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The Conjuror Waits in the Wings: Theatre in Nabokov's Fiction

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Table of Contents:

Introduction: Nabokov's Theatre…….…….1

Chapter 1: A Shakespearean Drama: Nabokov's *Tragedy of Mr. Morn*……..11

Chapter 2: The Evolution of Theatrical Imagination: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*……..31

Chapter 3: Theatre and Authorship in *Pale Fire*…….50

Conclusion: Nabokov's Evolving Theatricality……...…70

A Note on Bibliography……..……75

Bibliography……77

Introduction: Nabokov's Theatre

In the midst of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1938), the narration breaks into a kind of Chekhovian theatre piece. It begins, "The lights go out, the curtain rises and a Russian summer landscape is disclosed."[1] What has been first person narration becomes a short dramatic scene full of imagery that recalls Anton Chekhov's plays, such as *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), *Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Seagull* (1896). A young poet paddles a small boat down a river with his lover sitting in the bow. The scene is described in languorous details: flowers are fragrant and insects swarm. The shadows of pines on the bank creep across the river as the afternoon progresses. The scene shifts and we find the young lovers sitting on a bench by the riverbank, the poet reading to his girlfriend from a small black book. Nabokov spares no effort in building up an atmosphere of nostalgia saturated with romantic longing, but, as in *The Seagull*, this scene of young love in the bucolic countryside is full of discontent, which slowly begins to surface. Soon, the poet asks the girl, "Is it true you've fallen in love with that student chap?"[2] She uses the handle of a bicycle pump to scratch the word "yes" into the earth. With that gesture, which breaks the poet's heart, "the curtain is wrung down,"[3] allowing Nabokov to thrust his reader back into the novel's present. The novel's narrator, known only as V., is interviewing his deceased half-brother's first love, now an exile living in Berlin and the mother of two children. Completely removed from her youthful beauty and her dreamlike past,

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[1] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 135. In Nabokov scholarship, there are accepted abbreviations for the titles of his works. Therefore, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* will be referred to in my footnotes as "*RLSK*" and Nabokov's other works will be referred to by their own abbreviations, all of which can be found in a a table in the bibliographical note on page 75.

[2] Ibid., 137.

[3] Ibid.

she provides V. with little insight into the Sebastian Knight's teenage years. Considering the complexity of this narrative interplay, with its shifting of time, space and perspective, the question that emerges is: why does Nabokov use Chekhovian theatre as a device in his novel? Why does Nabokov need the conventional trope of a curtain to section off this memory from the rest of the narrative? To an inexperienced reader, the Chekhovian episode of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* may seem an unnecessary, yet deft and elegant nod toward one of many great teachers of Nabokov, who was famous for his ability to absorb, rework and parody canonical prototypes. But, if one takes a bird's eye view of all of the master's novels, nearly twenty in total, one finds that Nabokov refers to theatre repeatedly throughout his oeuvre. His characters stand on stages, wear masks, even direct each other in dramas of their own. Nabokov's novels are often constructed with theatrical devices in mind, while striving for an artistic permanence that is decidedly un-theatrical.

Before Vladimir Nabokov was a novelist, he was a poet and a playwright. My analysis of three key masterpieces he wrote during the early, middle and late stages of his career revisits this background. As I researched my senior project, I became fully aware of the extent of this mostly unexplored facet of his work. Nabokov moves away from poetry in the mid 1920's when he finds artistic and financial opportunity in writing for the stage. For Nabokov, the theatre becomes a logical link between his early, relatively conventional poetry and the strikingly sophisticated fiction that he would eventually produce. In my opinion, Nabokov's early experience writing for the theatre prepares him for using theatre as a device, a theme and a metaphor in his later work. However, from Nabokov's perspective, theatre is also an essentially problematic medium for artistic expression. As an ephemeral, collaborative medium, theatre is a form deeply at odds with his artistic principles. It is not accidental that Nabokov, for whom modesty is not a habit, coyly

confers in his introduction to *Lolita: A Screenplay* (1974), "By nature I am no dramatist; I am not even a hack scenarist."[4] The confession is suggestive, because it establishes Nabokov as an artist who demands absolute control over his work and for whom a collaborative medium like theatre is therefore not ideal. The stage hands, the director, the set designer, the actors themselves, are all artists in their own right. They become the dramatist's co-creators, while the author, in Nabokov's opinion, must stand alone as a master puppeteer, "pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual."[5] Fiction, for him, is a world only he can create, control and populate.

Theatrical production was not Nabokov's strong suit, not only because he rejected the dialogical nature of theatre, but also because of his failure to deliver a successful stage play. His plays often went un-staged; when they were produced by a theatre company, honorariums were paltry and runs were short. For example, Nabokov staged *The Man from the USSR* in Berlin in 1927, but the play was only performed twice. Siggy Frank explains this phenomenon in her *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* by suggesting that "Nabokov's dependence on the actual staging for disseminating the play was a risky and ultimately unsuccessful strategy in the impoverished cultural and theatrical life of the Russian emigration."[6] Similarly, "The Event" was staged at the Russian Theatre in Paris in 1938 and, as Frank writes, "instead of just a simple failure, the play became a source of prolonged controversy."[7] It seems as though neither the actors, director, reviewers or the audience were ready for Nabokov's authorial strategies, such as

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[4] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay* (New York: Vintage, 1997), *xi*.

[5] Ibid., *x*.

[6] Siggy Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (New York: Cambridge, 2012), 31.

[7] Ibid., 37.

his layered fictional realities and "intertextual palimpsest,"[8] the texture specific to his fiction as well. In his vast two-volume biography of Nabokov, Brian Boyd discusses Nabokov's attempts at staging his plays in the Americas and seconds Frank's opinion of their reception. Shortly after his migration to the United States, Nabokov worked with Mikhail Chekhov's company to stage *The Event* in New York, to limited success. Nabokov subsequently failed to convince the director to stage his adaptation of *Don Quixote,*[9] as the two great minds clashed over differing interpretations of Cervantes' work. Nevertheless, both Frank and Boyd agree that the theatre provided a space for the young Nabokov to experiment with plot structure, characterization, and the complex, layered reality that would later typify his mature fiction.[10]

Theatricality in Nabokov's prose is, as a whole, a comparatively incomplete area in critical analysis. Trying to fill this gap, I argue that theatre is an important aspect of Nabokov's work, one that evolves along with his mastery of fiction. The central argument of this project is that Nabokov's use of theatre throughout his oeuvre evolves alongside his prose style, becoming not only an artifact of his early dramatic experience or a recourse in periods of transition and doubt, but an integral part of his mature fiction. This project began as an attempt to find and analyze Shakespearean references and allusions in Nabokov's English language novels. Indeed, I found many references to Shakespeare's plays and poetry as I read and reread novels like *Pale Fire* (1962), *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Pnin* (1957), *Lolita* (1955) and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. However, I came to realize that Nabokov's use of Shakespeare is only part of something

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[8] Ibid., 36.

[9] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 27. Like Nabokov's novels and short stories, certain critical works are usually abbreviated in Nabokov scholarship. Boyd's biography is so integral to Nabokov studies that it has earned the abbreviation "*VNAY*." For the full list of abbreviations, see page 75.

[10] Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, 6. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 224.

much larger. A vast web of interlocking theatrical devices and references to a wide variety of great dramatists that allow Nabokov to take his fiction to such great heights. The question driving my work shifted away from the why and how of Nabokov's use of Shakespeare and became instead: how does Nabokov's theatricality allow him to create the rich illusion and multilayered narratology of his novels? Through this question, a fresh perspective on Nabokov's works emerges. In his novels, one can find layers of directors and their actors, who are in turn actors in their own dramas, and, at the topmost layer, all under the dictatorial control of the author himself.

My work begins with an analysis of what can be considered Nabokov's first full length work, *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* (1924). It is a five act play, written in Shakespearean blank verse, that was never staged or published during Nabokov's lifetime. The Russian text appeared in 1997, and an English edition, translated by Anastasia Tolstoy and Thomas Karshan, only became available in 2013. As a result, *The Tragedy* is a relatively untouched area of Nabokov scholarship. Brian Boyd and Siggy Frank both discuss it, but they refer their own translations of the Russian text, which are imperfect and unpublished. This allows me to seize upon the opportunity to analyze a newly available Nabokov text. I can then argue that Nabokov's experience writing *The Tragedy* evolves into his use of theatre in the novels he writes in English during the later stages of his career.

After interpreting *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* as a transitional text, I will discuss Nabokov's use of theatrical devices and allusion in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. It is Nabokov's first English language novel, as well as one of his most enigmatic texts, comprising a narrative puzzle that requires its reader to doubt the reality of its narrator, V., and of his protagonist and half brother, Sebastian. Just like *The Tragedy,* it is another work that critics have

yet to fully penetrate, though there has been much more written on it than on Nabokov's early play. In my analysis, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* represents a transition between Nabokov's Russian language prose and his work in the English language, and I demonstrate how the use of theatre allows Nabokov to ground his text in shared cultural material and create his unique narrative texture.

If *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is an experiment in English language fiction, then *Pale Fire* is a fully developed masterwork in Nabokov's adopted tongue. It is another intensely puzzling work, composed of a thousand line poem by the fictive poet John Shade and an extensive and hilariously flawed commentary written by his neighbor, the dubious scholar Charles Kinbote. *Pale Fire* is also one of Nabokov's most thoroughly analyzed texts; a great variety of scholars offer a wide range of critical readings of the novel, from John Haegert to D. Barton Johnson.[11] In my discussion of the novel, I take a much narrower view than most scholars, dealing only with a small group of specific theatrical devices and motifs. This focused analysis of *Pale Fire* allows me to discuss the results of the evolution of Nabokov's theatricality that began with his early playwriting. This opens a new perspective on a work that has long been the subject of close analysis by scholars who attempt to solve its puzzles.

In my project, I rely heavily on the groundbreaking work of Siggy Frank, especially on *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*. Frank analyzes Nabokov's plays, including the *Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, alongside his critical writing and lectures on theatre. She also discusses theatricality in several of his novels by comparing *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936)*, Despair* (1934)*, The Real*

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[11] Some very good analyses of *Pale Fire* are, for example: Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)., John Haegert. "The Author as Reader as Nabokov: Text and Pretext in *Pale Fire*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26, no. 4 (1984): 405-424., D. Barton Johnson, *Worlds In Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov,* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), and Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailer Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's* Pale Fire, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister and *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), and investigating their theatrical sources. Frank draws attention to several Nabokovian devices that are peculiar to the stage: the layered reality that is created by characters and actors simultaneously occupying the same physical space; the essential unreality of a stage set contrasting with the perfect fictional reality of the drama itself; and the problem of authorial control in a collaborative art form.[12] Frank shows how Nabokov's theatre addresses these issues within itself, becoming a largely metatheatrical meditation on the nature of theatre, and, in a broader sense, creative art as a whole. By discussing theatrical allusions in his novels, she shows how these problems develop in Nabokov's imagination as a prose writer. In her analysis of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Frank offers a reading based on Nabokov's allusions to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in the novel. But, as much as I have learned from Frank, there is a lot more to be said about Nabokov's use of and manipulation of the theatre. My discussion of theatricality in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* goes a different route; where Frank zooms in on the *Twelfth Night* allusions, I mainly work with other theatrical aspects of the novel. My reading of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* also differs from her analysis, focusing more on its links to Shakespeare's plays and Nabokov's poetry. Frank's book, in addition to its convincing arguments, suggests that that there is much more to explore in the theatricality of Nabokov's novels and short stories. I attempt to build off of Frank's work to further fill in the theatrical void in Nabokov scholarship.

