

The Nonidentical Twin: The Possible Worlds of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* and *Look at the Harlequins!*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how Vladimir Nabokov probes the boundaries between autobiography and fiction in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, and his last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* Both autobiographies and first-person novels project possible worlds, that is, alternative perspectives on empirical reality. The Nabokov of *Speak, Memory* and V.V. in *Look at the Harlequins!* are both focalizers in possible worlds derived from the historical Nabokov's empirical reality. The common origin that binds them together opens up a multi-directional channel between the worlds, allowing the reader to gain a deeper understanding of Nabokov's life story than either of the texts could offer on its own. Nabokov's two texts highlight the fundamental similarities between the nonfictional genre of the autobiography and the fictional genre of the novel by exploring the transitory zone between fiction and reality. (BGY)

KEYWORDS: Nabokov, autobiography, possible worlds theory, ontology, reality, fiction



Vladimir Nabokov's works constantly probe the boundaries between two confronting-complementary spheres, described by Zoran Kuzmanovich in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (2005) in terms of "paradise and exile, this world and a beneficent traffic-directing otherworld, or average reality and true reality, . . . fiction and autobiography, Russian 'human document' realism and glittery but exhausted European modernism, or Sirin's English and Nabokov's Russian" (20). Here I propose taking a new look at how Nabokov probes the boundaries between fiction and autobiography in his *Speak, Memory* (1967; henceforth *SM*), a curious blend of verifiable facts, semi-fictionalized contexts, and artistic techniques, and his last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974; henceforth *LATH*), a self-contained work of art also functioning as a miniaturized recapitulation of Nabokov's previous novels, narrated by protagonist V.V. in an autobiographical form. As Galya Diment has noted, in *SM* Nabokov seems to be "skillfully designing a very special creative space for himself which lies between the 'invented facts' of fiction and the 'real facts' of one's personal life, and which he himself called the 'imagined facts'" ("Nabokov's Biographical Impulse" 172), a *modus scribendi*

which, in my view, also characterizes Nabokov's last finished novel. I will argue that both autobiographies and first-person novels project possible worlds, that is, alternative perspectives on empirical reality. The Nabokov of *Speak, Memory* and V.V. in *Look at the Harlequins!* are both focalizers in possible worlds derived from Nabokov's empirical reality. The common origin that binds them together opens up a multi-directional channel between the worlds, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of Nabokov's life story than either of the texts could offer on its own. Nabokov's two texts highlight the fundamental similarities between the nonfictional genre of the autobiography and the fictional genre of the novel by exploring the transitory zone between fiction and reality. Given that the framework of possible worlds theory can be applied to fictional and nonfictional texts alike, its use provides a theoretical background for including texts into an analysis that would otherwise have been excluded on ontological grounds.

The constant blurring of the boundary between fiction and life that characterizes Nabokov's works finds its equivalent in the debate whether autobiographies should be considered a literary or a historical genre. They seem to occupy a transitory zone between the two. In his influential study, Philippe Lejeune (1989) defines autobiography as a "[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). But around the same time, other critics already recognized that fiction plays a much larger role in autobiography writing than what Lejeune's definition would allow us to infer. In his 1990 book, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, Timothy Dow Adams claims that no autobiographical texts should be taken at face value because they are mainly written to appease their authors' desire for a coherent and purposeful life, and to achieve this effect, the authors do not refrain from lying, either through factual distortion or omission. As Arnaud Schmitt (2017) notes, from this time onwards, a tug-of-war between factuality and fictionality has dominated the field of autobiography studies, and more often than not "the panfictional view has prevailed. In other words, many critics have decided to live with the formerly counterintuitive idea that facts can go hand in hand with fiction as far as life writing is concerned. We are a long way from Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact" (31).

Thus, even in cases when an author sincerely strives to give an objective account of his or her life, fictionality inevitably creeps in through the back door. Analyzing Philip Roth's autobiography, Mark Freeman (1997) notices that Roth inevitably failed in the "task he has set for himself to leave

behind his own natural inclination to step into his usual role as fiction writer” since “the ‘fictive’—the making of sense and meaning—is indeed part and parcel of both historical understanding and of interpretation more generally” (112). Following the ideas of Hayden White and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Freeman claims that the pre-selection of material and their subsequent interpretation renders all autobiographical texts at least partly fictional, notwithstanding any authorial statement to the contrary. In the initial stages of writing, “the very determination of what is to count as a fact derives from the questions (and the hypotheses) one brings to the task of inquiring. In selecting for inclusion in his story the facts he has rather than some others, he has already determined what sort of story he wants to tell” (118–19). Furthermore, this entails that “virtually all interpretations are fictions: to make sense of a text, whether it is the text of one’s past or some other one, is precisely a process of creating a framework, an interpretive context, within which the relevant information may be placed; it is . . . an attempt to confer a measure of order and coherence upon it” (Freeman 30). The fictionality inherent in autobiographical enterprises has thus practically reached axiomatic status, and Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir echoes an already established sentiment in 2003 when she announces “fictionality to be a necessary part of the autobiographical process itself and not something external to it, or incompatible with it . . . [which is] especially apparent in any autobiographical text where the autobiographer deals actively with the problematics of the writing process itself” (4–5).

