

NABOKOV'S AMPHIPHORICAL GESTURES

S. E. SWEENEY
Brown University

I. Metaphors and Amphiphors

"A title must convey the colour of the book—not its subject," Knight's faithful amanuensis, Clare Bishop, declares in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.¹ This essay's title, which is intended to convey the ambiguous nature of some of Nabokov's metaphors, is paraphrased from a dazzling example in *Bend Sinister*, in which thought, personified as a circus performer, displays "the extreme simplicity of heaven in the acrobat's amphiphorical gesture."² "Amphiphorical" is a word noticeably absent from its expected place in the *Oxford English Dictionary* between "amphioxus" and "amphipneust" (two species of fish); it is probably a "portmanteau word," which Humpty Dumpty defined in *Through the Looking Glass* as two or more words compressed into one, with the original meanings retained.³ Because "amphi-" as a prefix, means two kinds or two sides, and "amphiboly" means ambiguity, Nabokov's portmanteau implies not only a two-sided sign—a gesture made with both arms—but also a metaphor with two possible interpretations.

Before examining other possible ingredients in the "amphiphorical" portmanteau, or looking more closely at the metaphor from *Bend Sinister* (quoted here only in part), we need to understand the importance of such imagery in Nabokov's work. The metaphorical level was essential to Nabokov, both in the way he wrote and organized his fiction, and in the way he intended it to be read. His responses to others' novels, preserved in his *Lectures on Literature* and *Lectures on Russian Literature*, tend to focus on metaphors and conceits; reading *Madame Bovary*, for example, he treats detailed descriptions of Charles's schoolboy cap and of Charles's and Emma's wedding cake as metaphorical paradigms for the structure of the

entire novel.⁴ Such scrupulous attention to individual images and sentences, as well as his thoroughly underlined, illustrated, and annotated copies of these same novels, and the revelation, in a *Paris Review* interview, that he assembles his fiction sentence-by-sentence on individual file cards suggest that Nabokov intended his own novels to be read with similar close scrutiny.⁵

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that his fiction demonstrates the use of three different kinds of metaphor—by which I mean not the specific figure of speech (some of the examples presented here are technically similes) but, more loosely, a rhetorical device that states an implicit analogy between two unlike things, and that, by so doing, both persuades and challenges the reader.⁶ At one level, Nabokov uses metaphors as any other writer does: to clarify and intensify a given description. At another level, one requiring more deliberation and self-consciousness but certainly not peculiar to Nabokov, metaphors of the first type collect additional resonance in the context of the entire novel, as they develop, through systematic repetitions of similar imagery, into themes or leitmotifs. Thus the literal meaning of the text (its “plot”) is paralleled, echoed, explained, or otherwise refined by its underlying metaphors. The third type of metaphor in Nabokov’s fiction—which this essay seeks to define and analyze—is more rare. It is characterized by extended analogies; baroque, seemingly uncontrolled imagery and rhetoric; and inherent ambiguity. It is not unlike the extended Homeric simile; it bears a family resemblance to what Dr. Johnson called “the most heterogeneous ideas . . . yoked by violence together” of the metaphysical conceit.⁷ It is an “implicative” metaphor, whose meaning the reader must extract from the image itself, rather than a “summary,” “ornamental,” or “dramatic” metaphor.⁸ Its roots in the novel, as will be demonstrated, lie in Nikolai Gogol’s absurdly overgrown images and thumb-nail characterizations.

Yet the meaning of Nabokov’s metaphors—or, more precisely, the way in which their meaning is conveyed—distinguishes them from these predecessors. The relationship between the tenor of the metaphor and its vehicle is neither simple, as in Homer, rhetorical, as in Donne, nor humorous and absurd, as in Gogol. Rather, it is completely and deliberately ambiguous because the initial terms of comparison are often superseded by additional, deeper meanings not necessarily related to them. The resulting sleight-of-hand is much more startling than Donne’s trick of developing, or reducing to

absurdity, the meanings already inherent in his metaphors (for example, in "The Flea" or "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning").

The following passage from Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory*, in which he recalls his childhood departure from Russia, is a good example of this kind of metaphor, and a useful one to begin with because of its relative simplicity:⁹

I remember trying to concentrate, as we were zigzagging out of the bay, on a game of chess with my father—one of the knights had lost its head, and a poker chip replaced a missing rook—and the sense of leaving Russia was totally eclipsed by the agonizing thought that Reds or no Reds, letters from Tamara would still be coming, miraculously and needlessly, to southern Crimea, and would search there for a fugitive addressee, and weakly flap about like bewildered butterflies set loose in an alien zone, at the wrong altitude, among an unfamiliar flora.¹⁰

Initially, the most striking thing about this passage is the amount of information and skillfully developed significance which Nabokov is able to embed into a single sentence (albeit a long and complex one). The reader witnesses a gradual metamorphosis of these miraculous letters as they first search for the addressee (an activity which doesn't necessarily require physical life), and then flap weakly (which does), before turning into butterflies. The simile seems both logical and appropriate; the letters' random movement (which continues the ship's "zigzagging"), combined with their thin, papery texture and rustling noise, naturally suggests the motion of butterfly wings. Yet as Nabokov extends, qualifies, and refines the metaphor, it acquires additional levels of meaning.