Frank does not touch on several novels, such as *Pnin* or *Pale Fire,* that make use of theatre in ways similar to what she observes in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* or *Bend Sinister.* I discuss *Pale Fire* in my third chapter. Tracing theatrical motifs in *Pale Fire,* I refer often to Brian Boyd's study of the novel in his book *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery.*

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[12] Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, 6-8.

Boyd's book exhaustively tracks down the multitude of references and allusions in the novel, as well as offering a very convincing metaphysical reading of the text as a whole. His work is predicated on the idea that there are several opposed ways of understanding *Pale Fire* among Nabokov scholars. Scholars argue whether poet or commentator are responsible for creating the other. Boyd works to prove his own view, a reading in which the spirits of deceased characters are able to effect the writing process of the novel's dual protagonists. I appreciate Boyd's insights, but instead of following him in arguing for an overarching view, I examine only certain specific theatrical episodes in the novel in relation to Nabokov's view of authorship.

Other critics who I call upon in my work are Gennady Barabtarlo and Herbert Grabes. Barabtarlo's book, *Aerial View* (1993) offers an incisive analysis of Nabokov's changing metaphysical ideas and how they appear in his fiction. The ideas Barabtarlo conveys in *Aerial View* have greatly influenced the way that I read Nabokov's work; I refer to his essay on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in my third chapter, where I discuss that novel. According to Barabtarlo, ghosts and spirits are always a possibility in Nabokov's fiction, as are hidden meanings and soluble puzzles. Moreover, from his analysis, it becomes clear that Nabokov's works are not simply pleasurable textual problems; they are grounded in a unique philosophical outlook. I embrace this view. Another methodological influence is Grabes' essay "Nabokov and Shakespeare: The English Works," which appears in *The Garland Companion To Vladimir Nabokov*. Grabes discusses the allusion to Shakespeare found in *Bend Sinister* and in *Pale Fire* as a way of delving deeper into these texts, rather than merely pointing out the parallels between Nabokov's texts and Shakespeare's. In my work, Shakespeare becomes an entry point into Nabokov's work as an archetype of theatricality. Shakespeare becomes, for Nabokov, a supreme model of an artist whose work is tortured by lack of authorial control over the text.

My critical approach in this project entails a comparative study of Nabokov's use of theatrical motifs and devices, for example, the motif of donning masks or stepping out onto a stage. Tracing them through the three works I have selected to represent his career, I show how this motif structure develops from 1924 to 1962. In my discussion of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, my approach differs slightly as it is a work that is actively comparable to Shakespeare's plays, if not in virtuosity, then in structure and style. Because of the direct comparison that the Shakespearean form of *The Tragedy* makes available, I am able to use some ideas from Shakespeare scholarship to discuss Nabokov's play. I investigate Nabokov's use of and reference to his dramatic prototypes, focusing on Shakespeare though other dramatists are also important to Nabokov, such as Chekhov, Maeterlinck, Ibsen and Gogol.[13] As Nabokov himself notes in an interview with Alfred Appel, "Pushkin's blood runs through the veins of modern Russian literature as inevitably as Shakespeare's through those of English literature."[14] My analysis stems from my awareness that Nabokov's English language works look toward Shakespeare as a cultural prototype that his readers in English must be able to recognize. I also remain conscious of the fact that, for an author thus concerned, the corruption and appropriation of Shakespeare's work by editors, biographers, publishers and critics is both frightening and fascinating. I analyze how Nabokov uses Shakespearean allusion and theatrical motifs like masks and stage sets in *Pale Fire* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to disturb novelistic integrity and create a multilayered set of realities in his texts.

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[13] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays: With Two Essays on the Drama,* Trans. Dmitri Nabokov (San Diego: Bruccoli Clark, 1984). In the lectures ,"The Tragedy of Tragedy" and "Playwriting," Nabokov suggests that all of the playwrights listed are his theatrical influences.

[14] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 63.

Chekhov famously said that every theatre begins with a coat-rack. Nabokov's career begins with theatre. If we proceed to its very start, we find him at twenty-four years old, the same age as the 20th century. He had graduated from Cambridge in 1922 and followed his family to Berlin, where his father runs a Russian Emigre publication, *Rul'*, (Rudder). For the past several years he has been composing poetry in Russian for *Rul'* and other emigre papers. Surrounding Nabokov, the stages of Europe play host to a flood of great modernist playwrights. He too writes short plays and sketches, some for the Russian language cabaret theaters in Berlin and some only for his desk drawer.[15] The young man is unsure of his future as an artist. Under the n*om de plume* of Sirin, Nabokov shows great potential as a poet and a playwright, and has yet to compose a novel. Nabokov sets pen to paper and begins the laborious project of composing a play in Russian blank verse in the mode of Shakespeare. It is a drama about a masked king and his dreamlike nation, a tale of revolution and adultery, but most importantly a play about exile and memory. Although it will never be staged in Nabokov's lifetime, *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* is a turning point in a literary career that will span three languages and nearly six decades.

[15] Boyd, *VNRY*, 218.

Chapter 1: A Shakespearean Drama: Nabokov's *Tragedy of Mr. Morn*

Written in verse in 1924, *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* epitomizes the transition between Nabokov's early poetry and the prose work he would later produce. It is thematically reminiscent of later novels like *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire*, though it is far less virtuosic. Like much of Nabokov's writing, it deals with themes of exile, illusion, and dreams. It is also predicated on the idea that ontologically, fiction can be multilayered and metaphysically complex, which, in Nabokov's creative universe, calls for devices that emphasize the author's right to disrupt and construct the fictional reality. Inexperienced in creating fully plotted long-form works, the twenty five year old Nabokov produces a poet's play replete with homage and allusion to Shakespeare. In *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* he is able to experiment with the narrative techniques that would later allow him to develop his unique approach to the novel. At the same time, he creates a work that looks up to Shakespeare, whose poetic genius was, for Nabokov, no less important than his dramatic power. With this connection in mind, in this chapter, I will examine the metadramatic character of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, focusing on elucidating its use of dream framing and Shakespearean allusion. Furthermore, I will attempt to show how these aspects of the play foreshadow and interact with the use of theatrical devices and allusions in Nabokov's later works, which I will discuss further in chapters two and three.

Nabokov's early drama offers a glimpse inside the beginning of his career and allows particular insight into the influence of the theatrical in his later work. It also connects Nabokov to earlier theatrical prototypes, most prolifically to Shakespeare's dramas. In 1924 Nabokov is still in the process of perfecting and creating his set of artistic goals and principles. He has not yet settled into one particular medium for artistic expression: for all he knows, his future could lie in

poetry and playwriting, following in the footsteps of Shakespeare. This is why, in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, Nabokov's indebtedness to Shakespeare is especially apparent. In his Stanford lectures notes, written nearly two decades after he wrote his first plays, Nabokov argues that Shakespeare is unique in his ability to shape and control the artistic reality of his plays. Unlike less successful playwrights, according to Nabokov, Shakespeare avoids the pitfalls of dramatic determinism, creating instead "dream-plays" that circumvent conventional logic. For Nabokov, Shakespeare's dreamlike worlds are multidimensional universes that expand on the usual triviality of place and the predictable, linear time of ordinary tragedies and comedies. In my opinion, in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, Nabokov aspires to the "dream-logic" he finds in Shakespeare. He lays bare both the dream-like nature of his text and the devices that contribute to its creation, allowing the fictional reality to disintegrate as the play ends.

Though it is clear that *The Tragedy* was intended to be staged,[16] the novelistic layering of reality in the play makes this difficult. Nabokov echoes Shakespeare, whose a vast dramatic creations can be read as novelistic works adapted for the stage. The play includes a large cast of characters; they act out a story epic in scope and it represents a large swath of the history of a nation. There is not room on stage for as many characters as Nabokov seems to want to include in his play. He is unable to fully elaborate several roles that had appeared in earlier drafts as well developed characters, but who are only mere husks in the final version. It is an experiment in genre and technique, analysis of which can only be informative to the scholarship of Nabokov's mature works. Constantly aware of his indebtedness to Shakespeare, he not only borrows Shakespeare's images, devices and characterizations, but also he expands on his vision of the British playwright's artistic genius through his allusions. Nabokov appropriates Shakespearean

[16] Nabokov gave a public reading of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* in 1924 and hoped to have it staged by a German company in Königsberg. (Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, 25-26).

dream logic to create a play that would never be staged or widely read in his lifetime. It is a deeply flawed yet still an artistically beautiful work. It begins what will become a life-long relationship with Shakespeare as an influence and as a source of cultural material common to readers and speakers of the English language. In later decades, Nabokov would make use of dream-logic and Shakespeare more fully in his novels, *Bend Sinister*, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Pale Fire* as he developed his mature style of authorship.

The Tragedy of Mr. Morn is also an intensely metadramatic[17] work that calls attention to itself as a work of theatre written for the stage by alluding to the theatricality of the actions of its characters. For example, the King's mask, Ella as a actress and theatre student, and Ganus playing the role of Othello are all such theatrical concepts that the audience is forced to realize that they are in fact watching a play. In *The Tragedy*, Nabokov discusses ideas about the theatre as an art form in general, calling attention to the inherent tensions between actor, character, stage and setting. For instance, Morn is acutely aware that his role as king is analogous to that of an actor on stage. He makes statements like, "The stupefied mob/ does not know that the knight's body is dark/ and sweaty, locked in its fairy-tale armor."[18] Morn's dual identity as man and king continually interacts with the duality of character and actor that is impersonated on the stage. Tremens, the revolutionary leader, refers to the tension between the two halves of Morn's duality quite directly. He says, "He plays…I have no interest in the actor/ himself, yet—strange—it still seems to me/ that this is not the first time I have heard his/ voice…"[19] Tremens refers both to the

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[17] In this project I will borrow James Calderwood's definition of metadrama as a work in which "the playwright subjects the nature and materials of his art to radical scrutiny" (James Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad (*Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 1).

[18] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* trans. Thomas Karshan and Anastasia Tolstoy (New York: Knopf, 2012), *5.2.124-126*.

[19] Ibid., 2.1.294-98.

affected manner of Morn and to the fact that he is being played by an actor. Through metadrama in his play, Nabokov creates a second layer of meaning that exists underneath the surface of the action. As a result, metadrama becomes an essential component of Nabokov's interest in creating theatrical text rather than a novel or short story, media that he would later consider superior.

Siggy Frank suggests in *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* a set of reasoning behind Nabokov's fickle, yet pervasive, relationship to the theatre. Nabokov's negative conception of the theatre appears to be based in its impermanence and the lack of authorial control over its production. Theatre's fleeting nature is a "point of contention for an artist who subscribes to a notion of eternal and absolute art and beauty."[20] Nabokov's "insistence on individual authorial control" [21] as a principle of his art is very much at issue with the existence of the multifarious individual artists embodied by the directors, set designers and actors of the theatre. However, Frank argues, the naturally layered reality of the theatre holds a special attraction to Nabokov's artistic sensibilities. At every moment on stage, character and actor exist in the same body. The stage is simultaneously a room in a palace and a strange three walled chamber being observed by a crowd of people. These essential qualities of the theater are directly aligned with the type of layering that Nabokov engages in with many of his texts, not only his plays. It also makes the theatre the perfect place for Nabokov to begin to create his fiction because he has this interest in exploiting the disturbed fictional reality that can be accessed so naturally in theatre.

The Tragedy of Mr. Morn presents a period of violent upheaval in an unnamed Eastern European nation that echoes, but does not fully imitate, the revolutionary Russia from which Vladimir Nabokov fled in 1917. In this nation, after years of revolutionary struggle, a king has

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[20] Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, 3.

