹ But Ivanov is a poor tutor who will never visit the places he has studied. His vacation to a German seaside town is lackluster compared to Aeneas's

⁴⁵ Chretien Detroyes, "Erec et Enide," "Yvain," *Four Arthurian Romances*, ed. Douglas B. Killings, and David Widgeby, trans. Carleton Carroll and William W. Kibler, (Project Gutenberg, February 1, 1997), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/831/831-h/831-h.htm#linknote-11>.

⁴⁶ See Murrieta-flores and Naomi Howell's "Towards the Spatial Analysis of Vague and Imaginary Place and Space: Evolving the Spatial Humanities through Medieval Romance" and Paul Augustus Broyles' dissertation, *Remapping Insularity: Geographic Imagination in Medieval English Romance* for analyses of spatial representation in the medieval romance.

⁴⁷ Nabokov, "Perfection," 338.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "viatic, adj.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223036>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Nabokov, "Perfection," 338-9.

voyages; and unlike Odysseus and so many epic heroes, there will be no return home for the exile—at least not while he's alive.

Ivanov's appearance also has ironic associations. His anachronistic clothes—his “starched collars and cuffs; his deteriorating shirts [with] an outdated tongue in front to be buttoned to the top of his long underpants... [and] his old formal black suit”—link him to the past.⁵² His “black suit” signals mourning, a state that constantly refers to a bygone.⁵³ His clothes are figuratively and literally decayed. At one time, in his native Russia, this get-up would have been considered gentlemanly. Indeed, he believes he dresses nobly: “it seemed to him that he was dressed in sober good taste.”⁵⁴ No epic or chivalric hero is without his distinctive garb. Vivid verses describe pauldrons and cuirasses. Maidens swoon over the knight-in-shining-armor. The hero's clothes, like his deeds, are exceptional; they raise him above the masses. Unfortunately, Ivanov's get-up makes him stand out in an embarrassing way (unbeknownst to him). To the typical well-adjusted modern person, he appears clownish, obliviously walking down the street clad in formal black with “a somewhat unhinged, bouncing gait, his head held high.”⁵⁵ To more gracious eyes, he seems impractical, perhaps childish. David's sensible mother says to him, “You will be frightfully hot in those clothes.”⁵⁶

As a modern protagonist, Ivanov conforms to a certain set of demands. In the 20th century, readers and writers are suspicious of clean-cut literary heroes; they prefer farcical heroes, trusting the picaresque more than the epic. Modern readers refuse to

⁵² Ibid., 339.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 342.

accept the hero as a figure of worship. They relish moral ambiguity, subjectivity; pessimism is the norm; their hero is the anti-hero. The critic Christopher Ricks in *The Heroic Line* suggests that the heroic tradition is an endangered genre due to "the imaginative slights perpetrated by the mock-heroic or by skepticism as to the heroic."⁵⁷ Modernist writers who wanted to work in this tradition had to do it indirectly. The master of this was Joyce. In *Ulysses*, he doesn't transform Dublin, or "Hellenise it"; rather, using the shadow play of irony, allusion, and patterning, Joyce transports his city.⁵⁸ He depicts Dublin as worthy of Virgil and Homer, conveying it to a realm of myth where it has a place beside Troy and Ithaca, and immortalizing its ordinary modern people with Aeneas and Odysseus in the Elysium Gardens. Several critics figure *Ulysses'* protagonist, Leopold Bloom, as an ironic blend of the everyman and mythic hero. Samuel Lewis Goldberg, in *The Classical Temper: A Study of Joyce's "Ulysses,"* argues that Bloom is a gentleman and distinguished among the characters of the novel by his knight-like "moral integrity."⁵⁹ John Henry Raleigh, in his article "Bloom as a Modern Epic Hero," describes Bloom as "a hero of the psyche or the soul, displaying the same intrepidity, resourcefulness, and indomitability against the threats of psychic disintegration and anarchy that his prototype [Odysseus] had displayed against the

⁵⁷ Christopher Ricks, *Along Heroic Lines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), xii

⁵⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 7.

⁵⁹ Samuel Lewis Goldberg, *The Classical Temper: A Study of Joyce's "Ulysses"* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), 262.

disorders of the external world."⁶⁰ "Perfection" shares this reimagining of the modern hero with *Ulysses*.⁶¹

The drama of the modern hero's 'psyche' can be compared to the dramatic interplay between the hero's strengths and weaknesses in classical hero-narratives. Odysseus has his wit and hubris, Achilles his spear and heel. Ivanov has strengths and weaknesses too, but they do not necessarily align with the standards of the Ancient Greeks or the Middle Ages. Though Ivanov is physically weak, he is learned. He is trained in geography, has an aptitude for math, and displays ornithological knowledge. On a walk through the woods with David, he urges his student to imagine that he is in "not Pomerania but a Malayan forest," and proceeds to play fantasy tour-guide: "you'll presently see the rarest of birds fly past, Prince Albert's paradise bird, whose head is adorned with a pair of long plumes consisting of blue oriflammes."⁶² ⁶³ Ivanov is also

⁶⁰ John Henry Raleigh, "Bloom as a Modern Epic Hero." *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1977): 584.

⁶¹ In "Perfection," the phrase "frog-legged" is used to describe a group of "Muzhiks[...] running out of the water" during Ivanov's recollection of "the last time [he] went swimming[...] in the river Luga." In Nabokov's fourth English novel, *Pnin*, a swimming Timofey is likened to "a giant frog." In Joyce's *Ulysses*, toward the end of the opening chapter, "[a] young man clinging to a spur of rock" in the ocean is described as moving "frogwise." This is not evidence of deliberate intertextuality on Nabokov's part. It goes without saying that Nabokov read Joyce deeply, and it is interesting to entertain the possibility that Nabokov, consciously or unconsciously, assimilated Joyce's striking figure. Nabokov, "Perfection," 341. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 21.

⁶² Nabokov, "Perfection," 344-5.

⁶³ The bird is *Pteridophora alberti*, aka King of Saxony bird-of-paradise, native to the mountains and rain forests of New Guinea. *The World Atlas of Birds* describes its family, *Paradisaeidae*, as follows: "These birds are small to medium, 5 1/2 - 40 inch long (mostly tail in the longer species). They have medium wings and a short to long tail. The legs and feet are strong, the former short. The bill varies from stout to slender and is sickled or hooked in some. Plumage is black in some, very brightly coloured and elaborately plumed (among males) in others. The sexes are unlike." Unfortunately, the *Pteridophora alberti* has been overhunted for its beautiful "blue oriflammes," and is now an endangered species. *The*

literary, packing “Pushkin’s works in the Panafidin edition” in his suitcase for the trip.⁶⁴ Several of Nabokov’s heroes are fans of Pushkin. Pnin teaches the poet, and Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift*, one of the authorial alter egos, carries Pushkin’s lines in his memory. Furthermore, notice the careful mention of the exact edition. This concern with details is an element of what Nabokov calls “artistic sense.”⁶⁵ In a 1962 interview collected in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov declares that an attention to “obscure facts” makes a good artist.⁶⁶ In “Good Readers and Good Writers,” he says, “the best temperament for a reader to have[...] is a combination of the artistic and the scientific one,” and asserts that a writer needs to feel the passionate heat of artistic “intuition,” while maintaining a “scientific coolness.”⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ In “The Art of Commonsense,” Nabokov refers to “the supremacy of the detail over the general, of the part that is more alive than the whole, of the little thing which a man observes and greets with a friendly nod of the

World Atlas of Birds, ed. Sir Peter Scott, C. Hilary Fry, and J.J M. Flegg (New York: Chartwell Books, 2014), 206, 263. Nabokov, “Perfection,” 345.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 342.

⁶⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” 3.

⁶⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 7.

⁶⁷ Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” 5-6.

⁶⁸ Marin Grishakova points to patterns as the “structural affinity” Nabokov finds between art and science. In his essay, “Fictional Realism: Scaling the Twin Peaks of Art and Science,” Dorion Sagan, riffing on Nabokov’s mountain conceit from “Good Readers and Good Writers,” says that “the distinct but equally necessary paths of art and science seem to scale opposite sides of the same majestic mountainscape.” (As you may have guessed, Dorion is the son of the astronomer Carl Sagan. His mother is the equally distinguished but less famous biologist Lynn Margulis.) Marin Grishakova, *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov’s Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2012) 53. Dorion Sagan, “Fictional Realism: Scaling the Twin Peaks of Art and Science,” in *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov’s Scientific Art*, ed. Stephen H. Blackwell and Kurt Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 244.

spirit[...]."⁶⁹ Compared to David—"a little *Sportsmann* as are all modern kids," according to his mother—Ivanov is an introvert, whose scholarly knowhow is a unique, archaic trait.⁷⁰

Ivanov's central characteristic involves this artistic sense:

Ivanov daydreamed about the many things that he would never get to know closer, about professions that he would never practice, about a parachute, opening like a colossal corolla, or the fleeting speckled world of automobile racers, about various images of happiness, about the pleasures of very rich people amid picturesque natural surroundings. His thought fluttered and walked up and down the glass pane which for as long as he lived would prevent him from having direct contact with the world. He had a passionate desire to experience everything, to attain and touch everything, to let the dappled voices, the bird calls, filter through his being and to enter for a moment into a passerby's soul as one enters the cool shade of a tree. His mind would be preoccupied with unsolvable problems: How and where do chimney sweeps wash after work? Has anything changed about that forest road in Russia that a moment ago he recalled so vividly?⁷¹

Ivanov's urge to "get to know closer" is linked to the artistic preoccupation with details. However, these details are unattainable. His daydreaming begins with poetic specificity—"parachute[...] like a colossal corolla"—but gets hazier: "various images of happiness."⁷² The "picturesque natural surroundings" he concludes with are an abstract ideal disconnected from the real natural world. When Ivanov walks in the forest with David, "Geometrid moths, matching the bark in coloration" fly "off the trunks" of nearby trees.⁷³ The word "geometrid" combines the prefix *geo*, meaning "the earth," and

⁶⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 373.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 341

⁷¹ Nabokov, "Perfection," 339-40.

⁷² Nabokov, "Perfection," 340.

⁷³ Ibid., 344.

metron, meaning "measure" or "meter" in Ancient Greek prosody. These moths are earth-measurers, fellow geographers, and unlike Ivanov, whose thought flutters behind the glass pane, they are free to fly where they please.⁷⁴ In Nabokov's list of "what should a reader be to be a good reader," number four is someone who has "imagination."⁷⁵ Ivanov has a strong imagination. In this same scene, he tries to teach David the value of imagination by urging him to envision the paradisaal bird flying overhead. The words "paradise" and "oriflammes"—the latter meaning "An object, principle, or ideal that serves as a rallying point in a struggle"—associate the bird with Ivanov's idealism and desire for transcendence.⁷⁶ ⁷⁷ This is the closest Ivanov can get to the picturesque natural surroundings he so desperately yearns for.

