

Playing Nabokov: Performances by Himself and Others

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Artistic originality has only its
own self to copy.

—Vladimir Nabokov,
Strong Opinions

A demon, I felt, was forcing me
to impersonate that other man,
that other writer who was and
would always be incomparably
greater, healthier, and crueler than
your obedient servant.

—Vladimir Nabokov,
Look at the Harlequins!

Nabokov plays his game quite
well. He should—he invented it.

—Andrew Field,
Nabokov: His Life in Part

After twenty-five years, echoes of Nabokov's quarrel with Field—his first biographer, for a short time his authorized biographer, and the author of four books on his life and work—still reverberate in the world of Nabokov studies. As a subject, Nabokov presented Field with an irresistible but almost impossible challenge. He jealously guarded his privacy, as many public figures do. In addition, however, he had already perfected the role of his own biographer—in a series of mock biographies that began with a game he invented in adolescence, and that continued in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*

(1966), and his fiction. The encounter with Field, his first real-life biographer, produced a spate of similarly parodic texts by himself and others: Nabokov's last novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974); Field's biography, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (1977); and Roberta Smoodin's novel, *Inventing Ivanov* (1985). This essay takes part in that same masquerade. A metacritical study of influences and intertexts, it compares successive attempts by Nabokov and others to resolve the vexed relationship between his life and his art. It argues, moreover, that each of these three books—like *Speak, Memory* before them—becomes another performance of his self-reflexive game.

Nabokov and I

Life's relation to art, in fact, is the explicit theme of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. This book traces the continual struggle between Nabokov's private self and his published writing. The opening sentences of Chapter 5—which was written and published before the rest of *Speak, Memory*—even suggest that he composed this memoir expressly to protect his personal past from the encroachment of his fiction.¹ Nabokov noticed, he says, that whenever he tried to preserve “some treasured item” from his past in a novel, “it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist. . . . The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left” (95).

“Self” versus “artist,” “man” versus “fictionist”—Nabokov's contrast of life and art recalls the eerie *Doppelgängers* that haunt his novels. Other writers describe this relationship in a similar way: Joyce Carol Oates, for example, complains about being subjugated to “Joyce Carol Oates” and having “to spend hours as a kind of secretary to that person” (136), and Jorge Luis Borges confesses, “I live, I let myself live, so that Borges can weave his tales and poems, and those tales and poems are my justification. . . . Which of us is writing this page I don't know” (279). Indeed, putting any words at all on paper requires negotiation among private and public identities. Writing, as Geoffrey Green points out, involves “a reproduction of the self . . . an outward projection of an internal conception” (8).

More precisely, to write is to impersonate oneself. Nabokov's remarks on his role as author indicate that he thought of his own

writing in these very terms: as a kind of imposture. He admits in his afterword to *Lolita*, the bookend to the 1955 novel's fictitious foreword, that "any comments coming straight from me may strike one—may strike me, in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book" ("On" 313). And during one of his famously staged interviews—for which he composed elegant replies to questions submitted in advance—he calls the persona he has thus constructed "the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether unpleasing personality" (*Strong* 158).

As a writer's autobiography, *Speak, Memory* emphasizes this distinction between self and artist, man and fictionist, person and persona. Indeed, its title implies three separate identities: the individual whose experiences it chronicles; Memory, who remembers those experiences and inspires the writer to recreate them; and the writer, who traces the "thematic designs" formed by such events as he composes the memoir (27). And its subtitle, "An Autobiography Revisited," suggests a whole series of Nabokovs looking back at themselves. Together, title and subtitle show how this memoir actually stages Nabokov's biography, with the roles of subject, source, and Boswell all performed by himself—so as to render additional participants, like Andrew Field, entirely unnecessary. For Nabokov, such mock biography offers an ideal solution to the conflict between life and art.

In order to enact his own *Life*, moreover, Nabokov presides over a wide spectrum of voices and discourses in *Speak, Memory*. He also orchestrates complex grammatical shifts in person, gender, and tense, as shown by the working titles for some chapters: "Third Person," "Second Person" (addressed to his wife), and "Perfect Past" (*Selected* 94-95). In his autobiography, then, as in his fiction, Nabokov's sense of doubled consciousness leads to the parody of literary genres and to an oddly ventriloquial kind of narration.

Autobiography Revisited

Nabokov's first experiment with narrating his own biography, as a way to express such doubled consciousness, may have been an adolescent pastime that he recalls in *Speak, Memory*. Chapter 12 ends in summer 1918, in the Crimea, where the Nabokovs and other White Russians had fled after the revolution. There, in that "poor little oasis of miraged youth" (247), Nabokov played with a girl named "Lidia T." "a little oasal game of our own invention." He describes this game in detail:

The idea consisted of parodizing a biographic approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past as perceived by a doddering memoirist who recalls, through a helpless haze, his acquaintance with a great writer when both were young. For instance either Lidia or I (it was a matter of chance inspiration) might say, on the terrace after supper: "The writer liked to go out on the terrace after supper," or "I shall always remember the remark V. V. made one warm night: 'It is,' he remarked, 'a warm night'"; or, still sillier: "He was in the habit of lighting his cigarette, before smoking it. . . ." (248)

Brian Boyd's biography confirms that in 1918 Nabokov did play such a game—apparently in imitation of Pushkin's biographers—with his friend Lidia Tokmakov (*Russian* 147). The passage above suggests that only Nabokov was identified as a prospective "great writer," but that he and Lidia each took the role of future memoirist: "either Lidia or I (it was a matter of chance inspiration) might say" In an unpublished chapter, however, Nabokov reveals that he alone narrated his "own movements or words in the reminiscent, slightly mincing manner [she] might be supposed to develop many years later when writing her memoirs" (qtd. in Boyd, *Russian* 147). Nabokov thus cast Lidia as Mnemosyne in the future perfect tense. He appropriated *her* voice, in other words, to transform his own first-person, present-tense experiences into a fictive third-person past, which she remembers from an imaginary hereafter.