The heavy reliance on memory in the process of writing an autobiography is also responsible for its inherent fictionality, no matter how faithful to the events of their past autobiographers strive to remain. The unreliability of memory has been the subject of many studies of which Robyn Fivush’s 1995 article “Language, Narrative, and Autobiography” gives a comprehensive overview. Faced with the frequent problem of subjects “recalling” events that have never happened to them, Fivush recognizes that the crux of the matter is the way in which language and narrativization are used to organize and store memories. She argues that

we make sense of our experiences by placing them in an explanatory and evaluative narrative context. Narratives provide cohesion and meaning to event memories, and memories that conform to canonical narratives will be stable and resistant to suggestion. However, many event memories are not narratively organized upon experience, but may become so through reminiscing with others. In this process, misinformation may come to be

incorporated into the evolving narrative, such that the stable memory that emerges includes false information. (102)

The problematic nature of remembering has become one of the main areas of enquiry in contemporary autobiography studies. Galya Diment noted that “[f]ew common wisdoms of the nature of autobiography ever go to the essence of the process of writing the autobiography, and what this process inevitably does to ‘facts’ that long ago ceased being immediate or even ‘real’” (40–41); “facts” entailing both historically verifiable data and the subjective, “imagined” facts that Fivush analyzed. Freeman also points out that the reminiscing author “reads” their past as if it were a text to be deciphered, a text that constantly hovers between reality and fiction since its “sentences,” the memories, may not always refer to actual events (146).

Gudmundsdóttir explicitly identifies memory and fiction as “two strands in autobiographical writing that constantly negotiate the space of writing” (54) and suggests that both writing and remembering “duplicate” and “rework the past” (53). She further calls attention to the act of forgetting which creates gaps in the past-narrative, resulting in “[t]he admission that things might have happened differently from what the autobiographers remember, or might even have happened to someone else, [which] highlights the complex workings of memory and the impossibility of rendering it straight into words” (53). A consequence of the present evocation of the past is that “[w]hen the memoirist deals with his or her feelings or other inner responses, it is not always clear whether these are, indeed, memories of the responses or projections of the attitudes at the time of the composition: the voices of the protagonist and the narrator may merge” (Toker 27–28). This caveat has been noted with respect to Nabokov and *SM* as well: “it is never entirely clear how much of what is being recalled is in fact a construct of [his] imagination” (Ksiezopolska and Wisniewski 10).

Uncertainty thus becomes the pervasive mode of autobiographies: a text based on memories can never faithfully reproduce the past reality that it attempts to recreate. Instead of an objective historical account, autobiographical texts construct a *possible world*, as described by Lubomir Doležel, Ruth Ronen, and others. The concept of possible worlds originates from modal logic but has been adopted and adapted by a number of disciplines, literary theory included, to examine issues ranging from the contingency of true/false propositions through counterfactual and hypothetical scenarios to fictional world creation. In the present context, a possible world is understood as an imaginary (fictional) state of affairs, “based

on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs” (Ronen 8); that is, what *could have* happened, or what one *wishes* to happen, or what one *fears* or *believes* will happen. Although the elements of such a possible world are not on the same level of existence as those of empirical reality, they are not nonexistent either; they occupy an in-between ontological status, that of “nonactualized possibles” (Doležel 16). This description is applicable to the worlds projected by autobiographies, as their factuality can be called into question as a result of the unreliable nature of the process of remembering and forgetting, the author’s desire to forge a coherent, meaningful narrative, and, consequently, the deliberate inclusions and omissions, which lend a teleological layer to the text that empirical reality lacks. Autobiographical texts are, in short, fictionalized versions of their authors’ past, as Nabokov himself pointed out: “It [SM] is a literary approach to my own past. There is some precedent for it in the novel, in Proust say, but not in the memoir” (qtd. in Alexandrov 20–21). For this reason, as Alexandrov notes, “[w]hen Nabokov was asked if he was worried by the unavoidable distortion of detail inherent in remembering, he answered ‘not at all’. The reason is that ‘the distortion of a remembered image may not only enhance its beauty with an added refraction but provide informative links with earlier or later patches of the past’” (44).

Possible worlds theory provides a suitable framework for treating *SM* and *LATH* as alternative autobiographies. As Marie-Laure Ryan, a major advocate for possible worlds theory in literary and narrative studies, phrases it, “[t]he foundation of PW theory is the idea that reality—now conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists—is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds.” Ryan uses the solar system as a structural metaphor: what we habitually refer to as the “actual world” occupies the position of the Sun, orbited by a multitude of “possible worlds.” By analogy, in fictional texts there is a central “textual actual world” where, similarly to the actual world, truth conditions apply,¹ and this textual actual world is orbited by the possible worlds of the characters’ mental constructs. Reading (and writing) a text entails a process she calls “recentering,” when the reader mentally leaves their actual world and adopts the worlds projected by the text *as* actual. The smoothness of this “gesture of imaginative recentering” is governed by “accessibility relations,” that is, how closely the textual actual world resembles the actual world: Ryan’s example for a close world is one where her (Ryan’s) counterpart “only differ[s] from my actual self in the number of hairs on [her] head,” while a remote world is where “I am embodied as a giant insect while retaining my basic identity” (Ryan 644–