Is having a large imagination enough to lead a good life? In *Speak, Memory*, imaginative inwardness is just one part of artistic creation. Equally important are moments of concentrated sensory attunement. Nabokov's example is water dripping off a leaf. He says that "all poetry is positional," and "the poet feels everything that happens in one point at time."⁷⁸ Unlike the poet, the exiled man-out-of-time has no position. Like the spectacted cloud, Ivanov floats in fantasy. He is the little man trapped beneath a fold of history; all he possesses to keep from suffocating is his "private universe."⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 3.

⁷⁶ Nabokov, "Perfection," 345.

⁷⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "oriflammes, n.2," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132554>.

⁷⁸ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 218.

⁷⁹ Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," 373.

Ivanov's impediment is figured as "the glass pane" that "prevent[s] him from having direct contact with the world."⁸⁰ The trope evokes Saint Paul: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."⁸¹ Saint Paul's glass represents the limits of our earthly perspective. Like Ivanov's glass, it remains for as long as we live. Removing the biblical glass means seeing the eternal, the light of God. Ivanov is also concerned with limitation, but for him removing the glass means attaining and touching "everything"; it would allow him "to enter for a moment into a passerby's soul as one enters the cool shade of a tree."⁸² His couple of "unsolvable problems," because they are terrestrial, are improbable. If he knew a chimney sweep, he could ask him where he "wash[es] after work," and if he had access to his homeland, he could see if "anything changed about that forest road in Russia."⁸³ For Saint Paul's fallen man, it is impossible to witness God until the appointed hour. What Ivanov desires has to do with "touch"; even his wish to enter another human's "soul" is grounded in the idea of "a passerby[...]," a real living person he can see on the street and grab by the collar. He wants "direct contact with *the world*" and other people in it (emphasis mine).⁸⁴

Ivanov's limitation is also associated with his inability to access a certain memory: "he suddenly half-remembered something—something extraordinarily comforting and strange—but it immediately dissolved[...]."⁸⁵ This half-memory is

⁸⁰ Nabokov, "Perfection," 340.

⁸¹ Cor. 13:12 KJV.

⁸² Nabokov, "Perfection," 340.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 345.

foreshadowed earlier: "From somewhere came the playing of an orchestra, and its every sound, muted by distance, seemed to be corked up."⁸⁶ This is a classic Nabokovian jigsaw. The earlier passage introduces the sound of "an orchestra," while the later passage presents a "half-remembered" memory without specifying what that memory is. The attentive reader realizes these passages fit together: the memory is of the music.⁸⁷ In both instances, the memory is bracketed by intimations of mortality. The first is preceded by Ivanov becoming "conscious of an acute discomfort in his chest, a sudden tightness followed by a sudden void," and concludes with the simple statement: "breathing was difficult."⁸⁸ The second begins with the line: "His horizon was narrowed by the glasses [his real glasses], he was afraid of a sudden automobile"; and ends with the line: "the turbulent sea air constricted his chest."⁸⁹ The feelings are claustrophobic and oppressive: "tightness," "narrowed," "constricted."⁹⁰ Ivanov is uncomfortably trapped in his body and thoughts. The memory is positioned outside him, on the other side of the glass pane.

Both half-memories occur when Ivanov is on the beach. In the first, the sound of the music is described as "corked up" and in the second, the memory is "dissolved," meaning "reduce[d] into a liquid condition."⁹¹ ⁹² Throughout the story, water is associated with transcendence. Examples include: "When[...] he went up in the elevator,

⁸⁶ Ibid., 342.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 345.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 342, 345.

⁹¹ Ibid., 342.

⁹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "v.I.2" <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/55533>.

he would have a sensation of slowly growing, stretching upward, and, after his head had reached the sixth floor, of pulling up his legs *like a swimmer*,” and “Nice to go bathing in the river[...] How hard to put on again one’s socks and shoes without muddying the *soles* of one’s feet” (emphases mine).⁹³ The first passage depicts Ivanov’s transcendent movement upward at the end of the story, and the second puns on “soles.”⁹⁴ Putting on his shoes and socks can be read as a return to a prior state of sin. Water also presages Ivanov’s mortality: “the higher the water rose, the deadlier became the spasm that contracted his heart;” “The *stabbing* chill compelled him to get promptly out of the water[...] After a while the sun warmed him, he *revived*,” “a wave[...] *threatened* to douse his trouser”; and Ivanov himself declaring to David in warning, “How often it happens that a careless bather dies of sun stroke or heart failure” (emphases mine).⁹⁵ Through these images and tropes, memory, death, and transcendence are linked. Ironically, life is Ivanov’s problem. His body and mind are what limit him.

Ivanov’s last characteristic has to do with how he views his student, David:

And yet David was not untender. His indifference to the unusual could be explained—for I, too, reflected Ivanov, must have appeared to be a stolid and dryish lad, I who never shared with anyone my loves, my fancies and fears. All that my childhood expressed was an excited little monologue addressed to itself. One might construct the following syllogism: a child is the most perfect type of humanity; David is a child; David is perfect[...] He must be saving up on something[: bright childish impressions whose paint remains on the fingertips of the mind. He keeps silent about it just as I kept silent.⁹⁶

⁹³ Nabokov, “Perfection,” 340-1.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 341.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 343-4.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 341.

Ivanov's explanation of David's indifference is inaccurate.⁹⁷ The truth is "David's eyes, indeed, were not devoid of a certain dreaminess; but it was the dreaminess of concealed mischief."⁹⁸ If Ivanov was more cognizant of David's real nature, he might not have been so quick to rush into the water to save him. He might have recognized something amiss in the pitch of the boy's screams or the exaggeration of his gesture. Later, Ivanov's thoughts about David take on another dimension, and from this we learn more about the hero's backstory:

[...] Ivanov thought vaguely of several matters at once, imagining among other things that the boy who slept in the bed next to his was his own son. Ten years before, in Serbia, the only woman he had ever loved—another man's wife—had become pregnant by him. She suffered a miscarriage and died the next night, delirious and praying. He would have had a son, a little fellow about David's age.⁹⁹

The theme of Ivanov's long-ailing heart is connected to this past heartbreak. In *Shades of Love*, Ellen Pifer suggests that "love"—selfless love—plays an important role in Nabokov's work. Not every character is capable of loving. She says that love "liberates the imagination, inspiring our perception of others," and asserts: "Within Nabokov's worlds of artifice[...] love serves not only to liberate the perceptions of his characters but to offer redemption from hellish despair."¹⁰⁰ ¹⁰¹ The exclusivity of

⁹⁷ Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 4.

⁹⁸ Nabokov, "Perfection," 341.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 343

¹⁰⁰ Ellen Pifer, "Shades of Love: Nabokov's Intimations of Immortality," *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 2 (1989): 78.

¹⁰¹ Here she is invoking John Bayley's study (not so well-known these days) *Characters of Love*: "Calling attention to the essential distinction between love and lust, Nabokov invites the reader to clarify the difference in his own mind. So crucial to an understanding of Nabokov's fiction is this (often ignored) distinction that it warrants further, although necessarily brief, attention at this point. And here the

Ivanov's love evokes the chivalric knight's devotion to his damsel: *amour courtois*, or courtly love. Defining courtly love is a contentious topic among medievalists:

There are in fact many examples of adulterous love, of knights humbling themselves before idealized ladies, of courteous lovers, of love talk using religious vocabulary. But to group these four themes together as the essential traits of a new phenomenon called "courtly love" is to distort seriously the views which courtly people held about love. It is to take all the other poetic themes concerning love and to treat them as exceptional, or "non-courtly," when in fact they are not[...] Scholars have commonly exercised themselves in defining courtly love and, having framed their definitions, in explaining where courtly love came from. Some said it was adulterous, others said not. Some said it was spiritual and pure, others said it was sensual and erotic. Some said it was freely given, others said it was the result of fate or uncontrollable passion.¹⁰²

I suspect Nabokov was aware of these nuances. Ivanov's spiritual/pure love is marred by the adulterous em-dash supplement: "another man's wife."¹⁰³ In this way, the ignobility of their relationship aligns with the chivalric tradition. The unlawfulness of the affair is accented by the woman's "delirium" after her miscarriage. The second

eminent British critic, John Bayley, proves a most helpful guide. In his well-known study, *The Characters of Love*, Bayley finds the distinction between love and lust a central one, bearing directly upon creations of the literary imagination. Discussing some of the greatest works of western literature, he distinguishes between the narrow impulse or motivations of desire and the more creative ground from which love springs. Love rather than lust, he points out, liberates the imagination, inspiring our perception of others and fostering the creation, in literature, of memorable literary characters. 'Love,' says Bayley, 'is preoccupied with the uniqueness of the individual'; when we truly love, 'we are really seeing another person,' even though recognition of the other person's otherness may cause distress or anxiety. Challenging Proust's insistence on the essentially solipsistic nature of love, Bayley contends that love opens human consciousness to the world: it 'remind[s] us of the alien worlds that impinge on our own.'" Ellen Pifer, "Shades of Love: Nabokov's Intimations of Immortality," *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 2 (1989): 78.

¹⁰² John C. Moore, "'Courtly Love': A Problem of Terminology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 4 (1979): 623-4.

¹⁰³ Nabokov, "Perfection," 343.

listed definition of “deliring” in the OED is “To act or speak in an absurd, deluded, or irrational manner.”¹⁰⁴ The first definition, marked as rare after the 17th century (nowadays, obsolete) is “To go astray, esp. morally; to sin; to turn aside *from* what is expected or desired.”¹⁰⁵ The former definition makes more sense; yet, Nabokov, who always wrote with a dictionary handy, certainly had both in mind. Here the reader should recognize “[the] shadows of words.”¹⁰⁶ Despite this moral trespass, however, Ivanov's imperfect backstory exhibits his capacity for love. Furthermore, his view of David shows that he has faith in the reserves of human interiority. By not assuming he knows what's going on inside David's head, he offers the child space. He is wrong in believing David is perfect, but at the end of the story, he will heroically risk his life and ultimately die for his ideal.

“Perfection” can be divided structurally into two parts. The first part relates Ivanov's static attributes via exposition and several small events—e.g., a tutoring session, a walk in the woods, etc. The second part features Ivanov as a man-of-action. We can separate this second part into a series of four triumphant feats (the third is Ivanov running into the water to save David). I will discuss these feats in the order that they appear.

The first feat takes place when Ivanov reads a “postcard that David had begun writing to his mother and had left lying on the window ledge” while they are on vacation:¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “delire, v.2.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/49446>.

¹⁰⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “delire, v.2.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/49446>.

¹⁰⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 30.

¹⁰⁷ Nabokov, “Perfection,” 344.