[21] Ibid.

come to power, who, hiding behind a mask, single-handedly seems to create a golden age of peace, happiness and prosperity in his country. The play opens as Ganus, a former revolutionary, returns to the capital after escaping exile in a labor camp to find the former leader of his revolution, Tremens, confined to his home by fever. Tremens' daughter, Ella, provides Ganus with the costume and makeup of Othello. Dressed as Shakespeare's hero, Ganus attends a party at his own home in order to see for himself whether his wife, Midia, has been faithful during his exile.[22] He discovers his wife in an affair with Morn, a dashing socialite, whom Ganus challenges to a duel.[23] The duel is to be settled by the draw of a card that determines which of the two men must kill himself.[24] Morn loses, but he cannot overcome his cowardice, fleeing the country with Midia. It is revealed that Morn himself was the king behind the mask.[25] After some time, the King's absence is noticed by the revolutionaries, who seize power. Ganus chases Morn into exile after realizing that he hasn't died, but he is unable to kill Morn. Morn returns to his country as a counterrevolution restores everything to its normal state. The final scene sees Morn as the King hosting a party, at the end of which he steps offstage and shoots himself, honoring the outcome of the duel.

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[22] Ganus' disguise as Othello serves two purposes. The first is that the device of the disguise used to spy on a lover is a staple of Shakespearean comedy, introducing this device early, Nabokov firmly places *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* on the level of Shakespearean drama and cues the audience to pay attention to further, more subtle allusions. The second is that the choice of Othello as a disguise heralding the result of Ganus' investigation, that his wife is cheating on him. By donning the disguise, Ganus takes on the role of the character he is dressed as. "Take this pillow, smother me"(TMM 1.2.478), Midia tells Ganus.

[23] The use of Othello as a reference also allows Tremens' premonition of the King's secret in the first scene. He says, "Strange:/ I dreamt that the King was being strangled/ by a colossal negro" (TMM 1.1.199-201), foreshadowing both Ganus's fight with Morn and the revelation that the Morn is actually the man behind the mask of the King.

[24] This type of duel is called a *duel à la courte paille*, as Ganus refers to it (*TMM,* 1.2.410).

[25] Edmin, Morn's confidant, reveals the identity of the King to Ganus, but not to the audience, in scene two of the first act, whispering the secret in Ganus' ear. Morn's secret is alluded to several other times before it is fully revealed to the audience by Morn himself, standing in the palace in the beginning of the third act.

All of this action is framed by the very minor character of the Foreigner, who appears in the beginning and end of the play with the suggestion that, in fact, everything is occurring within his dream. The Foreigner's reality, which seems very similar to the real world Russia that Nabokov had been forced to flee, places the play in historical context. While much of Nabokov's early poetry deals with the theme of exile, history would become a much greater force in his later works. In *The Tragedy,* the basic story already works on a epic scale; it is acted out on the level of kings, revolutions, and vast shifts in the politics of a nation. The Foreigner's dialogue with the rest of the play's characters emphasizes the historicity of the play. The Foreigner tells Morn, "In our country, all is not well,/ not well…When I wake up, I will tell them/ what a magnificent king I dreamt of…"[26] In a sense, this statement suggests that the Foreigner sees a way to read the events of the play as something that can inform the people of his waking reality, or comfort them. Perhaps this may even be a goal of the play itself: to mythicize the political events that led to the emigration of the Russian intelligentsia in the late 1910's and 20's. Here, the Foreigner might also suggest another reading of the play, which is that there can be no golden age like the one created by Morn. A benevolent and charismatic King cannot exist outside of fiction. Morn, in realizing the falsehoods implicit in his rule and his character, chooses to step off stage, leading to his own death. The Foreigner causes the King to realize his own impossibility and his existence ceases.

In novels like *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire,* the historical elements of the plot figure prominently. Nations and governments rise and fall both in the background of the storytelling and due to the actions of specific characters. More importantly, themes and motifs recur through history in the novels, becoming key components of the works' structures. Moreover, Nabokov's

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[26] Nabokov, *TMM,* 5.2.98-100.

own biography interacts with history in a similar way. In *Speak, Memory* (1967), Nabokov's autobiography, the movement of history is always a concern, driving Nabokov to flee Russia, Germany and then France. Nabokov is able to show themes developing over the space of years and wars in his own personal history. One motif he thus traces in his own biography is that of a match: he refers to a famous Russian General, Kuropatkin, performing a magic trick with matches. Later, Kuropatkin reappears and asks Nabokov's father for a light. Nabokov writes, "What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had trifled with had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through…"[27] Nabokov allows history to become interwoven with the events that he describes, and allows his imagery to drift between the mundane and the historical. In *The Tragedy*, the personal struggle of Morn's adulterous affair with Midia and the resultant duel lead to the fall of his government and the rise to power of Tremens' revolution. However, Nabokov is unable to work with motifs in the same way that he does in his novels. The structure of the play is defined by the Shakespearean five acts rather than by Nabokov's future facility with detail.

The presence of the Foreigner as an observer, and possibly "narrator," from another place and time adds a striking, dream-like layer to the play's reality. However, the convoluted twists and turns of the basic story and often clumsy characterization make the play far less intricate and persuasive than Nabokov's more finely wrought later works. For example, both Midia and Ella vacillate between love interests in ways that are not explained or fully explored in the play. At one point, Midia leaves Morn for his confidant, Edmin, and they fully profess their love for each other, though it is unexplained why this occurs and reads as being completely out of keeping with the way both Edmin and Midia have been characterized up to this point. Ella appears to flirt

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[27] Nabokov, *SM,* 27.

with Ganus, who, at certain points in the play, seems a much better choice for her than her betrothed, Klian. However, this subplot is dropped and in the end becomes inconsequential. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* Nabokov finds himself operating on a grand scale without fully supporting the grandeur either psychologically or structurally. As in his early poetry, he employs archetypical characters: a villain, a damsel in distress, a faithful lover, and a rebel. He begins the play ambitiously, with an array of characters divided into two separate but interrelated groups, by both class and politics (the division is structurally reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*, where the scene shifts between tavern and palace and the two group, noblemen and underclasses, eventually merge at the play's close). However, by the third act, Nabokov abandons most of the subplots arranged in the first two acts to focus on the main story involving the duel, exile and suicide of his protagonist, Morn.

When he begins to write *The Tragedy,* Nabokov has already developed his poetic skills and utilizes his versification techniques to create a long-form narrative. The transition from poetry to prose, however, was far from uncomplicated. In his introduction to *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Poetry*, Thomas Karshan suggests that the principle difference between Nabokov's poetry and his literary fiction is that while the poetry is overtly "simple" and works within the stylistic confines of particular genres, his novels are just the opposite. Karshan writes, "...anyone surveying Nabokov's poems from a list of their opening lines will find displayed there a lyric landscape which, for over fifty years, remained one of ardent declarations, ingenuous exclamations, and straightforward narratives."[28] Nabokov had to build up from the generic simplicity and light plotting of his poetry in order to evolve into the mature novelist he would become. *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* is indeed full of poetic exclamations. "Your eyes/ are like

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[28] Thomas Karshan, "Introduction" *Selected Poetry* (New York: Knopf, 2012), *xii*.

swallows in autumn, when they cry out:/ 'southwards,'"[29] Morn exclaims to Midia, echoing Nabokov's love verse and almost in parody of it. But *Morn's* subject matter goes beyond that of "ardent declaration." It is as tied to Nabokov's poetry as it is to *Pale Fire* or *Ultima Thule,* a novel and a short story that explore an individual's relationship to history. Moreover, in its main theme, the play creates a solid link between Nabokov's early lyrical oeuvre and his later novels. In his introduction to *Poems and Problems (*1969), Nabokov describes "a period [of verse composition] (reaching well into the 1920's) of a kind of private curatorship, aimed at preserving nostalgic retrospections and developing Byzantine imagery,"[30] during which he created poetry about Russia and exile. *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* just like many of his novels, from *Mary* (1925) to *Ada or Ardor: a Family Chronicle* (1965), is set in this world of nostalgic retrospection, in a fairy-tale version of the country Nabokov had been forced to flee.

In his poetry of the early to mid 1920's, Nabokov sets his sights on subject matter that is inextricably linked to the plot and style of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* but is less linked to his novels. One can trace a progression in both style and imagery from a poem like "The Ruler" (1923) or "Shakespeare" (1924) to *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*. In "The Ruler", Nabokov creates an image of a king of an exotic land:

> An India invisible I rule:
> come 'neath the azure of my realm,
> I shall command my naked wizard
> to change a snake into a bracelet for thee.[31]

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[29] Nabokov, *TMM,* 1.2.419-21.

[30] Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), 13.

[31] Nabokov, "The Ruler" *SP,* 8.

"The Ruler" is a piece of what Nabokov called his "passionate and commonplace love verse,"[32] in which the poet, casting himself as a king, offers his lover the luxuries, wealth and magic of his palace. In this poem, Nabokov draws on the exotic image of the far east, rather than one of Russian emigre nostalgia as he does in the *The Tragedy*. His fantasy of monarchy, though, is notably reminiscent of Morn's role in *The Tragedy*. As in the play, Nabokov allows this image of a powerful king of a dreamlike land to disintegrate at the end of the poem, writing:

> I'll give thee earrings, twin teardrops of sunrise,
> I'll give the heart out of my breast,
> I'm emperor, and if you don't believe it,
> then don't—but come in any case.[33]

This lightly humorous ending bears a structural similarity to the *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* in that the king is revealed to be an ordinary man donning a mask. This relatively simple set of four rhymed quatrains already poses the questions of narration that Nabokov will return to throughout his works. The king is not a king and the reality of the poem is disturbed to the point where mundane reality peaks through the fantasy. This is precisely the mechanism of the last act of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* where Nabokov challenges the reality of his fictional world.

In "Shakespeare," another poem intimately connected to *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* Nabokov demonstrates his extensive knowledge of Shakespeare's works and English literature, composing an ode to the bard's poetic influence. Nabokov's appeal to Shakespeare is overwhelmingly and blatantly adulatory: "Reveal yourself, god of iambic thunder,/ you hundred-mouthed, unthinkably great bard!"[34] This kind of obsequious praise for another author, even for Shakespeare, is strikingly out of character for Nabokov. It is very unlike Nabokov's later

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[32] Nabokov, "Introduction," *PP,* 13.

[33] Nabokov, "The Ruler," *SP*, 8.

[34] Nabokov, "Shakespeare," *SP,* 12.

cautious expressions of admiration and respect for other authors, including Shakespeare. In a 1967 interview, for example, Nabokov writes, "The verbal poetical texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has known, and is immensely superior to the structure of his plays as plays,"[35] thus putting his praise for Shakespeare in a critical, even comparative context. It is possible that Nabokov's excessively laudatory tone in the poem stems from his desire to shield his fellow author from accusations of plagiarism or even non-existence. The poem explores the disputed and doubted authorship of Shakespeare and argues with those who would doubt his authenticity:

> You are among us, you're alive; your name, though
> your image, too—deceiving, thus the world—
> you have submerged in your beloved Lethe.
> It's true, of course, a usurer had grown
> accustomed, for a sum, to sign your work
> (that Shakespeare—Will—who played the Ghost in *Hamlet,*
> who lived in pubs, and died before he could
> digest in full his portion of a boar's head)…[36]

The fact that Nabokov's oeuvre is preoccupied with questions of authorship and authenticity of narration further supports this explanation. His author-characters and characters who are poets and writers stubbornly defend their right to own, control and manipulate their creations. In this early poem, Shakespeare becomes vulnerable and is robbed of his authorial power outside of his own literary works. In a way, he becomes like Morn, a man in a mask, who creates and manipulates a nation of dreamlike perfection and magic, like a fairy-tale, but cannot reveal his true self, that of a cavorting aristocratic socialite. In the poem, Nabokov's lyrical hero addresses Shakespeare as a man who hides his literary gift from others: "you easily, regretlessly relinquished/ the laurels twining into a dry wreath,/ concealing for all time your monstrous

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[35] Appel, Alfred. "Interview with Vladimir Nabokov." Nabokov *writes* this because the written word was his preferred method of answering interview questions, rather than talking off the cuff.