46). The core of the difference between any two worlds can be located in the different application of modal operative systems as devised by Lubomír Doležel (114 f). Doležel differentiates four categories of constraints that serve as the building blocks of all fictional possible worlds: alethic (governing possibility, impossibility, and necessity), deontic (governing what is permitted, prohibited, and obligatory), axiological (governing values and disvalues), and epistemic (governing what is known, unknown, and believed). All the constraints operate on both a global and an individual level, with the occasional clashes between the parameters set for the textual actual world (for instance, demureness is expected from women) and the parameters of a given individual character (for example, a woman character rebels against this expectation) driving the plot forward.

The framework of possible worlds theory can be applied to Nabokov's fiction, which, as Emma W. Hamilton has observed, often showcases "the fallacy of simple, symmetrical reflection" and often relies on the "refracted image," which "contains the elements of its original, but it skews and redesigns them in a way that multiplies and intensifies possibilities and perspectives instead of merely recreating them" (16). *LATH* may arguably be such a "refracted image," an alternative autobiography that complements *SM*, which is obliquely acknowledged by V.V. when he mentions that one of his books, *The Invisible Lath* (conspicuously missing from V.V.'s list of publications in the preface of *LATH*, and obliquely pointing to the fact that it corresponds to *Speak, Memory*) is "a book rather similar to that in the reader's hands" (*LATH* 131).

Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory* proves these points perfectly given that Nabokov admittedly worked with "imagined facts," while pretending to play the role of the infallible memoirist. Nabokov's last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*—one of his most neglected works, which received a fraction of the exposure that *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* or *Invitation to a Beheading* have been given, and which is usually dismissed as a playful synthesis of Nabokov's earlier works and, as such, not really a novel addition to the canon—is a less obvious candidate to do so. It is my contention, however, that *Look at the Harlequins!* bears a striking resemblance, perhaps the strongest among his non-Russian novels, to *Speak, Memory*. *LATH* is the autobiography of an aging novelist with uncertain memories, V.V., whose life events and recollections closely parallel those of Nabokov in *SM*. A non-exhaustive list of the more obvious similarities includes basic biographical data: Nabokov shares his name, date of birth, country of origin, trilingual education and occupation with V.V. (V.V. is shorthand for Vadim Vadimovich, which in

turn is shorthand for Vladimir Vladimirovich). Furthermore, he is identified with Nabokov's pseudonym, V. Sirin, when he reveals he has been using the pen name of V. Irisin (a doctor writing a study on his illness also pairs him with another patient named "Mr. V. S.," *LATH* 13). Both men are forced to leave Russia and live in exile, in the same set of countries (England, Germany, France, and later the US, and Switzerland). Their career paths coincide as well, with Nabokov and V.V. both attending university in Cambridge, being well-known figures in the Russian émigré literary circles of Berlin and Paris, and holding lectureships in the US while teaching the same courses. Another common point is the otherwise recurrent theme of the mistaken murder of a loved one: Nabokov's father in his case and V.V.'s first wife, Iris, in *LATH*. They both pursue love on the French Riviera, admire the same authors, and hate Freud with the same intensity. Although the traits enumerated so far are allocated to other Nabokov characters as well, more intriguing is the fact that V.V.'s novels echo those of Nabokov's, and the career-facilitating financial breakthrough comes with the publication of *Lolita* and its fictional counterpart, *A Kingdom by the Sea*. Finally, *LATH*, similarly to *SM*, is addressed to an anonymous "you" which in both cases is implied to be the author's wife.² Based on these parallels, I argue that since both the writing of historical autobiographies and of first-person autobiographical fictions involve the creation of possible worlds, Nabokov in *SM* and V.V. in *LATH* can be treated as interrelated selves, and thus *LATH* may be regarded as both an inversion and an extension of *SM*, depending on whether the given period and topic is included in *SM* or not. In fact, it has been proposed that *LATH* was written *instead of* a planned second autobiography (Springer 370–71). Thus, *SM* and *LATH* open up two different but not mutually exclusive perspectives on Nabokov's life.

Although *SM* was, on one level, written by Nabokov as a proof of his existence (as the title of the original edition, *Conclusive Evidence* suggests), his quest for veracity is counterpointed by an awareness of the inherent fictionality of memories. The artistic quality of the memories presented also highlights the ambiguous status of autobiographical texts. As Zsuzsa Hetényi has claimed, in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov "consciously breaks" Lejeune's autobiographical pact by "exploit[ing] all his literary skills and routines" (25, my translation). The last chapter of *SM* reinforces one's feeling of reading a work of art as here the author subjects his autobiography to a scrupulous analysis as if it were a literary text in need of interpretation. Thus, notwithstanding its professed genre, Nabokov chooses to employ his full novelistic repertoire to present to the reader the picture of a perfect, idyllic