David wrote that his tutor was probably ill for he never went swimming. That very day Ivanov took extraordinary measures: he acquired a black bathing suit and, on reaching the beach, hid in the cabana, undressed gingerly, and pulled on the cheap shop-smelling stockinet garment. He had a moment of melancholy embarrassment when, pale-skinned and hairy-legged, he emerged into the sunlight. David, however, looked at him with approval. "Well!" exclaimed Ivanov with devil-may-care jauntiness, "here we go!" He went up to his knees, splashed some water on his head, then walked on with outspread arms.¹⁰⁸

Then come bad feelings. Pain in the heart. A violent chill. Ivanov gets out of the water and foreswears "sea bathing."¹⁰⁹ His journey from beach to water, though short, is the first time in the story that he leaves his comfort zone. The physicality of the act is stressed with the verbs "acquired," "hid," "undressed," "pulled," "went," "splashed," "walked," and the adjectives "pale-skinned and hairy-legged."¹¹⁰ Ivanov isn't daydreaming anymore. The emphases, "That very day" and "extraordinary measures," though comical, show that for Ivanov this is a big deal.¹¹¹ He is embarrassed to go in the water. His body is unattractive, and he is not a strong swimmer. But after reading the letter, he immediately buys a suit because he doesn't want his student to think poorly of him. Beneath the endearing irony, we glimpse an admirable trait. His desire to impress David and his mother, to live up to a set of standards (those of his pupil and employer) indicates a sense of duty. His pride is not the first deadly sin, but a "consciousness of what befits, is due to, or is worthy of oneself or one's position; self-respect; self-esteem, esp. of a legitimate or healthy kind

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

or degree."¹¹² At the end of the passage, Ivanov's "outspread arms" are something we have all seen on tentative swimmers at the beach.¹¹³ Of course, we have also seen them elsewhere: for instance, hanging on the walls of community centers or certain friends' and relatives' homes. Ivanov's dip is a heroic and sacrificial feat.

The second feat requires a quick run-down of Ivanov's stats: an impoverished modern hero, a learned man concerned with facts and details, an unsatisfied dreamer, a man desiring transcendence (and a oneness with other people), a generous teacher, a mourner capable of real love: a figure of comedy and pathos. On the beach, before his death, Ivanov seems to discern some of this in a terse reflection:

The dusky flags flapped excitedly, pointing all in the same direction, though nothing was happening there yet. Here is the sand, here is the dull splash of the sea. His ears felt plugged up, and when he inhaled through the nose a rumble started in his head, and something bumped into a membranous dead end. I've lived neither very long nor very well, reflected Ivanov. Still it would be a shame to complain; this alien world is beautiful, and I would feel happy right now if only I could recall that wonderful, wonderful—what? What was it? ¹¹⁴

Ivanov's awareness of several sensory details—"Here is the sand," "His ears felt plugged," "a rumble started in his head," "something bumped into a membranous

¹¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "pride, n.I.3.a.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/151185>.

¹¹³ Nabokov, "Perfection," 344.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 345.

dead end”—prompts a sort of epiphany.¹¹⁵ ¹¹⁶ Ivanov’s recognition of his failure to live “well” is a moment of redemptive self-awareness: indeed, a triumphant feat.¹¹⁷ Importantly, he does not linger on his inadequacy (a mere sentence is spent on it). Instead, as if learning from his conclusion, Ivanov skirts solipsistic rumination—“it would be a shame to complain”—and gazes outward at the world.¹¹⁸ With the adjective “alien,” he accepts the world’s strangeness and observes that he is only a visitor.¹¹⁹ Ivanov’s question—“What was it [the half-remembered memory]?”—is interrupted when David asks him if he can go for a swim.¹²⁰ After some prodding, the tutor reluctantly allows it. David rushes into the water and Ivanov reclines on the sand, raising “himself on one elbow” (in the posture of a young English poet) to survey “the waves.”¹²¹ Promptly, he returns to his old inward self; but he is not thinking about his desires anymore:

He sank his head, propping one cheek, grieving, computing indefinite measures of life, of pity, of happiness. His shoes were already full of sand, he took them off with slow hands, then was again lost in thought, and

¹¹⁵ Alexandrov describes Nabokov’s epiphanies as “a sudden fusion of varied sensory data and memories, a feeling of timelessness, and intuitions of immortality. This perceptual, psychological, and spiritual experience is intimately connected with Nabokov’s conception of artistic inspiration, and is thus a facet of his theme of the creation of art.” This is essentially a summary of the “cosmic synchronization” that Nabokov describes in Chapter Eleven of *Speak, Memory*. Examples of the epiphany in his fiction include the chessboard, squirrel, and singing children passages from *Pnin*, *The Luzhin Defense*, and *Lolita* respectively. Ivanov’s realization is not quite an epiphany, but it does have something of that flavor. Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, 7. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 218.

¹¹⁶ Nabokov, “Perfection,” 345.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 346.

again those evasive little knots began to swim across his field of vision—and how he longed, how he longed to recall— A sudden scream. Ivanov stood up.¹²²

Ivanov, having decided that his own life is not worth mourning, grieves for humanity. His thoughts are impersonal. The word “computing” suggests logical thinking as opposed to dreaming.¹²³ Of course, life, pity, and happiness cannot be computed, and unable to rationalize the irrational, Ivanov is soon “again lost in thought,” or more precisely lost in *memory*.¹²⁴ The “evasive little knots” appeared earlier in the story, where they were described as “remote and vague semievents,” “impossible to concentrate on,” and likened to “those transparent little knots that swim diagonally in the vitreous humor of the eye.”¹²⁵

The third feat takes place when Ivanov seems to be on the verge of locating the memory but is again interrupted by David.¹²⁶

Amid yellow-blue waves, far from the shore, flitted David’s face, and his open mouth was like a dark hole. He emitted a spluttering yell, and vanished. A hand appeared for a moment and vanished too. Ivanov threw off his jacket. “I’m coming,” he shouted. “I’m coming. Hold on!”¹²⁷

Like the first feat, Ivanov’s third feat is ironic. For the rereader, his worried shouts—“I’m coming[...] I’m coming. Hold on!”—are almost cartoonish, even grimly comical.¹²⁸ As he

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 345-6.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 346.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

splashes through the water, he wants “to take off his glasses, but his agitation, the cold, the numbing weakness, prevented him from doing so.”¹²⁹ His clothes cause him to feel “enclosed in a tight painfully cold sack.”¹³⁰ Then, at his weakest, “his heart[...] straining unbearably[...] All at once a rapid something passed through him, a flash of fingers rippling over piano keys.”¹³¹

—and *this* was the very thing he had been trying to recall throughout the morning. He came out on a stretch of sand. Sand, sea, and air were of an odd, faded, opaque tint, and everything was perfectly still. Vaguely he reflected that twilight must have come, and that David had perished a long time ago, and he felt what he knew from his earthly life—the poignant heat of tears. Trembling and bending toward the ashen sand, he wrapped himself tighter in the black cloak with the snake-shaped brass fastening that he had seen on a student friend, a long, long time ago, on an autumn day[...].¹³²

Ivanov does not *remember* this musical phrase; rather, the memory is gifted to him by the swift fingers of the pianist Mnemosyne. The “stretch of sand” is immaterial, a psychic space, for we learn later that he drowns.¹³³ The world fades, grows darker, and concluding that his student must be dead, Ivanov acknowledges the sadness of his life. The cold ocean water is replaced by “the poignant heat of tears.”¹³⁴ This hot feeling of grief is emphasized by the word “ashen”—an index of fire.¹³⁵ The word also evokes the biblical relation of ash and mourning: “And Tamar put ashes on her head[...] and went

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 346-7

¹³⁴ Ibid., 346.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

on crying"; and "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning[...]"— and the relation of ash and repentance:

"Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes"; and "I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes."¹³⁶ In the posture of prostration—"bending toward the ashen sand"—Ivanov's constricting clothes—his "painfully cold sack"—are transformed into a "black cloak with the snake-shaped brass fastening that he had seen on a student friend."¹³⁷ This friend is mentioned in an earlier passage: "[Ivanov] recalled a fellow student in Russia, a close friend of his, who had the knack of pitching pebbles so as to have them glance off the water's surface two, three, four times, but when he tried to demonstrate it to David, the projectile pierced the surface with a loud plop, and David laughed[...]."¹³⁸ The stone-skipping recalls Christ's miracle, which in a way Ivanov has performed, standing on his mental sand bed above the waves. Awarded the clothing of his more capable, skillful friend, Ivanov metamorphosizes into a legendary figure. The use of the snake-shaped fastener dates to the Middle Ages and was possibly incorporated in Roman fashion. The outfit appears in *Speak, Memory*: "he wore a Byronic black cloak with a silver S-shaped clasp."¹³⁹ Similarly, in *Pnin* the titular character sees "himself fantastically cloaked" during a dream of heroic escape.¹⁴⁰ In her study, *Eve of the Festival: Making Myth in Odyssey 19*, Olga Levaniouk investigates the function of "cloaks" in the classical epic. While discussing the scene "When Odysseus describes his cloak and pin to Penelope,"

¹³⁶ Sam. 13:19 KJV; Isa. 61:3 KJV. Job 42:6 KJV. Dan. 9:3 KJV

¹³⁷ Nabokov, "Perfection," 346.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 343.

¹³⁹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 156.

¹⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Pnin*, 109.

she argues that the “cloak and pin [symbolize Odysseus’] status and function as an accomplished hero.”¹⁴¹ She also mentions “yet another splendid mythological cloak on a hero’s shoulders in the myth of Jason and the voyage of Argo” from Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, in which there is “an extended ecphrasis of the cloak.”¹⁴² Both Jason and Odysseus’ cloaks are “fastened with a pin.”¹⁴³ In several examples, she refers to mythological cloaks as being earned, “won,” and “received [as a prize].”¹⁴⁴ Ivanov’s cloak resembles Odysseus’ cloak and pin, or a medieval magician’s robe. No longer is his appearance ridiculous. He is visibly transfigured into an archetypic hero, reminding us that his attempt to rescue David, though futile and comically pathetic, is an act of courage.