Such adjectives as "fugitive," "bewildered," "alien," "wrong," and "unfamiliar" complete the imagery and diction of the sentence's beginning (the headless knight, the missing rook, "eclipsed"), yet they also impart more emotional weight to the butterflies. The three prepositional phrases ("in an alien zone, at the wrong altitude, among an unfamiliar flora") stress a sense of alienation through their repeated parallel structures at the same time that they specify geographical and biological distance. By means of such elaborations and qualifications, the "bewildered butterflies" develop into a symbol for everything that has been displaced: Nabokov's love for Tamara; his homeland; his childhood; his mother tongue; his cultural matrix,

literary tradition, and audience; and, of course, his physical self. In addition, the subsequent accidental assassination of Nabokov's father, which is foreshadowed by the knight who has lost his head, adds to the sense of loss pervading the passage.¹¹

What is remarkable about the metaphor, however, is this: although the butterflies develop enough significance to function as a symbol of all "lost property," they do so not for the same reason (their affinity to Tamara's letters) that first introduced the comparison. The vehicle of the metaphor remains the same, but Nabokov seems to have switched passengers while the reader was looking the other way. Moreover, such sleight-of-hand is especially appropriate in the context. "The sense of leaving Russia was totally eclipsed by the thought" that he would miss Tamara's letters, Nabokov says, but that eclipse is not total; later, when he recalls and artistically orders his memory, the sense of leaving Russia shines forth and irradiates with significance the butterfly metaphor which consciousness has placed before it.

The "spontaneous generation" of these butterflies (a phrase Nabokov used for the weird development of Gogol's imagery),¹² which appears haphazard but is actually controlled and significant, exemplifies one of the major characteristics of Nabokov's complex metaphors. In other examples, however, even more work is required of the reader. Not only does the vehicle of the metaphor develop its own special momentum, gradually metamorphosing into something quite different from what the reader expects, but the gap between vehicle and tenor is much wider. Instead of neatly and ironically completing the initial statement, as the butterfly imagery did, the vehicle may lead the reader into an entirely different landscape.

As a result of this gap between the initial comparison and its surprising conclusion, such metaphors include an additional, and more fundamental, level of ambiguity. Because statements in the interval have no fixed referents, they provide an ideal means of representing metaphorically ideas that are too ambiguous to discuss at the literal level. Nabokov's coy appraisal of V. Sirin (the pseudonym he used as an expatriate Russian writer), in *Speak, Memory*, delineates this very quality: "Russian readers . . . were impressed by the mirrorlike angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences and by the fact that the real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech, which one critic [probably also Nabokov himself] has compared to 'windows giving upon a contiguous world . . . a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train

of thought'' (p. 288).¹³ That world is indeed contiguous; in each of the examples presented here, those windows, those gaps between the beginning and the end of a metaphor, reveal the ambiguity of death and Nabokov's own ambivalence towards it.

Thus Nabokov's most complex metaphors comprise more than one possible interpretation, just as the portmanteau word includes more than one meaning. I propose to name such metaphors "amphiphors," after the acrobat's amphiphorical gesture, because of their rhetorical acrobatics, their deceptive simplicity, and their two-sidedness.

II. "Spontaneous Generation": Gogol's Influence on Nabokov's Imagery

Before examining more complex amphiphors, I would like to review the original source of such figures of speech, and to discover how Nabokov exploits their inherent ambiguity for his own aesthetic purposes. Critical approaches to Nabokov's fiction frequently underestimate his debts to Russian literature, so that his art seems to have appeared magically out of the blue, like Athene sprung fully armed from the mind of Zeus—a reputation which Nabokov, of course, has helped cultivate.¹⁴ Yet in the surreal, seemingly uncontrolled imagery of his amphiphors we can deduce the influence of Nikolai Gogol, a writer whom Nabokov much admired and the subject of the only critical biography he wrote.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, this particular stylistic trait of Gogol's fascinated Nabokov. In *Nikolai Gogol*, he analyzes it with witty precision: "The peripheral characters of his novel are engendered by the subordinate clauses of its various metaphors, comparisons, and lyrical outbursts. We are faced by the remarkable phenomenon of mere forms of speech directly giving rise to live creatures" (p. 78). In Nabokov's butterflies we have just witnessed the same kind of metamorphosis.

Nabokov goes on to cite and then explicate a typical example from Gogol's *Dead Souls*: " 'Even the weather had obligingly accommodated itself to the setting: the day was neither bright nor gloomy but of a kind of bluey-gray tint such as is found only upon the worn-out units of garrison soldiers, for the rest a peaceful class of warriors

except for their being somewhat inebriate on Sundays.' [. . .] It is not easy," Nabokov complains, "to render the curves of this life-generating syntax in plain English so as to bridge the logical, or rather biological, hiatus between a dim landscape under a dull sky and a groggy old soldier accosting the reader with a rich hiccup on the festive outskirts of the very same sentence" (notice that Nabokov perpetuates and even extends Gogol's transformation in his own description of it). Gogol achieves such a feat, Nabokov explains, by using a connecting phrase (translated as "for the rest") which makes for grammatical, but not logical, sense; "as soon as this false bridge . . . has accomplished its magical work these mild warriors cross over, staggering and singing themselves into that peripheral existence with which we are already familiar" (p. 78).

Not surprisingly, Nabokov's own imagery and rhetoric was at least partially influenced by what he called such "Gogolian gusto and wealth of weird detail" (p. 71). W. W. Rowe, comparing Nabokov to his Russian literary forefathers, noted that both Gogol and Nabokov use metaphors characterized by "the unexpectedness of the image selected," and yet often with an appropriate emotional association.¹⁶ Moreover, one particular novel, *Bend Sinister*, which was written at approximately the same time as *Nikolai Gogol* (the mid-1940s), not only unmistakably reveals Gogol's influence upon its imagery but even acknowledges that influence in the text. As part of an ongoing parody of narrative styles and conventions in this novel, for example, Nabokov allows a parenthesis to breathe and expand in characteristic Gogolian fashion: "nothing in the innocent and well-meaning, if not very intelligent prattle of the young scientist (who quite obviously had been turned into a chatterbox by the shyness characteristic of overstrung and perhaps undernourished young folks, victims of capitalism, communism and masturbation, when they find themselves in the company of really big men, such as for instance someone whom they know to be a personal friend of the boss, or the head of the firm himself, or even the head's brother-in-law Gogolevitch, and so on) warranted the rudeness of the interjection . . ." (p. 59). We can see that in duplicating one of Gogol's overgrown metaphors, Nabokov also includes as tribute the name of their inventor.