childhood and a sensitive adolescence. Precisely chosen metaphors and allusions coupled with his linguistic virtuosity elevate otherwise common scenes to poetic heights. His abundant use of theatrical and cinematographic expressions and techniques suggests life's similarity to plays or films, further emphasizing the fact that the memories of one's past are continually and artistically recreated. Hetényi notes that for Nabokov, conformity to reality was secondary: he chooses "artistic selection and the reversal of proportions" instead of "true-to-life" writing methods, with the episodes selected for inclusion in the text being "either inconsequential details disproportionately enlarged or, vice versa, significant events only passingly referred to" (Hetényi 29, my translation). His strong characterization and evocative descriptive passages also lend a dim fictional aura to his recollections. Interestingly, some of the most vividly detailed episodes are the most evidently imaginary, but Nabokov's narrative and stylistic techniques give them the illusion of reality and make them blend seamlessly into the autobiographical texture. One such imagined scene is Mademoiselle's arrival in St. Petersburg (*SM* 68–70), which, although Nabokov did not witness it, conforms to his and our conception of Mademoiselle's character and thus lends the description strong plausibility. St. Petersburg's depiction, in general, seems especially affected by parched nostalgia's colorful panes of glass, assuming a kind of mythical aura—which Nabokov later comments on sarcastically during his exile: "those hardly palpable people [his fellow émigrés] who imitated in foreign cities a dead civilization, the remote, almost legendary, almost Sumerian mirages of St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1916 (which, even then, in the twenties and thirties, sounded like 1916–1900 BC)" (*SM* 215).

Scenes witnessed by Nabokov himself are not exempt from this artistic quality either. Especially the parts on the Yalta period, after the Bolshevik revolution forced the Nabokov family to flee St. Petersburg but before they left Russian soil for Western Europe, appear as if taken from a dreamy novel. The passages are saturated with literary references and allusions right from the opening scene describing Nabokov's lucky escape into his train from a deserted platform: "A sturdy proletarian arm conformed to the rules of sentimental fiction (rather than to those of Marxism) by helping me to swarm up" (*SM* 185). "Sentimental fiction" is the dominant texture in the Yalta months, where society lives in carefree decadence and where the region is explicitly compared to a dreamland:

I looked at the abrupt Yayla Mountains, covered up to their rocky brows with the karakul of the dark Tauric pine; at the maquis-like stretch of

evergreen vegetation between mountain and sea; at the translucent pink sky, where a self-conscious crescent shone, with a single humid star near it; and the whole artificial scene struck me as something in a prettily illustrated, albeit sadly abridged, edition of *The Arabian Nights*. (*SM* 185)

This quotation proves that, in contrast to the majority of autobiography writers who aspire to uphold the illusion of the unadulterated factuality of their text, Nabokov calls attention to the fact that his autobiography is actively shaped by his imagination. Thus, the text of *SM* constructs a possible world: the present depiction of a past reality, plausible as it may be, is unavoidably affected by the unreliability of memories and the narrative context. Although when read at face value, he seems to take considerable pride in his own remembering abilities (especially with regard to his earliest memories which “belong to the harmonious world of a perfect childhood and, as such, possess a naturally plastic form in one’s memory, which can be set down with hardly any effort” [*SM* 9]), he is well aware of their unreliability. In the last chapter of *SM*, which is an analytical review of the preceding material in the third person, he reflects on the issue of memory in ironic terms:

Obviously Nabokov’s method would lose all sense unless the material were as true an account of personal experience as memory could possibly make it. The selective apparatus pertains to art; but the parts selected belong to unadulterated life. Nabokov’s memory, especially in regard to the first twenty years of his life, is almost abnormally strong, and probably he had less difficulty than most memoirists would have had in following the plan he set himself: to stick to the truth through thick and thin and not be tempted to fill gaps with logical verisimilitudes posing as preciously preserved recollections. (*SM* 238)

He pushed the irony to its extreme by exaggerating the infallibility of his memories even in the face of contradictory evidence:

Now and then he disagreed with the Department’s findings and then some amusing exchanges occurred. One of them had to do with the funnel of the Atlantic liner *Champlain*. Nabokov distinctly remembered it as white. A *New Yorker* checker talked to the French Line; the Line said, the *Champlain* had not been camouflaged in 1940 and had at the time its usual red-and-black French line funnel. Nabokov replied that he could omit the epithet altogether but that nothing could induce him to change a color he so clearly remembered. He wondered if perhaps the military authorities at St. Nazaire

had repainted the thing without notifying the French Line office in New York. (*SM* 249)

These ironic passages corroborate what we have established earlier about the inherent unreliability of the remembering process. At times Nabokov leaves the ironic mode and explicitly calls attention to being tricked by memory, dutifully warning the reader to tread with precaution: “It seldom happens that I do not quite know whether a recollection is my own or has come to me second-hand, but in this case I do waver. . . . And now comes that bicycle act—or at least my version of it” (*SM* 116 and 157). At other times he implicitly acknowledges the fact that he may have unwittingly “colored” his recollections. Talking about the colorful panes of glass in the window of a childhood pavilion and how he liked to peer out through each of them and compare the various effects of the hues on what he saw, he laments that

when, after such richness, one turned to a small square of normal, savorless glass, with its lone mosquito or lame daddy longlegs, it was like taking a draught of water when one is not thirsty, and one saw a matter-of-fact white bench under familiar trees. But of all the windows this is the pane through which in later years parched nostalgia longed to peer. (*SM* 75)

In rare cases he drops the mask of the over-confident memoirist and admits to *forgetting*: “when, nowadays, I attempt to follow in memory the winding paths from one given point to another, I notice with alarm that there are many gaps, due to oblivion or ignorance, akin to the terra-incognita blanks map makers of old used to call ‘sleeping beauties’” (*SM* 100).