Nabokov's precise role in this game is significant because he also plays it in his fiction. The point of the "oasal game," after all, is the illusory effect of psychological and temporal distance—the mirage in the desert, so to speak—that narrating produces. Nabokov would later devise similar *trompe-l'oeil* effects in the narration of his stories and novels; and in "Time and Ebb" (1945)—a futuristic tale, set in 2024, in which a 90-year-old man recalls the fantastic world of the 1940s—he even used the same trick of conflating real and narrative time so as to transform the "specious present" into a "paralyzed past." Nabokov would also continue to "parodiz[e] a biographic approach," especially in fictive autobiographies that announce their fictionality. Already, at age 19, he had found in such mock biography a perfect metaphor for the reciprocal relation of self and artist.

Even his description of the game echoes its strategic manipulation of person and tense. Indeed, this passage functions in *Speak*,

Memory as a *mise en abyme*, “a miniature replica of a text embedded within that text” (Prince 53). “Projected, as it were, into the future,” the fictive biography becomes the very book we are reading. Man and fictionist become one and the same as middle-aged Nabokov, the “doddering memoirist,” recounts the life of V. V. Nabokov, the “great writer” he knew in his youth. To further emphasize the game’s significance as a precursor to *Speak, Memory*, this passage concludes with a flashforward to the present when Nabokov is composing the memoir. As he now recalls his and Lidia’s long-ago mockery of future recollection, he is struck by the hopeless nostalgia that it unknowingly anticipated: “—all this delivered with much pensive, reminiscent fervor which seemed hilarious and harmless to us at the time; but now—now I catch myself wondering if we did not disturb unwittingly some perverse and spiteful demon” (248). The sudden shift in temporal markers (from “at the time” to “now—now”), along with the urgently repeated reference to *this* moment, remind us that the memoir’s present tense is also specious—and that in narrating this passage Nabokov plays the game anew.

Nabokov “parodiz[es] a biographic approach” on two other occasions in *Speak, Memory*, each time in reference to his writing. In Chapter 11 he describes the rainbowed aftermath of a summer shower which inspired his first poem. Writing that poem and reciting it to his mother gave 15-year-old Nabokov an uncanny sense of being both within and without himself, so much so that when he gazed into a mirror he “had the shocking sensation of finding the mere dregs of [his] usual self, odds and ends of an evaporated identity” (227). In order to illustrate this multiple consciousness—the “manifold awareness” produced by the writing process (219)—Nabokov conjures up several versions of himself:

Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch . . . and trillions of other such trifles occur—all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus. (218)

With that first series of clauses—"a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say"—Nabokov repeats the game of shifting identities and inverting narrative time. He not only composed this chapter of *Speak, Memory* in Ithaca, but often incorporated details of house and garden from his residences there into his prose (Boyd, *American* 303). Thus "the poet," who seems hypothetical at first, turns before our eyes into Nabokov himself, "sitting in a lawn chair" as he writes these very words. The third-person poet, then, is the adult Nabokov who composes *Speak, Memory*; yet it is "I" who narrates the autobiography, and the youthful poet of 1914 who is the subject of this chapter. But who, in any case, is that other party—Nabokov's "philosophical friend"?

"Vivian Bloodmark" is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov's first and last names; "Vivian" is a homonym of his initials, V. V. N. And the context for this overdetermined pseudonym—Nabokov's first attempt at writing—suggests that "Vivian" may represent another alter ego: his writing self, the intermediary between his individual consciousness and his public role as author. The name's ambiguous gender, moreover, adds to the sense of dissociation here—as if Nabokov must manipulate gender, as well as person and tense, to convey the multiple identities involved in the act of writing. Lest this claim seem farfetched, let me point out that he often associates creative inspiration with a female persona. The oasal game of narrating his own actions depended on Lidia's presence; his preferred title for his memoir, *Speak, Mnemosyne*, invokes the mother of the muses (11); and his published letters often compare literary composition to mothering a child (*Selected* 45, 69; *Nabokov-Wilson* 168) or coupling with a female muse (*Nabokov-Wilson* 69, 121). Here the name "Vivian" may allude to Merlin's muse in particular, just as the poet's "wandlike pencil" may imply the magician himself. But "Vivian" also appears in other anagrammatic avatars throughout Nabokov's works—from "Vivian Calmbrood," the pseudonymous author of his first attempt at playwriting and literary hoaxing in 1921 (Boyd, *Russian* 187), to "Vivian Darkbloom," Quilty's offstage collaborator in *Lolita* and the *nom de plume* for Nabokov's own "Notes to *Ada*" in 1970.² Indeed, "Vivian" recalls "Rose Sélavy," a female alter ego with an equally lively name (a homonym for "Eros, c'est la vie") who played a similar role in Marcel Duchamp's creative life.

In describing his first writing experience, then, Nabokov manipulates person, gender, and tense in order to establish a large cast of characters: self, remembered self, and remembering self; author,

muse, and narrator; artist, scientist, and philosopher. The distinctions among them are important, moreover, because his description of the poet as both “nucleus” and “organism”—as capable of feeling everything at once—implies that he can experience all these identities simultaneously.

