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# 

# **INTRODUCTION**

**1. Basic concepts**

Nabokov’s novels simultaneously tell us a story and reveal the process of their composition. They insistently draw our attention to the act of their creation. The element of artistic self-consciousness increases in prominence as Nabokov’s oeuvre progresses, and, in the end of the Russian period, the issue of art becomes the central theme. Dar tells the story of a writer who is writing the novel Dar.[[1]](#footnote-0)

This does not mean, however, that Nabokov’s exclusive focus is his own literary effort. In his early novels self-referentiality is indirect and covert. Mashen’ka, Korol’, dama valet, Kamera obskura, Podvig, and Zashchita Luzhina avoid explicit references to their author; only the structure of their fictional worlds - built around foreshadowing and order - indirectly points toward their origins. And the later novels (Sogliadataj, Otchajanie, Priglashenie na kazn’ and Dar) while openly self-referential, are never mere literary and linguistic games. Nabokov creates not just texts, but worlds. His distinctive method of exploring creativity rests on the *questioning the metaphysical status of created reality*.

Consequently, artistic and metaphysical elements in his novels merge together. Themes of fate, authorial design, pattern and perfection form a seamless whole. As in the case of Kamera obskura, where the protagonist in the beginning unknowingly observes the ending of the novel – his own death – in a movie, it is often impossible to determine what is taking place, metafictional reference or metaphysical description, a sign from the author or a mystical glimpse of the character’s future. D. Barton Johnson made an attempt to integrate those two aspects of Nabokov’s writing, using the model of ‘worlds in regression’:

Many, if not all, of Vladimir Nabokov’s novels contain more than one world in varying degrees of presence. This is not merely a stock literary metaphor: the world of the novel versus the world of the novelist. At the very least, what appears to be the world of the novelist is that of an author-persona who, within the framework of the novel, creates and occasionally intrudes upon the world of his characters. Author Nabokov stands at still greater remove. An analogy with Van Eyck’s [Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride] wedding scene is illuminating. The small figure in the world of the mirror is not the artist but his persona, while the artist who creates the whole remains outside the frame. Each Nabokov novel contains at least two fictive worlds. This “two world” model accounts (in a formal sense) for much of what happens in many Nabokov novels. It describes their underlying cosmology. The patterns, the webs of coincidence that pervade the world of the characters, are but an imperfect mirroring of events in a second, controlling world. Although the characters of a given universe regard the intuited next higher world as the ultimate, all-defining one, it in turn stands in the same subordinate position vis-a-vis a still more all-encompassing world. (Johnson, 1985, pp.1-2)

This makes for a specifically Nabokovian resolution of the problem of art versus life. Reality, according to Nabokov, is necessarily artistic, and art is real. Any artistic device implies a matching event in the world of the characters; every aspect of fictional world constitutes an element of composition.

The resulting universe has an unmistakable affinity with Leibniz’s clockwork world. Like Leibniz, Nabokov maintains that *everything* is design. Principles of composition and coherence permeate his worlds throughout, as the reason for any entity to exist is the degree of its fitness with the rest of creation. This merger of metaphysics and aesthetics is one of Nabokov’s main artistic achievements.

Yet, if we read Nabokov as merely an aesthetician and metaphysician, the result is peculiarly incomplete. While such a reading resolves the opposition of structure and reality in his oeuvre, it misses a perhaps more important opposition – between structure and *subjectivity*. Reading Nabokov, we become involved with subjective experiences of his characters - sensory, emotional, intellectual, moral - as directly and undeniably as we are involved with authorial designs or the workings of fate. Nabokov’s world is saturated with the first person perspective. His impersonal narrators have access to the mental sphere of characters and show plot events from personal points of view. Reality in the novels emerges as *experienced*. Pain, joy, hope, surprise, despair, terror – as well as smell, sound, color, texture, taste – all varieties of inner experience find a place in the very fabric of Nabokovian style.

Moral experience is particularly important. Nabokov is one of the most uncompromisingly judgmental writers in the Russian tradition. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he is not lost in an ethically obscure and complicated world. He knows exactly what is right and what is wrong, and often his ethical judgment truns into ruthless satire. Nabokov’s judgmental urge is so strong that he explores its criminal (Otchajanie), political (Priglashenie na kazn’), and historical (the fourth chapter of Dar) ramifications.

All this implies that Nabokov's characters in an important sense are free. Without considering them as responsible agents, it would be impossible for the author to use the sophisticated scale of justification and liability that determines the moral climate of the novels. The mixture of condemnation and laughter toward N.G. Chernyshevsky in Dar, the subtle analysis of voyeurism in Sogliadataj, and even the detached contemplation of Luzhin's self-destruction in Zashchita Luzhina – these attitudes are predicated on the characters’ freedom of choice, and on the reader’s capacity to recognize that freedom.

Another prerequisite for moral disposition is the subject’s real connection with the other. The monads of Leibniz’s world are windowless; they are denied access to each other. They cannot affect their neighbors, and cannot be affected themselves. Moral subjects, on the other hand, emerge only in interaction. Morality can be philosophically defined as a special manner of treating others, and, in general, in a special way of relating to otherness. This manner is determined by the notion of equality – of being able to recognize identity in otherness, specifically the identity of worth.

Julian Connolly, who has studied the subjective and experiential tendency in Nabokov’s Russian oeuvre, summarizes:

… the complexity of Nabokov’s work reflects its creator’s unique response to the richness of human experience, from the rapturous potential of the human imagination to the stark realities of alienation, loss and suffering. At the core of this experience lies the crucial relationship between self and other. (Connolly, pp.1-2)

Thus, we have two seemingly *incompatible* Nabokovs. One is the metaphysical and metafictional writer of elaborate, self-referential worlds, where all events are predetermined (written) in advance, and where characters resemble Leibniz’s monads. Another is the existential writer of the first-person experience who examines choice and recognizes the primacy of intersubjective contact. This puzzling contrast is not accidental, but derives from a basic underlying issue, which may be called *the paradox of self*. Аre we pieces in a cosmic game or free agents forming our destinies? Is experience a pre-determined record or the process of subjective self-definition? Is self a subject or an object? The above-mentioned oppostions, central to Nabokov’s entire Russian oeuvre – fate versus freedom and structure versus experience – are the outcome of his deep philosophical concerns.

This dissertation attempts to show that Nabokov resolves the paradox of self, linking composition to consciousness and metaphysics to morality. His solution is similar to Leibniz’s: the best possible world must be based on *harmonization* rather than on *coersion*. Order, according to both the philosopher and the writer, emerges as freely realized by its elements. The unfolding of fate is not opposed to freedom, but rather results from it. Fate is constituted by the spontaneous self-actualization of individuals. Unconstrained, Nabokov’s agents are always presented as fundamentally responsible for what they are. Their author, while sometimes markedly present, never interferes with their actions directly. He never bends their will. Authorial control in Nabokov’s plots operates through the intermediary of internally consistent motivations of its participants. Consequently, individual choice always matters.

The problem of choice proves especially important for Nabokov’s characters resembling Leibniz’s monads. Close readings of the novels discover two fundamental facts related to the problem of Nabokovian monadology. First, his characters are monadic as a result of their windowlessness - the combination of blindness and non-transparency. Secondly, windowlessness in the novels is never a purely given or inborn state, but consistently emerges from the characters’ own existential dispositions. Being windowless for Nabokov is the subject’s own choice – a choice in relation to others.

A phenomenological analysis, based on Sartre’s theory of the gaze, shows that Nabokov conceives interpersonal encounters ontologically: the subject reacts to *being* what others see. Windowlessness, in this context, is the negative reaction - the choice to ignore or avoid the other’s gaze. According to Nabokov, the paradox of self arises not because somebody sees subjects as objects, but because subjects *make* themselves into objects by failing to accept the observer’s view of themselves. Nabokovian characters go undercover and turn blind fighting or simply neglecting the others’ gaze.

Once the key Nabokovian issues are located on the level of self-other involvement, *vision* comes to the fore as its very medium.[[2]](#footnote-1) The intersubjective aspect of vision is crucial for Nabokov. His plots are built around his characters’ reactions to the gaze, to the primordial sense of existential exposure. Nabokov is one of the foremost explorers of *privacy* in the 20th century. He understands that interpersonal contact begins with exposure: we discover others as subjects not just by placing them in our field of vision, but recognizing *their* gaze and feeling *their* evaluating attention. Nabokov also understands that we are often unwilling to pay such a high price for contact, considering it to be a deal in which others make unilateral profit. Otherness in the novels always threatens individuation. Privacy, the foundation of individual being, is repeatedly compromised by the intersubjective encounter.

As a result, Nabokov's characters relentlessly attempt to protect themselves against the world’s gaze. Like Luzhin in Zashchita Luzhina, they *defend*. Their main defensive weapon is to assume a status or to employ a strategy that we may call ‘*incognito*.’ Being incognito protects the self from the alien gaze, and Nabokov’s protagonists can all be classified according to the method of their self-concealment. Building and living their ‘incognito’ defines their life projects. In this context Martin's insistence on the clandestine character of his trip to Russia in Podvig, and Cincinnatus’s abstract non-transparency in Priglashenie na kazn’ are closely related and more understandable. The urge to hide in the novels lies deeper than moral and social levels. The necessity to avoid the other's gaze is so universal that it overrides the positive/negative, good/evil and beautiful/ugly oppositions.

Why are Nabokov’s characters so sensitive to exposure? Detailed analysis shows that the main source of the threat is not the ‘honest,’ open gaze the subject is aware of, but the possibility of a hidden gaze leading to the *invasion of privacy*. The invasion of privacy takes place whenever the subject is observed without knowing it, or, more generally, whenever the other knows something about the subject, while the subject is unaware of that knowledge. The paradigmatic instance of the first situation is voyeurism; of the second, lying. Both are almost universally considered to be forms of aggression.

The invasion of privacy, along with the corresponding – paranoid – reaction to it, is different from the more familiar mode of intersubjective encounter, the power struggle. The medium of privacy conflict is awareness rather than force. And what is at stake is not freedom, but authorship, or, to put it differently, not desire, but being. The majority of Nabokovian protagonists experience what may be termed *existential loss* under the gaze of the world. They are surrounded by eyed universes that follow their every move, pre-empting, appropriating, and consuming their being. For Krechmar (Kamera obskura), this invading gaze is personified, and in Magda and Gorn, the villans in Kamera, we have a chance to observe the perpetrators of the invasion of privacy, the *parasites*.

The gaze in Nabokov’s world is so dangerous that even self-observation becomes a threat. Instead of giving the subject the certainty of the cartesian *Cogito*, self-consciousness splits his self. Doubles, mirror reflections, and other alienated splinters of personal being are less the result of traditional Romantic projection than of a modern type of dispersal of one’s being which occurs under the gaze, and especially under one’s own gaze. Among other things, Nabokovian novels examine the conflict between privacy and *self-exposure*.

Nabokov often associates invasion of privacy with another structure of existential loss - temporal flux. Perceiving time as a threat, he devises a special strategy of self-protection. While ‘incognito’ is the defense against others, memory is the defense against time. The similarity between temporal and interpersonal experience in the novels is striking. Nabokov conceives remembrance as an act of seeing. The longer the span of time, the more remote the past object appears; bad memory is a case of myopia; to remember is to light up the past, etc. The object of remembering, like the object of vision, is out there, to be retrieved from darkness. Seeing, in its turn, is also intimately related to memory. To perceive an object is to be able to remember its name and classify it; to recognize something in its uniqueness is to find a word, a metaphor, and, ultimately, a story for it. Seeing becomes for Nabokov a way to immerse its object, through language, in a vast cultural memory, to remember its previous appearances on the scene of universal drama.

If loss of being relates forgetting and blindness, the link between ‘incognito’ and remembering is the concept of *recovery*. Looking back at others, invisible and observant, I can repossess what they took from me; looking back at my own past, I can recuperate what I left there and reabsorb my dispersed self. Among the novels, the most extensive example of the combined ‘incognito’/remembrance project is presented in Dar, where self-recovery is successfully completed through a combined process of remembering and encounters with other selves. One of the characters shrewdly calls this project “an autobiography with mass executions of good friends.”

When, in the later novels, Nabokov presents protagonists that are themselves authors or artists, the situation becomes even more complex. The effort of self-recovery results for such characters not only in their restored selves, but also in works of art. Such an outcome is possible because Nabokov conceives authentic being and art as sharing defining qualities. He wants personal being to be the infinitely manageable, infinitely obedient, and fully ‘owned’ medium of self-authored action, ready to take any new shape and absorb any part of the world - something very similar to his demands for *language.* His words are supposed to be always at hand, ready to perform any task with limitless pliability, faithfulness and precision. Nabokov asserts that he created his own tongue; he insists that he was able to appropriate words from the speaking community, synchronically as well as diachronically, and make them wholly his own; paradoxically, he claims that he is able to eliminate from his words all traces of public meaning.[[3]](#footnote-2) His style, in a sense, is a display of brilliantly organized privacy. Free of any outside influence, fully self-referential, fascinating, his novels frustrate external tampering and interpretation. All great art, according to Nabokov, has an essential quality of self-protection. Another, more Nabokovian way, to put it would be to say that all great art is *ironic*.

Thematic analysis of art in Nabokov’s oeuvre shows that his writing protagonists (Herman, Smurov, Fyodor) build their narratives around the awareness of the reader. In Sogliadataj, the most pronounced case, the level of fictional reality proves to be secondary to the level of telling. In that novel the narrator’s main aim is to manipulate information and thereby to *distort* the reader’s understanding of both the narrated events and his own identity. The narrator maintains an intricate ‘incognito’ against the reader, and his enterprise serves him as the dramatic, structural and stylistic grounds for composition. In Dar, the identity of the narrator (and of certain key characters) is also systematically suppressed for the sake of composition, and the narrative structure in Otchajanie and Priglashenie na kazn’ is essentially similar.

Thematically, art in Nabokov’s novels is governed by the same ontological laws as the self-other relation. In other words, the relationship between the author and the reader is regulated by the same principles as the relationship between the characters. This is true for all Nabokov’s novels, even for those where art, thematically, does not play a central role.

This resolves the paradox of the two Nabokovs. There is an unbroken continuity of experience between a paranoid character building the protective shell of his ‘incognito,’ and a reader-aware artist hiding behind the radiant facade of the fictional reality he creates. The purely cosmological and metaphysical Nabokov, who, like a clockmaker or a god, abandons to the reader a perfect system of enclosed worlds, turns out to be an illusion. In fact, all his metaphysical inventions – as well as the inventions of his characters – are related to his main concern with privacy and exposure. They are oriented toward the audience, derivable from its attention, and organized around its anticipated response. Nabokovian art at its deepest is an existential strategy. In the density of its structures and in the perfection of its designs we always read the great adventure of being.

**2. Texts**

The corpus of texts selected for this study is Nabokov’s nine Russian language novels: Mashen’ka [Mary] [[4]](#footnote-3) 1926, Korol’, dama, valet [King, Queen, Knave] 1928, Zashchita Luzhina [Defense] 1930, Sogliadataj [The Eye] 1930, Podvig [Glory] 1932, Kamera obskura [Laughter in the Dark] 1932, Otchajanie [Despair] 1936, Priglashenie na kazn’ [Invitation to a Beheading] 1936, and Dar [The Gift] 1938. This choice is dictated by the considerations of language and unity.

Nabokov’s English language novels are omitted because the dissertation employs close stylistic analysis which is language specific.

Translations are also excluded from consideration. Nabokov and his collaborators reworked his texts, sometimes considerably, in the process of converting them from Russian to English. The translated novels represent a new textual universe. Its relationship with the world of Nabokov’s Russian novels is a vast critical issue.[[5]](#footnote-4) As that issue is irrelevant to the principal argument, and as this dissertation treats Nabokov's novels as a unified system, it was elected to focus only on the originals.

The third omission is related to Nabokov's Russian short stories. This serves the double purpose: to limit the already vast corpus of texts and to prevent elements of short-fiction discourse from contaminating the purity of the novelistic material selected for examination.

**3. Method**

This dissertation is based on two main methodological premises. The first, fortunately shared by Nabokov, is that form corresponds to content. It is assumed that behind even the most formal aspect of structure, there is a corresponding element of worldview. The novels, rather than *representing* the world, realize a certain concept of it – a certain philosophy. This philosophy unfolds not as logical argument, but as fiction. Unlike instances of systematic thought, fiction does not consist of assertive propositions, yet, while generating imaginary constructs, novels make assumptions about the world that we, the readers, share with the novelist, and those assumptions implicate truth claims similar to those of open assertions. A piece of fiction, in this sense, is a complex indirect hypothesis about our world.

The second premise is that the nine Nabokov’s Russian novels form a unified whole. It is that whole, not just separate sections of it, that is considered to be the object of investigation. Separate novels – the parts of the whole – may bring into prominence this or that aspect of the overall unity, but a particular aspect can become meaningful only in the general context of the oeuvre. The main goal of this dissertation is to let Nabokov's oeuvre speak - to make the worldview it contains as evident as possible in all its depth and import.

Such a methodology brings about certain problems. In order to uncover the worldview that the novels implicate, it is necessary to describe them as finished works of art, containing their own, *fictional* worlds. The nature of Nabokov’s writing, which generates numerous internal worlds in regression, adds to the problem. Critical reading becomes even more difficult as it requires the development of appropriate conceptual tools, which often leads to digressions from a text at hand into the domain of theory. Precise definition of the *level* of investigation is essential to keeping it consistent.

The analysis below will advance on three main levels. The first is the level of the characters acting inside their fictional world. The second is the level of the author and the reader, who share a narrative space inaccessible to the characters. The third is the general philosphical level, related to the development of appropriate concepts (such as the gaze, focalization, *mise en abîme*, etc.), as well as to the oeuvre’s general worldview which this dissertation attempts to grasp. Whenever necessary, the current level of analysis will be signposted by an explicit statement or by an indication as to a specific *agent* the analysis focuses on. The denomination ‘Nabokov’ will be reserved for the most general authorial level responsible for everything in the text.

The defining moments of a critical study are the moments when it is discovered that the structure of a fictional world reveals something universal – when art shows itself as containing truth. At such moments the distinction between the world of the novel and the world of the novelist becomes irrelevant, and what is known about characters – Billy Budd, Leopold Bloom, or Humbert Humbert – is valid for the rest of humanity. I hope that this dissertation contains a few such moments, and that its readers will be able to recognize them.

# 

# **CHAPTER 1**

**Between Micro and Macro: Narrative and Metaphysics in Korol', dama, valet**

All great artists have something in common: their works and worlds consist of elements that are in turn works and worlds of art. An effort to understand them may delve deeper and deeper, and each consecutive level will manifest complexity comparable to that of the whole. Moreover, what resides in the depth of the work of art is always in some manner related to its surface. This agreement between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ is probably one of the most certain signs of aesthetic success, and one of the most important objects of criticism. To see how the ‘physiology’ of a work shows in its ‘facial expression’ is to understand its meaning.

In literature, the study of ‘physiology’ usually requires extensive examination of all available texts and backgrounds, juxtapositions of seemingly remote parts, and the induction from the overwhelming field of concrete facts. Sometimes, though, all that is necessary for grasping the structure of an oeuvre is concentrated within one compact passage, one short episode. Often hidden and neglected, such a nexus of meaning reflects, like a little oversaturated mirror, the composition of the whole: its themes, techniques, ideas, and rhythms. Finding it one discovers the key to a writer.

The following is such a passage from Nabokov’s novel Korol’, dama, valet (King, Queen, Knave, 1928):

В купе, куда Франц вошел с безмолвным, низким поклоном, сидели только двое: чудесная большеглазая дама и пожилой господин с подстриженными желтыми усами. Франц снял пальто и осторожно сел. Сиденье было так мягко, так уютно торчал у виска полукруглый выступ, отделяющий одно место от другого, так изящны были снимки на стенке: какой-то собор, какой-то водопад... Он медленно вытянул ноги, медленно вынул из кармана газету; но читать не мог: оцепенел в блаженстве, держа раскрытую газету перед собой. Его спутники были обаятельны. Дама - в черном костюме, в черной шапочке с маленькой бриллиантовой ласточкой, лицо серьезное, холодноватые глаза, легкая тень над губой и бархатно белая шея в нежнейших поперечных бороздках на горле. Господин, верно, иностранец, оттого что воротничок мягкий, и вообще... Однако Франц ошибся.

- Пить хочется,- протяжно сказал господин.- Жалко, что нет фруктов...

- Сам виноват, - ответила дама недовольным голосом, и, погодя, добавила:

- Я все еще не могу забыть. Это было так глупо...

Драйер слегка закрыл глаза и не возразил ничего.

- Сам виноват, что пришлось прятаться...- сказала она и машинально поправила юбку, машинально заметив, что пассажир, появившийся в углу, - молодой человек в очках, - смотрит на голый шелк ее ног. Потом пожала плечом.

- Все равно...- сказала она тихо, - не стоит говорить.

Драйер знал, что молчанием он жену раздражает невыносимо. (...) Удобно одетый, с туманом легких мыслей в голове, с мятным ветерком во рту, Драйер сидел, скрестив руки, и складки мягкой материи на сгибах как-то соответствовали мягким складкам его щек, и очерку подстриженных усов, и вееркам морщинок у глаз. И глядел он, слегка надув шею, слегка исподлобья, с чертиками в глазах, на зеленый вид, жестикулирующий в окне, на прекрасный профиль Марты, обведенный смешной солнечной каемкой, на дешевый чемодан молодого человека в очках, который читал газету в углу, у двери. Этого пассажира он обошел, пощупал, пощекотал долгим, но легким, ни к чему ни обязывающим взглядом, отметил зеленый крап его галстучка, стоившего, разумеется, девяносто пять пфеннигов, высокий воротничок, а также манжеты и передок рубашки,- рубашки, существующей впрочем только в идее, так как, судя по особому предательскому лоску, то были крахмальные доспехи довольно низкого качества, но весьма ценимые экономным провинциалом, который нацепляет их на суровую сорочку, сшитую дома. Над костюмом молодого человека Драйер нежно загрустил, подумав о том, что покрой пиджаков трогателен своей недолговечностью и что этот синий в частую белую полоску костюм уже пять сезонов как исчез из столичных магазинов.

В стеклах очков внезапно родились два встревоженных глаза, и Драйер отвернулся, проглатывая слюну с легким чмоканьем. Марта сказала:

- Вообще происходит какая-то путаница.

Муж вздохнул и ничего не ответил. Она хотела добавить что-то, но почувствовала, что молодой человек прислушался,- и, вместо слов, резким движением облокотилась на столик, оттянув кулаком щеку. Посидев так до тех пор, пока мелькание леса в окне не стало тягостным, она, с досадой, со скукой, медленно разогнулась, откинулась, прикрыла глаза. Сквозь веки солнце проникало сплошной мутноватой алостью, по которой вдруг пробежали чередой светлые полосы - призрачный негатив леса,- и каким-то образом вмешалось в эту красноту, в это мелькание, медленно и близко поворачивающееся к ней, невыносимо веселое лицо мужа, и она, вздрогнув, открыла глаза. Но муж сидел сравнительно далеко и читал книжку в кожаном переплете. Читал он внимательно, с удовольствием. Вне солнцем освещенной страницы не существовало сейчас ничего. Он перевернул страницу, и весь мир, жадно, как игривая собака, ожидавший это мгновение, метнулся к нему светлым прыжком,- но ласково отбросив его, Драйер опять замкнулся в книгу.

То же резвое сияние было для Марты просто вагонной духотой. В вагоне должно быть душно; это так принято, и потому хорошо. Жизнь должна идти по плану, прямо и строго, без всяких оригинальных поворотиков. Изящная книга хороша на столе в гостинной или на полке. В вагоне, для отвода скуки, можно читать какой-нибудь ерундовый журналишко. Но эдак вкушать и впивать... переводную новеллу, что ли, в дорогом переплете.- Человек, который называет себя коммерсантом, не должен, не может, не смеет так поступать. Впрочем возможно, что он делает это нарочно, назло. Еще одна показная причуда. Ну что ж, чуди, чуди. Хорошо бы сейчас вырвать у него эту книжку и запереть в чемодан...

В это мгновение солнечный свет как бы обнажил ее лицо, окатил гладкие щеки, придал искусственную теплоту ее неподвижным глазам, с их большими, словно упругими зрачками в сизом сиянии, с их прелестными темными веками, чуть в складочку, редко мигавшими, как будто она все боялась потерять из виду непременную цель. Она почти не была накрашена; только в тончайших морщинках теплых крупных губ сохла оранжевато-красная пыльца.

И Франц, до сих пор таившийся за газетой в каком-то блаженном и беспокойном небытии, живший как бы вне себя, в случайных движениях и случайных словах его спутников, медленно стал расти, сгущаться, утверждаться, вылез из-за своей газеты и во все глаза, почти дерзко, посмотрел на даму. (...)

Сама Марта ему помогла: глядя искоса в окно, она зевнула, дрогнув напряженным языком в красной полутьме рта и блеснув зубами. Потом замигала, разгоняя ударами ресниц щекочущую слезу. И Франца потянуло к зевоте. В ту минуту, как он, не справившись с силой, распиравшей небо, судорожно открыл рот, Марта на него взглянула и поняла по его зевоте, что он только что на нее смотрел. И сразу рассеялось болезненное блаженство, которое Франц только что ощущал, глядя на мадоннообразный профиль. Он насупился под ее равнодушным лучом, и когда она отвернулась, мысленно сообразил, будто протрещал пальцем по тайным счетам, сколько дней своей жизни он отдал бы, чтобы обладать этой женщиной. (Nabokov, 1, pp.118-122)

[The compartment that Franz entered with a silent low bow was occupied by only two people - a marvelous big-eyed lady and a middle-aged man with a clipped yellow mustache. Franz took off his coat and sat down carefully. The seat was so soft; there was such a cozy semi-circular projection at temple level separating one seat from the next; the photographs on the wall were so elegant - some kind of cathedral, some kind of waterfall... He slowly stretched out his feet, slowly took a newspaper out of his pocket; but he was unable to read: benumbed with luxury he just held the newspaper open. His fellow travelers were charming. The lady wore a black suit and a diminutive black hat with a little diamond swallow; serious face, cold eyes, a slight shadow above her upper lip and a velvety white neck with very delicate transverse lines at the throat. The man must be a foreigner, judging by his soft collar and in general... Franz, however, was mistaken.

"I am thirsty," said the man slowly. "Too bad there is no fruit..."

"It is your own fault," answered the lady in a displeased voice, adding a little later: "I still cannot get over it. It was such a silly thing to do..."

Dreyer slightly closed his eyes and made no reply.

"It's your own fault you had to hide," she said and automatically pulled at her skirt, automatically noticing that the passenger who had appeared in the corner - a young man with the glasses - looks at the sheer silk of her legs. Then she shrugged her shoulders...

"Anyway," she said in a low voice, "it's not worth discussing."

Dreyer knew that his silence irritated Martha unspeakably. (...) Comfortably dressed, with a mist of vague pleasant thoughts in his head, with a peppermint wind in his mouth, Dreyer sat with crossed arms, and the soft folds of the fabric in the crook of his arms matched the soft folds of his cheeks, and the outline of his clipped mustache, and the wrinkles fanning templewards from his eyes. Puffing a little his throat, with little devils in his eyes, he gazed at the green landscape gesturing behind the window, Martha's handsome profile rimmed in a funny way with sunlight and the cheap suitcase of the bespectacled young man who was reading a newspaper in the corner by the door. With a long, but light and non-committal glance he examined, palpated, tickled this passenger, noting the green pattern of the young fellow's tie which obviously had cost ninety-five pfennings, the stiff collar, and also the cuffs and front of his shirt - a shirt incidentally which only existed in an abstract form because, judging by a treacherous gloss, it consisted of the pieces of starched armor of rather low quality but greatly esteemed by a frugal provincial who attaches them to a bleached cloth shirt made at home. As to the young man's suit, it evoked a delicate melancholy in Dreyer, as he reflected on the pathetically short life of the jacket cut: that blue suit with a pin stripe had disappeared from Berlin stores at least five seasons ago.

Two alarmed eyes were suddenly born in the lenses, and Dreyer turned away swallowing and smacking his lips. Martha said:

“Things are not going as they are supposed to.”

Her husband sighed and said nothing. She wanted to add something, but felt that the young man was listening and, instead of words, leaned her elbow abruptly on the table leaf - pulling up the skin of her cheek with her knuckles. She sat that way until the flicker of woods in the window became irksome; she slowly straightened her body, annoyed and bored, then leaned back and closed her eyes. The sun penetrated her eyelids with solid scarlet, across which luminous stripes suddenly moved in succession - the ghostly negative of the passing forest, and a replica of her husband’s unbearably cheerful face, as if slowly rotating towards her, got mixed up in this barred redness, in this flickering, and she opened her eyes with a start. But her husband was sitting relatively far, reading a book bound in brown morocco. He was reading attentively and with pleasure. Nothing existed for him now beyond the sunlit page. He turned the page, and the outside world avidly, like a playful dog waiting for that moment, darted up to him with a bright bound, - but pushing it away affectionately, Dreyer again immersed himself in his book.

For Martha, that frolicsome radiance was simply the stuffy air in a railway car. It is supposed to be stuffy in a railway car: that is customary and therefore good. Life should proceed according to plan, straight and strict, without freakish twists and wiggles. An elegant book is all right on a living-room table or on shelf. In a railway car, to allay boredom, one can leaf through some trashy magazine. But to imbibe and relish in this way... a translated story, or whatever, in an expensive binding. - A person who calls himself a businessman cannot, must not, dare not act like that. But for that matter, perhaps, he may be doing it on purpose, to spite me. Just another of his show-off whims. Very well, keep showing off. How nice it would be to pluck that book out of his hands and lock it up in a suitcase...

At that instant the sun seemed to lay bare her face, flowing over her smooth cheeks and lending an artificial warmth to her eyes with their large elastic-looking pupils amid the dove-gray radiance and adorable dark lids slightly creased, rarely blinking as if she were constantly afraid of losing sight of an essential goal. She wore almost no makeup - only in the minute fissures of her warm full lips there seemed to be drying traces of orange-red pollen.

Franz, who had been hiding behind his newspaper in a state of blissful and anxious nonexistence, living on the outside of himself, in the chance motions and words of his traveling companions, now started to assert himself and openly, almost with insolence, looked at the lady. (...) Martha helped him: while looking sideways out of the window she yawned, her tongue trembling in the red penumbra of her mouth and her teeth glistening. Whereupon she blinked, dispersing a tickling tear with the beat of her eyelashes. And Franz was infected with yawning. At the moment when, unable to overcome the force prying his palate, he convulsively opened his mouth, Martha happened to glance at him, and, seeing him yawn, realized that he had been looking at her. And the morbid bliss he had shortly before experienced as he looked at her Madonna-like profile dissolved at once. He knit his brows under her indifferent beam and, when she turned away, mentally calculated, as though his fingers had rattled across a secret abacus, how many days of his life he would give to possess this woman.][[6]](#footnote-5)

The narrator of this episode is omniscient. He fully knows the world he describes and is able to see it from every angle. He can penetrate his characters' minds and report their thoughts and feelings. In principle, nothing limits his access to fictional reality. Yet, his omniscience is of a very particular kind. Instead of assuming a stable point of view and describing phenomena as if presented to him on a single plane, equally transparent, sufficiently distanced and uniformly lit, our narrator constantly changes perspective, switching minds and directions. Rather than dissolving in impersonality, he merges in turns with each of the three persons whose story he tells.

In the beginning of the episode, while Franz is entering the compartment and settling down, we see everything through his eyes. He observes his fellow travelers; he experiences the marvelous softness of the seat and the elegance of the wall photos. Even the vagueness of the pictures – ‘some kind of cathedral, some kind of waterfall’ - reflects his blissful, tense and unfocused state. Then, the perspective gradually changes. After several lines of casual dialogue, for a brief moment, we see the situation from inside Marta: she becomes conscious of a bespectacled young man ogling her from the corner. And almost immediately after, the point of view becomes Dreyer's. We learn his thoughts (he knows he irritates his wife); his feelings (he is comfortable in his clothes); even his sensations (he is chewing gum and its mint taste aerates through his head.)

During the episode, the point of view changes six (!) times. The narrator enters each of the characters more than once. He combines immediate description of mental processes with free indirect discourse to convey what is taking place inside each mind. The narrator’s insight is quite deep: he reaches beyond the level of immediate consciousness and reports states of mind of which the characters themselves are unaware.

Narrative access is not Nabokov’s invention, nor is it the main emphasis here. What is truly remarkable about the episode, and what sets it apart structurally, is the fact that all three characters constantly *look at each other.* Once we recognize that, the scene reveals its hidden complexity. Rather then experimenting with reporting mental states, Nabokov focuses on the act of looking and on the relation it establishes. All possible combinations are realized: Franz is looking at Dreyer and Marta; Marta is looking at Franz and Dreyer; Dreyer is looking at Franz and Marta. The onlooker naturally comes to the fore. We learn of Marta's irritation, Franz's timid lust and Dreyer's detached interest. But the subjectivity of the onlooker is not solitary: it is conditioned by the presence of the others. Despite the fact that characters are in turns animated by the impersonal narrator, all three of them are *personal*: they are physically present in their world and in addition to observing others may be observed themselves. In fact, they are incessantly observed by each other. Whenever one of them is looking, another is looked at. They spend most of their time exposed to each other’s glances.

Exposure to others is not only the way the characters are presented to the reader, but also an event in their inner experience. In the course of the above episode each of them becomes conscious of being watched. First, Marta notices that Franz is staring at her legs. Then Dreyer suddenly sees Franz's eyes behind the glasses. And, finally, Marta and Franz verge on eye contact. In the last paragraph the sequence of glances, yawns, and turns that they exchange creates a curious climax of the theme of mutual observation.

Being looked at and, more generally, being observed is the new element Nabokov adds to the usual play of individual perspectives. It creates the hidden subplot of the episode, running from the moment when Franz walks into the compartment and up to the point when Marta's glance is called a ‘beam’. At that moment it does not matter what Marta sees. Her perceptions cease to be the topic of the narrative. All that is important is the bare fact that Franzfeels observed. For him her glance becomes substantial, acquires density and focus, and that ‘indifferent beam,’ of which she herself is hardly aware, exists more in his mind than in hers, as his personal way of experiencing her presence.

Each character in the episode has a specific manner of reacting to others’ attention. Being observed involves a particular organization of behavior, a sequence of choices. Franz is shy; he hides behind his newspaper, at first almost lost to his companions. Then, realizing the potential of his ‘incognito,’ he looks at Marta ‘almost with insolence.’ That insolence implies his awareness that others may look at him at any moment - in his shy and indirect way, he confronts and challenges their possible attention. Marta, in her turn, demands that attention. She wants not only to be observed, but to become the exclusive focus of observation. She intends to command others’ choices and govern their time. If that does not happen she becomes aggressive. Her need to be watched is more powerful than her interest in what is happening around her. She is searching for a mirror that will reflect her desired image, consistently and obediently.

As for Dreyer, when he examines Franz we are told “Этого пассажира он обошел, пощупал, пощекотал долгим, но легким, ни к чему ни обязывающим взглядом …” [With a long, but light and non-committing glance he examined, palpated, tickled this passenger...] Even when Dreyer himself is the observer, apparently spontaneous and invulnerable, the possibility of a counterglance is built into the essence of his disposition. In and by the act of looking he adopts an attitude - that of a participant in an almost erotic game of tickling touches, light and uncommitted. Dreyer expresses himself outwardly in the shape of his playful and attentive glance. In the very act of observation he assumes a specific way of being observed.

Interestingly, the focus of his attention is how his rival, Franz, presents himself to the world. Dreyer’s experienced eye (later we learn that he sells men's apparel) penetrates Franz’s defenses layer by layer. He goes first through the outer shield of the newspaper and the tie, then pierces the ‘armor’ of the shirt and the suit, and finally reaches Franz's glasses. Protected by his game, comfortably clothed, Dreyer gradually undresses Franz. After his prey is finally naked and obvious, the victory appears to be complete. He sees everything and is himself hidden. In a sense, Dreyer puts on himself all the defense layers he peeled off Franz. From the center of his citadel he can watch without being watched, he can judge without compromising himself. Then, however, something unexpected happens. Driven by the momentum of his study, Dreyer removes the last piece of Franz’s attire, the glasses - and suddenly meets his eyes. This stops the game. Franz's eyes abruptly arrest Dreyer’s maneuvers and make him turn aside. In the same way in the end of the episode Marta’s eyes paralyze and avert Franz.

Eye contact, the element that organizes our episode rhythmically, is also its key signifying event. Being the culmination of mutual observation and the horizon towards which the characters struggle, *it is never reached*. In the grammar of human enounter that our episode introduces, the prohibition of eye contact plays a secretly central role. Dreyer is forbidden to go behind Franz's eyes. Franz cannot bear Marta's beam-like glance. Marta always appears to Dreyer in profile. The suppressed eye contact is exactly what creates the peculiar atmosphere in which the right to look is transferred from one character to another in an orderly, almost ritual fashion, and where glances (or is it just a single glance?) travel from one person to another as if locked in a chamber of mirrors.

The prohibition of eye contact, we should note, orders and *civilizes* the situation. Marta's studied indifference, Dreyer's control of commitment, Franz's shy hiding - these are forms of social reaction to the presence of others. Characters are aware of each other, and, without interacting directly, constantly select their attitude, distance and tone. They send each other ‘recognition’ signals and respond with necessary answers. They avoid lapsing into uncoded intimacy. They make themselves acceptable. All three of them, no matter how isolated they appear, share the grammar of coexistence, which allows them to be with each other while remaining themselves. It is in terms of that grammar that they resemble the members of a family, a kinship unit. The title of the novel, King, Queen, Knave, already contains the analogy. It presents the characters as belonging to a single group and suggests that a system of formal principles regulates relations within it.

Nabokov, of course, does not order his plot according to the structures of kinship found in primitive societies or in contemporary families. What is clear, however, is that he is using a certain language of behavior, a formal system of intersubjectivity. At this point, several main principles of that language can be identified: the core of its signification is the act of looking; the elemental situation is a triangle; the main regulating (syntactic) principle is the prohibition of eye contact.

How does Nabokov conceive of intersubjectivity? Why does he select the triangle as a starting point? Why is the prohibition of eye contact so important? In order to answer these questions we need to leave the purely formal field of glance distribution, and address the problem of *meaning*.

The most fundamental fact that an analysis of meaning immediately reveals to us is that all three characters are *wrong* in their perceptions of each other. Wrong not just because all three of them do not know Franz’s identity (later in the novel Franz turns out to be Dreyer’s nephew), but also because they are unable to penetrate behind each other’s appearance. Franz begins a long chain of errors mistaking Dreyer for a foreigner and Marta for a cold Madonna. Marta, in her turn, suspects that her husband wants to make her angry, whereas he is just fully engrossed in his book. Finally, Dreyer thinks that Franz is reading the newspaper, while the harmless ‘bespectacled young man’ is actually looking at his wife, calculating how many days of his life he would give up to possess her.

This chain of mis-taking is realized and reported through a combination of mutual observation and omniscience. As the narrator constantly switches point of view, observers inevitably come to be observed. The reader has a chance to access everyone in the compartment from the inside as well as from the outside. We know what each character is, and, simultaneously, how he or she appears to others. To put it more technically, when reported to the reader, each character's mental reality serves as reference to verify, or, rather, *falsify*, the perceptions of other characters. Taken separately, all three travelers are simply there, in the train compartment, thinking their thoughts. However, as soon as they orient their attention toward one another - as soon as they begin to look at each other - they cancel each other’s authenticity.

It would be inaccurate to say that they deceive each other. Deceiving implies an intention to deceive, whereas at this point they are simply passive and curious. The falsehood springs from the mere fact that they are together. Inaccessible to each other, yet connected through the fluid medium of looking, they contaminate each other’s pure being with error.

This subtle irruption of falsehood into a fictional world is disturbing. Fiction at its simplest is fictional; that is to say, neither true or false. It does not point to anything outside itself and therefore cannot lie. That is exactly what we find in the beginning of Korol’, dama, valet. Prior to our episode, the narration comes at us as reality. More precisely, we experience discourse as more or less transparent: it sends us directly to the world it relates. The narrator’s impersonality and omniscience are employed to make his presence escape our attention. He is, of course, around, but he takes himself out of focus and all we see are the events. The effect of reality is thus created. Within the episode this ‘realistic’ organization of fictional discourse is profoundly altered. As soon as the narrative begins to report the thoughts of the characters who look at each other, the sentences we read come to have two sources: the narrator and the character. One is telling, another is thinking. The discourse still refers to the fictional reality (the inner reality of the character), and as such it is still indisputable -- but only in terms of being reported by the narrator. In terms of being thought by a looking character the discourse refers to *another character,* the one who is looked at. Furthemore, as the narrator provides us with independent access to all three of them, we can verify the referent (the thought) against the reference (the person who is looked at). We can see the characters’ reciprocal misreadings, and judge their thoughts as being false. *The inability of the characters to perceive each other accurately is the main narrative effect of the episode.* Whenever the narrator leaps from one mind to another, the result is not that of a complementary addition to a multidimensional truth but of a painful contrast and an unbridgeable gap between beings: “То же резвое сияние было для Марты просто вагонной духотой.” [For Martha, that frolicsome radiance was simply the stuffy air in a railway car.]

Throughout the episode, it should be remarked, the narrator remains fully reliable. *His* take on the characters is never contested. Moreover, it serves as a standard against which we measure the verity of everything else. His voice, even when it mingles with that of a character in free indirect discourse, is always protected by our basic suspension of disbelief. The falsehood emerges from the fact that the narrator reports everything from a variety of *limited* points of view. In Genettian terms, the unreliable agency here is not the Voice (speaking) but the Mode (seeing).

Genette calls *focalization* the sum of restrictions applied to the information available to the narrator.[[7]](#footnote-6) He assumes that the narrator does not generate fictional reality - creating is the function of the author - and only reports it to the reader. Therefore, as an ideal horizon, fictional reality exists independently from the act of telling and the narrator can have various types of access to it. Maximum access is total omniscience and zero focalization. Limited access is a certain degree of focalization which constitutes a particular point of view. Point of view, according to Genette, is a set of restraints applied to full omniscience.[[8]](#footnote-7)

The theory develops further as follows: the agency of speaking always implies an agent (the narrator), even if the narration is impersonal; the agency of seeing also has a corresponding agent, *the focalizer.* Both the narrator and the focalizer are structural elements of discourse, or, in other words, the concepts through which we understand the text. Both can be realized in a particular narrative as personal or impersonal, human or non-human, involved or non-involved in the events of the plot, etc. Genette’s most important thesis concerns the relationship between the narrator and the focalizer. Genette asserts (and proves with examples) that the agency of narration and that of focalization are *independent* from one another. ‘Who speaks,’ he suggests, does not necessarily correlate with ‘who sees.’ Narratology holds point of view and voice to be two separate and in principle independent discursive categories.

The possibility of isolating voice from point of view allows Nabokov to introduce falsehood into fictional discourse without compromising the narrator's reliability. In our episode, the falsehood is clearly present, yet no one is lying. Characters’ misperceptions emerge as if by themselves, without anyone intentionally promoting them. The *referential turbulence*, the mismatch between what seems and what is,occurs earlier than the stage of telling, at the point of seeing - and only during the moments when the act of seeing is delegated to the characters. The voices of everyone involved are entirely trustworthy -- it is the points of view that are limited; it is the perspectives that are falsified. We are dealing here with *unreliable focalization.*

The situation of unreliable focalization should be carefully distinguished from that of unreliable narration.[[9]](#footnote-8) From the fact that the agency of seeing is independent from the agency of speaking it follows that their respective unreliabilities should also be independent. How are we to tell them apart? What is the criterion to determine what is not to be trusted, voice or point of view? The problem seems to go deeper than just the issue of unreliability. The true question is how to differentiate between narration and focalization in general. Intuitively, the difference between ‘seeing’ and ‘speaking’ is clear enough, but as soon as we realize that in the text everything, including ‘seeing,’ is expressed by language, the demarcation line is blurred. If everything is language then focalization should allegedly be reducible to purely linguistic phenomena. Consequently, in critical thought, there exists an argument that focalization is subsumed in the narration. “If the focalizer is a character, the argument goes, then his acts of perception are part of the story. If he is the narrator, focalization is just one of many rhetorical strategies at his disposal.” (Rimmon-Kenan, 1988, p.85) The underlying assumption here is that “the *ultimate* source of everything in the narrative, including the focalizations and the free indirect discourse (...), is the narrator or teller.” (Toolan, 1988, pp.75-76)

The above assumption does not seem entirely correct. The crucial notion is attribution. It is true that any type of utterance implies a source, but from such a premise it does not follow that *everything* in speech should be attributed to the speaker. There are clearly certain aspects of meaning that the speaker cannot fully control. Grammar, for instance, is less within his immediate authority than propositional content. Not everything in a given utterance is intentional.