Nabokov treats *SM* in the same manner as he treats his fictional works, highlighting how he actively shapes its structure and texture. As he claims, the hunt for “thematic designs through one’s life” is “the true purpose of autobiography” (12), and in the name of this *ars poetica* he regularly ignores spatial and temporal considerations and “fold[s his] magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (102–03). Thus, Nabokov recounts in a childhood story how he chased a butterfly which he finally captured “after a forty-year race, on an immigrant dandelion under an endemic aspen near Boulder” (87), and how he found himself in the America of the 1940s after crossing a marshland in the Russia of the 1910s (102). As Vladimir E. Alexandrov (1991) observes, Nabokov believed in “memory’s ability to retrieve patterns from human lives

extending over long stretches of the past, and to fix them in language. In his view the two activities of recollecting the past and fashioning a work of art are inevitably linked because of the inherently artistic nature of memory” (44).

If *SM* deals with the uncertainty of remembering in a subtle manner, *LATH* pushes the issue to the foreground and emphasizes the fictional quality of memories. In the first few pages, V.V. recalls an aunt he visited when he was a child who advised him to “look at the harlequins” and to “invent reality,” but, as it turns out at the end of the passage, this aunt in fact never existed: “I invented my grand-aunt in honor of my first daydreams” (*LATH* 7). “Daydreams” is a rather euphemistic expression for what the narrator himself terms “the secrets of a confirmed madman” a couple of lines earlier, and V.V. is quick to leave another signal for the reader: “Glancing through my oldest notes in pocket diaries, with telephone numbers and names elbowing their way among reports on events, factual or more or less fictional, I notice that dreams and other distortions of ‘reality’ are written down in a special left-slanted hand—at least in the earlier entries, before I gave up following accepted distinctions” (*LATH* 16–17). V.V.’s gesture seems to acknowledge that no matter how scrupulous an author strives to be when writing their autobiography, there is always the possibility of flaws, distortions, even deliberate lies, ensuring that the world projected by the autobiographical text will never equal empirical reality. Although *SM* and *LATH* differ in their intentions (one written as an autobiography and the other as a novel), the bias oscillates within both texts between these two intentions of “memory seem[ing] merely a springboard for the supreme freedom of art . . . where the exactness of remembered experience far surpasses the vague gropings of imagination” (Foster 111). This highlights Nabokov’s “deeper ambivalence” towards remembering, which he resolves with the realization that “only authorial invention can restore the erasures of time” (111). In other words, “Nabokov ultimately rejects any notion of truth in memory and shows how . . . we keep on wandering in the hall of mirrors and reproductions, taking copies for the originals and our phantasies for true recollections, incapable of recovering anything substantial” (Lipszyc 166), which opens up the possibility of reading *LATH* as an autobiography.

Since the narrators of *SM* and *LATH* are quasi-identical in terms of both their life events and their names, they can be said to inhabit possible worlds which are easily accessible in relation to each other. They resemble each other to such an extent that V.V. frequently feels as if he were an alter ego of an ontologically superior being, and although he tries to dismiss these feelings, the echoes between Nabokov and V.V. do not subside but continue

to disturb V.V.'s peace of mind. The two worlds, in fact, are so close that they seem to overlap several times: two characters in *LATH*, the émigré publisher Oksman, and the Soviet activist Orlov, appear to act as Nabokov's conspirators, and possess information that could only be obtained from an extratextual source. Oksman is constantly mixing the titles of V.V.'s books with those of Nabokov's and believes Nabokov's father to be V.V.'s, much to V.V.'s irritation who says that Oksman "used to welcome me with a knowing twinkle as if we shared some very private and rather naughty secret" (*LATH* 77–79). Orlov, disgusted that a writer of V.V.'s caliber does not work in the service of the Soviet Union, mistakes the plot of *A Kingdom by the Sea* for that of *Lolita*, prompting V.V. to correct him (185).