Nabokov plays this game again in Chapter 14, which recounts his experiences as an émigré in Berlin and Paris. After recalling his acquaintance with “various Russian authors abroad” (283), he mentions one in particular:

But the author that interested me most was naturally Sirin. He belonged to my generation. Among young writers produced in exile he was the loneliest and most arrogant one. Beginning with the appearance of his first novel in 1925 and throughout the next fifteen years, until he vanished as strangely as he had come, his work kept provoking an acute and rather morbid interest on the part of critics. (287)

V. Sirin, “naturally,” was Nabokov’s *nom de plume* in the 1920s and 1930s. In this instance, Nabokov not only refers to his writing in the third person and the past tense, but slyly assesses his own literary production and critical reception. He even quotes an anonymous critic who is presumably another version of himself:

Sirin’s admirers made much, perhaps too much, of his unusual style, brilliant precision, functional imagery and that sort of thing. Russian readers . . . were impressed by the mirror-like 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 has compared to “windows giving upon a contiguous world . . . a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train of thought.” (287-88; first ellipsis mine)

This passage, like other instances of Nabokov’s game in *Speak, Memory*, seems to describe its own “clear but weirdly misleading sentences.” Consider the shift in tense from simple past (“were impressed”) to present perfect (“has compared”), which allows remarks about Sirin’s long-ago writing to apply to the present. In terms of grammatical person, moreover, the passage’s “mirror-like angles” reflect at least four versions of Nabokov himself: the middle-aged narrator; his subject, the young Russian émigré; his public persona as a writer then, Sirin; and the coy critic of his early work. Even the

remark that “the real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech” alludes to Nabokov’s own literary detective story, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941): the last novel he wrote before emigrating to America, the first he composed in English, and the first he published under his own name and not Sirin’s. But that remark also refers to this very passage—in which “Sirin” becomes a “figure of speech” for Nabokov’s real life as an émigré author.

The pastime of parodizing a biographic approach thus develops, in *Speak, Memory*, into a veritable grammar of self-reflexive relationships with which Nabokov manipulates person, gender, and tense to narrate his own life. This strategy culminates in the book’s final chapter, originally entitled “Second Person” (*Selected* 95). Addressed to Véra Nabokov, it recounts their last years in Europe from the imagined vantage of a rapidly approaching future when “presently nobody will know what you and I know” (*Speak* 295). The memoir’s concluding chapter, then, repeats and completes the long-ago game in which Nabokov had pretended to be Lidia Tokmakov, in a distant, utterly hypothetical future, remembering *him*.

That game, which Nabokov first played in 1918, and which he plays again in narrating his memoir, also offers a useful paradigm for his fiction—with its authorial self-reference, its themes of doubling, incest, and mistaken identity, and its parodies of autobiography and biography. Many of his plots feature pairs of artist figures—the hero who finds aesthetic bliss in life versus the dispassionate trickster—which repeat the contrast of man and fictionist. His narrative technique also demonstrates his awareness of himself as both subject and observer.³ He specializes in first-person narrators who suffer from dissociation and are artful enough to have written the works in which they appear (Lokrantz). In *The Eye* (1930; trans. 1965), for example, Smurov tries to escape his identity by describing himself in the third person; in *Despair* (1936; trans. 1966), Hermann kills a supposed lookalike and even appropriates his voice. Other novels, such as *Real Life* and *Pale Fire* (1963), feature not one narrator split in two, but two possible narrators who are either the same person or “both someone whom neither of [them] knows” (*Real* 205). All of Nabokov’s incestuous siblings, troubled doubles, and schizoid storytellers, then, may ultimately express his own divided consciousness. In this sense, each novel also replays the game of playing Nabokov.

Nabokov's Harlequinade

Nabokov's acute self-consciousness raises disturbing questions, however. Is it merely "autoplagerism"—his term, in *Speak, Memory* (37), for using details from one's life in one's art? Is it solipsism—his protagonist's original sin in *Lolita*? Or is it narcissism, as some of his detractors have claimed?

To ask these questions, of course, is to ask what happens when Nabokov's readers, critics, and biographers attempt to join his game. Nabokov's encounter with his first biographer, fifty years after he began staging his own biography in the Crimea, is a case in point. Andrew Field had already written a lucid, chronologically organized analysis of Nabokov's oeuvre, entitled *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (1967), when he approached Nabokov in 1968 about writing his biography. Nabokov had misgivings about the project but apparently felt that an authorized biography would at least allow him some control over others' versions of his life (*Selected* 449 n.1). Field resisted Nabokov's advice, however; and Nabokov, for his part, thought Field's resistance was presumptuous and belligerent. By the time Field published *Nabokov: A Bibliography* in 1973—that is, before he had completed the actual biography—Nabokov would no longer speak to him (*Selected* 524). And twenty-five years later—after Field's *Nabokov: His Life in Part* finally came out in 1977, after Nabokov's death that same year, after the subsequent appearance of Field's *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1986), and even after the eventual publication of Brian Boyd's definitive two-volume biography (1990, 1991)—Dmitri Nabokov, the writer's son, translator, and literary executor, continues to denounce Field in public and in print. Nabokov's quarrel with his first biographer has also been replayed, moreover, in three separate texts: Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins!*, Field's *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, and Roberta Smoodin's *Inventing Ivanov*. Each of these books repeats, in turn, the game of playing Nabokov.

Look at the Harlequins!, the last novel that Nabokov published in his lifetime, is not among his best. But because he apparently conceived it as a fictional rebuttal of Field's forthcoming biography (Boyd, *American* 614) and a way to protect his private life from "a matter-of-fact, father-of-muck, mucking biograffitist" (*Look* 192), it explores the tension between man and fictionist even more explicitly than *Speak, Memory* did. *Look at the Harlequins!* is a further refinement, then, of Nabokov's parody of biography. But if this novel

uses such self-reflexive mystification to protect Nabokov's privacy, it also serves as his answer to the charges of autoplagerism, solipsism, and narcissism.