Thus, the line of demarcation between various aspects of discourse depends on their attribution to the speaking agent. This attribution, in its turn, must be based on *intention*. Here resides a possible criterion that could separateMode and Voice (point of view and speaking) and prevent focalization from collapsing into narration. The proposed criterion works in the following way: those aspects of discourse that are intended[[10]](#footnote-9) by the speaker belong to the domain of narration; those that are not intended pertain to focalization. The concept of intention delimits the contribution of the speaking agent to the meaning of utterances.

Let us see how this criterion operates in our initial episode from Korol’, dama, valet. At first sight the episode seems to contradict our theory. The narrator’s control over his discursive choices, including those related to “who sees,” is complete. He decides which character to select as a point of view carrier and for how long. To leave one perspective and to assume another is fully within his authority. It appears that he governs focalization, and that point of view dissolves in the series of his narrative acts. This objection, however, can be answered by pointing out that the above criterion should be understood as applying to the agent *whose point of view is in question*. We cannot determine how the characters focalize the discourse by examining the intentionality of the narrator. Their contribution to the meaning of utterances must be decided on the level of *their own* intentionality. Indeed, if we concentrate our attention on the characters themselves, we will see that whatever the narrator is doing is beyond the scope of *their* control. For them, the fact that the discursive flow from the narrator towards the reader is organized around their subjective vantage point is entirely unavailable. They do not even know that the story is being told. Therefore, in so far as they intend their utterances (for example in the dialogue with each other), they can be viewed as narrators; insofar as they unintentionally structure the communication between the impersonal narrator and the reader, they are focalizers.

Now let us check our theory against the actual narrator of the episode. Does *he* have a point of view? Clearly, there are certain elements in the text that do not fall into the realm of his strategies*.* Even though he is omniscient, he does not command every aspect of his discourse. There exists a whole set of presuppositions, tacit conventions, deep structures, contexts and ideologies that generate his utterances rather than being generated by them. Ideally, the whole of the narrator's competence - in contrast to his performance - belongs to that larger, overall perspective which can be reasonably called the narrator's point of view.Any utterance has a point of view; behind any narrator looms a focalizer. In a given story, certain aspects of focalization, such as spatio-temporal context, moral attitudes, psychological or ideological framework can come to the fore, but what is important here is not the particulars of some possible form of focalization, but its distinctive feature, which is the diminished degree of intention. [[11]](#footnote-10)

Two important conclusions concerning the nature of focalization can be drawn from the above analysis. First, focalization necessarily implies a frame that is to some extent unavailable to the focalizing agent. He views events *from* that frame while residing *within it*. That frame must be bestowed from outside. In the case of a character, it is supplied by the narrator, who delegates the point of view. In the case of the narrator himself, the source of the frame is the reader who, in the act of interpretation, evaluates the narrator’s competence and sees his performance as coded (framed) by its context. There exist, therefore, two essentially different types of focalization. The first is the process that *constitutes* the point of view as the narrator’s speech is received by the reader. The second is related to the transfer of point of view inside a story when the narrator passes it to and between characters.

Another conclusion of our theory of focalization is that the agent and not the utterance should ground the analysis of point of view, because only the agent can be the seat of intention and therefore the source of focalization. A given utterance can be narrated and focalized by multiple sources. Only by detecting the exact contribution of each source can we arrive at an accurate description of the way the story is told. In our episode, for instance, whenever free indirect discourse is employed, four agents, two speaking and two focalizing, become associated with each utterance. One pair, a speaker and a focalizer, is impersonal, and coalesces into what we have previously called the main narrator. Another pair is personal and resides within the character. The interaction of personal and impersonal *speakers* is well recognized in the theory of free indirect discourse (*style indirect libre, erlebte Rede*),[[12]](#footnote-11) which studies how the narrator merges his voice with that of the character. The nature of the interaction between focalizers, less noticeable but equally important, calls for a theory of *free indirect focalization.[[13]](#footnote-12)* To attempt such a theory, at least in relation to the initial episode, we must return to the issue of unreliability.

Once intention is established as a demarcation line between narration and focalization, it becomes relevant to the issue of trust and disbelief. An unreliable narrator *intends* to be unreliable; an unreliable focalizer does not. The archetype of the former is a liar; of the second, a child or an idiot. Unreliable narration is ‘cynical’; unreliable focalization is ‘naive.’ The resulting discourses are radically different; confusing them can substantially affect the adequacy of interpretation and even the fundamental understanding of a text.

There is an additional subtlety. From our basic definition it follows that focalization proper is essentially unreliable because it involves the necessary limitation of perspective.[[14]](#footnote-13) Any discourse is in a certain sense naive because in it a fully intentional message reveals itself on an unintentionally assumed background. Banfield, analyzing point of view linguistically, concurs: “Any subject confronting the world necessarily adopts a position from which he perceives what will constitute his visual field, his experience, and any point of view is thus a limited one.” (Banfield, 1982, p.68)

Now we can address the issue of unreliability in our initial episode. Marta, Franz, and Dreyer do not want to deceive either the reader or each other. If they did, their thoughts, and, consequently, the utterances of the text, would have involved intentional deception. This would turn our episode a spy thriller. Hiding their real identities, the characters would maneuver to outsmart their opponents. In the actual episode, the characters, on the contrary, are presented as ‘innocent.’ Nabokov is dealing not with the intentionality of deceitful narration or action, but with the necessary limitations of the point of view. It is these limitations that are *dramatized*. The narrator, through special technique, brings the unreliable nature of focalization to the fore.

What is this technique and what are its goals? We have already remarked that prior to the above episode the narrator’s omniscience was employed to make him transparent and leave the reader face to face with events. In the body of the episode the presence of the narrator is more complex. Most importantly, his omniscience has a different *function*: he ‘spends’ it, so to speak, *to contest the vision of characters*. Each change of perspective, when the narrator leaps from one mind to another, undermines the preceding point of view.

In addition, the narrator address the reader directly. The following passage from our initial episode cannot be attributed to any of the characters:

В это мгновение солнечный свет как бы обнажил ее лицо, окатил гладкие щеки, придал искусственную теплоту ее неподвижным глазам, с их большими, словно упругими зрачками в сизом сиянии, с их прелестными темными веками, чуть в складочку, редко мигавшими, как будто она все боялась потерять из виду непременную цель. Она почти не была накрашена; только в тончайших морщинках теплых крупных губ сохла оранжевато-красная пыльца. (Nabokov, 1, p. 121)

[At that instant the sun seemed to lay bare her face, flowing over her smooth cheeks and lending an artificial warmth to her eyes with their large elastic-looking pupils amid the dove-gray radiance and adorable dark lids slightly creased, rarely blinking as if she were constantly afraid of losing sight of an essential goal. She wore almost no make up - only in the minute fissures of her warm full lips there seemed to be drying traces of orange-red pollen.]

No one in the compartment is able to see Marta that way. The description gains its force as an aspect of Marta *invisible* to her companions (and even to herself): it is in full view, yet beyond the reach of the characters. The contrast between the suddenly tender, poetic and objective tone of that passage and the characters’ thoughts, all trapped in boredom, lust or habit - trapped inside their individual perspectives - is the main narrative moment here. Throughout the episode the narrator communicates directly with the reader to the same effect.

Here, thus, is how our episode is told. At the nucleus of presentation there are three ‘innocent’ individual perspectives of the characters. The next layer of meaning results from the fact that all three perspectives are juxtaposed and directly commented on by the narrator. They are fully surrounded by the impersonal narrative. Each of them is entirely contained within a larger narrative space shared by the narrator and the reader. When the narrator, contrasting Marta’s and Dreyer’s states of mind, says: “То же резвое сияние было для Марты просто вагонной духотой,” [For Martha, that frolicsome radiance was simply stuffy air in a railway car.] he speaks directly to the reader within that larger space.[[15]](#footnote-14) Neither Marta, Dreyer, nor Franz knows of its existence. Innocent and transparent, they are fully immersed in the all-penetrating medium of the narrator's omniscience. They are classical victims of dramatic irony.

The narrator orients the totality of fictional information against each particular way of apprehending it. In the narrative space thus organized, the act of looking, instead of informing the characters about each other, isolates and deceives them. The very structure of telling the story emphasizes blindness. The narrator’s goal is not to present the reader with a uniform surface of reported reality – a picture; not even to describe certain individual ways to see it. What he tries to present is rather the individual ways *not to see it*. Generalizing, we can say that he is probably more involved in showing how blind his characters are than in reporting what they perceive. The diminished degree of intentional control, which we indicated before as the essence of focalization, is dramatized in our episode as the lack of grasp on the plenitude of reality, an impotence to see. In order to understand the function and the meaning of such a way of presentation we must step back from the fragment and assess the novel as a whole.

Nabokov, it turns out, builds the entire plot of Korol’, dama, valet around the theme of blindness. Hidden at first in the fabric of narrative, it proves to be the basis of the plot. Characters look at, but do not see each other. Dreyer is happily unaware that Franz becomes Marta's lover and that together they plan his murder. Marta does not know that at a certain point Franz begins to fear and hate her (he sees her as a gigantic toad,) and neither lover has access to Dreyer's business experiments. Even Franz's mad landlord, a puny old ruin, has his secret. *‘Incognito’* is the main regime of existence in the novel and it reaches its climax in the character of an unidentifiable inventor:

Началось с того, что как-то в среду, в первых числах ноября, к нему явился незнакомый господин с неопределенной фамилией и неопределенной национальности. Он мог быть чехом, евреем, баварцем, ирландцем,- совершенно дело личной оценки. (Nabokov, 1, p.168)

[It began one Wednesday, in the first days of November, when he received a visit from an unknown gentleman with a vague name and no determinable origin. He might have been Czech, Jewish, Bavarian, Irish - it was entirely a matter of personal evaluation.]

Consequently, the incidents of the plot take place always on the verge of denouement, of a drastic reversal of fortune. Blind to each other, the characters tempt their luck again and again. The novel constantly breeds triangles in which two of the participants share certain knowledge unavailable to the third, and available to the reader. The *secret* becomes the principle of such 'triangular' drama as well as the basic psychological mechanism that binds the pairs together:

Как то семя, которое факир зарывает в землю, чтобы истошным колдовством вытянуть из него живое дерево, просьба Марты [к Францу] скрыть от Драйера их невинное похождение, просьба, на которую он тогда едва обратил внимание, теперь в присутствии Драйера, мгновенно и чудовищно разрослась, обратившись в тайну, которая странно связывала его с Мартой. (Nabokov, 1, p. 153)

[Like a seed that a fakir buries in the ground only to coax out of it, with manic magic, a live tree, Martha's request [to Franz] that he conceal from Dreyer their innocent adventure, a request to which he had barely paid attention at the time, now, in presence of Dreyer, had monstrously grown, turning into a secret which strangely bonded him to Martha.]

The central triangle, naturally, is Dreyer-Franz-Marta. The chief source of dramatic tension is the fact that Dreyer is so close to the massive truth, but does not see it. Like a sleep-walker, he constantly passes the lovers by, without recognizing what they are doing or about to do. We almost want to help him; we want to shout into his ears the truth that escapes his notice for so long. As the murderous plan progresses the 'innocent' misperceptions of the initial episode grow into the gaping, glaring absence of insight which thickens around Dreyer and eclipses almost everything else about him. In fact, his blindness proves to be as active, complex and dramatically potent an aspect of him as his vision. His blindness is definitely more important to the plot, because *the logic of events hinges more on what Dreyer does not see than on what he sees*.

Variations on the theme of blindness in the novel are inexhaustible. Dreyer is unable to realize that a young man on the train is looking at his wife's legs, just as later he cannot conceive of a love affair between them. Instead of studying his close family, he is investigating his driver. Even when he visits a criminology museum and realizes, in a rare fit of clairvoyance, that the streets around him are full of potential killers and poisoners, he still sees the two real soon-to-be murderers in his own home as the only normal people in town. Marta and Franz, in their turn, are equally blind in relation to Dreyer's business life. They do not know that he is involved in a series of actions that will decisively change the outcome of their murder plot. Unable to imagine Dreyer as having an independent existence, they view him just as a passive object of their developing plans.

At this point we can better understand the prohibition of eye contact discovered in our initial episode. What is eye contact? It begins when, while looking at the other, I realize that the other is looking at me. Suddenly, in the midst of my protective ‘incognito,’ I am lit by the other's glance and exposed as an object in his world. Through eye contact I become conscious that I am *given* to the other. From the self-less, spontaneous subjectivity of pure observation, I am abruptly driven onstage and shaped as an object in someone else's world.

How do I react to that foreign freedom which wraps me inside my own image, giving me a surface I cannot see? Usually, at such a moment I lower my eyes, consenting to be an object. I turn myself into a gift of trust, establishing the zone of safe coexistence. This sacrifice, however, is not entirely sincere because in it I sacrifice only my surface. In breaking the eye contact, I deny access to my real self. In a sense, I hide myself behind my surface. That is why lowering the eyes is often associated with unclear conscience. In fact, instead of being the true token of trust, my image presented to the other is a smoke screen.

If, in a second outcome, I do not avert my eyes it means that I accept the challenge. Conscious of being looked at, I fight back. With my own gaze I attempt to overcome and envelop the source of that alien depth from which the other is looking at me. In full openness, knowing and to some extent sharing our intentions, we, I and the other, live the unstable equilibrium of our contest. We accept the risk as the condition of contact and pit against one another our freedoms.

Korol’, dama, valet, as we have seen, is built around the fact that such an open meeting is carefully prevented. The basis of the novel is not a power struggle, but the comedy of error and coincidence. The characters act in illusion which directs them in such a way that they never confront each other. Even the final revelation of truth is denied them: dying Marta happily smiles, dreaming that Dreyer is killed at last, while Dreyer, healthy and desolate, pathetically misinterprets the happiness of her smile.

Adultery, the literal core of the plot, also emerges in the novel as the basic aspect of the human condition. The other is fundamentally unfaithful, Nabokov seems to say; requited love and any type of actual contact are hallucinations. Even when no third party is involved, the other is still unfaithful inside, behind the deceptive surface. And most of the time, tragically, that adultery remains secret. We cannot know when, where and exactly with whom; we are not even aware that it is taking place. Beside the main group of Dreyer-Marta-Franz, all the characters are involved in virtual triangles in which one of the participants is deceived by another with the third. Everybody in the novel is, sooner or later, betrayed by the world.

One of the most peculiar forms of that betrayal is related to the concepts of time and change. When the narrator directly mentions Dreyer's blindness to the reader he says:

Наблюдательный, остроглазый Драйер переставал смотреть после того, как между ним и рассматриваемым предметом становился приглянувшийся ему образ этого предмета, основанный на первом остром наблюдении. Схватив одним взглядом новый предмет, правильно оценив его особенности, он уже больше не думал о том, что предмет сам по себе может меняться, принимать непредвиденные черты и уже больше не совпадать с тем представлением, которое он о нем составил. (Nabokov, 1, p.180)

[Observant, sharp-eyed Dreyer would stop looking after having between himself and an object in question placed a favorite image of that object based on his first sharp observation. Having grasped with just one glance the essence of a new object, having accurately evaluated its distinctive features, he would not think that the object could change on its own, take unexpected forms, and cease to coincide with the idea he made of it.]

Later this is almost exactly repeated to Dreyer by his former lover Erica:

Ты сажаешь человека на полочку и думаешь, что он будет так сидеть вечно, а он сваливается,- а ты и не замечаешь,- думаешь, что он все продолжает сидеть,- и в ус себе не дуешь... (Nabokov, 1, p. 222)

You put a person on a shelf and think that he will sit there eternally, but he falls down - and you do not even notice - you think that he keeps sitting there - and do not care at all...]

Dreyer cannot understand either of these warnings. Encountering another person for the first time, Dreyer creates his or her image, and then *projects* that fixed and rigid image onto its original.[[16]](#footnote-15)

In this specific projective form, blindness finds its symbolic expression in the theme of the *mannequin*. It is one of the main themes in the novel. All three protagonists are compared to dolls, puppets and automata. When Marta and Franz plan Dreyer's murder we learn that

…Драйер раздвоился. Был Драйер, опасный, докучливый, который ходил, говорил, хохотал, - и был какой-то , отклеившийся от первого, совершенно схематический Драйер, которого и следовало уничтожить. Все, что говорилось о способах истребления, относилось именно к этому второму, схематическому объекту. Им было очень удобно орудовать. Он был плоский и неподвижный. Он был похож на те фотографии, вырезанные по очерку фигуры и подкрепленные картоном, которые любители дешевых эффектов ставят к себе на письменный стол. (Nabokov, 1, p.224)

[Dreyer had divided into two. There was the dangerous irksome Dreyer who walked, spoke, guffawed; and there was a second, purely schematic Dreyer, who had become detached from the first – and it was this one that had to be destroyed. Whatever method of annihilation was mentioned, it applied precisely to this schematic object. It was very convenient to manipulate. It was flat and immobile. It resembled those photographs of close relatives cut along the outline of the figure and reinforced with cardboard that people, fond of cheap effects, place on their desks.]

And later:

В этой его ясной и гибкой схеме одно всегда оставалось неподвижным, но этого несоответствия Марта не заметила. Неподвижной всегда оставалась жертва. (Nabokov, 1, p.225).

[In his lucid and flexible pattern only one thing remained always stationary, but his discrepancy went unnoticed by Marta. The stationary thing was always the victim, as if it had become paralyzed in advance, waiting.]

We can see here that a corpse, passive and obedient, becomes the ultimate version of the mannequin. Projection is strongly associated with and almost equated to murder, thus integrating the symbolic aspect of the novel to its principal plotline.

The link between the cognitive and the criminal develops gradually. On the level of events, the two key elements realizing the mechanism of projection are deception and manipulation. Once the story gains momentum, the characters begin to lie and scheme, attempting to bring others into compliance with their wishes. The effects of their maneuvers, however, are not what might be expected. Projection not only fixes and mortifies its object, but also affects its perpetrator.[[17]](#footnote-16) All manipulators in the novel are eventually revealed as being manipulated themselves. The strongest example is Franz’s landlord. He believes that he invented everybody around him (indeed, the whole world) and that he can do whatever he wants with his inventions. In the course of the novel, however, we gradually realize that he is mad. His actions do not affect other characters. There is no one at the target end of his projects. Even his wife, who at first appears real, turns out to be just a figment of his imagination. In his own absolute scheme, he operates with nothingness. It is possible to generalize this for the entire novel: the more total the manipulation appears to be, the more hallucinatory are its objects, and the more ignorant of reality around them are the manipulators. All other characters’ attempts at manipulating others should be viewed in light of this rule.

The theme of projection begins to develop in the novel when Dreyer decides to hire the inventor of moving mannequins. He buys the idea and controls the inventor, thus becoming a puppeteer of the second degree. A little later, however, he himself appears in the role of an ignorant puppet when Marta and Franz plan his murder. They project him into their various scenarios as a still corpse, a wooden, ready-to-be-destroyed doll. Ignoring their schemes, profoundly blind, he is passively moving toward his destruction. Franz, in his turn, on many occasions experiences a sensation to be just a toy in Marta's willful hands and a mannequin in Dreyer's store. Finally, Marta, at the culmination of the plot, is accidentally manipulated by Dreyer, so that she postpones the killing and dies herself instead. All three protagonists are revealed as resembling sleepwalkers captured and driven by the logic of events. The basic aesthetic impact of the novel depends upon the reader’s ability to visualize the plot as played out by several mannequin-like figures, set out onto their intersecting courses from the beginning, and achieving the symmetry and grace of their lethal encounter through the exact measure of their blindness. Never meeting eye to eye, never actually penetrating behind each other's surface, the characters, like windowless monads, collide blindly in the scheme of pre-established harmony.

Here, the analysis of the theme of the mannequin arrives at a crucial point – the link between the symbolism of the mannequin and the nature of the characters’ actions. Nabokov begins the novel by presenting the characters as ‘puppeteers,’ that is to say, as active subjects attempting to manipulate others, and ends it by showing them to be ‘puppets,’ ignorant of the key circumstances of their situations and driven by extraneous forces. From a sufficient distance everyone in the novel seems manipulated.

Let us examine this manipulation more closely. Its most important and interesting feature is absence of force. There is no direct ‘pushing and shoving’ in the novel, no explicit pressure. Characters are ‘brought’ to make their choices through their own volitions – but *misdirected* volitions. We see Marta, Franz and Dreyer act the way they do, not because something forced them to, but because they misunderstand their situation. Vision, or, more precisely, the absence of it, becomes central for Nabokov's novels as it determines the structure of causality.

Let us start again at the microlevel of immediate character interaction and examine the causality of the plot:

Марта в бесплотном сиянии его [Франца] близорукости нисколько не была похожа на вчерашнюю даму, которая позевывала как тигрица. Зато мадоннообразное в ее облике, примеченное им вчера в полудремоте и снова утраченное, - теперь проявилось вполне, как будто и было ее сущностью, ее душой, которая теперь расцвела перед ним без примеси, без оболочки. (...) Она решила, что ошеломила его совершенно видом небольшого, но очень дорогого сада, где, между прочим, было и персиковое деревцо, и плакучая ива, и серебристые елочки, и какая-то патентованная яблоня, и магнолия, и банан, уже завернутый в рогожку... То, что сад для Франца только зеленоватое марево, ей просто в голову не пришло, хотя она заметила, как беспомощно он близорук. Приятно принимать его так изящно в саду, приятно поражать невиданным богатством, но особенно приятно будет показывать ему комнаты в особняке и выслушивать рокот его почтительного восхищения. (Nabokov, 1, p.131)

[In the insubstantial radiance of his [Franz's] myopia, Martha bore no resemblance at all to the lady of yesterday who had yawned like a tigress. But something madonna-like in her image that he had noticed yesterday in half-dream and lost again now emerged more fully, as if it were her essence, her soul now blossoming before him without any admixture, without any cover.(...) She decided that she had stunned him completely with the sight of her small but very expensive garden which contained among other things a peach tree, a weeping willow, several silver firs, some sort of patented apple tree, a magnolia, and a banana tree, already wrapped up in burlap... The fact that for Franz the garden had been just a greenish fog did not even come to her mind, even though she noticed how helplessly nearsighted he was. How enjoyable it is to receive him so elegantly in the garden; how enjoyable it is to dazzle him with unheard-of wealth, but especially enjoyable it will be to show him the rooms in the villa and hear the gurgle of his respectful admiration.]

In the bigger episode from which this short excerpt is taken Franz comes to Marta and Dreyer's. It is important that in the morning of that day he has accidentally broken his glasses. Being terribly shortsighted, he does not entirely recognize Marta. He is in his own world, vague, uncertain and unstable; a dreamy world where things merge with their shadows and light dissolves contours. Dreyer is away and Marta shows Franz the house. It is the first time they have met since the train ride and the first time they see each other alone. In a sense, it is the true beginning of their love affair. During that meeting their mutual feelings are born; the foundation of their attraction is formed. We can see what type of forces brings them together.

Remarkably, for both of them those forces are different and based on error. In the fog of Franz's shortsightedness Marta again appears to him as a Madonna. What is even more important is that he believes to see her finally as she is. He thinks he observes her soul without any admixture or cover. She blooms in front of him like a flower that comes out of its bud, a sudden and lucky apparition from the fog. The sense of that available and luxurious nakedness merging with the puzzled gratitude for an undeserved gift is always in the background of his erotic experience.

In reality, Marta is fully clothed in the protective armor of her status. Far from giving a gift, she is engaged in the calculated trading of recognition. For her the whole affair is social, without a trace of soul. All her emotions are mediated throughout by the fact that she and Franz are sitting in an elegant upscale garden; that she appears exceedingly rich to a provincial; that he reacts appropriately. He attracts her, a poor outsider, because only in his presence is she able to experience her wealth and status. Only with him and through him can she possess what she owns. That possession is the true basis of her sexuality which requires an inferior partner, dazzled and controlled. She believes her little world overwhelms Franz and, tasting his stupefaction, enjoys the first pleasures of love.

His stupefaction, in its turn - the narrator informs us directly - is due mainly to his extreme myopia. While Marta thinks she affects him, his reaction is the result of what is taking place in his own subjective sphere. He does not see the garden at all. Afterwards he will not see the house. He will never really care about the cars, the dresses, the money... Marta's ambitions, when later in the novel he vaguely becomes aware of them, inspire in him only fear and loathing. His reality consists of lips, skin, hair, smell...

We can see that both Marta and Franz are totally isolated inside their own private worlds. Later in the novel, they negotiate caresses and exchange dialogue lines thinking they affect each other, while in fact they have no idea where their actions actually lead. Yet, the plot progresses smoothly. The characters resemble automata who perform miraculously intricate series of corresponding motions, without crashing or breaking the rhythm. The secret of that correspondence is in the fact that each of them independently executes a scenario which is *synchronized* with those of the others. There is subtle and continuous accord between Marta's social manipulations and Franz's carnal confusion. Adding Dreyer to that planetary system increases the level of mutual harmonious misunderstanding to almost comic proportions and complexity. Only a series of new errors and deceptions can prevent a premature climax.

One episode is particularly telling: Dreyer, meeting Franz, decides on the spur of the moment to visit his apartment, which he has never seen before. He hurries there, dragging Franz with him, and goes towards Franz's room. At the same time, inside the room sits Marta, who, also on a whim, has decided to come to her lover's without warning. Dreyer wants to open the unlocked door but Marta from within holds the handle. A short struggle ensues. Franz, unable to figure it out, tries to help Dreyer open the door. Marta is almost defeated when the landlord suggests that inside is Franz's 'little girlfriend.' Dreyer laughs and leaves, without realizing that the landlord meant Marta. Franz returns to his room and makes love to Marta. Marta returns home before Dreyer and tells him that she was at the post office. Dreyer, still laughing, tells her how he discovered Franz's ‘little girlfriend.’

In this fast sequence each event has multiple meanings, one per character.During the decisive struggle, four contradictory interpretations of what is happening coexist and interact. But the individual perspectives, so charged with conflict, are carefully prevented from canceling each other in a short circuit of general denouement. At one point, only the door separates Dreyer from Marta and the novel's plot from collapse. That door is nothing but a physical realization of the ontological gap between the spouses. Both the door and the gap are impenetrable, but the nature of the impenetrability does not reside in the obstacle’s solidity or width. We should remember that only the interference of the landlord, equally mistaken, saves the situation. The characters are isolated by the orchestrated sequence of events better than by locks and walls. The pre-existing general plan envelops them in a transparent medium of reciprocal ignorance and saves the plot from premature reversal of fortune. The precise synchronicity of their blind movements - a recognizably Nabokovian mark - is the result of that plan.[[18]](#footnote-17) Almost impossible collisions of mutual error are always resolved in the novel (as well as in all other novels) through matching motivations entirely plausible within each character's private sphere.

In that respect, Nabokovian plots are *orchestrated.* Each character plays an independent line similar to that of an instrument in an orchestra, and all lines come together in the overall design of the score. What differs between a piece of music and the novels is the fact that musicians know in advance the entirety of the score, whereas Nabokov's characters are ignorant even of its existence. Moreover, their ignorance is exactly what generates the causal consistency of the plot. In plots of that type, ignorance makes the characters dramatically significant, so much so, that Nabokov finds it appropriate to emphasize the extent of that ignorance:

Но ни Драйер, ни секретарь, ни вообще кто-либо в мире, никогда не узнал, что изобретатель с синими щеками жил, случайно, как раз в том номере, где по приезде переночевал Франц, - где из окна был виден теперь уже голый ясень, и где можно было заметить, - если очень-очень тщательно присмотреться, что въелась мельчайшая стеклянная пыль в линолеум у рукомойника. То, что судьба поселила изобретателя именно там, - знаменательно. Этот путь проделал Франц, - судьба вдруг спохватилась, послала - вдогонку, вдогонку, - синещекого человека, который об этом, конечно, ничего не знал, и никогда не узнал, - как вообще об этом никогда не узнал никто. (Nabokov, 1, p. 180)

[But neither Dreyer, nor his secretary, nor anyone at all in the world ever found out that the blue-cheeked inventor happened to live in the same room where Franz had spent the night of his arrival - where an ash tree, now leafless, was visible from the window, and where one could notice - if one looked very carefully, that some minute glass dust had become imbedded in the cracks of the linoleum by the washstand. The fact that Fate should have lodged the inventor exactly there is significant. It was a road that Franz had traveled - and all at once Fate remembered and sent - in pursuit, in pursuit - the blue-cheeked man, who of course knew nothing of it, and never found out anything about it, as for that matter no one else ever did.]

This blue-cheeked inventor comes to Dreyer. Dreyer develops his invention and, during a boating trip, when Franz is ready to push him into water, casually mentions to Marta that he is about to sell the idea of the mannequins and gain a big sum of money. Moved by greed, Marta decides to postpone the murder and, as a result of the trip, catches pneumonia and dies herself. If the inventor had not come after Franz, the narrator suggests in the paragraph above, Dreyer would have been dead. The protagonists do not know about that hidden causality of events. If they had known, their actions would have been different. Deeply deceived, each of them resembles a cog which believes itself to be moving the mechanism of their common situation, whereas the mechanism is simply designed in such a way as to include and condition all possible movements of its parts.

On the basis of that resemblance it is easy to see Nabokov's characters as full automata. Accusations of depriving his subjects of spirit, of viewing human beings in a scientific, almost clinical light are often leveled against him. Part of the Russian literary community considers him to be a literary surgeon, or rather pathologist, always ready to dissect his lifeless characters and then assemble them back. Even the famous article by Khodasevich[[19]](#footnote-18), explaining that Nabokov exposes his devices and that his novels always describe the workshop of an artist, suggests that Nabokov bares the strings of the puppeteer and thus ascribes to him the Frankensteinian qualities of self-conscious, surgical art. Georgy Adamovich exemplifies this attitude saying:

People about whom Nabokov tells are outlined most sharply, but, as in Gogol's writings, they lack something elusive and most crucial, final breath, or, perhaps, soul. The snapshot is probably so clear because it captures the dead and still life, painted and cleverly placed puppets, and not the live world where Nabokov's mechanical gleam and his relentless play of intrigues and denouements do not exist. [[20]](#footnote-19)

To start answering such accusations, we should remark first that the sense of inhumanity, accurately linked by the critic to the mechanistic atmosphere permeating Nabokov's universe,[[21]](#footnote-20) does not issue from an alleged hollow inside his characters, a lack of soul. It is, as we have seen above, the effect of *surface*, of their very windowlessness, and of the perfect fit between their isolated acts. The automatic aspect of their attuned revolutions comes from the fact that they cannot affect anything in their world. Their world is precalculated in such a way that the effects of their actions only *appear* to be caused by their own volitions, while we, the readers, see that events are occuring on a level beyond their understanding and will.

What then does Adamovich accuse Nabokov of? The gist of the accusation seems to be that Nabokov sees the world in terms of art – full of stylistic brilliance, characters-puppets and careful composition – whereas the actual reality is about life and soul, which is what the artist is supposed to convey to the audience. According to that view, Nabokov is merging two different and opposed planes, the literary and the real. Superimposing the first onto the second, seeing the world as orderly and dead presumably gives him an advantage of being able to use it as especially convenient literary material.

Before answering these accusations we should resolve the general metaphysical issues raised by our discoveries. We should address the basic logic of the human condition. The issues in question group around the opposition of predestination and freedom.

This opposition immediately refers us to a conspicuous resemblance between what Leibniz describes in Monadology (as well as in several other works) and what Nabokov accomplishes in Korol', dama, valet. Leibniz thought about precisely the problems mentioned above, and in a similar context. Not only are the worlds of Nabokov and Leibniz similar, but the logic of their metaphysical difficulties, as we shall see below, is practically identical.

The famous clockwork universe, as we learn from Monadology, is predicated on the windowlessness of the monad. Once we assume that monads are windowless, it necessarily follows that only a pre-existing design can co-adjust totally isolated units and assure the semblance of their complex reciprocity. Here is how Leibniz explains an 'impossible' interaction between windowless entities:

51. [The] influence of one monad upon the other is but *ideal* and can take effect only through the intervention of God; in the ideas of God, indeed, any monad reasonably requires that in his ruling of all others, God, from the beginning, take that monad into consideration. For since no created monad can exercise a physical influence upon the interior of any other, this is the only means by which the one can depend upon the other. (Leibniz, 1965, p. 156)

In order to appear as interaction, Leibniz suggests, the act of one monad and the response of another must be synchronized in advance. The notion of 'in advance' here needs qualification. According to Leibniz, all events of the world exist simultaneously. An extratemporal divinity created them in such a way that, played out in time, they produce sequences which appear as relations. Your questions correspond to my answers, his shots correspond to their wounds... But those questions, answers, shots, and wounds have been fabricated independently, and exist independently in the timeless 'script' of God. Using our temporal notions, we call predestination that part of the divine reality that lies ahead of us, in the future.

All that does not actually solve the problem of soul, but reformulates it in more precise terms. Now the question is: does the clockwork world consist of clockwork parts?

Is there a difference between the monad and the robot? Both are somehow determined; both move along some sort of tracks. Yet, we intuitively feel that the un-freedom of the robot is different from the un-freedom of the monad. The robot does not have choice in any sense. It is immediately caused by its program and the causal mode of relation between its program and its actions constitutes its essence. If there existed such a thing as a robot's subjectivity, it would revolve around inner *constraint*, an irresistible coercive force. The monad, on the other hand, is free in an important sense. There is no compulsion in its inner experience. Its being has a dimension of spontaneity. Its essence is constrained from neither the outside nor the inside. Even while its future is pre-established, such a future is not related to the monad as a program to a programmed entity. Destiny does not pull strings - it is freely lived.

How are predestination and freedom/soul compatible? This problem, we suggest, is not existential, but conceptual. Can we *think* predestination and freedom simultaneously? Still remaining on the general metaphysical plane, we can at this point bring in an example from the realm of the artistic. What happens when we encounter a motion picture? Coming to a movie theater we realize that the movie has already been made. The future of all the characters exists before they even begin to act and before we begin to watch. It is there, in the cans of film. Yet, we are able to perceive the characters as free and meaningfully apply to them moral notions. The same happens in literature (at least in its character-oriented works). We do discuss Pierre Bezukhov’s choices and Raskolnikov’s responsibility even though we know perfectly well that the books in which they act have already been written. Without the possibility of such a moral attitude towards the characters, familiar novels would lose a large part of their impetus and significance. These examples illustrate that a character is a very peculiar creature: there exist two mutually exclusive languages (conceptual systems) that are equally applicable to him. One treats him as a full time human, free and responsible; another assumes him to be part of the authorial design in relation to which the issues of freedom and responsibility are suspended or simply irrelevant. Literature and cinema show the possibility of there being two logically incompatible ways of looking at something that coexist perfectly in our minds.

The Leibnizian variety of predestination theory invites us to accomplish the same type of mental dialectics – to accept that the future of the world already exists *and* to retain awareness of ourselves as free. On various occasions Leibniz insists that divine preordination does not render our actions necessary.[[22]](#footnote-21) In A Vindication of God's Justice, for instance, he says that "the objective certainty, that is the infallible determination of truth, inherent in the future contingents should not be confused with necessity." (Leibniz, 1965, p.136).

What is, according to Leibniz, the actual relation between these two conceptual orders – two ways of thinking about human beings? Here is what he writes in Monadology:

53. Now, since in the divine ideas there is an infinity of possible universes of which only one can exist, the choice made by God must have a sufficient reason which determines him to the one rather than to another.

54. This reason can be found only in fitness, that is in the degree of perfection contained in these worlds. For each possible world has a right to claim existence in proportion to the perfection it involves. Thus nothing is entirely arbitrary. (Leibniz, 1965, p.156)

Leibniz finds the solution to the problem of freedom in the notion of sufficient reason.[[23]](#footnote-22) He holds that the sufficient reason for whatever happens is in its *fitness* with the rest, that is to say, in the degree of perfection it involves. God's effort is the effort of *harmonization* rather than of authority. Instead of coercing things to fit his designs, God lets them be what they are by combining them in such a way as to achieve maximum perfection:

God, in co-operating with ordinary actions only follows the laws which he has established, that is to say, he continually preserves and produces our being so that the ideas come to us spontaneously or with freedom in that order which the concept of our individual substance carries with itself. (Leibniz, 1955, p.49)

God, according to Leibniz, is tender. He does not press, warp, corrugate or wrinkle us. He *preserves* us the way we are. He lets us be. He leaves us alone. Predestination, Leibniz suggests, operates through the natural spontaneity of beings, that is to say, through the agents’ own choices, for which they are fully responsible and which

they live as their own. The beauty of Leibniz’s world lies exactly in the fact that it does not require any external interference, any tune-up or maintenance. It runs itself, like a stand-alone machine, that, as a bonus, always arrives on time at the point of destination. This miraculous inner coherence, based on the perfect fit of all its independent parts, is what makes it similar to Nabokov’s novels.

The future of Nabokovian characters indeed pre-exists. Unknown, it waits for them to be lived. But to conclude from this premise that freedom is an illusion is to confuse determination and predestination, causality and fatality. Seen in terms of freedom, predestination does not function as a pushing, abusive force – instead, it appears as freely lived *fate*.

Fate, Nabokov's grand theme in Korol’, dama, valet, was already known in Hellenic antiquity. But while the Greeks considered the connection between blindness and predestination as tragic Nabokov is able to see it primarily as aesthetic (tragedy, we should note, was in Ancient Greece a form of art). A realization that the very effort to resist a prophecy may result in its fulfillment opens for Sophocles the realm of the inevitable. Along with his protagonist, he accepts blindness as part of the human condition. Nabokov, on the other hand, finds something *purely* aesthetic in the fact that blindness may be instrumental in the causality of a plot. He inverts the relation fate-blindness and sees any instance of limited vision as directly or indirectly generating predestination and pattern. Order and harmony in his world are essentially related to someone's *inability* to see them. Windowlessness of the parts for him is crucial to the design of the whole. Just like Leibniz, Nabokov sees the monad as essentially artistic material.

The only contemporary theorist who attempted to apply the consequences of Leibniz’s metaphysics to the realm of art is Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s starting point is the link between windowlessness and artistic form. The problem is treated at length in the essay “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity.” Defining his terms, Bakhtin writes:

The author not only sees and knows everything seen and known by each hero individually and by all the heroes collectively, but he also sees and knows *more* than they do; moreover, he sees and knows something that is in principle inaccessible to them. And it is precisely in this invariably determinate and stable *excess* of the author’s seeing and knowing in relation to each hero that we find all those moments that bring about the consummation of the whole – the whole of each hero as well as the whole of the event which constitutes their life and in which they jointly participate, i.e., the whole of a work. (…) And it is these actions of contemplation, issuing from the excess of my outer and inner seeing of the other human being, that constitute the purely *aesthetic* actions. The excess of my seeing is the bud in which slumbers form, and whence form unfolds like a blossom. (Bakhtin, 1990, p.12&25)

Bakhtin relates the dramatic aspect of blindness to the finalizing capacity of its observer. According to him, the aesthetic attitude appears whenever we are able to grasp an object as a whole, to perceive its external surface, its outer limit, in short, its *form*. Bakhtin is also aware of the metaphysical and theological consequences of this view: he says that artistic vision is “seeing as divination that has an inherent tendency to predetermine me” (Ibid., p.34) In his essay, freedom is constantly opposed to the finality of artistic vision – but one does not cancel the other. Moral and aesthetic attitudes coexist on a dialectical basis.

In the context of Bakhtin’s theory we can see the accuracy of Adamovich’s accusation of Nabokov. *The latter indeed sees the world as art: more precisely, he sees it as form.* Nabokov’s vision is artistic: in the very act of seeing, he applies an excess of knowledge in relation to its object. In case of characters it results in presenting them as windowless. We may even suggest such an excess of knowledge – which corresponds to the excess of pattern and order - as the *raison d’être* of Nabokov’s artistic enterprise (in this he is again the opposite of Kafka, for whom the departing moment is the *lack* of vision.)

This explains the similarity between Nabokov and Leibniz as far as their fundamental morality is concerned. Seeing the world as form, Nabokov inevitably sees it as design. Composition/order is the only mode of existence. Consequently, the success of design is the criterion according to which things must be judged. Nabokov follows Leibniz in equating the Good with the Perfect. This also explains the link that Nabokov perceives between science and art: both scientists and artists tend toward the same end, the excess of knowledge.

Passing now from metaphysics to fiction and keeping in mind the similarity between Monadology and the world of Korol', dama, valet, we can make several important remarks as to the purely artistic aspects of Nabokov’s novels. The prohibition of eye contact, for example, should be related to the requirement of windowlessness. We remember that this requirement appeared in our initial episode as a purely formal structure of presentation and later emerged as the existential and causal cornerstone of the plot. Now, finally, we can see it as the aesthetic basis of Nabokov's imagination.

Another consequence of Nabokov's metaphysical principles is his essentialism. Windowless and unaffected by the world, most of Nabokov's characters do not change. They are never subjected to true transcendence and becoming. As monads they always remain themselves and realize their hidden potential. Like plants or butterflies, they grow from the unrecognizable larvae of the first sentences into fully developed specimens without losing their identity. This is one of the reasons why Nabokov likes to redirect his readers back toward the beginning of his stories: he wants to show that all the transformations of his characters, however unexpected and incongruous, are already there, among the first episodes. One of the most interesting facets of his novelistic art consists in integrating various stages of character development: in Korol', dama, valet he shows, for example, how a majestic lady in a second class train compartment can, without interrupting the continuity of forms, turn into a murderous mannequin. Nabokov's characters remain with us as the ‘simple substances’ of Leibniz's universe, unique and indestructible.

The last feature of Korol', dama, valet - *self-conscious complexity* - is also immediately traceable to metaphysics. Once the principle of sufficient reason is used as the criterion of perfection, *best* comes to mean *least arbitrary*. Among all possible worlds - and among all possible novels - the creator selects the one which contains the lowest degree of randomness (the highest degree of harmony.) Every thing, in order to contribute to the total amount of agreement in the universe, must be in the strongest possible way connected with the rest of the world. Leibniz explains in Monadology:

56. This connection of all created things with every single one of them and their adaptation to every single one, as well as the connection and adaptation of every single thing to all others, has the result that every single substance stands in relation which expresses all others. Whence every single substance is a perpetual living mirror of the universe. (Leibniz, 1995, p. 156)

We have here a strikingly accurate description of Nabokov's well known use of *pattern*. His emphasis on detail, his use of narrative echoes, repetition, foreshadowing and symmetry, his constant linguistic inventiveness, and his rhetoric all find their foundation in the principle of sufficient reason understood as a demand for unity. In the first part of Nabokov's career, this demand resulted in the creation of conspicuously dense fictional universes, where even minute details were linked to each other and situated within the network of reciprocal references. In the second part, starting with Dar, the ever increasing demand for unity became explicit, which generated the tendency of his novels to explain openly their internal links and to incorporate those explanations as their integral parts. Dar is involved in a continuous effort of self-criticism and self-elucidation, and in Pale Fire and Look at the Harlequins! the Nabokovian novel turns into a full-fledged self-commentary. Nabokov came to the postmodern themes of autoreferential discourse and textuality in his own way: he avoided direct preoccupation with language, and simply drove the application of the principle of sufficient reason to its radical conclusions.

This ends the exposition of Nabokovian metaphysics. Beginning at the microlevel of Nabokov's narrative we have arrived at the macrolevel of his fictional worlds. The exceptional unity of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ and those worlds expresses the deep connection between his aesthetics and his metaphysics. At the crux of this connection, between the molecular realm of discourse and the architecture of authorial designs, dwells the monad - the remarkable citizen of Nabokov's universe. It is the true center of his novel, carrying within itself almost all of its secrets and explanations.