[36] Nabokov, "Shakespeare" 11.

genius/ beneath a mask…"[37] Thus Shakespeare becomes Nabokov's idealized authorial persona, a masked, godlike wizard-king of an imaginary land.[38] This not to say that Morn represents the author in *The Tragedy,* but rather that the masked king is an image that is important and idealized for Nabokov. It is an image intimately connected with Nabokov's conception of authorship.

Brian Boyd observes in *The Russian Years*, "*The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* unmistakably aims at Shakespeare."[39] While the whole play can be read in Shakespearean terms, there are two specific ways that Nabokov alludes to and calls upon Shakespeare in *The Tragedy* that are essential to understanding the play's metadrama and as well as its role as precursor to Nabokov's later work.[40] The first is Morn's relationship to the kings of Shakespeare's history plays and the second is the continual parallel to Shakespeare's metadrama, which consists of dreams and plays within plays. Nabokov references Shakespeare's histories in the very core of *The Tragedy*. Morn's climactic struggle with the revolutionaries, his own mortality, his sense of honor and Morn's use of language associate him with the kings of Shakespeare's dramatizations of British history. Like Shakespeare, Nabokov notices the drama that exists in history and how history can be observed in terms of logical plotting and recurrent motifs. *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov's autobiography, is an exercise in this type of reading of history, where the author is able to find the patterns and plotting within the reality of his past. *Morn*, as a whole, also exists as a Shakespearean allusion in its use of metadramatic technique. Nabokov allows his characters to

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[37] Ibid.

[38] In the poem, "Fame," Nabokov offers a self-portrait of his authorial persona, "To myself I appear as an idol, a wizard,/ bird headed, emerald gloved, dressed in tights,/ made of bright blue scales…" Such an image is clearly in the same vein as the image of Shakespeare as an abstract authorial persona in "Shakespeare."

[39] Boyd, *VNRY, 222*.

[40] There are other ways, as well, including the direct reference that is Ganus playing the role of Othello and then assuming the role of the jealous husband thereafter in the second act of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*.

attempt to control the setting and events of the play itself, taking on roles of directors, managers and instigators of the drama.

This is what Shakespeare does in plays like *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where he gives specific characters the power to adjust the parameters of the world around them through powerful magic akin to the ability of an author to control the narrative at will. One of the guests in the first act of *The Tragedy* comments,

> The King has protected poetry, the agitation
> of bygone ages--horse, and sails, and live
> ancient music--although alongside these,
> there wander through the air transparent,
> electrical birds...[41]

The dreamlike nature of the *The Tragedy* seems to be caused by the orchestrations of the King. It is as if the King himself has made the fractured and drab world of the reality of hardship in a country in the midst of revolution into a dreamworld without care, where everyone walks about the bright, sublime architecture of the city squares with an "ever-cheerful gait." There are no cripples in the streets and even the sounds of footsteps and hooves are melodious.[42] The electrical birds mentioned by the guest suggest props and scenery rather than something concretely real that would exist outside of a theatre or a dreamworld. In Shakespeare's kings and dukes, Nabokov sees mirrored versions of himself as an author, puppeteers who control the people around them and even the very fabric of reality. Morn is often referred to (by himself and by others) as responsible for the very atmosphere of the stage and setting. When he makes his disappearance into exile, this atmosphere collapses. Tremens, who embodies Morn's antithesis, seems to have designs on the same ability to control, but to the opposite end. Where Morn is able

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[41] Nabokov, *TMM,* 1.2.89-94.

[42] Ibid., 1.2.65-72.

to create a clockwork stage-set kingdom in which the city streets are nearly as perfect as painted scenery, Tremens desires the opposite, an apocalyptic theatre of destruction in which he can direct the suffering of the characters in a drama of his own making.

In his book on the metadrama of Shakespeare's *Henriad* tetralogy of history plays, James Calderwood argues that the central metadramatic plot of the plays revolves around the stability of verbal meaning. Calderwood traces this metadramatic undercurrent through the plays from the "magical investment in royal semantics" of Richard II, through Henry IV's "surrender of sacramental language to a utilitarian one in which the relation between words and things is arbitrary, unsure and ephemeral," into the "redemption of the word"[43] under King Henry V. The metadrama of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* is tightly linked to this way of reading Shakespeare's tetralogy. Contemplating his own death at the end of the play, Morn fixates on the deception inherent to his rule. The semantics of his kingship, Morn says, are "empty and deceiving."[44] The feeling of guilt that drives Morn to suicide is inextricably tied to the lies of his reign and exile. A perfect monarchy cannot exist outside of fiction, as Morn realizes, without devolving into dictatorship, incompetence, or revolution. The relationship between words and meaning, the symbols of the king and the plain truth behind them, are too tenuous to go on existing. Morn says, "I must die! I am guilty, not before Ganus,/ but before God, before you, before myself,/ before my people!"[45] Morn's death is the destruction of an impossible rhetorical construction. Moreover, his enemy, Tremens, represents a threat to language itself. He seeks the "spread of wondrous cold and fire/ of tormenting illness across my country:/ deathly revolts; hollow

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[43] Calderwood, "*Henriad*" 5-7.

[44] Nabokov, *TMM*, 5.2.160-61.

[45] Ibid., 5.2.153-55.

destruction;/ bliss; emptiness; non existence."[46] The revolutionary wants to destroy meaning itself. In Shakespeare's *Henriad*, the disconnect between word and meaning is resolved by the rise to power of Henry V, the son of the usurper Henry Bolingbroke. As Calderwood asserts, Hal begins his journey to power as an "apparent lie," but then attempts to "restore value and meaning both to Kingship and the King's English."[47] However, Morn has no heir; instead of leaving the task of restoring truth to his successor, he must take drastic action. Morn kills himself, destroying his physical form as well as the constructed persona of his sovereignty, in order to resolve the lies inherent to that reign.

Here, at its suicidal conclusion, *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* references another Shakespearean trope, the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies, a medieval belief maintaining that the King has both a fallible, aging, material "body natural" and an incorporeal, immortal form, the "body politic," tied to the continuation of sovereignty after his death.[48] In the text, Nabokov uses both the name "Morn" and "King" to indicate the character's speech, one representing the human person of Morn and the other representing the immortal historical figure of a King. At the close of the play, Edmin soliloquizes, "...No one must see how/ my King presents to the heavens,/ the death of Mister Morn."[49] The body natural, supposedly, is to die as the curtain falls, but the implication is that the King's body politic is to live on. When Morn abdicates the first time, exiling himself, it takes a lengthy period of time for the people to notice his absence.

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[46] Ibid., 1.1.322-25.

[47] Calderwood, "*Henriad,*" 7.

[48] In her essay, "The Woman Will Be Out: A New Look At The Law In *Hamlet,*" Carla Spivack draws a connection between the two bodies doctrine and the symbolism of the body of Ophelia in the play. Perhaps the most specific reference to the doctrine that Spivack highlights in *Hamlet* occurs when Polonius says "The body is with the King, yet the King is not with the body" (*Hamlet* 4.2.26-27).

[49] Nabokov, *TMM,* 5.2.193-95.

Anyone may don Morn's mask and rule the country in his stead. Had Edmin been characterized differently, it might have been him. Perhaps it could be Morn's young nephew referred to in the third act.[50] However, this is all Morn's construction and, though even in this last scene Edmin is still under the control of Morn's spell, it will fall apart after Morn's death. Morn says, "A dream once interrupted cannot be resumed,/ and the kingdom which sailed before me in a dream/ is suddenly revealed as merely standing/ on the earth."[51] Morn equates his rule by deception with the dream of the Foreigner. Once he is dead, all of the lies that were holding the nation together and building it up into a state of dreamlike beauty will dissolve. Morn destroys the falsehood that plagues him by allowing the two facets of himself to recombine in his death. In Edmin's final words, Morn and the King finally become one body, neither body politic or body natural. The semantic disconnect between the two names is resolved as the play text switches quickly between the name of Morn and King and the two names are finally used in the same sentence by Edmin.

Though he bears little influence on the events of the plot or on the politics of Morn's country, the Foreigner's place in the play's structure destabilizes Morn's attempts at control of the narrative. The Foreigner frames the play, appearing at the gathering in Ganus' house in the first act and again at the party at the King's palace in the final scene. He is a visitor to Morn's country. He offers an outsider's perspective on the action of the play and of the other characters, for example, facilitating the introduction of new characters by asking other guests about them.[52] He introduces himself, "I have come from the Twentieth Century, from/ a northern country

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[50] Ibid., 3.1.16.

[51] Ibid., 5.2.137-40.

[52] Ibid., 1.1.1-40.

called... [whispers]"[53] The implication is that the inaudible nation is real-world revolutionary Russia and that the world of the play is therefore a dream-like echo of that reality dreamed up by the Foreigner. He offers a context to the traffic of the stage, driving home the nostalgia that Nabokov referred to as a "private curatorship"[54] of his Russian past. To those who, like Nabokov, were experiencing the uncertainty of emigre life, the dream of Morn's nation offers something that they longed for, but frames it as unreality. The Foreigner acts as the representative of the audience on the stage, but also, as the dreamer and therefore the ultimate genesis of the play's action, takes on the role of author or of a fictionalized avatar of the playwright.

Throughout his brief appearances at the start and close of the play, the Foreigner maintains a dreamlike, distant and unconcerned demeanor. He never takes a particularly active role in the plot, assuming the role of a novelistic third person narrator. He is the character in the play most associated with Nabokov the author, who at the time of writing *The Tragedy* was living as a foreigner in Prague.[55] His position in Morn's society is also analogous to Nabokov's exiled Russian speaking audience in Germany. He presents himself as a storyteller, saying to Morn, "I'm pleased: I dreamt you up well."[56] The Foreigner, like Morn, is interested in the meaning of the story that has just been shown on stage. He says that when he wakes up he will bring the story of Morn, the magnificent king, to the people of his real world nation as a symbol

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[53] Nabokov, *TMM,* 1.1.47-48.

[54] Nabokov, *PP, 4*.

[55] The setting of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* is very reminiscent of the city of Prague. He writes, in a letter to Vera in October of 1924, "On one side the hill suddenly drops off into a fortress wall; on its top stands a dark two-towered castle, girded here and there with scarlet fretwork – like a Slavic sheen falling on Gothic geometry. There, too, behind a cast-iron railing, is a Catholic cemetery: straight little graves, golden crucifixes." His descriptions of the Prague recall the Foreigner's description of Morn's capital: "I am struck by its spaciousness, by its clean,/ extraordinary air: in it music sounds/ differently; houses, bridges, and stone arches,/ all the architectural outlines in it,/ are boundless, light, like the passage /from the happiest sigh to sublime silence..." (*TMM* 1.2.62-72).

[56] Nabokov, *TMM,* 5.2.85.

of hope in the face of a nihilistic revolution. Nabokov uses the Foreigner to experiment with narrative and authorial voice, foreshadowing the appearance of the narrator-character at the end of *Pnin* or the invasion of reality into the fictional text at the end of *Bend Sinister*: "I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire netting of my window."[57] The author, or at least a fictionalized version of him, appears in the text as details from the world outside the narrative (not necessarily an autobiographical reality, but significantly less fictive than that of the novel itself), becoming interwoven with the final scene of the novel as the author considers his creation. As in these later works, in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* reality is always in question, until it finally unravels in the last act.