Like many of Nabokov's earlier novels, *Look at the Harlequins!* is a fictitious autobiography. However, its ostensible author, Vadim Vadimych N., senses that he is merely "a parody, an inferior variant" of another writer, merely "a figment of somebody's—not even my own—imagination," merely the impotent narrator of someone else's novel (74, 211). In the opening paragraph, Vadim describes his life as

a clumsy conspiracy, with nonsensical details and a main plotter who not only knew nothing of its real object but insisted on making inept moves that seemed to preclude the slightest possibility of success. Yet out of those very mistakes he unwittingly wove a web, in which a set of reciprocal blunders on my part caused me to get involved and fulfill the destiny that was the only aim of the plot. (3)

Even the title of Vadim's autobiography, *Look at the Harlequins!*, is part of this conspiracy. As several critics point out, the title forms an acronym, "lath," which denotes a wooden frame used in construction—just as the plot of Nabokov's novel is the frame for his narrator's life. The "reciprocal" relationship between Vadim the narrator and Nabokov the "plotter" thus echoes the familiar struggle between man and fictionist (3).

Look at the Harlequins! not only smacks of autoplagerism; it takes the game of playing Nabokov to new lengths by constantly referring to his identity. When Vadim is recovering from a mysterious seizure, for example, he tries to remember his last name:

I definitely felt my family name began with an N and bore an odious resemblance to the surname or pseudonym of a presumably notorious (Notorov? No) Bulgarian, or Babylonian, or, maybe, Betelguesian writer with whom scatterbrained émigrés from some other galaxy constantly confused me; but whether it was something on the lines of Nebesnyy or Nabledrin or Nablidze (Nablidze? Funny) I simply could not tell. I preferred not to overtax my willpower (go away, Naborcroft) and so gave up trying. (210-11)

The notorious nomen that he can't quite remember, of course, is "Nabokov." And if Vadim's "sonorous surname" resembles

Nabokov's own, then it is not surprising that, as he goes on to explain, his first name and patronymic sound like a slurred pronunciation of "Vladimir Vladimirovich" (211).⁴ Indeed, Vadim's life closely follows Nabokov's, except for certain surreal looking-glass distortions—as if he were Nabokov's Antiterranean equivalent. Both writers share an idyllic prerevolutionary childhood; years spent in Russian émigré communities in Berlin and Paris; a flirtation with American academe (Vadim taught at "Quirn," Nabokov at Cornell); and a bestseller about a middle-aged man and a nymphet that guarantees them financial independence. Both began their careers writing in Russian under a pseudonym (Vadim's was "V. Irisin") and later wrote in English under their real names. *Look at the Harlequins!* even contains a list of "Other Books by the Narrator" whose titles allude to Nabokov's own. No wonder that many readers cite this novel as conclusive evidence of Nabokov's narcissism—claiming, for example, that such self-reflexive details reveal him to be "a deeply isolated man, whose wealth and success have done little to temper this isolation" (Hyde 37), and that *Look at the Harlequins!* may be nothing more than "a tired self-referential joke" (Boyd, *American* 624).

Yet I think that such readers miss the point—as Boyd, for one, now admits (626, 642). Vadim may resemble his author, but Nabokov makes it quite clear that they are not the same. "People tend to underestimate the power of my imagination and my capacity of evolving serial selves in my writing," he complains in *Strong Opinions* (24). He was especially annoyed by Field's search for whatever secrets and sources might lie behind his art. Accordingly, Nabokov created in Vadim a narrator whose private life—complete with "three or four" wives and an incestuous relationship with his daughter—"could have yielded, and in fact did yield," in Vadim's words, "quite a number of erotic passages scattered like rotting plums and brown pears throughout an aging novelist's books. Indeed, the present memoir derives much of its value from its being a *catalogue raisonné* of the roots and origins and amusing birth canals of many images in my Russian and especially English fiction" (7). Readers of this passage may be seduced into forgetting that *Look at the Harlequins!* is also a novel, and that neither the third person ("an aging novelist's books") nor the first ("my Russian and English fiction") necessarily refers to Nabokov. Vadim's narration, in fact, is calculated to make a fool of anyone who reads *Look at the Harlequins!* as a *roman à clef*.

If the novel represents Nabokov's real life at all, it does so only as an "oblique autobiography—oblique, because dealing mainly not

with pedestrian history but with the mirages of romantic and literary matters" (71). Paradoxically, this "oblique" approach may allow Nabokov to come closer to the truth. As Dean Flower says of his artfully staged interviews, "the point of these fictions is not so much that [he] must conceal his private life . . . as that he expresses himself better by adopting a persona" (148). The matter of literary and romantic "mirages" reminds us, moreover, of the oasal pastime of narrating one's life as if one were someone else.

Indeed, the ending of *Look at the Harlequins!* repeats that game of transposed identity and inverted time. In this instance, Vadim's prospective fourth wife reassures him that he is quite sane, even though he has never been able to imagine himself reversing his position and his progression during a hypothetical walk. She explains that he has merely "confused direction and duration. . . . Nobody can imagine in physical terms the act of reversing the order of time" (214). Vadim may have confused space and time; Nabokov, however, has devised a spatial analogy for that imagining of future memories which is the essence of his game. And in this very passage he again manipulates person, gender, and tense in accordance with the game's rules. Vadim's future fourth wife—the muse who inspires *his* autobiography and thus the text of Nabokov's novel—is addressed almost entirely in the second person and named only as "You." Vadim confesses his concerns about his sanity to "You," moreover, by showing her an unfinished manuscript in which he ascribes them to a first-person male narrator; and she defuses those concerns, in turn, by referring to that narrator in the third person. Nabokov thus employs changes in person—along with ambiguous pronoun reference, direct and indirect discourse, identification of addressee with narratee, and specification of the addressee's gender—to indicate how utterly Vadim's sense of identity is transformed by his relationship to "You."