Although V.V. apparently dismisses the importance of such lapses on the part of others, he ultimately concludes that "even *Ardis* [that is, *Ada*], my most private book, soaked in reality, saturated with sun flecks, might be an unconscious imitation of another's unearthly art" (*LATH* 198), with the word "unearthly" also conjuring up Antiterra, the alternative universe where the plot of *Ada* takes place. Deep down V.V. is tormented by the thought that he may not be an autonomous being, that his existence is forever tied to another man's. His visit to Oksman comes as a final confirmation:

There might be nothing particularly upsetting about a well-meaning, essentially absurd and muddled old duffer mistaking me for some other writer. . . . But that a fool's slip of the tongue or error of memory should establish a sudden connection with another world, so soon after my imagining with especial dread that I might be permanently impersonating somebody living as a real being beyond the constellation of my tears and asterisks—*that* was unendurable, *that* dared not happen! . . . Should I ignore the coincidence and its implications? Should I, on the contrary, repattern my entire life? Should I abandon my art, choose another line of achievement, take up chess seriously, or become, say, a lepidopterist, or spend a dozen years as an obscure scholar making a Russian translation of *Paradise Lost* that would cause hacks to shy and asses to kick? (80–81)

Chess, lepidoptery, and translations of classics are heavily associated with Nabokov himself, reinforcing the idea that V.V. inhabits another possible world where he pursues these activities. He remains to be haunted by a "dream feeling that my life was the nonidentical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon, I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer" (*LATH* 74). His conviction becomes even stronger after he regains

his sense of reality following his hospitalization: “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, Betelgeusian writer with whom scatterbrained *émigrés* from some other galaxy constantly confused me . . . poor Vadim Vadimovich was but a figment of somebody’s—not even my own—imagination” (210–11). Here, on the last pages of *LATH*, we receive the firmest hint yet that V.V. is indeed a possible world version of Nabokov: he feels he is “permanently impersonating somebody living as a real being” from “another world,” from “another earth,” from “some other galaxy,” of whose life he is merely “the nonidentical twin, a parody, an inferior variant”; he believes to be living in a “dream,” in a “nightmare” as “a figment of somebody’s—not even my own—imagination.” Out of Doležel’s four modal systems, the epistemic operator can be applied here as an explanation for the differences between the two possible worlds. Whereas Nabokov is aware of the presence of alternative worlds, V.V.’s included, V.V. is at first ignorant about these possible worlds, but by the end of *LATH* he starts to believe in the presence of another world that he, under the persona of Nabokov, also inhabits. Although the potential is there for V.V. to acquire more knowledge, he never progresses beyond the “he believes” parameter since that would erase the epistemic boundaries between him and Nabokov.

Changing the parameters of a constraint can lead to counterfactual scenarios, with the result that *LATH* can both be conceived of as an inversion of *SM* (presenting counterfactual versions of scenes found in *SM*), and also an extension by presenting episodes and explanations that concern topics omitted from *SM*. In this sense, *LATH* acts as a complementary or extended autobiography: whereas the majority of *SM* deals with Nabokov’s childhood and youth and only a few chapters are devoted to his *émigré* life in Europe (and nothing whatsoever after his leaving for the US), *LATH* is mainly focused on Europe and the American and Swiss years missing from *SM*. On the whole, there is no truthfulness competition between *SM* and *LATH* simply because, for the most part, they do not concentrate on the same events in their author’s life. Even in the case of overlaps (the period in Berlin and Paris), a shift in emphasis towards inner struggles and doubts ensures that the reader treats these scenes in *LATH* as illuminating and not falsifying. The descriptions of *émigré* literary circles and of the “backstage secrets” of being a writer evoke passages from *SM* but, by providing more insight into the workings of this community, seem to convey supplementary information and fill the gaps in the autobiography. The descriptions of V.V.’s

successes and failures, feelings and thoughts are possibly rooted in what Nabokov himself experienced in this period. Thus, when V.V. remarks that “I regarded Paris, with its gray-toned days and charcoal nights, merely as the chance setting for the most authentic and faithful joys of my life: the colored phrase in my mind under the drizzle, the white page under the desk lamp awaiting me in my humble home” (*LATH* 66), the reader cannot help but recall Nabokov’s unfavorable opinion of the French city in *SM* (209–10).

Another problematic issue of this period in Nabokov’s life is his supposed anxiety over switching from Russian to English text composition. Nabokov only hints at such hardships in *SM*, and by delegating the full articulation of his experience onto V.V., he achieves the double purpose of expressing his insecurities in writing without the danger of exposing his privacy too much in his autobiography: “[T]he question confronting me in Paris, in the late Thirties, was precisely could I fight off the formula and rip up the ready-made, and switch from my glorious self-developed Russian, not to the dead leaden English of the high seas with dummies in sailor suits, but an English I alone would be responsible for, in all its new ripples and changing light?” (*LATH* 104).

As for counterfactuality, a complex parallel can be drawn between Nabokov and V.V.’s experiences of illness. V.V. suffers from a psychological malady related to changing directions that he summarizes in the following terms:

In actual, physical life I can turn as simply and swiftly as anyone. But mentally, with my eyes closed and my body immobile, I am unable to switch from one direction to the other. Some swivel cell in my brain does not work. I can cheat, of course, by setting aside the mental snapshot of one vista and leisurely selecting the opposite view for my walk back to my starting point. But if I do not cheat, some kind of atrocious obstacle, which would drive me mad if I persevered, prevents me from imagining the twist which transforms one direction into another, directly opposite. (*LATH* 35)

Most characters in the novel downplay the gravity of the situation and think that V.V. is only being melodramatic, but this peculiar mental illness, which is to have physical consequences for V.V., can be regarded as an amalgam of some of Nabokov’s experiences. The basic idea of opposing directions is evoked in *SM* in two separate passages. In one, Nabokov recalls a night of stargazing:

Overhead, between the formless trees bordering my dissolving path, the night sky was pale with stars. In those years, that marvelous mess of constellations, nebulae, interstellar gaps and all the rest of the awesome show provoked in me an indescribable sense of nausea, of utter panic, as if I were hanging from earth upside down on the brink of infinite space, with terrestrial gravity still holding me by the heels but about to release me any moment. (*SM* 171–72)

In the other, he remembers the dawn of his son's birth:

In the purity and vacuity of the less familiar hour, the shadows were on the wrong side of the street, investing it with a sense of not inelegant inversion, as when one sees reflected in the mirror of a barbershop the window toward which the melancholy barber, while stropping his razor, turns his gaze (as they all do at such times), and, framed in that reflected window, a stretch of sidewalk shunting a procession of unconcerned pedestrians in the wrong direction, into an abstract world that all at once stops being droll and loosens a torrent of terror. (*SM* 225)

Both descriptions suggest that for Nabokov there was something sinister and dizzying in reversion, in the flip of the usual order of things. Such distrust of course does not constitute a pathological case in itself, but the problem inherent in such a situation may have been expanded into a full-fledged disorder due to the influence of a serious illness Nabokov went through in his early childhood. He describes his sickness in *SM* as involving dangerously high fever that resulted in deliriums (19) and there is intimation that V.V. suffered from a very similar illness in his childhood when he recalls a “kindly but cold-fingered (and cold-earlobed) doctor who treated the ‘inflammation of the lungs’ I had in the winter of 1907” (*LATH* 91). Although Nabokov recovered with minor consequences, it must have lingered on in his mind that things could have gone the other way and his life-threatening illness could well have had serious, even fatal, complications regarding his physical and mental well-being. Nabokov claims to have lost a remarkable mathematical aptitude because of his illness (*SM* 19), which in *LATH* manifests itself in a doctor's diagnosis of V.V.'s disorder as “numerical nimbus” (*LATH* 13). In a sense, V.V.'s psychological disorder is a thought experiment based on the hypothetical premise that the feverish stage of delirium left a permanent mark on his mental stability.

The psychologically disabled V.V. may be considered a manifestation of one of Nabokov's so-called “feared selves.” Feared selves, along with

desired selves and expected selves, for instance, belong to the overarching category of “possible selves,” which “represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation” (Markus and Nurius 954). Although possible selves inhabit the possible worlds projected by the individual’s wishes, desires, fears, and expectations, and are thus not part of the individual’s actual persona, they bear a strong influence on actuality by “interven[ing] in self-evaluation and self-perception, and act[ing] as powerful behavior guidelines determining approach or withdrawal strategies regarding the desired or the feared self” (Martínez 118). For a notoriously precise author like Nabokov, not being able to think clearly and rationally must have been a terrifying prospect, but by creating a possible world and changing what Doležel called the “alethic operator,” he could allow this feared self, under the alias of V.V., to become actual in the textual actual world of *LATH*, establishing the grounds for a creative alternative autobiography. V.V.’s predilection for hallucinations is therefore expected in the “intermediate world” of *LATH*, shaped by the “alethic contrast between the natural and supernatural” (Doležel 117).

The autobiographer undertakes a similar crossing of ontological boundaries when they, as Nabokov did, transfer their memories into the world projected by their written text. Relocating fleeting events from one’s life into art, however, has its price, as Nabokov laments: “I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it . . . [and] 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” (*SM* 66). Yet, Nabokov regards the events and ingredients of his life as the exclusive domain of his art, unchangeable by an independent “reality”; accordingly, when he hears of developments in other people’s lives that do not fit his ideas and predictions, he “experienced a queer shock; it was as if life had impinged upon my creative rights by wriggling on beyond the subjective limits so elegantly and economically set by childhood memories that I thought I had signed and sealed” (*SM* 65). This realization, pushed to its logical and ontological extremes, plays a crucial role in the plot of *LATH* as well, but here this ontological border crossing ultimately proves to be V.V.’s undoing as his psychological disease does not allow him to mentally reverse directions. Hamilton analyzes V.V.’s predicament in detail, claiming that the root problem is the “merely reflective quality of his fiction”:

In Part Six, Vadim's problem shifts from conceptual to actual—when taking a walk, he physically cannot make an about face and return to his love, whom he calls, not coincidentally, "Reality." Vadim has borrowed too much from his life for his works of fiction, using directly incidents and people from his life as episodes and characters in his work. . . . Vadim himself, after a lifetime of too much borrowing—for there cannot be enough poignant, crucial details in his very eventful life to illuminate both a life and an entire body of prose—confounds his life and his art, and physically takes on a formerly imagined problem. (7–8)

As a retribution for fleshing out his fiction with his real-world experiences, V.V.'s mental disability evolves into a physical one, resulting in his becoming paralyzed when trying to turn back at the end of his walk. By this time, he has already smothered nearly all of his relationships, most notably the strong bond with his daughter, Bel (which, as a parodic nod to *Lolita*, verges on the incestuous), because he

cannot sustain both the writing of a rich text and a romantic relationship—especially the relationship that inspired the writing. Instead of writing *to* Bel, he writes *about* Bel. Though his writing and his life have conflicted before, *A Kingdom by the Sea* represents the novel that is drawn most from his personal experience and by choosing to write it, he must allow his relationship to fizzle out. (Hamilton 21)