The final feat directly follows Ivanov’s recollection and visual transformation. He has a few thoughts before and after he drowns:

—and he felt so sorry for David’s mother, and wondered what would he tell her. It is not my fault, I did all I could to save him, but I am a poor swimmer, and I have a bad heart, and he drowned. But there was something amiss about these thoughts, and when he looked around once more and saw himself in the desolate mist all alone with no David beside him, he understood that if David was not with him, David was not dead.¹⁴⁵

This feat is not an instance of heroic bravery, as with the first and third feats; it is more closely related to the second: Ivanov’s meditation on the tenderness of the world: life,

¹⁴¹ Olga Levaniouk, *Eve of the Festival: Making Myth in Odyssey 19*, Hellenic Studies Series 46. (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2011). http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_Levaniouk.Eve_of_the_Festival.2011.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Nabokov, "Perfection," 347.

pity, happiness. The difference is that here Ivanov's compassion is directed at an *individual*. David's mother is a remote character. We know only that she has a "high-strung temperament."¹⁴⁶ She speaks three times. Her first speech is the story's longest piece of dialogue and its emptiest. In an impersonal, straightforward, rapid-fire monologue, she asks Ivanov if he can look after David on his vacation, explains why she cannot do it herself, and justifies her decision: "I trust you, and he listens to you. Above all, I want him to speak Russian more often."¹⁴⁷ Ivanov hardly knows this woman, and yet in his dying moments expresses sympathy for her. It might be argued that his thoughts about "what would he tell her" are self-interested excuses—especially "It is not my fault"—but I think they can be forgiven, especially since his only concern in "the desolate mist" is whether David is with him.¹⁴⁸ For his courage, Ivanov is rewarded the garb of a mythical hero; but it is ultimately for his compassion that his desire to experience everything is fulfilled:

Only then were the clouded glasses removed. The dull mist immediately broke, blossomed with marvelous colors, all kinds of sounds burst forth—the rote of the sea, the clapping of the wind, human cries—and there was David standing, up to his ankles in bright water, not knowing what to do, shaking with fear, not daring to explain that he had not been drowning, that he had struggled in jest—and farther out people were diving, groping through the water, then looking at each other with bulging eyes, and diving anew, and returning empty-handed, while others shouted to them from the shore, advising them to search a little to the left; and a fellow with a Red Cross armband was running along the beach, and three men in sweaters were pushing into the water a boat grinding against the shingle; and a bewildered David was being led away by a fat woman in a pince-nez, the wife of a veterinarian, who had been expected to arrive on Friday but had had to postpone his vacation, and the Baltic sea sparkled from end to end, and, in the thinned-out forest, across a green country road, there lay,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 341.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 347.

still breathing, freshly cut aspens; and a youth, smeared with soot, gradually turned white as he washed under the kitchen tap, and black parakeets flew above the eternal snows of the New Zealand mountains; and a fisherman, squinting in the sun, was solemnly predicting that not until the ninth day would the waves surrender the corpse.¹⁴⁹

The glass motif is resolved. The unexpected and energetic verb “broke” (as opposed to slower and softer verbs like “faded” or “dissipated”) evokes a prison escape or the cracking of a chrysalis. The worried “human cries,” paired with the “clapping of the wind,” become celebratory, cheering Ivanov on.¹⁵⁰ He flutters upward, his vision expands. His dilating sight includes insight as well. He sees into David’s *soul*: the poor boy’s fear of admitting that he “had struggled in jest.”¹⁵¹ He has knowledge of a *passerby* too: the details of a fat woman’s veterinarian husband’s travel plans. As he rises above the Baltic Sea, his two unsolvable problems are answered. The forest surrounding the country road in Russia has been “thinned-out”—yet the felled trees, because they were recently cut, still breathe—and a chimney sweep washes “under the kitchen tap,” an action which recalls the water-as-spiritual-cleansing-agent trope.¹⁵² The prophet-fisherman’s prediction regarding the “ninth day” is related to the Eastern Orthodox memorial service, the Christian reference being prepared by the “Red Cross armband.”¹⁵³ In the Orthodox Church, the third, ninth, and fortieth days are ritual occasions for mourners, marking the stages in a departed soul’s journey to the throne of God where he or she receives Particular Judgement. Between the third and ninth day

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

the soul is shown Paradise. The linked motif of transcendence and mortality returns in the juxtaposition of “eternal snows” and “corpse.”¹⁵⁴ A figure of the ethereal is followed by the most corporeal object possible: Ivanov’s bloated body on the strand.¹⁵⁵ The final word deemphasizes the metaphysical. Ivanov’s soul escapes even the reader, and we are left with the feeling of waking from an especially vivid dream. A firm line is drawn between the physical and metaphysical, between our world and “Perfection.” The glass pane is put before the reader, and the curtain closes.

Now we are outside the theater, walking through the cool parking lot. It is nighttime and a half-moon is out. It casts “the moonshine of generalization” and we begin to think again about heroes and archetypes and traditions.¹⁵⁶

A significant idea in the hero-narrative is that the hero lives on in the memories of those who witness his deeds and in stories told to later generations. In the classical epic, this idea is troped with the Elysium Gardens.¹⁵⁷ Ivanov will be remembered by

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ As regards the doubtful “black parakeets” I was unable to identify them. The English *parakeet* was originally synonymous with *parrot*. This might be the intention, as there are no ‘black’ parakeets—i.e., in the modern sense: “any of numerous small to medium-sized, typically long-tailed and predominantly green parrots belonging to *Psittacula*, *Aratinga*, *Pyrrhura*, and other genera”—native to New Zealand, or anywhere else for that matter. There are light grey, brown, and black-capped parakeets, none of which are evoked by the adjective ‘black.’ The male *Pteridophora alberti* (discussed earlier) wears a jet-black cape over a marigold breastplate and is found in montane ecosystems, but his species is exclusive to New Guinea. Nabokov, “Perfection,” 347. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “parakeet, n.1,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/137448>.

¹⁵⁶ Nabokov, “Good Reader,” 1.

¹⁵⁷ This theme is not exclusive to classical literature. For the English Romantics, it is embodied in the idea of literary ‘fame,’ since the hero of the lyric is the poet. A Keats’ sonnet (composed in January 1818 and published posthumously) begins:

When I have fears that I may cease to be

Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-pilèd books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;

The grain image is an allusion to the Gospel of John: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Keats' resurrection and immortality is dependent on his poetry. The sonnet concludes antithetically: "[...] then on the shore/Of the wide world I stand alone, and think/Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink." Jumping ahead about forty-seven years, the anchoritic American Dickinson (aware that she will probably never know celebrity in her lifetime) also composes on this theme:

Fame is a bee.
It has a song—
It has a sting—
Ah, too, it has a wing.

The final note of the poem—"Ah, too"—expresses longing. The angelic resonance in "wing" suggests transcendence of a religious kind. For the modernists, this spiritual element persists. Consider Proust's conclusion to Bergotte's death: "They buried him, but all through that night of mourning, in the lighted shop-windows, his books, arranged three by three, kept vigil like angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection." There are more overt instances of the theme (at the end of *Time Regained*, Marcel quotes the 'corn of wheat' passage), but this is my favorite example.

Nabokov, who read these writers, wrote his own poem about fame, titled "Fame," originally composed in Russian and later translated by the author for *Poems and Problems* (1969). Here is a relevant quatrain:

To myself I appear as an idol, a wizard
bird-headed, emerald gloved, dressed in tights
made of bright-blue scales. I pass by. Reread it
and pause for a moment to ponder these lines.

The poet sees himself as a mythical entity: a combination of wizard, inverted sirin (a dangerous beast of Russian folklore, with the head of a lady and the body of a scaly bird), and medieval witch doctor. Notice the similarities to Ivanov's visual transformation. Following this vision, the poet declares:

Without body I've spread, without echo I thrive[...]

I admit the night has been ciphered right well
but in place of the stars I put letters,
and I've read in myself how the self to transcend—

As in "Perfection," the speaker of "Fame" experiences visual and spiritual transcendence. Jn. 12:24 KJV. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 5: The Captive & The Fugitive.*, trans. C.K Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.j. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 246. Vladimir Nabokov,

David (and maybe by some of the people who searched for him in the ocean) but not as a hero. His mundane prophecy at the beginning of the story is satisfied with an awful twist: David will certainly have nightmares about the man he killed. Thus, Ivanov's status in *his* world is tragic and unheroic. No bards or poets will sing his life, no history books will "make known his deeds among the peoples."¹⁵⁸ He was one whose name was writ in water. W.H. Auden describes two kinds of heroes in his essay "The Quest Hero": one whose "superior *arete* is manifest to all" and "[t]he other type, so common in fairy tales[...] whose *arete* is concealed."¹⁵⁹ ¹⁶⁰ Ivanov is an example of the latter type. But unlike the "youngest" and "weakest" boy who eventually proves his heroism and surprises everyone, Ivanov's virtue is discerned only by the Good Reader.¹⁶¹

Nabokov likens the work and relationship of writer and reader to two people climbing opposite faces of a mountain. The reader struggles with the text, losing their footing on loose stones, grasping at crumbling dirt, slipping two fingers into a crevice, reaching up, raising their leg, an arm, the right, the left. . . while the writer makes an equal effort on the other side. The reader and writer meet each other at the summit and "there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever."¹⁶²

Selected Poems, ed. Thomas Karshan, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nanokov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 107, 109.

¹⁵⁸ Ps. 105:1 KJV.

¹⁵⁹ W.H. Auden, "The Quest Hero," in *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Norte Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, June 1, 1968), 46.

¹⁶⁰ "Arete" is an Ancient Greek term that means "excellence" and, in a separate sense, "moral virtue." *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, 9 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), s.v. "ἀρετή."

¹⁶¹ Auden, "The Quest Hero," 46.

¹⁶² Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 2.

For readers of "Perfection," during that embrace the fog of irony lifts. In Ivanov's world, he will never be recognized as a hero. Yet, our memory is just as important as David's. We see Ivanov's metamorphosis into a mythic figure, a heroic archetype; we observe the fulfillment of his dreams, the answers to his questions, his transcendence. And we understand why he receives these rewards. Ivanov says that he has a "bad heart," but we know he doesn't.¹⁶³ He is courageous, compassionate, and capable of overcoming his shortcomings. He rises above his world, out of the page, and into the garden of our memory. We remove our reading glasses and see this.

¹⁶³ Nabokov, "Perfection," 347.

The Magician, the Witch, and the Dwarf

. . . to make the cell
A hero's world in which he is the hero
Man must become the hero of his world.

Wallace Stevens, *Montrachet-le-Jardin*

. . . the gigantic bulk of him
Grew strong, as if the doubt never touched his heart.
Of what was this the force? From what desire
And from what thinking did his radiance come?

Wallace Stevens, *Chocorua to Its Neighbor*

The climax of Nabokov's short story "The Potato Elf" (composed in 1929 in Berlin) is a circus dwarf's climax during intercourse with his best friend's wife. On first reading, the story might appear the tragicomic tale of a silly, insane dwarf, whose delusions doom him; however, I argue that the story should be read as a hero-narrative, sharing with "Perfection" the themes of transformation, transcendence, and imagination. In fact, I believe this story is superior to "Perfection" in its treatment of these themes and its overall structure. The ironic contrasts are starker, the play between the protagonist's personal reality and the reality of other people is closer to how this dichotomy appears in Nabokov's mature work, the third person cinematics are unmatched as far as Nabokov's short stories go (excepting "Signs and Symbols"), and on the whole, the story is more emotionally affecting than "Perfection" in my opinion.

Despite the merit of "The Potato Elf," commentary on the story is sparse. The few critics who analyze it find that the most compelling character is the cuckolded husband, a circus magician named Shock. Among these critics are Andrew Field, Marina Turkevich Naumann, and Walter Evans. To begin this chapter, I am concerned with

Evans' reading, since it is the most recent and takes a revisionary stance. He describes the critical terrain: "Andrew Field considers the story not merely a 'masterpiece' but Nabokov's 'greatest short story'; yet his description of the conjuror Shock as a 'sorrowful and even tragic figure' suggests that Field misinterprets that character's role in the story, picturing him much more as a victim of fate or of the potato elf [the dwarf] than Nabokov ever does. Marina Turkevich Naumann clearly errs in depicting Shock as a godlike presence exercising 'supernatural powers' over life and death[...] and in treating the piece primarily as a 'love story.'"¹⁶⁴ Evans goes on to say that these critics "seriously misunderstand the plot" and "miss Nabokov's point."¹⁶⁵ He implies their readings are "superficial," refers to Naumann's as "remarkably naive," insinuates they did not read the story "carefully," and concludes by dismissing their entire projects as "Nonsense."¹⁶⁶ These curmudgeonly and aggressive comments are especially disturbing when you realize that Evans' reading is wrong.