What is the monad? Is it born windowless, or is its isolation from other monads the result of its own determinations? How unbridgeable is the gap separating the monad from other monads? How should it react to the best of all possible worlds? Once it realizes that it is inside a work of art, what next? These are some of the ultimate questions Nabokov is dealing with. This constellation of questions is his personal version of the initial paradox of self. In order to understand his solutions – and they, as we hope to show, are related not to the either/or choice between the opposed terms of the paradox but to the dialectics of sufficient reason – we need to step back from purely textual analysis, survey all nine novels, and develop a basic theory of the Nabokovian subject - *the ontology of the monad.*

# 

# **CHAPTER 2**

**The Ontology of the Monad**

In the above study of Korol’, dama, valet, Nabokov’s characters were identified as monads on the basis of their windowlessness, understood as both blindness and impenetrability. It was discovered that characters’ actions only appeared to affect others, being in fact orchestrated in advance with others’ independent re-actions. Is windowlessness enough to define the monad? And what exactly is the monad, apart from the fictional universe of Nabokov’s novels? A short review of the philosophical history of the problem is due.

Leibniz, its inventor, arrived at the concept of the monad reflecting upon the Aristotelian notion of substance. Aristotle tried to understand the structure of predication and the world that the possibility of predication implies. He realized that when we use an adjective in a proposition (the house is red) we predicate a quality, an attribute. But to what? The 'thing' we predicate the quality to cannot be of the same nature as the quality itself. Aristotle calls the 'bearer' of qualities substance. Substance is what *exists* and what *has* qualities. Substances are the 'stuff' of the world. But how many substances are there? How is substance individuated? This is one of the most difficult metaphysical problems. It has two famous solutions: Spinoza holds that there is only one substance, Leibniz that there is an infinite number of substances.

The substance of Spinoza is God. All qualities are actually predicated to Him. He is the only true individual in the world (He coincides with the world.) All other individuals are illusory, being just clusters of qualities and not having any independent substance apart from that of God (according to Spinoza people and objects are similar to the tentacles of an octopus: they are not independent creatures but only parts of a central body.)[[24]](#footnote-23)

The substance of Leibniz is the monad. Leibniz wanted to see what could make something an individual.[[25]](#footnote-24) He realized that it is meaningful to speak about the individuation of substance only in terms of its attributes. His idea was that true individuals must be *fully* individuated, that is to say, determined only by their own attributes and not by the attributes of other individuals.[[26]](#footnote-25) Leibniz could not conceive how one, being oneself, could depend on something else. He thought that relations between individuals are incompatible with their individuality, and therefore unreal. From the same premise he inferred that being oneself implies indivisibility because otherwise one would be just a composite, surrendering true individuality to one’s parts. Thus, not having parts (being radically simple), the true individual of Leibniz is unchangeable; being inaccessible to anything else, it is indestructible and eternal. The true individual – Leibniz calls individuals ‘simple substances’ - possesses a unique list of attributes which distinguishes it from all other individuals and determines everything that can happen to it in time. This simple, fully individuated substance is the monad. One example of the monad is the human soul – it does not have

parts, is indestructible, and is fully individuated. Monads are completely isolated from one another and all visible interactions between them are explained through the theory of pre-established harmony. According to that theory, monads are created in such a way that, each realizing independently its nature, they all produce a semblance of actual interactions - the harmonious web of co-existing and co-operating phenomena.[[27]](#footnote-26)

The above described concepts apply well to the novels. The notion of individuation plays a major role in Nabokov's oeuvre. Luzhin, from Zashchita, goes mad over the idea that he is just a piece in an cosmic chess game. Smurov, from Sogliadataj, announces that he does not have any identity apart from what others impose on him. The whole world of Priglashenie turns out to be insubstantial, its characters losing their individuality to the extent that they are revealed to exist as the attributes of a central mind. The two main characters of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Nabokov's first English novel, are shown to be not fully distinguishable from one another, and it is directly intimated that they may be just two aspects of a single higher unity.[[28]](#footnote-27)

Full individuation is one of Nabokov’s main aesthetic goals. In order to be a successful creation, his character must possess maximum existence - which means maximum individuality, inevitability, and existential necessity.[[29]](#footnote-28) Nabokov also wants to build the best of all possible worlds. In order to be a successful whole, his novel must display maximum organization - maximum order, orchestration, harmony. Consequently, Nabokov begins his career with characters that are monads - compressed, self-identical, nuclear creatures interacting according to complex laws of predetermined mechanics.

In our study of Korol', dama, valet we observed those linear, almost mathematical interactions. The characters in the monadic novels are so isolated and self-contained that even their direct collisions leading to utmost proximity do not result in real contact. In Mashen'ka, the most intense relationship turns out to be the most imaginary, as Ganin does not even *meet* his beloved in the present of the novel.[[30]](#footnote-29) The characters are denied access to each other's inner region and just re-bound along their predetermined orbits to ensure the appropriate development of intricate plotlines. Their end is contained in their beginning: in Mashen'ka, the whole plot is secretly foretold in the first episode in the elevator; in Korol', dama, valet, the train compartment scene shows us Marta wishing to attack her husband, Franz calculating what he is ready to do to possess her and Dreyer dressing and undressing a 'mannequin'. In the very beginning of Kamera obskura Krechmar sees the end of his story in a movie he watches by chance. Thus, the world of Nabokov's first novels almost ideally fits the clockwork picture of the Monadology. Nabokov seems to revel in the disconnectedness of human beings - but not in the heavy, straightforward disconnectedness of the existentialists. What inspires him is rather windowlessness and order: the fact that several human dramas can play themselves out within the same space without merging; that they can mutually support, promote and condition without having any substantial contact with one another.

In the previous chapter we have seen that the windowlessness of the characters is the result of Nabokov’s aesthetic way of seeing them. The artistic act necessarily involves for him the excess of knowledge over its object. This leads to presenting the characters as blind and predetermined. But we have also established that Nabokov sees his characters as free and responsible. The contradiction is resolved in the novels by the principle of the strict avoidance of power interference. In Dar, Fyodor directly describes this correspondence between the experiential and the formal, the subjective and the artistic:

… но постепенно досада на самого себя проходила, и с каким-то облегчением – точно ответственность за его душу принадлежала не ему а кому-то знающему в чем дело, - он чувствовал, что весь этот переплет случайных мыслей, как и все прочее, швы и просветы весеннего дня, неровности воздуха, грубые, так и сяк скрещивающиеся нити неразборчивых звуков – не что иное, как изнанка великолепной ткани, с постепенным ростом и оживлением невидимых ему образов на ее *лицевой* стороне. (Nabokov, 3, p.281)

[… but gradually his annoyance with himself passed and with a kind of relief – as if the responsibility for his soul belonged not to him but to someone who knew what it all meant – he felt that all this skein of random thoughts, like everything else as well, the seams and gaps of the spring day, the ruffle of the air, the coarse, variously intercrossing threads of confused sounds – was but the reverse side of a magnificent fabric, on the front of which there gradually formed and became alive images invisible to him.]

This can be taken as a general ontological statement. Fyodor suggests that his world has an outer, invisible aspect. We can easily recognize in this outer aspect the artistic form, the more so as Fyodor indirectly refers to an inaccessible author and his excess of knowledge (“someone who knew what it all meant”). Importantly, Fyodor does not say that the author uses him, the character, as *material*. Instead, thinking about the author, he employs the image of fabric. The image ascribes the magnificence of the fabric’s front – its aesthetic quality – not to the sculpting, coercive interference, but to the radical ‘outsideness’ of the author, to the position of his vantage point.

Thus, even while the presence of the author is felt, it is experienced as informed gaze rather than repressive guidance. In the description above, the flux of Fyodor’s inner life appears to him as random, that is to say, unorganized, meaningless. In the beginning he even feels annoyed with himself for not being able to order his perceptions. That is why his premonition that they emerge as ordered on the outside comes as a relief. The correspondence between his – internal, existential, imperfect - self-authorship, and another – external, aesthetic, complete – authorship, is Fyodor’s main conclusion. And perhaps even better than by the term ‘correspondence’ the relation between the reverse side of experience and the front side of form can be expressed by the term ‘identity’ – after all the reverse *is* the front, as they are two aspects of the same fabric.

This conclusion is consistently confirmed throughout Nabokov’s novels. Their key structural principle is the avoidance of direct interference. The worlds of the novels, just like Leibniz’s universe, run themselves. This principle is realized through the correspondence whereby external form is always and exactly matched by internal choice. Aesthetic elements in Nabokov’s oeuvre, even those seemingly showing signs of authorial presence, are inevitably met by the characters’ effort of self-determination.

Therefore, the task of this chapter – understanding the monad – requires understanding the nature of the characters’ existential self-determinations that make them monadic. Their personal choice that results in windowlessness must be made clear.

This task requires a guiding theory. Windowlessness is complex: it is the mixture of impenetrability and blindness – the mixture of ‘incognito’ and ignorance. As such, it appears partly choice (‘incognito’) and partly chance (blindness.) But even the element of chance within windowlessness does not seem accidental. The blindness of the characters (this is especially noticeable in case of Krechmar from Kamera obskura) is shown as deserved and therefore chosen.

Our starting point in the examination of windowlessness should be the fact that it is an *interpersonal* phenomenon. As both blindness and impenetrability, windowlessness exists in relation to the other. Without the other, there is nothing to perceive and nobody to hide from. Therefore, to understand the monadic choice of the characters, we must uncover their deep existential dispositions in relation to otherness. We need to understand otherness itself, and see how Nabokov’s characters react to it.

The most detailed theory of otherness so far has been developed by Sartre in Being and Nothingness; the sections of that book dedicated to being-for-another (*être-pour-autrui*) can be called the basic ontology of alterity. When applied to Nabokov, Sartre’s theory brings about a somewhat anticipated result: *windowlessness in the novels is related less to seeing than to the way one responds to others’ gaze.*

Sartre begins his study by analyzing the very notion of the subject. According to him (and to the whole phenomenological tradition after Kant and Hegel) the subject (as agent) should be understood in its opposition to the object. The object, in its turn, is by definition the object of knowledge. It is an entity which exists in the physical world of space, time and causality. We perceive objects, we know them. The reverse, it is argued, is also true: all we can perceive or know belongs to the realm of objecthood. We cannot perceive a subject because the very act of perception, as Kant has shown, objectifies.

How then, if not through perception, are we related to another subject? Sartre starts answering that question with an example: I am sitting in a garden observing a man who is walking by. If I treat that man as, say, a mannequin, in other words, as an object, I apply to him all the concepts (categories) I ordinarily use to organize spatio-temporal ensembles. I grasp him as being next to the chairs, several feet from me, exercising certain pressure on the ground, etc. In contrast to that, Sartre writes, “to grasp him as a human being is to register a distanceless organization of things of my universe around this privileged object.” (Sartre, 1943, p.312) He suggests that another subject is not a spatial phenomenon and, in fact, not a phenomenon at all. Another human is a new *center* around which objects are organized, and thus is the structure of reference, not of appearance.

As a result of the emergence of another subject my world is decentered. Sartre explains:

Instead of the objects grouped around me I am dealing with their orientation which escapes me. (...) Thus, when among the objects of my universe there emerges an element that effects the disintegration of that universe, I know that another human appeared in my world.[[31]](#footnote-30) (Sartre, 1943, p.313)

The objects turn to the other a side which eludes me. I do not know how the other sees them. In his presence I do not fully own my world. Sartre says that another subject is stealing my world; that he is like a gap into which my world is constantly disappearing; that he effects a hemorrhage of being in my universe. (Sartre, 1943, pp.313-320) This can be illustrated with an example from our initial episode from Korol', dama, valet.

... она [Марта], вздрогнув, открыла глаза. Но муж сидел сравнительно далеко и читал книжку в кожаном переплете. Читал он внимательно, с удовольствием. Вне солнцем освещенной страницы не существовало сейчас ничего. Он перевернул страницу, и весь мир, жадно, как игривая собака, ожидавший это мгновение, метнулся к нему светлым прыжком, - но, ласково отбросив его, Драйер опять замкнулся в книгу. (Nabokov, 1, p.119)

[... she opened her eyes with a start. But her husband was sitting relatively far, reading a book bound in brown morocco. He was reading attentively and with pleasure. Nothing existed for him now beyond the sunlit page. He turned the page, and the outside world avidly, like a playful dog waiting for that moment, darted up to him with a bright bound - but pushing it away affectionately, Dreyer again immersed himself in his book.]

Dreyer is decentering Marta’s world. At any moment the whole visible universe is ready to rush towards him. Somewhere inside him there is a miraculous, almost unbearable point around which everything arranges itself instantly and continuously no matter what else is happening. The world belongs to him, and he can have what is his at any moment. That is the reason Marta becomes aggressive. She senses that something is constantly being taken away from her while she wants to keep everything under control. Her project is to own the world and to be its only center. In that, she embodies an important element of the human condition: we all take the other to be a permanent structure of theft, a living violation of our property rights. Or, to put it in more erotic terms, the world is unfaithful to us with the other (here again we encounter the theme of adultery, so important in Nabokov's oeuvre.)

Hemorrhage of being, theft, dispossession of the world - this silent catastrophe remains relatively harmless if the other, like Dreyer on the train, is only reading a book. In that case, all one needs to handle is the solid and massive volume of one's own perceptions just punctured at their center by the dangerous vacuum of another subject. One controls that puncture, hemorrhage-proofs it with a thick envelope of one's gaze. A human form passing by, engrossed in reading, is still an object in the very middle of which there is a small localized singularity. To grasp another subject in his fundamental relation to *me* (and not to something in my world) it is necessary to study how his influence extends toward me, to let him 'touch' me more immediately. Here is how Sartre formulates the basic relationship:

If another-as-object in his relation to the world is defined as the object that sees what I see, then my fundamental relation to another-as-subject must be based on my permanent possibility of being seen by the other. It is in the revelation of my being-object for the other that I grasp the presence of his being-subject. (Sartre, 1943, p.314)

I cannot be an object for another object. It takes a subject to objectify me. I am related to another subject in a non-perceptual relation of being-seen. This relation - being-seen-by-another - is not a *quality* of another subject. It is rather a permanent possibility of *my* being. I discover the other not through looking and knowing but through being visible and available. In order to account for this new, non-perceptual, type of relation, Sartre introduces his most important concept, *'le regard'* (the gaze, looking). He calls thus the whole complex of relations involving looking, becoming aware, grasping the other's gaze, being-seen, etc.[[32]](#footnote-31)

Describing the Sartrean gaze we must remark that although it is most often associated with the appearance of a human form in one's field of vision, that condition is not necessary. The presence of others can manifest itself through the creaking of a door, the rustling of leaves - in fact, through anything. Glances can be directed toward us from anywhere. From the outset we exist in a human world, immersed in a human space, under the gaze of all other human beings.

For Nabokov, that diffuse human presence around his characters is extremely important. His world is full of eyes; everything is looking, listening, waiting, heeding:

Неловко заступив, Цинциннат задел поднос, стоявший у стены на полу: "Цинциннат!" - сказал поднос укоризненно... (Nabokov, 4, p.73)

[Having made an awkward step, Cincinnatus caught a tray which stood on the floor by the wall. “Cincinnatus!” the tray said disapprovingly.]

Не дай Бог кому-либо знать эту унизительную скуку, - очередной отказ принять гнусный гнет очередного новоселья, невозможность жить на глазах у совершенно чужих вещей... (Nabokov, 3, p.9)

[Мay God spare you that humiliating boredom, that regular refusal to accept the base yoke of the regular house-warming, that feeling that it’s impossible to live under the eyes of absolutely alien objects...]

Он перепрыгнул лужу, где два навозных жука, мешая друг другу, цеплялись за соломинку, и отпечатал на краю дороги подошву: многозначительный след ноги, все глядящий вверх, все видящий исчезнувшего человека. (Nabokov, 3, p.70)

[He jumped over a puddle, where two scarabs tried to catch a straw, slowing one another, and imprinted his shoe sole onto the edge of the road - a meaningful foot trace which keeps looking upward, keeps seeing the person who has already disappeared.]

- Осторожно, - шепнул Франц, озираясь. Он не доверял стенам. Пристально уставился на него старик в сюртуке на темном портрете. Буфет, поблескивая, смотрел во все глаза. Что-то было напряженное в складках портьеры. (Nabokov, 1, p.190)

[- “Be careful,” whispered Franz, looking around. He did not trust the walls. An old man in a frock-coat stared at him from a dark portrait. A glistening side-board gazed. Something tense was in the folds of the drapery.]

Но в это время размашистым, легким ходом вошел в комнату Том. "Убери собаку, - сказал Франц. - Я ничего не могу делать, пока тут собака." Марта резко крикнула: "Уходи, Том... Хуш!" Том прижал уши, вытянул нежную серую морду и зашел за кресло. "Убери", - сказал Франц сквозь зубы и его всего передернуло. (1, p.234)

[But at that moment they saw the light, swinging gait of Tom entering the room. “Take the dog away,” said Franz. “I cannot do anything while the dog is here.” Tom flattened his ears, stretched his delicate gray muzzle and went behind the armchair. “Take it away,” said Franz with a shudder, clenching his teeth.]

Human presence surrounds Nabokov's characters everywhere. They are as if acting onstage, under the gaze of an attentive audience. That gaze has a rather complex structure. First of all, everything is either man-made or bears an indelible trace of human presence. Not only furniture, walls and drapery, but also dogs, trees and stars carry layers of meaning. Everything reveals the generalized other, everything contains an hint of the gaze. The world is one infinitely complex gaze, coming from all directions and holding the characters in its focus from birth to death. They exist only on the stage of that gaze, only in relation to all others, past and present. This ontological structure lies at the foundation of Nabokov's descriptive style. Verbal inventiveness is not its main point. His descriptions are so powerful because they create *presences*.[[33]](#footnote-32) Reading Nabokov we are surrounded with those presences, observed by them, and constantly driven to become aware of ourselves, exactly as his characters in the above passages become aware of themselves when they come into contact with their world.

The background of diffuse human presence, however, is only a general setting for particular situations. In actual plots each character distinguishes what is relevant specifically to him in the secret life of things: for Fyodor it is his author; for Cincinnatus, it is his approaching death; for Franz, the dreadful presence of his future victim. Thus, each plotline adds a second, concrete layer to the gaze of the world. At this level, instead of containing a general element of humanity, things and objects are forcefully evoking live presences. At any moment, the possibility of being seen can actualize into a human form: the other sooner or later appears in person. Such an event is a defining moment in the universe of Nabokov's characters - a veritable eruption of meaning, a revolution of basic existential realities.[[34]](#footnote-33) Our goal is an accurate description of that ocular meeting between the subject and the other. Such a description would constitute the central part of the ontology of the monad and could give us a hint as to how Nabokov conceives otherness in general. The choice of the other (contemporary thought knows many types of otherness: Buber's 'Thou', the Bakhtinian 'Partner', Lacanian 'Language', even the Hegelian 'Master') is fundamental and reflects Nabokov's identity as a writer.

Let us now return to our analysis of the gaze. I am being seen by the other: we should note that this is not a piece of information. I do not learn about it from, say, a letter. I am directly aware that I am being gazed upon. I experience it. The experience of being seen (and not my perceptual or sensual data input) is the core of my relation to the other. Here is how Bakhtin, as interested as Sartre in the gaze, describes this experience:

(…) We evaluate ourselves from the standpoint of others, and through others we try to understand and take into account what is transgredient to our own consciousness. Thus, we take into account the value of our outward appearance from the standpoint of the possible impression it may produce upon the other, although for ourselves this value does not exist in any immediate way (for our actual and pure self-consciousness). We take into account the background behind our back, that is to say, all that which in our surroundings we do not see and do not know directly and which has no direct axiological validity for us, although it is seen and known by other s and has validity for others; all that, in other words, which constitutes the background, against which, as it were, others perceive us axiologically, against which we stand forth for them. (…) In short, we are constantly and intently on the watch for reflections of our own life on the plane of other people’s consciousness, and, moreover, not just reflections of particular moments of our life, but even reflections of the whole of it. And while seeking to catch these reflections, we also take into account that perfectly distinctive value-coefficient with which our life presents itself to the other – a coefficient which is completely different from the coefficient with which we experience our own life in ourselves. (Bakhtin, 1990, pp.15-16)

I am aware of myself as being seen. The gaze is a specific type of mediation between me and myself. In other words, it is a specific type of self-consciousness. It is distinctly different, however, from simple reflexive self-consciousness. In the presence of the other I am given to myself not as the object of my own attention. In fact, I am not for-myself (*pour-soi.*) I am for-another (*pour-autrui.*) Being seen, I experience my self in so far as it is given to the other. This means that my self escapes me: I will never see it as the other does, it will never belong to me the way it belongs to him. Nevertheless, I *am* that self. I do not reject it as something alien to me, but adopt it as the self that I am without knowing what it is. The consent to be what the other sees is revealed in shame. Shame, on its deepest level, is the shame of *self* (I am ashamed of myself, he is ashamed of himself, etc.) Its essence is my recognition that I *am* that object that the other sees. The relation between me and myself (my self) mediated by the gaze is a relation not of knowing but of being.

Let us see how the above developed concepts apply to the novels. The following example from Mashen'ka, Nabokov's first novel, presents the themes of looking, being seen, self-awareness and shame with remarkable clarity. The protagonist, Ganin, watching a movie, recognizes himself among the extras:

Теперь внутренность того холодного сарая превратилась на экране в уютный театр, рогожа стала бархатом, нищая толпа - театральной публикой. Он напряг зрение и с пронзительным содроганием стыда узнал себя самого среди этих людей, хлопавших по заказу(...) И Ганин в этот миг почувствовал не только стыд, но и быстротечность, неповторимость человеческой жизни. (...) "Не знаем, что творим", - с отвращеньем подумал Ганин, уже не глядя на картину. (...) Он шел и думал, что вот теперь его тень будет странствовать из города в город, с экрана на экран, что он никогда не узнает, какие люди увидят ее, и как долго она будет мыкаться по свету. И когда он потом лег в постель и слушал поезда, насквозь проходившие через этот унылый дом, где жило семь русских потерянных теней, - вся жизнь ему представилась той же съемкой, во время которой равнодушный статист не ведает, в какой картине он участвует. (Nabokov, 1, pp. 49-50)

[Now that cold barn was transformed on the screen into a comfortable theater, sacking became velvet, and a poor crowd a theater audience. Straining his eyes, with a deep shudder of shame he recognized himself among all those people clapping on command. (...) And at that moment Ganin felt not only shame, but also the fleeting, irrepeatable character of human life. (...) “We have no idea what we are doing” he thought with disgust, already not watching the picture. (...) He was walking and thinking that from now on his shadow will be wandering from town to town, from screen to screen and he would never know what kind of people would see it and for how long it would be tossed around the world. And when later he went to bed and listened to the trains passing right through this sad house where seven Russian families found their home - life itself seemed to him a shooting session during which an indifferent extra had no idea what movie he was in.]

It is highly important that this episode happens in a movie theater - a place where images are both photographic and public. Ganin recognizes himself and simultaneously becomes aware that others see him as well. He experiences himself as an object. The whole experience is so sharp because he is given a chance to face his alienated image on the screen, to observe his self out there, 'naked' without his protection and fully available to others. His shame shows that he accepts that image: he *is* that person on the screen. The motion in which he assumes responsibility for himself is so strong that he transfers the attributes of his screen existence (homelessness, ignorance of the real plot) to his real life, and to the lives of those who resemble him, the Russian emigrants, his neighbors. “We have no idea what we are doing,” he thinks in disgust, and he is right: we do not know, the other does. Anyone who sees us is the director of the movie in which we act, and such a director knows more about who we are than we do ourselves. Our being depends on the other in an essential way.

What is also important is that this dependence is related to the freedom of the other. Ganin feels that he will never know “what kind of people will see him” not just because he is unable to control the film distribution, but mostly because the other is free in principle - free to see him in unforeseeable ways.[[35]](#footnote-34) Ganin's shame reveals that he is surrounded by freedom: his ‘role’ and his ‘plotline’ are unpredictable. He *is* that unpredictability, he lives the others' freedom. That explains why along with the shame and in the shame he feels the “fleeting, irrepeatable character of life.”

Shame, it should be insisted, is intimately related to individuation. We have already mentioned Hegel who, in his study of the consecutive stages of subjective development, showed that one is constituted as oneself only by encountering otherness. The other is a necessary condition for the emergence of identity. I become myself by negating that I am the other. To put it differently, being someone means not being anything else. Hegel discovered negativity as a continuous effort the subject must undertake in order to maintain himself in existence. With that discovery he found an original solution for Leibniz's problem of individuation. Leibniz, we remember, tried to construct an ontology in which the subject (the monad) would not need to do anything to maintain his identity. Leibniz wanted to give the subject individuality free of charge and by default. It was Hegel who first suggested that individuation is our own affair and responsibility. Hegel also recognized that individuation is related to self-consciousness, and is impossible without the other. According to Hegel, in presence of the other, the subject’s urge toward individuation translates into the need - and, ultimately, the fight - for recognition. Sartre, with his concept of the gaze, advances Hegel’s theory. Along with Hegel, he acknowledges that the other is necessary for the constitution of selfhood, but his idea of the intersubjective encounter is more subtle than Hegel’s.

Sartre asks whether the negating effort one has to undertake in order to distance oneself from the other is simple and unambiguous. Clearly, one cannot negate the other as an object because the other is not an object. My not being John is fundamentally different from my not being a chair. I cannot distance myself from the other directly because the other is related to me in a distanceless way, outside of physical space and time. The other does not have a sufficiently 'hard' surface which I could push away. In fact, the other does not have any surface at all because by definition the other is that which gives surface to me. And that surface - my own objectified and unknowable facade - is the only one available to me. Unable to push the other away directly, I have to do it indirectly, by adopting my own alienated self which is the only thing that could stand between us and separate us.[[36]](#footnote-35) I am not John only due to my consent to be what John sees me to be. And such a consent, once again, is the basis of shame. Shame is a necessary condition of individuation.

To see how the concepts of individuation and shame work in the novels, let us read a passage from Dar in which Fyodor, its protagonist, observes bathers on a lake shore in Berlin:

Серые, в наростах и вздутых жилах, старческие ноги, какая-нибудь плоская ступня и янтарная, туземная мозоль, розовое, как свинья, пузо, мокрые, бледные от воды, хриплоголосые подростки, глобусы грудей и тяжелые гузна, рыхлые, в голубых потеках, ляжки, гусиная кожа, прыщавые лопатки кривоногих дев, крепкие шеи и ягодицы мускулистых хулиганов, безнадежная, безбрежная тупость довольных лиц, возня, гогот, плеск - все это сливалось в апофеоз того славного немецкого добродушия, которое с такой легкостью может в любую минуту обернуться бешеным улюлюканьем. И над всем этим, особенно по воскресеньям, когда теснота была всего гаже, господствовал незабываемый запах, запах пыли, пота, тины, нечистого белья, проветриваемой и сохнувшей бедности, запах вяленых, копченых, грошовых душ. (Nabokov, 3, p.302)

[Gray, all in tumors and swollen veins, old legs, some flat sole with an amber, aboriginous callus, pig-pink belly, wet, paled by the water coarse-voiced teens, globes of breasts and heavy rumps, loose, all in bluish spots, thighs, goose-bumps, blistery shoulder-blades of crooked-legged virgins, tough necks and buttocks of pumped-up thugs, the hopeless, limitless dullness of satisfied faces, fussing, laughing, splashing - all this was merging together into the full blossom of that good German nature which can easily transform at any moment into a savage roar. And over all that, especially on Sundays, when the crowd was most wretchedly pressed, an unforgettable smell ruled, the smell of dust, sweat, slime, unclean underwear, aired and drying poverty, the smell of smoked, cured, cheap souls.] [[37]](#footnote-36)

One of the most peculiar details in this passage is the fact that human beings here are dismembered. What is the reason for that? Fyodor’s disinterested and artful way of seeing the world cannot account for the dismemberment because the description is saturated with moral judgement. The actual point is how the bathers themselves take Fyodor’s gaze and, in fact, any outside presence, including each other's*. The bathers are not aware of how they appear, they are literally shameless*. Undressed, fully open to whoever may look at them, they are not in the least constituted by an outside gaze. Even when the description hits their faces, the absence of self-awareness proves to be their main feature: “the hopeless, limitless dullness of those satisfied faces.” There is no hope because they do not exist for us and we cannot expect anything from them. All they do is not-for-another. In their case human reality is locked into itself. In its double form of self-satisfied joviality or fanatical violence (neglecting or destroying the gaze) and, in fact, in many other forms, that internal petrifaction of subjectivity constantly reappears in Nabokov's world.

Without seeing themselves as others see them, without assuming their reflections in the gazes of each other, the bathers cannot maintain their identities. Hence, the dismemberment. Individuality dissolves. They – ‘that’ would be probably a more appropriate pronoun here - consist of legs, bellies, breasts, calluses, veins, skin, buttocks, necks, etc. In the next stage of their decomposition the bathers congeal together into one undifferentiated mass. The stylistic devices Nabokov uses to convey this process are noteworthy. He lodges all corporeal parts, however disparate, into one long sentence without subordination; he intensifies mutual diffusion through alliterations; from mere individualized flesh, he passes to motions, voices, and sounds belonging to all of them at once; and, finally, he plunges the whole picture into that unforgettable, ubiquitous smell which penetrates, envelopes, contains and resumes everything.

Self-awareness and shame are basic for understanding Nabokov. One's ability to see oneself through the eyes of others (one's ability to encounter the other) is for him the foundation of any personal ontology (it is worth remembering here that Fyodor's spiritual growth in Dar passes inevitably through confrontation with various responses to his creations.) Once that ability is damaged or suppressed, the balance of individual existence is in danger. It is even possible to suggest that the deep source of dramatic interest in Nabokov's plots lies in an ontological threat we carry within ourselves - the threat of failure to establish oneself in relation to the other.

Zashchita Luzhina, Otchajanie, Sogliadataj, and Kamera obskura are four novels where such a failure is directly dramatized. Especially remarkable are Otchajanie and Sogliadataj, as they present two opposing extremes. Smurov, the main character of Sogliadataj is overwhelmed by the burden of others' images of him: he is brought to assert that he is nothing, absolutely nothing besides what others see him to be. If we understand shame as a basic social mechanism (seeing oneself through the eyes of others is indeed a precondition for being social), then Smurov is hypersocial. He is involved with others to the point of disappearing in the very medium of their attitudes towards him. Sartre calls the condition in which others’ perceptions matter more than one's self-awareness ‘timidity.’

The opposite of timidity is ‘pride’[[38]](#footnote-37) represented by Herman, the protagonist of Otchajanie. Herman does not esteem others highly enough to accept that they can see what he actually is. As a result, he does not know how they see him. He is not just mistaken about his resemblance to Felix; the problem is deeper: *he does not know how he looks*.

The key issue in both novels is the freedom of the other. Smurov overvalues that freedom. He experiences the other as an absolutely unpredictable observer capable of seeing him in any possible way; he has no defense against the other; he is radically vulnerable. Herman, on the other hand, grossly undervalues the freedom he is surrounded by. He believes that he can fully control the way others see him and as a result does not have any access to their minds (that access, it should be remembered, is gained by giving oneself up to the other instead of controlling him.) He is unable to use others as faithful mirrors. Consequently, he does not know who he is in the world, that is to say, who he is for-another. His case reveals a decomposition of synthetic unity between for-oneself and for-another, two mutually implied and involved dimensions of being.

Such a predicament has several important outcomes. First, similarly to what we have observed in the description of the bathers, it affects identity: Herman has difficulties distinguishing himself from Felix. Secondly, it undermines perception: Herman not only mistakes Felix for his twin, but also cannot arrange his ‘perfect’ crime. An emphasis on failed perception is reinforced by the fact that Herman, the only narrator of the story, still ignores what even the reader is given to know: an affair between his wife and her cousin. An insubstantial film of error isolates him from reality. That error drives the novel’s plot and at the second reading, emerges as his most outstanding feature eclipsing both his character and his writing style. Here the familiar feature of Korol', dama, valet, where blindness was also an integral element in the causality of events and the main dramatic focus of the story, comes to the surface. Like Dreyer, Marta and Franz, Herman is a monad - but a monad under a microscope, and narrating itself.

This lucky insight into the inner workings of the monad allows us to make a crucial conclusion about the ontology of such a creature. What makes the monad - a nuclear, self-identical, blind body of the type we meet in Korol', dama, valet, Otchajanie, or Kamera obskura - is not an innate defect of data acquisition or processing powers, not a perceptual weakness, but a certain determination of being. Of being-for-another, to be more precise. One becomes windowless (and here we return to Leibniz) *neglecting to be-for-another*, failing the involvement of the gaze.

That is a very special condition, basic for Nabokov, and it deserves to be described in more detail. Windowlessness means lack of access to the outside world; in Nabokov's novels it means lack of insight into the reality of others. The path to this insight, it turns out, is indirect. In order to gain access to the other (and to the world in general) one has to be-for-the-other. Seeing, paradoxically, implies being available for the gaze. There is no coincidence in the fact that the only Nabokovian protagonist who looks for others and is truly involved with them, Fyodor from Dar, can partake in the other’s vision:

…он [Федор] старался, как везде и всегда, вообразить внутреннее прозрачное движение другого человека, осторожно садясь в собеседника, как в кресло, так чтобы локти того служили ему подлокотниками, и душа бы влегла в чужую душу, - и тогда вдруг менялось освещение мира, и он на минуту действительно был Александр Яковлевич или Любовь Марковна, или Васильев. (Nabokov, 3, p.33)

[… he [Fyodor] tried, as everywhere and at any time, to imagine the internal, transparent motion of another person, carefully setting himself into his interlocutor as if into an armchair, so that the other’s elbows would serve him as armrests and his soul would fit into the other’s soul - and then suddenly the lighting of the world would change and he would actually become for a moment Alexander Jakovlevich, or Lubov’ Markovna, or Vasiliev.]

Nabokovian characters who are blind choose to be blind. Rejecting the gaze, they lose access to other’s minds. This can be directly observed in the novels. Dreyer, unwilling to commit; Luzhin, still a child, rejecting his name (“Больше всего его поразило то, что с понедельника он будет Лужиным.” [What struck him most was the fact that from Monday on he would be Luzhin.] (Nabokov, 2, p.5); Krechmar, lying both to Magda and to his wife; Herman, lying to his reader; N.G. Chernyshevsky, immaculately honest, possessed by his idea; bathers, unresponsive to the gaze - all of them, in various forms, display the same condition. It could be called *betraying the audience*. It is betraying in the broadest sense: betraying hopes, attention, trust, sheer presence. Failing an existential contract which, on the most basic level, unifies humans and provides them with a space for being together.[[39]](#footnote-38)

Such a phenomenon, as it becomes clear from the connotations of the terms ‘betraying’ and ‘contract’, is deeply moral. In the next chapter we shall see what ethical consequences Nabokov draws from the notion of being-for-another. Here, we are interested in the ontological effects of one's negative choice in relation to otherness.

What is the outcome of betraying the audience? On the micro-level of day-to-day interactions, failing to assume being-for-another (failing to be what the other sees) means insulating oneself from the other's perspective. The subject neglects, for various reasons, to share the other's point of view. This condition can be called the *mirror syndrome* because being subject to it one does not recognizes the mirror in the other and does not become involved with one's reflections. Betraying the audience thus results in a special form of blindness, closely related to the failure of self-awareness.[[40]](#footnote-39)

To perceive the consequences of betraying the audience on the macro-level we need to reread the novels once more: Ganin spends several days engrossed in a love affair with his absent memory; Herman is obsessed with his identical twin, even his resemblance to whom turns out to be imaginary; Luzhin, the chess player, commits suicide pursued by the idea that he is a piece in a mysterious chess game; Dreyer is unknowingly immersed in a secret plot constructed by his wife and her lover, who are very similar to the moving mannequins he himself brings to life; Krechmar is exploited and finally murdered by an exact incarnation of his life-long erotic nightmares; finally, Cincinnatus is openly tortured by the monsters of his own mind. Read this way, the novels display an obvious pattern: *failing to be-for-another locks a character within the circle of his own phantasmatic projections.[[41]](#footnote-40)* Without any means to verify his perspective, one inevitably falls victim to self-induced hallucination. When one's being is not constituted from without (when one does not let oneself be formed by the world) the only possible source of meaning and being is one's own subjectivity.

In that respect we should study more closely the most intense example of projection in Nabokov's Russian oeuvre, Priglashenie na kazn’.[[42]](#footnote-41) The solitude of Cincinnatus there is so complete that before the full collapse of his world all he can encounter are the more or less terrifying phantoms of his own being. He is inside his own dream. He is conscious of himself within the dream, but does not know that it is a dream. Yet, his situation within the dream (he is sentenced to death for an obscure reason) makes him realize that something is wrong. The whole novel represents his attempts to find a way out of the ontological impasse of his nightmare.

The inspiration of the novel, even if not explicitly acknowledged, is undoubtedly Cartesian. Cincinnatus fights the famous *demon of illusion*.[[43]](#footnote-42) In the beginning he repeats after Descartes the motion of radical doubt:

Я жаловаться не собираюсь, - сказал Цинциннат, - но хочу вас спросить: существует ли в мнимой природе мнимых вещей, из которых состоит этот мнимый мир, хоть одна такая вещь, которая могла бы служить ручательством (...). Я ставлю вопрос шире: существует ли вообще, может ли существовать в этом мире хоть какое-нибудь обеспечение, хоть в чем-нибудь порука, - или даже сама идея гарантии неизвестна тут? (Nabokov, 4, 38)

[“I do not intend to complain,” said Cincinnatus – “but wish to ask you: is there in the fictitious essence of the fictitious things of which this fictitious world consists at least one thing that could serve as a token of trust? (...) I am posing an even broader question: is there in this world, can there be, any kind of security, any commitment to truth - or is even the very idea of guarantee unknown here?”]

We recognize here not only the procedure of radical doubt, but also the search for an independent criterion of verification in the world of appearance - in the world of pure subjectivity. Several pages later Cincinnatus formulates the first discovery of his quest against illusion - almost verbatim the famous *Cogito*:

На меня этой ночью, - и случается так не впервые, - нашло особенное: я снимаю с себя оболочку за оболочкой, и наконец... не знаю, как описать, но вот что знаю: я дохожу путем постепенного разоблачения до последней, неделимой, твердой, сияющей точки, и эта точка говорит: я есмь! - как перстень с перлом в кровавом жиру акулы, - о мое верное, мое вечное... и мне довольно этой точки, - собственно больше ничего и не надо. (Nabokov, 4, 50)

[Tonight - and it was not the first time - I had a strange sensation: I am taking off layer after layer, until at last... I do not know how to describe it, but I know this: through the process of gradual divestment the final, indivisible, firm, radiant point, and this point says: I am! - like a pearl ring in a shark's gory fat, - oh, my faithful, my eternal... and this point is enough for me - actually, nothing more is necessary.]

It turns out however, that, both for Nabokov and for Descartes, '*sum*' is not enough to defeat the demon. After making his argument for the existence of the subject, Descartes employs a separate ontological proof to establish the existence of God. Why does he need God if he already has the subject? Because if the subject remains in the realm of his own subjectivity, there is no way to overcome the demon and the doubt stays undefeated. With no independent perspective, 'ergo sum' is the only truth available in the universe of dream. In the sequence of Descartes’ argument God emerges as such a perspective. This explains why He becomes the Absolute Good: He guarantees the truth of our perceptions; He is the only token that the world *is* and not only seems.

In agreement with Descartes’ sequence, Cincinnatus continues to look for something outside the realm of the immediate. We should remember that the world he is fighting against is not simply malignant - its main feature is falsehood:

Все сошлось, - писал он, - то есть все обмануло, - все это театральное, жалкое, - посулы ветреницы, влажный взгляд матери, стук за стеной, доброхотство соседа, наконец - холмы, подернувшиеся смертельной сыпью... Все обмануло, сойдясь, все. Вот тупик тутошней жизни, - и не в ее тесных пределах надо было искать спасения. (Nabokov, 4, 118)

[Everything has fallen into place," he wrote, "that is, everything has duped me - all of this theatrical, pathetic stuff - the promises of a volatile maiden, a mother's moist gaze, the knocking on the wall, a neighbor’s friendliness, and finally, the hills that broke out in a deadly rash... Everything plotted and lied, everything. This is the dead end of this life - and I shouldn’t have sought salvation within its narrow confines.]

Cincinnatus is trying to find true - independent - otherness. That is the reason he so obsessively looks for ‘tam’ (there) opposed to ‘tut’ (here).[[44]](#footnote-43) Having settled his cogito Cincinnatus is still caught within his solipsistic nightmare. All his efforts to use 'here' to escape from the prison of seeming fail. ‘Here’ (his own subjectivity) does not have exits, and trying to break away he inevitably returns to his own cell. The solipsism of the dream underlies the circularity characteristic of all his motions.[[45]](#footnote-44) At the edge of his false universe he meets himself again and again. It is not a coincidence that the collapse of that universe is simultaneous with his discovery of real others, those

mysterious “beings, [who] judging by the voices, [are] akin to him.” (Nabokov, 4, p.130).

With all the emphasis Nabokov places on illusion and hallucination, the ontology of his monad may be summarized as the *ontology of dreaming*.[[46]](#footnote-45) Two novels that give us the deepest insight into the inner space of monads, Priglashenie na kazn’ and Otchajanie, describe their protagonists as isolated from the rest of the world, convoluted within themselves, massively projective entities. Only their directions are opposite: Cincinnatus tries to escape from his nightmare, whereas Herman goes farther and farther toward the center of his self-induced hallucination. Both are logically joined by Luzhin from Zashchita and N.G. Chernyshevsky from Dar. The latter two are even deeper recessed into dream because they do not seem to pass even the first stage of the 'Cogito' and become conscious of their own existence. While Herman and Cincinnatus give us examples of defective but almost unbearably strained self-consciousness, Luzhin and N.G. Chernyshevsky represent a prereflexive existential state - that of *possession*. For one of them possession is passion (chess), for another, idea. And their possession is effective both on the micro and on the macro level. They are as unable to assume control of their minute to minute operations in the world as they are helpless against the patterns spanning their lives. It would be wrong to believe, however, that they are possessed by extraneous forces. Luzhin falls victim

to repetitive chess-like combinations of events; Chernyshevsky constantly relives the themes which appear early in his childhood and which, becoming stronger and stronger, finally destroy his life.[[47]](#footnote-46) What happens to these characters is intimately related to their respective identities. In other words, they are *possessed by themselves*. The demon of illusion in their case is their own self.[[48]](#footnote-47) On the microlevel that self-possession is realized as dream (what is a dream if not a possession where the possessed and the possessor coincide); on the macrolevel - as Fate.

Fate in Nabokov's world is nothing but the unfolding of one’s essence, life seen as a dream. This unfolding is inexorable, but the nature of such an excessive rigor, as we have already mentioned in Chapter 1, is not coercive. Rather, it is logical, or, to be even more precise, tautological. Luzhin and Chernyshevsky, as well as most of Nabokov’s protagonists, are defenseless against themselves. They are all they have. Neglecting or failing the other, they have no *tam* (there), no outside point of leverage - they are always, and inevitably, themselves. That is the ontological reason of excessive repetition infecting their lives.[[49]](#footnote-48)

At this point it becomes clear that Nabokov is an *ontological writer*. Behind the surface of his constantly reappearing epistemological, moral and aesthetic themes there is always an all-encompassing and fundamental problematics of, and even obsession with, being. In asking what Nabokov’s essence as a writer and a thinker is, with which central problem he wrestled all his creative life, the answer would be that it is the problem of *how to maintain oneself in existence*. And on the opposite end of that problem, as its negative pole and a source of conflict, he saw nothingness. He is the writer who showed us the most impressive catalog of non-being in modern literature. Persons dismembered, persons confusing themselves with their mirror image, dissolving in the gaze of others, surrendering their identities to their doubles, taking off their body as clothing, seeing their future on the screen, escaping into wall pictures, meeting their author, and morphing into discourse - this is only a short sample of that catalog. The intensity of Nabokov's preoccupation with the problem of being never fades in the English part of his oeuvre. We should remember here Pnin[[50]](#footnote-49)

and Pale Fire, where main characters turn out to be inventions of another characters, or Transparent Things, where the reader is given covert indications that the whole of the novel is narrated by a character who dies in the middle of the plot.[[51]](#footnote-50) In the latter part of his career Nabokov tended to frame ontological problems in terms of fictionality, but at the core of his treatment of fictional worlds there is always a direct existential preoccupation with what is and what is not. It might be even possible to suggest that the issue of non-being lies deeper in the hierarchy of Nabokov's worldview than his artistic pursuits: imaginary objects are after all just one sub-variety of the non-existent.