Nabokov also engineers an odd shift in temporal framing, so that the novel's last chapters appear to narrate the beginning rather than the end of Vadim's story. It is as if "You" is about to lead him into a radiant reality that will supplant the fiction in which he now finds himself enmeshed. But on the novel's last page that imminent future has not quite arrived. "You" remains unnamed; she still hasn't finished reading Vadim's first-person manuscript; and she and Vadim are not yet married. Vadim's narration itself breaks off not only *in medias res* but in mid-sentence. By emphasizing such constraints of person, gender, and tense in *Look at the Harlequins!*, moreover,

Nabokov is able to transcend them—just as he does in his game with Lidia and in *Speak, Memory*'s final chapter.

Look at the Harlequins! is thus an inspired solution to the conflict between man and fictionist, and an ingenious answer to the charges of autoplagiarism, solipsism, and narcissism. Nabokov ultimately resolves that conflict, and those charges, by hinting that there are other levels of reality within and beyond the narration of his novel. If Vadim is somehow analogous to Nabokov, then the speciousness of *his* apparent existence implies that the existence Nabokov shares with his readers may also be a mirage. Playing Nabokov, after all, is only a game.

Partly Nabokov

Nabokov's parody of biography has also affected the books that others write about him. In *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, for example, Andrew Field apparently sets out to beat Nabokov at his self-reflexive game. But Nabokov not only invented that sport, he excels at it; and Field must ultimately acknowledge, even within the metatextual stratagems of his biography, his own inability to get the better of his subject.

Judging by his other works, Field probably planned the biography's artful dodges from the beginning. His first and best book about Nabokov, *His Life in Art*—which is identified as "a critical narrative" on its title page—self-consciously "treat[s] Nabokov's novels, poems, stories, plays, and essays as characters in a novel" (6) and features sections labeled "In Place of a Foreword," "In Place of a Bibliography," and "In Place of an Index." His own novels, *Fractions* (1967) and *The Lost Chronicle of Edward de Vere* (1990), exhibit unreliable narration, authorial self-reference, parodies of autobiography and biography, fictional incidents involving actual literary figures—from Ben Jonson to "Susanne Sunday" (Susan Sontag) and "Dick Upjohn" (John Updike)—and other metafictional gambits. *Fractions*, for example, opens with a foreword by a fictitious figure who grudgingly admires Field's "cranky though remarkable study of Vladimir Nabokov," but claims that the present text is based on his own life and vows to seek revenge: "I am not merely a character in one of your novels, Andrew, and with this very foreword—hard as it has been for me to write it—you stand exposed at last" (9, 18). *The Lost Chronicle* purports to be an autobiography by Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, in which he claims to have

written Shakespeare's works; accordingly, it is narrated in Shakespearean style, bolstered by historical research, and interspersed with bracketed editorial remarks signed "A. F." Field no doubt meant *Nabokov: His Life in Part* to be even more slyly unreliable than these critical and fictional narratives, and to obscure even further the boundaries between fiction and fact. Indeed, he may have decided that this was an ideal scheme for a biography of Vladimir Nabokov. But Nabokov was annoyed by Field's metatextual maneuvers and by his tendency to question the accuracy of whatever Nabokov told him.⁵ Before long, the initial cordiality between subject and biographer evaporated into mutual resentment and mistrust. The manifestations of this quarrel in the text, moreover, make *His Life in Part* resemble one of Nabokov's own mock biographies—with Field in the role of ineffectual narrator and hapless scholar.

Field warns his reader, for example, that "I have had difficult moments as I worked on this book"; he admits that "the book you hold does not come with the recommendation of Vladimir Nabokov"; and he calls his subject, then working on *Look at the Harlequins!* as well as a proposed but never completed sequel to *Speak, Memory*, "my competitor" (8, 27, 32). He even acknowledges his own lack of objectivity: "I was upset. There are, I must confess at the outset, ways (and I am not thinking now of his many virtues and attributes) in which I am too much like Vladimir Nabokov to judge him" (9).⁶ Such intrusive narration, such admissions of narrative unreliability, and, more important, such struggles with one's double for authorial control are familiar elements in Nabokov's fiction.

His Life in Part evokes *Look at the Harlequins!* in particular—the novel that Nabokov began after he had read Field's manuscript (Boyd, *American* 614), but which actually preceded it in print (because legal disputes delayed the biography's publication). *His Life in Part*, for example, also describes a biographer's relation to his subject in terms of imposture: "The Nabokovs are professionals, and there is little doubt that one of the attractions of the game we played was watching how everyone else played his part" (11). Nabokov constantly impersonated himself, Field says, although he seemed "too good an actor to be satisfied with a lifelong character part" (25). Field even claims that Nabokov impersonated his own biographer, as he had done in his game with Lidia Tokmakov: on one occasion, Nabokov "was playing [Field's] part" while Field was "playing Russian" (12). It is scarcely surprising, then, that at least one contemporary reviewer thought *His Life in Part* was actually

“Vladimir Nabokov’s latest novel,” which had been merely “attributed to ‘Andrew Field’ ” (Brien 760).

Playing Nabokov is primarily a game of narration. It is appropriate, then, that the contest between subject and biographer appears in the text as an exchange between rival voices. Like many novels, *His Life in Part* begins *in medias res* with a conversation. As in a Nabokov novel, moreover, that conversation—an argument between Nabokov and Field about the biography’s title—concerns the book in which it appears. It recalls specific instances in which Nabokov’s fictional writers agonize over titles or debate them with others, as when Sebastian Knight’s girlfriend tells him that “a title must convey the colour of the book—not its subject” (*Real* 72). It also resembles the dialogue embedded in Nabokov’s *Nikolai Gogol* (1944), in which Nabokov refuses to change anything in *his* biography despite the publisher’s pleas. But Field’s and Nabokov’s conversation is only the first of many in *His Life in Part*—and, as such, it evokes *Ada* (1969) more than any other work by Nabokov. Just as *Ada* is strewn with the comments of narrators Van and Ada Veen—parenthetical glosses and emendations that reflect stages of the narrative’s composition—so *His Life in Part* is peppered with similar exchanges between Nabokov and Field. However, *His Life in Part* is not a happy commingling of voices, like *Ada*, but a pitched battle between them.