Contrary to Field and Naumann, Evans characterizes Shock as a Prospero-like mastermind who orchestrates most of the events in the story, including the affair. He asserts that Shock is "a figure of power and control," maneuvering his wife and the dwarf like pawns.¹⁶⁷ He portrays Shock as the story's representative artist, a kind of stand-in for the author: "For Nabokov, the artist is preeminently the one who orders or controls, who employs illusions intelligently to manipulate an audience for some

¹⁶⁴ Walter Evans, "The Conjuror in 'The Potato Elf,'" in *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life's Work*, ed. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1982), 75.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 76.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

purposeful effect. In the story Shock unambiguously earns his title of artist."¹⁶⁸ Shock's wife, Nora, on the other hand, is a one-dimensional villain: an insecure, spiteful woman, who resents the talented Shock because he is *better* than her. Better how? Better because he can play tricks on her; because he is a skilled conjurer who constantly exhibits his talent; because he is a Nabokovian artist; and above all, because Evans, who puts Shock on a pedestal, thinks so. I will argue these characterizations rely too heavily on Evans' Shock-knows-all theory, the wrongness of which I will address, and reduce Shock and Nora to wooden stock-figures: artist and evil wife.

Evans' interpretation focuses on the first six sections of the eight-section story. Here is a summary of the events in the sections. Shock finds the dwarf (his circus partner) in the street after the dwarf has been thrown out of a building for trying to kiss an acrobat. Shock says to the dwarf, "You'll sleep at my place tonight."¹⁶⁹ He brings him to his house, introduces him to Nora, gives him a room, and the dwarf goes to sleep. In the morning, Shock leaves the house "for an unknown destination."¹⁷⁰ Nora and the dwarf talk, at which point Nora has a "vindictive vision" and decides to sleep with the dwarf.¹⁷¹ They sleep together and the dwarf leaves. After wandering the streets of London, the dwarf enters a "familiar restaurant" where he spots Shock.¹⁷² The dwarf tries to tell Shock about the affair, but Shock doesn't seem to be listening, so the dwarf gives up. Shock leaves the restaurant and returns home. Nora and Shock eat together at the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 231.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 233.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 234.

¹⁷² Ibid., 235.

kitchen table. Shock takes out a "vial" and drops mysterious liquid into his wine.¹⁷³ Shock drinks the glass in "one gulp."¹⁷⁴ Nora is excited by her secret and feels she now has power over her husband: "With grim pleasure she thought, Ah, if you only knew. You'll never find out. That's my power!"¹⁷⁵ Shock talks about his day. Then he stands up, tells her he just drank poison, and reveals that he knows about the affair. Nora thinks he is playing a trick. She yells at him: "You repel me, oh, you're a laughingstock with your unsuccessful tricks—" ¹⁷⁶ Shock goes into his room and lies down on the bed. Nora approaches him and studies his face. Oh no! He really does appear to be dying! Nora suddenly realizes her true feelings: "At that instant Nora knew that she loved him more than anything in the world. Horror and pity overwhelmed her."¹⁷⁷ She gets hysterical, runs out of the room, calls the doctor, runs back, and finds her husband standing at the mirror, adjusting his tie. It was a trick, after all.

Evans claims that Shock knows all this is going to happen when he decides to bring the dwarf home. However, in his otherwise comprehensive analysis, Evans neglects a crucial passage in the scene when the dwarf encounters Shock in the restaurant. The dwarf, having decided to tell his friend about the affair, approaches Shock. The magician greets him and begins telling a story. The dwarf tries to interrupt: "I say, Shock—[...] The fact is. . . Be brave, Shock. I love your wife. This morning, after you left, she and I, we two, I mean, she—" but Shock cuts him off, as if he did not hear,

¹⁷³ Ibid., 238.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 239.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 240.

and continues his story.¹⁷⁸ Once finished, the magician chuckles "softly at his own thoughts," and asks: "Were you about to tell me something my little friend?"¹⁷⁹ The dwarf responds defeatedly: "No, no, nothing. . . . One can't talk to you."¹⁸⁰ The question is not whether Shock hears and understands what the dwarf is trying to tell him. He does. Evans' novel notion is that the affair is not news to the magician. But the following passage derails this interpretation:

Shock's hand stretched out—no doubt he intended to snip out a coin from Fred's ear—but for the first time in years of masterly magic, the coin, not grasped by the palm muscles firmly enough, fell out the wrong way. He caught it up and rose.

"I'm not going to eat here," said he, examining curiously the crown of the dwarf's head. "I don't care for this place."¹⁸¹

Those who read this passage as anything more than a trivial detail know that Shock has just learned his wife betrayed him. Is it a coincidence that Shock botches this simple trick—which the dwarf in all his years of knowing him has never once seen him flub—*now*? Evans tells us with a flourish of his wand, "It's much easier to believe that here as throughout the story Shock has anticipated the other's action, remains perfectly in control, and is carefully creating precisely the effect he desires"—but we do not need to believe anything.¹⁸² There is no ambiguity. Clearly, Shock is *not* "perfectly in control."¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 237.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Evans, "The Conjurer in 'The Potato Elf,'" 78.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Evans' portrayal of Shock and Nora largely depends on his misreading. He says that Shock's magic has an "almost divine benevolence," while Nora and the dwarf are his manipulatees.¹⁸⁴ The truth is Nora and Shock are engaged in a game of deception, and the playing field is more even than Evans thinks. Of course, a distinction should be drawn between the two characters' abilities. Nora's deception is merely a lie, while Shock's trick artfully shocks Nora into recognizing how much she loves him. One is egocentric, the other is a formal experience involving a recipient. Evans' emphatic mention of Nora's maliciousness, however, implies a moral dimension to Shock's superiority. It is true that Nora's deception is "vindictive" and gives her the air of an evil witch—"Nora awaited him most impatiently, quivering with evil glee"—but Shock's trick, which causes Nora to break into a "storm of tears," is not without its cruelty.¹⁸⁵

Furthermore, Evans' account of the reason for Nora's actions is simplistic: "she imagines the secret of her adultery will for the first time give her power over the superior husband she has begun to resent almost to the point of hatred."¹⁸⁶ Is Shock's superiority the only explanation for Nora's resentment? No. Nora is more complex and sympathetic than that: "It is hard to be happy when one's husband is a mirage, a peripatetic legerdemain of a man, a deception of all five senses."¹⁸⁷ Later, the wife expresses this feeling again: "she despised him furiously, that he was not a person, but a phantom of rubber, that she could not bear to live with him any longer[...]"¹⁸⁸ These complaints are consistent with descriptions of Shock throughout the story: "dreamy smile" (pg. 228); "slender, pale"

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸⁵ Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," 234, 238, 240

¹⁸⁶ Evans, "The Conjurer in 'The Potato Elf,'" 78.

¹⁸⁷ Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," 232.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 239.

(pg. 229); "ethereal hands" (pg. 229); "translucent fingers" (pg. 231); "unreal and shifty" (pg. 231); "ghost-gray eyes" (pg. 232); "absentmindedly became engaged to her" (pg. 232); "an abstract smile" (pg. 233); "transparent fingers" (pg. 236); "ethereal hand" (pg. 236); "ghostly eyes" (pg. 237); "elusive" (pg. 238); "As usual, he kept looking not directly at her, but a little above her" (pg. 239); "absentminded" (pg. 240); "transparent fingertips" (pg. 240).¹⁸⁹ Shock is limpid and evasive. He stands at stage left or stage right—but never in the center. The reader has no access to his thoughts and cannot be sure of what he feels or desires. He does not look at Nora when he speaks to her or when she speaks to him. He is "absentminded" with her.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, he married her "absentmindedly."¹⁹¹ Clearly Shock isn't present for his wife: "actually he never seemed to notice his wife, as he was always engaged in imagining secret devices for his show."¹⁹² Yet, Shock enjoys harassing her with meaningless acts of deception: "Nora had to be constantly on the lookout, since he never missed the occasion to contrive some small, inutile, yet subtly artful deception."¹⁹³ As Evans suggests, Shock's nonutilitarian magic is artistic. But it is also bullyish. Can we really consider him superior to Nora?

Shock and Nora are more similar than Evans admits. In the description of Nora's appearance, we find a visual resemblance between the two characters:

She was a lady of uncertain age, with dark eyes which had a yellowish tinge around the iris. Her skinny frame, parchment complexion, lifeless black hair, a habit of strongly exhaling tobacco smoke through her nostrils,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 228-9, 231-3, 236-40.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 240.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 232.

¹⁹² Ibid., 231.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

the studied untidiness of her attire and hairdo—all this could hardly attract many men, but no doubt, was to Mr. Shock's liking[...]"¹⁹⁴

The adjectives "uncertain," "skinny," "parchment," and "lifeless" evoke a spectral character.¹⁹⁵ Like Shock, Nora is thin, pale, smoky, and though not "transparent," has an analogous "ghostly" quality.¹⁹⁶ These features are "to Mr. Shock's liking" because he shares them.¹⁹⁷ Nora and Shock are linked both by their capacity for deception and by their phantasmal appearance. Naturally, the spectral qualities of the more artful deceiver are more pronounced. For Nabokov, our world is full of deception. The butterfly intimidates the predator with blotches resembling large eyes on its wings; the white polar bear stalks its prey in the arctic snow. Deception masks and camouflages. It allows the deceiver to influence others behind a shroud. In Shock and Nora's case, deception also seems to abstract them from their humanity. They appear pale, lifeless, and unreal.

Yet, Shock and Nora are not feelingless phantoms. Shock is pained and angry when he learns of his wife's betrayal and at several points exhibits tenderness toward the dwarf. He brings his little partner home out of pity, and later generously pretends not to hear the dwarf's confession. Nora's warmth is even more explicit. When she first meets the dwarf, she shows her motherly side: "And Nora, kindhearted as childless women frequently are, felt such an especial pity that she almost broke into tears. She proceeded to mother the dwarf, she fed him, gave him a glass of port, rubbed his

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 236-7.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 231.

forehead with eau de cologne, moistened with it his temples and the infantine hollows behind his ears."¹⁹⁸ The next day, before she sleeps with the dwarf, she asks him to tell her "about his existence":¹⁹⁹

[...] he spoke slowly, choosing his words, and, strange to say, that unforeseen dignity of diction became him. Bent-headed, solemn, and elastically tense, he sat sideways at Nora's feet. She reclined on the plush divan, her arms thrown back, revealing her sharp bare elbows. The dwarf, having finished his tale, lapsed into silence but still kept turning this way and that the palm of his tiny hand, as if softly continuing to speak. His black jacket, inclined face, fleshy little nose, tawny hair, and that middle parting reaching the back of his head vaguely moved Nora's heart.²⁰⁰

All the characters in the story physically look down at the dwarf. Often, they figuratively look down at him as well. In section 2, "sister acrobats" laugh at the dwarf's ridiculous, lustful advances, and their French partner, "without any resentment," throws him out of the building "like a monkey."²⁰¹ These normal-sized people don't take the dwarf seriously. He is an animal, an alien, an object. What does he see, think, or feel? The acrobats are indifferent; their opinions and judgements are the standard, their reality the norm; the dwarf is just a freak. Nora, on the other hand, shows interest in the dwarf's "perspective." She recognizes that the dwarf *has* an "existence" which can be accessed only through his articulating it.²⁰² We do not hear what the dwarf says. Rather, Nora's reaction directs our imagination. The dwarf's enchanting account of his existence moves and attracts her, as if pulling her toward another world. Both Shock and Nora see

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 233.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 233-4.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 230-1

²⁰² Ibid., 233.

the dwarf as a human being worthy of pity and interest. In this way, they are detached from the normal reality of the acrobats.