Returning to the sequence of the main argument of this chapter, in light of the above we should better understand the ontology of the Nabokovian monad. It revolves around the notion of individuation. Nabokov, like Leibniz, understands individuation in relation to windowlessness. Unlike Leibniz, however, he conceives windowlessness not as a metaphysical given but as the result of a certain etermination of being. This determination - an existential choice on the part of his characters - establishes a genuinely moral dimension. In the broadest sense, this choice was defined as betraying the audience - not necessarily the human audience of other characters but the more general audience of the dispersed, universal gaze. Seen from another angle this choice is dreaming - dreaming which neglects the other, does not recognize mirrors and ignores the world. The paradigmatic instances of dreaming in Nabokov’s oeuvre are sleep-walking and self-deception. Accordingly, his artistic and existential effort is directed toward waking up, towards concentration, focus and lucidity.

Alain Renaut, in his Era of the Individual writes:

The themes of the unconscious and of finitude are undoubtedly the two main intellectual aspects of the critique of the idea of subject. Opaque for himself, thrown into the world he does not constitute, the subject finds his own foundations shattered as well as the foundations of reality. And with that the whole system of humanistic values (consciousness, control, will, auto-foundation, autonomy) collapses. (Renaut, 1989, p.15)

In the context of this statement, Nabokov's monadology appears deeply connected to the mainstream intellectual problem of the 20th century, that of the subject. But his solution goes somewhat against the current. Far from accepting the decomposition of the subject and the collapse of humanistic values, Nabokov emerges as probably one of the last great *defenders* of individuality, consciousness and freedom. His attitude toward the subject is not naive or straightforward. He sees very clearly the dangers of autonomy. His novels may be read as peculiar, patho-onto-logical experiments performed around the notion of self. If one may speak of his critique, it would not be the critique of the very idea of independent subject, but only of a certain form of individuation, namely, individuation through the crude negation of the other. However strange it may seem, Nabokov-the-individualist understands that saving individualism is possible only through a special art of involvement with the other. He clearly realizes that full autonomy - the betrayal of the audience - results either in paranoia, the paroxysm of individuality, or in the emergence of the mass, the total loss of individuality. Using the other and otherness to be oneself is the way out Nabokov proposes. The shift he advances is subtle. Instead of autonomy, he promotes privacy; instead of will, the impetus of imagination; instead of freedom, voluntary surrender to the rules of mutual engagement.

In order to describe the above mentioned art of involvement, it is necessary to examine the actual meeting between Nabokov's characters directly. We need to find out what perpetuates their choices in relation to one another and see the moral implications of those choices. In short, we must determine the ethical effects of the primary ontological realities described in this chapter.

# 

# **CHAPTER 3**

**The dialectics of the gaze**

Bruno Krechmar, the protagonist of Kamera obskura, is blind and corrupt; he dies at the end of the novel. Cincinnatus C., the protagonist of Priglashenie na kazn’, is non-transparent and innocent; he miraculously survives. The key to Nabokov’s moral system, we shall attempt to show below, resides in the strict dialectics of blindness and transparency.

Otherness, Nabokov constantly reminds us, is far from benign. As a source of alternative meaning, the other inevitably emerges as a competing force in one’s world. Each object is a nucleus of conflict. The beams of individual gazes constantly intersect on objects, infusing them with value, controlling them, and warding off competitors. Upon encountering a public object, instead of meeting a passive receptacle of subjectivity, we participate in a dynamic balance of conflicting points of view. Things resist, and in their resistance we feel the totality of all ongoing interpretations.

As a result, the world is *difficult*. A certain effort is required to maintain an efficient grip on reality, even if only to keep it stable. In making such an effort, one becomes involved with the rest of mankind. Robert Musil, writing about “an enormous undertaking which nowadays it takes merely to be a person who does nothing at all” (Musil, 1992, I, p.12), means exactly that effort.

The other does not only pull things in his direction - the whole of the world already belongs to him.[[52]](#footnote-51) The world is fully out there, for him, in the same way it is for everyone else. Left alone, I would own reality. It would be exclusively mine. The presence of others makes me *share,* but this sharing implies not division but co-ownership. In this sense, we do not bargain with others over our respective portions; we do not strike a deal. The other appears and takes the whole world, up to the horizon and farther to infinity. Each new birth renegotiates the entire distribution; each new death is the destruction of a universe.

When the other’s gaze leaves the world and turns toward *me* the situation becomes critical. Now, *I* belong to the other. My properties become his property. Observation is an exercise of power. Direct gaze turns the conflict of ownership into the struggle for identity:

Кашмарин унес с собой еще один образ Смурова. Не все ли равно, какой? Ведь меня нет, - есть только тысячи зеркал, которые меня отражают. С каждым новым знакомством растет население призраков, похожих на меня. Они где-то живут, где-то множатся. Меня же нет. (Nabokov, 2, p.344)

[Kashmarin had borne away yet another image of Smurov? Does it make any difference which? For I do not exist, - there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me. With every new acquiantance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. Somewhere they live, somewhere they multiply. I alone do not exist.]

Direct gaze effects a split of self, or, as Connolly calls it, a ‘bifurcation of identity.’[[53]](#footnote-52) In addition to for-oneself it institutes a new regime of being, for-another. This process is not accidental or contingent. Being-for-another is a facade the self assumes in relation to the other, the self’s outer surface. One necessarily has such a facade. Moreover, the self is *constituted* by its outer surface. In a crucial sense, the self is generated by the other and cannot exist without the other. One’s outward appearance has two ‘authors’ - one’s own subjectivity and the other. The respective contributions are synthetically unified: it is impossible to dissociate the way we are and the way others see us. Being-for-another resembles a joint account in which the other is my partner. Whatever we own, we own together. Whatever I am in the presence of the other, I am, owing not only to myself, but also owing to him.

At the same time, the other is by definition unknown to me. I cannot and will never know how I appear to him for the simple reason that I will never see myself as he sees me. In the presence of the other I have to be something without knowing what it is. The other makes me *mysterious* to myself. In addition, the other is free. His gaze is a form and a revelation of his freedom. I am enveloped by it; I am partially constituted by an unknown, alien freedom. I depend on the other ontologically and this dependence is the price I have to pay for beingwith the other.

Thus described, being-for-another appears to be a highly unstable balance. The other gazes at me, I gaze back - and at any moment the equilibrium can be upset. The principal reason for this is, again, our reciprocal ignorance. I do not know the intentions of my partners, and the partnership of being rests entirely on trust.

The utopia of such a trust was the personal and social dream of Rousseau and his contemporaries. Rousseau’s own constant preoccupation with sincerity, his cult of confession, even his political theories spring from his dream of absolute trust:

The paradise [of Rousseau] is the reciprocal transparency of selves, total and trusting communication. (...) To suppose that a society can be built in full transparency, to suppose that all selves would consent to open to one another and to surrender any secret and ‘particular’ will - this is the hypothesis of the Social Contract. (Starobinski, 1971, pp. 19 and.62)

Nabokov, without any doubt, thought about such a possibility. He even directly experimented with the ‘paradise world of Rousseau’: in Priglashenie na kazn’ Cincinnatus lives exactly in the universe of full transparency. He calls it “мир прозрачных друг для дружки душ” [the world of mutually transparent souls] (Nabokov, 4, p.12). Given Nabokov’s constant focus on the fair circulation of being, it would seem that such a world could solve all problems. Once everybody is transparent for everybody, everything is available and there is nothing to steal. The abuse of trust is impossible. The gaze does not meet any obstacle and therefore cannot violate anything. Being and meaning are fully shared. Such a model could serve as a foundation of an ideal collective contract. Yet, Nabokov entertains a particularly strong aversion to this and all similar social arrangements. Why?

The reason for Nabokov’s aversion lies in the fact that he relates being to *privacy*. Only the hidden, personal, original and truly individual possesses actual being. Everything public and general is an illusion. It does not quite belong to the existent. We should remember that the fully transparent world of Priglashenie turns out to be a fiction, or, as Nabokov puts it, a sham. A society which forfeits privacy - and this is the paradox of full openness - is unable to use the equality and justice. Instead, it negates and distorts all moral values. Morality, according to Nabokov, implies a bearer, a responsible agent, whereas full mutual transparency makes such an agent impossible. What survives the final crush of the universe of Priglashenie is Cincinnatus himself, the only private entity in the world of the novel. All other characters have only the semblance of individuals. They do not fit the requirements of Nabokov’s personal version of *Cogito*: I am private *ergo* I am. The narrator of Sogliadataj, formulates this *Cogito* in its negative form: I am not private ergo I am *not*.

Another, more aesthetic, way to illustrate the role of privacy in Nabokov’s novels is to consider chess. Privacy in chess is a constitutive element of the game. The game can go on only because respective intentions are unavailable to the opponents. One cannot play chess with oneself. The presence of another, sufficiently shielded subjectivity, is the foundation of the process. The non-transparency of another mind constitutes the true nerve of the game. Thus, what is played out in chess via the rules and the pieces is the very enigma of otherness. All attempts to eliminate otherness for the sake of sincerity and trust destroy, in the case of chess explicitly, and elsewhere implicitly, the basic possibility of the game. A curious instance of the need for privacy in chess appears in Zashchita Luzhina. Luzhin’s story can be read as an uninterrupted defense of privacy, which alone can guarantee that he is playing (that he exists as an independent, generative entity) instead of being played.

Privacy is the central notion in Nabokov’s world, a juncture between metaphysics and ontology. It makes possible both his narrative and his agents. Taken metaphysically, it is nothing else but *windowlessness*, both from within and from without. It ensures the mutual impenetrability of the monads and allows the creation of the clockwork plot developments based on blindness. Taken ontologically, privacy is *individuation*. It delineates the borders around the self - the borders which separate the inner from the outer. It marks the self as different from other selves, and at the same time protects it from all violations from without. In that, privacy is a *security of being*. [[54]](#footnote-53)

Most importantly, privacy is the bridge between abstract metaphysical and ontological concepts and the concrete realization of plot and discourse. It can function in this role because it is *the counterconcept to the gaze*. Indeed, privacy is what the gaze meets when directed towards another subject. The gaze does not shine freely through another subjectivity but experiences it as an obstacle. Subjects, like objects, resist attention. This resistance is privacy.

In this respect, privacy constitutes the gaze. The involvement is mutual: the gaze creates the outer surface of the self and is created by it. The dynamics of seeing has, as its negative pole, the resistance of privacy. We can look, know, and relate only because our partners, in some sense, hide and elude. The availability to the gaze, as the regime in which a subject meets and experiences another subject, is possible only against background of privacy, in a dialectical tension with individual opaqueness. In the world of full mutual transparency I cannot experience the other’s gaze as creating my outward surface because I see through the other. I do not need the other. A mirror of otherness is of no use to transparent entities.

The tension of privacy, we shall attempt to show, generates the dramatic conflict of all Nabokov’s plots. Privacy versus the gaze, privacy and the gaze - those are the themes in which the general principles of structure and existence are transfromed in the novels into the particulars of character build-up, sentiment and action.

We have already mentioned that privacy in Nabokov’s world is intimately related to being. Being, in its turn, is an expensive commodity. In Dar, Fyodor thinks: “Наши здешние дни - только карманные деньги, гроши, звякающие в темноте, [и] где-то есть капитал, с коего надо уметь при жизни получать проценты в виде снов, слез счастья, далеких гор.” [Our current days are just small change, pennies clinking in darkness, and somewhere there is a capital from which we should know how to obtain revenue in the form of dreams, tears of happiness, distant mountains.] (Nabokov, 3, p.147) In Mashen’ka, the narrator says about Ganin: “Не брезговал он ничем: не раз даже продавал свою тень подобно многим из нас” [he deemed nothing below himself: more than once, like all of us, he even sold his shadow] (Nabokov, 1, p.40), the narrator says about Ganin, the protagonist of Mashen’ka. Nabokov’s existential preoccupations are always linked to value. Very often he talks about the *preciousness* of experience, the *gifts* of life and the *richness* of the individual self. The finance-infused language penetrates even the domain of the aesthetic: Nabokov’s most developed writer-protagonist thus describes his gift of artistic vision: “Да, всю жизнь я буду добирать натурой, в тайное возмещение постоянных переплат за товар, навязываемый мне.” [Yes, all my life I shall be getting that extra barter to compensate my regular overpayment for merchandise foisted on me.] (Nabokov, 3, p.7) ‘Unreal estate’, a phrase Nabokov coined in Lolita, is probably the best metaphor to express his vision of a delicate market where being is given and received - circulated, invested and traded. The language he developed in the course of his writing career serves him as a tool for extremely precise measurement and account-maintenance of being.

Once being is a commodity, it inevitably becomes desirable and vulnerable, especially if it is hard to get:

При этом все в нем дышало тонкой, сонной, - но в сущности необыкновенно сильной, горячей, своеобычной жизнью: голубые, как самое голубое, пульсировали жилки, чистая, хрустальная слюна увлажняла губы, трепетала кожа на щеках, на лбу, окаймленном растворенным светом... и так это все дразнило, что наблюдателю хотелось тут же разъять, искромсать, изничтожить нагло ускользающую плоть и все то, что подразумевалось ею, что невнятно выражала она собой, все то невозможное, невольное, ослепительное... (Nabokov, 4, p.69)

[At the same time, everything about him breathed with a delicate, drowsy, but in reality exceptionally strong, ardent and independent life: his veins of the bluest blue pulsated; crystal-clear saliva moistened his lips; the skin quivered on his cheeks and his forehead, which was edged with dissolved light... and all this so teased the observer as to make him long to tear apart, cut to shreds, destroy utterly this brazen elusive flesh, and all that it implied and expressed, all that impossible, spontaneous, dazzling ...]

In such a situation the access we have to each other’s being via the gaze results in complex hierarchies of ownership, because the value of what one sees depends not only on the inherent worth of the object of vision, but also on who is looking at it at the same time:

Но иногда, рядом со школьным портфелем и сверкающим велосипедом, прислоненным к стволу, лежала одинокая нимфа, раскинув обнаженные до пахов, замшево-нежные ноги, заломив руки, показывая солнцу блестящие мышки; стрела соблазна едва успевала пропеть и вонзиться, как уже он [Федор] замечал, что, на некотором расстоянии, в трех, одинаково отдаленных точках, образующих магический треугольник вокруг (чьей) добычи, виднеются среди стволов три неподвижных ловца, друг другу незнакомых: два молодых (этот ничком, тот на боку) и старый господин в жилете, с резинками на рукавах рубашки, плотно сидящий в траве, неподвижный, вечный, с грустными, но терпеливыми глазами; и казалось, эти три ударяющих в одну точку взгляда наконец, с помощью солнца, прожгут дырку в черном купальном трико бедной немецкой девочки, не поднимающей маслом смазанных век. (Nabokov, 3, p.301)

[But sometimes, next to a school satchel and beside her shiny bicycle propped against a tree trunk, a lone nymph would sprawl, her legs bared to the crotch and suede-soft to the eye, and her elbows thrown back, showing glistening armpits to the sun; temptation’s arrow had hardly had time to sing out and pierce him before he [Fyodor] noticed, a short distance away at three equidistant points, forming a magic triangle around the prey (whose?), and strangers to one another, three motionless hunters visible between the tree trunks: two young fellows (one lying prone, the other on his side) and an elderly man, coatless, with armbands on his shirt-sleeves, sitting solidly on the grass, motionless, eternal, with sad but patient eyes; and it seemed that these three gazes striking the same spot would finally, with the help of the sun, burn a whole in the black bathing tights of that poor little German girl, who never raised her ointment-smeared eyelids.]

Fyodor notices the girl and possesses her in vision (the initial description shows him almost caressing her with his eyes.) The advance of his claim toward a more substantial type of possession (“the arrow of temptation”) is arrested by the fact that he spots the others who are also looking at her. This is an indirect version of the basic intersubjective struggle. We saw it in the Sartre’s description of the gaze: the other, Sartre indicated, steals and decenters one’s world. While the simpler type of conflict is decided in the open battle of eye contact, in the above passage eyes never meet. Instead, the gazes contest an intermediary, the girl. Fyodor’s tactics in that contest are indirect. Discovering the competition he immediately surrenders the prize, concentrating his gaze on the competitors. The passage shows how, detaching from the girl, invisible, he observes her observers in the process of observing her. The final part of the passage, though, suggests that he never loses her from sight, being quite concerned with the depletion of value (the burn) the others’ looking can effect on her.

The two passages above direct us to the basic vicissitudes of subjectivity under the gaze. On the most fundamental level, attention is experienced as a *threat* – an attempt to appropriate or steal one’s being. Nabokov’s constant interest in crime and justice (Korol', dama, valet, Otchajanie, Priglashenie na kazn’) springs directly from his existential concerns. His universe is divided into victims and perpetrators, prey and predators: Krechmar, Luzhin, Smurov, and Cincinnatus are obvious victims; their experience is that of threat, loss, hemorrhage of being. Gorn, Magda, Marta, M’sieur Pierre are obvious predators; they consider others as their feeding grounds; they are ruthless and insatiable.

This perspective illuminates the composition of almost all Nabokov’s novels. A deep underlying structure generates particular surface effects of each plot. In this deep structure the central place is occupied by the victim. The victim is vulnerable, threatened, robbed of his vital possessions. The main mode of his existence is self-protection, or, according to the title of one of the novels, ‘*zashchita*’, defense. Let us survey the novels. In Mashen’ka, Ganin learns that his long-lost beloved has become his neighbor’s wife, and spends the rest of the novel in an interminable, all-consuming attempt at her retrieval. In Podvig, what is taken from Martin is his native land, Russia. In response he devises a clandestine expedition planning to cross the Russian border, as if symbolically trying to restore his rights to his country of birth.[[55]](#footnote-54) In Zashchita Luzhina the protagonist justly suspects that his personal being is alienated in an intricate repetition of a pattern resembling a chess game. He wants to devise a defense in order to thwart the game, and finally, in a calculated move, commits suicide. In Priglashenie na kazn’, Cincinnatus’ freedom and life are being taken away, and the plot of the novel revolves around his successful fight to retain them.

As Nabokov is usually on the side of the victims, he is at his most ingenious when his characters plot strategies for self-defense. In Otchajanie, for example, Herman arranges the murder of his double and assumes his identity, thus trying to escape the gaze of the world and, conveniently, his creditors. The situation is even more complex in Sogliadataj and Dar where the protagonists experience the attention of the world not only inside their fictional reality, but also on the meta-level of fiction itself: they sense the presence of the reader. Their actions are informed by their direct awareness of their audience. There is one more dimension to their existence - the dimension in which they are self-conscious of being literary characters and artists. Their strategies of self-protection, however, remain essentially the same. In Sogliadataj, Smurov plays a cat-and-mouse game with the reader, masking his real

identity and revealing it only at the very end. In Dar, Fyodor keeps the reader ignorant of the fact that he is the real author of the entire novel. Among other things, these two novels suggest that Nabokov sees art as a particular form of self-defense.

In all the above-described plots personal being and privacy are at stake. Predators attack, victims protect themselves. What is common to their strategies of self-protection? What does the victim use against the predator or against the intrusive attention of the world? To the questions framed in these terms - the terms of the Sartrean theory of the gaze - Nabokov gives the following answer: the only self-protection in the world of the gaze is *hiding*. Privacy consists in opaqueness. The subject responds to the violation of his being by building an ‘*incognito.*’ All Nabokov’s protagonists - in so far as they are victims - can be classified according to the type of their self-concealment. And even the predators, such as Gorn (Kamera obskura) or Marta (Korol', dama, valet) act ‘undercover.’

In order to understand the real nature of ‘undercover’ in the novels, we have to take the Sartrean theory of the gaze one step further. While the concept of hiding is relatively simple, it illuminates a key complication. Hidden or hiding can be not only the object of the gaze, the victim, but also the gaze itself, the predator. I can look at another person with or *without* his knowing that I am looking. The latter is by definition the *invasion of privacy*. In general, it takes place whenever I know something about another person without his knowing that I know.

Lying is inevitably an invasion of privacy, which explains why a lie is often considered as a form of aggression.[[56]](#footnote-55)

Sartre does not study the issue of the hidden gaze. In Being and Nothingness he gives a description only of the ‘direct’ gaze, that is to say, the gaze the looked-at subject is aware of. Sartre is interested in the open, honest theatricality of being. He examines the immediate interaction between the actors and the spectators. His subjects are actors because they know they are observed. Indeed, the awareness of being observed is, according to Sartre, our link to others. Therefore, in his world, if one experiences the other’s gaze as a threat there is always a possibility of looking back, restoring the balance of just interaction. Privacy for Sartre, properly speaking, is never invaded (he does not even introduce the notion of invasion.) Nothing, according to him, can contaminate the nucleus of absolute autonomy at the core of the subject. Inside the most oppressed, there is always an irreducible agency of choice and, consequently, a root of individuality. However reactive an action may seem, for Sartre its essence is always active. “We are doomed to be free” proclaims the famous existentialist slogan. This untouchable, free individuality is unconditionally protected from the gaze.

It is clear, however, that adequacy of information and vision drastically affects one’s autonomy. Let us consider a section from Kamera obskura. Krechmar,

the protagonist, is blinded after a road accident. He lives in a remote house in Switzerland with Magda, the woman he loves. More precisely, he *thinks* he lives with her. In fact, Gorn, Magda’s true lover, is also present in the house, unknown to Krechmar:

В первое время совместного житья он (Горн) и Магда были очень осмотрительны, хотя и позволяли себе всякие невинные шутки. Он ходил либо босиком, либо в войлочных туфлях. Перед дверью своей комнаты, в коридоре, он устроил баррикаду из ящиков и сундуков, через которую Магда по ночам перелезала. Кречмар, впрочем, после первого обхода дома перестал интересоваться расположением комнат, зато спальню свою и кабинет изучил досконально, Магда описала ему все краски там - синие обои, желтый абажур, - но, по наущению Горна, нарочно все изменила: Горну казалось весело, что слепой будет представлять себе свой мирок в тех красках, которые он, Горн, продиктует. (Nabokov, Romany, p.381)

[During the first days of their life together, he [Gorn] and Magda were very cautious, although they indulged in various harmless jests. He walked either barefoot or in felt slippers. Before the door leading to his room, in the corridor, he had erected a barricade of boxes and trunks, over which Magda clambered at night. However, after his first stroll through the house Krechmar was no longer interested in the topography of the rooms, but he thoroughly studied his bedroom and his study, the colors of which – the blue wallpaper, the yellow lampshade – Magda described to him, but which, egged on by Gorn, she had deliberately changed: Gorn thought it funny that the blind man would picture his little world in the colors prescribed by him.]

What can we say in these circumstances about Krechmar’s freedom? Of course, all his actions are still voluntary. They contain an irreducibly active element. But can he be called fully their author? To what extent is his life actually his? We approach here one of Nabokov’s favorite versions of the paradox of self, that of will and authorship. Authorship is traditionally equated with freedom. According to that tradition, freedom is self-determination. It is thought that self-determination occurs in the *act* and that the crucial moment of the act is will, a self-causing agency. But Nabokov, as we have seen above, *divorces freedom from authorship*. Blind Krechmar is indeed free inside his own dark world. Only death can eliminate an insoluble knot of active will inside him. But in addition to being dark, his world is essentially *small*: there exists another world embracing his universe. In the larger picture of the outer world, Krechmar does not fully control his being. He does not know what is actually happening around or with him. He does not know what in fact he is doing, because the information he has is erroneous. He is controlled. In Krechmar’s case, as well as in relation to the majority of his other characters, Nabokov constantly drives our attention to the contrast between the purely subjective, irreducible, and narrow point of free will inside a subject, and the larger frame of adequate understanding in which the subject may appear manipulated. He shows, indeed he insists, that the problem of authorship, in addition to Will, is directly related to Representation.

We may say that Nabokov is interested in *control* rather then in *power*. What is the difference? Power forces, control organizes; power works against the will via forcing, control with the will via manipulation. The mechanism of manipulation, as the manipulated does not know he is manipulated, is necessarily based on deceit, and therefore on invasion of privacy.

The connection between being and information – between authorship and the gaze - is *paranoia*.[[57]](#footnote-56) Paranoia is not just the fear of adversity. It is the fear of *secret* adversity. The paranoiac suspects invisible enemies are plotting against him. He

senses that everything has another, hidden meaning. His own actions, too, have meanings he is not aware of. The others have foreseen his choices and are taking advantage of them - taking advantage of the very fact that he does not know they are taking advantage. What is most unbearable for a paranoiac is the feeling that his own life is being alienated from him by others, and that he is helpless to retain it. Impotence and paralysis are at the core of the paranoid experience.

Paranoia, in its existential aspect, is the advancement of the concept of the gaze. While the gaze, roughly speaking, is the awareness of being watched, paranoia is the awareness of not being aware of being watched - an awareness of missing the gaze. It is the gaze plus the knowledge (ignorance) of it. As such, it introduces its own conceptuality. Bypassing the simple theatricality of for-another and of choice, paranoia is indifferent to the notions of consciousness, bad faith (*mauvais foi*), sincerity, role playing, etc. Paranoia realizes that self-authorship – which Nabokov equates with self-ownership - depends on the adequacy of understanding. The adequacy, that is to say, of how one understands the way others see him. And such an understanding, we have a chance to remark, is deeply related to privacy. The cluster of concepts that paranoia introduces consists of secrecy, ‘incognito,’ blindness and deception. When my privacy is invaded - when I am secretly observed by the other or when the other knows something about me without my knowing that he knows - I become alienated from my own acts. My act-ivity and will notwithstanding, I cease to be the author of my actions. They stop being mine. The other, invisible, pre-empts and owns them.

Sartre, writing about the gaze, mentions the theft of being. He is wrong. The open gaze is robbery - a direct power confrontation, a conflict of wills. Only the secret gaze is true theft. *We do not know about the theft while it occurs.* Our ignorance, our retroactive sense of violation are essential in our reaction to it. The thieves of being are smooth, as are all other thieves. The invasion they perpetrate is at the same time evasion. It negates the very idea of force. The world of paranoia is a soft, suave world of slanted gaze, suspicion, and polite, ambiguous cruelty.[[58]](#footnote-57)

The concept of paranoia, developing the theory of the gaze, advances the old Hegelian ‘Master/Slave’ dialectics. Hegel understood that the other is a necessary element in the logical growth of subjectivity. He was also first to perceive the intersubjective encounter as a struggle. According to him, this struggle is the struggle for recognition. We become self-conscious - we recognize ourselves - only in the process of being recognized by others. The key element in the Hegelian struggle is risking life. Risking life is the show of independence (hence, freedom) and the true claim for recognition. The Master is ready to risk his life - he is an autonomous, commanding, self-causing entity. The Slave is not ready to risk his life. His fear of death dictates his acts. He surrenders his will - to the Master, or, in general, to the world.

Sartre perfected these dialectics and showed that the struggle occurs not only on the level of actions, but also on the level of mere presences. The intersubjective space is in itself a tension of intersecting individual claims to meaning and control. Sartre described in detail the meeting of two subjects - the meeting of two freedoms. He borrowed from Hegel the idea that a freedom wants to dominate another freedom, but emphasized that even the defeated freedom must remain free. Sartre developed the concept of a voluntary surrender of freedom. Like Marx before him, but in another way, Sartre drew attention to *the freedom of the Slave*.

Sartre’s struggle is universal. In fact, it structures intersubjectivity - it *is* intersubjectivity. Its variations are love, pride, sadism, hate, and even indifference. All these existential dispositions are modifications of the gaze: the Sartrean struggle takes place between the actors and the audience.[[59]](#footnote-58)

The concept of paranoia modifies the Hegelian/Sartrean analysis. ‘Incognito’ is incompatible with recognition. The ultimate struggle of paranoia, as it is clearly visible in the story of Kamera obskura, is not of recognition, but of being. Magda and Gorn do not value the freedom of the other enough to fight for it. What they need is the sheer stuff of the others’ being. They simply consume it, without giving anything back, and without even letting the victim know that they are present. They are *parasites* rather than predators, which is the basis of Nabokov’s moral attitude towards them.[[60]](#footnote-59)

Gorn and Magda are pure examples of parasitism, but it would be inaccurate to say that Nabokov simply gave us a few examples. He distinguished the element of parasitism in the composition of human reality. He saw ‘incognito’ and appetite as related to the very essence of privacy, and dramatized the idea of the theft of being. The crowning achievement of this insight into the human condition is probably

Lolita (that is why it is so popular and central to Nabokov’s oeuvre): Humbert Humbert is *simultaneously* the predator and the victim. The perpetrator of the crime, he is wronged in his turn by another invisible parasite, Quilty.

Nabokov is the true bard of paranoia. Eavesdropping prevails in his universe over open eye contact; ‘incognito’ over direct aggression; mimicry over advertised performance. Let us recall the novels in chronological order: Ganin does not tell anybody, including Alfiorov, about his discovery; Marta and Franz plot to murder Dreyer; Luzhin is caught in the web of an infernal, hidden game; Martin plans his clandestine trip to Russia alone; Herman secretly schemes and executes his crime; Smurov spies on his neighbors and on the readers who, he believes, are spying on him; the whole story of Cincinnatus unfolds around surveillance and non-transparency (even the executioner arrives ‘incognito’). Only in Dar is the theme of paranoia balanced by the theme of intimacy, as Fyodor opens to Zina and enters the zone of true self-disclosure.

To see the extent and the intricacy of paranoia (as we defined it) in Nabokov, we should consider two novels more closely: one is Kamera obskura, another Priglashenie na kazn’.

In the latter, Cincinnatus has a secret. This secret is the main thing about him, the center around which his individuality is crystallized. His ‘I am invisible’ sounds almost exactly like ‘I am.’ Invisibility for him is being. Having a secret, however, he is unable to hide this fact from the others. He tries:

…он научился все-таки притворятъся сквозистым, для чего прибегал к сложной системе как бы оптических обманов. (Nabokov, 4, p.12),

[he learned nevertheless to feign translucency, using a complex system of something like optical illusions]

but is unsuccessful:

В разгаре общих игр сверстники вдруг от него отпадали, словно почуя, что ясность его взгляда да голубизна висков - лукавый отвод, и что в действительности Цинциннат непроницаем. (Nabokov, 4, p.12)

[In the midst of the excitement of a game his coevals would suddenly forsake him, as if they had sensed that his lucid gaze and the azure of his temples were but a crafty deception, and that actually Cincinnatus was impenetrable.]

Cincinnatus attempts to hide from the others the very fact that he is hiding something! When he fails, the others become aware that his manifested identity is just a shell. While still not knowing what exactly is beneath it (does Cincinnatus himself know?), they realize that, impenetrable, he sees through them. *They realize he is invading their privacy.* They do not care if it is inborn: for them Cincinnatus is a monster – a moral monster. They want to isolate and destroy him.[[61]](#footnote-60) Before the execution, however, they want to digest his secret, his very individuality. They want him to abandon himself and dissolve in the collective - to the point of collaborating voluntarily in his own execution. M’sieur Pierre, the executioner, speaks about “the atmosphere of warm camaraderie” [атмосфера теплой товарищеской близости (Nabokov, 4, p.100)] that is supposed to develop between him and the death-row inmate.

It is quite difficult to develop the atmosphere of warm camaraderie using simple and literal violence. Cincinnatus’ surrender, according to the principle of the struggle, must be voluntary. That is why the novel is called ‘Invitation.’ In order to ‘invite’ Cincinnatus to join them, others attempt to revert the action of the offense and expose Cincinnatus himself to the regime of intense invasion of privacy. It seems to be their only chance to break through his protective shell. This reverse invasion operates on all levels. It starts with the most literal and brutal forms of the hidden gaze:

С течением времени безопасных мест становилось все меньше, всюду проникало ласковое солнце публичных забот, и было так устроено окошечко в двери, что не существовало во всей камере ни одной точки, которую наблюдатель за дверью не мог бы взглядом проткнуть. (Nabokov, 4, p. 13)

[In the course of time the safe places became ever fewer: the affectionate sunshine of public concern penetrated everywhere, and the peephole in the door was placed in such a way that in the whole cell there was not a single point that the observer on the other side of the door could not pierce with his gaze.]

Родион, стоя за дверью, с суровым шкиперским вниманием глядел в глазок. Цинциннат ощущал холодок у себя в затылке. (Nabokov, 4, p.6)

[Rodion, standing behind the door, peered with a skipper’s stern attention through the peephole.]

... довольно, довольно, - не ходи больше, ляг на койку, Цинциннат, так, чтобы не возбуждать, не раздражать, - действительно, почувствовав хищный порыв взгляда сквозь дверь, Цинциннат ложился или садился за стол, раскрывал книгу. (Nabokov, 4, p.69)

[…enough, enough, - do not walk anymore, lay down, Cincinnatus, so that you would not excite, would not irritate - and indeed, having felt through the door the predatory drive of the gaze Cincinnatus would lay down or sit at the table and open a book.]

Then, it runs through almost everything in the curious ritual of detention, itself a part of the ritual of execution. Hidden identities (even the guards are masked); the hidden date and time of the beheading; a requirement that the executioner be introduced incognito and become the friend of the victim; a fake escape attempt organized by the execution team – all of these compose a series of invasions which gradually become increasingly penetrating and ruthless. The general strategy is observed even in little details: the spider in Cincinnatus’s cell is plastic, which the inmate does not know; the hands of the clocks in the prison are painted every half an hour - these quaint subterfuges clearly work toward the single end. That is why the artificial, staged character of Cincinnatus’s world seems to him (and to Nabokov) so abhorrent: it is just one more way to spy.

At a certain point M’sieur Pierre says:

Для меня важно установить, что ни один ваш душевный оттенок не ускользает от меня... Для меня вы прозрачны, как - извините изысканность сравнения - как краснеющая невеста прозрачна для взгляда опытного жениха. (Nabokov, 4, 93)

[It is important for me to establish that not a single spiritual shade eludes me… You are transparent for me like – forgive the exquisite comparison – a blushing bride is transparent to the gaze of an experienced groom.]

And later:

Mы полюбили друг друга, и строение души Цинцинната мне также известно как строение его шеи. (Nabokov, 4, 101).

[We came to love each other, and the anatomy of Cincinnatus’s soul is as familiar to me as the anatomy of his neck.]

This summarizes what is happening in the novel. M’sieur Pierre, along with all the others, wants to see through Cincinnatus. He wants to penetrate the impenetrable, to pierce the non-transparent. In this optical contest M’sieur Pierre uses the threat of execution as the main means of penetration. Applying the threat, he attempts to make Cincinnatus come out of his retreat and coincide with his fear of death. Trasparent and evident, Cincinnatus would be then easy to grasp. Interestingly, in this strategy M’sieur Pierre *mimics Cincinnatus.* He himself tries to become invisible, building his ‘incognito’ and spying on his prisoner.

In this context, the various forms of the existential struggle in the novel become more distinct. All of its stages are present, from the confrontation of wills to the parasitic cruelty of the hidden gaze. And, in full accordance with the rules, one can win only by showing oneself ready to shed one’s life, thus affirming one’s freedom. Cincinnatus’s plotline in the novel is exactly this - the fight against fear. Showing himself ready to die, he wins and becomes the Master of his world,[[62]](#footnote-61) realizing that everything around him is the dream of which he himself is the origin.

In Kamera obskura the struggle is almost totally reduced to the sophisticated schemings of parasitism. Let us recall the beginning of the novel. Krechmar, a wealthy art critic, begins an adulterous affair with Magda. He hides the affair from his wife, Annelisa, and from her brother, Max. He also conceals from Magda that he is married, lying to her about his name and address. Eventually, Magda finds out who he is. She threatens to reveal the affair to his wife, who still does not know anything. One day, when Max accidentally overhears Krechmar’s phone conversation with Magda, he learns the truth. That day Max visits Krechmar and Annelisa, but tells no one about his discovery. He dines with them, observing how Krechmar deceives him and Annelisa.

The knot of lies is resolved in a burst of interlocked revelations. Magda sends a love letter to Krechmar's address. When he visits her she tells him about it and learns that Annelisa habitually reads his correspondence. Krechmar rushes to his apartment to catch the mailman but is too late. Unable to face his wife, without seeing her, Krechmar returns to Magda. When, next day, he comes home, Annelisa is gone. In the empty apartment Krechmar meets Max. Max accuses him of having an affair and betraying Annelisa. Krechmar tries to lie his way out, pretending there was a misunderstanding, but Max reveals that he has just seen Magda, and that there is no doubt.

The above-described sequence resembles the episode from Korol, dama, valet we studied in the first chapter. In both novels Nabokov creates populated arrangements of characters, and denies them access to each other’s inner domain. All situations are consistently presented from the points of view of all participants. We observe the plot moving through the almost innumerable gradations of exposure and denouement.Yet, there is an important difference. In the train episode of Korol, dama, valet there was no deception. Dreyer, Marta and Franz did not lie. Consequently, no one had advantage over the others. In Kamera obskura, on the contrary, someone always knows more than the others, and enjoys the advantage of the information surplus. Someone is always in control. First it is Krechmar who lies to everyone. Then it is Magda who uncovers his lying but does not tell him about it. Then it is Max who overhears the telephone conversation and becomes the most informed person. The tendency toward hidden observation intensifies as the plot progresses. When, at the end of the novel, Gorn and Magda make love next to the blind Krechmar, the sentiment and causality of traditional dramatic conflicts recede, leaving bare only the sophisticated maneuvers of the parasites and the helplessness of the victim they ‘consume.’

The examples of Priglashenie and Kamera obskura help us come to an important conclusion: *Nabokov is not so much preoccupied with vision and its paradigm as with visibility and invisibility*. He is interested in various possibilities of exposure, and its relation to self-authorship. He interprets sight as a protective faculty, and awareness as a structure of privacy. How, he asks, using vision and knowledge, should one protect oneself against the violation of one’s private being? A physical screen always contains a danger of breach; a wall can be trespassed. Effective security implies effective surveillance. Truly invulnerable protection consists in knowing more about potential violators than they know about the protected object, and, furthermore, in knowing more about them than they know about themselves.

This paradigm of visibility and surveillance found its theoretical expression long after Nabokov had written his novels. In 1970 Michel Foucault in Surveiller et Punir (“Discipline and Punish” in English translation) developed the theory of disciplinary power. According to that theory, traditional forms of power used visibility - direct theatricality of display and performance. The sovereign was constantly advertised, emphasized, magnified and put in front of his subjects. Everything in that tradition - costume, ritual, language - converged towards the same goal. The sovereignty of the sovereign was based on direct *impression*.[[63]](#footnote-62) The epoch of Louis XIV, *Le Roi-Soleil*, was the culmination of such a tradition. The coming of disciplinary power reversed the relation of visibility. In the new arrangement the power hides (it is exactly its invisibility that makes it powerful) and its subjects are forced out in the open. Their very exposure operates and controls them. Disciplinary power brought with itself new practices of surveillance and new concerns for visibility and ‘incognito.’[[64]](#footnote-63) Discipline, according to the way Foucault uses the term, is the power structure of paranoia.

The resemblance between Foucault’s well-known discussion of Bentham’s Panopticon[[65]](#footnote-64) in Surveiller et punir and Nabokov’s world of Priglashenie deserves a special comment. Both Nabokov and Foucault see the prison as the matrix of culture. Both conceptualize the prison and power in optical terms. Foucault studies the decisive change in the aims of incarceration: while before the prison was intended to lock, deprive of light, and hide, it now locks, but keeps in constant display. “Full light and the gaze of the guard, writes Foucault, grasp (*captent*) the prisoner better than shadows that were, after all, protective. Visibility is an ambush.” (Foucault, 1975, p.202) Foucault develops here the line of analysis started by Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectics and Sartre’s theory of the gaze. The concept of will (power) in Surveiller et punir finally begins to interact with that of representation. In the passage above Foucault suggests that the gaze *grasps* the prisoner: we almost sense how this happens - how an invisible guard transforms into one continuous presence; how this presence, in an instantaneous, non-spatial way attains and permeates the prisoner; how being is alienated and pre-empted by the gaze. The guard does not even need to be in the central tower. It is only necessary that the prisoner not know whether the guard is there or not. Developing this idea, Foucault suggests that the Panopticon is something like a gigantic machine of power, digesting prisoners.[[66]](#footnote-65) This machine turns surveillance, which still implies a personalized gaze, into *pure exposure*. Why does Foucault call prison the machine of power, and not of punishment? Because the prisoner, once inside it, is grasped; he does not belong to himself anymore; his being is not his. Power, in Foucault’s optical theory, is translated into the notion of control.

In Surveiller et punir Foucault suggests that contemporary society as a whole is a Panopticon. That is to say, it is a gigantic prison, where there is no guard in the central tower and yet the prisoners are constantly on display. According to Foucault, we internalized the tower. We absorbed the prison. Our being is perpetually alienated from us, grasped, and organized, but there is no one personally responsible for this. All is happening due to the specific grammar of society, to its optical regime. This regime is called *discipline*. A picture almost fully identifiable with the world of Priglashenie.

Yet, there is an important difference. The most interesting, and imaginative, aspect of Nabokov’s novel is that there *is* a guard. The guard is Cincinnatus. He is the very eye which, from its tower, observes the world. All the others are in fact his prisoners, his hostages. He is in the center of the world, invisible, and, therefore, invulnerable. That is why he is alone in the citadel. He is the only guard in the novel. In a sense, the novel describes an unsuccessful attempt by society to eliminate its power source, to oust its consciousness, or, more precisely, its superego. Cincinnatus incarnates the moral order of his world, he is responsible for its ethical burden.

Nabokov, to evaluate respective achievements, understood the prison more deeply than Foucault. The latter arrives at the idea of disciplinary power by observing an unaccounted rift in history. According to Foucault, at a certain moment one social paradigm was simply replaced by another, and he limits himself to describing the change. Nabokov, on the other hand, builds the conceptual system of paranoia from its ontological foundations up, towards the social organization as a whole. Individuation, privacy, the gaze, error, ‘incognito,’ loss of being - this is the gradual ladder that led him to the world of Priglashenie. Nabokov is the heir to the metaphysical ontologies of Spinoza and Leibniz rather than to the historical analysis of twentieth-century relativism.

Returning to our study of intersubjectivity, we should remark that the central place in the ontological concept of paranoia is occupied by the notion of blindness. Once we leave the paradigm of sight and become concerned with exposure, blindness acquires a radically new aspect: it ceases to be the limitation of vision, and appears instead as a tragic increase in visibility, an explosion of vulnerability, a massive loss of privacy. The blind cannot protect themselves by looking back at the observer. Not only do they ignore who is looking at them, they do not even know that looking is taking place. They become fully exposed. Theirs is the case of a true hemorrhage of being. They are giving their being out, radiating it in all directions.

One of the best illustrations of the vicissitudes of blindness in Russian literature is Revizor. Khlestakov owes his triumph to the officials. Their blindness projects him as the Inspector, allows him to appear other than he is, and, simultaneously, exposes *them* for what they are. This accounts for the effectiveness of Gogol’s satire. The dramatic impetus of the play resides in the fact that the audience knows who Khlestakov is, and the officials do not. Not-knowing becomes their most important feature. As a result, they become more powerfully presented, that is to say, *disclosed*. Each of their acts, because it is dictated by blindness, becomes irresistibly attractive and as if blown up. The structure of the play *magnifies* its characters. That is why the moment when their sight is fully restored and they learn the real situation becomes the climax - the paroxysm - of representation, the famous ‘mute scene.’