Field quotes Nabokov’s complaints, demurrals, and rebuttals in boldface, presumably to distinguish them from his own text. And yet they inevitably shape a reader’s response to the biography, just as they visually dominate almost every one of its pages. Field also introduces several remarks with the words “*Nabokov says.*” This italicized phrase is meant, apparently, to imply that Nabokov is the sole authority for the veracity of whatever follows; however, it prompts readers to heed Nabokov rather than Field. Including Nabokov’s voice in *His Life in Part* may be candid, clever, and consistent with Field’s other attempts to transgress the border between fact and fiction. It may be an appropriate homage to Nabokov’s self-reflexive references, literary allusions, and narrative strategies. It may even have been necessary, given Nabokov’s warning that he would sue Field “for breach of contract, slander, libel, and deliberate attempts to damage my personal reputation” if the book did not incorporate all of his suggestions (*Selected* 517). Once Field includes Nabokov’s voice in the biography, however, he forfeits his own authority. Nabokov’s remarks, in both boldface and italics, remind the reader that he has already read the book—and found it

wanting. In a sense, Nabokov became the ultimate author of his authorized biography: he retained legal counsel, issued "200 pages of Critical Comments," revised the typescript, and checked the proofs (*Selected* 516, 544-45). Field, then, seems to become the book's narrator rather than its author.

If Nabokov has usurped the authorship of his biography—as he did in the Crimea by speaking for Lidia Tokmakov—then Field's only recourse, in this latest performance of the game, is to appropriate Nabokov's voice in turn. Accordingly, Field tries to show that he has written the biography exactly as Nabokov himself would have done. He traces biographical themes in Nabokov's fiction (28-29), points out instances of "autoplagerism" in Nabokov's works,⁷ and cites as his models Nabokov's unconventional biographies of Nikolai Gogol, Nikolai Chernyshevsky (in *The Gift* [1937-38; 1952; trans. 1963]), and Alexander Pushkin (in the commentary on *Eugene Onegin* [1964]). Yet this strategy only further undermines Field's authority. After all, Nabokov's unreliable first-person narrators—whether Hermann in *Despair*, Humbert in *Lolita*, or whoever—also claim to have authored the texts in which they find themselves.

Field's most explicit attempt at impersonation occurs when he describes Nabokov's first romance in St. Petersburg:

As the two furtive young lovers went their rounds of the city's museums and parks and cinemas and other nooks of semi-privacy, the young man's love for the girl blended and evidently even got confused with his love for the cold and beautiful city without trees. The pale violet mists and light fogs of St. Petersburg, its smart trotting horses, the grey-blue of officers' great-coats on promenade. Beautiful ladies of fashion, urchins and beggars, red-cheeked doormen and the sound of their brooms, a somber policeman on a bridge. The cupolas of cathedrals sparkling in the pure blue and milk spring sky, and the slightly smaller churchlike edifices of the old-fashioned letter "Б" on the city's galaxy-like profusion of richly still illustrated shop signs. . . . [T]he elegant and smooth full stops of the city's squares, the creak of the barges on the splendid Neva as they press up against one another. (104)

At first glance, this passage seems to imitate Nabokov's prose style. It boasts precise sensory details; a catalogue of images that juxtaposes large and small, transcendental and mundane, sky and ad-

vertisement; an analysis of the mnemonic associations of a single letter's architecture (which mirrors this passage, in which hundreds of letters are arranged to evoke a city); other references to verbal discourse (such as the implicit comparison between St. Petersburg's topography and a telegram); and, finally, an initial subject (the lovers' trysts) that is apparently left behind as the paragraph proceeds, but nevertheless continues to govern its imagery—for example, in those creaking barges that “press up against one another.”⁸ Even more Nabokovian, however, is the comic deflation that ends this rhapsody:

I have decorated the preceding passage—a dreadful macédoine according to Nabokov—with pictures and images from Nabokov's early poetry. Nabokov assures me that he has *never* seen somber policemen on bridges or heard creaking barges in St. Petersburg. (104; emphasis in original)

Here Field smugly discloses his imposture; he has described St. Petersburg in Nabokov's “pictures and images,” as if he himself were Nabokov. But Nabokov reclaims his words by claiming, ironically, that they are false: he never saw such policemen or heard such barges.

Field's possible rejoinder—“but you *said* you did”—remains unspoken. It is as if he finds himself already outmaneuvered in Nabokov's game. Such a reply would mean confessing that he has confused Nabokov's art with Nabokov's life, by wrongly assuming that if a poem's “speaker” saw or heard something, then the poet did as well. Such a reply would also mean acknowledging Nabokov's ultimate authority: only the poet knows, after all, whether he heard that creaking on the Neva! Field would thus have to admit that what is art in Nabokov's hands remains unsubstantiated scholarship in his own. Even when Field's words are Nabokov's, then, Nabokov still has the last word.

For Field, unfortunately, playing Nabokov always ends in this way: he must acknowledge *him* as the only begetter. The game's structure, moreover, ensures that he must continually perform the role of blundering biographer and clumsy critic to Nabokov's artist—or, in terms of *Pale Fire*, the Charles Kinbote to his John Shade—in a masquerade that Nabokov has already scripted and cast. In his own book, then, before our eyes, Field metamorphoses into another of those unreliable narrators who hopelessly aspire to the textual

authority and metatextual reality of Nabokov himself. All Field can do is reveal—by means of the self-conscious design and narration of *His Life in Part*—that he knows his book has become merely another one of Nabokov's enactments of his own biography.