By focusing on the magician, critics have paid the story's protagonist less attention than he deserves. Evans holds that the dwarf lives in an "illusion" developed by Shock: "Illusion showers [the dwarf] with benefits life otherwise denies him."²⁰³ "Delusion" might be a more accurate substitute since we have established that Shock develops less than Evans suggests. Regardless, these terms are reductive when we consider the idea of existence. "Existence" means more than a mode of perception; it refers to "The fact[...] of [...] having objective reality; *being*" (emphasis mine).²⁰⁴ Let us turn to the dwarf's existence.

The dwarf is a circus performer named Fred Dobson. His stage name, given to him by his manager, is "the Potato Elf."²⁰⁵ He is "twenty, and weigh[s] less than fifty pounds," but is "extremely well built" for his size.²⁰⁶ Notice the juxtaposition with "slim" Shock and Nora's "skinny frame."²⁰⁷ His yellow hair is "evenly parted by a line which [runs] up the exact middle of his head to conclude a cunning agreement with its crown."²⁰⁸ This "crown" is one of the features that moves Nora—"that middle parting reaching the back of his head"—and is mentioned again when Shock examines "curiously the crown of the

²⁰³ Evans, "The Conjuror in 'The Potato Elf,'" 80.

²⁰⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2021) s.v. "Existence, n.1.a.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/66262>.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 231-2

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

dwarf's head" in the restaurant scene.²⁰⁹ For his performances, Fred travels around Europe to various circuses. In a Dutch circus, he "became greatly attached to a miniature pony Snowdrop"; in Wien, "he conquered the heart of a stupid and glum giant."²¹⁰ His best friend is the talented conjurer Shock. These details—the monikers, the crown, the pony, the conquering of a giant, the magician partner—evoke a fairy-tale figure.

Nabokov says that all great works of fiction "are great fairy tales."²¹¹ Is "The Potato Elf" a fairy-tale? As with "Perfection," irony permeates Fred's connection to the fairy-tale hero. The "comic epithet" *potato* sunders the fairy-tale link in the same breath as it's formed; the crown is just Fred's hair part; his steed is a miniature pony; he conquers the giant by "stretching up to him the first time he saw him and pleading like an infant to be taken up in Nurse's arms"; and Shock is merely a fellow circus performer.²¹² Furthermore, like Ivanov, Fred is a social outcast. He is a literal clown and a physical anomaly: "The Potato Elf, by his sole aspect, aroused a storm of applause and laughter throughout England, and then in the main cities of the continent."²¹³ Compared to Shock and Nora, and to Ivanov for that matter, the dwarf is uncomfortably conspicuous.

Fred forms a mental barrier between himself and the laughing audience. On the stage, he seems only partially aware of their presence: "The world was invisible to him. There remained in his memory the same faceless abyss laughing at him, and afterwards,

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 233, 237.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 229.

²¹¹ Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 2.

²¹² Ibid., 228-9

²¹³ Ibid., 229.

when the performance was over, the soft, dreamy echo of a cool night that seems of such a deep blue when you leave the theater."²¹⁴ The passage can be read as a condition particular to Fred's time on the stage—i.e., the world becomes invisible when he is performing—but a more accurate reading takes this as a general statement. "The world" is reality, and belongs to the "laughing" audience, the masses, normal people.²¹⁵ When Fred stands on the stage, he comes face to face with reality, which he sees as an inhuman "abyss."²¹⁶ The image recalls the opening of *Speak, Memory*: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness."²¹⁷ In *Speak, Memory*, the abyss represents the nothingness after death.²¹⁸ This association is here as well. Two forms of reality are

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 19.

²¹⁸ The opening sentence of *Speak, Memory* is a kind of red herring, a magician's diversion, for Nabokov does not agree with this commonsensical conceit. (Cf. Carlyle: "One Life; a little gleam of Time between two Eternities"). Vladimir E. Alexandrov's study, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, which was probably the most read book-length work of Nabokovian criticism when it was published in 1991, gives an account of Nabokov's belief in a transcendent afterlife. The study is based on remarks made by Vera Nabokov in a preface to the posthumous collection of poems, *Stikhi*. Alexandrov says that "Vera Nabokov calls 'potustoronnost' Nabokov's 'main theme,' and stresses that although it 'saturates everything he wrote,' it does not appear to have been noted by anyone." Alexandrov translates the Russian *potustoronnost* as *otherworld* and declares that in 1991 what Vera said is still true: this theme has not been investigated. Actually, as Brian Boyd points out in his review of Alexandrov's book, several critics had already discussed the theme; Boyd cites "William Woodin Rowe's crude Nabokov's Spectral Dimension (1981), [and] superb books by Sergei Davydov (1982), D. Barton Johnson (1985), and Pekka Tammi (1985)"; with annoyance, he also mentions his "own doctoral dissertation, submitted in January 1979." Boyd could have included Ellen Pifer in his list, who translates *potustoronnost* as *hereafter*. Alexandrov's definition of the otherworld is essentially a paraphrase of a passage from Chapter Two of Nabokov's memoir, *Speak, Memory*, where the author describes his mother's beliefs:

distinguished: the reality of the audience and the "dreamy" plane of existence Fred returns to when he exits the theater. In reality, the audience sees Fred as a hilarious freak. In Fred's reality, Fred sees the audience as a dangerous void. To differentiate, I will refer to the former as *Reality* and the latter as *Fairyland*.

In Fairyland, Fred's life goes "round and round with smooth monotony."²¹⁹ He travels to a circus, gets on stage, performs, then gets off. Repeat. What Fred considers a remarkable break from this routine might sadden or amuse the reader, depending on her sensibility: "One day in the dark of the wings, he tripped over a bucket of house paint and mellowly plopped into it—an occurrence he kept recalling for quite a long while as something out of the ordinary."²²⁰ When Fred meets Nora, the circle breaks, and a tale is set in motion. In the style of the romantic ballad, Nora and Fred engage in amorous congress, knock boots, share the bed, shake the sheets, bake the potato: "And all at once, in some absurd and intoxicating way, everything came into motion."²²¹ Nora

She found a deep appeal in the moral and poetical side of the Gospels, but felt no need in the support of any dogma. The appalling insecurity of an afterlife and its lack of privacy did not enter her thoughts. Her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life. All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour.

This faith in "another world" can be seen in many of Nabokov's heroes. Pnin, for instance, shares a similar belief: "He did not believe in an autocratic God. He did believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts. The souls of the dead, perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended to the destinies of the quick." Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 39. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 3-4. Brian Boyd, "Review: Nabokov's Otherworld by Vladimir E. Alexandrov," *Modern Studies* 38, no. 2 (1992): 474-5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26284175>. Nabokov, *Pnin*, 136.

²¹⁹ Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," 229.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 234.

enters Fairyland and impregnates Fred's imagination; his life begins to spiral."²²² When she leaves in section 5, an idealized version of her remains:

He now felt so sorry for the poor magician that, at first, he decided to conceal everything; but then it occurred to him that Nora could not cheat anyway and would probably tell her husband that very evening ("I've fallen in love with Mr. Dobson. . . . I'm leaving you")—and that she should be spared a difficult, disagreeable confession, for was he not her knight, did he not feel proud of her love, should he not, therefore, be justified in causing her husband pain, no matter the pity?²²³

When we consider how Nora really views Fred—"The dwarf was a nasty little worm"—his thinking here might make it difficult for us to see him as anything more than a pitiable or laughable personality.²²⁴ Fred's gullibility, however, is not a shortcoming. There is evidence to suggest that devoting oneself to an unworthy woman is a Nabokovian virtue. Consider, for instance, Pnin's love of Liza: "You, Lise, are surrounded by poets, scientists, artists, dandies[...] And here I am, daring to write to you. I am not handsome, I am not interesting, I am not talented. I am not even rich. But, Lise, I offer you everything I have, to the last blood corpuscle, to the last tear, everything."²²⁵ Based on her actions and the narrator's portrayal of her, Liza is a shallow lady and morally inferior to Pnin. Yet Pnin sees something in her, though we cannot be sure what that is. Fred's love for Nora, who is at once crueler and more compassionate than Liza, can be compared to Pnin's love. Both characters are blinded by their feelings, but how else are we to imagine true love? Furthermore, why should we privilege Reality

²²² Ibid., 229

²²³ Ibid., 236

²²⁴ Ibid., 238

²²⁵ Nabokov, "Pnin," 183.

over Fairyland? If we maintain that the reality of Fairyland is just as valid as the reality of Reality—in which Fred is *not* Nora's knight—then Fred is demonstrating virtue by acting according to Fairyland's codes of conduct. His pity for Shock and love for Nora are authentic; and unlike the deceptive couple, he chooses to be honest with his friend.

In sections 4 and 5, directly before and after the sexual encounter, Fred's perspective, related by third-person limited narration, is full of images of light: "in the distance an attic window was thrown open, and its pane caught a glint of *sunshine*" (pg. 233); "*Sunlight* was beginning to infuse the mist over London's soft wilderness" (pg. 233); "wearing a kimono embroidered with *sunflowers*, appeared Mrs. Shock" (pg. 233); "the glossy pillar boxes *glowed crimson*" (pg. 234); "the entire city *shimmered*" (pg. 234); "the broad smooth street, flooded with *sunlight*" (pg. 235); "a *dazzling glitter*" (pg. 235); "all that motion and *glitter* dazed him" (pg. 235) (emphases mine).²²⁶ The light-motif contrasts with the darkness, haziness, transparency, and gloominess that surrounds Shock and Nora. Consider the shift of imagery in the opening line of section 6, in which the narrative voice centers on Nora: "London was cautiously *darkening*[...] The *black* leaves of the limes in the park were patterned against the *transparent* sky like aces of spades. At this or that turning, or between the *funereal silhouettes* of twin towers, a burning *sunset* was revealed like a vision" (emphases mine).²²⁷ Night falls on the cruel deceivers; but before that, the sun rises in benevolent Fairyland. In sections 4 and 5, notice the verbs of motion among the descriptions of light—"beginning," "appeared," "flooded," "all that motion"—and the pre-code description of Fred and

²²⁶ Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," 233-5.