Still other instances of Gogolian "spontaneous generation" in *Bend Sinister* allude not only to Gogol himself, but even to Nabokov's own analysis of his style. Lucy Maddox recently pointed

out, for example, that Professors Gleeman and Yanovsky, two minor characters in *Bend Sinister* who are described as "newborn homunculi" (p. 38), "seem to point directly to all those secondary characters that drift in and out of Gogol's works. In his discussion of *The Government Inspector* Nabokov refers to these characters as 'homunculi' and points to their appearance as one of the marks of Gogol's eccentric genius. . . ." ¹⁷ Even more significant, the acrobat amphiphor from *Bend Sinister* mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in which "mythology stretches strong circus nets, lest thought, in its ill-fitting tights, should break its old neck instead of rebounding with a hep and a hop" (p. 61), not only exemplifies Gogol's "spontaneous generation" but also echoes the very trapeze imagery in *Nikolai Gogol* with which Nabokov characterized its effects: "a complete circle is described, and after his complicated and dangerous somersault, with no net spread under him, as other acrobatic authors have, Gogol manages to twist himself back . . ." (p. 79). The similarity between these passages provides a rare and valuable glimpse of Nabokov's mind at work, and particularly the way in which a single critical perception and its verbal expression could blossom into one of the most intriguing images in his own books. ¹⁸ Moreover, because of the close affinity between Nabokov's study of Gogol, and his own Gogolian imagery, this essay will concentrate on metaphors from the two major works written at the same time as *Nikolai Gogol: Bend Sinister and Speak, Memory*.

Yet, although it is important to recognize the source of Nabokov's amphiphors, we must not overestimate Gogol's influence; as Andrew Field pointed out, Nabokov, like Gogol's other literary descendants, tended to "do more or less *deliberately* what Gogol did in spite of himself. The important Gogolian writers . . . are those who have found a unique and personal voice and viewpoint to accompany (and in the end, form) some new variant of Gogol's manner." ¹⁹ Thus, although Nabokov's overgrown figures of speech resemble Gogol's, there are important differences between them. Gogol's runaway metaphors, which breed strange but naturalistic minor details and vivid characterizations, function primarily to heighten the keen sense of reality in his fiction; their primary effect, due to a frenetic accumulation of ludicrous and unimportant details, is comic. With a few exceptions, his metaphors are incidental—partly because, as Nabokov indicates in his critical biography, they register the heedless, hectic, easily distracted quality of Gogol's imagination, and

not necessarily, or not always, his artistic control. Nabokov's amphiphors, on the other hand, are employed sparingly and deliberately, and are characterized by conscious irony and tragic overtones. In contrast to the weird imagery proliferating in the corners of Gogol's scenes, Nabokov's amphiphors cluster at the end of a chapter—where they resonate with covert and ambiguous meanings at the figurative level which are never explained at the literal.

III. "A Perfectly Balanced Mind"

Thus Nabokov developed and refined the farcical chaos of Gogol's imagery into deliberate and sustained irony. Like Gogol, he can be considered an Absurdist because his fiction emphasizes coincidence and randomness, the handiwork of "Aubrey McFate"; yet Nabokov's aesthetics achieve a delicate balance between logical absurdity and aesthetic sense. Consider his use of metaphors borrowed from Gogol: he exploits the gap between their initial and final points of comparison, so that they demonstrate a peculiar ambiguity—what William Empson defined as the seventh and most pronounced type, which "occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind . . . at once an indecision and a structure, like the symbol of the Cross."²⁰ This definition, which Empson applied only to individual word choice, describes perfectly the intrinsic ambiguity of Nabokov's amphiphors. Similarly, Lewis Carroll explained in his preface to *The Hunting of the Snark* that a portmanteau word, which combines two words rather than choosing between them, not only demonstrates this same paradoxical combination of indecision and structure, that Michael J. Apter has called a "cognitive synergy,"²¹ but also reveals "that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind."²²

Unlike Carroll or the writers cited by Empson, however, Nabokov is able to sustain such remarkable balance throughout an entire figure of speech. The previously mentioned acrobat amphiphor from *Bend Sinister* provides an excellent example of such a feat, while self-consciously comparing it, in a marvelously appropriate image, to a tightrope balancing act. Here is the passage in full:

They separated and he caught a glimpse of her pale, dark-eyed, not very pretty face with its glistening lips as she slipped under his door-holding arm and after one backward glance from the first landing ran upstairs trailing her wrap with all its constellation—Cepheus and Cassiopeia in their eternal bliss, and the dazzling tear of Capella, and Polaris the snowflake on the grizzly fur of the Cub, and the swooning galaxies—those mirrors of infinite space *qui m'effrayent, Blaise*, as they did you, and where Olga is not, but where mythology stretches strong circus nets, lest thought, in its ill-fitting tights, should break its old neck instead of rebounding with a hep and a hop—hopping down again into this urine-soaked dust to take that short run with the half pirouette in the middle and display the extreme simplicity of heaven in the acrobat's amphiphorical gesture, the candidly open hands that start a brief shower of applause while he walks backwards and then, reverting to virile manners, catches the little blue handkerchief, which his muscular flying mate, after her own exertions, takes from her heaving hot bosom—heaving more than her smile suggests—and tosses to him, so that he may wipe the palms of his aching weakening hands. (pp. 60-61)

In order to appreciate the complexities and unexpected correspondences of this amphiphor, we need to know more about its context. Adam Krug, the hero, is a recent widower whose endorsement as a celebrated intellectual is sought to legitimize the farcical, Kafkaesque dictatorship spreading malignantly through his country. Although Krug cares more about the death of his wife, Olga, than anything else—indeed, he views the surrounding political turmoil as a nuisance and a distraction—up until this point he has not allowed himself to think about her.