Blindness is a ‘spectacle.’ Something attracts us to the blind. They are natural actors. Vision, taken from them, is transferred to the audience and turns it into *spectators*.[[67]](#footnote-66) This redistribution of vision creates a new type of theatricality in addition to the simple relation of looking and being looked at: the theatricality of paranoia. It is the theater not of actors, but of *characters*. This theatricality is closely connected with the concept of dramatic irony mentioned in Chapter 1. Here is what Muecke, a respected authority on irony, writes about it:

... it is the audience that sees and the dramatis personae who are seen, who are unaware of being observed, blind to the fact of being watched. Characters are not infrequently literally blind or blinded and almost invariably are metaphorically blind, whether willfully or accidentally, to the machinations of the villain, the wiles of the hero or heroine, the workings of fate, the identity of another, or their own natures or motives. All this the audience sees. Blindness and sightedness - ironically reversed in Tiresias and Oedipus (the blind ‘seeing’ and the sighted ‘blind’) and in Gloucester (‘I stumbled when I saw’) - are as basic to theater as to irony. (Muecke, 1982, p.66)

What is said above about particular characters can be generalized on the metafictional level. The characters do not know they are observed. Unless we are watching the famous Pirandello experiment, the characters do not even know they are characters, which adds greatly to our fascination. The structural - contractual - blindness of the characters in relation to the audience is responsible for the hypnosis of theater. A well-known theatrical concept of the ‘fourth wall’ is directly related to that blindness. In theater we watch the actors, but spy on the characters.[[68]](#footnote-67)

In the first chapter it was established that blindness plays the key role in Nabokov’s strategies of presentation. The technique of the *unreliable focalizer*, ubiquitous in his novels, encases every individual perspective within a larger perspective of more informed characters, and finally within the omniscient perspective of the narrator or the author. In this technique, the juxtaposition of inner and outer perspectives, frequently complemented by narrative embedding, directly dramatizes the blindness of the character. This discursive blindness, it should be emphasized, is unintentional, which distinguishes it from the fundamentally deliberate maneuvers of the narrator.

Unreliable focalization (a more technical term for dramatic irony,)

via the notion of intention, links discourse and being. Whenever the ironic narrative assumes a personal point of view, its bearer, be it a character or a narrator, appears to the reader as ‘naive’: he ignores the frame in which he is observed by the reader, and, as a consequence, is not fully in control of himself. This results in the peculiar radiance and poignancy of his presence – in existential disclosure. Nabokov presents human beings as essentially pathetic. Undermining their point of view, he wants us to experience not so much the characters themselves, but their very exposure to us and to other characters. Exposure is the urgency and the drive behind Nabokov’s novels.

If we abandon now the point of view of the author, the reader or the parasite, and look at the whole situation from the point of view of the victim – Luzhin or Krechmar – then exposure to the other appears as *the loss of being.* In Nabokov’s world, we should remember, being is value. It is desirable and vulnerable. Like capital, it is at a constant risk of diminution. The victim has to defend himself against the universe of the gaze. This defense is naturally related to hiding and ‘incognito.’ [[69]](#footnote-68) Martin’s expedition, Herman’s artistic crime, Cincinnatus’s writing – all of these are examples of such a defensive stand.

Now, having established that ‘incognito’ itself is an active strategy, we can determine the nature of Nabokovian ‘defense’ more precisely. The victim’s response to loss and violation is *active recovery*. The victim wants to reabsorb what was lost or stolen. The mechanism of recovery uses the same means of the hidden gaze that were instrumental in the loss. The last point is the most notable. *The victim does not leave the world of the hidden gaze, the space of paranoia*. M’sieur Pierre uses ‘incognito’ against Cincinnatus; Smurov literally spies on his neighbors; Herman attempts to get what he thinks is due him through an intricate, veiled scheme. Such a principle of recovery leads to a situation in which victims are often hardly distinguishable from aggressors. To some extent, everybody is implicated in existential deals. The circulation of being puts the subject simultaneously on both poles of the spectrum of loss and acquisition. Only absolute intimacy elevates the character from the ‘trading floor.’ The safe haven of full trust exists in the Russian Nabokov only in Dar - in the relationships between Fyodor and Zina and between Fyodor and his mother.[[70]](#footnote-69)

In order to see how the above analized structure of loss and recovery is realized in an actual text, let us read closely what on the surface seems to be the least paranoid of Nabokov’s novels, Podvig. Its plot is simple: Martin, the protagonist, grows up in Russia; during the Revolution he and his mother escape from the Crimea to Europe; soon thereafter he goes to college at Cambridge; while at Cambridge he befriends a British fellow student Darwin and falls in love with a Russian émigré Sonia who lives in London. Eventually, he conceives a plan to cross the border from Latvia to Soviet Russia secretly and disappears somewhere between Riga and the Russian border.

Traditionally, Podvig is read as either autobiographic (Nabokov himself, at approximately the same age as Martin, escaped the Red Army through the Crimea and went on to study at Oxford) or symbolic (the text contains a series of covert indications suggesting that the actual expedition Martin undertakes leads him into the realm of imagination and art).[[71]](#footnote-70) Before accepting any of these interpretations, however, we should study the plot on its literal level.

The first significant event in Martin’s life is the death of his father: “Смерть отца, которого он любил мало, потрясла Мартына...” [The death of his father, whom he did not much love, stunned Martin…] (Nabokov, 2, p.160). That initial loss is immediately linked to the gaze. The intermediary notion in this association is shame: in grief both the mother and the son feel a certain sacred, ubiquitous presence in the world:

Эта сила не вязалась с церковью, никаких грехов не отпускала и не карала, - но просто было иногда стыдно пред деревом, облаком, собакой, стыдно перед воздухом, также бережно или свято несущим дурное слово, как и доброе. (Nabokov, 2, p.162)

[This power had no connection with the Church, and neither absolved nor chastised any sins – but it was just that she sometimes felt ashamed in the presence of a tree, of a cloud, of a dog, or of the air itself that bore an ill word just as religiously and gently as a kind one.]

Loss-death-God-shame[[72]](#footnote-71) - such is the chain of associations suggested by the narrator. The shame in the above passage is coming from trees, clouds and air. It is impossible to localize its source. This sad, sweet shame envelops the characters as the air itself, as the passing of time - as the everywhere present, yet nowhere seen, divine gaze. The initiation of self-awareness under the gaze begins the plot of the novel.

The loss of native land comes after the loss of the father. Martin is too young to understand the true significance of the emigration, but as he goes to Cambridge the situation changes: “Встречаясь с англичанами-студентами, он, дивясь, отмечал свое несомненно русское нутро.” [Upon talking to his English fellow students he noted with wonder his unmistakably Russian essence.] (Nabokov, 2, p.191) The theme of dispossession becomes explicit when Martin begins to study Russian literature. His teacher, Archibald Moon, is British. He is introduced in the context of a learned, almost artistic theft: “...Россию потихоньку украл Арчибальд Мун и запер у себя в кабинете.” […and meanwhile Archibald Moon had quietly stolen Russia and locked it up in his study.] (Nabokov, 2, p.198) The verb “to steal” in this sentence could have been just an accidental metaphor, but later Nabokov repeats and develops the image:

Порою он невольно любовался мастерством его лекций, но тотчас же, почти воочию, видел, как Мун уносит к себе саркофаг с мумией России. В конце концов Мартын от него совсем отделался, взяв кое-что, но претворив это в собственность, и уже в полной чистоте зазвучали русские музы. (Nabokov, 2, p.221)

[He would recall with involuntary admiration the artistry of Moon’s discourse, but the moment after would perceive as a vivid reality the picture of Moon carrying away to his rooms a sarcophagus with Russia’s mummy. In the end Martin did get entirely rid of Moon, while appropriating this and that element, but converting it into his own property, and then at last, the voices of Russian muses began to sound in complete purity.]

Moon not only steals Russia, he mummifies it (this, almost parasitic, appropriation becomes even more revolting given the alliteration between the name ‘Moon’ and the word ‘mummy’, used in the text.) Such a depredation provokes a response: Martin repossesses his Russia. He takes it back along with something that belongs to Moon himself, but is able, in his turn, to digest the alien element and make it his own. The word ‘sobstvennost’ (ownership) does not leave room for ambiguity: we are dealing here with the issue of property. The laws of existential exchange are violated. Russia belongs to Martin; he will take it back from whoever claims it.

The next, and probably the most important, stage in the escalation of loss in Martin’s life is related to women. While Martin studies, his mother marries his Swiss uncle.[[73]](#footnote-72) Again, Martin is shaken. He treats her marriage as a treason, both to himself and to his father:

Вместе с тем он спрашивал себя, как же теперь с нею встретится, о чем будет говорить, удастся ли ему простить ей измену. (Nabokov, 2, p.224)

[At the same time he kept asking himself how he would face her again, what they would talk about, and would he manage to forgive her for the betrayal.]

His mother’s treason is only an introduction to the world of unfaithfulness. The most important betrayal (and the one taking a much larger narrative space in the novel) is Sonia’s. It acquires strong symbolic overtones, as Sonia is Russian, and as Martin strongly associates her with Russia. He falls in love with her, yet she prefers Darwin, Martin’s friend. At this plot juncture, the novel focuses simply on Martin’s jealousy. But later Sonia’s romance with Darwin itself turns out to be a cover-up. The story of this second, embedded treason complicates jealousy into something deeper. At a certain point, as an intimate game, Martin and Sonia invent a fictional country, strongly resembling Soviet Russia. They call it Zoorland and imagine it in detail.[[74]](#footnote-73) This game becomes for a while the strongest link between them. Then, after a more than a year, in a Russian newspaper Martin accidentally reads a fiction story called ‘Zoorland’ and signed by Bubnov, Sonia’s and Martin’s common acquaintance:

Это оказался короткий, чудесным языком написанный рассказ 'с налетом фантастики', как выражаются критики, и в нем Мартын со смущением и ужасом узнал (словно произошла страшная непристойность) многое из того, о чем он говорил с Соней, - но все это было странно освещено чужим бубновским воображением. "Какая она все-таки предательница", - подумал Мартын и в порыве острой и безнадежной ревности вспомнил, как видел однажды Бубнова и Соню, идущих по темной улице под руку, и как уверил себя, что обознался, когда Соня на другой день сказала, что была с Веретенниковой в кинематографе. (Nabokov, 2, p.269)

[It turned out to be a short story in that author’s admirable style “with a touch of the fantastic,” as critics like to put it. In it Martin recognized with embarrassment and horror (as if he were witnessing some dreadfully obscene act) much of what he and Sonia used to think up - now oddly illumined by Bubnov’s alien imagination. “How treacherous she is, after all,” Martin reflected, and in a surge of acute and hopeless jealousy recalled having once observed Bubnov and her walking arm in arm down a dark street; and how he had tried to believe what she told him on the following day - that she had gone to the movies with the Veretennikov girl.]

This passage is almost paradigmatic as it contains all the main themes of paranoia. The intimate story about Russia is secretly stolen from Martin by the very woman he loves. Russia and love are not only stolen, but also ‘sold’ to the happy rival, to an alien imagination. The violation is experienced as betrayal (secret aggression) and is immediately associated by Martin with a preceding lie. The narrator indicates embarrassment and the sense of obscenity as Martin’s reactions. This again links loss and violation to shame and hidden gaze. The jealousy Martin feels emphasizes the themes of property, paralysis and betrayal. Martin, like blind Krechmar discovering the presence of Gorn in his house, retroactively realizes that all the events of his relationship with Sonia, even the most intimate, had double meanings.

The theme of loss is finalized at the very end of the novel in the last meeting between Martin and Darwin. Darwin does not understand the expedition. He has forgotten everything, including their friendship. He forgot the section of their life, which, in a sense, harbors the real significance of Martin’s plan: “Мартын с ужасом отметил, что воспоминание у Дарвина умерло или отсутствует, и осталась одна выцветшая вывеска…” [To his horror Martin realized that Darwin’s memory had died, or was absent, and the only thing that remained was a discolored signboard.](Nabokov, 2, p. 291)

Thus, Martin’s life is presented in the novel as a constant chain of loss, strongly associated with betayal and death.[[75]](#footnote-74) Martin’s reaction - the existential determination which structures his plot-line and accounts for his ‘expedition’ - is a clear example of self-protection. Let us see how he builds this defense.

At a certain point in the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells us about Martin’s solitude:

Чувство богатого одиночества, которое он [Мартын] часто испытывал среди толпы, блаженное чувство, которое испытываешь, когда себе говоришь: вот, никто из этих людей, занятых своим делом, не знает, кто я, откуда, о чем сейчас думаю, - это чувство было необходимо для полного счастья... (Nabokov, 2, p.188)

[A feeling of rich solitude, which he [Martin] often had experienced amid crowds - the delight he took in saying to himself: Not one of these people, going about their business, knows who I am, where I am from, what I am thinking about right now - this feeling was indispensable to complete happiness…]

Martin’s solitude is described as ‘rich’ – another reference to the value of being. It is important to note that in his case the value is preserved, not diminished by solitude. It is a special type of solitude – solitude in the crowd. As a prerequisite for full happiness Martin needs to be simultaneously exposed to others and protected from them by his ‘incognito.’ He does not express interest in the variety of human types or in the vitality of the incessant motion of the crowd - the interests of a *flaneur*.[[76]](#footnote-75) The crowd here is the undifferentiated, monolithic element of exposure. Martin needs this exposure *to experience* his protection. In the crowd he is invisible in the midst of the intense ubiquity of the gaze. He truly possesses himself (feels rich) only in the process of constantly eluding others.

From this starting point we can follow how he conceives his clandestine trip.

He constantly changes passports and national identity. He speaks all European languages, is able to mimic accents, and anywhere can pass for anybody. When he goes to work as a farm hand in southern France, he shows his Swiss passport:

Третий раз таким образом он менял отечество, пытая доверчивость чужих людей и учась жить инкогнито. (Nabokov, 2, p.266)

[It was thus the third time that Martin changed his nationality, testing the credulity of strangers and learning to live incognito.]

Here the notion of ‘incognito’ becomes explicit. Later Martin directly relates it to his expedition:

... время шло, близилась черная осенняя ночь, им намеченная для перехода, и он уже чувствовал себя отдохнувшим, спокойным, уверенным в своей способности прикидываться чем угодно... (Nabokov, 2, p.268)

[… time was running out, the dark autumn night he had marked for slipping across the border was nearing, and he now felt rested, refreshed, sure of being able impersonate anything and anyone…]

Martin transforms ‘the trust of strangers’ into his own confidence (*doverchivost’* into *uverennost’.*) He constructs his ‘incognito’ and learns the art of how to be not what he seems. Having absorbed the lesson of many betrayals, he teaches himself how to betray the gaze. In such an education, Martin finds a teacher, or, at least, an ideal model. Juri Timofeevich Gruzinov is a true virtuoso of ‘incognito,’ a soldier who mastered the art of intelligence and counterintelligence and did many times what Martin is planning to do. Martin wants advice on how to cross the Russian border (he pretends that his friend plans a similar expedition) but fails in the confrontation of disguises:

Оказалось, однако, что Юрия Тимофеевича Грузинова не так-то легко привести в благое состояние духа, когда человек вылезает из себя, как из норы, и усаживается нагишом на солнце. Юрий Тимофеевич не желал вылезать. Он был в совершенстве добродушен и вместе с тем непроницаем. (...) Его простоватость, даже некоторая рыхлость, старомодная изысканность в платье (фланелевый жилет в полоску), его шутки, его обстоятельность, - все это было прочной оболочкой, коконом, который Мартын никак не мог разорвать. (Nabokov, 2, p.272-273)

[It turned out, however, that Yuri Timofeevich Gruzinov was not one to be easily put into that euphoric state of mind when man scrambles out of his own self, as out of a burrow, and sun-bathes naked. Yuri Timofeevich refused to scramble out. He was perfectly benevolent, and at the same time impenetrable. (…) His simplicity, or, rather, certain flaccidity of demeanor, the old-fashioned stylishness of his clothes (the stripped flannel waistcoat), his jokes, his circumstantiality – all that formed a solid shell, a cocoon, which Martin could not manage to tear.]

Peculiarly, the lesson Yuri Timofeevich gives Martin is purely negative. Without explaining anything, he just demonstrates how to be impenetrable.

After his ‘incognito’ is perfected, Martin tests it on everybody he knows, his mother, Sonya, Darwin... When, on the eve of the trip, he comes to Sonya, he deliberately does not open to her:

Но уйти он не мог, как не мог придумать ничего занимательного, и Соня своим молчаньем как бы нарочно старалась довести его до крайности, - вот он совсем потеряется и выболтает все, - и про экспедицию, и про любовь, и про все то сокровенное, заповедное, чем связаны были между собой эта экспедиция, его любовь, и “унылая пора, очей очарованье”. (Nabokov, 2, p.285)

[But he could not bring himself to leave, as he also could not think of anything amusing to say, and Sonia seemed to be deliberately trying to provoke him with her silence – he was on the brink of losing control and spilling it all - his expedition, and his love, and that innermost, mysterious something, which bound together the expedition, the love and Pushkin’s ode to autumn.]

Martin is tempted to confess but makes an effort restrain himself. He somehow realizes that the very love which moves him to open towards Sonya would be ruined by the elimination of his ‘incognito.’ His rich solitude (*sokrovennoe, zapovednoe* – the words denoting privacy in Russian) - the fullness and the urgency of his being - consists in retaining his secret from his closest affiliations. This secret is everything for him - his identity, his love, his language, his struggle. All is unified, merged in the fully individual, fully private sphere that Martin has built inside his protective shell. It is impossible to separate this shell - the outer surface of his self - from what is inside. His love, dignity, solitude, youthful strength cannot exist without the secret. In a sense, they *are* the secret. Just before his departure for Riga, Martin asks Darwin to send his mother postcards written in advance and having his Berlin return address, one every week. This request is the final development of Martin’s ‘incognito,’ and this time it is truly inseparable from his feelings for his mother - from his desire to protect her and maintain a connection with her even during his expedition.

Concluding this analysis of Podvig we can see that behind the seemingly innocent arrangements of an autobiography or the fine, deliberately pale hints of a symbolic novel, there is a powerful existential plot. Like Smurov, gradually exterminated by others’ attention; like Cincinnatus feeling on his neck the gaze from the peephole; like Herman fleeing from his invisible pursuers - like all of Nabokov’s victims - Martin wages a continuous war against loss and violation. He defends himself, and the aim of his defence is to maintain himself in existence.

The the whole of Nabokov’s oeuvre tells us that such a defense is a precarious undertaking. The bathers from Dar represent one extreme: shameless because fully indifferent to exposure, they decompose into a faceless mass (indifference in their case turns into indifferentiation). Another extreme is Gorn from Kamera obskura: equally shameless because fully hidden, he is a magnificent parasite. Both poles of this spectrum - full exposure and full ‘incognito’ - approach the realm of the inhuman. What Gorn and the bathers lack is a higher human capacity, which is able to develop only in an *equal* encounter with otherness. This capacity, according to Nabokov, is related to *memory and self-consciousness*, the themes we shall study in the next chapter.

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# **CHAPTER 4**

**Memory and self-consciousness**

Ganin, the protagonist of Mashen’ka, in many ways resembles Martin from Podvig. Both are emigrants with a strong attachment to their native land. Both, at least psychologically, live in a radically decentered world revolving around distant Russia. The theme of loss plays a decisive role in their respective plotlines. For Ganin the experience of dispossession is as sharp as it is for Martin: "... и теперь страшно было подумать, что его прошлое лежит в чужом столе" [...and now it was horrifying to imagine that his past lay inside someone else’s desk] (Nabokov, 1, p.69) Ganin meditates upon discovering that his lost beloved has become his neighbor’s wife. The list of resemblances can be continued. Ganin is a true master of ‘incognito.’ His Berlin neighbors know almost nothing about him. At a certain point, well into the novel, with odd, metafictional surprise, we even learn that his name is not Ganin, as he uses counterfeit identity papers. Like Martin, he executes a clandestine expedition in the direction of Russia. Here, however, the resemblances stop and we encounter a cardinal difference: while Martin goes to Russia physically, Ganin does not move from Berlin. His trip remains entirely a matter of memory.

Ganin’s ‘expedition’ is an attempt at recovery - the recovery of love as well as of Russia. We can suppose that the nature of loss is also the same, and related to otherness. The reasons for such a supposition are quite strong. Russia was taken from Ganin in an open confrontation: he fought, was wounded, escaped by sea, and fought again. His beloved, too, is openly expropriated from him: she has become someone else's wife. She belongs to Alfiorov, who is standing between Ganin and her in all the repulsive reality of the possessor, constantly touching and tasting his treasure. As a result, it is tempting to see in Mashen’ka an earlier version of Podvig. Ganin wants to reacquire his love and his country, but, being just a pale draft of the future character, never develops to the point of launching a *real* expedition.

One crucial detail undermines this interpretation. Upon having recognized Mashen’ka in Alfiorov’s photograph, Ganin makes his initial vertiginous memory jump to the time immediately preceding his youthful love affair. He remembers himself meeting the girl, falling in love with her, and spending two magnificent summer months in the country together. He remembers how in the fall both of them move back to St. Petersburg and continue to meet all through the winter. But there, in St. Petersburg, during the ‘snowy epoch of their love,’ *they remember the summer*:

... в тех частых, пронзительно нежных письмах, которые они в пустые дни писали друг друту (он жил на Английской набережной, она на Караванной), оба вспоминали о тропинках парка, о запахе листопада, как о чем-то немыслимо дорогом и уже невозвратимом, быть может только бередили любовь свою, а может быть действительно понимали, что настоящее счастье минуло. (Nabokov, 1, pp.83-84)

[… in the frequent piercingly tender letters which they wrote to each other on empty days (he lived on the English Quay, she on Caravan Street) they both recalled the paths through the park, and the smell of fallen leaves, as being something unimaginably dear and gone forever: perhaps they only did it to enliven their love with bittersweet memories, but perhaps they truly realized that their happiness was over.]

This is a curious detail - the first instance of *mise en abîme* in Nabokov’s novelistic oeuvre. Inside Ganin’s big enterprise of remembrance the two characters of his memories remember their past. Their letters (the inserted ‘text’ of the *mise en abîme*)[[77]](#footnote-76) cast a totally new light on the nature of Ganin’s ‘expedition’(the outer frame). They have not yet lived through the Revolution, Civil War, emigration, and her marriage. No Alfiorov (and no Lenin) stands between Ganin of St. Petersburg and his love. He and the girl fully belong to one another. Even so, they remember their first summer as something ‘unimaginably valuable and already irreversibly lost.’ In this short phrase the theme of the value of being is seen again - related, however, not to the threat of otherness, but to the *irreversibility of time*.

Time for Nabokov is a structure of loss par excellence, as pregnant with potential terror, as blindness and the hidden gaze.[[78]](#footnote-77) The initial experience of the past is that of something elusive, out of reach, distant, inactual. The past is repeatedly associated with disappearance and death: “воспоминание либо тает, либо приобретает мертвый лоск" [recollections either melt away, or else acquire a deathly gloss] (Nabokov, 3, p.17). Temporality neither has a positive end nor contains seeds of development. Nabokov almost never links time to becoming and choice. He denies the entire old/new opposition, as he does not accept that something genuinely novel can spring out of the mere passage of time. With time, he suggests, the world does not become new, only older. In this respect Nabokov is radically anti-Darwinist. Instead of evolving, the world of his novels degenerates. People die; countries crumble; love and childhood end; happiness disappears. Nabokov’s novels are often openly elegiac: the past is presented as lost and the present becomes the place of exile.

In addition, while treating time as loss, Nabokov also rejects it as illusion. Events in his world only seem to come one after another - in fact all of them coexist in an eternal, immutable script. Within the framework of Nabokov’s aesthetics of perfect form, it is crucial to ensure that the end be contained in the beginning, and that pro-gression be replaced by circum-gression.

In its double aspect of loss and illusion, time for Nabokov is the representative of nothingness at the heart of being. Such an attitude, however, contains a latent paradox, related to the above-mentioned paradox of self. Loss implies the actuality of losing - of becoming older, of being subject to ruination or degeneration. In short, loss implies the reality of change, hence, the reality of time. Predestination, however, is realted to the irreality of time. If everything already exists, then the phenomenon of time is simply a subjective way to experience the immutable, predetermined script of events. In order to find the solution for this paradox we have to study Nabokov’s concept of *memory*.[[79]](#footnote-78)

In the very beginning of his autobiography, Drugie berega, Nabokov describes his efforts to tackle the mystery of the limits of life: before-birth and after-death. What is interesting in that description is not the failure of his straightforward attacks, but rather the methods he employs: in his exploration of time he uses the terms of *vision* almost exclusively. 'Вглядываться' [to peer], 'щель слабого света' [a crack of weak light], 'черные вечности' [black eternities], 'просматривать фильм' [to watch a movie], 'луч' [beam], 'мираж' [mirage], 'высмотреть' [to spot] (Nabokov, 4, pp.135-136) – here we encounter an almost entirely optical vocabulary. Throughout his autobiography, Nabokov continues in this vein, and eventually it becomes possible to distinguish two groups of terms pertaining to the workings of memory. One revolves around the notion of light; another is related to distance:

Эта страстная энергия памяти не лишена мне кажется патологической подоплеки - уж черезчур ярко воспроизводятся в наполненном солнцем мозгу разноцветные стекла веранды, и гонг, зовущий к ужину... (Nabokov 4, p.171)

[This passionate energy of memory is not devoid, it seems, of a certain pathological subcurrent – the multicolored glass of our veranda and the gong calling everybody to supper are reproduced in my sun-filled brain altogether too keenly.]

...они вялой подводной походкой шагают вдоль самого заднего задника сценической моей памяти: и вот перед дальнозоркими моими глазами вырастают буквы грамматики, как безумная абзука на таблице у оптика. (Nabokov, 4, p.174)

[… here is their listless, underwater walk across the remotest backdrop of my stage memory: and, akin to the mad alphabet of an optician’s chart, the grammar-book lettering looms again before me.]

The sunlight in the first of these two passages undergoes almost innumerable transformations in Drugie Berega. It becomes the electric light of memory, the projectionist’s light of a movie theater, the inner light of a mind gaze, the brilliance of the very reality remembered, etc. This same light, when insufficient, turns into darkness, blackness, twilight and haziness. Distance in the second passage is also constantly reappearing in the text, sometimes linked to actual geographical distance, sometimes to the span of time, and sometimes, as is the case in the passage, to the relevance of the remembered to the present of the memoirist (Nabokov tries to restore the image of the characters from his childhood English textbooks.) Complimentary to distance is the concept of sight - strong or weak. Far-sightedness is equated to the power of memory; conversely, myopia, to the failure to remember clearly. All sorts of optical devices, from telescope to microscope to stereoscope are associated with the conceptual fields of vision and memory.

The general conclusion we can draw from the above is that Nabokov conceives of memory in terms of looking. In fact, for Nabokov memory *is* a special sort of looking. The act of remembrance, in all its essential parameters - distance, point of view, illumination – emerges as the act of seeing, or, more precisely, the act of sense perception. The past arises for the subject in its utmost physicality, including color, texture, weight, taste and smell. It is out there, to be seen and experienced.

Treating the act of remembrance via the conceptuality of sensory perception implies a subject-object opposition. Through and by all his memories Nabokov insists that the past exists independently of the act of remembering it and of the person who remembers. This urgent need to affirm the ontological reality of the past is the reason why on many occasions he asserted the superiority of the remembered world over the universe of the remembering subject:

Ощущение предельной беззаботности, благоденствия, густого летнего тепла затопляет память и образует такую сверкающую действительность, что по сравнению с нею паркерово перо в моей руке и самая рука с глянцем на уже веснушчатой коже, кажутся мне довольно аляповатым обманом." (Nabokov, 4, p.173)

[A sense of absolute security, of well-being, of thick summer warmth pervades my memory and forms such a brilliant reality that next to it the Parker pen in my hand and the hand itself with its glossy, already freckled skin, seem rather crudely fake.]

Therefore, the past exists objectively, and time is indeed an illusion:

Признаюсь, я не верю в мимолетность времени - легкого, плавного, персидского времени! Этот волшебный ковер я научился складывать, чтобы один узор приходился на другой. (Nabokov, 4, p.213)

[I confess I do not believe in time – light, fluent, Persian time. I learned to fold that magic carpet in such a way as to superimpose one pattern upon another.]

The only difference between the past and the present is distance and lighting, plus a perceptual effort necessary to actualize the latent reality. [[80]](#footnote-79) This effort, to be sure, is not the distinguishing mark of memory. It can be directed elsewhere. The same effort, for example, is required to ‘remember’ one’s future:

Это странно, я как будто помню свои будущие вещи, хотя даже не знаю, о чем будут они. Вспомню окончательно и напишу. (Nabokov, 3, p.174)

[It’s strange, as if I remember my future works, even though I do not even know what they will be about. When I remember them fully I will write them.]

Without a perceptual effort, even one’s present, the physical reality of the current moment, can be as dim and out of focus as one’s past. Memory is different from anticipation or perception only in the *direction* of the gaze. Its object, the past reality, has the same ontological ‘rights’ as the objects of current perceptions or the objects of foresight.

Consequently, direct loss is also illusory. Rather than belonging to the realm of degeneration - to actual nothingness - loss is related to the semantics of ‘lost and found.’ Nothing is fully lost; nothing actually disappears; all that has ever happened exists out there in a special, dormant state. We just do not see it. Time for Nabokov is a peculiar deterioration of awareness, a *progressive unidirectional blindness*.

As a subspecies of blindness, it results in a special type of exposure. This exposure involves all the ontological consequences we studied in the previous chapter. Unable to recollect his past, the subject is alienated from himself. He is unaware of what he actually does and, eventually, of who he is. He loses himself, just like a blind person loses his being under the hidden gaze.[[81]](#footnote-80) He radiates being. Bad memory is as spectacular as blindness. That is why Nabokov is so attracted by all sorts of blunders related to the accuracy of retaining the past.

The blindness of oblivion is the actual experience of existential loss. When Fyodor in Dar imagines that his father is still alive somewhere, hiding death as something shameful, shame becomes associated with the moment of dying - the moment when the exposure of the past becomes overwhelming. The dead person (his history, his life) is the victim of our gaze: he cannot, from the moment of death on, protect himself against us.[[82]](#footnote-81)

The connection between memory and the gaze in Nabokov’ oeuvre does not stop here. In another episode from Dar, Fyodor thinks:

Забавно: если вообще представить себе возвращение в былое с контрабандой настоящего, как же дико было бы там встретить в неожиданных местах такие молодые и свежие, в каком-то ясном безумии не узнающие нас, прообразы сегодняшних знакомых: так, женщина, которую, скажем, со вчрашнего дня люблю, девочкой, оказывается, стояла почти рядом со мной в переполненном поезде, а прохожий, пятнадцать лет тому назад спросивший у меня дорогу, ныне служит в одной конторе со мной. В толпе минувшего с десяток лиц получило бы эту анахроническую значительность: малые карты, совершенно преображенные лучом козыря. И с какой уверенностью тогда... [Nabokov, 3, p.39]

[It is a funny thing, when you imagine yourself returning into the past with the contraband of the present, how weird it would be to encounter there, in unexpected places, the prototypes of today’s acquaintances, so young and fresh, who in a kind of lucid lunacy do not recognize you; thus a woman, for instance, whom one loves since yesterday, appears as a young girl, standing practically next to one in a crowded train, while the chance passerby who fifteen years ago asked you the way in the street now works in the same office as you. Among this throng of the past only a dozen or so faces would acquire this anachronistic importance: low cards transfigured by the radiance of the trump. And then how confidently one could... ]

This passage is crucial for understanding the essence of Nabokov’s concept of time. The core of the temporal experience is again ignorance rather than non-existence. The past as well as the future exist, all the people we knew are still out there, forever the way they had been. We, forever the way we are now, will be fixed in our places. Each moment, indestructible and eternal, exists separately from all the rest. This temporal digitalization would have been catastrophic if the moments had not been connected ontologically. A girl standing next to me in a train *is* the woman I will fall in love with many years later. My present co-worker *is* a passerby asking me for directions several years ago. What makes the participant significant and the passage of time hypnotic is the fact that *no one knows*. The future is veiled. We already *are* what we will be, only without knowing it. The situation is similar to our relation to the other: to be looked at is to be what the other sees without knowing what it is. The veiled character of the future is for blindness of time what the freedom of the other is for the blindness under the gaze; later we shall see that this is not just an accidental resemblance. There is the same ontological necessity to assume being without controlling it - the same indeterminacy. We, in a sense, extend beyond ourselves; our being stretches out beyond the zone where we can control it.

There is an important exception to the law of the veiled nature of the future. No one knows what he will be - except the person who is remembering. In the act of remembrance the subject returns to his past with the surplus of information.[[83]](#footnote-82) Joining his previous self, he travels across his former world, knowing what is to happen. “The beam of the trump”[[84]](#footnote-83) in the above passage is exactly this extra-insight which allows the time traveler to watch the characters of his past, knowing more about them than they know about themselves. And while one does not necessarily know the future of everybody involved in one’s past, knowing one’s own future is unavoidable. *One cannot see one’s past - one can only spy on it.* Memory is inherently paranoid. The remembering subject is doing in his past exactly what the narrator of Sogliadataj does in his present. Becoming an insubstantial eye and moving in the space of remembrance, inaccessible to the characters who inhabit that space, the subject is spying on his former con-temporaries, including himself. Sogliadataj, it should be noted, imitates the workings of memory so well that even the value-oriented quality of remembrance is faithfully conveyed: the split between the narrating (present) and the acting (past) selves remains solid while the situation is neutral but becomes rapidly confused as soon as the events involve something essential for the narrator.

If the future is veiled, then the passage of time is its gradual unveiling. One lives through the events which illuminate the meaning of everything that precedes them. One comes to see the ends of all means, the destinations of all movements, the actual targets of all aiming. As we live, accidental occurrences coalesce into causes under the light of realized effects. The coming of the future is the *progressive improvement of vision*. Which, of course, is compensated for by the regress of forgetting. We come closer to what we need to see, while leaving behind the reasons for needing it. Only the *effort* of memory lets us understand the clarifications arriving from the future (as well as taste the fruits of foresight.) In the case of Nabokov’s novels - where characters are always to some extent blind and where the causal development of the plots depends on their blindness – such clarification becomes extremely important. Certain key events bring about massive and almost instantaneous modifications of our perception of the past. When in Korol, dama, valet Marta realizes that Franz who came to her Berlin house is Dreyer’s nephew and rethinks the train compartment scene, we encounter one of the instances of the unmistakably Nabokovian *temporal kaleidoscope*. In other instances, Luzhin suddenly perceives the pattern of sinister repetitions permeating his life; Herman retroactively recognizes the import of Felix’s cane, blind Krechmar deduces the

presence of Gorn in the house and its inevitable significance for the accurate interpretation of all preceding events.

In relation to the above we should conclude that Nabokov’s concept of time and memory in all its major aspects differs from that of Bergson. The paradigm of Bergson is life and movement; the paradigm of Nabokov is being and perfection. Nabokov is very far from the organicity of *durée*. For him, the present does not grow or evolve out of the past. It exists independently, alongside the past and the future, as part of the general extratemporal landscape. Analysis of distance and lighting in Nabokovian memory discourse shows that his time is entirely spatialized. It is not the time of subjective becoming, but a static coexistence of oriented elements; not an evolution of experience, but a landscape of destiny.

What, then, is responsible for the unity of Nabokovian time? What prevents the moments, all existing independently, from dispersing into unrelated splinters? What personalizes events, what makes them belong to me, to him or to us? For Bergson, the unity is maintained by the *continuity* of consciousness. He argues for the accumulated identity of human life: his subject fully digests his past and turns it into his own substance, leaving nothing extraneous behind. The unity of Nabokov’s world is more problematic. If eternal events of the Nabokovian universe are ontologically separate from one another, then there always exists a danger that they may remain altogether isolated. The unity of time in this case depends only on memory. For Nabokov, memory is much more than reverse chronology - it is the possibility of an individualizing connection between any number of past and future events. In this respect, it is a *dimension* rather than a faculty. Just as a three-dimensional creature can soar above a two-dimensional plane and move instantaneously between points separated on it by a great distance, the memoirist possesses an ability to cut immediately between any number of events separated by a linear span of time, however significant. This is exactly what creates unity: in the dimension of memory all events can merge into one infinitely available, infinitely pliable medium where any segment is connected to any other. In a sense, memory creates what Leibniz dreamed of - a world of isolated entities fully compressed into the most interconnected whole without losing their individuality.

Having an ontologically independent past as close as possible without fully merging with it is what Nabokov calls *possessing*:

... that kind of thing is absolutely permanent, immortal, it can never change, no matter how many times I farm it out to my characters, it is always there with me; there’s the red sand, the white garden bench, the black fir trees, everything, a permanent possession. (Nabokov, 1973, p.12)

Here, we again encounter the themes that first appeared in our analysis of intersubjectivity - being as value and its ownership. The past, as Nabokov conceives it, has all the characteristics of an exceptional asset. It is fully under control. It does not deplete, is easily available, and its owner has an exclusive privilege to give it out. On many occasions Nabokov returns to the above listed qualities of the past-as-commodity: its permanence, privacy, availability, and the privilege of the owner. He even relates the law of inheritance to memory:

Полагаю, что моя способность держать при себе прошлое - черта наследственная. Она была и у Рукавишниковых и у Набоковых. (Nabokov, 4, 171)

[I believe that my faculty of retaining the past is a hereditary trait. Both the Rukavishnikovs and the Nabokovs possessed it.]

Especially peculiar here is the fact that the content of the hereditary transfer is memory itself. A capacity to retain the past is inserted into the very past. In the continuation of the passage Nabokov recollects his father remembering one of his childhood experiences, generating the structure of a memory within a memory. But the argument does not stop at that. After mentioning his father, Nabokov evokes himself at the age of five: away from home, the five year old remembers with uncanny clarity the precious details of his family park and mansion.[[85]](#footnote-84) Drugie berega, we should conclude, presents the treasure of the past as if locked in a sequence of *matryoshka* boxes where it remains safe and tamperproof. From the theme of inheriting the capacity to control the past Nabokov directly moves to the *mise en abîme* as a structure of memory. This is logical: if the past is valuable and requires a permanent effort of remembering, one inevitably comes to remember oneself in the process of remembering yet an earlier version of himself remembering – and so on. Nabokov takes this idea to its extreme when, in the beginning of the section dealing with the inherited character of memory he insists that his skill for remembering existed prior to his experience:

Заклинать и оживлять былое я научился Бог весть в какие ранние годы – еще тогда, когда в сущности никакого былого и не было. (Nabokov, 4, p.171)

[To conjure and to revive the past I learned at God knows how early an age – at the time where there was, in essence, not past at all.]

The structure of inserting the past into the present (or of embracing the past with the present) does not depend on the concrete contents of memory! It is the pure topological form of inside and outside, the sheer possibility of personal being to

mirror itself.

We have already seen Nabokov using memory-related *mise en abîme* in Mashen’ka, the novel of memory. It should be added that the whole plot of the novel is resolved in that structure. In its unexpected ending, Ganin locks several successive remembrances inside one another:

Но теперь он до конца исчерпал свое воспоминанье, до конца насытился им, и образ Машеньки остался вместе с умирающим старым поэтом там, в доме теней, который сам уже стал воспоминаньем. (Nabokov, 1, pp.111-112)

[But now he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them, and the image of Mary, together with that of the old dying poet, now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory.]

The image of Mashen’ka is the nucleus inside the Ganin who remembers her; that Ganin is himself inside the house where he lived in the present of the novel; the house itself, along with all its inhabitants, becomes the “house of shadows,” a memory inserted into the thoughts of Ganin leaving Berlin. Memories are neatly telescoped into one another and, in one decisive sweep, Ganin collapses them like a spyglass. In this rapid movement he realizes he never needed the live Mashen’ka. He needed part of himself left behind. His memorywork (something akin to dreamwork) consisted in regaining control over a lost piece of his past. Once he rediscovers this piece and safely encases it into several layers of remembrances, the work is done and he can turn towards the future.[[86]](#footnote-85)

In Dar, *mise en abîme* is fully generalized and becomes the overall structure of the novel. The term ‘structure’ is not quite adequate as the book, itself a fictional autobiography, is constantly spawning internal memories which, in their turn, implode into still smaller subdivisions of remembering. Let us consider an example: in the first chapter of Dar, Fyodor rereads his recently published book of verse (Nabokov, 3, pp.11-27). The composition of this section, carefully examined in light of knowing the whole of the novel, is extremely complex. On the one hand, the poems in Fyodor’s book describe his own childhood. On the other, the whole of Dar is also written by Fyodor, only much later. There are, therefore, several temporal layers: Fyodor-the-author-of-Dar (layer 1, the latest) remembers himself reading his first book (layer 2) and recollecting writing it earlier (layer 3), while the theme of the book is his childhood (layer 4) and while in certain episodes of this childhood Fyodor-the-boy himself remembers yet earlier episodes of his life (layer 5). The reader, in fact, faces five levels of remembering, which surpasses in sheer number of encasements what we observed in the end of Mashen’ka. And when in the subsequent chapters of Dar Fyodor remembers the reading itself, there appears an intermediate point between layers 1 and 2, bringing the total number of memory layers to six.

In general, as the novel progresses it is constantly turning towards its own previous sections, which, as we have seen, are also cascading into sublevels of self-reference. And in addition to being retroactive, this self-reference is also proactive, because Fyodor-the-author-of-Dar knows what will happen to Fyodor-the-character and presents the episodes of the latter’s life as patterned by Fate. The loop of time - the distance between the outer and the inner frame - becomes ever so small and, at the limit, each, however minuscule, section of the book contains a potentially infinite amount of inserted fragments. *Mise en abîme becomes the texture rather than the structure of Dar.*

In addition, it is impossible to say whether the secondary portions are inserted into the pre-existing larger wholes, or, on the contrary, primary inner nuclei are surrounded by the secondary outer layers. Thus, it is impossible to establish if the present is generated and illuminated by the past, or if the past is organized and illuminated by the future. The circular, involuted character of the book transforms *mise en abîme* into a paradoxical disposition where it is not entirely clear what is inside and what is outside, what is past and what is future. *Mise en abîme* emerges as the form in which memory functions as an additional dimension of being. Infinitely embracing and self-embracing, it gives being unity; infinitely inserting and self-inserting it gives being depth.

Later it will be shown that this makes *mise en abîme* extremely important for Nabokovian aesthetics. Here, however, it is important to note that memory is just one particular type of the relation of the subject to himself.[[87]](#footnote-86) On the more general level this relation is *self-consciousness*. The study of self-consciousness shall conclude our examination of Nabokov’s ontology.

When I remember myself I watch myself act in the past. That young person, heroic or pathetic, is me. I do not desolidarize from my past (“*Je ne me désolidarise pas de mon passé*.”(Sartre, 1943, p.158))[[88]](#footnote-87) Remembrance is the affirmation of identity, the act of self-recognition. Such an affirmation can be relevant, and the recognition non-trivial only if my self in some way is at a distance from itself - if in the full solidity of being there is a gap, the gap of nothingness.

The distance in question can emerge in different ways. Two of them were studied above: the gaze and time. We are alienated from ourselves both in presence of the other and in temporality. We are not where and what we are - we are away from ourselves, out there, in the eyes of others or in the past. Only this non-coincidence with ourselves allows us to perceive ourselves at a distance and have a relation to ourselves.

Otherness and time are not the only two possible mediators of the division. Direct introspection and language are another two. Introspection necessarily divides the self into two agencies: the living and the examining. It is not a full split, if the normal unity of the subject is preserved, yet it brings about the issues of recognition and attitude. The puzzle of mental sin is a succinct example of the problems arising around the notion of introspection.

Language introduces a gap of a different nature inside the whole of

personhood. The possibility to designate oneself generates two simultaneous, opposed elements within the totality of the person: the subject and the object of speech. The problems related to the relationship between the speaking and the acting ‘I’ are sufficiently illustrated in Nabokov’s Sogliadataj.[[89]](#footnote-88)

The above-described internal divide in all its forms is what distinguishes persons from things. While in case of objects, being is in perfect adequacy to itself, subjects are more complex. Humans are always at a distance from and in relation to themselves. Heidegger, in his basic definition, says that Dasein is an entity for which ‘in its very being that being is an issue’ (Heidegger, 1984, p.12*). Self-reference is the regime in which being becomes human*.

Thus, at the level of humanity, being relates not only to other being, but also to itself. The gap at the core of being, separating it from itself, is *nothingness*. Humanity is a secret decompression inside the compactness of things. Non-being permeates human reality. In becoming human we succumb to nothingness and cooperate with it. Self-consciousness necessarily implies taking the part of nothingness. That is why the interests of Nabokov-the-ontologist tend to move easily between the issue of non-being and that of self-consciousness.