In his later novels, Nabokov often makes use of a similar, but more developed technique of authorial representation. He employs narrator-characters who come very close to being avatars of the author or audience in the text, but who ultimately can't exist on the same level as the extra-textual author and reader. For example, in *Pnin,* the narrator-character is a Russian Emigre intellectual who shares Nabokov's first name and patronymic, but is ultimately an imperfect simulacrum of the author. In the words of Mary Besemmeres in her article "Self Translation in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin,*" the narrator is a "glittering snakeskin the author sloughs off by the end of the novel."[58] The Foreigner's framing of *The Tragedy* and his fifty odd lines of verse, cannot amount to the same complexity as that of *Pnin's* narrator or the confused identity of V., the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. In the latter novel and in *Pale Fire*, the true identity of the narrator is called into question, potentially turning the whole text upside down. In

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[57] Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage, 1990), *216*.

[58] Mary Besemmeres, "Self Translation in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin,*" *The Russian Review* 59 (2000), 391.

the end of *Sebastian Knight*, V.'s ambiguous statements lead the reader into considering several opposed readings, wherein he or the titular protagonist is not real, or "perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows."[59] With this final comment to his text, V. calls into question his own reality, suggesting that he and Knight are figments of someone else's authorship. *Pale Fire* presents an even more complex dilemma of authorship. Thus the Foreigner exists in a tradition of doubted fictive "authors" and dreamers in Nabokov's fiction as their predecessor or prototype.

While the Foreigner represents an experiment in framing and emphasizes the play's dream-logic, his revelations about the reality of the events of the plot are a matter of aesthetics rather than structure. *Pnin,* for example, closes with the third person narrator revealing himself in the first person as a fictionalized version of the author, watching his protagonist escaping from the narrative. The narrator is then told the events of the episode which begins the novel, forming a closed loop.[60] Other novels, like *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* contain realities very unlike the real world, but also dissimilar to Morn's fairy-tale dream. Nabokov creates dystopian nightmare realms in which his characters must navigate surreal versions of *Morn's* dreamscape. After *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, Nabokov creates several more readily performed, though less ambitious plays, which continue to explore his themes of emigre life, exile, illusion and questioned reality. *The Man from the USSR* returns to these subjects, though it is eminently more easily staged than *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*. Nabokov ceased to write for the theatre and

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[59] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.

[60] In *Speak Memory,* Nabokov discusses the idea of closed loops of history, writing, "The spiral is a spiritualized circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free" (SM 275). In *Pnin*, the title character is able to subvert the narrator's insistence on a vicious circle by escaping his narration making the circle into a spiral.

his poetic output declined after his first novel, *Mary*, was published in 1926.[61] He returned to the theatre after a decade of success as a writer in Berlin's Russian emigre community as he prepared for another great transition in his writing career: his switch from Russian to English as he struggled to earn a living in Paris. Plays like *The Event* and *The Waltz Invention* (1938) represent this period well. They also work with framing and create nightmare landscapes like *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister,* which were written during the same period. When Nabokov was invited to teach at Stanford, his qualifications as a dramatist were emphasized even more than his abilities as a poet or novelist.[62] Nabokov's next and final foray into dramatic writing is represented by the ultimately unsuccessful *Lolita: A Screenplay*. Contradictorily, writing for the theatre cannot hold Nabokov's interest for very long, yet it is integral to his development as a writer and to the qualities of the nondramatic writing for which he is better known. Nabokov writes, "the most popular plays of yesterday are on the level of the worst novels of yesterday. The best plays of today are on the level of magazine stories and fat best sellers."[63] He suggests that plays are similar to novels, but cannot aspire to the level of complexity and artistic achievement found in the best novels. Nabokov's own oeuvre might be the best possible proof of this statement, though it might be more simply self-reflexive.

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[61] Karshan, *SP, xxvi.*

[62] Boyd, *VNAY,* 22.

[63] Nabokov, *USSR,* 327.

Chapter 2: The Evolution of Theatrical Imagination: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1938), Nabokov makes subtle use of both Shakespearean references and theatrical devices. One of the most theatrical sections of the novel is its final scene, in which V., the narrator and fictive author of his half-brother's biography, reviews the action in theatrical, even burlesque terms. He writes, "Thus—I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going—the dim figures of the few friends he had, the scholar, and the poet, and the painter,—smoothly and noiselessly paying their graceful tribute…"[64] V. creates a surreal image in which theatrical performance in which he plays the role of Sebastian. The scene is the novel in miniature, where the major events are recast as spectators viewing V.'s performance, rather than him traveling to visit and interview them, which makes up the majority of the novel's text. He continues,

> …and here is Goodman, the flat-footed buffoon, with his dicky hanging out of his waistcoat; and there—the pale radiance of Clare's inclined head, as she is led away weeping by a friendly maiden. They move round Sebastian—round me who am acting Sebastian,—and the old conjuror waits in the wings with his hidden rabbit; and Nina sits on a table in the brightest corner of the stage, with a wineglass of fuchsined water under a painted palm. And there the masquerade draws to a close. The bald little prompter shuts his book, as the light fades gently. The end, the end. They all go back to their everyday life (and Clare goes back to her grave)—but the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. [65]

The curtain falls on the novel's action. Sebastian is dead, the truth about his relationship with Nina has been revealed, as has the tragedy of his relationship with Clare. V., however, is stuck in his role as a biographer and as acting Sebastian. After his obsessive quest for some kind of

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[64] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.

[65] Ibid.

ultimate answer in the life and works of his brother, the famous author, he finds only that he has become an actor trapped in a role, with a mask that cannot be removed from his face.

The motif of the mask occurs throughout the novel and is particularly theatrical, dividing the characters from the actors and suggesting that everyone is engaged in either deception or some differing layer of reality that is separate from the surface of what the reader is directly shown by the narration. Each of the major players who V. talks to in his research into Sebastian's life appears at this strange show. Oddly, the "old conjuror" waiting in the wings seems to be a character from one of V.'s direct quotations from Sebastian's books. V. himself, stands in the middle of all these characters. Nina, alone out of all the other people V. has encountered, stands on the stage beside him, rather than standing passively in the audience. She is the featured performer, the *femme fatale* of Sebastian's final years. Her glass is not only full of false wine, but it is water dyed with a chemical whose historical use is to disguise poor quality wines. She and V. are both actors here, as they are in the episode in which V. meets with Nina and eventually finds out her secret identity, another episode steeped in theatricality. V. is the representative of the writer, Sebastian Knight, attempting to keep his memory alive, but in reality only telling his own story. Unlike Nabokov's later failed biographer, Charles Kinbote, it is much less clear whether V. is truly serving his subject; whatever madness V. has is truly not on the same scale as Kinbote's. However, V., by becoming an actor playing Knight, who cannot escape his role, becomes a truly flawed biographer. He seems to believe that he is able to act for his deceased brother, instead of simply portraying him. In this novel, Nabokov, through V., presents Sebastian as a fictional author, only knowable through the text in which he exists. Sebastian is relieved of control by his death and by V., himself. Unable to speak from beyond the grave, Sebastian cannot ensure his work is presented in full and free of misinterpretation. In this chapter, I will discuss how the

evolution of theatrical device and motif in Nabokov's work leads to its connection with the theme of doubted authorship that arises in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and will be developed further in Nabokov's even later work.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Vladimir Nabokov's first English language novel, ends with the death of its title character, in accordance with biographical convention. In the novel, V., a Russian exile living in France, sets out to chronicle the life of Sebastian Knight, his Cambridge educated half-brother who has become a relatively famous author in England. V. travels across Europe reliving the final years of Sebastian's life, eventually returning to the scene of Sebastian's death in a rural French hospital. In a novel so full of deception, mistaken identity and ambiguity, it is fitting that, in the final chapter, V. has been sitting outside the hospital room of a dying man who is not actually his brother. V. writes, "So I did not see Sebastian after all, or at least I did not see him alive. But those few minutes I spent listening to what I thought was his breathing changed my life as completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying."[66] V.'s acceptance of his failure to hear his brother's final words offers an insight into the nature of this biography. Sebastian remains hidden,[67] only revealed through the words of others and the pieces of his writing that V. allows the reader to see. The concept of doubted authorship, that authorial control might be subverted or that the author's identity could be questioned, is therefore central to this novel. In fact, the central critical problem in the novel is the reliability of the premise of its narrator, the fictive author, V. He claims to be the author of the text, writing in the first person the story of his adventures pursuing the truth of his deceased brother's life, at times discussing the nature of writing and at others apologizing for not being as

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[66] Ibid., 202.

[67] As Gennady Barabtarlo points out in his book *Aerial View*, the letters in "Sebastian Knight" can be rearranged to "A Knight is Absent" (*Aerial View,* 215).

good a writer as Sebastian himself. It is easy, though, to doubt V.'s claims and consider that the narrative might be a ruse created by Knight himself. The novel might be a playful kind of autobiography created by Knight himself, an author imagining what it would be like if he died. On the other hand, V.'s existence, while easily doubted, is for all purposes impossible to prove or disprove. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Nabokov's theme of doubted authors and interest in indisputable authorial control over his fictional works are crucial elements of his oeuvre as a whole. Sebastian Knight is an author whose control of his works, and even his very existence, cannot remain unquestioned.

Earlier in his career, as is discussed in the previous chapter, Nabokov gained experience working with the layered reality of the theatre while writing plays like *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*. In writing that play, and along with poetry like "Shakespeare," Nabokov also began to make use of Shakespearean allusion and to explore the problems of Shakespeare's biography. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Nabokov creates an fictional author and then examines the problems that arise from depriving him of his most basic requirements. Sebastian Knight becomes like the hero of Nabokov's early poem, entitled "Shakespeare," in which the author can be known only through his works and through a nebulous, dubious mythos surrounding his personal life. Knight's life and works are mediated by wholly unreliable, incompetent and overbearing critics, biographers and their sources, who sometimes even lie outright. Many, including Nabokov himself, might argue that an author ought to only be known through his works, independent of the real person who embodies him. For writers like Knight and Shakespeare, even this is not possible. Shakespeare is read via the compilers of the various quartos and folios,[68] while Knight's work is present to the reader only in V.'s curated quotations of his novels and short

[68] The first folio was published in 1623, 7 years after Shakespeare's death in 1616.

stories. Moreover, Shakespeare's works are interpreted by actors on a stage, even further distancing the mind and pen of the playwright from the final product through which he is known. Likewise, Sebastian is represented by V. who is "acting Sebastian."[69] Just as a theatrical production consists of a multitude of voices, the actors, the director, producers and stage managers, the novel is full of competing voices all attempting to elucidate the true meaning of the life of Sebastian Knight, who can never be truly present. Over all of these voices, Nabokov presides, the true author, laughing as they struggle and squabble amongst themselves, undoubtably in control of the narrative.

Sebastian's knowledge of Shakespeare's work is shown in several episodes of the novel, though as a Cambridge student and writer in the English language, it can also be reasonably expected. However, it also seems that Sebastian is aware of the problems of his authorial control and of their possible comparison with Shakespeare's biography. Shakespeare seems to be sardonically parodied in a brief excerpt V. provides from Sebastian Knight's novel, *Success*. The novel itself, V. explains, deals with the strange working of fate that would cause two people, namely Percival Q. and Anne, a conjuror's assistant. Knight writes, "William [Anne's first queer effeminate fiancé, who afterwards jilted her] saw her home as usual and cuddled her a little in the darkness of the doorway."[70] The scene is a strange parody of Shakespeare's relationship to Anne Hathaway, a woman whom he married at a young age, but, according to popular legend, regularly abandoned or ignored while living in London. Shakespeare's gift is a curse as he annoys Anne with easy rhymes and absurd metaphors, saying things like, "the onion of happiness…poor Willy is willy nilly a willow" and "That moon is childish, and that wet

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[69] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.