When Krug interrupts a young couple's good-night kiss, the elusiveness of the girl (later identified as Mariette), whose face he barely glimpses and who runs up the stairs beyond him with only one backwards glance, evokes two figures from folklore and classical mythology. Like Cinderella, Mariette flees at midnight, leaving only a single clue to her identity—the spangled evening wrap, which in Krug's reverie gradually becomes the lady acrobat's blue handkerchief. (Subsequently there develops in *Bend Sinister* an obvious, almost parodic network of images specifically linking Mariette with Cinderella.) But Mariette also suggests Eurydice, who, after being

painfully won back from the dead by her lover Orpheus, returned to Hades when he glimpsed her face. These underlying themes, as well as the erotic farewell kiss Krug has just interrupted (a farewell denied him and Olga), and the girl's sudden, upward, starry flight, all combine to release from Krug's tortured mind the memory of his wife's recent death. What is the true identity of that fleeing female figure? At the literal level, of course, she is Mariette; but in Krug's philosophical meditation-*cum*-fantasy, she is metamorphosed into Olga herself, "his muscular flying mate."

The initial description of Mariette's spangled wrap provides the first and loftiest representation of death in the passage. Krug naturally identifies its pattern of stars with the night sky, and particularly with two related constellations, Cepheus and Cassiopeia, which immortalize the King and Queen of Ethiopia in the same shared "eternal bliss" Krug imagines for himself and Olga. In this romanticized view of death, even grief is beautiful—here, stylized as "the dazzling tear of Capella." The constellations are northern ones; Polaris, of course, is the north star which sailors steer by, just as Krug tries to guide himself by his memories of Olga.

Even as Krug enumerates the constellations, however, he remembers that they are infinite, dizzying, and repetitive. The "mirrors of infinite space" frighten him as they frightened Pascal (Krug is a philosopher by vocation), and he contradicts his earlier transcendent imagery with meditations on the apparent disorder of the universe. The most important thing about these mirrors, however, is that Olga is not there, although her presence had been implied by the earlier Cassiopeia imagery. That brief little phrase, "and where Olga is not," is the only direct mention of her name in the passage, and its connection with the preceding statement seems slight; yet her death and the infinite mirrors are two aspects of the same phenomenon, both frightening in their ambiguity and apparent meaninglessness. Because it is stated only in the negative, the reference to Olga—in direct contrast to stellar immortality, or traditional Judaeo-Christian notions of the afterlife—emphasizes that death is nothingness.

Krug continues his philosophical meditation by implicitly acknowledging death's ambiguity, and the universe's apparent meaninglessness, while at the same time recognizing that mythology is necessary for human sanity. The adjective "swooning," which connotes vertigo, suddenly develops into a galactic trapeze act, "where mythology stretches strong circus nets, lest thought, in its ill-fitting

tights, should break its old neck instead of rebounding with a hep and a hop—. . . ." The metaphor is both a vivid illustration of Krug's statement (we are told elsewhere in the novel that his philosophical treatises are laced with metaphors), and a poignant image of the human condition.

After the dash (which in German, appropriately enough, translates as *Gedankenstrich*, "stroke of conscience"), the personification of thought, which has already served its purpose, gets out of control. In true Gogolian style, the figure of speech becomes a real person through the accretion of precisely observed details which have no apparent relevance: "hopping down again into this urine-soaked dust to take that short run with the half pirouette in the middle and display the extreme simplicity of heaven in the acrobat's amphiphorical gesture, the candidly open hands that start a brief shower of applause while he walks backwards. . . ." Such absurd, homely details also neatly contradict the earlier romanticization of the constellations in tone, content, and rhetorical effect.

Thought, during its gradual Gogolian metamorphosis into a flesh-and-blood creature, loses its polite neuter and becomes not only masculine but "virile." Because he is a philosopher by vocation, the masculine pronoun invites us to read "thought" as signifying Krug himself, an analogy which works in two ways. The new emphasis on gender and even sexuality ("virile manners") heralds Krug's imaginary vision of Olga. At the same time, the acrobat personifies Krug's own thinking, as he valiantly tries to maintain his sanity in the face of Olga's death (let alone the simultaneous disintegration of cultural, political, and economic norms).

By this time, in fact, Krug's meditation has evolved into fantasy. After remembering classic mythical conceptions of death, and recognizing first that they are false, and then that they are necessary to preserve human sanity, Krug finally creates his own personal myth: a new version of infinite space in which Olga does exist. The same acrobat metaphor which originally clarified a philosophical aphorism (which, in turn, had been inspired by a Petrarchan simile involving the night sky), becomes a private fantasy in which the longed-for reunion with Olga actually takes place. Thought, once merely a personification, has now taken a wife, and she too becomes more real in Gogolian fashion through such details as her "heaving hot bosom—heaving more than her smile suggests." Meanwhile, the human trapeze act itself acquires additional meanings. It suggests that life after death is

an illusion, just as the trapeze is a mimicry of flight; and yet, at the same time, that such death-defying stunts as Krug's fancied reunion can at least be imaginatively experienced.