How is self-consciousness related to the problem of the other? In Chapter 2 it was shown that self-involvement – shutting oneself off from others - is what makes the monad. ‘Betraying the audience’ locks the subject into the circle of his own subjectivity. Ganin, involved with his own memories; Dreyer, almost killed by his fantastic mannequins; Krechmar, destroyed by the creatures which materialized out of his forbidden dreams; Luzhin-the-chess-player, caught inside an existential game - this involution of self is the source of Nabokovian horror and hypnotism; the sophisticated circularity of that involution is what makes him a great writer. This structure becomes even more explicit in Nabokov’s later novels. Herman, obsessed with his double; Smurov, obsessed with himself; Cincinnatus, directly inside his own nightmare; Fyodor, inside his own autobiography - behind the gradual shift toward the external other we see the subject’s progressively explicit involvement with himself.[[90]](#footnote-89)

Self-involvement occurs in the novels in the variety of forms: memory (Ganin); dream (Cincinnatus); mirrors and doubles (Herman), autobiography (Fyodor.) The other can be found as a constitutive element in each case. It is impossible to avoid the gaze. Even Herman, who wants to purge his life of otherness and institute the utopia of the Same, is negatively involved with those around him. Otherness is not the end destination for Nabokov. He avoids the fashionable 20th century fascination with exoticism. In his novels, the flow of involvement, however far-reaching, inevitably returns to the subject. Like Cincinnatus, a typical Nabokovian protagonist always has a vague premonition that he is both his own jail and his own jailer. This premonition tells him that *he himself is the gaze.*

This realization is the foundation of Nabokovian *tragedy*. It contains the permanent link between the novels and Hamlet. At this point, the play itself must be examined, the more so as it has strong factual and historical ties to Nabokov’s novelistic career.[[91]](#footnote-90) In our interpretation, the dramatic impetus of the play is related to the fact that at the very beginning the protagonist (along with the audience) learns something essential which he does not share with others: the report of the Ghost. It immediately puts him in a privileged position in relation to the rest of the characters. He enjoys an excess of knowledge. He knows something about others they do not know about themselves. His excess of knowledge varies as far as each of the characters is concerned. In the case of Claudius, it is minimal and very subtle: both know about the murder, but Claudius does not know that Hamlet does. All the others, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, present a gamut of successively decreasing amounts of knowledge in relation to the maximum possessed by the prince.

Hamlet’s actions can be perceived as an unrelenting expansion of paranoia.[[92]](#footnote-91) The protagonist is surrounded by the scheming, alien world – he sees even Ophelia as a delicate part of the plot against him – and he takes up the tactics of that plot to respond to it. Invisible, he watches others act in ignorance. He is clearly fascinated with the variety and radiance of others' blindness. If Claudius is blind only in relation to Hamlet himself, the rest are, in addition, deceived by Claudius. Therefore, Claudius becomes Hamlet’s main target. Overpowering him means indirectly controlling everybody else. The whole episode of the play within the play is an intricate scheme to amplify the minimal advantage Hamlet has over Claudius. Hamlet’s strategy is blackmail. He uses the fact that Claudius himself has a secret. The hidden truth of that secret suddenly escapes its safe darkness and stands in front of Claudius in all its obscene nakedness, on the verge of being recognized by everybody. Claudius is shattered. He demands “some light.”And all the while, Hamlet is avidly observing him, registering his slightest facial expressions, deducing his emotions, tasting his being. At the moment of panic Claudius becomes fully transparent.

As for the others, Hamlet finds ways to confront Gertrude, Ophelia and Polonius without telling them anything about the ghost, while constantly provoking them. He is far from being withdrawn or indifferent. He attacks. He experiments. The fury of his ‘enigmatic’ aggression is clearly an attempt to disturb the medium of others’ being as violently as possible in order to grasp its inner regions in the bloodshot light of his special knowledge. Hamlet takes advantage of his privilege without disclosing its nature or even its existence. He possesses the others, as he alone knows the whole significance of what they did and what they are doing. He becomes the true master of their actions, the actual director of the show. In his conversation with Rosencranz and Gildenstern, he brings what is eating away at him into the open. He, Hamlet, is the player - never the flute. He will not allow anyone to manipulate him. He sees all intentions, knows all hidden plans, can effectively counter all plots. He deems Rosencranz and Guildenstern so inferior that he discloses the essence of his war, knowing full well they will not understand the real significance of this sincerity. And they don’t. They are caught in the deadly clash of information and die in it, helpless and blind victims. Hamlet secretly redirects against them the weapon they were helping to direct against him.

Hamlet does this throughout the play. He kills Polonius using the victim’s own disguise. He kills Ophelia using her love. He kills Gertrude by refusing the cup which Claudius offers him. He kills Laertes and Claudius using the poisonous weapon destined for himself. This fact is peculiar: Hamlet always picks up the game in which others attempt to play him and, using his superior knowledge and capacity for reaction, turns it around. One after another he destroys those who participate in the plot, those who attempt to watch him while remaining invisible. The murder of Polonius is particularly telling as it is an explicit attack against the aggression of the hidden gaze. However, this episode only begins the carnage. Hamlet’s attitude towards Gertrude and Ophelia, who represent two progressive degrees of innocence, suggests that the essence of his condition is deeper than just pragmatic survival or even simple restoration of justice. *The real condition of the prince is not melancholia - it is paranoia*. He sees the whole world as ‘rotten,’ the time itself as ‘out of joint.’ He attempts to exterminate this world, the circle of the masked gaze, itself deceived in ever increasing degrees. He sees everybody, the guilty and the innocent, the male and the female, the old and the young, as equally drawn into the universe of falsehood and disguise, prey and predators, victims and parasites. But the most remarkable fact is that Hamlet senses *himself* to be part of that universe. *Exterminating everybody who is watching him, he, among others, kills himself.* Hamlet’s death is a conscious choice, a suicide. The deepest truth of the play (which makes it a tragedy instead of a melodrama) is that the protagonist is part of the plot against himself, and probably its most essential part. It is impossible for him (and for us) to escape the gaze and become fully invisible. Absolute spectatorship is a utopia. Even after erasing all eyes the subject continues to watch himself, to puzzle himself, to attack himself, to be deceived and manipulated by himself…

This is the basic lesson of Hamlet, the lesson of the *mise en abîme*. Being self-conscious - containing the structure of the gaze - the subject carries within himself the whole mechanics of spying, ‘incognito,’ and loss of being. The lesson of Hamlet suggests the idea that is crucial for understanding Nabokov: being is privacy, and not only privacy from others, but privacy from oneself. Self-consciousness is something akin to an internal hemorrhage of being. The subject is both the actor and the spectator, the prey and the predator, the victim and the parasite. He cannot avoid being watched because he is watching himself. According to Foucault this is the foundation of disciplinary power:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. To arrange things so that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if discontinuous in its action; so that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; so that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, so that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation which they carry within themselves. (Foucault, 1975, p.202-203)

The power situation which we carry within ourselves is one of the basic types of self-relation. It can be distinguished already in the Christian practice of self-examination and confession, then in the contemporary methods of disciplinary organization, and we encounter it in the involution of all Nabokov’s novels. Building his plots around the circularity and repetitiveness of the monad, Nabokov directly thematizes self-involvement.

Once the structure of self-directed gaze is sufficiently recognized, it is possible to make a more detailed account of the Nabokovian *master plot*. Its initial stage is the basic split of the self. The self loses its original wholeness and emerges at a distance from itself, often not recognized as such. This cataclysm always implies the appearance of a double of some sort (young Ganin, Felix, Smurov, etc.)[[93]](#footnote-92) The double is related to the subject himself and to the gaze, but not always immediately and explicitly. In Kamera obskura, for example, Gorn and Magda are two outbursts of Krechmar’s substance, but they are mystical, phantasmic creatures rather than direct incarnations of the way Krechmar is perceived by others. Their relation to doubling and mirroring is extremely subtle, as they both are born of the optical realm in which Krechmar himself lives.[[94]](#footnote-93) Gorn emerges from the universe of visual arts, and Magda materializes out of the darkness of the movie theater where Krechmar blindly watches the story of his own upcoming destruction on the screen.[[95]](#footnote-94)

Examining the novels in relation to the self-other dimension of the Nabokovian subject, Connolly interprets the appearance of the double or doubles as the bifurcation of identity, the birth of the ‘character’ self. The double, in that view, is a runaway splinter which the world claims from the subject and through which others manipulate him. In order to achieve creative freedom - true authority - the remaining ‘authorial’ self, according to Connolly, has to shed its counterpart.[[96]](#footnote-95) This operation has a surgical air: as it were, it removes a tumor and restores the main body to its healthy energetic functionality.

The notion of self-consciousness and the evidence from the novels, however, point to the fact that the situation is, in a sense, reversed. The dominant aspect of the double in the context of our study is not his otherness, but his ontological *identity* to the subject. The double is different from a twin. Its fever and madness, its dramatic and tragic impetus reside in the fact that it’s *me* out there, *my* being in front of myself. The double threatens the basic unity of self, its ability to grasp itself as one. The strangeness of such alienation should be similar to the ontological vertigo of a soldier who sees in front of him his own leg, cut off by an explosion or amputated. In this respect, Nabokov’s Otchajanie should be juxtaposed not to Dostoyevsky’s The Double, but to Gogol’s Nose. In the latter, the ontological link between the protagonist and his double is much clearer because it is the link of substance, not of resemblance. [[97]](#footnote-96)

Let us examine the evidence of the novels once again and see how the relationship between the subject and the double is expressed on the level of the master plot. Once self is externalized - projected onto the world - the first urge is not to reject or shed that terrifying and deeply intimate part of one’s being, but to study it from the new, previously inaccessible point of view (Nabokov presents two fully developed examples of this morbid curiosity in Sogliadataj and Otchajanie, and later in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, Pale Fire, and Look at the Harlequins!) The double becomes the main focus of attraction in its aspect of an alienated, disturbing and fascinating extension of one’s own being. The subject is moved by the deep necessity to assimilate it back. Nabokov’s characters want to return all being that is taken away from them. Their curiosity and attraction are the initial expressions of a general motion toward reabsorbtion.

The basic curiosity phase is followed by the stage of defense. The subject goes ‘undercover’ in order to seal the hemorrhage of being which caused the birth of the double. Upon building a sufficient ‘incognito,’ he plans and executes the attempt at reunification. He aims to approach the alienated part as close as possible in order to re-embrace it. The function of ‘incognito’ at this stage is not exclusively defensive. In previous chapters we have seen that paranoia inevitably transforms the victim into an aggressor. The subject needs the devouring capabilities of the hidden gaze to grasp his alienated being and restore unity. In Mashen’ka, Ganin follows his past self through all his adventures of love and history only to merge with it in the present of the novel. In Podvig, Martin tracelessly penetrates into his imaginary Russia, the true end of his expedition. In Otchajanie, Herman’s murder of Felix does not end just in amputating his inferior identity or shedding his own: the result of the murder is rather an incestuous whole combining the features of both. In Sogliadataj, the narrator transcends his separation from the character of Smurov through a process of smooth blending together:

Взявшись за дверную скобку, я увидел, как сбоку в зеркале поспешило ко мне мое отражение, молодой человек в котелке, с букетом. Отражение со мною слилось, я вышел на улицу. (Nabokov, 2, p. 342).

[As I pushed the door handle, I noticed my reflection in the side mirror hurrying toward me: a young man in a derby, holding a bouquet. That reflection and I merged into one, and I walked out into the street.]

The situation is even more complex in other novels. In Zashchita Luzhina, for example, if we take the protagonist himself as the point of reference, the basic split of self results not in the appearance of a physical double, but rather in an explosion of meaning. This explosion infects the whole world around the protagonist with the form of his being - chess - and with its substance, the past. Reality, in its entirety, up to the tiniest details, becomes a living, enormous reflection of Luzhin. The energy of this primal explosion is so great that it affects its own source and pulls it into the whirlwind of the cosmic combination.

Taking Luzhin-the-character as the point of reference, however, is not the only possibility in reading the novel. The cosmic game Luzhin is caught in is far from being just a hallucination. It does exist; it is real. Ontologically, the world of the game and the character inside it are on the same plane. In a sense, the game is also Luzhin, and it is difficult to decide what is primary and what is secondary in the hierarchy of being. Therefore, if we take the game itself as the point of departure, then Luzhin-the-character appears as the double - an individuated splinter, suddenly aware of himself as a chess piece, a part of the whole. Zashchita Luzhina, in that sense, *is focused on the double*, studies the double from inside, and makes him the central character of the plot.

In an even more pronounced manner this structure appears in Priglashenie, where Cincinnatus-the-character - Connolly was first to show it - is presented as the protagonist of a dream dreamed by Cincinnatus-the-narrator.[[98]](#footnote-97) The narrator never reveals himself in the text in person but the whole novel is a solid monument to his fascination with his acting-within-the-dream part. From time to time, assisting and encouraging, the narrator even addresses the character directly.[[99]](#footnote-98) The strongest sign of their link remains entirely on the structural level: the narration never abandons Cincinnatus’s point of view. Also important is Cincinnatus’s writing. The protagonist’s own text, quoted verbatim and being itself a part of the larger novel, belongs *simultaneously* to Cincinnatus-within-the-dream and to Cincinnatus-the-narrator. It is in the act of writing that Cincinnatus is able to approach his wakeful self. At the end, when the dream reality collapses, the unity of the protagonist’s self is fully restored.

The restoration of identity between the self and its alienated part is rarely successful. It fails, for example, in Kamera obskura and Korol, dama, valet, when the doubles - mannequins and parasites – either kill the protagonist or die themselves. But even when the merger occurs, it does not guarantee the end of self-alienation. Nabokovian tragedy gains force when the subject, upon merging with his double, discovers that it did not change anything, that the gaze persists. In Sogliadataj, for example, even after recognizing himself as Smurov and asserting that he is fully transformed into a substanceless, all-observing eye, the narrator is still caught in the game of the gaze.[[100]](#footnote-99) In the act of his indicative and exclamatory violence concluding the novel, he still addresses the reader, feeling himself observed and judged. In Otchajanie, Herman cannot shake either his own humiliating self-criticism or the mute gaze of the world. He is observed by his neighbors, by the police, and, most peculiarly, by *mirrors*.[[101]](#footnote-100) Finally, in the last paragraph of the novel, the imaginary, subjective character of his paraonoia becomes obvious: “Я опять отвел занавеску. Стоят и смотрят. Их тысячи, миллионы. Но полное молчание, только слышно как дышат.” [I again pulled off the curtain. They are standing and watching. Thousands, millions of them. And full silence, I can hear them breathing.] (Nabokov, 3, p. 462) The infinite crowd under his window does not exist; in imagining the rest of mankind directing toward him its dreadful gaze, Herman watches himself.

This third stage, as the quote suggests, is the true stage of paranoia. In it the protagonist discovers himself to be surrounded by the mutely gazing universe. Two novels - Zashchita and Priglashenie – begin with the third stage, and the struggle with the cosmic gaze occupies there the whole of the plot. These novels give us the illuminating explanation of paranoia in Nabokov’s oeuvre: *paranoia is the experience of the double himself*. It is the double who struggles with the Cartesian demon, it is the double who is blind, it is the double who senses his will pre-empted by the hidden gaze. Paranoia is the experience of a mirror reflection in front of the original, the experience of a part losing its being to the whole.

Nabokov makes the situation increasingly complex with his unrelenting use of *mise en abîme*. The part, according to him, does not only belong to a larger whole, but also contains its own subparts. This process continues potentially to infinity - in both micro and macro directions. Self-consciousness and self-reference occur on many ascending and descending levels. And all those levels are related ontologically, through the uninterrupted self-inclusion and self-embracement of being. The part *is* a segment of the whole; the whole *is* inits part. That is why Nabokov’s novels are involuted like a Moebius strip: pursuing the double or running from the gaze the subject inevitably discovers that both the double and the gaze *are* himself. Even if the monad finds a window out into the world, it finally discovers that there is no window out of the world.

The discovery of the involuted character of human reality - the discovery that in humans the universe is relating to itself - is the most existential aspect of Nabokov’s oeuvre. In it he sounds the well-known existential theme of being irreversibly thrown into the world, logically and topologically imprisoned in it. The fictional space of his novels is *claustrophobic*. He uses the involuted topology of self-consciousness to close and lock the causal dimension of his plots.

The countercomplement to claustrophobia is escape. Nabokov creates characters who determine themselves in the impossible projects of leaving their universe. Once the option of defense fails (one is playing against oneself) the only remaining possibility is to quit the game altogether. The fact that almost all Nabokov’s protagonists in the end *suddenly exit their novels* is probably one of the most peculiar and charming aspects of his writing. Ganin unexpectedly leaves the entire enterprise of recovering Mashen’ka; Martin disappears without a trace; Luzhin uses the window (a curious instance of the theme of windowlessness) to jump out of the plot; Cincinnatus leaves behind the whole world of the narrative; Fyodor reveals himself to be the author who composed the novel. The project of self-reabsorbtion studied above ends in Nabokov’s novels through a sudden exit jump. Given the self-imprisoning regime of their existence, the protagonists exit themselves as much as they exit their novels. Nabokov’s entire Russian oeuvre can be read as an illustrated ‘suicide’ manual - a library of advice on how to escape oneself.

Are Nabokov’s protagonists successful in their escape? If yes, where do they go after leaving the world of the novel? Are they losing their identity or regaining it in the moment of the decisive ‘jumpout’? Nabokov strongly associates the art of escaping from oneself (the art of relating to oneself) to Art in general. Only after examining Nabokov’s literary art as the expression of his existential concerns will it be possible to answer the above questions.

# 

# **CHAPTER 5**

**Art and Being**

The narrator of Nabokov's short novel Sogliadataj does not tell the reader his name – he participates in the event of the plot but always refers to himself in the first person. At the beginning we learn that he is a Russian émigré living in Berlin. Beaten up and humiliated by the husband of a woman he had an affair with, he commits suicide. According to his words, he dies but survives after death through sheer ‘inertia of thought.’ His mind, allegedly working free of his non-existent body, imagines that he recovers, leaves the hospital where he was treated, finds a new job and rents a new apartment - in short, continues to live. At a certain point in this ‘afterlife’ he is introduced to a Russian family occupying an apartment above him. Visiting this family he meets a young man named Smurov and gradually becomes interested in him. He observes him, meditates about his thoughts and feelings, asks questions, and even goes so far as to steal the letter of another character which, he supposes, should contain something important about Smurov. The narrator tells the story of Smurov's engagement (later discovered to be a mistake) to Vania, one of the daughters in the family. As the narrator himself is in love with Vania, Smurov consistently remains the focus of his attention. In the concluding episode of the novel, the narrator accidentally meets the person who provoked his suicide. This man approaches and asks the narrator to forgive him. In the course of their conversation, the man addresses him as Smurov, and from the narrator’s casual response it becomes evident it is indeed his name. Smurov is the narrator!

This is the key moment in the story. The reader realizes that the overall meaning of events is different from what it appeared to be. While relating Smurov’s behavior and other people’s attitudes towards him, the narrator was referring to himself all along. This brisk revolution of reference is the most dramatic event of the story; indeed, its culmination. Yet, absolutely nothing happens at that moment in the world of the characters. Both interlocutors know perfectly well who Smurov is and what his name is. In the course of their conversation they simply go through the motions of a regular dialogue. It should be acknowledged that the culmination occurs only between the narrator and the reader, exclusively on the level of *telling*.

The discovery of the narrator’s identity transforms the reader into the rereader.[[102]](#footnote-101) The rereader goes back to the beginning and re-examines everything in light of new evidence. Such an effort brings important results. The story contains a series of covert indications pointing toward its major truth. Here is an example: at one point the narrator describes an evening and mentions that only three people are in Vania’s apartment - Vania, Smurov and another character named Mukhin (Nabokov, 2, p.318). The context makes this moment insignificant, as the reader automatically supposes the teller - the narrator himself - to be present at the event by default. Another example: the narrator mentions that a bookstore owner is ready to give him a job but later says that Smurov works at this position (Nabokov, 2, p.314). This is also

ambiguous, as there is no direct indication that the job was actually given to the narrator, and the reader assumes that the person who had eventually gotten it was Smurov. The text is full of such inconclusive pointers intimating the identity of the narrator – they become relevant only in light of the final direct revelation. On their own, they would remain obscure ambiguities devoid of referential import.

The structure of the novel is subtle. Understanding it requires not only following the events of the plot but also reconstructing the intentions of the narrator from indirect evidence. Consequently, there exists an unfortunate and persistent critical error in assessing the novel, namely, that the narrator of Sogliadataj is mad. He is usually diagnosed as having a complex hallucinatory belief in his survival after death, and as suffering a condition of multiple personality.[[103]](#footnote-102) Let us first deal with the latter diagnosis. Who is able to make it? Only the reader. As far as the characters are concerned, they must be constantly addressing the narrator by the name of Smurov - his actual name - and he must be responding appropriately. If he did not, he would have been discovered as a madman immediately. This does not happen. Throughout the plot he is effectively engaged in social interactions from which we must infer that on the level of events he goes by his name and adequately manages his individuality. The characters in the story never even learn that any distance exists between the narrator and Smurov. For them there is only a single, sane individual.

It may be objected that the narrator is still insane to the reader who, after all, does discover the above-mentioned distance. But how is this discovery made? Clearly not via the narrator’s direct confession nor via his explicit discursive inability to manage his personality. The reception of the story is controlled by a coherent strategy of the *narrator himself*. This strategy consists of the systematic suppression of direct identity references. It also consists of avoidance of all contexts that would allow the reader to recognize the narrator as Smurov. In order to execute such a strategy the narrator must have conceived the story as a whole in advance and then carefully obeyed the requirements of his central device. This device, the main structural element of the story, neither supports nor refutes the theory of multiple personalities. Its main aim is *to manipulate the reader* - first into believing that there are two persons, then suddenly into realizing that they are one, and finally, upon rereading, into understanding the full subtlety of the narrator’s game.[[104]](#footnote-103) In Sogliadataj we are dealing not with an attempt of the author to present a mad protagonist, but with an attempt of the narrator to play with the reader.

In the last paragraph, the narrator, addressing the reader directly, makes his intentions explicit:

И пускай сам по себе я пошловат, подловат, пускай никто не знает, не ценит того замечательного, что есть во мне, моей фантазии, моей эрудиции, моего литературного дара... Я счастлив тем, что могу глядеть на себя, ибо всякий человек занятен, - право же занятен! Мир, как ни старайся, не может меня оскорбить. Я неуязвим. (Nabokov, 2, p.345)

[What does it matter if I am a bit cheap, a bit foul, and that no one appreciates all the remarkable things about me - my fantasy, my erudition, my literary gift... I am happy that I can gaze at myself, for any man is absorbing - yes, really absorbing! The world, try as it may, cannot insult me. I am invulnerable.]

Here, *for the very first time in the story* (and right after its structural culmination) the narrator mentions his ‘literary gift.’ He writes literature! In such a context, the only adequate way to interpret his confession is to assume that he refers to the text we just read, indicating himself as its ‘gifted’ author. His manipulation of the reader must be related to his intention to create the work we have just read. In addition, he associates his literary gift to his fantasy and erudition. This, in turn, makes us suspect that some or all details and events of the story (including his allegedly supernatural survival after death) are fruits of his imagination.[[105]](#footnote-104) By mentioning his ‘fantasy,’ the narrator undermines the whole referential level of the story, preserving as fundamental only the reality of his relationship with the reader.[[106]](#footnote-105) He is right to draw our attention to his literary imagination: the most important part of the story - the chase after Smurov - exists only in that imagination and in the reader’s mind. The actual events that form the background of the story are quite different and more ordinary. Only during a second encounter with the text, as rereaders, can we attempt to reconstruct the hard facts, detaching what actually happened from the screens of the narrator’s game.

In summary, a second ‘invisible plot,’ in which the narrator directly interacts with the reader, exists alongside the visible plot. The second plot evolves in a dimension structurally inaccessible to the characters, on the level of telling. The narrator uses the events of the first plot for the purposes of the second; what we would normally call the text of Sogliadataj is only a *pretext* - the pretext for the intrigue taking place entirely in the metaspace of narration.

But there is nothing special, it may be objected, in the narrator interacting with the reader. Wayne Booth, analyzing the controversy between showing and telling, proved conclusively that pure showing is impossible and that the teller is always present in the story.[[107]](#footnote-106) The narrating agent, according to him, cannot avoid being in contact with the reader. This objection brings us to a crucial point about the structure of the novel: what is important is not that the narrator of Sogliadataj simply interacts with the reader - the fact that such an interaction is taking place is trivial - but that *he maintains a premeditated ‘incognito’ against the reader*.[[108]](#footnote-107)

As a generalization of this and the preceding analysis, it can be said that Nabokov abandons the communicative (circus) mode of narration and uses the existential (theatrical) mode. The goal of the next section is to describe this change and to show that Nabokov’s arrival at his distinctive narrative regime is determined by the same ontological dispositions that we discovered in the previous chapters.

Narrative modes can exist in a literary text in two forms, in action and as a theme. In action, they are realized as the concrete acts of storytelling; thematically, they are realized as dramatic episodes of the plot. Nabokov spends considerable effort developing the thematic treatment of narrative and art. The center of this treatment is a protagonist who is a writer or an artist. Let us see how such protagonists are presented within the novels?

Even a cursory glance at Fyodor, the writer-protagonist of Dar, reveals involvement with the audience as his most outstanding and consistent feature. [[109]](#footnote-108) The nature of this involvement is quite specific. Fyodor constantly imagines others’ reactions to his works. In the beginning of the novel he reads his own book of poetry as a critic. The narration, while relating his thoughts, imitates the style of a newspaper article about Fyodor’s book. In his imagination, Fyodor transforms himself into another person reading his poems. His will to see himself from someone else’s point of view is so strong that an unknown critic he imagines becomes independent enough to err. At times Fyodor resists and corrects the reading he himself is imagining.

This pattern is repeated in relation to all Fyodor’s literary works. The short story about Yasha Chernyshevsky’s suicide, inconspicuously inserted into the main narrative, prompts Fyodor to imagine that Yasha’s father hallucinates the visits of his dead son. At first we even think that those are Fyodor’s own hallucinations, but later it becomes clear that Fyodor attempts to reproduce what he supposes the experience of the deranged parent must be. In other words, Fyodor juxtaposes the way he sees Yasha in his story and the way his most important potential reader could see his dead son.

Fyodor’s next work, the biography of his father, remains unfinished. The reason for that, too, is related to attempt at reading the still non-written book from the point of view of its potential reader. Fyodor is afraid that the final result will be about *him* rather than about his father. In a letter to his mother, who in this case becomes his literary ‘conscience’, Fyodor writes:

Знаешь, когда я читаю его или Грума книги, слушаю их упоительный ритм, изучаю расположение слов, не заменимых ничем и не переместимых никак, мне кажется кощунственным взять да и разбавить все это собой. (…) Видишь ли, я понял невозможность дать произрасти образам его странствий, не заразив их вторичной поэзией, все больше удаляющейся от той, которую заложил в них живой опыт восприимчивых, знающих и целомудренных натуралистов. (Nabokov, 3, p.125)

[You know, when I read his or Grum’s books and I hear their entrancing rhythm, when I study the position of the words that can neither be replaced nor rearranged, it seems to me a sacrilege to take all this and dilute it with myself. (…) You see, I have realized the impossibility of having the imagery of his travels grow without contaminating them with a kind of secondary poetization, which keeps departing further and further from the poetry with which the live experience of these receptive, knowledgeable and chaste naturalists endowed them.]

Thus, before even beginning the writing Fyodor acts as his own critic.Such a delicate critical self-awareness later helps Fyodor find a solution to the problem. Instead of following and emulating his father, he decides to write a biography of his antipode, N.G. Chernyshevsky. The fourth chapter of Dar consists entirely of that biography (we are also told the story of its publication.) In relation to this work, the pattern of Fyodor’s interactions with the external readings becomes fully explicit. A large section of Dar immediately following the fourth chapter is a compendium of various critical responses to it, from openly hostile to friendly to absurd to irrelevant. Fyodor’s work is again grasped as an object of outside interpretations and judgments.

Nabokov’s other writing characters also determine themselves in the dimension of potential response. Smurov and Herman, who generate their own literary works, in their very composition implicate an audience. The essence of Smurov’s story is deception and revelation; he is playing the game, which necessarily requires the presence of an opponent, the reader. As to Herman, he does not simply attempt to kill his double - he wants the world to acknowledge the perfection of his plan. His audience is supposed to recognize the victim as himself and appreciate both the murder and its literary account as art. Even Luzhin, the most autistic artist in Nabokov’s Russian corpus, needs an opponent to play chess.

It appears that for Nabokov any creative impulse in general proceeds from becoming conscious of the audience. The awareness of the gaze is the basic experience, the bedrock of action in his universe. This leap of primordial sensitivity provides the space in which personal identity is constituted. The structural unity of the entire artistic enterprise, as the example of Sogliadataj shows most clearly, also depends on plot dispositions directly oriented toward the reader. Involvement with the other comes for Nabokov’s artists before self-involvement. In this Nabokov is in accord with Hegel: the passage from the animal sentiment of self to the human consciousness of self is possible only as a result of an equal encounter with otherness.[[110]](#footnote-109) The other’s gaze participates in the constitution of the subject: in contrast to the contemporary idea that the text generates its reader, in Nabokov’s case the reader generates the text. Or, in the more rigorous language of structural theory, *the level of the implicit reader is more fundamental than the level of the plot or even the level of discourse*. Awareness of attention comes before any urge of imagination, knowledge, self-expression, construction, writing or speaking. And all subsequent actions of the subject, be he a character or an author, are his responses to the first and basic reality of the gaze. Nabokov’s existential and artistic dispositions are answers to the mirror of otherness.[[111]](#footnote-110)

What types of answers are they? How can an artist react to the gaze? Fyodor’s literary attitude towards the other is best illustrated by the following paragraph:

...собрав удобнее листы и тронувшись по панели, [он] перечитывал свое несколько раз, на разные внутренние лады, то есть поочередно представляя себе, как его стихотворение будут читать, может быть сейчас читают, все те, чье мнение было ему нужно, - и он почти физически чувствовал, как при каждом таком перевоплощении у него изменяется цвет глаз, и цвет заглазный, и вкус во рту, - и чем ему самому больше нравился дежурный шедевр, тем полнее и слаще ему удавалось перечесть его за других. (Nabokov, 3, p.58)[[112]](#footnote-111)

[... he would gather the pages more conveniently and, resuming his progress along the sidewalk, would read his poem over several times, varying the inner intonations; that is, imagining one by one the various personal ways the poem would be read, perhaps was now being read, by those whose opinions he considered important - and with each of these different incarnations he would almost physically feel the change in the color of his eyes, and also in the color behind his eyes, and in the taste in his mouth, and the more he liked the chef-d’oeuvre du jour, the more perfectly and succulently he could read it through the eyes of others.]

Fyodor accepts the gaze. In the very act of his writing he anticipates the corresponding act of reading. He experiences his creation in the intimacy of the other’s imaginary presence. He becomes, physically, this presence, and integrates it into his being as his constitutive part. Two long imaginary conversations Fyodor has with Koncheev (his literary rival) show that Fyodor opens to the outside both in his art and in his physical existence (Nabokov, 3, pp.64-69 and 303-308). Without recognizing such an opening in Nabokov’s own writing, without, in other words, seeing its essentially unsolipsistic nature, it is impossible to understand his oeuvre adequately. Connolly’s idea that Nabokov’s subject intends to efface his 'character' (other-related) aspect and preserve only the self-sufficient ‘authorial’ part is misleading. The very essence of the ‘authorial’, according to Nabokov, is its recognition of the potential spectator.[[113]](#footnote-112) Nabokov’s attitude toward the betrayal of the audience in letters is revealed quite clearly in an openly satirical episode in Dar in which Bush, deadly serious, reads his play aloud, totally unaware of the hysteria of laughter sweeping his listeners.

Equally misleading is the idea that Nabokov simply lays bare the devices of his art. If this were true it would turn the reader of his novels into a tourist surveying the construction site of independently built creations. But in Nabokov’s case the gaze

*precedes* the process of creation. In the ontological space where the writer first meets us there is nothing to lay bare yet, no art, no identity. All Nabokov’s devices carry our gaze in themselves as a seed, as a formless source of energy. Therefore, he cannot unveil them to us. *In the largest sense, Nabokov’s novels are not realistic*: they do not show, do not lay bare, do not unveil; their ultimate level resides deeper than the presentation of an independent reality, be it the reality of events, or the reality of artistic devices. Nabokov’s novels start with existential contact and are built out of contact.

While Fyodor from Dar is the extreme of artistic self-disclosure, the caricaturist Gorn from Kamera obskura embodies the opposite end of the spectrum of possible responses to otherness. According to him:

Самые смешные рисунки в журналах именно и основаны на этой тонкой жестокости с одной стороны и глуповатой доверчивости - с другой: Горн, бездейственно глядевший, как, скажем, слепой собирается сесть на свежевыкрашенную скамейку, только служил своему искусству. (Nabokov, Romany, p.324).

[The funniest drawings in the magazines are based exactly on this subtle cruelty on one side and credulity on the other: Gorn, passively watching, say, a blind man about to sit down onto a freshly-painted bench, was only a servant to his art.]

Gorn's attitude toward the blind Krechmar only extends his creative credo: “cruelty plus credulity”. By this he means that the artist needs a prey (a victim) to perform his act. Hiding, becoming invisible, the artist renders his victim blind. Then he may either taste the fruits of his advantage himself, or create a caricature for his viewer-accomplice. “Cruelty plus credulity,” therefore, means blindness of the victim plus the invisibility of the artist/viewer. Unlike Fyodor, for whom art means giving himself up to others, Gorn sees the artistic act as the artist’s withdrawal from observation. He entirely counts on the spectacular, hypnotic potential of the victim’s blindness – on the hemorrhage of being that the blind victim cannot prevent. The lost being escaping the victim and absorbed by the artist/viewer is for Gorn the basis of aesthetic pleasure. Art is essentially parasitic – it is based on the satisfaction of the existential appetites. The goal of the artist, thus, is not to offer himself, but to ‘bleed’ or ‘milk’ someone else: to find and frame instances of blindness, and, if they are missing, to generate them through deception. The attitude of the artist is invisibility coupled with omniscience.

Gorn occupies exactly this position in the course of the plot. His safe heaven is violated only at the end, when Max discovers him torturing blind Krechmar:

Макс схватил трость, лежавшую на полу, около кресла, догнал Горна - Горн обернулся, выставил ладони, - и Макс, добрейший Макс, который в жизни своей не ударил живого существа, со всей силы треснул Горна палкой по голове около уха. Тот отскочил, продолжая усмехаться, - и вдруг произошла замечательная вещь: словно Адам после грехопадения, Горн, стоя у стены и осклабясь, пятерней прикрыл свою наготу. (Nabokov, Romany, p. 386)

[Max seized a stick laying on the floor by the armchair, caught up with Gorn – Gorn turned around and held up his hands, - and Max, kindest Max who had never in his life hit a living creature, swung out mightily at Gorn’s head by the ear. The latter leaped back, continuing to sneer, - and suddenly something remarkable occurred: like Adam after the Fall, Gorn, standing by the wall and grinning, covered his nakedness with his hand.]

In this passage Gorn recognizes the gaze for the first time. Nabokov compares this with the Biblical moment of the Fall. Gorn loses the innocence of invisibility and at the same moment learns shame. He *is* the naked man Max sees; he finally *is* what the other perceives him to be. His being acquires a new dimension: for-another.

The case of Herman from Otchajanie resides somewhere between Gorn and Fyodor, between parasitism and the partnership of the gaze. Herman’s predicament, as Nabokov describes it, has one important advantage: it helps us to see clearly the moral foundations of art. Art, if we attempt to define as a specific type of relation to the other (the reader or the spectator,) necessarily aims at involving the other’s freedom. In this, art is similar to love. Any attempt to obtain forced recognition catapults its originator out of the realm of the artistic. The artist cannot threaten, blackmail, or even hypnotize his audience into liking him. Aesthetic response is valuable only if it is free.[[114]](#footnote-113) Art, therefore, is necessarily ethical, treating its receiver as subject (an end in itself) and never as object.

Herman, undeniably, attempts to be ethical. He commits his murder in the spirit of the Categorical Imperative. Far from performing a private act of violence or personal gain, he insists on *universalizing* its significance. He honestly lobbies the reader to make the maxim of his action (art justifies crime) a universal law. In the very beginning of his memoir he writes: “я сравнил бы нарушителя того закона, который запрещает проливать красненькое, с поэтом, с артистом” [I would compare the person who breaks the law prohibiting bloodshed with a poet, an artist] (Nabokov, 3, p.333).

Such an attitude, however, puts the artist in a peculiar position in relation to the other. The other - any other - is considered as a potential material for art: the means rather than the end. Therefore, universalizing the right to murder Herman both undermines the Categorical Imperative and renders null and void his own claim for art. Conceiving others as artistic material, ready to be manipulated, deceived, and even murdered, he eventually loses them as an audience able to evaluate freely his oeuvre's degree of perfection. Such a self-defeating attitude has its basis in Herman’s ontological dispositions. He exists in the modus of pride – the condition in which one’s direct self-perception weighs infinitely more than the perceptions of others. This conclusion needs qualification. Herman’s project, once we see him as a murderer *and* an artist, is more elaborate. He intends to be both a Master and a Mastermind, trying to engage and betray the other at the same time. His is the paradigmatic instance of what Sartre calls bad faith (*mauvaise foi*): he wants to be recognized by the other in whose ability to recognize him he does not believe; he attempts to attract the freedom he denies.

Thus, on the thematic level, the spectrum of Nabokov’s artists is contained between the avoidance and acceptance of the gaze, between voyeurism and self-disclosure. However, it would be wrong to suppose that the artist can choose between one and another in their pure form. The need for recognition drives the artist toward visibility and display; the hunger for being makes him go undercover. Two passages from Dar illustrate this point. In the first, Fyodor reads the drafts of his biography of N.G. Chernyshevsky to Zina and comments:

В ее отзывчивости была необычайная грация, незаметно служившая ему регулятором, если не руководством. (Nabokov, 3, p.185)

[Her responsiveness possessed an extraordinary grace which, secretly, served if not as guide, then as a regulating principle for him.]

In the beginning of this chapter we saw that Fyodor interacts with his mother, Koncheev, and indeed with all the others in the same manner. He constitutes his art and himself as a response to the gaze of the other, implicating his readers in his creative process.

In another passage, however, we encounter a different attitude towards the other. Fyodor tells how he used to hide during his children’s games with his sister:

Автору приходилось прятаться (речь теперь будет идти об особняке Годуновых-Чердынцевых на Английской Набережной, существующем и поныне) в портьерах, под столами, за спинными подушками шелковых оттоманок - и в платяном шкапу, где под ногами хрустел нафталин, и откуда можно было в щель незримо наблюдать за медленно проходившем слугой, становившемся до странности новым, одушевленным, вздыхающим, чайным, яблочным... (Nabokov, 3, p.15)

[The author had occasion to hide (we are now in the Godunov-Cherdyntsevs’ mansion on the English Quay of the Neva, where it stands even today) among draperies, under tables, behind the upright cushions of silk divans, in a wardrobe, where moth crystals crunched under one’s feet, and whence one could observe unseen a slowly passing manservant, who would seem strangely new, animate, ethereal, smelling of apples and tea...]

Even though this passage does not deal directly with writing, it nevertheless indicates a crucial element of Fyodor's creativity. This element is related to the *adventures of ‘incognito’* in the whole of Nabokov’s art. Importantly, ‘incognito’ in the passage above begins with the game of hide-and-seek. The simple game, however, develops into something new and unexpected: Fyodor, invisible, observes a passing servant. The mere fact that the observer (Fyodor himself) is hidden transforms the object of observation. Ignorance of the gaze deprives the servant of the protective aura of self-awareness and enables the watcher to see through his own layers of habit. Secretly observed, the servant begins to radiate being - taste, smell, breath, life, and meaning. This is an inherently artistic event, and the fact that it can be abused (as happens in the case of Gorn) does not discount its key role in the Nabokovian version of creativity.

Thus, the artist both exposes and hides, reveals himself and observes from behind his ‘incognito.’ Are we dealing here with the case of art as game? Would chess be the correct model of Nabokovian art? This conclusion appears inadequate, as in chess, after all, the guiding principle is victory. Chess is based on the paradigm of the Hegelian struggle for recognition, whereas in Nabokov’s novels the need for recognition is countered by the urge toward invisibility. His case requires more elaborate models of intersubjectivity than the simple concept of an antagonistic game.

Nabokovian ontology, we have seen, is intimately related to the notion of being as value. The need for recognition in that ontology is the need *to* *constitute oneself as value to the other*, while the urge toward ‘incognito’ is an attempt *to* *constitute the other as value to oneself*. What is important for Nabokov is the balance of those two opposed motives. His goal is *justice* - a meticulous equilibrium of gain and expenditure, opacity and exposure. Successful individuation involves such an equilibrium, rather than a bias in any direction. Unilateral profit from parasitism is as unacceptable as the vulgar charity of blind self-exposure. Bathers, decomposing under Fyodor’s gaze, are presented as close ‘relatives’ of Gorn and M’sieur Pierre, who eventually prove to be false individuals, dependent in their being on someone else (on Krechmar and Cincinnatus.) Parasites in Nabokov’s world are as ready to disintegrate into non-being as the ordinary members of the mob.

Thus, Nabokovian morality is eminently ontological, just as his ontology is moral: the notions of justice and fair play in his world are intimately involved with the process of effective individuation. As a result, morality, dependent on the equilibrium of value, cannot proceed from any form of stable contract. Morality as balance is related to perfection rather than to obligation, and as such requires exercising one’s faculties rather than straining one’s will. Ontological justice must be *practiced* and what is needed to practice it is a certain *virtuosity of being*.[[115]](#footnote-114) This virtuosity is inherently difficult. Only a few can succeed in it. It is difficult to achieve the right measure of ‘incognito’ and exposure. It is difficult to maintain both the unity of self and solidarity with others. Individuation is precarious: not enough of it and we lapse into the decomposing mass of the bathers;[[116]](#footnote-115) too much - and we are caught in the hermetic circle of our own projections. Individuation is an art.

All the above is relevant for the art of literature, that is to say, for the relationship between the author and the reader.[[117]](#footnote-116) The most important element in that relationship is *the acting character*. The character is the ontological regulator of that relationship: he simultaneously is and is not the author. Through the character, the author exposes himself to the reader while at the same time hiding behind an alien identity. This is not a simple truism. The reception of fiction necessarily unfolds as an ontological conflict. On the one hand, the illusion of verisimilitude makes us believe that the character acts because he decides to or is inclined to act. On the other, we understand that he acts because the author makes him act. The reader constantly juxtaposes the way characters move existentially and the way the author forms their moves aesthetically. In the reception of the work of fiction (and this is probably the true definition of fiction) the resulting effect depends on our ability to retain and follow *simultaneously* two independent causalities - one of the fictional world, another of the aesthetic structure.

It is in this sense that the character is an ontologically indeterminate creature. As an agent in the fictional world he is distinctive from the author; as a sum of structural devices he coincides with the results of the author’s creative activity. This suggests that, contrary to widespread opinion, the character is the locus where the author is *most removed* from the reader. Indeed, in the text everything refers back to the author who is exposed in each syntactic sign, word, sentence, detail, and slightest hint of meaning. If the author has any means to hide at all, it is through the alien identity of the character that can be *inserted* between him and the reader. Therefore, whenever a character comes on stage, it means that the author, weary of advertising resemblance, steps back into the shadow of difference. The character is the structure of the author’s ‘incognito.’[[118]](#footnote-117)

In light of contemporary narrative theory, however, even the above analysis is too simple. Between the character who acts and the reader who reads, the chain of reception houses one more link - the narrator who reports. The narrator is another independent agent who plays an essential role in the balance of exposure between the author and the reader.