[70] Ibid., 96.

pavement is childish and Love is a honey-suckling babe."[71] V. leaves the Shakespearean quality of the young lover uncommented upon,[72] though he suggests that William is, in fact, a fictionalized version of Sebastian Knight, who at the time of writing Success is going through the rough end stage of his relationship with Clare Bishop, with whom he had lived as husband and wife for many years. This suggestion would seem to equate Knight and Shakespeare rather directly, at least in V.'s mind, though it is supported by the fact that Sebastian gives William a heart ailment mirroring his own: "Coates (the doctor) is right when he says that my heart is too small for my size. And sighs."[73] It may seem a little egotistical for Sebastian, as a writer, especially in the context of Nabokov's uncharacteristically wholehearted praise of the bard, to compare himself to Shakespeare. However, it happens here, as well as in his discourse with Mr. Goodman, though in that instance it is somewhat warranted as it is intended as an insult to Goodman's intelligence. In Sebastian's *Success,* however, William's similarities to both Sebastian himself and to a parodic version of Shakespeare, are in part overshadowed by the appearance of another character who is perhaps a better analogy for both Knight and Shakespeare.

In the excerpt from *Success*, William goes to visit Anne's employer, the conjuror (possibly the very same individual as the conjuror waiting to come on stage following V.'s performance of Sebastian at the end of the novel). William insults the conjuror, saying, "A ridiculous profession, a pick-pocket gone mad, a matter of patter. The pennies in a beggar's cap

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[71] Ibid.

[72] In a previous scene, V. points out how Sebastian fooled Mr. Goodman into believing that his first novel (unpublished and destroyed) had been about "a fat young student who travels home to find his mother married to his uncle; this uncle, an ear-specialist had murdered the student's father," *i.e*. Hamlet. Here, however, he either doesn't notice or wishes to allow the reader to discover it.

[73] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 97.

and the omelette in your top hat. Absurdly the same."[74] In many ways, Sebastian is closer to the conjuror than he is to William. The writer and the magician both create verisimilitude, even though their media are by definition fictional. V. describes Sebastian's composition of *Success*, writing, "all the magic and force of his art are summoned in order to discover the exact way in which two lines of life were made to come into contact."[75] Though it seems likely that the fictional William Shakespeare is some kind of writer, poet or playwright by the way he speaks and acts, the conjuror is far more writerly. "We are used to insult,"[76] he says, refusing to take the critic, William, seriously. The conjuror is writer, director and actor in his own play. Perhaps Sebastian has divided the two aspects of his relationship with Clare Bishop into William and the conjuror. One is the affectionate, though at times grating lover, and the other is the master magician, in whose art Clare (or Anne) both assists and finds fascination. Shakespeare, too, is nearer to the conjuror than the effeminate and scattered Will. The conjuror is a metaphor for the writer in the same way as Shakespeare's Prospero is in the Tempest. The magician faces all of the problems of authorship and is required to create in his critical, perhaps even unwilling, audience a suspension of disbelief. He creates and manipulates a world for dramatic effect.

The Shakespearean parallel in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is not merely the resemblance of his confused history of representation with that of Sebastian Knight. As Siggy Frank observes in *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, the plot of the novel itself, in addition to isolated episodes that reference other plays, heavily draws on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare's Sebastian and Viola chart a similar course to Nabokov's Sebastian and V. Like the

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[74] Ibid., 98.

[75] Ibid., 94.

[76] Ibid., 98.

two half-brothers of Nabokov's novel, the theatrical Sebastian and Viola are a pair of siblings who are exiled from their native land and forced to create lives for themselves on foreign shores. Nabokov, along with the protagonists of his novel and of Shakespeare's play, all have lost a father at a young age.[77] Also, structurally, the two pairs of siblings begin together and are reunited. Viola spends much of the action of the play apart from Sebastian, almost impersonating him by dressing herself as a man, after she is separated from him in the storm. Likewise, V. begins his narrative by describing his childhood with Sebastian in Russia and then he proceeds to take on the character of Sebastian through the course of his perambulations around Europe in search of the past. By the end of the novel the two are reunited, in a sense, as Sebastian and V. seem to merge into a single entity. This scene, where in V.'s words, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows."[78] mirrors the scene and sentiment of Shakespeare's twins becoming reunited. Shakespeare's Sebastian says, "Do I stand there? I never had a brother;/ Nor can there be that deity in my nature,/ Of here and every where."[79] Both texts end on an uncomfortable note. V. is stuck in the role of Sebastian and Shakespeare's two protagonists enter into expedient marriages. Viola barely bothers to remove her disguise before walking off stage with Orsino.

V. becomes an actor portraying Sebastian Knight and also, conversely, Sebastian Knight seems to inhabit the role and the person of V., who drops almost all of his personal concerns in order to serve as Sebastian's biographer. In *Twelfth Night,* Viola drops the role in which she played the object of Olivia's love and lets Sebastian fill it, remaining in her chosen character of

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[77] That age, 13, is shared by Sebastian Knight and Shakespeare's twins, (*RLSK* 1912, and *Twelfth Night* 5.1.238), incidentally a similar age to Nabokov's when his own father dueled a political rival (and survived) (*SM* 188).

[78] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.

[79] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night,* 5.1.224-26.

lover to Orsino. The twins are separated again, but this time in order to marry their chosen mates and live in happiness. In Nabokov's text as well, the "twins" are separated at both the beginning and the end of the novel, as V.'s tale begins with the story of his and Sebastian's exile from Russia and ends with Sebastian's death. However, the beginning and end of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* are also essentially the same. From the scene of the false deathbed at the conclusion of the novel, the narrator returns to the very beginning of his investigations into Sebastian's life with the revelation that he has been "acting Sebastian" through the whole novel. The end of the novel, *i.e*. Sebastian's death, is also the starting point of V.'s biographical mission, as he returns to the scene of Sebastian's death in a hospital in France. It is here that V. decides to take on the task of an autobiography. As the novel ends, all the events V. has described up to this point, aside from his hasty and confused trip to St. Damier to see the dying Sebastian, have yet to occur. The idea that, in V.'s words, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows,"[80] suggests the fictionality of the whole exercise, but it is also something that V. has been pretending not to have realized for the entire length of his biographical attempt. V. is convinced of the ability of the dead to attach themselves to the living and subtly guide them. Although he suggests that he and Sebastian have always had some kind of connection based on their relationship as half-brothers, after Sebastian's death this connection grows far stronger as V. feels he is acting as Sebastian's envoy to the world of the living. V. relies on his ability to intuit the great leaps of logic that abound in Sebastian's prose as well as in the thoughts that governed his life. Naturally, the description of the subject's death comes at the end of the biography, but here it is also truly the beginning of the story. V. is unable to remove his mask, and he has had it on for the whole novel.

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[80] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.

The motif of masks and of the removal and donning of masks occurs throughout *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The image of people carrying out rather mundane conversations or actions while wearing a black mask lends certain scenes a surreal quality. Specifically, V.'s interview with Mr. Goodman, another biographer of Sebastian's, albeit an even more flawed one than V, becomes quite strange as V. refuses to describe Goodman's face until the very end of the scene. He writes, "A black mask covered his face. 'What can I do for you?' He went on looking at me through the eyeholes and still holding my card."[81] The addition of the imaginary mask lends the interview a surreal quality, but it also signals V.'s willingness to alter reality in his writing in the service of his narrative. Goodman's face remains covered throughout the interview, becoming an obtrusive part of the description of the person, rather than serving its purpose as a narrative device used to avoid accurate description. V. continues, "Mr. Goodman with his finger and thumb stroked his face… I mean the face under the mask…stroked it down, down, reflectively."[82] V., it seems, is a sloppy writer, but purposefully so. After altering the scene so much through the addition of the mask, he almost lets it slip off. He corrects himself, inserting the strange image after the face of the action between a pair of ellipses. Goodman is deceiving V. throughout their interview by not revealing the fact that he too is composing a biography entitled *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight*.

It is only after he finds out about the book from Goodman's secretary, Helen Pratt, that V. allows the mask to fall from Goodman's face completely. He writes, "She darted away and very slowly I descended the steps. Mr. Goodman's large soft pinkish face was, and is, remarkably like

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[81] Ibid., 55.

[82] Ibid.

a cow's udder."[83] The insult is a parting shot from the rightly as V. allows himself to express his anger. Goodman has not only lied to him about his own book, but also attempted to discourage him from writing a competing biography. The black mask is a theatrical image, like the stage sets and actor-character relationships later in the novel, and there is also something quite theatrical about the way the image seems entirely out of its creator's control. If he abandons the device later on, there doesn't seem to be any reason for V. to include it at all. Additionally, the scene is made even more theatrical because the conversation between V. and Goodman is being eavesdropped upon by Helen Pratt. She says, "I have overheard as much of your conversation as I could stand…"[84] The scene is theatre, but it is deeply flawed and clumsy; so much so that its audience can barely stay seated. Once a mask slips off in the impermanent medium of the theatre, it has happened. Though it might be fixed afterward, an error cannot be unseen. At the end of the encounter, V. writes, "After shaking hands with me most cordially, he returned the black mask which I pocketed, as I suppose it might come in usefully on some other occasion."[85] The mask is a device of V.'s narration that he uses in order to avoid slandering Mr. Goodman. But for all of the surreality it imbues the episode with, which is perhaps the true reason for its inclusion, the pretense is completely abandoned as V. leaves the office.

This particular insult, while quite funny, is so seemingly devoid of context, as well as of Sebastian's artistry, which V. has already absolved himself of imitating. After having generously supplied the mask, V. cannot help but remove it. This theatrical style, wherein a thought is both permanently a part of the work and perhaps an error that must be corrected, mirrors Sebastian's

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[83] Ibid., 58.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid., *57*.

style of writing out first drafts of his fiction. V. provides an example: "As he a heavy A heavy sleeper, Roger Rogerson, old Rogerson bought old Rogers bought so afraid Being a heavy sleeper, old Rogers was so afraid of missing to-morrows."[86] Sebastian Knight refuses to cross anything out, instead simply continuing on to his next statement, allowing multiple versions of the same sentence or the same thought to appear at the same time in the sequence in which he thought of them. It is theatrical in that the errors are part of the work, which is both permanent in its written form and ephemeral when seen on a stage. Goodman drops the mask after V. discovers the truth about him. The scene is over when Goodman ceases to be acting and the audience can see the actor behind the character.

In the same way, Nina drops her mask as V. uncovers her secret and the curtain falls on the episode in which V. meets with her. V. doesn't confront Goodman or Nina, offering his judgement only in his narration. But where Goodman's lying makes him into a grotesque and corrupt figure, Nina's is full of playful artistry. This makes her appearance in the novel a far more successful piece of theatre than the scene in Goodman's office. V. alludes to Nina's deception shortly after meeting her, writing, "The soft curve of the cheek and the upward dart of the ghostly eyebrows were very Russian, I thought. There was a gleam on the lower eyelid, and a gleam on the full dark lips. The expression seemed to me a strange mixture of dreaminess and cunning."[87] V.'s attraction to Nina Lecerf becomes as much an object of the description in the scenes where they meet as V.'s search for information about Sebastian. Though he notices the Russian characteristics of Nina's features as well as the "mixture of dreaminess and cunning" that make her into such a superb seductress and actress, he doesn't doubt her until much later. V.

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[86] Ibid., *38*.