There is other magic going on as well. Let's look more closely at the transformations of the major motif in the passage, Mariette's evening wrap. Its spangled folds inaugurate the metaphor, reappear as the stretched circus nets of mythology, and finally surface as the "little blue handkerchief, which his muscular flying mate, after her own exertions, takes from her heaving hot bosom—heaving more than her smile suggests—and tosses to him, so that he may wipe the palms of his aching weakening hands." One possible explanation for the handkerchief's importance is that it alludes to St. Veronica; Krug's flying mate tosses him her handkerchief, "so that he may wipe the palms of his aching weakening hands," just as Veronica gave her handkerchief to Christ on the way to Calvary.²³ Even if this allusion is justified, however, its implications are ironic rather than revealing. To begin with, Olga is a more redemptive figure than Krug, both in this passage and throughout the novel, which suggests a reversal of the relationship between Veronica and Christ. In addition, the acrobat's handkerchief functions not as a means of religious transcendence, but of artistic transcendence; Veronica's handkerchief was returned to her bearing the image of Christ's face, whereas the handkerchief that Krug imagines mirrors the heavens (it changes from a starry pattern to "blue") and corresponds to the movement of the passage. At the same time, however, such a distinctly Christian reference is part of the general cultural mythmaking to which Krug responds, and which he converts into his own private fantasy. Moreover, like Veronica's handkerchief, Cinderella's slipper, or the vision of Eurydice's face, the female acrobat's handkerchief functions as a relic cast to Krug in his misery, to console him and help him to stay sane.

As in the butterfly amphiphor, the appositives, parallel structures, and lateral associations of this passage duplicate the mechanics of memory itself—only it is Krug's memory this time, not Nabokov's. The sentence is self-conscious about this: Krug's thinking must walk backwards, "reverting to virile manners," before he attains his vision of Olga. It is self-conscious, too, about its own acrobatics: phrases like "that short run with the half pirouette in the middle," or "walking backwards," could describe the rhetorical movements and turns of the syntax itself. The controlled exertion implied by such feats suggests

Nabokov's own artistry, as well as Krug's desperate attempts to retain his sanity.

In Nabokov's own terminology, this passage uses metaphor as a "springboard" which introduces a different level of discourse at the same time that it initiates a figurative rising and falling movement. We begin, at the literal level, with an upward motion as Mariette runs upstairs; we are next catapulted into the metaphor, inspired by her starry wrap, which continues the trajectory through related imagery (stars, space, trapeze); finally, we descend with the metaphor to the "urine-soaked dust."

"The manner of his prose was the manner of his thinking, and that was a dazzling succession of gaps," V. says of his brother in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and the same is true of Nabokov himself (p. 35). In order to complete the gaps in Nabokov's prose, the reader must reconstruct the thought behind his syntax, or what *Speak, Memory* calls "the shadow of a train of thought" (p. 288), and follow it to its implied conclusions. Because those implications are often grim, or, at least, more serious than the apparent surface intentions of the sentence itself, the shadows cast by Nabokov's ambiguous figures of speech—as in the metaphor we have just analyzed—tend to extend far beyond their humorous or absurd initial point of reference.

IV. Death's "Monstrous Riddle"

"He used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion. J. L. Coleman has called it 'a clown developing wings, an angel mimicking a tumbler pigeon,' and the metaphor seems to me very apt," V. remarks in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Exactly what is the serious emotion, then, towards which Nabokov's amphiphors propel us?

The two examples we have investigated—the butterfly amphiphor from *Speak, Memory*, and the acrobat amphiphor from *Bend Sinister*—both demonstrate a preoccupation with the awareness of death, and, more particularly, with death's ambiguous nature. Not surprisingly, these themes dominate Nabokov's fiction; it is amazing, for example, how many of his novels are shaped by the death

of the hero or narrator, or both. John Shade's poem "Pale Fire" ponders death, and the uncertainty of what follow it:

How could man live without
knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom
Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb?²⁴

The typographical confusion between the words "fountain" and "mountain," which Shade describes in his poem, and which first seems to confirm, and then to deny, conjectures about life after death, further emphasizes this ambiguity.

The only solution to the riddle, as Nabokov sees it, is an aesthetic one. Shade eventually transcends death through art when his own dying becomes part of his poem. Van and Ada Veen, too, if they "ever intended to die . . . would die, *as it were*, into the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of its blurb, we are told in *Ada*.²⁵ (Like Shade, the Veens express death as an ambiguity, a choice between polarities: Eden or Hades, the novel or its blurb.) Thus the artists and surrogate artists in Nabokov's fiction usually attempt to resolve death's paradox in aesthetic terms: to render it, as Nabokov wrote of Krug's death in *Bend Sinister*, merely "a slippery solipsism, a play upon words" (p. 241).

For example, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* identifies death as a riddle and, even more important, gradually demonstrates that such a riddle can only be expressed, let alone resolved, metaphorically. Consider Sebastian's last novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, which uses a dying man as its central metaphor and promises to reveal the true nature of death: "We feel that we are on the brink of some absolute truth, dazzling in its splendor and at the same time almost homely in its perfect simplicity. By an incredible feat of suggestive wording, the author makes us believe that he knows the truth about death and that he is going to tell it. In a moment or two, at the end of the sentence, in the middle of the next, or perhaps a little further still, we shall learn something that will change all our concepts. . . ." Moreover, according to V.'s synopsis, *The Doubtful Asphodel* hints that this truth about death is coded metaphorically in the natural world: ". . . the vowel of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings of a road writing its message in a clear round hand, as clear as that of one's father. . . . Thus the traveller spells the landscape and its sense its disclosed" (pp. 178-

79). The impression conveyed by Sebastian's last novel, that "the truth about death" will be revealed, is paralleled in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* itself by V.'s dream, in which Sebastian's voice "came in one last loud insistent appeal, and a phrase which made no sense when I brought it out of my dream, then, in the dream itself, rang out laden with such absolute moment, with such an unfailing intent to solve for me a monstrous riddle, that I would have run to Sebastian after all, had I not been half out of my dream already" (p. 190). Sebastian's novel never discloses the secret of death, and V. never discovers a hidden meaning in the remembered phrase from his dream; but, by confirming his own instinctive identification with Sebastian, V. does transcend his brother's death.