Reinventing Nabokov

Roberta Smoodin's 1985 novel, *Inventing Ivanov*, repeats once more the pastime that Nabokov invented. But because Smoodin plays Nabokov in a fictional work composed after his death—rather than an authorized biography written while he was alive—she is less constrained by this role than Field. She even devises feminist and metafictional narrative strategies that allow her, to some extent, to transcend the limitations of Nabokov's game.

Inventing Ivanov, which Smoodin describes as “the most conscious Nabokovian thinking I've done, whether you call it adaptation, emulation, imitation, or whatever,” was inspired by Nabokov's life and art—and by his encounter with Field (Letter 2). More precisely, the idea for *Inventing Ivanov* came from a few anecdotes that Smoodin was told by someone who as a child had known Nabokov in Paris, and from their ensuing discussion about the dangers of literary biography and Nabokov's quarrel with Field in particular. Her novel, she says, thus “came to life as a meditation on the puzzle of biography” and “the relationship of the biography/biographer to the life of the subject”—especially when that subject is Vladimir Nabokov (Letter 2, 3). Smoodin adds, however, that she feels no anxiety about the relationship between her novel and Nabokov's life: “it was done out of love and respect and curiosity, a trio he would have understood, I think” (Letter 2).

Smoodin's novel concerns a novelist, poet, and translator named Ivan Dmitrievich Ivanov, whose life is another Zemblan mirror of Nabokov's own: a privileged trilingual childhood in Russia before the revolution; an education in exile at a British university; a father who is assassinated in Berlin; a brother who dies in a German concentration camp; and a wife to whom his books are dedicated. Ivanov's oeuvre also resembles Nabokov's: a critical study (of Chekhov); early novels written in Russian; and later novels written in English, including *Annette*, the love story about a professor and a young girl that brought him fame and fortune. The titles of these works are even listed opposite the title page of *Inventing Ivanov*, a device that recalls the “Other Books by the Narrator” in *Look at the*

Harlequins! More important than such historical or literary allusions, however, is the fact that Ivanov's discomfort with biography also echoes Nabokov's. Known as "the old biographer-killer," he mocks interpretations of his life and art made "by over-fertile and over-banal imaginations," and complains during one interview: "You have before you a unique mind, a mind like few others, if only because it has produced novels in two languages, if only because it has produced novels and poems and essays and stories at all, and you ask questions that can only command banal answers designed to make that mind sound like all others" (*Inventing* 216, 197, 196). In his life and art, then, Ivanov resembles Nabokov. He also resembles Nabokov's impersonations of himself—from "Vivian Calmbrood," "Vivian Bloodmark," and "Vivian Darkbloom," to the character of that anonymous émigré novelist whose existence haunts Hermann Karlovich in *Despair*, Timofey Pavlich in *Pnin*, Vadim Vadimych in *Look at the Harlequins!*, and a few other Nabokovian "galley slaves" (*Strong* 95).

The plot of *Inventing Ivanov* also repeats the game of parodizing a biographic approach. Protean, playful, wily Ivanov has consented to permit E. Michael Ross—a self-absorbed assistant professor—to write his biography. Ross eagerly begins his research, confident that being Ivanov's biographer will win him fame and tenure. But his progress is hampered by Ivanov's fabrications, conundrums, and practical jokes, as well as by his own infatuation with Ivanov's tender, brilliant, beautiful white-haired wife. One of Ross's students is in love with *him*, too—but she can't compete with his private fantasy of achieving academic glory on Ivanov's coattails and then marrying his widow after his death. In Nabokovian fashion, the novel alternates this story, Ross's search for the real life of I. D. Ivanov, with excerpts from an autobiography that Ivanov himself is writing. And that embedded autobiography—which imitates Nabokov's prose style and resembles *Speak, Memory* in particular—is actually another fictitious biography, since it is narrated in the third person. When Ivanov's wife reads it, for example, she cannot decide whether it is "autobiography? Memoir? Fiction masquerading as either?" (236).

But Smoodin avoids becoming trapped in this game, to some extent, because she transforms the story of male doubling and rivalry—so pervasive in both Nabokov's novels and Field's biography—into feminist metafiction.⁹ In *Inventing Ivanov*, neither the male artist nor the male commentator has the last word. Instead, that

honor is given to the female muse, Ivanov's wife, who is clearly modeled on Véra Nabokov. "As a woman reading Nabokov's work and life," Smoodin explains, "how can one not be fascinated by the shadowy presence, always, of Véra Nabokov? . . . I was interested in the manner in which women traditionally work as muses for men, secretaries for men, creators of domesticity for men, so that men may create worlds" (Letter 2). *Inventing Ivanov* thus reinvents Nabokov's life and art by including, according to Julia Kristeva's definition of the feminine, "that which is not represented, that which is unspoken, that which is left out" (37).

In the game that Nabokov devised as an adolescent, he appropriated Lidia Tokmakov's utterances in order to describe himself in the third person and the past tense. *Inventing Ivanov* returns that lost female voice to the conversation, in a sense, by imagining his life in part from Véra Nabokov's perspective. Playing Nabokov, of course, often involves apostrophizing a female other—whether he is reading his first poem aloud to his mother, appealing to a coquettish muse, invoking a female alter ego, employing an androgynous pseudonym, commanding Mnemosyne to speak, describing *Mary* (1926; trans. 1970), *Lolita*, and *Ada* as his "girl[s]" (*Selected* 457), or addressing Véra Nabokov in the last chapter of *Speak, Memory* and the unnamed "You" at the end of *Look at the Harlequins!* As in Lidia's case, in fact, the presence of these female muses seems essential for that self-transcendence which is the real purpose of the game. Smoodin's novel both echoes and extends this Nabokovian theme: its last chapters take place after the great writer's death and are narrated from his wife's point of view. In the final pages of *Inventing Ivanov*, then, the apostrophized female auditor, alter ego, and addressee at last becomes the *first* person instead of the second.