[87] Ibid., 150.

also notices the "stage-set" nature of Nina's apartment, with the "sham piece of polished furniture" and mobile setting shifting to accommodate scene changes. Tea service is a mere farce. V. writes, "I don't know why, but the atmosphere of the place somehow drove me to affected speech and manner."[88] Both Nina and V. are acting here, willing participants in a theatrical production to which there is no audience. Eventually, Nina drops her mask and the play is over. V. tricks her into revealing her knowledge of the Russian language; Nina Lecerf and Nina Rechnoy are one and the same. As with Goodman, V. doesn't confront her directly, writing, "No, I did not say a word of all this. I just bowed myself out of the garden. She will be sent a copy of this book and will understand." V. simply bows and leaves the scene.

Another short episode that is particularly theatrical is V.'s description of Sebastian's teenage love affair with Natasha Rosanov, a woman he meets by chance in Berlin. He begins the scene, "The lights go out, the curtain rises and a Russian summer landscape is disclosed."[89] Again, the scene ends as a secret is revealed. The masks are dropped. Natasha admits that she has fallen in love with another boy. The players bow and the curtain falls before there can be a true confrontation. The scene of Nina and of Sebastian's first love, Natasha Rosanov, become plays within a play, that exist within the larger narrative of the novel but are not truly a part of it. It is a drama enacted by V. and Nina as actors in a kind of society drama in a Chekhovian rather than Shakespearean mold. The countryside setting of both of these dramas, the rich portrayal of the Russian country in the summer and the crumbling country estate where V. follows Nina is typical of Chekhov's plays. Even further, Nina Toovoretz can be read as an actor in the tradition of Chekhov's Nina Zarachnaya, from his play, *The Seagull*. As strong as Shakespeare's influence is

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[88] Ibid., 152.

[89] Ibid., 137.

in Nabokov's novels, especially in his English language works, Nabokov works with a variety of dramatic prototypes. Like Treplev in *The Seagull*, who is driven to despair arguably as a result of his love for Nina Zarachnaya, V. often suggests that the fickle Nina Toovoretz drove Sebastian closer to his death. Chekhov's Nina says, "You're a writer; I'm an actress…Drawn into the whirlpool, the two of us," to which Treplev replies, "There were times when I cursed you, Nina, hated you. I tore up your letters and pictures. But every second I knew I belonged to you forever, all of me."[90] These lines become the kind of drama that V. seems to hope to find in his discovery of Nina. However, Nina Toovoretz and Nina Zarachnaya are very different. Chekhov's Nina is a tragic figure whose love for Trigorin carries her away from Treplev, who loves her, and she is forced into a life as a second rate provincial actor. Nabokov's Nina is a roguish trickster who is playful, even when she is involved with a moody and sullen writer. Nabokov's character is a dangerous seductress, but she is also free of the depressive, writerly atmosphere that pervades the rest of Sebastian's life. The portion of the novel in which she appears can be described as a separate interlude because she is so different from any other character in the novel.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight's theatrical interludes embody one of the elements of the Shakespearean stage that is also used in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*. This is the conflation of the space of the stage with a dream space. In *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* this comparison between dream and theatre is embodied by the Foreigner, who claims to be dreaming the reality that is shown on the stage. Though it has little to do with the unfolding of the play's plot, this claim highlights the duality of the stage as something that is real in physical space, but also not real in that it tells a fictional story. The actors on stage are at once characters and actors. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, V.'s dream, the only true scene of a dream in the text, takes the form of

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[90] Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*. *Chekhov: The Essential Plays,* Act IV.

a theatrical performance just as the scenes of Nina and Natasha do, if not more literally. V. describes the room he occupies in the dream as "a general impression of wooden walls and planking." He continues, "I was sitting on a crate or something, and my mother was also in the room, and there were two more persons drinking tea at the table round which we were seated—a man from my office and his wife, both of whom Sebastian had never known, and who had been placed there by the dream manager—just because anybody would do to fill the stage."[91] The dream manager becomes a kind of stage director, assigning actors to unreal roles in V.'s dream. As in the scene with Nina, tea becomes a signifier of artifice. The most important aspect of the theatre here and in the other theatrical episodes of the novel is that the theatre is a space of multiple layers of reality. There is the mundane realm where V. is an actor sitting on a crate on a stage, and the artificial realm where he is a character involved in a drama. The black glove that appears on Sebastian's hand later in the dream serves as a kind of mask. It is a "sham thing attached to the wrist," just like Nina's sham furniture. In the dream, figures from reality are recast as unreal characters or as representatives of wholly different people.

For Nabokov, good theatre is inextricably linked to dreams; as I discussed in my first chapter, Nabokov refers to his favorite Shakespearean dramas as "dream-plays" in his Standford Lectures. He praises them for their use of "dream-logic" rather than conventional deterministic dramatic logic. In 1941, Nabokov would close a lecture to his Stanford students saying, "And finally I have spoken of how reading a play and seeing a play correspond to living one's life and dreaming of one's life, of how both experiences afford the same pleasure, if in somewhat different ways."[92] Nabokov argues that a good play is equally so whether it is read or staged, but

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[91] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 185.

[92] Nabokov, *USSR,* 322.

that the experiences are entirely different. Both are useful in understanding the work itself, just as both dream and waking experience are essential to experiencing life and creation. The theatrical episodes of the novel, of Nina and of Natasha, in addition to the description of V.'s dream are all similar in their ending and the way they transition back into "living one's life" from "dreaming one's life."[93] V. describes how one can find some particular absolute meaning in a dream occurrence and then lose grasp on it as soon as waking reality returns, writing, "I know that the common pebble you find in your fist after having thrust your arm shoulder deep into water, where a jewel seemed to gleam on pale sand, is really the coveted gem though it looks like a pebble as it dries in the sun of everyday."[94] V. insists in the validity of dream experience, even when it seems improbable or untrue when considered in a waking state. The same is true of the way that V. seems to awaken from his scene with Nina still trying to confront her for her deception. The kernel of truth about Sebastian's final years that V. recovers from his journey does look like a pebble drying in the sun, but to V., it is still the gemstone.

As Gennady Barabtarlo argues in his short essay on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* in *Aerial View*, the reader is left with one certainty after the novel concludes: "there is no Sebastian Knight at the end of the chase, and the reader is made to feel as one who, after carefully inching one's hand into the folds of the net in the hope of finding and nipping a long-hunted rare insect, triumphantly grabs one's own thumb—and wakes up."[95] He suggests that the novel as a whole represents a kind of dream state in the same way as the smaller episodes. The reader, or the narrator, wakes up after a dream in which he feels as if he has grasped the truth, only to realize

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 188.

[95] Barabtarlo, *Aerial View,* 214.

that the author is missing and the truth isn't there. The dramatic structure of the "plays within a play" are formal in a theatrical sense, existing in acts, with beginnings, middles and ends. However, the structure of the novel itself is entirely dissimilar. The curtain doesn't close at the end of the novel; "the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off."[96] V. doesn't wake up from the dream, or at least he is able to return to its beginning. There is certainly more truth still left to discover. The structure of the novel is cyclical.

The story takes on a classically Nabokovian spiral structure, as he describes it in *Speak Memory*. Nabokov writes, "The spiral is the spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free."[97] Nabokov bases this image on Hegel's triadic series of "thesis," "antithesis" and "synthesis." He writes, "Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the new series."[98] In the context of *Speak Memory*, Nabokov writes, "A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life."[99] The twenty odd years each spent in Russia, Western Europe, and finally in America form the three parts of the triadic series. However, in his fiction, the spiral form takes on perhaps even more power. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the circle forms as V. takes on the task of writing Sebastian's biography following Sebastian's death, and then that biography wends its way back to the scene of his death, where V. again takes up his task. V. and Sebastian seem to merge into one entity at the close of the novel, as V. writes, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I."[100]

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[96] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.

[97] Nabokov, *SM,* 275.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.

For Nabokov, this isn't a mere circle. He famously wrote that "Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader."[101] Nabokov suggests that written work must be perceived as a whole, like a painting, which can only be accomplished after it has already been read. Thus, the second and third readings of a book are inherently better and more interesting than the first. A book with a circular structure inevitably climbs ever higher the more times the reader travels around the circle. But it is actually even before V. undertakes his confused train ride to find Sebastian's deathbed that they begin that process of merging. V. describes a telegram written by the Russian doctor treating Sebastian in rural France, writing, "It was worded in French; the "v" in Sebastian's name was a transcription of its Russian spelling; for some reason unknown, I went to the bathroom and stood there for a moment in front of the looking-glass."[102] V. begins to see the mirroring that will take place between him and his deceased brother as he traces his path. He also sees himself in Sebastian, specifically his initial in the transliterated Russian name, but also in his own mirrored face.

However, it remains that none of the voices in the novel are entirely trustworthy. V. tells the reader, "Beware of the most honest broker. Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale."[103] In terms of either a broad philosophical conclusion, or even an answer to the identity of the book's narrator, Nabokov creates a text full of purposeful ambiguities. V. continues, "And where is the third party? Rotting peacefully in the cemetery of St. Damier. Laughingly alive in

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[101] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 3.

[102] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 189.

[103] Ibid., 50.

five volumes. Peering unseen over my shoulder as I write this."[104] At the end of the text, Sebastian Knight's identity becomes subsumed into V.'s and it is possible to squint at the text and make out his eerie presence subtly directing V.'s course through the novel. Or, perhaps, V. is subsumed into Sebastian Knight's identity, just as the printers and editors of Shakespeare's folios and quartos have become lost in the glow of their subject like planets orbiting a sun. The last line of the novel, "…perhaps we are both someone whom neither of us knows,"[105] obliquely acknowledges the possibility that there is some other guiding force throughout the novel, specifically, Nabokov the author. In many ways, this is hinted at throughout the novel, and by its very existence and the name on the cover, it should be quite obvious to any reader. It seems though, in a novel so preoccupied by authorial control, Nabokov must reassert his complete and utter dominance over the voices vying for control of the text. In 1938, when he wrote *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov's personal metaphysics, his language and his artistic interests were in a state of flux.[106] The nightmarish shifts in scenery and revelations of shifting personas is clear to be seen in *Bend Sinister.* The entire structure of the work anticipates the revolutionary structural experiment of *Pale Fire,* though in that book, the "biographer" is a complete madman, while in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* he is merely hapless. The crossed rails and misinterpreted train schedules resurface in *Pnin*, though in that novel, the protagonist might be even *more* hapless. Nabokov's tendency to borrow from past works, or to create finished works for later, even more complex achievements shows his development into the master of English prose that he would become.

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[104] Nabokov, *RLSK,* 50.

[105] Ibid, 203.

[106] Barabtarlo, *Aerial View.*

Chapter 3: Theatre and Authorship in *Pale Fire*

In *Pale Fire* (1962), Vladimir Nabokov has perfected the art of authorial control and deception. The result is a novel that is unabashedly "difficult." Its structure, a thousand line poem[107] by the poet John Shade bookended by a foreword and farcical commentary compiled by the insane Charles Kinbote, seems deliberately designed to require the reader to reread, or even flip back and forth, in order to make sense of the text's contents. Many critics have attempted to offer a complete reading of the text; for example, Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Pale Fire* is set up in terms of Nabokov's Hegelian spiral and offers a "synthesis" or "re-rereading" which is quite convincing. In this chapter, I do not intend to produce a complete analysis of Nabokov's masterwork, nor do I mean to trace every theatrical or Shakespearean element of the text (of which there are many).[108] Instead, I will show how *Pale Fire*, a work written by Nabokov at the height of his powers, fits into the larger pattern of Nabokov's use of Shakespeare and theatre in his art, which begins with his early plays and poems. Disguises and masks are again important devices and motifs in *Pale Fire*. Their use suggests that the characters in the novel are not always who they say they are. Nabokov's creations put on facades in their social interactions and in their personal lives. Furthermore, the novel becomes structurally like a theatrical production in which one character, Kinbote, becomes (or longs to be) a director, but is also forced to collaborate and contend with a variety of other artists, stagehands and actors in order to realize his project.