In *Bend Sinister*, too, Krug ponders the necessity of using metaphor to depict death's ambiguity: "We speak of one thing being like some other thing when what we are really craving to do is to describe something that is like nothing on earth . . . death is either the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge (similar say to the instantaneous disintegration of stone and ivy composing the circular dungeon where formerly the prisoner had to content himself with only two small apertures optically fusing into one; whilst now, with the disappearance of all walls, he can survey the entire circular landscape), or absolute nothingness, *nichto*" (pp. 174-75). Krug himself cannot even discuss death without resorting to another complex, overgrown metaphor; moreover, he describes death in terms of the two choices stressed in the acrobat amphiphor from *Bend Sinister*: either "the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge" or "absolute nothingness."

Nabokov presents the same alternative, and contradictory, interpretations of death in an amphiphor from *Speak, Memory* foreshadowing his father's death. He recalls, as a child, witnessing his father being thrown up in the air and caught by the local peasants:

From my place at table I would suddenly see through one of the west windows a marvelous case of levitation. There, for an instant, the figure of my father in his wind-rippled white summer suit would be displayed, gloriously sprawling in midair, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome, imperturbable features turned to the sky. Thrice, to the mighty heave-ho of his invisible tossers, he would fly up in this fashion, and the second time he would go higher than the first and then there he would be, on his

last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin. (pp. 174-75)

As in the butterfly metaphor, the seemingly absurd, but logical, associations of memory (whether they reflect Nabokov's actual memories, or simply a stylistic device which imitates them) partly explain what happens in this passage. Two isolated incidents not only turn out to be related, but one directly foreshadows the other.

Even before he introduces his metaphor, Nabokov has discreetly expanded the significance of the literal level. The description of his father in flight, "sprawling . . . his limbs in a casual attitude," his face imperturbable, foreshadows his appearance in death. With the phrase, "and then there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon," time seems to slow down while the suspended syntax of the periodic sentence, interrupted by a series of dependent clauses, bears its subject—Nabokov's father—aloft. "Last and loftiest" and "as if for good," two characteristic Nabokovian qualifications, add to the effect of weightlessness and timelessness, while preparing the reader for a subsequent connection between this early childhood memory and his father's later death.

Everything in the passage stresses death's ambiguity, even the factual basis of the memory: the father is lifted by "invisible tossers," and the child's perceptions are limited by the window frame. Double-edged qualifications develop this ambiguity further. Although the father's flight connotes transcendence, it also presupposes an eventual landing; "as if for good" simultaneously implies the idea of permanence and undermines it. "Good" has additional resonance, too. Death, especially a sacrificial death like that of Nabokov's father (he was accidentally assassinated while protecting the intended victim), may seem transcendent, noble, and glorious—but is it?

Nabokov includes two possible answers to that question in his metaphor and lets the reader choose for himself. First, in the initial

terms of the metaphor he presents an image of death as transcendent, blissful, and fulfilling Christian hopes of resurrection: "like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church. . . ." Yet the same word choice that stresses the reassuring nature of this image—"personages," "comfortably," "a wealth of folds"—is also ironic, hinting that such a view of death is merely reassurance rather than truth. "Ceiling" also suggests two antithetical connotations simultaneously: either transcendence or limitation.

With the transitional phrase "while below," Nabokov introduces a second representation of death: "one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin." The candles are traditional symbols of mortality. "Chant" suggests mindless repetition, and "eternal repose," like "ceiling," works in two ways at once to connote cessation as well as comfort.

If Nabokov's father resembles the saints, floating blissfully on the ceiling, then who lies in the coffin? On the one hand, of course, we must infer that his father is there, too, and that the lights are swimming because the viewer's eyes are blurred with tears—the only open acknowledgment of grief Nabokov allows himself in the passage. Yet, at the same time, the recurring visual haziness—the swarm of flames, the mist of incense, and the swimming lights—stresses death's ambiguity. Even more important, the face in the coffin is obscured, which implies a view of death as erasure, lack of identity, loss of consciousness, and nothingness. Nabokov takes what initially seemed a positive comparison, and deftly turns it to show the reader its underside.

V. Amphiphors Revisited

All of the amphiphors we have examined demonstrate this same surprising, double-edged ambiguity. Like Gogol's images, they begin with an unexpected juxtaposition or an absurd situation: letters compared to migrating butterflies; an evening wrap which metamorphoses into the night sky, and then into a circus act; a father

thrown three times in the air. Yet, unlike Gogol, Nabokov develops this initial absurdity first into an ironic undermining of grandiose, romantic images, and then into a fundamental ambiguity which cannot be resolved.

The similarities in rhetorical structure are best exemplified by the acrobat amphiphor from *Bend Sinister* and the "case of levitation" amphiphor from *Speak, Memory*. Like the butterfly amphiphor, they identify death, loss, and transience with flight, but they extend that premise much further. In each instance the upward motion that inaugurates the comparison—Mariette running up the stairs in one metaphor, Nabokov's father hoisted aloft by the serfs in the other—is transformed into the image of death as flying, accompanied by celestial allusions to blue or starry skies. Yet, in each metaphor, Nabokov undermines that flight in two ways: he reveals it to be merely appearance, rather than reality—a painted icon, or a circus stunt; and he follows the trajectory downwards to coffins, obscurity, nothingness, and dust. Moreover, this flight is paralleled by the movement of the syntax and the relationship of the images: the levitation amphiphor, for example, lifts buoyantly with the "last and loftiest flight," floats through the initial part of the metaphor, and then descends downwards to a different part of the terrain.