Nabokov is keenly aware of the agency of the narrator. The chronological progression of his novels shows a radical change of the narrator’s role and function. In Mashen’ka, Korol, dama, valet, Kamera obskura, and Podvig - the first part of Nabokov’s Russian oeuvre - the narrator is impersonal, whereas in Otchajanie, Sogliadataj, Priglashenie na kazn’, and Dar - the later novels - the narrator enters fictional reality and becomes one of the protagonists of the plot. It may appear that in accomplishing this change the author approaches and exposes himself to the reader. In fact, just the opposite is true. The personalized narrator removes the author from the reader even farther.

Here is the definition: the 'distance' between the author and the reader is constituted by the number and the type of agents that separate them. This distance is the shortest when the author directly addresses the reader. It begins to increase with the arrival of the characters. As far as the narrator (the teller) is concerned, the distance depends on his type, that is to say, on the intensity and the form of the narrator's presence in the story. In the variety of narrators the impersonal narrator is the most transparent and disappearing type. The reader almost automatically identifies him with the author. In order to emphasize the *gap* between himself and the teller, and increase the distance between himself and the reader, the author needs to disturb the transparency of telling, to draw attention to the *reporting* nature of narration. There is a multitude of ways to accomplish this: alternative voices and points of view, direct address to the reader in which the author claims distance from the narrative agency, and, finally, the personification of the narrator.[[119]](#footnote-118) By introducing another personal agent, the author takes one more step back. Now, between him and the reader there are two fully personal agents: the character and the narrator. This is consistent with the author’s strategy of ‘incognito.’ In discharging the character the author screens out his identity; in disgorging a personal narrator the author covers his voice.

In the case of Nabokov, the process of personifying the narrator is insistently problematic. In three of his later novels, Sogliadataj, Priglashenie and Dar the identity of the teller remains concealed till the very end. The question ‘who speaks’ is not just theoretical in this novels – the discovery of the actual status of the narrating agent becomes the structural culmination of reading.

Why is the identity of the narrator so important in Nabokov’s novels? To answer this question we need to understand the relationship between the acting and the narrating ‘I’ on the level of events, and then see how it affects the position of the reader.

In the previous chapter we have studied the first part of this problem - the acting-narrating split. We remarked that it derives from the larger notions of self-consciousness and self-reference. We showed that the narrator of Sogliadataj, who turns out to be identical with the character of Smurov, resembles Fyodor who, in the end, is discovered to be the author of Dar. We also showed that Cincinnatus, struggling with the world of his dream, resembles Luzhin, who is pursued by the universe organized as a chess game. These examples suggest that what is at stake in the problem of the narrative voice is not just the identity of narrator with one of the characters but the general status of all characters and all events.

*Nabokov’s later novels show us protagonists who in some sense generate fictional reality.* Each novel realizes this basic principle in its own way. In Priglashenie na kazn’, for example, Cincinnatus engenders the world around him in the ontological sense. All its details,[[120]](#footnote-119) however alien or hostile, belong to his substance. Like a turtle, he is locked inside the outgrowth of his own being. In his case, the fundamental split, characteristic of the human condition, underlies the level of conscious will. Cincinnatus, to emphasize it once more, is the more radical version of Luzhin who is also caught inside the world, which, *against and beyond his will*, derives from his individuality.

The fictional worlds of Sogliadataj, Otchajanie and Dar are different. Their protagonists generate them via imagination. They *compose* their universes. They are aware of the subjective character of reality - of their personal role as its origin - and participate actively in its composition. At the start reflections and doubles pursued by the paranoia of the projected universe, they become originals and originators. From being the objects of self-consciousness, they become its subjects.

Remarkably, in their awakening they also grow aware of the reader. This confirms our initial insight: *for Nabokov the process of becoming the author of one’s world dovetails with the process of discovering the audience*.[[121]](#footnote-120) Luzhin is caught within himself without knowing it; Cincinnatus comes to understand that he is his own cell and tries to escape it by looking for the real others; Herman is constantly addressing, deceiving, and hiding from his audience; finally, Fyodor is fully oriented towards the other’s gaze, while consciously composing his world. The compositional strategies of Nabokov’s later narrators are permeated with intersubjective response.

What kind of response is it? In becoming self-conscious, Nabokovian protagonists turn their ‘incognito’ against the reader. As a result, the position and the status of the latter profoundly change. We remember that in the early novels dramatic irony/unreliable focalization was the space in which the author,[[122]](#footnote-121) over the heads of blind characters, directly communicated with the reader. The windowlessness of the monads was predicated on the author's letting us see, and the clockwork world depended in its key aspects on the complicity between the author and the reader at the expense of the characters.[[123]](#footnote-122) The later novels destroy this complicity and turn the principle of windowlessness against the reader. In Sogliadataj, the best example of the change, the reader is the *least informed* of all participants. The reader knows less than the characters, and catastrophically less than the narrator. *The story is told from the point of view of the reader*. There is simply no other agent to ground its paradoxical perspective. The reader in Sogliadataj is the focalizer, as the flow of discourse - the presentation of events - is organized around his ignorance. This is consistent with the definition established in Chapter 1, according to which focalization is the unintentional aspect of discourse. In the case of Sogliadataj we are dealing with the intentionality of the reception-end of discourse.

The narrative situation in Dar is less violent but essentially similar.[[124]](#footnote-123) We can locate the acting Fyodor as the carrier of the point of view but this does not exhaust the structure of telling. Its most important element is the fact that the identity of the narrative voice is concealed from the reader. The novel differs from a simple memoir, where the older self explicitly remembers its younger version. The narrator of Dar refers to Fyodor in the third person and *never* names himself. This creates a context of impersonal narration - a *Gestalt* strong enough to embrace everything in the text. Frequent switches to the first person are perceived simply as free indirect discourse relating Fyodor’s thoughts to the reader. Even when first person passages begin to refer more and more to events unrelated to Fyodor’s mental processes, they are interpreted as the inserted portions of Fyodor's own narrative. Upon encountering large fragments of the first person narration, we automatically suppose that instead of describing Fyodor the impersonal narrator allows him to speak. The reporting agency, we assume, gradually retreats to the background but never disappears completely. Thus, the initial *Gestalt* of impersonal narration turns out to be almost irrefutable. It collapses only at the very end, after a direct indication that Fyodor plans to write the story we have just read - the story of his oeuvre and his meeting Zina. *Only at this moment does the reader clearly realize that Fyodor himself is the narrator (and the author) of the whole novel.* In this respect, the structure of Dar is analogous to what takes place in Sogliadataj, where the reader is systematically denied the key fact of presentation and only in the end is enlightened about the actual situation.

Who then is the addressee of the discourse in its entirety in these two novels? We know that in the earlier novels the author, over the characters' heads, communicates with the reader. We realize now that in the later novels the narrator sends messages over the reader’s head. But to whom if not to the reader? The answer is: to the *rereader*. The rereader is the agent who is supposed to receive messages inaccessible to the reader. The rereader goes back to the beginning of Sogliadataj and discovers the covert indications as to the real identity of Smurov. The rereader returns to the beginning of Dar and reinterprets all the intrusions of the first person as the manifestations of Fyodor-the-author, and the reader joins the characters as the victim of dramatic irony. The author-narrator and the rereader stand together and watch the reader make his mistakes.

Rereading, of course, is important in all fiction, as well as in all the temporal arts (music, film, etc.)[[125]](#footnote-124) The receiver by definition cannot know the later portions of the ‘text.’ That is to say, the significance of the earlier parts is necessarily modified by the later developments. Any reception of a temporal work (and any experience of temporality in general) implies to some extent going back and re-experiencing the beginning with the knowledge of the end. To perceive the specificity of Nabokov’s treatment of the problem we should ask the following question: what structural level gives meaning to the act of rereading in his oeuvre? If we take a realistic novel told by an impersonal narrator, we should see that the retroactive influence of the ‘later’ to the ‘earlier’ resides on the level of fictional reality. The future, in becoming present, affects the meaning of the past. The key concepts in the rereading of such a novel are causality, coincidence and fate: the rereader is supposed to perceive how the earlier events were moving toward the later ones, how the future was secretly contained in the past. But in Nabokov's Sogliadataj the situation is entirely different. Rereading this novel has nothing to do with causality or fate. In fact, it has nothing to do with events. Sogliadataj contains a special way of *telling* the events. Retroaction in such a novel is related to the level of narration.

The case of Dar is more difficult as it contains both types of retroaction. On the one hand, we are to follow the secret attempts of fate to make Fyodor meet Zina; on the other, upon discovering that Fyodor is the narrator, we are supposed to retrace the whole structure of narration and see how skillfully he *presented* those attempts.[[126]](#footnote-125) In addition to being a novel of *fate and investigative memory*, Dar is a novel of *narrative ‘incognito’ and structural rereading*.

The similarities between the two types are obvious: both heavily depend on the law of sequence according to which later segments change the meaning of the earlier ones; both require returning back and reexamining the previous parts in the context of new evidence. But in the novel of fate we do it on our own. No personal agent is involved in pushing us back to the beginning. It would be wrong to assume that the author directly solicits us to perceive the pattern of fate. The intention of the author in creating ordered plot sequences and narrating them impersonally is to *eliminate* the personal mediation. The author presents events as causing one another and puts the reader in front of them alone. The solitude of the reader facing the causality and teleology of events is an essential component of the novel of fate.

In the novel of narrative ‘incognito’ - the specifically Nabokovian type - the situation is different. Instead of events, we encounter a personal agent who *reports* events. What is reported in Nabokov’s later novels and how? The answer is crucial: the narrators report themselves (Smurov and Fyodor are the ‘stuff’ of Sogliadataj and Dar, just like Cincinnatus is the ‘stuff’ of Priglashenie). What is even more important is that the narrators hide from the reader the identity of the reporter with the reported. *The* s*elf-presentation of Nabokov’s narrators conceals from the reader its ontological link with the self it presents*. This concealment becomes the central element of presentation. Disclosing it at the end, turning us into rereaders, Nabokov’s narrators urge us to return to the beginning and appreciate not so much the surface events of the plot, but their own nuanced methods of masking and revealing themselves - the art of effective self-individuation under our gaze.

The above-mentioned virtuosity of being - ontological justice - happens thus to consist neither in making oneself visible (vulgarity) nor in making oneself invisible (parasitism), but in making one’s invisibility as visible as possible. Tangible elusiveness, palpable immateriality - such are the results of a successful effort of being. The whole Nabokovian phenomenology of delicacy, sophistication and perfection derives from his central insight into the nature of existence under the gaze. In this sense, Nabokov’s central character, at least in the Russian part of his oeuvre, is Cincinnatus. In him the principle of *visibility of the invisibility[[127]](#footnote-126)* reaches the literal level. We never learn what is hidden behind Cincinnatus’s opacity. We never perceive his true nature. The novel does not unveil what is hidden. The aspect we are engaged with (along with the rest of the characters) is the spectacle of the invisibility itself. Incessantly, in all possible ways, Cincinnatus plays out his non-transparency and, ultimately, non-availability.[[128]](#footnote-127)

Basically the same happens in Dar and Sogliadataj - the only difference being that while Cincinnatus was born invisible, Smurov and Fyodor *make* themselves invisible. Their performance is intentional. The novels complement one another in their realization of the strategy of narrative self-concealment. In Sogliadataj, the reader hears the narrative voice clearly, while its link to its physical source is suppressed. In Dar, conversely, the reader can see the acting and living Fyodor, but the identity of his narrative voice is concealed. The protagonists in these two novels use their art to hide themselves, instead of showing themselves through art.[[129]](#footnote-128) The regime of their interaction with the reader and with the world is *mimicry*.

Mimicry, as Nabokov understands it, is *the display of the art of hiding*.[[130]](#footnote-129) He sees the strongest examples of it in the realm of Nature. He suggests that the resources that mimicry activates far surpass the normal needs of self-protection:

Он рассказывал о невероятном художественном остроумии мимикрии, которая необъяснима борьбой за жизнь (грубой спешкой чернорабочих сил эволюции), излишне изысканна для обмана случайных врагов (...) и словно придумана забавником-живописцем как раз ради умных глаз человека... (Nabokov, 3, p.100)

[He was telling about the incredible artistic wit of mimetic disguise, which was not explainable by the struggle for existence (the rough haste of evolution’s unskilled forces), was too refined for the mere deceiving of accidental predators (…) and seemed to have been invented by same waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man...]

Mimicry is a delicate notion. It is an advancement in relation to ‘incognito’ and a solution to the dead end of paranoia. Mimicry differs from imitation, that is to say, from an attempt to copy. It also differs from impersonation, where the central moment is the dissolution into an alien identity. The defining feature of mimicry is *its move to manifest itself*. The nature of this self-manifestation is subtle. On the one hand, its own excess draws attention to it; on the other, it hides its source in the very process of displaying itself to this attention. Nabokovian mimicry never hides completely, never disappears from sight - that would be its failure. Rather, its intention is to become as conspicuous as possible, but precisely in its effort to thwart identification. The element of self-manifestation is what makes mimicry inherently moral. [[131]](#footnote-130) Comparing his artistic methods with those of realistic novels, Nabokov writes: "A good *trompe l’oeil* painting proves at least that the painter is not cheating." (Nabokov, 1973, p.165). By this he means that while the intent of a realistic novel is to present an imitation of reality hiding from the reader its artificial nature, mimicry is more honest because it openly displays its artifice. Being a game of equal partners, mimicry never aims at manipulation as its ultimate goal. On a certain level, it necessarily involves recognition and equality. 'Intelligent human eyes' are its *raison d’etre*. Mimicry does not betray the audience.

Another paradigmatic image of art in Nabokov’s oeuvre - chess problems[[132]](#footnote-131) - gives an even purer example of everything we observe in mimicry. What moves us to solve a chess problem derives from the fact that its solution is unknown. The solution itself - the sequence of moves - can be absolutely ordinary. The life of the problem is elsewhere, namely, in how the solution is hidden. The composition of a chess problem is base on the delicate art of hiding its solution. But this art is not empty: according to Nabokov, it implies rules, traditions, logic, time, character, sentiment - in short, all the components of being. And this art - the art of hiding - is what is on display. After the problem is solved, its ‘rereader’ goes back to the beginning of the process and, together with the composer, appreciates the plot, which consists entirely of concealing maneuvers:

Все было осмыслено, и вместе с тем все было скрыто. Каждый творец - заговорщик; и все фигуры на доске, разыгрывая в лицах его мысль, стояли тут конспираторами и колдунами. Только в последний миг ослепительно вскрывалась их тайна. (Nabokov, 3, p.154)

[Everything had acquired a sense and at the same time everything was concealed. Every creator is a plotter; and all the pieces impersonating his ideas on the board were here as conspirators and sorcerers. Only in the final instant was their secret spectacularly exposed.]

The art of the chess problem can serve as a formal, almost mathematical model of Nabokov’s aesthetic and existential discoveries. It contains the grammar which determines the respective positions of partners - their roles, their goals and rewards, the types of effort and responsibility involved, the distribution of meaning - the complete grammar of being.[[133]](#footnote-132) This grammar informs the whole of Nabokov’s oeuvre, from the conception of the character to the causality of the plots. It also informs his style, making *irony* its master trope.

It is possible to understand irony simply as a richer means of communication.[[134]](#footnote-133) While a regular indicative statement sends just a single message, an ironic statement doubles the content, involving two parts which to some extent contradict (and complement) one another. This allows the sender, using additional contextual codes, to intensify communication using the same channel capacity. Seen

this way, irony is a particular case of the multiplicity of meaning and pertains to the realm of discursive economy. Nabokovian irony is different. Its key aspect is the way that the outer meaning *hides* the inner. Correspondingly, in terms of reception, Nabokovian irony is a problem rather than a message. Like the chess problem, it invites the addressee to search for a solution, and, after the solution is found, to evaluate the way it was masked. Eventually, it calls for the appreciation of skill rather than for the comprehension of content.

Similarly to individuation, irony is precarious. If it insists too much on canceling its facade it turns into satire; if it overpromotes its inner content it lapses into mere ambiguity. Irony, as Nabokov understands it, does not promote anything. His novels, he insisted on many occasions, are about nothing. Their essence is in the negating, or, more precisely, self-negating effort.[[135]](#footnote-134) The skill of the ironist consists in making his message undermine itself as perfectly as possible. In its extreme form irony is the art of self-canceling, zero content performance. It is exactly its overdeveloped sense of balance that saves irony from the accusation of nihilism. The *expertise* of hiding is the positive aspect of ironic narratives. In his performance the ironist puts on display his ability to conceal himself.

The notion of irony should not be conceived as pertaining exclusively to style. In its contemporary form the concept extends far beyond its origins in rhetoric. Beginning with the German Romantics, irony tends to be linked to the general level of presentation:

The distance that the author, using the techniques which emphasize the fictionality of the text, inserts between himself and his creation accentuates the artistic nature of the work of art. Schlegel expresses this in the following manner: "Irony is the permanent parabasis" ((Philosophishe Fragmente, #668, KA XVIII: 85). Parabasis, in the ancient Greek theater, is the author's way to address himself directly to the audience, often via a messenger or a chorus; in this way the author introduces himself personally into the fiction he creates. The permanent parabasis immediately stops being parabasis, and that is why Schlegel's formula should be understood metaphorically: irony is the constant accentuation of the fictional and artificial character of fiction beyond all its pretense to realism. It is in this perspective that Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs could define romantic irony as "the means by which Art auto-represents". (Schoentjes, 1993, p. 95)

The majority of contemporary critics considers irony from the point of view of artistic self-representation. This makes irony practically synonymous with *mise en abîme*. Dallenbach defines the *mise en abîme* as:

(i) the ‘making present’ in the diegesis of the producer or receiver of the narrative;

(ii) the revelation of the production or reception per se; or

1. the ‘making explicit’ of the context that determines (or has determined) this production/reception.

The common feature of these three 'manifestations' is that they all, through artifice, try to make the invisible visible. (Dallenbach, 1977, p.75)

The concept of irony as *mise en abîme* leads to an existential account of Nabokov’s ‘worlds in regression.’ [[136]](#footnote-135) In Nabokov’s novels, embedding begins on the microlevel of characters. It is the logical outcome of the gaze, particularly the hidden gaze. Being watched implies being surrounded by someone else’s meaning, enveloped in an alien world. Analyzing the concept of shame, we saw how in Mashen’ka Ganin felt trapped on film, caught in the universe of a movie. In his case the themes of embedding, exposure and art merged in one integral experience. And in all of the novels subsequent to Mashen’ka, each instance of the hidden gaze leads to the situation of a world within a world. The possibilities of embedding are varied. Sometimes it is unilateral: Krechmar lives entirely inside the universe created by Gorn and Magda. More often, it is mutual: Dreyer is an ignorant doll inside Martha’s and Franz’s murderous plans, while they are the living mannequins inside his imaginative schemes. Often embedding generates a succession of regressive worlds: Herman in Otchajanie creates an artificial reality for Felix, being, in his turn, inside the reality created by the authorial persona of the novel.[[137]](#footnote-136) One more possibility is realized in Priglashenie na kazn’: the dreaming Cincinnatus is encased within himself. In view of those multiple variants we should emphasize once more: *the ontology of subjectivity and intersubjectivity is the ultimate ground for the subsequent topics of authorship and embedding*. The opposition of the inner and the outer in Nabokov’s novels grows out of the structure of seeing and being seen. There is an unbroken continuity between the interactions of the characters and the relationship of the author and the reader. Both the fictional world and the metafictional space of art reception are governed by the same laws of the gaze. One character building an aggressive ‘incognito’ against another; dramatic irony presenting to the reader a blind character immersed into the sphere of the author’s omniscience; narrative irony presenting to the re-reader a blind reader – all of these themes and strategies interpenetrate and form one integral whole. Irony, therefore, happens to be the master figure not only of Nabokov’s discursive style, but also of his narrative and compositional strategies.[[138]](#footnote-137) Nabokov’s global modes of telling the story, especially unreliable focalization and narrative ‘incognito,’ may be termed ironic. Another way to put it is to say that irony in Nabokov’s oeuvre is the most general regime of interaction between the author and the reader.

The above analysis of the thematic treatment of art in the novels helps us understand the existential role of irony as *the intersubjective regime of the functioning of meaning*. Meaning turns ironic when it becomes aware of the gaze, more precisely, when it becomes aware of itself under the gaze. Irony, in this sense, is the effort to maintain the *privacy of meaning* - the antipode to its blind self-exposure.[[139]](#footnote-138) Related to the capacity of meaning to remain in the possession of its originator, irony introduces the principle of ownership into the domain of sign exchange.

As such, irony is of utmost importance for Nabokov. Meaning, like being, is a liquid commodity. How to retain it? Once uttered, original significance immediately becomes common sense. How to resist its uncontrollable appropriation by the other, its banalization in the public sphere? The problems Nabokov faced in terms of

presence and the gaze reappear as equally urgent in the situation of speaking and writing. Voyeurism, exposure, blindness, theft, ‘incognito,’ game - the notions of being - translate into the idiom of meaning: point of view, excess and suppression of narrative information, interpretation, parody, fiction - all recognizably Nabokovian themes.

The conversion between the themes of being and the themes of meaning should make us return to Bakhtin, especially to his later writings. Once more, Bakhtin’s thought illuminates Nabokov’s artistic concerns.[[140]](#footnote-139) The central concept, around which the aformentioned conversion from being to meaning revolves, is *dialogue*. While early Bakhtin analyzes the interaction of physical presences (bodies) and visions, later, with the concept of dialogue, he passes to the analysis of the interaction of *meanings*. This corresponds to his refocusing attention from action (*postupok*) to word (*slovo*). Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue treats meanings as subjects – as living and active entities able to affect one another. Cardinally important is his idea that meanings, particularly in the genre of the novel, become aware of one another (when it happens, they become ‘voices’) – and, as a result, aware of themselves. It is not a coincidence that Bakhtin was first to introduce as central a group of contemporary themes: language as subject, intertextuality, quotation, and self-conscious discourse.

Nabokov’s oeuvre as a whole, and especially Dar, can serve as an excellent illustration of Bakhtin’s view of novelistic meaning as existing among and interacting

with other meanings. In Dar the variety of voices is almost infinite. There are many voices of Fyodor - his spoken words, his thoughts, his projected texts, his poems, his published biography of Chernyshevsky (including the voice of another biographer Fyodor invents,) and, finally, the whole text of his novel which we are reading and in which he is embedded as a character. Then, there are the voices of Fyodor’s family (his mother’s letters and father’s books) and acquaintances, of his fellow writers (among them Bush and Koncheev,) of his critics (several critical articles as reactions to the Chernyshevsky biography,) of Chernyshevsky himself, and of numerous Russian and non-Russian writers and poets (as quoted in the first imaginary conversation between Fyodor and Koncheev, as well as throughout the book.) The multiplicity of relations among these voices is almost equally unlimited. The attitudes of quotations range from jealous admiration of Koncheev’s poetry or full acceptance of Tolstoy’s prose, to neutral presentation of factual information about Chernyshevsky, or to farcical satire in quoting absurd critical responses to Fyodor’s book. Besides quoting, the novel displays other types of dialogical relations: accurate reproduction of scientific discourse presenting data about Fyodor’s father’s publications on lepidoptera; conscious imitation of realist style in the first paragraphs of the novel, stylization of Pushkin’s prose in a fictional excerpt containing the biography of Fyodor’s grandfather, and many others. Stylization turns into parody when Fyodor mimics Chernyshevsky’s writings in the biography, discusses Goncharov and Pisemsky in the conversation with Koncheev, or reproduces the style of Georgy Chulkov in a poem to Zina. Lampoon, caricature, travesty – Nabokovian parody is one of the richest in literature.[[141]](#footnote-140) And all the while Fyodor’s voice is in the most intricate relationship with itself, as the discourse of his earlier acting self is embedded into and constantly juxtaposed with the discourse of his later self writing the novel. These embeddings and juxtapositions, it should be remarked, are realized via numerous chronologically intermediate selves of Fyodor, injecting their own discourses into the narrative. It can be said that Fyodor is fully self-dialogized, while Dar as a whole presents a fully developed instance of multifaceted discursive interaction.

Obvious similarities set off important differences between Nabokov’s and Bakhtin’s uses of the concept of dialogue. While Bakhtin sees dialogue simply as a global regime of the existence of meaning and tends mainly to show how a given discourse interacts with other discourses, Nabokov subordinates the functioning of meaning to the general principles of the gaze. His dialogue is structured according to the ontology of intersubjective conflict. Nabokovian meaning is born not just aware of the presence of other meanings, but extremely sensitive to them, which can be seen in Nabokov’s ongoing concern with originality.[[142]](#footnote-141) Reading him makes us feel how meaning is vulnerable: surrounded by other meanings, constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by later ones or of ignorantly repeating the earlier ones, individual meaning has even more reasons to feel paranoid than individual being. The paranoia of meaning can be defined as a threat of its dissolution in the universe of common sense.

Art, in this respect, is particularly vulnerable. A writer is constantly compared with other writers and is at the mercy of his readers. The example of Herman from Otchajanie should alert us to at least one correct idea: the work of art is similar to crime in so far as it is supposed to be so perfect as to make its author beyond the reach of the reading ‘police.’

The analogy between reading and gazing goes even farther. Artistic meaning is especially susceptible to the hidden gaze. Dar shows what can happen with meaning when it cannot protect itself. N.G. Chernyshevsky is paralyzed under Fyodor’s pitiless pen. Fyodor does not allow his character’s voice to defend itself. His reading and interpretation turn into an exercise of the author’s unilateral advantage. It happens, of course, because blindness, as Fyodor shows, is Chernyshevsky’s own choice, but this only accentuates the power of the lesson: meaning is vulnerable; it has to be aware of itself to protect itself - otherwise it will be swallowed and digested by other meanings, just like Chernyshevsky is digested by Fyodor’s art. What is at stake here is not so much the truth of Chernyshevsky’s ideas, but their very independent existence. Fyodor appropriates them for his own purposes; they become the substance of his work, while losing, under his critique, any autonomous significance. Discussing his future novel with Zina, Fyodor explains what he is planning to do with other meanings, including his own past:

Ну, положим, - я это все так перетасую, перекручу, смешаю, разжую, отрыгну… таких своих специй добавлю, так пропитаю собой, что от автобиографии останется только пыль, - но такая пыль, конечно, из которой делается самое оранжевое небо. (Nabokov, 3, p.328)

[Well, let's suppose – I so shuffle, twist, mix, rechew and rebelch everything, add such spices of my own and impregnate things so much with myself that nothing remains of the autobiography but dust – the kind of dust, of course, which makes the most orange of skies.]

What is peculiar here is the vocabulary of feeding: chewing, belching, adding spices, impregnating. Fyodor is confident of his capacity to fully digest all extraneous materials. He intends to decompose them into the most elementary substance (dust,) on the level of which they would lose all independent identity, and then recompose it into his own oeuvre. This radical *gastronomy of meaning* is in full accord with Nabokov’s existential ideas of privacy and the gaze.

Thus, Dar involves us in a struggle of meaning.[[143]](#footnote-142) This struggle is considerably removed from its Hegelian origins. The parties do not (and do not need to) risk their lives. The issue of freedom is irrelevant in the encounter of texts. What is finally left is only the conflict of authorship, or, to put it more generally, the being of meaning. Fortunately, Nabokov goes beyond the simple struggle. The biography of Chernyshevsky is only a chapter in a larger work of a more complex nature. Dar as a whole, it may be suggested, is a novel not about how to win the war of meaning, but rather about how to exist in the world of meaning. It is Nabokov’s novel about literature as the medium of existence.

The key notion of Nabokov’s thinking about the world of meaning is *value*. Value in the novels is an even more difficult notion than being: Nabokov understands it, as the examples in Chapter 3 suggest, in financial rather than in moral terms.[[144]](#footnote-143) His characters protect their being just like a banker protects his assets. Beneath the existential layer of emotions and the metaphysical layer of artistic dispositions, there always operates a fundamental pragmatics of privacy and ownership.[[145]](#footnote-144) And if on the level of characters this pragmatics is obscured by the traditional elements of melodrama, on the level of literature itself - literature as institution - the axiological nature of Nabokov's thinking becomes fully evident.

The parallel between currency and signs clarifies most of his linguistic paradigms. Just as money can potentially be exchanged for anything, words, according to Nabokov, can grasp reality. All that *is* can be told. Words measure reality and then, appropriately arranged, introduce its value into circulation. Being and meaning continuously run into one another, if the language is used adequately. Nabokov never subscribed to the Romantic theories of the inexpressibility of truth.[[146]](#footnote-145) But while being has value in the sense of primordial fecundity - being is the source of all value - language can play the role of a universal equivalent only by acquiring certain special qualities. Literature is the institution responsible for generating and upholding those qualities.

First of all, literature makes words *precious* so that they can serve as currency. That is the ultimate function of artistic perfection and the goal of artistic labor. Defining the nature of his effort, Nabokov directly relates it to ownership: "I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure." (Nabokov, 1973, p.115) But there is an additional nuance. Sheer effort of labor is insufficient to generate preciousness. An element of *rarity* implied in it means that procuring it involves luck or miracle. Gold and precious stones, like anything rare, containing a break of the law of probabilities - a disruption of rationality, a transcendent presence. What corresponds to this presence in literature is *inspiration*.[[147]](#footnote-146) Artistic language cannot be manufactured like simple merchandise. The secret pulsation of happy chance (a patently Nabokovian feature) distinguishes it from all other types of discourse.

In addition to making words precious, literature makes them hard to counterfeit. *Coining* words is analogous to minting or printing currency. Nabokovian language successfully solves the problem of unauthorized copying: its extreme intricacy, its network of pattern and correlation correspond to the sophisticated microscopy of printing techniques and water signs on paper bills. Nabokovian discourse even contains hidden traps, intended, among other things, to catch careless *faux-monnayeurs*: anagrams, obscure puns, secret quotations woven like metal strips into the fabric of his text.

The task of deterring counterfeiting, though, is not the only task of literature. Judging from Nabokov’s own practice, he understood literature as an institution responsible for the general *security of language*. Probably one of the most serious aspects of his, generally ambiguous, public discourse, is its war against all sorts of fraud. Almost everything is used to that end: grotesque, satire, parody, open pronouncements, etc. His educational career in the United States showed him to be a veritable enforcement officer who, with a dictionary and heavily marked copies of original texts, exacts compliance with the ethics of discourse. His Lectures - on Russian and on world literature – are clearly involved in a constant enforcement discourse aiming to protect the *wealth* of letters and to assure its just distribution.[[148]](#footnote-147) The roots of that tendency can be traced back to Nabokov's own literary criticism in the late twenties and thirties. His attitude toward language and literature at that time is amply reflected in Dar where Fyodor treats both positively and negatively his own and others’ works. Fyodor’s small critical essay on Yasha Chernyshevsky’s poetry; the reading of Bush’s play; the grotesque quarrel among émigré writers; several critical responses to N.G. Chernyshevsky biography (the first of them cited for unmistakably hostile and parodistic purposes as an example of glaring misreading and ignorance); and, of course, the biography itself – these sections of the novel make us see in it not just elements of interpretative criticism but a moral and didactic message about the uses and abuses of literature.

Nabokov’s obsessive concern with artistic and critical fraud shows once again his closeness to the existential problematic - on the most general level this concern translates into a preoccupation with the *authenticity of being*. Authenticity is nothing but the absence of existential fraud, the fair play of being, and the problem of authenticity can move to the center of the philosophy of life only on the basis of ontology understood as axiology. When in Strong Opinions Nabokov writes, “I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth” (Nabokov, 1973, p.68); and in Drugie Berega he concludes an act of remembrance: “Все так, как должно быть, ничто никогда не изменится, ничто никогда не умрет.” [Everything is as it should be; nothing will ever change, nothing will ever die.] (Nabokov, 4, 173), he meditates on the principles of a moral and aesthetical codex which could help the artist create stable worlds and guarantee their authenticity.

Given his (quite independent and original) closeness to existentialist thought, Nabokov drastically differs from existentialists as to his solutions. Heidegger attempts to solve the problem of authenticity in the direction of accepting one’s finite character, of being-toward-death. Sartre’s version of authenticity requires rejection of any type of excuse and assent to radical responsibility. Both philosophers see self-deception as the main obstacle to authentic being; both stay within the limits of individualism. Nabokovian thought concerning authenticity is essentially public. For him the danger of the fake derives not from self-deception - failing oneself - but from failing the audience. His invisible villains torture their neighbors; his madmen are unable to play the game because they cannot perceive their partners.

Another instance of the breakdown of being-together for Nabokov is *poshlost'*. It joins two elements: the first is fraud, the faking of being; the second is a self-advertising, self-interested character. (In this sense, *poshlost’* should be opposed to irony.) *Poshlost’* is always aggressive; its aim is to gain, through faking, a unilateral, parasitic profit. We should remember that Nabokov finds the paradigmatic examples of *poshlost’* in the realm of commercials.

Consequently, overcoming the danger of fraud can be accomplished only in the public domain. Authenticity, according to Nabokov, is the partnership of the gaze, the just existential contract between equal partners. Nabokovian ethics is the ethics of trust and security involved in such a contract. And while literature, due to its verbal nature, functions as the governing institution of language, art in general is the government of being. It is a set of codes and skills to preserve being as value, to make it public while preventing its abuse.[[149]](#footnote-148)

In that sense, Nabokov is something more than a moralist, he is a *politician*. He is thinking about a community that exceeds any total sum of individuals, a community as an organized and legislated whole. We can see it in the progression of his Russian oeuvre. Several detailed examinations of intersubjectivity in the early novels lead to the analysis of power and legislation in Priglashenie; an experiment with time and a small society in Mashen’ka concluded with a historical and political treatise in N.G. Chernyshevsky’s biography; Nabokov’s own immediate experience of writing developed into the thematization of art and literature as legal and social phenomena in Otchajanie and Dar.

Thrown by the Great Revolution out of his native space into a life-long exile, Nabokov used art to create a new universe as a space for living. And not only the space - a new way of life in which nothing is given by birth, nothing is inherited, and everything has to be earned and invented anew. The corpus of his novels and stories can be read as a textbook and an encyclopedia for emigration, containing all that is needed to generate, maintain, and protect being - from science to law, from hygiene to the principles of beauty and order, from pedagogy to the lexicon of bilingual existence. This encyclopedia, begun in Nabokov's Russian novels and carried over into the English part of his oeuvre, still awaits its commentary.

# 

# **CONCLUSION**

The character registers the other's gaze and feels it as a threat. Especially dangerous is the hidden gaze, resulting in the invasion of privacy. Under the gaze, the character experiences loss of being. He realizes that the gaze affects individuation. Undermining his self-control, the gaze prevents him from becoming fully the author of his being. In order to defend himself against the corroding influence of the gaze the character attempts to build a protective shell of ‘incognito.’ The goal of ‘incognito’ is not just to screen the character from others, but also to turn him into the invisible observer. Armed with the hidden gaze, he is capable of repossessing and reabsorbing the lost fragments of his being.

‘Incognito’ proves to be a dangerous weapon, as it disrupts the very medium of intersubjectivity. It makes the subject betray his audience. Suppressing his avalability to others, the character cannot see himself the way others see him. He is able apprehend himself only via direct self-consciousness. He becomes his own sole observer, and the only source of information and interpretation in his world. Without independent correction, his vision turns into the projection of his subjectivity. The character imposes his perspective and judgment onto the world. He hallucinates his world.

In extreme cases the energy of projection splits individual substance. Hallucination aquires independent status while remaining secretly connected to its source. The character is surrounded by his own unrecognized outgrowths. This leads to the emergence of a double, or, in a more pronounced outcome, to a situation in which the character is entrapped in a universe that has a covert affinity with his own substance. The world watches him and appropriates his being. This is the stage of dream or paranoia. The character is basically inside himself; he experiences self-relation as an alien and alienating gaze. He fights against surrendering his being to the whole he does not recognize as his. The outcome of this struggle is either his suicide, the autoliquidation of the part, or the reidentification of the part with the whole - the beginning of self-authorship.

The process of self-authorship ends the dream stage and coincides with the rediscovery of true otherness. Ceasing his attempts to avoid or defeat the other, the subject recognizes the gaze. Facing the audience allows him to become his own author. He fashions his being, along with his world, under the gaze. He creates. His creation (the work) neither opens him to the public, nor makes him fully invisible. Instead, it stands between him and the public, involving both as participants in a structured contact. In this contact the audience is as much under of the gaze of the artist as the artist is under the gaze of the audience. The art of fiction, through the distribution of narrative information, allows the parity of the author and the audience to be maintained throughout the story. The writing self (the author) generates the acting self (the character) to meet the reader. The storytelling is organized in such a way that the character and the reader lack vital information about the nature of the narrative world and about the identity of the narrative voice. They are, from their respective sides, symmetrically related to the whole of the universe they encounter. Detached from them, behind their backs and over their heads, stand the author and the re-reader. They possess the commensurate fullness of vision, which lets them interact as equals. Each of them is related to his lower-level agent by the link of identity: the author *is* the character, the re-rereader *is* the reader. The artistic event sets in motion and coincides with the complex crossplay of awareness between all involved parties. The character becomes gradually conscious of other characters, of the reader, and of the author (that is to say, of himself as the author). The reader also becomes conscious of the author behind the events, and of himself as the re-reader. At the end, the author and the re-reader, having played out and incorporated the mutual surplus of vision, face one another in the clarity and moral balance of the realized work of art, each aware of himself under the gaze of the opponent.

Such is the Nabokovian version of the development of spirit (*Geist.*) He infers from it all the rest: his morals, politics, aesthetics and history. There exist, of course, other versions, but this one, it seems, is original, complete and formally persuasive.

# **APPENDIX** **A**

**Plot Summaries**

Mashen’ka [Mary]

Ganin, a Russian emigrant in Berlin, learns that his neighbor, Alfiorov, expects his wife, Maria, to come in a week. Upon seeing a photograph of Maria, Ganin recognizes in her his first love. Without telling his discovery to anyone, Ganin remembers his past (his memories occupy approximately half of the novel,) and plans, on the eve of Maria’s arrival, to drink her husband to sleep and then elope with her. Approaching the station to meet her train, Ganin suddenly changes his mind and departs in another direction, without even seeing Maria.

Korol’, dama, valet [King, Queen, Knave]

Krechmar, a wealthy apparel merchant, is married to Martha and lives in Berlin. His provincial cousin sends to him her son Franz. Krechmar gives the young man a job and embraces him as a friend. Unbeknownst to him, Franz becomes Martha’s lover. Martha wants to kill Krechmar and marry Franz. Together, Martha and Franz plot to lutre Krechmar on a boat trip and then to drown him. When, already on the boat, Krechmar informs Martha he is about to make a lucrative deal, she decides to postpone the murder. After catching pneumonia on the trip, Martha dies in several days.

Zashchita Luzhina [Defense]

The novel narrates the life story of a famous Grand Master named Luzhin. The story begins in his childhood. Luzhin learns to play, becomes a chess prodigy, leaves his father and tours the world. Eventually, he marries a Russian woman and lives in Berlin. At a certain point in his life he becomes increasingly focused on inventing a defense against his most dangerous opponent Tourati. At an international tournament, during his game with Tourati, Luzhin suffers a mental breakdown. Doctors forbid him to play chess. After a period of relative stability, Luzhin becomes gradually aware of certain symmetrical chess-related patterns spanning his whole life. He suspects (justly) that he is a piece in a mystical, cosmic game, and tries to invent a defense against a combination which, he believes, is leading him back to chess and eventually to death. All his attempts to obstruct this combination fail, as they only further its development. In the final move of his defense Luzhin throws himself out of the window of his apartment.

Sogliadataj [The Eye]

The narrator is a Russian young man living in Berlin. Humiliated and beaten up by the husband of a woman with whom he had an affair, he shoots himself. According to him, however, he is able to survive after death through an effort of will. He continues to live as a ghost, but others think he is a normal person. He finds a job and new acquaintances. Among them is one Smurov, in whom the narrator is unusually, and somewhat obsessively, interested. He asks questions, observes Smurov’s behavior, and even steals from others letters and photographs referring to him. At the end of the novel, though, the narrator indirectly suggests that he is Smurov, and that he composed his story to make clear to the reader certain philosophical points about personal identity and moral value.

Podvig [Glory]

Martin, 17, escapes with his mother from revolutionary Russia. His mother settles down in Switzerland, while Martin goes to Oxford to study Russian literature. In Oxford he befriends Darwin, a British student, and falls in love with Sonia, a Russian girl living with her family in London. After graduating from Oxford and spending a summer on a farm in southern France, Martin conceives a clandestine expedition to Russia. He plans to cross the Russian border alone and without documents. The last place he is heard from is Riga: the novels hints that he disappears forever.

Kamera obskura [Laughter in the Dark]

Krechmar, a rich art critic, lives with his wife and daughter in Berlin. He begins an adulterous affair with a younger woman named Magda. Krechmar’s wife, Annelisa, learns about the affair and leaves, taking their daughter Irma with her. Krechmar lives with Magda in his apartment. Gorn, Magda’s former lover, arrives, and she starts seeing him secretly. Gorn befriends Krechmar, who takes him and Magda on a car trip. Krechmar is morbidly jealous, but Gorn makes him believe he is a homosexual while enjoying, during nightly stops, Magda’s favors. When Krechmar learns the truth he is on the verge of shooting Magda, but she is able to calm him down. They depart, leaving Gorn behind. Driving the car in a state of shock, Krechmar gets into an accident, as a result of which he becomes fully blind. He and Magda rent a house in Switzerland, but Gorn, without Krechmar’s knowledge, moves in with them. During a visit of his brother-in-law Krechmar finds out about Gorn’s presence in the house. Krechmar returns to Berlin to his wife. As soon as he discovers the whereabouts of Magda, he attempts to kill her. He corners her in their former appartment, but in the ensuing struggle she is able to grab his gun and kill him.

Otchajanie [Despair]

The narrator of the story, Herman, is a chocolate manufacturer in Berlin. During one of his business trips he sees Felix, whom he takes to be his double. He conceives a crime – an artistic crime. He wants to kill Felix, make the police think the corpse is himself, collect the insurance money with the help of his wife, and live on, assuming Felix’s identity. There are several problems with this plan. First, others do not recognize the resemblance between Herman and Felix (which is, as it becomes evident from the text, fully Herman’s projection). Secondly, Herman’s wife, unknown to him, is having an affair with her cousin Ardalion. And thirdly, after killing Felix, Herman forgets to remove his cane, which bears Felix’s name and city of birth. Discovering from the newspapers that his crime is badly botched, Herman writes a story attempting to justify it. The text of this story fully coincides with the text of the novel. Herman’s diary in the last chapter describes how he flees the police and is finally surrounded in a small mountain village.

Priglashenie na kazn’ [Invitation to a Beheading]

Cincinnatus C. is sentenced to death in the first paragraph of the novel for the crime of ‘gnoseological turpitude’. Later this crime is related to the fact that he is the only non-transparent individual in the society where all the people are fully transparent to one another. Cincinnatus, awaiting his execution, is the single inmate in the gigantic prison on the hill above the city. The date and time of the execution are unknown. At one of the key moments of the plot, another inmate, M’sieur Pierre, is moved into the cell next to Cincinnatus’s. Later, it turns out that M’sieur Pierre is the executioner, who is supposed to direct the ceremony of beheading. As the novel progresses, the protagonist (and the reader) gradually realize that the whole world around him, including other characters, is illusory. Immediately before and during the execution reality begins to collapse, described as stage props, and when the ax falls, Cincinnatus abandons his body and walks amidst the “flapping scenery” toward, the novel says, “beings akin to him.”

Dar [The Gift]

The protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, is a Russian writer living in Berlin. The novel traces his creative development and progresses along with a series of his works (a book of poems, an outlined story of another writer’s suicide, the projected biography of Fyodor’s father, and the biography of a Russian 19th century critic N.G. Chernyshevsky). Simultaneously, the novel tells the story of Fyodor meeting and falling in love with Zina, who becomes his literary muse. At the end, Fyodor explains to Zina the next book he is planning to write and we understand that he refers to the text we are reading, the novel Dar.

# **APPENDIX** **B**

**Nabokovian Scholarship: A Short Review**

Critical literature on Nabokov is very extensive. There exist more than 1200 articles, 200 books and 300 dissertations with his name as a substring in the subject. Below is a survey of the main contributions to the field of Russian Nabokov so far.