²²⁷ Ibid., 238.

Nora's sex: "everything came into motion."²²⁸ Fred has woken up from his dreamy cyclical existence. He moves forward, walking the London streets. The city is "lovely," and the sky is "tender."²²⁹ A new sense of "liberation and lightness" overwhelms him.²³⁰ He is the Prince of Faerie and Nora is his princess: "The Potato Elf came out on the broad smooth street, flooded with sunlight, and instantly knew that the whole city had been created for him and only for him."²³¹ Like the fairy-tale hero, Fred is at once the most important person in his world and a character in a fiction created by an author. In Fred's case, he is a character in a fiction within a fiction since Fairyland, contrary to Evans' reading, is *his* creation.

The sunlight seems to enhance Fairyland's fairy-tale features; yet there are signs of Fairyland's distinction from Reality buried in these details. Passing cars are described as "Gobelin green."²³² "Gobelin" is a compound noun, often used with "tapestry" or "carpet": "a tapestry [or carpet] made at the Gobelins factory in Paris, typically characterized by a fine level of detail."²³³ The word (used as an adjective here) simultaneously evokes the fairy-tale monster, "goblin," and well-wrought artificiality. Fred's liberation takes place within the confines of his imaginative space. He experiences an ample "sensation of freedom, pride, and happiness," but at the same time is nagged by "the laughing eyes" of people passing him in the street. Reality is at

²²⁸ Ibid., 233, 235.

²²⁹ Ibid., 234.

²³⁰ Ibid., 235.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 234.

²³³ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2021) s.v. "Gobelin, n.I.1.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79605>.

war with Fairyland, and Fred cannot let it gain any ground.²³⁴ He quickly retreats into a restaurant full of fellow circus performers—a tavern of freaks.

In section 7, however, Reality catches up to Fred. He receives a letter from Nora "with a dragon-shaped water mark": "*All this, I am afraid, is an awful misunderstanding.*"²³⁵ Fleeing the dragon of Reality, Fred moves to a "tiny town in the north of England" called "Drowse."²³⁶ The town's name is fitting: "[the town] looked, indeed, so somnolent that one suspected it might have been somehow mislaid among those misty, gentle-sloped fields where it had fallen asleep forever[...]" "twilight at Drowse was particularly blurry and blue, softening every outline."²³⁷ Instead of being woken up by the realization that Nora is not his princess, Fred goes back to sleep, returning to the dreamy night outside the theater. And he will not enter the theater again. He gives up his life as a performer and hides from all reminders of Reality.

At first, the "Drowsians" gossip about the mysterious stranger, who hardly leaves his house; but eventually people forget about him:²³⁸

Mr. Dobson, apparently, never went out. The housekeeper, a large stern woman, who had formerly been employed in an insane asylum, would answer the casual questions of neighbors by explaining that Mr. Dobson was an aged paralytic doomed to vegetate in curtained silence. No wonder the inhabitants forgot him the same year that he arrived in Drowse: he became an unnoticeable presence whom people took for granted as they did the unknown bishop whose stone effigy had been standing so long in its niche above the church portal. The mysterious old man was thought to

²³⁴ Ibid., 235.

²³⁵ Ibid., 242.

²³⁶ Ibid., 240.

²³⁷ Ibid., 240-1.

²³⁸ Ibid., 241.

have a grandchild—a quiet fair-haired little boy who sometimes, at dusk, used to come out of the Dobson cottage with small, timid steps.²³⁹

The housekeeper, who has traded her position at one asylum for another, protects Fred by telling everyone that he is a "paralytic."²⁴⁰ Her crafty prophecy, however—"doomed to vegetate in curtained silence"—is certainly a possible conclusion to Fred's story.

Remaining behind his curtain, Fred becomes invisible to the townspeople.²⁴¹ The grandchild, of course, is Fred himself, dressed in "an admirably made wig."²⁴² The deception succeeds and Fred stays far from the laughing crowd in the privacy of his house. Eventually, he begins "to forget" Nora and growing "fond of the coziness he had never known before," finds a more comfortable cyclical existence than the one he had as a performer: "He lived peacefully and inconspicuously in his three rooms, subscribed to a circulating library at the rate of three or four books (mostly novels) per week[...]."²⁴³ On a wall of his house hangs a "print" of "a St. Bernard dog, complete with barrelet, reviving a mountaineer on his bleak rock."²⁴⁴ The print, which Fred finds consoling, is an image of salvation, the spiritual element of which is emphasized by the Saint Bernard. Though Fred has successfully escaped Reality, his status in Fairyland has dropped: "The Potato Elf started to go bald at the very beginning of his new existence, and his head was soon[...] smooth and glossy."²⁴⁵ Fred's crown is gone. He is no longer a prince. On top of

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 242.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 241.

that, he has developed a heart condition: "It was then [after reading Nora's letter] that the first attack of angina pectoris occurred."²⁴⁶ Like Ivanov, the loss of a love has injured Fred's heart, figuratively and literally.

Section 8 of the story relates the events of a single Sunday morning eight years later. The section is full of fairytale tropes. Fred wears a dressing gown clasped with "yellow frogs," evoking the Brothers Grimm's frog prince as well as the theme of transformation; his doctor, who visits him to play chess, is named "Knight"; and when Fred hears his doorbell, he loses "one slipper" like Cinderella as he runs into "the inner rooms" to hide (again: the theme of transformation).²⁴⁷ The sunlight motif returns with the mysterious visitor: "Sunlight poured in. A tall lady all in black stood on the threshold."²⁴⁸ The lady in black enters the house without being let in. Fred, unaware of who she is and afraid of being exposed as a dwarf, tries to hide: "He retreated to the bedroom; wanted to lock himself up, but there was no key" (233-4).²⁴⁹ Then he hears the visitor call out—"Fred, why are you afraid of me?"—and recognizes Nora's voice.

Fred emerges from the bedroom and confronts the woman he once loved. Nora, whose husband isn't the only one with the power to shock, wastes no time in telling Fred that she had a son by him:

The dwarf froze, his gaze fixing a miniscule casement burning on the side of a dark blue cup. A timid smile of amazement flashed at the corners of his lips, then it spread and lit up his cheeks with a purplish flush.

"My . . . son . . ."

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 242.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 243

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 243-4.

And all at once he understood everything, all the meaning of life, of his anguish, of the little bright window upon the cup.²⁵⁰

The news of a child regenerates Fairytale and wakes Fred from his drowse. Like that remarkable paint bucket Fred plopped into, the empty blue cup is filled with sunlight. Fred's sudden understanding of "the meaning of life" can be compared to Ivanov's epiphanic experience on the beach.²⁵¹ Yet, where Ivanov turns to face an alien, beautiful world, seeing it clearly through his glass pane, Fred is still very much grounded in Fairyland. The real reason Nora visited Fred was not to give him this happy news, as he assumes, but to look a last time at her child through his father's resemblance: "Nora took him by the shoulders, turned him to the light, and with eager, sad eyes examined his features."²⁵² In Reality, their boy is dead.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Nora begins crying. Fred misunderstands, thinking she is afraid he will take the child from her: "He dashed up to her, he remembered a novel read a short while ago: 'You have no cause,' said Mr. Dobson, 'no cause whatever for fearing that I may take him away from you. I am so happy!'"²⁵³ Like Don Quixote, Fred mistakes literature for real life, or vice versa. Nora, pitying "the tender and joyful radiance with which the dwarf's countenance breathed," decides to deceive Fred once more. Fred asks if the boy is a dwarf like him. Allowing Fred to believe the child is still alive, Nora responds, "Oh, on the contrary[...] A big boy, like all boys," and says that she will arrange a meeting someday. Then she tells Fred that she has a train to catch, goes to

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 245.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid., 244.

²⁵³ Ibid., 245.

the doorway, and before leaving, turns to examine the "Sunlight" on Fred's "bald head."²⁵⁴ The potato elf has a new crown.

When Nora leaves, Fred's imagination begins working:

After she had gone, Fred remained standing for a long time in the hallway, as if afraid to spill his full heart with an imprudent movement. He kept trying to imagine his son, and all he could do was to imagine his own self dressed as a schoolboy and wearing a little blond wig. And by the act of transferring his own aspect onto his boy, he ceased to feel that he was a dwarf.

He saw himself entering a house, a hotel, a restaurant, to meet his son. In fancy, he stroked the boy's fair hair with poignant parental pride. . . . And then, with his son and Nora (silly goose—to fear he would snatch him away!), he saw himself walking down a street, and there—²⁵⁵

Fred's bucket, or cup, or heart is "full" again.²⁵⁶ In the process of trying to imagine his son, conjuring the child in his mind like a magician, Fred recreates and transcends himself. His mental "act of transferring his own aspect onto his boy" is foreshadowed by his dressing up as a child. The difference is that this mental act is not an act of deception. In an imaginative leap, he exits his dwarf body and from an incorporeal perspective, comparable to the position of an author, sees the meeting that cannot take place in Reality. In Fred's imaginary space, he touches the son he will never touch, stroking "the boy's fair hair."²⁵⁷ The adjective "poignant" enhances the sensuousity of the event.²⁵⁸ The image of himself, Nora, and the boy walking down the street suggests that Fred might believe in the possibility of a future with Nora again.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 246.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

The theme of transcendence continues in the next paragraph:

Fred clapped his thighs. He had forgotten to ask Nora where and how he could reach her!

Here commenced a crazy, absurd sort of phase. He rushed to his bedroom, began to dress in a wild hurry. He put on the best things he had, an expensive starched shirt, practically new, striped trousers, a jacket made by Resartre of Paris years ago—and as he dressed, he kept chuckling, and breaking his fingernails in the chinks of tight commode drawers, and had to sit down once or twice to let his swelling and knocking heart rest; and again he went skipping about the room looking for the bowler he had not worn for years, and at last, on consulting a mirror in passing, he glimpsed the image of a stately elderly gentleman, in smart formal dress, and ran down the steps of the porch, dazzled by a new idea: to travel back with Nora—whom he would certainly manage to overtake—and to see his son that very evening!²⁵⁹

Fred's vision of himself in the mirror echoes Ivanov's visual transformation (shabby clothes becoming a heroic cloak) at the end of "Perfection." Unlike Fred's previous instance of transcendence, which took place in his mind ("In fancy"), here Fred's vision is in an *actual* mirror.²⁶⁰ He does not "feel" that he is a gentleman or see himself "as" a gentleman. Rather, the "stately elderly gentleman, in smart formal dress" appears as an "image" modified by an indefinite article.²⁶¹ Fred is distanced from the man in the mirror; he sees the gentleman as an Other. Nabokov's technique here is reminiscent of Joyce's in the banister scene in "The Dead" (1914). Gabriel Conroy, the story's protagonist, gazes "up the staircase": "A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also."²⁶² Two sentences later it is revealed that the lady is Gretta

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² James Joyce, "The Dead," in *A Portrait of the Author as a Young Man and Dubliners* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 402.