Smoodin also attempts to transcend the game as Nabokov himself did—by acknowledging its illusory reality. Just as Vadim is often confused with another, more successful émigré novelist in *Look at the Harlequins!*, so Ivanov's would-be biographer seeks information about *him* in a memoir by the musical cousin of "an émigré novelist more famous than Ivanov" (132). This other memoir has been recommended to Ivanov's biographer, in turn, by a more successful colleague at his university. Smoodin describes how the hapless biographer searches through the "Mus-" to "Nat-" section of the university library's card catalogue:

snapping cards ahead one after the other, amazed at the collection of work on the more famous émigré novelist, despairing of ever finding the book by his cousin: perhaps this is all a prank, [he] thinks, that fellow has nothing to worry about, he's having fun with me, he doesn't want me to be competition. Perhaps this is a phantom cousin, a fictional cousin, made up on the spur of the drunken moment, to send me on this spurious chase. (133)

This passage, too, imitates Nabokov's style: the subtle movement from third-person narration to free indirect discourse to stream of consciousness; the long, complex sentences, with their series of parallel clauses; the startling insertion of a new word in a familiar phrase ("on the spur of the *drunken* moment"); and the wordplay of "spur" and "spurious," which resonates from one phrase to the next. The passage also constitutes another *mise en abyme*. That famous émigré novelist, with a musical cousin (Nicolas Nabokov) and a last name filed between "Mus-" and "Nat-," is obviously Vladimir Nabokov. This search through that novelist's works—a search haunted by suspicions of a nonexistent book, a "phantom" memoirist, a "fictional" cousin, a "spurious" investigation—clearly alludes to Nabokov's self-reflexive narratives. And the investigator's suspicions suggest, of course, Smoodin's own doubts about her ability to resolve the mysteries of Nabokov's life. But because she is writing a novel rather than a biography, she does not find that prospect as frustrating as Field evidently did. Indeed, these metafictional strategies allow her to maintain the "oblique," enigmatic spirit of Nabokov's own mock biographies. She does this so faithfully that even after Ivanov's death, his real life still remains inaccessible outside of his art—and utterly out of reach, therefore, to Smoodin and her readers.

Endgame

Clearly, playing Nabokov is dangerous. Nabokov's biographers, critics, and disciples may find themselves inescapably repeating Nabokov's own representations of Nabokov—whether or not they write his *Life* as if it were one of his fictions, like Field, or write fiction based on his life, like Smoodin. Even his son, Dmitri Nabokov, may find himself describing "the last details of a sunset" in Nabokov's voice (in his poignant essay "On Revisiting Father's Room" [6]) or taking Nabokov's part in literary matters (in his numerous replies to his father's critics). An additional difficulty for

those who join Nabokov's game is that they must play it on his terms. Indeed, Dmitri Nabokov has not only accused Smoodin and Field of distorting the facts of his father's life, but has even expressed disapproval of anyone "giv[ing] a second's attention in a Nabokovian context to a book entitled *Inventing Ivanov*" ("Things" 75). But playing Nabokov involves a greater danger than either taking his part or breaking his rules: the likelihood that whatever one may write about him may seem to have been written already, and with more authority (in all senses of that word), by Nabokov himself. Even this essay cannot help but replay Nabokov's superior performance of his game.¹⁰

Notes

1. Chapter 5 was written in French in 1936; other chapters, composed in English, appeared in American magazines from 1943 to 1951; the entire text was revised and published in Britain as *Conclusive Evidence* and in America as *Speak, Memory* (1951), augmented and translated into Russian as *Drugie Berega* (1954), and then revised once more as *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966). All quotations are from the 1966 text.
2. Nabokov also used other pseudonyms, especially during his early years as an émigré writer (Boyd, *Russian* 180, 181, 187, 261, 509).
3. See Morrison, who shows how Nabokov's narrative technique "laminat[es] third-person voice upon first-person experience" (495).
4. Vadim's mnemonic effort echoes feats in Nabokov's memoir (for example, when he recalls the name of Colette's dog) and his fictitious autobiographies (for example, when Humbert recalls the name of Valeria's Russian colonel in *Lolita*).
5. Nabokov told Field that he admired biographies "for their documentation," not their reliance on "good stories" (5-6, 22), but *His Life in Part* experiments with narrative conventions and does not bother with notes, bibliography, or index.
6. On Nabokov's quarrel with Field, see his *Selected Letters* 511, 513, 515-19, 523-24, 536, 544-45, 555-586, and Boyd, *American* 580-82, 602-6, 609-14, 616-19.
7. Field claims that Nabokov "invited me to mine material for the Crimean period of his life" from *Glory*, but "later withdrew his invitation" (*Part* 129). He speculates that "a cargo of personal details . . . quite independent of the plot" exists in Nabokov's early novels (197).

8. In "Nabokov's Amphiphorical Gestures" I analyze his characteristic use of such artfully constructed imagery. On his allusions to St. Petersburg, see Tammi.

9. On feminist metafiction, see Greene.

10. I presented earlier versions of this essay at the 1991 MLA Convention in San Francisco and the 1992 Nabokov Conference in Nice, France, and published it in condensed form in the proceedings of the Nice conference (*Cycnos* 10.1 [1993]: 63-73).

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