As far as structural analysis is concerned, the most outstanding achievement is a book by a Finnish scholar, Pekka Tammi, Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Analysis, published in 1985 in Finland. It is a full narratological guide to Nabokov's entire oeuvre, both Russian and English, using the latest advances in theory. It classifies most aspects of Nabokov's narratives: temporality, causality, perspective, speaking and seeing agents, voice and point of view, implied author and reader, and so on. It also contains all necessary conceptual tools and references.

Another significant structuralist work is Sergej Davydov's "Teksty - Matreshki" Vladimira Nabokova, published in 1982 in Germany in Russian. Davydov focuses on narrative embedding. He discovers that inserting texts belonging to his characters within his own texts is one of Nabokov's main devices. He analyses it and comes to the following, clearly Bakhtin-inspired, conclusion: “Nabokov's novels are about the author's and the character's minds, about their relationship and, the last but not the least, about the primacy of the author's mind over the character's mind.” (Davydov, 1982, p. 201.) Such a conclusion, I think, is oversimplified. It tends to isolate creative effort from being-in-the-world. Author-character relation in Nabokov's texts is clearly governed by the same rules as the author-reader and character-character relations. Only in terms of the general ontology of Nabokov's subject can narrative embedding find its adequate meaning.

The only work on Russian Nabokov written in the existentialist vein is Julian Connolly's Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other. His point of departure is Davydov's idea that author-character opposition is at the core of Nabokov's thought and technique. According to Connolly, each protagonist in Nabokov's works has two selves: one is free, creative, and gravitates towards the author; another is fixed, constrained by others, and identifies him as a character. Those two selves are in conflict. A protagonist always strives to exorcise his character-related double and to ascend towards authorship. Connolly's work is descriptive rather than theoretical. He does not mention either existentialism or phenomenology, the two areas of thought where the approach he uses has been originated. In the notes he does talk about Lacan in relation to the concepts of otherness, gaze and shame, but is entirely silent about the fact that Hegel and Sartre were first to introduce them and to develop coherent theories on their basis. As a result, a whole wealth of philosophical concepts is left outside the scope of his book, and its hold on the essential reality of Nabokov's oeuvre appears limited.

Another important branch of Nabokovian criticism is linked to a suggestion Vera Nabokov made in the introduction to a posthumous collection of her husband's poems. She identified *potustoronnest'* [otherworldliness] as Nabokov's main theme. The logical outcome of this suggestion is an idea that Nabokov is a cryptic occult writer. In a more or less veiled way, according to this view, he treats in his books such themes as existence after death, supernatural presences, and, in general, the connection between our physical world and another, spiritual world which is beyond our senses but can be somehow apprehended by a special, usually mad or artistic, mind. The main proponents of such a view are Bryan Boyd, the author of a monumental biography Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years and Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years, Vladimir Alexandrov (Nabokov's Otherworld) and William Rowe (Nabokov's Spectral Dimension). A subtrend of this approach, started again by Davydov's analysis of Priglashenie na kazn’ in his "Texty-Matreski", ties Nabokov's intimations of the spiritual world to Gnostic texts. A chapter *Nabokov as a Gnostic Seeker* in D. Barton Johnson's influential Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov tackles this theme directly.

The rest of Nabokovian criticism is eclectic. The authors usually frame one or several aspects of Nabokov's oeuvre - memory, art, exile, sports, puns, sexual symbols, etc. – and attempt to find all their instances in the selected corpus of texts. One of the best representatives of that approach is Dabney Stuart whose readings in Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody are exceptionally perceptive.

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1. The plot summaries of all Nabokov’s Russian novels are given in Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. For the general analysis of vision as a medium of culture see Martin, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. See his article “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” in Nabokov, 1980, pp.371-381. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. The translations of the titles are Nabokov's as he himself supervised the conversion of all his Russian language novels into English. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. See Grayson, 1977 and Berdjis, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. This, and all translations below are made on the basis of the published English versions of Nabokov’s Russian works. The translations attempt to be literal; lexical and, when possible, syntactical reproduction of the original was their primary goal. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. For Genette's standard treatment of focalization see Genette, 1972, pp.183-269. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Genette, in his New Narrative Discourse, confirms his definition: “Focalization, as I understand it, is the restriction of the ‘field,’ that is to say, a selection of information in relation to what the tradition calls omniscience.” (Genette, 1983, p.49) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. This distinction is absent in standard treatments on narratology. Booth, who introduced the notion of the unreliable narrator in 1961 in his Rhetoric of Fiction (Booth, 1961), did not distinguish between Mode and Voice; whereas Genette who first made that distinction in 1972 did not address the issue of unreliability. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. The notion of intentionality is basic both in phenomenology and in analytical philosophy. For the full discussion of the term, see Anscombe's Intention and Strawson's article ‘Intention and Convention in Speech Acts’ in Strawson, 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. This theory brings about a peculiar result, namely, that absolute omniscience is impossible. One cannot speak without accepting a context and assuming a stance, that is to say, without giving up the pretence of omniscience. Meaning can emerge only against a background. A totally omniscient utterance, something absolutely contextless, or, rather, something that includes in its message all possible contexts - such a monstrous utterance would be totally incomprehensible. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Toolan (1988, pp.122-138) and Rimmon-Kenan (1988, pp.110-116) dedicate substantial portions of their reference works to free indirect discourse (FID) and list extensive bibliographies. Among the most prominent treatments of FID are: Uspensky, 1973, Pascal, 1977, McHale, 1978, Cohn, 1978, Banfield, 1982 and Stanzel, 1984. Bakhtin’s early statement on the issue can be found in Voloshinov, 1973. Bakhtin’s later notions of dialogue, multivoiced discourse and heteroglossia give the whole discussion a much broader scope. For the general examination and the bibliography of Bakhtin's works related to FID see Morson&Emerson, 1990, pp.121-172&306-366. For the best analysis of FID in Nabokov see Tammi, 1985.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Free indirect focalization is mentioned in Bal, 1997, pp.159-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. The notion of unreliable focalization is closely related to the formalist concept of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization, distancing.) The latter essentially consists in presenting the familiar in a new context, often from a naive point of view. This technique, first analyzed by Shklovsky in “Art as Device”, later became the focus of intensive investigation. Lotman associates it to the Enlightenment and its interest in the Noble Savage. He writes about the method of describing everyday reality through the eyes of an essentially alien observer – the technique which became widespread in the 18th century literature: “Voltaire generated a whole chain of literary works by introducing into one of his novellas a character of a Huron who, amazed, contemplates European prejudices. ‘Natural Savages’ inundated literature. Krylov used the ‘point of view of a little dog.’ Tolstoy later employed this device in shaping the tale of Kholstomer (worldly-wise horse) as a natural – and, consequently, 'naturally' incomprehending - view of the world.“ (Lotman, 1994, pp.116-117) The broadest analysis of this technique is conducted by Bakhtin. In “Discourse in the Novel” Bakhtin studies what he calls ‘incomprehension’ in the context of the conflict of discourses. Incomprehension is related to the character of the *fool*, who does not understand the official view of the world. Bakhtin traces the fool back to the beginnings of literature. He talks about the wisdom and the functions of the foolish perspective, citing ‘Don Quixote’ as one of its most prominent examples. He also mentions Swift, Montesquieu, and Tolstoy. After examining the concept generically, Bakhtin links it to the Formalists’ notion of defamiliarization. See Bakhtin, 1981, pp.403-404. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. In this respect Nabokov's narrative can be opposed to that of Kafka. In The Trial and The Castle the narrator and the reader know no more than the protagonist. Together with the protagonist the reader gropes along in the murky and incomprehensible world. We feel that it is radically impossible, even for the impersonal narrator, to understand fully the actual meaning and significance of events. In this sense Kafka's world as a whole is inhuman. Its nature makes it radically inaccessible to the human mind. The universe of Korol', dama, valet is more comfortable. The reader and the narrator, over the characters' heads, do enjoy the fullness of information necessary to perceive everything in proper light. There *is* a proper light. The benevolent narrator gives it to the reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Connolly, reading Korol’, dama, valet, defines projection as “the tendency to create an internal image of an idealized ‘other,’ which is then superimposed onto an actual living person, often at the expense of that person’s autonomy.” (Connolly, 1992, p.35) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Connolly writes: “Ironically, the characters’ predilection for objectifying others has the effect of reducing themselves to automatons too.” (Connolly, 1992, p.55) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Michael Ryklin interprets Nabokov's story of '*netki*' in Priglashenie - meaningless and strange objects that are reflected as beautiful and perfect in special warped mirrors - as a metaphor of such a synchronicity. He writes that, according to that metaphor, "cosmos can be born out of two different types of chaos, ideally fitting one another." (Ryklin, 1992, p.17). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. See Khodasevich, 'On Sirin', in Appel & Newman, 1970, pp.96-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Quoted from Davydov, 1982, p.96. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Even the image of a dead dummy is perceptively registered here. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. See for example chapter XX of "Discourse on Metaphysics", in Leibniz, 1995, pp. 48-49. The chapter bears a subtitle that begins as follows: "How God inclines our souls without necessitating them." For a general discussion of metaphysics and freedom see Lovejoy, 1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. On the principle of sufficient reason see Leibniz, 1951, pp.93-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. See Scruton, 1986.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Leibniz, 1951, pp.96-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Heidegger in Being and Time gives similar analysis of the notion of substance. He emphasizes that the main ontological determination of substance is its needlessness (*Unbedurftigkeit*) (Heidegger, 1984, pp.92-95) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Space and time, according Leibniz, are parts of that web - unreal results of the relations between monads that, in themselves, are extratemporal and spaceless. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Pnin and Pale Fire amply develop this theme. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. Inside the novels, the problem of individuation emerges as moral - Nabokov constantly reminds us that Evil, with all its seeming power and brightness, always hides an existential deficiency, a lack of being: "Так развивается бок о бок с нами, в зловеще-веселом соответствии с нашим бытием, мир прекрасных демонов; но в прекрасном демоне есть всегда тайный изъян, стыдная бородавка на заду у подобия совершенства; лакированным лакомкам реклам, объедающимся желатином, не знать тихих отрад гастронома, а моды их всегда чуть-чуть отстают от действительных." [A world of magnificent demons develops right next to us, in sinister and joyful symmetry with our being; but a magnificent demon always harbors a secret defect, a shameful wart on the behind of the perfection's parrot; the varnished gourmands of advertisement will never know the simple joys of the gastronome. ] (Nabokov, 3, p.14) Nabokov always relates Evil to bad design. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. In his Discourse on Metaphysics Leibniz says: “...were I able to consider directly all that happens or appears to me at the present time, I should be able to see all that will happen to me or that will ever appear to me. This future will not fail me, and will surely appear to me even if all that which is outside of me were destroyed, save only that God and myself were left.” (Leibniz, 1995, p.25) Ganin can serve as a curious illustration of the last part of that dictum, as he goes through the motions of his love in the physical absence of its object. In that respect he anticipates the enterprise of Herman from Otchajanie who is able to build the complex labyrinth of his crime on the basis of his fully imaginary resemblance to Felix. Nabokov finds aesthetic satisfaction in exposing monads running through their predetermined routine in complete absence of proper context or setting. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. The disintegration that Sartre mentions here is studied in detail in Anna Karenina, where the unattainable existence of Vronsky not only undermines Anna’s perceptual realm but also eats to the very core of her being. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Introducing the notion of the gaze, Sartre radically departs from Leibniz. More precisely, abandoning the *cognitive* grounds, Sartre discovers a structure of human reality that bypasses the isolation of radical windowlessness and provides a permanent, always available bridge between subjects. Later we shall see Nabokovian characters who negate the gaze and live windowlessness as their existential choice. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. Nabokov has a definite predilection for animating tropes. Here is an example from Dar: “...мебельный фургон, запряженный желтым же трактором с гипертрофией задних колес и более, чем откровенной анатомией. На лбу у фургона...” [... a furniture wagon, harnessed to an equally yellow tractor with the hypertrophy of the hind wheels and more than indiscreet anatomy. On the forehead of the wagon...] (Nabokov, 3, p.5) And another example from Zashchita: “…она [пешка] приобрела совершенно чудовищную силу и все росла, вздувалась, тлетворная для противника, как злокачественный нарыв на самом нежном месте доски.” [It [the pawn] acquired an altogether terrible power and kept growing, swelling, poisonous for the opponent like a malignant abscess on the most tender spot of the board.] (Nabokov, 2, p.77) There are hundreds of similar instances of animating language in the novels, and all of them are clearly geared toward filling the world with presences. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. Julia Bader maintains that “Nabokovian characters have intermittent, temporary personalities brought to life by a trick of lighting, by a transitory sleight-of-hand. This deliberately discontinuous technique of characterization implies that the self is alive only when observed and observing.” (Bader, 1973, p.11) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. According to Sartre, “being seen means grasping oneself as an unknown object of unknowable attitudes.” (Sartre, 1943, p.326) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. “I can hold the other at a distance only accepting a limit of my own subjectivity.” (Sartre, 1943, p.346) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. In this description Nabokov joins a great visual art tradition of painting bathers. From the Renaissance to Cezanne, Picasso and Gauguin, painters always have seen in bathers the archetype of humanity shorn of its surface layers and displaying its essential features. Nabokov's rendering of the traditional theme, however, is fundamentally different from that of the cubists and Cezanne. In addition to involving the author who, just like a painter, dispassionately analyzes forms and colors, the structure of the episode involves the character, whose encounter with the bathers is involved and judgmental. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. English language lacks lexical means to differentiate between two opposite types of pride: the first type is the pride in being what others see, an enthusiastic and self-complementary acceptance of others' perceptions; the second - the rejection of the others' right and ability to see one accurately, from the outset deeming them to belong to a lower level of being. Other languages have this opposition: *fierté* and *orgueil* in French and *gordost’* and *gordynia* in Russian. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. Betraying the audience is not a rebellion. Rebelling always implies acquiescence to the gaze - in order to rebel one must at least recognize the enemy's point of view. Any sort of resistence acknowledges the reality and the urgency of the way others see us. Therefore, rebellion is a type of connection, whereas the condition at hand is a disconnection. It is closer to indifference and dreaming. Nabokov always considers it to be a failure. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. In Dar we find an example of a fully reversed situation – an ideal instance of *involvement with the gaze*. It is represented by Zina, Fyodor’s love: “Она едва говорила с ним, хотя по некоторым признакам – не столько по зрачкам, сколько по отливу глаз, как бы направленному в его сторону, - он знал, что она замечает каждый его взгляд, двигаясь так, словно была ограничена легчайшими покровами того самого впечатления, которое на него производила.” (Nabokov, 3, p.159) [She hardly spoke to him, although by certain signs – not so much by the pupils of her eyes as by their luster that seemed slanted at him – he felt that she was noticing every glance of his and that all her movements were restricted by the lightest shrouds of that very impression she was producing on him.] Zina here is able not only to be exactly what Fyodor sees, but to be it unforced (that is why the shrouds are ‘lightest’). In other words, she is able to be aware of herself by using his mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. Stephen Blackwell was first to draw attention to the notion of projection in Dar. He analyzed the scene from the fourth chapter, in which exiled Chernyshevsky reads to his fellow inmates a long book that later is said to contain only blank pages. See Blackwell, 1995, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
42. The classic instance of handling the projection theme in the American part of Nabokov's output is Pale Fire. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
43. Carroll (1982) examines Cartesian parallels in Otchajanie, and specifically the problem of the demon. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
44. For the analysis of demonstrative pronouns in Priglashenie na kazn' see Jonhson, 1985, pp.28-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
45. Stuart writes about “a series of suggestions that Cincinnatus is his own cell, and that no matter where he goes he is in it.” (Stuart, 1978, p.68) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
46. The interpretation of Priglashenie as a dream belongs to Connolly (Connolly, 1992, pp. 180-184.) Pifer to some extent corroborates this idea saying that the reality of the prison is dependent on Cincinnatus’s subjective participation (Pifer, 1980, pp.49-67.) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
47. It is possible to show that the events of Luzhin's life repeat themselves not two, as it is easy to believe, but *four* times. The first, miniature, cycle is entirely contained within the first chapter of the novel: in it Luzhin runs away from his parents, returns to his country house, goes up to the attic, sees, among other things, a small chessboard, and, in anticipation of the very end, hears a crowd of people coming to rescue him (2, pp.5-10) The second cycle begins with the second chapter and ends in the middle of the fourth: Luzhin learns to play, again runs away from home, falls ill and his chess fever repeats almost identically what he feels and sees during his final suicide jump. (2, pp.10-38) The third cycle ends with chapter 8; it incorporates sixteen years of Luzhin's chess career, his own love affair and marriage and ends with his final game with Turati, after which he again falls ill, has chess-hallucinations and drops out of the building where the game takes place through the glass door (2, pp.38-83). The ultimate fourth cycle occupies the rest of the novel: Luzhin recovers, realizes that his life is heavily loaded with repetitions (this realization has already occurred in cycle two, in the form of a momentary déjà-vu; 2, p.33), invents a suicide defense (leading him exactly to one more repetition), runs away from everything and everyone up to his bathroom window, jumps out and sees a black-and-white eternity opening for him as he falls. (2, pp.83-152). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
48. In terms of this argument the dramatic conflict of N.G. Chernyshevsky in Dar becomes particularly clear. Chernyshevsky’s very integrity proves to be the main impetus of his predicament. The more honest and inflexible he is, the more isolated and impotent he emerges in the world. At the end of his life the gravitation of his integrity grows so strong that his final years turn into a full collapse of all events and feelings towards the core of his self – towards the very beginning of his life. At the same time, very appropriately, the text ends with the first lines of the sonnet which begins the biography, thus intimating that the story must be making a full circle. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
49. Baudrillard concludes his book ‘The Transparency of Evil’ with a penetrating aphorism: “The Other is what allows me not to repeat myself infinitely.” (Baudrillard, 1990, p.220). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
50. The narrator of Pnin writes: “I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is its discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is the space-traveler’s helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego” (for this quote and the related discussion see Toker, 1989, pp.6-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
51. The notion and the condition of transparency is very important in this respect. From the specter of memory Ganin meets on the street in Mashen’ka (Nabokov, 1, p.56) to the very essence of objecthood and personhood in Transparent Things, transparency and opacity form the basic scale against which Nabokov measures the varying degrees of being. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
52. An instance of that disposition appears in the very beginning of Korol', dama, valet. The departure of the train is presented from the point of view of a passenger (Franz): Огромная, черная стрела часов, застывшая перед своим ежеминутным жестом, сейчас вот дрогнет, и от ее тупого толчка тронется весь мир: медленно отвернется циферблат, полный отчаяния, презрения и скуки; столбы, один за другим, начнут проходить... [The gigantic black clock-hand, frozen right before its regular one-per-minute move, will now shake, and its dull thud will set the whole world in motion: the dial, full of despair, scorn and boredom will slowly turn away; the light-posts, one after another, will start passing by…] (Nabokov, 1, p. 115) The relativity of motion here is immediately translated into the existential idiom: the whole world arranges itself around Franz, referring to his movements and moods. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
53. Connolly, 1992, p.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
54. Privacy in its historical, existential, and literary aspects was studied by Bakhtin in his essay ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.’ (Bakhtin, 1981, pp.234-407) As the essay does extensive readings in ancient Greek and Latin literature, Bakhtin is able to investigate the moment of the emergence of privacy in European culture. He defines the public domain in terms quite close to those of the gaze - “Public life and public man are by their very essence *open, visible and audible*.” (Ibid. p.122) – and then goes on to examine the development of the private individual in the Hellenistic and early Christian periods. Bakhtin concludes that the emergence of privacy made it difficult to report events that were unavailable for direct observation. The result, according to Bakhtin, was that literature developed new methods of reporting based on spying and eavesdropping. Later we will see that Nabokov’s oeuvre pushes the problem of privacy and the gaze to the limit issue of spying on onself. See also the chapter ‘Spying on Everyday Life’ in Morson & Emerson, 1990, pp.388-392. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
55. At the end of this chapter it will be shown in detail that Martin’s feat (*podvig*) is in fact an elaborate version of defense. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
56. Trilling writes in Sincerity and Authenticity: “…although innocent feigning has its own very great interest, it is dissimulation in the service of evil that most commands the moral attention. The word 'villain' as used in drama carries no necessary meaning of dissembling - it is possible for a villain not to compound his wickedness with deceit, to be overt in his intention of doing harm. Yet the fact that in the lists of dramatis personae in the First Folio Iago alone is denominated 'a villain' suggests that, in his typical existence, a villain is a dissembler, his evil nature apparent to the audience but concealed from those with whom he treads the boards.” (Trilling, 1983, p.14) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
57. This term is introduced here to designate a certain conceptual cluster. This cluster contains psychological meanings, but they are auxiliary. Our usage of the term is primarily ontological – it attempts to grasp an ontological condition, as well as to demarcate a set of conceptual tools necessary to deal with it. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
58. For the examination of the link between paranoia and the gaze see Mathonet, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
59. Girard analyzed love as portrayed in literature in Hegelian/Sartrean terms: “Romantic passion is thus the exact opposite of what it pretends to be. It is not the self-abandonment to the Other but the implacable war of two rival vanities. (...) The victory belongs to the lover who better maintains his or her lie.” (Girard, 1969, p.113) [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
60. Connolly writes: “Not only is [Gorn’s] art parasitical, feeding on the misfortunes of others, but a spirit of sadism informs its very core.” (Connolly, 1992, p.123) [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
61. Starobinski, writing about Rousseau, deduces this attitude from the very logic of the transparent world: “To suppose that a society could be built on the basis of mutual transparency; to suppose that all the subjects would consent to open themselves to one another and surrender any secret and ‘particular’ will – such is the hypothesis of the “Social Contract” – and nothing then allows to the individual to be preferred over society. On the contrary, in the social organization which favors the communication of minds nothing is more pernicious to the harmony based on the ‘general will’ than the individual turning toward himself and his particular will.” (Starobinski, 1971, p.62) [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
62. In this he can be contrasted to Kirilov from Dostoyevsky’s Besy. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
63. “The fact that the crime and the punishment were related and bound up in the form of atrocity was not the result of some obscurely accepted law of retaliation. It was the effect, in the rites of punishment, of a certain mechanism of power: of a power that not only did not hesitate to exert itself directly on bodies, but was exalted and strengthened by its visible manifestations...” ( Foucault, 1975, p.60) [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
64. See Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p.159. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
65. Panopticon is a circular prison invented by J. Bentham. The prisoners are contained in the cells around the perimeter open towards the central tower. From the tower they are constantly surveyed by an invisible guard. They do not know whether the surveillance is taking place at any given moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
66. “The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the seeing/being seen dyad: in the peripheral ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.” (Foucault, 1975, p.203) [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
67. This argument may serve as the existential counterpart to Bakhtin’s definition of the excess of vision as the root of artistic form. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
68. Speaking historically, we can distinguish two types of theater in the European tradition: the first is the theater of awareness and show-off; the second - the theater of voyeurism. One is closer to circus and sports, the other is theater proper. In European dramatic literature there exists a famous play that makes the second type of theater its explicit focus: it dramatizes the power of the hidden gaze, brings out onto the stage all the relations of blindness and exposure, and even uses in its plot a small group of actors, thus becoming fully self-conscious of its own critical analysis of theatricality. That play is Hamlet - the culmination of paranoia and voyeurism in world literature. Later, we shall return to Hamlet and to the place it occupies in Nabokov’s oeuvre. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
69. When the incognito defense is impossible - such is the case of blind Krechmar who retroactively realizes what has been done to him - the only possibility is the physical destruction of the aggressor. More precisely, the destruction of the gaze. Krechmar’s attempt to kill Magda at the end of the novel should be directly related to vulnerability and self-protection: “С необычайной ясностью он [Кречмар] представлял себе, как после его отъезда она и Горн - оба гибкие, проворные, со страшными лучистыми глазами навыкате - собирают вещи, как Магда целует Горна, трепеща жалом, извиваясь среди открытых сундуков, как наконец они уезжают - но куда, куда?” [With extraordinary clarity he [Krechmar] imagined how, after he leaves, she and Gorn – both supple, agile, with terrible, radiant, bulging eyes – pack things; how Magda kisses Gorn, her sting trembling, her body contorting amidst open trunks; how, finally, they leave, but where to, where?] (Nabokov, Romany, p.388) [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
70. In these relationships the issue of personal identity is radically transformed. Fyodor does not quite differentiate himself from his parents and Zina. He rather merges with them. His writing in the novel often fades into his mother’s letters or his father’s discourse and back without any overt narrative marks. Nabokov constantly intimates that Fyodor and his parents are not as separate as regularly individualized creatures. As to Zina, Fyodor’s interior monologue, especially after they fall in love, is constantly organized around her presence. We can conclude that Fyodor, his parents, and Zina form a separate race among Nabokov’s characters – a race with its own ontology. See also Blackwell, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
71. See, for example, Boyd, 1990, pp.353-361. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
72. In Dar Fyodor also associates his father’s death with shame: “... смерть скрывающий, как некий стыд, он появляется в моих снах...” [hiding death as some sort of shame, he appears in my dreams…] (Nabokov, 3, p.108) [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
73. This is a decisive factual digression from the alleged autobiographical novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
74. Zoorland is the first premonition of the prison-worlds of Priglashenie, and later of Bend Sinister. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
75. Death is rampant in Podvig. In addition to Martin’s father’s, and Martin’s own, almost certain, deaths, several other characters die in the course of the novel. See Nabokov, 2, pp. 252-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
76. The theme of the crowd is treated in Benjamin's article ‘On some motives in Baudelaire’ in Benjamin, 1968, pp.155-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
77. For the general analysis of embedding in Russian Nabokov see Davydov, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
78. Boyd (importantly, a biographer) writes: “Time for Nabokov always shuts us out of our own past...” (Boyd, 1990, p.147). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
79. The most comprehensive thematic examination of memory in Nabokov’s oeuvre is Foster, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
80. “The Past is also part of the tissue, part of the present, but it looks somewhat out of focus.” (Nabokov, 1973, p.186) [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
81. In Istreblenie tiranov (The Destruction of Tyrants), one of Nabokov’s Russian short stories, the protagonist says about the dictator of his country: "... то есть какая-то грубая механика памяти в нем все-таки работает, но если бы ему было богами предложено образовать себя из своих воспоминаний, с тем, что составленному образу будет даровано бессмертие, получился бы недоносок, муть, слепой и глухой карла, не способный ни на какое бессмертие." [… well, some sort of crude memory mechanics, I agree, is working in him, but if the gods let him reconstruct himself out of his memories, offering immortality to the reconstructed self - an abortion, an amorphous mess would come out, a blind and deaf dwarf altogether incapable of immortality.] (Nabokov, 4, p.397) This passage is exemplary in linking the working of memory and the degree of existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
82. This is why, it seems, special care is exercised in making judgments about the deceased. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
83. Such a structure of memory is directly related to Bakhtin’s notion of the excess of knowledge we discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
84. This is a peculiar combination of a perception term (lighting) with a card-playing term. The latter points at a game situation in which one of the partners does not know the array of the deal before the trump is played and the surplus of knowledge is revealed and used. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
85. Nabokov, 4, p.172. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
86. Nabokovian memorywork is radically different from Freudian dreamwork. Nabokov’s subject is concerned with being, not with desire. In embracing his past he reconstructs his identity and thus maintains himself in existence, whereas the Freudian subject simply works out internal conflicts. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
87. “О не смотри на меня, мое дество, этими большими испуганными глазами” [Oh, do not look at me, my childhood, with these big, frightened eyes,] Fyodor exclaims in Dar trying to account for his failure to complete his father's biography and evoking his childhood and its exacting gaze as one of the reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
88. See also Gusdorf, 1951, p.341. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
89. In the chapter called ‘Self-Narrated Monologue,’ Cohn studies the various types of relationship between the acting and the narrating agents within the limits of the same self. See Cohn, 1978, pp.166-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
90. In Mashen’ka, upon seeing the photograph of a woman, Ganin, with sudden great joy and a sense of the event’s significance, begins to recollect his past. In Otchajanie, written fifteen years later, Herman looks at a beggar and, shattered, exclaims: “A miracle!” Both moments are characterized by a sudden eruption of new meaning. They are meetings with something - the meetings, in fact, of an individual with himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
91. The connection between Nabokov’s novels and Hamlet could in itself became a topic for extensive research. Here we would like to advance the hypothesis that Mashen’ka, Nabokov’s first novel setting the tone of his whole novelistic career, is a palimpsest on Shakespeare's play. First, there is a parallelism of names and characters: Ganin/Hamlet (Gamlet in Russian), Polonius/Podtiagin, Rosencranz&Guildenstern/Kolin&Gornotsvetov, Ophelia/Ludmila, Klara/Gertrude, Alfiorov/Claudius. Secondly, there is a parallelism of episodes: the beginning scene where characters introduce themselves in the dark (the night shift of the guards); the scene where Ganin pulls the door and Podtiagin, almost dead, falls into his room (the murder of Polonius); the episode in which Ganin ends his relationship with Ludmila (the rejection of Ophelia); the episode in which Ganin tries to make Alfiorov dead drunk (the poisoning of Claudius). Finally, a parallelism of structure: Ganin finds out about a key truth and does not inform anybody of it. Each of these similarities in itself is, of course, insufficient to establish the connection, but all of them together make a stronger case. There is also an additional circumstance. The first draft of Mashen'ka was finished in October of 1925, and several months before that Nabokov had finished his first big play, Tragedia Gospodina Morna (The Tragedy of Mr. Morn). The play, Brian Boyd writes, "unmistakably aims at Shakespeare: in its five acts, its three thousand lines of blank verse, its mongrel names (Dandilio, Edmin, Ganus), and above all in the atmosphere of its plot." (Boyd, 1990, p.222). The plot revolves around the fight between the protagonist, Ganus (!), and the king, Morn, for a woman, Midia. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
92. Using the definition of paranoia from Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
93. For the general discussion of the double in European culture see Troubetzkoy, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
94. Krechmar is an art critic and a movie producer. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
95. On the connections of Kamera obskura with visual arts, especially with film, see Stuart, 1978, pp. 87-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
96. Connolly, 1992, pp. 4&40 [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
97. Gusdorf elaborates at length on this topic: "If exterior space - the stage of the world - is a light, clear space where everyone’s behavior, movements, and motives are quite plain on first sight, interior space is shadowy in its very essence. The subject who seizes on himself for object inverts the natural direction of attention; it appears that in acting thus he violates certain secret taboos of human nature.(...) The image is another “myself”, a double of my being but more fragile and vulnerable, invested with a sacred character that makes it at once fascinating and frightening. Narcissus, contemplating his face in the fountain’s depth, is so fascinated with the apparition that he would die bending toward himself. According to most folklore and myth, the apparition of the double is a death sign. (...) Nature did not foresee the encounter of man with his reflection. " (Gusdorf, 1980, p.35) [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
98. Connolly writes: “The interrelationship between the perspective of the narrator and the figure of Cincinnatus is particularly intimate. Cincinnatus appears in every scene, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish whether a given passage represents the perspective of Cincinnatus or that of an extradiegetic narrator. This intimate link is understandable if one regards Cincinnatus as the central representative or mask of the dreamer within the dream - that is, on the level of the story which the dreamer envisions.” (Connolly, 1992, p.181) [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
99. “Цинциннат, тебя освежило преступное твое упражнение.” [Cincinnatus, you are refreshed by your forbidden exercise.] (Nabokov, 4, p.18) “Невольно уступая соблазну логического развития (осторожно, Цинциннат!), сковывая в цепь то, что было совершенно безопасно в виде отдельных, неизвестно куда относившися, звеньев, он придавал смысл бессмысленному и жизнь неживому.” [Involuntarily giving up to the temptation of logical development (be careful, Cincinnatus!), binding together into a chain what was absolutely harmless in the form of separate and disparate links, he was giving meaning to the meaningless and life to the lifeless.] (Nabokov, 4, p.90) [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
100. See Boyd, 1990, pp.346-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
101. At the end of the novel Herman exclaims: “Зеркала, слава Богу, в комнате нет, как нет и Бога, которого славлю.” [There is, thank God, no mirror in the room, and there is as well no God whom I celebrate.] (Nabokov, 3, p.461). What is important here is the fact that the protagonist links self-observation (mirrors) and the outside gaze in its most abstract form (God). [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
102. In relation to re-reading see Nabokov’s article “Good Readers and Good Writers” in Nabokov, 1980, p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
103. See, for example, Lee, 1976, p.50 and Rowe, 1971 pp.67-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
104. This is a classical instance of using the difference between sense and reference (*Sinn and Bedeutung*). See Frege, ‘On Sense and Reference’, in Frege, 1960, pp.101-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
105. The narrator on many occasions links the events of the story and the actions of other characters to the power of his imagination. (Nabokov, 2, pp.308&330) Tammi, observing this tendency in Russian as well as in English novels, writes: “It is a frequent practice in the author’s fiction to present not only isolated aspects of the narrated history from given positions, but ultimately to subsume Narrated World in its entirety into the subjective consciousness of Characters.”(Tammi, 1975, p.76). [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
106. Something similar, according to Toker, happens in Pnin: “On repeated reading, aware of the narrator’s cognitive unreliability, we have to treat the narrative of chapters 1-6 as recording not the random flow of plausible events but the workings of the narrator’s imagination.” (Toker, 1989, p.26) [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
107. See Booth, 1961, pp.3-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
108. His incognito, being a personal strategy, drastically differs from the standard, default and evenly distributed incognito of an impersonal narrator. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
109. Stephen Blackwell was first to draw attention to the importance of the reader in Dar. In his dissertation he writes: “The ultimate leap of consciousness comes in Fyodor’s efforts to enter the perspective of his readers. (...) Fyodor’s move into his reader’s mind and hence incorporation of the reader into the work, is indeed one of the most innovative aspect of The Gift as a novel. The transition proceeds in an evolutionary way, beginning with the simplistic imaginary reader of the book of poetry. Next comes Fyodor’s inability to imagine his father reading the biography in chapter two; Zina’s contribution to the Chernyshevsky book, and the five relatively full voices who respond to it (responses which were, in all likelihood, foreseen and inscribed in the text by Fyodor himself); and, most complexly, the incorporation of Zina’s role as a reader/editor of The Gift into the fabric of the entire novel.” (Blackwell, 1995, p.81) [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
110. See especially Kojève, 1947, pp. 13-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
111. Bakhtin is probably the most important theoretician who applied Hegel’s phenomenology to the domain of verbal arts. Bakhtin’s conclusion was that the very possibility of aesthetic form is predicated on the self-other dimension. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
112. A related experience is described earlier in the novel: “Ему [Федору] представилась ее [матери] радость при чтении статьи о нем, и на мгновение он почувствовал по отношению к самому себе материнскую гордость; мало того: материнская слеза обожгла ему края век. ” [He [Fyodor] imagined her [his mother's] joy upon reading the article about him and for an instant he felt maternal pride toward himself; not only that: his mother's tear burned the edge of his eyelids.] (Nabokov, 3, p.27-28) [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
113. Banfield in her theory of ‘unspeakable sentences’ distinguishes (after Benveniste) between language-as-discourse and language-as-narration. She defines discourse as text which is both communicative (having references to the addressee) and expressive (having references to the speaker.) Narration is at the opposite end of the spectrum: it does not refer to the addressee and does not disclose its sender. (See Banfield, 1982) From the above discussion it should be clear that Nabokov uses the discursive regime. Nabokovian discourse is always aware of the potential reader, always refers and relates to him. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
114. Sartre in What is Literature writes: “Thus, the book is not an instrument, a means toward an end: it offers itself as an end to the freedom of the reader. (...) If I appeal to the reader to keep up the enterprise I started, it goes without saying that I consider him as pure freedom, pure creative power, unconditioned activity; I would not in any case address his passivity, that is to say, I would not try to affect him, inducing in him intentionally the emotions of fear, desire or anger.” (Sartre, 1948, pp.60&62) Sartre attempts here to build a theory that would differentiate art from entertainment and ideology. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
115. See Gadamer’s discussion of *tact* in Truth and Method. Analyzing the basic notion of culture (*Bildung*) as self-formation, Gadamer links it with tact, the balance of silence and truth. According to his theory, such a balance is the required regime of individuation, combining the defense of identity with the recognition of the other: “Thus tact helps one to preserve distance. It avoids the offensive, the intrusive, the violation of the intimate sphere of the person.” (Gadamer, 1989, p.16) [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
116. Another version of such an lack of privacy is Shchegolev in Dar, a man “with one of those open Russian faces, the openness of which is almost obscene” [с одним из тех открытых русских лиц, открытость которых уже почти непристойна.] (Nabokov, 3, p.60) [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
117. For the key discussions of this relationship in Nabokov’s novels see Couturier, 1983, Tammi, 1985, Kuzmanovich, 1988, De Jong, 1994, and Blackwell, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
118. An important (and obviously Bakhtin-related) analysis of the author-character dimension in Nabokov is Davydov, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
119. For the study of various methods of the author’s self-reference across the narrator’s discourse see Tammi, 1985, p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
120. With the exception of the mysterious ‘beings’ at the very end, representing real otherness. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
121. Tammi moves in that direction when he remarks: “We shall say, in other terms, that the central problematic of VN’s texts always come to concern also the principles of their own ordering: the relationship between man’s life and its literary representation in the text becomes the dominant Nabokovian theme.” (Tammi, 1985, p.21)

     [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
122. The author who is not sufficiently distinguishable from the impersonal narrator. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
123. “Dramatic irony always depends strictly on the reader’s or spectator’s knowing something about the character’s situation that the character does not know. (...) Moments of this kind are possible, as we have seen, only when the author is sure that we know that he knows that we know - which is to say, the author and the audience stand together watching the characters from above as they make their mistakes.” (Booth, 1961, p.255) [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
124. For the alternative discussion of the narrative situation in Dar see Alexandrov, 1993, pp.129-130. His study avoids narrative theory, omits any mention of free indirect discourse, and does not distinguish between voice and point of view. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
125. The best general discussion of time in its relation to narrative is Morson, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
126. We may suggest that Fyodor-the-author is trying to show that the workings of fate resemble his artistic (narrative) strategies. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
127. Not to be confused with the visibility of the invisible. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
128. For an important discussion of the aesthetic aspects of Priglashenie see Peterson, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
129. Herman in Otchajanie fails to maintain the equilibrium of hiding and revealing. He finally blows up the cover of his incognito and is found out. The silent crowd looking at him in the last paragraph of the novel pronounces the sentence on his art. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
130. Caillois (1963) develops an alternative treatement of mimicry. His theory is especially curious because, like Nabokov, he bases his arguments on the scientific observations of insects. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
131. Rowe felt the moral subtlety of Nabokov’s mimicry when he wrote: “In his deceptive, but weirdly honest writing Mr. Nabokov takes remarkable pains to give only the true information, even while deliberately misleading the reader.” (Rowe, 1974, p.179)

     [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
132. Here is the well known definition from Strong Opinions: “...problems are the poetry of chess. They demand from the composer the same virtues that characterize all worthwhile art: originality, invention, harmony, conciseness, complexity, and splendid insincerity.” (Nabokov, 1973, pp.160-161) In the article “The Honesty of Nabokovian Deception,” from which the quote above is taken, Rowe also mentions the link between mimicry and chess problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
133. We call it grammar because it remains invariant in all concrete situations. It is a certain form of all Nabokov’s ontological statements (plot developments) - or at least an ideal form, against which all such statements should be measured. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
134. For a metaphysical discussion of irony (Leibniz, possible worlds, point of view) see Japp, 1983, pp.11-23. For the study of the relation between irony, hiding and play see Caillois, 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
135. Jankelevich calls the ironist a “sincere liar.” (Jankelevich, 1950, 133) [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
136. Appel discusses *mise en* *abîme* in Nabokov's oeuvre, both Russian and English, in his introduction to The Annotated Lolita. He comes up with his own term 'involution' and proceeds analyzing its elements: parody, coincidence, patterning, the work-within-the-work, and the staging of the novel. See Appel, 1970, pp.xxi-xxxiii. For discussion of vision and spatial encasement in Kamera obskura see Seifried, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
137. The situation in Otchajanie, as Davydov has shown, is peculiar: the text written by Herman, including the title, exactly coincides with the text written by Nabokov. See Davydov, 1982, Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
138. In Dar Fyodor refers to the plan of his entire book (not just discourse) when he describes his ironic aim as “пробираться по узкому хребту между своей правдой и карикатурой на нее” [advancing along a narrow ridge between one’s own truth and its caricature] (Nabokov, 3, p.180) [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
139. As a specific type of relation to the other, blind self-exposure is radically different from confession. The latter is self-exposure, too, but intentional and aware. Confession implies control of appearances, whereas blind exposure is an uncontrollable outpouring of being. Consequently, these two regimes of intersubjectivity involve different partners and different attitudes toward otherness. The counterpart of the blind person is a parasite-voyeur, while the counterpart for the confessing person is a priest-judge. Discursively, confession corresponds to Voice, whereas blindness corresponds to Focalization. (In relation to confession in Nabokov see Clej, 1986) [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
140. The summary of Bakhtin’s dialogical theories below is derived in its essential parts from Morson&Emerson, 1990, pp.121-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
141. Fyodor writes in Dar: “Пародия всегда сопутствует истинной поэзии” [Parody always accompanies true poetry] (Nabokov, 3, p.13) In this phrase he reminds us that successful art is the balance between privacy and exposure. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
142. See Strong Opinions, where practically every interview contains an emphatic rejection of influences. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
143. In an even more pronounced form this struggle takes place in Pale Fire. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
144. The opposition rich/cheap, basic for Nabokov, is related to his understanding of value and indirectly introduces the link between treasure and taste he used so intensely. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
145. Even about Fyodor’s love for Zina, the most authentic feeling in his whole Russian oeuvre, Nabokov talks using the financial metaphors: “Если в те дни ему пришлось бы отвечать перед каким-нибудь сверхчувственным судом (…), то вряд ли бы он решился сказать, что любит ее, - ибо давно догадывался, что никому и ничему всецело отдать душу не способен: оборотный капитал ему был слишком нужен для своих частных дел…” [If during those days he had to answer before some pretersensuous court (…), he would scarcely have decided to say that he loved her – for he had long since realized that he was incapable of giving his entire soul to anyone or anything: the working capital was too necessary to him for his own private affairs…] (Nabokov, 3, p.160) [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
146. In Dar, Fyodor says: “Часто повторяемые поэтами жалобы на то, что, ах, слов нет, слова бледный тлен, слова никак не могут выразить наших каких-то там чувств (…), ему казались столь же бессмысленными, как степенное убеждение старейшего в горной деревушке жителя, что вон на ту гору никогда никто не взбирался и не взберется; в одно прекрасное, холодное утро появляется длинный легкий англичанин – и жизнерадостно вскарабкивается на вершину.” [The often repeated complaints of poets that, alas, no words are available, that words are pale corpses, that words are incapable of expressing our feelings (…) seemed to him just as senseless as the staid conviction of the eldest inhabitant of a mountain hamlet that yonder mountain has never been climbed by anyone and never will be; one fine, cold morning a long lean Englishman appears – and cheerfully scrambles up to the top.] (Nabokov, 3, p.138) [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
147. A rare direct treatment of creative process can be found in Dar where Fyodor describes the composition of a chess problem. (Nabokov, 3, p.153) We find there the themes of the pre-existence of the work of art to the process of creation (in chess as well as in literature) and of inspiration as an initial miracle of finding it in its latent form; then he proceeds to describe labor, precision and economy of shaping it; finally, he mentions perfection combined with deception in the finished product. See also Nabokov’s much later article ‘Inspiration’ in Nabokov, 1973, pp.308-314. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
148. See in this respect ‘Pounding the Clavichord,’ the famous article in which Nabokov destroys Arndt’s translation of Evgenij Onegin. (Nabokov, 1973, pp.240) [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
149. Nabokov, it seems, saw psychoanalysis as a breach of that security - as voluntary surrender to the invasion of privacy on the part of the patient and as institutionalized parasitism on the part of the analyst. He also perceived in it the inflation of language, easily faked due to the mechanical and repeatable character of interpretation procedures. Being quite sensitive to fraudulent speculation, he anticipated the crash on the market of truth that was the result of the irresistible flood of cheap psychoanalytic discourse. (See Green, Freud and Nabokov, 1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-148)