Conroy, Gabriel's wife. The effect in both cases is the reader's sense of a character perceiving the familiar with eyes cleansed of memory and imagination, so that the perceived appears, momentarily, unfamiliar. Interestingly, this technique can only be pulled off in third-person narration. Gabriel sees Gretta as if for the first time, and Fred glimpses another world in the mirror, beyond Reality and Fairyland. Perhaps this passage has, in a way, a more direct likeness to Ivanov's recognition of the alien world, since the image of the gentleman seems to have a kind of objectivity that can't be found anywhere else in the story.

When the Drowsians notice the dwarf running down the street, they see the opposite of a stately gentleman:

A broad dusty road led straight to the station. It was more or less deserted on Sundays—but unexpectedly a boy with a cricket bat appeared at a corner[...]

And instantly, from God knows where, more boys appeared, and with gaping stealthiness started to follow the dwarf. He walked faster and faster, now and then looking at his watch, and chuckling excitedly. The sun made him feel a little queasy. Meanwhile, the number of boys increased, and chance passersby stopped to look in wonder. Somewhere afar church chimes rang forth: the drowsy town was coming to life—and all of a sudden it burst into uncontrollable laughter.²⁶³

Fred, his pace quickening—"faster and faster"—as the unexpected audience grows larger and louder, resembles a persecuted person running from a lynch mob.²⁶⁴ But he doesn't pay the mob any attention. In fact, as the town bursts into "uncontrollable laughter," Fred chuckles to himself "excitedly."²⁶⁵ The "watch" and the "church chimes" add a sense

²⁶³ Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," 246.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

of gravity, a momentousness to the scene. Reality and Fairyland clash; unlike previous instances though, our hero is unafraid of the laughter. It is surprisingly the sun, the symbol of Fred's imagination, that seems to injure him: "The sun made him feel a little queasy."²⁶⁶ The dwarf continues on:

The Potato Elf, unable to master his eagerness, switched to a jog. One of the lads darted in front of him to have a look at his face; another yelled something in a rude hoarse voice. Fred, grimacing because of the dust, ran on, and abruptly it seemed to him that all those boys crowding in his wake were his sons, merry, rosy, well-built sons—and he smiled a bewildered smile as he trotted along, puffing and trying to forget the heart breaking his chest with a burning ram.²⁶⁷

The return of the name The Potato Elf, which juxtaposes the comic and the fairy-
talesque, emphasizes that juxtaposition here. Which force is stronger: the Potato or the Elf; Reality or Fairyland; the chasing audience or fleeing Fred? Does the moniker's mythic ring immortalize Fred as a clown? The questions that readers face throughout the text are dramatized in this scene. Reality's cruelty becomes evident: "another yelled something in a rude hoarse voice."²⁶⁸ In the next sentence, Fred grimaces "because of the dust," but from our perspective we also see that the grimace is connected to the blow dealt by the rude voice. Fred summons up a defense, like a magic shield, imagining the boys are "his sons, merry, rosy, well-built."²⁶⁹ Yet, we know that Fred is nearing Nora, who has the power to shatter his imagination for good. The adjective "bewildered" is especially fitting; its precise definition is "Lost in pathless places, at a loss for one's

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 246-7

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 246.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 247.

way."²⁷⁰ Poor Fred flees toward what he believes is his one hope of salvation, a meaningful life with his son and Nora, but alas, Reality surrounds him: the audience on one side, Nora on the other. Yet, Fred is happy. His heart, as if it has grown too big for his little body, begins breaking his chest.

Fred reaches Nora:

Fred was beginning to stumble, there was a singing in his ears, the front stud of his collar dug into his throat, he could not breath. Moans of mirth, shouts, the tramping of feet deafened him. Then through the fog of sweat he saw at last her black dress. She was slowly walking along a brick wall in a torrent of sun. She looked back, she stopped. The dwarf reached her and clutched at the folds of her skirt.

With a smile of happiness he glanced up at her, attempted to speak, but instead raised his eyebrows in surprise and collapsed in slow motion on the sidewalk. All around people noisily swarmed.²⁷¹

Fred is dead. Evans' reading of the conclusion—"Nabokov dramatically ascribes the potato elf's death[...] to a surfeit of reality"—is shrewd and useful.²⁷² But to strain the Reality vs. Fairyland conceit, this reading would mean that Reality overwhelms Fred's private imaginative space and wins out in the end; it would mean Fred's death is essentially tragic. But does Nabokov really ascribe Fred's demise to Reality? Consider the three intimations of Fred's impending death in the running sequence: "The sun made him feel a little queasy"; "the heart breaking his chest with a burning ram"; and "a torrent of sun."²⁷³ These lines link Fred's full heart and sunny imagination to his death. Could it be that death is a happy ending, or at least the happiest ending possible for

²⁷⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2021) s.v. "Bewildered, adj.1.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/18466>.

²⁷¹ Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," 247.

²⁷² Evans, "The Conjurer in 'The Potato Elf,'" 80.

²⁷³ Nabokov, "The Potato Elf," 246-7.

Fred? After all, the potato elf probably would have learned the truth had he talked to Nora; his death saves him from that. If we compare Fred's Fairyland to Ivanov's glass pane, and his running after Nora, while knowing he has a bad heart, to Ivanov's heroic feats, then this conclusion should be read differently; Fred's imagination triumphs over the laughing audience and frees him once and for all from Reality. Both Ivanov and Fred occupy limited spaces which they furnish with their imaginations, and for both, death is the only way to fully transcend these spaces.

We emerge from the theater into the open air, a chilly night. The moon is full and bright. We experience an acute feeling of *déjà vu*. As we observe our breath appear and disappear in the moonlight, the story begins to revolve in our mind.

Some readers might be tempted to join the laughing audience, to mirthfully cringe at Fred's fantasies and chuckle at his pride. Others might read the "The Potato Elf" as a "crude and cruel" story, like *Don Quixote* in Nabokov's characterization.²⁷⁴ But the Good Reader realizes that the story is a fairy-tale, and an affirmation of interiority and a testament to the power of storytelling, even if Fred's reality is a self-deception. Fred's imagination enlarges him; his imaginative leaps, rather than being forms of delusion, are his only mode of survival. Fred is certainly a quixotic character; but in "The Potato Elf" the negative connotations of "quixotic" are erased.

Nora, Shock, and Fred, in their ways, all have an artistic sense. None of them are confined to Reality. Nora and Shock are the only characters in the story, besides the housekeeper and Doctor Knight, who see Fred as more than a circus dwarf. As

²⁷⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Don Quixote* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983), xiii.

characters with a capacity for deception, they operate above, or to the side, or perhaps beneath Reality. They are deceivers; but they are not creators. Only Fred is comparable to Nabokov's definition of the artist:

But the real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib, that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself. The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says "go!"²⁷⁵

Fred creates chivalric values and finds the potentiality of fiction in his affair with Nora. The difference between Fred and "the real writer" is that Fred is not aware of creating anything; he is the man asleep, modeling himself.²⁷⁶ Fred is the writer of his *own* fairy-tale, and at the end of the story, Fred says "go!" to himself. For Nabokov, "Reality is a very subjective affair."²⁷⁷ He says that, because we can never know enough about that which surrounds us, the essence of things—the bedrock that science digs for—is "unattainable" and hence a mystery: "we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects."²⁷⁸ Much of the world is like the common machines and devices we observe and use regularly, but don't understand. The mystery surrounding us becomes a kind of shell. We live in a theater, or better yet, an empty-paint bucket.

²⁷⁵ Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 2.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Nabokov, "Strong Opinions," 10.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 11.

CONCLUSION

Exceptional People

I prophesy that the world will once more become *sincere*; a believing world; with *many* Heroes in it, a heroic world! It will then be a victorious world; never till then.

Thomas Carlyle

In "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov declares, "Bless the freak!" The two characters I have discussed in this project are, in their own ways, freaks. Ivanov, the Russian exile who tutors for a meager salary and cannot for the life of him master the German language, and Fred Dobson, the English dwarf who has spent most of his existence entertaining a jeering audience, are both outsiders who have been slighted by history and genetics. Neither are what you would initially think of as heroes; and unlike the unassuming type of hero, who you expect to unexpectedly prove his heroism, those who expect anything of Ivanov and Fred may find their expectations disappointed. Yet, if we distance ourselves from the stories' worlds, in order to examine them closer, we realize that Ivanov and Fred are heroes of the imagination.

In his essay "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," which appears at the end of *Lectures on Literature* and can be read as a companion piece to "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov says:

The irrational belief in the goodness of man[...] becomes something much more than the wobbly basis of idealistic philosophies. It becomes a solid and iridescent truth. This means that goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one's world, which world at first sight seems hard to identify with the modern one of newspaper editors and other bright pessimists, who will tell you that it is, mildly speaking, illogical to applaud the supremacy of good at a time when something called the police state, or

communism, is trying to turn the globe into five million square miles of terror, stupidity, and barbed wire[...] I can very well imagine that my fellow dreamers, thousands of whom roam the earth, keep to these same irrational and divine standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death.²⁷⁹

Nabokov's ideal reader is someone who perceives the goodness in the world, whether that means the nonutilitarian intricacies of a butterfly's camouflage, which far exceed any predator's sense of appreciation, or the virtues of outcasts like Ivanov and Fred. Nabokov is certainly an elitist; but the characters and people he holds in high regard are not those who possess the ability to influence everyone they meet or who come off as particularly articulate and confident. They are the weirdos, the trapped, the disguised: the giants hidden in their dreams.

A sequence from Nabokov's short story, "The Vane Sisters," illustrates this point. The narrator attends a party hosted by his student/lover, Cynthia. A motley assortment of partygoers greets him. They are odd people of various ages, hailing from unconventional walks of life. After snidely noting their idiosyncrasies and offbeat appearances, the narrator leaves. Later in the story, Cynthia confronts him:

When suddenly, with no provocation on my part, she blazed out at me with vulgar vehemence, using poisonous words, saying—through pear-shaped drops of sparse rain—that I was a prig and a snob; that I only saw the gestures and disguises of people; that Corcoran had rescued from drowning, in two different oceans, two men[...] that romping and screeching Joan Winter had a little girl doomed to grow completely blind in a few months; that the woman in green with the freckled chest whom I had snubbed in some way or other had written a national best-seller in 1932. Strange Cynthia! I had been told she could be thunderously rude to people whom she liked and respected; one had, however, to draw the line somewhere and since I had by then sufficiently studied her interesting

²⁷⁹ Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," 373.

auras and other odds and ids, I decided to stop seeing her altogether.²⁸⁰

The gestures and disguises, so crucial to Nabokov's aesthetics, which many critics have interpreted as merely elements of a game, a sport with no ethical content, designed for homo ludens, are actually a reflection of the illusions found everywhere in nature and of the struggles we face in perceiving and relating to other people. Cynthia is certainly strange; and if you recognize that she is not a silly, laughable personality, a "whimsical" ghost as Harold Bloom characterizes her in his book *How to Read and Why*, but on the contrary, the nearly transparent and finely woven moral fabric of the story, which the narrator is unable to perceive, then you are probably strange as well.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ Nabokov, "The Vane Sisters," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 629.

²⁸¹ Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 56

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