V.V. finally arrives at the same realization as Nabokov in his self-professed autobiography, that transforming his life into fiction is dangerous: "Reality would be only adulterated if I now started to narrate what you know, what I know, what nobody else knows, what shall never, never be ferreted out by a matter-of-fact, father-of-muck, mucking biograffitist" (*LATH* 192). Accordingly, to prevent the relationship with his last and potentially true love from being damaged, he chooses the same tactic that Nabokov does in the case of his wife, Véra: exclusion. Apart from a few perfunctory statements and their roles as the "you" addressee of the memoirs, the texts reveal nothing substantial about Véra or "Reality," but both women serve as a means of salvaging something from empirical reality since their fictionalization, as Nabokov and V.V. experienced in other instances, would have risked their eventual loss as well.

From this perspective, *LATH* can be termed what Samuel Clark calls an autobiography of "self-investigation," that is, when writing represents the autobiographer's inner journey towards understanding themselves.

According to Hetényi, *SM* falls into this category (24), although others warn that *SM* “should not be read as one of Russian gentry pseudo-autobiographies, with their myth of the perfect childhood as the golden age” (Toker 23).

The other main strand of autobiographies, according to Clark, concern themselves with “self-presentation,” that is, “an engagement with the social world” where the author “aims to make and display a record or account of [him]self, or a mask, avatar, or persona for [him]self, aimed outward rather than inward” (53–54). Clark notes that these two alternatives are not mutually exclusive, it is in fact more common to find both aspects represented in the same text. *LATH*, much more so than *SM*, exhibits this self-presenting tendency—what is more, *LATH* seems to have been written as a predominantly public piece. *LATH* focuses on sensational topics such as espionage and murder, V.V.’s marital and extramarital affairs, the composition and reception of his publications, or his numerous bouts of mental illness, whereas *SM* treats these topics only perfunctorily, if at all.

By exaggerating the news-worthy aspects in life, *LATH* acquires a parodic overtone directed at the public’s hunger for sensationalism. Nabokov detached his private life from his professional one, taking extra care not to release too much information about himself, so when a biography was published on his life without his authorization,³ he took offense (Hetényi 804). The creative response was *LATH*, a parodic autobiography in which “the stereotypical traits which his critics, biographers and the media attached to [Nabokov’s name] are projected onto a separate character” (Hetényi 806, my translation). V.V. thus may be viewed as Nabokov’s “public possible self,” perhaps not entirely disjunct from the “feared possible self” alluded to earlier.

The public possible self of a writer inevitably includes traits extracted from their fictional characters. The character traits of V.V. and the plot of *LATH* exploit the fact that the public often confuses authors with their novels (many vulgar readings of *Lolita* still conclude that Nabokov liked underage girls) by playfully incorporating Nabokovian characters and story lines into *LATH*. Certain aspects of, notably, *Lolita* and *Ada*, Nabokov’s two most controversial books, are incorporated into *LATH*’s textual reality: V.V.’s daughter, Bel, and his lover, Dolly von Borg, are both distorted and exaggerated versions of *Lolita*, and V.V. re-enacts some of the more (in)famous scenes in the book with them; as for *Ada*, the siblings Ivor and Iris Black (the former V.V.’s friend and the latter his first wife) are modeled on *Ada*’s incestuous brother and sister, Van and Ada Veen. *LATH* in fact begins with a list of V.V.’s publications, all of which are oblique

transliterations of Nabokov's own books with similar but parodically altered plots, which gives Nabokov the opportunity to mock the misguided perceptions of both his critics and the public (Hamilton 20).

Nabokov's playful and (self-)mocking treatment of his life's work shows that irony and parody need to be taken into account when reading and interpreting *LATH*, but, as we have seen, the same cautious attitude is required in the case of *SM*. By playing with contingency and "exploiting the (parodically distorted) facts of his own life and oeuvre, Nabokov challenges our notions of autobiography" (Hetényi 811, my translation). *SM* and *LATH* project possible worlds with easy accessibility to one another, which in turn implies that V.V. and Nabokov are possible selves of each other, with Nabokov inhabiting the actual world. But, if certain modal constraints are switched to produce the possible world of *Look at the Harlequins!*, we arrive at a counterfactual version of *Speak, Memory*. Given the uncertainties about whether autobiographies can ever be entirely factual, a first-person novel that bears such a great resemblance to autobiographies might as well be read as one.

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Notes

1. Truth conditions in a fictional world are governed by the so-called "authentication function" For more on how the authentication function differentiates between what is true and false in a narrative, see chapter 6 in *Heterocosmica* by Lubomír Doležel.
2. See the chapter on *Look at the Harlequins!* in Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton UP, 1993) for more on this connection.
3. See Field, Andrew. *Nabokov: His Life in Art*. Little, Brown and Co., 1967.

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