These amphiphors convey a sense of grief and loss so great that it can only be expressed metaphorically; that is, only in a figure of speech can the emotion be controlled, resolved, and made to demonstrate a pattern of artistic significance. Isn't that the reason, after all, behind Nabokov's obsessive systems of repeated imagery, absurd parallels, and freakish coincidences—a passionate need to create aesthetic relationships where no logical ones exist?

Moreover, the way in which the amphiphor works—trying to make sense of death and grief with associative, ambiguous, but meaningful relationships—is not unlike the process of memory itself. In the levitation metaphor, for example, the conjunction of two apparently unrelated incidents reflects the way in which earlier memories are informed with the retroactive significance of later knowledge, and with the truth of artistic revision rather than historical fact. Nabokov tries to achieve the same retroactive significance in his art: he may not be able to defeat death, or to glorify it, but at least he can resolve its terrible ambiguities, at the metaphorical level, into a beautiful and stylized paradox.

We have seen that Nabokov's amphiphors provide the perfect

vehicle, in more ways than one, for presenting an ambiguous subject and yet allowing it to remain so. Thus, although they hint at a solution to death's "monstrous riddle," they do so only by duplicating the riddle, allowing the reader to confront it himself and choose his own solution.²⁶ Nabokov treats death at the metaphorical level and thus resolves its ambiguities in aesthetic, not logical, terms, which function only in their figurative context—just as Sebastian's portentous phrase made sense to V. only as long as he remained within his dream.

These carefully balanced contradictions, which Nabokov juxtaposes in his Gogolian metaphors in order to present two possible interpretations of death, naturally suggest that he may have packed other or additional meanings into his "amphiphorical" portmanteau as well. The acrobat's upraised arms form a symmetrical, two-sided sign; fine, but we are still left with the cryptic gesture itself, and the ambiguities of that "extreme simplicity of heaven" it indicates. How simple is heaven, after all? The constellations with their associated romances, the related classical pantheon, and, by inference, the Judaeo-Christian God, seem reassuring; but, Nabokov tells us, these concepts are really "mythology's strong circus nets," stretched to protect human consciousness from the frightening "mirrors of infinite space." On the high wire he describes, nothing is simple or safe. In this context, the phrase "extreme simplicity" seems quite ironic—and yet Nabokov himself is unable to describe the human condition without resorting to personification, rhetoric, and metaphor.

Do the mirrors imply a meaningful pattern, or mere anarchy? Nabokov does not, cannot answer, except to repeat and amplify the question, and to stress the poignancy of a human trapeze act between "this urine-soaked dust" and those eternal mirrors. Thus the arms of the acrobat, raised towards heaven, indicate two equally possible but contradictory interpretations of its "extreme simplicity." The gesture's ambiguity is reinforced by two antonyms, both relating to interpretation, significance, and correspondence, which may also be included in Nabokov's portmanteau: "amphigoric" describes a text which is disordered, meaningless, nonsensical; "allegorical," one which states complicated but meaningful abstractions by way of symbolism. Moreover, the tension between these two qualities is illustrated by the portmanteau itself—the word "amphiphorical" is meaningless, technically non-referential, and yet at the same time, as we have seen, it suggests specific meanings.

Such a reading is of course subjective and cannot be infallibly proved, but Nabokov's dazzling metaphorical gaps presume and require such subjective explanations on the reader's part. Nabokov does not tell us which interpretation of heaven is true—that it is meaningful, or meaningless—but he neatly collapses both possible readings into “the acrobat's amphiphorical gesture” and his own.

NOTES

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 72. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited by page number within the text.
2. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 60-61. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited by page number within the text.
3. Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson), *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, in *The Annotated Alice* with notes by Martin Gardner (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1960), p. 271. The likeness to Lewis Carroll's nonsense vocabulary is probably deliberate. One of Nabokov's first publications, in fact, was his translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into Russian. The result, *Anya v Stranye Chudes* (Berlin: Izdatel'stvo Gamayun, 1923; New York: Dover, reprint, 1976), is a remarkable feat which Warren Weaver described, in his *Alice in Many Tongues: The Translations of Alice in Wonderland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 90, as “especially clever and sensitive,” and as one of the few versions of *Alice* that imitate Carroll's wordplay rather than merely translating it. For more comparisons of Carroll's and Nabokov's wordplay, see Simon Karlinsky, “Anya in Wonderland: Nabokov's Russified Lewis Carroll,” in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations, Tributes*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., and Charles Newman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), and Beverly Lyon Clark, “Nabokov's Assault on Wonderland,” in *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on his Life's Work*, ed. J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 128.
5. Vladimir Nabokov, interviewed by Herbert Gold in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, fourth series, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Penguin, 1977), pp. 100-01.

6. "Metaphor," of course, is a word of slippery definition and even more slippery explanation, partly because, as Umberto Eco recently pointed out, "To speak of metaphor . . . means to speak of rhetorical activity in all its complexity" ("The Scandal of Metaphor: Metaphorology and Semiotics," trans. with Christopher Paci, *Poetics Today*, 4, 2 [1983], 217). Thus theories of metaphor are usually tautological ("that which allows one to speak metaphorically"), and inevitably involve other, equally problematic concepts, ranging from phenomenology to language formation.

In the same special issue of *Poetics Today* devoted to metaphor, Eddy M. Zemach goes right to the most prickly part of the problem: how it is that a metaphor can be meaningful, even though it is logically false. Zemach lucidly demonstrates that a metaphor indicates not merely the identity of an element, but also its value, significance, "essence": "A metaphor shows one as one would have been, had one's assumed essence been allowed to develop to its utmost capacity. . . . This, perhaps, is what Aristotle intended when he heralded poetry as truer than history" (Eddy M. Zemach, "Essences and the Meaning of Metaphorical Language," *Poetics Today*, 4, 2 [1983], 272).

Despite the recent contributions of Eco, Zemach, and others (see also *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. David S. Miall [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982]), I feel that much recent criticism dodges the issue of intentionality. What if a metaphor has distinct values or meanings which cannot be reconciled? True, a metaphor's context will help to insure that the reader will recognize the meaning intended by the author; but what of metaphors—like Nabokov's amphiphors—whose contexts allow equivalent but contradictory interpretations, neither of which is predominant? Alan Singer recently clarified the situation by suggesting not only that metaphor is essential to postmodern fiction, but that this fiction uses new metaphors: "Instead of nourishing the literal intentionality of the tenor, this vehicle declares its own purpose within the discourse. This 'destablized trope' more essentially 'fictionalizes' its formal constituents by maintaining the differential movement between them—not as an irreducible difference but as the apprehension of simultaneously competing interpretive possibilities" (Alan Singer, *A Metaphorics of Fiction: Discontinuity and Discourse in the Modern Novel* [Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1983], p. 40). Certainly more theoretical work needs to be done on this aspect of metaphor.

7. Samuel Johnson, "Abraham Cowley," in *Lives of the English Poets* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950), I, 11.

8. These self-explanatory distinctions in kinds of metaphor are borrowed from Stein Haugom Olsen, "Understanding Literary Metaphors," in *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. David S. Miall (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982), p. 46.

9. Because of the close affinity between Nabokov's study of Gogol and his own Gogolian imagery, this essay will concentrate on metaphors from the two major works written at the same time as *Nikolai Gogol: Bend Sinister* and *Speak, Memory*.

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 251. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited by page number within the text.
11. Both butterfly and chess imagery, of course, recur throughout Nabokov's work as lovingly evoked motifs.
12. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1944), p. 83. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited by page number within the text.
13. The first ellipsis is mine; the second, Nabokov's.
14. Recent criticism has begun to correct this false impression, however. See particularly Priscilla Meyer's controversial essay, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and Pushkin's *Onegin*:" McAdam, McEve, and McFate," in *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. George Gibian and Stephen Jan Parker (Ithaca, NY: Center for International Studies, Cornell University), 1984.
15. In an interview, Nabokov denied learning anything from Gogol: "I was careful *not* to learn anything from him. As a teacher, he is dubious and dangerous. At his worst, as in his usual stuff, he is a worthless writer; at his best, he is incomparable and inimitable" (*Writers at Work*, p. 104). Nevertheless, the case for Gogol's influence, however slight it may be, is considerable, and we must remember that Nabokov was notorious for denying his affinity to other writers. The above quote could suggest either that Nabokov was unconscious of Gogol's influence or, ironically, that he wished to conceal it. "Desperate Russian critics, trying hard to find an influence and to pigeon-hole my own novels, have once or twice linked me up with Gogol," he remarks teasingly at the end of *Nikolai Gogol*, "but when they looked again I had untied the knots and the box was empty" (p. 155).
16. W. W. Rowe, *Nabokov and Others: Patterns in Russian Literature* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976), pp. 148-49. More recently, Sherry A. Dranch ("Metamorphosis as a Stylistic Device: Surrealist Schemata in Gogolian and Navokovian Texts," *Language and Style*, 17, 2 [1984], 139-48) concluded her semiotic analysis of Gogol's "anecdotal metamorphosis"—which she defined as a narrative and poetic strategy, mimicking procreation, whose function is "to incorporate several time-spans within the space of one sentence" (p. 145)—with a passage from *Ada* which "is Gogolian in both technique and mood" (p. 146).
17. Lucy Maddox, *Nabokov's Novels in English* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), p. 62. Maddox also draws thematic parallels between Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*.
18. The circus image is one that Nabokov was fond of as a metaphor for art; see, for example, the "springboard of parody" and the mysterious landlord-conjurer in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Van Veen's topsy-turvy acrobatics in *Ada*, or Nabokov's often-quoted description of his second language as "a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet

backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, fractals flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way,” in “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” *Lolita* (New York: Berkeley, 1981), p. 288.

19. Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 192. Emphasis in the original. See also Field’s discussion of Gogol’s influence upon Nabokov’s plot, theme, and characterization in *The Waltz Invention, The Event, Invitation to a Beheading, and Despair*.

20. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 192.

21. Michael J. Apter, “Metaphor as Synergy,” in *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, p. 56.

22. Lewis Carroll, Preface to *The Hunting of the Snark*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Bramhall House, 1962), p. 34.

23. Elsewhere in *Bend Sinister*, Krug alludes to “that wonderful Jewish sect whose dream of the gentle young rabbi dying on the Roman *crux* had spread over all Northern lands” (p. 193).

24. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Berkeley, 1962), Canto Two, lines 174–76.

25. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Romance* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 443. Emphasis in the original.

26. Moreover, the different interpretations, of which there are at least three (death represents resurrection and eternal life; death represents cessation; death represents both equally) may reflect different readers, as Roger Tourangeau indicates in his description of the cognitive process of metaphorical perception: “Metaphors join two incompatible subjects. We use our beliefs about the one subject as a model to construct parallel beliefs about the other, hindered by incongruities between the domains of the two subjects. Understanding a metaphor requires several steps: during the main ones, we reorganize the metaphor, infer its subjects, create parallel beliefs about the principal subject, and compare these beliefs to our old beliefs.” in “Metaphor and Cognitive Structure,” in *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, p. 33. The issue of prior belief is critical, although at the same time an amphiphor is more likely to suggest the existence of other beliefs to the reader.