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[107] Even this is possibly up for debate. The poem as presented in the novel is, in fact, only nine hundred and ninety-nine lines with the implication that the poem runs full circle and that "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain" (PF 33) is both the beginning and end to the poem. The very fact that this is asserted by Kinbote calls it into question.

[108] To borrow John Haegert's phrasing from his study of *Pale Fire*, "Evidence of critical 'overstanding' abounds even in the most preliminary reconstructions of the work—those designed to forge a 'single shared thematic bond' between Shade's poem and Kinbote's Commentary." (Haegert 410).

As many scholars have pointed out, the title *Pale Fire* is taken from a line in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, which is itself a work that is believed to have suffered greatly from the ravaging of uncontrollable editors, commentators and publishers. The passage from which the phrase "pale fire" is taken is about the nature of art, specifically artistic theft.[109] As in Nabokov's other works, Shakespeare becomes a prototype of an author who is relieved of authorial control. In Shakespeare's text, Timon argues to a group of bandits that there exists a universal pattern of theft in nature and in human society and therefore it is justifiable as a natural act, both literally and artistically. The strange incongruity of Timon's speech leads one of the bandits to remark, "He has almost charmed me from my profession, by/ persuading me to it."[110] For a reader of Shakespeare like Nabokov, who is attuned to the biography of Shakespeare as an artist who cannot control how his work is produced or perceived, this scene holds a powerful irony. Shakespeare becomes like Timon, a victim of thievery who exhorts bandits to commit theft. For Nabokov, this acknowledgement of lack of authorial control from Shakespeare is both fascinating and disquieting. Therefore, one can read *Pale Fire* as a novel in which Nabokov references this aspect of Shakespeare's biography, alongside the inherent metatextual qualities of theatre as an impermanent medium that is at once physically real and an elaborate unreality, in order to establish an inquiry into the nature of art in the form of fiction.

Like *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Pale Fire* is a work in which the reader struggles to perceive an author (Sebastian Knight in the former, John Shade in the latter) through the unreliable narration with which he is presented. The closing lines of Kinbote's notes to the final lines of Shade's *Pale Fire* bear a striking thematic similarity with the strange theatrical

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[109] William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens,* In *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works,* 745-772. *(*New York: Random House, 1997), 4.3.2150.

[110] Ibid., 4.5.2164-65.

performance that V. describes at the end of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Kinbote writes, "I may pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments."[111] Kinbote uses theatre as a metaphor for the insane tale he delivers in the commentary. It becomes a dreamlike melodrama only tenuously connected to reality. Just as V. does, Kinbote recasts the now concluded narrative as a theatre piece. With many other metaphors possible, Kinbote chooses theatre seemingly because of those qualities that make theatre unique as an impermanent, collaborative art form. Nabokov's multi-tiered confection of competing voices is a piece of theatre because each voice not only offers competing visions of reality, but actively attempts to assert its dominance. Kinbote insists on this metaphor because it enables him to take the role of director and show his readers, his audience, exactly what he wishes them to see. Kinbote is also the bearer of a mask, living as an academic in American suburbia while he may be, as he claims, the exiled King of "a distant northern land," or, as he subtly suggests, an escapee from an insane asylum. In this further layer, Kinbote is a puppet of the authorial intention of Nabokov himself. The true director of the play that forms the novel *Pale Fire* is its author, but within that overarching reality, there are layers in which puppets take on directorial roles.

Masks take on a special importance in Nabokov's writing as the author plays with his ability to hide and reveal identities at will. In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov asserts supreme control of his text, creating a magical card trick where in one moment we are allowed to see a face card and the next moment it is again hidden. This is the essential difference between *Pale Fire* and a work

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[111] Nabokov, *PF,* 301.

like *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: in the earlier novel, Nabokov uses a character, V., who narrates the novel, as an audience for the theatrical performance of other characters, while in the later novel, everyone is wearing a mask and the reader is the audience. Nabokov again creates a layered reality, and allows his characters to take on different roles in those different layers, but in *Pale Fire,* the artifice is explicit. Kinbote very literally informs his reader that he is, in fact, an actor playing a role that is not himself. Even further, Kinbote is not Kinbote at all, "but Prof. Vseslav Botkin, a Russian and a madman," as Nabokov writes in a 1962 diary entry.[112] On the very first page of Kinbote's foreword to Shade's poem, he allows his reader a peak behind his mask, slipping "there is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings"[113] into what is otherwise thus far a dryly academic, almost mathematical text. He drops, for a second, the character of a self-serious academic and enters for the space of one line into a conversational and personal tone that he will fully slip into later.

Kinbote's masks are often literal; as King Charles of Zembla, he claims, he taught literature at a university while wearing makeup and a false beard. In the United States, he again dons the same disguise, this time with a real beard. Charles fully enters the role of Kinbote, though the reader slowly perceives that Charles is more of a fabrication than the professorial disguise. The mask of an emigre academic is necessary in order to maintain his privacy and to protect him from assassins. He suggests that the act of playing a part or of resembling others is a trait inherent to his character and to the character of his nation. He writes, "in fact, the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian *zemlya*, but of Semberland, a land of reflections, of

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[112] Quoted in Boyd, *The American Years,* note to page 433. Boyd suggests that Kinbote, or rather Botkin, "Lives within a complex and intricate network of delusions typical of the classical paranoiac"(*VNAY* 433). In this short chapter, I will not delve into the psychological realism or non-realism of Botkin's paranoia.

[113] Nabokov, *PF,* 13.

'resemblers…'"[114] His very being is surrounded by an aura of unreality. His persona is a series of smoke and mirror tricks. In Zembla, King Charles' life is full of mask-like details and deceptions. It is a world of masquerade parties, of courtly deception in which Charles pretends to have sexual relationships with women in order to satisfy the requirements of his kingship. Many of the qualities of his reign recall Nabokov's early play, *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, which, as discussed in my first chapter, is typified by deception.

For both Morn and Charles Xavier, kingship is defined as a role that one must play in a mask. For Shakespeare, the mask of the king is less literal, but it is nonetheless apparent that for Shakespeare's kings, especially for Henry the V, monarchy is a performance. Politics are inherently theatrical and therefore a play about kingship is ripe for becoming metadrama. The costumed Charles Xavier becomes a scholar of literature, studying, among other works, Shakespeare himself. He thus becomes aware of the Shakespearean model of kingship and it appears to effect the way in which he rules. As in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* however, there can be no perfect monarch and autocracy can only be flawed. As Morn does, Kinbote removes himself from the stage of monarchy as a result of his own impossibility. Examined separately, as a narrative distinct from the whole of *Pale Fire* as a cohesive novel, Kinbote's story of his Zemblan reign becomes a similar piece of self-reflective art to *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, though perhaps even more successful in that object. It is a tale of Charles Xavier's reign that reflects on stories of kingship from itself to Shakespeare's histories. Considered in interaction with the rest of *Pale Fire,* Kinbote's story is wildly contrasted with the lives of American academics and the personal struggle with death that is at the heart of Shade's poem. Atop all of this insanity, Kinbote further masks himself when he actually makes use of his dry academic voice to attempt

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[114] Nabokov, *PF,* 265.

a legitimate analysis of Shade's poem, a role he attempts to inhabit but for which he lacks the necessary skills.

Kinbote's conception of himself as an artist is intimately connected with his potential insanity, as well as his position as an artist working within the same space as Shade. In one scene in the commentary, Kinbote approaches Shade talking with another professor's wife, overhearing, "'That is the wrong word,' he said. 'One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That's merely turning a new leaf with the left hand.'"[115] Whether or not Kinbote actually believes that he is in any way insane, he suggests here that he knows that many of the people around him think that he is a madman. Here, though, Shade aligns the insanity of Kinbote with a kind of artistry. However, it is implied that this praise for Kinbote's madness is actually Kinbote's own fabrication. It is implied that Shade and the woman are actually talking about a different madman, and that Kinbote deliberately misrepresents their conversation because he believes in Shade's assessment of madness. In this case, Kinbote is actually applying the mantle of one who replaces an unhappy past with "brilliant invention" to himself. It is a mask of his own invention, though its purpose is quite clear. Kinbote is, in his mind at least, a "fellow poet" to Shade, even if Shade was actually talking about a different lunatic. Kinbote's mask is therefore that of an actor on the Shakespearean stage; he plays a variety of roles, often characters within other parts, as if the identity of "actor" becomes his only true identity. In fact, Kinbote seems to seriously view himself as a tragic hero in the Shakespearean mode, even going so far as to directly compare himself to Shakespeare's Timon.

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[115] Nabokov, *PF,* 238.

In Shakespeare's play, *Timon of Athens*, the hero is a spendthrift nobleman who is driven out of Athens by his creditors. Kinbote describes his lodgings as a "desolate log cabin where I live like Timon in his cave." Kinbote thus associates himself with Shakespeare's character, forming an easy comparison between the play and the theme of exile that pervades Kinbote's narrative of his life. While Kinbote's exile is caused by politics rather than money, he becomes associated with Timon's statements in the fourth and fifth acts of the play which are generally interpreted to be broad statements about the nature of art. It is from one of these statements that the title of the novel is derived: "The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction/ Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief,/ And her pale fire she snatches from the sun."[116] In his article "The Author as Reader as Nabokov: Text and Pretext in Pale Fire," John Haegert observes that this passage is generally considered to be a rather conventional, perhaps Platonic, view of art, where "the pale fire of art, in the usual view, reflects the fierce sun of reality." This is also a view of art that can be read as being supremely generous to the inept or untrustworthy commentator or editor, especially coming from a Shakespeare play. If a work of art is great enough, commentary to it can share in that greatness.

While Shakespeare's Timon refers to art as only an imitation of reality, perhaps parodying Plato's conception of art as mere reflection, he expands on this notion, implying that a particularly great work of art can indeed be the sun which is reflected by the moon who is the critic. Haegert goes on to suggest that, however, Kinbote's commentary is so unrelated to the poem it seeks to explicate that "In this context both critic and artist, lunar thief and solar source, are said to assume an equal authority and complementary importance, one equidistant between

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[116] Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens,* 5.3.2150.

them, as it were, yet finally dependent upon their mutually reflecting surfaces."[117] Haegert tends toward seeing the fundamental incompatibility of the commentary with the poem as the true critical problem of the text, arguing that "it does not complement Shade's poem at all; it simply competes with it."[118] However, in the context of the theatrical, the distinctness of Kinbote's artistry from Shade's become not only more apparent, but more reasonable and acceptable though Kinbote's madness remains almost entirely unquestionable. Shade and Kinbote share the same stage, that is, they are characters in the same novel, yet their writing is so utterly separated by their artistic goals.

Kinbote insists that Shade, like himself, wears a mask. He writes in the foreword, ""His whole being constituted a mask. John Shade's physical appearance was so little in keeping with the harmonies hiving in the man, that one felt inclined to dismiss it as a coarse disguise or a passing fashion."[119] There is a certain measure of untruth in the disguise that Kinbote gives to Shade. For Kinbote, John Shade's mask is an affectation of non-affectation. Kinbote expects him to act like the great poet he sees Shade as, but the poet refuses to be the dashing literary figure Kinbote paints his inner life to be. But Shade is a far more genuine artist than Kinbote and he doesn't need to don a mask. His art revolves around finding beauty in the mundane, rather than the fantastic. Kinbote suggests that Shade's demeanor is not in keeping with his prodigious abilities as a poet. He cannot understand that a man who possesses the talents that he wishes he had would not flaunt them in front of everyone. Kinbote describes Shade's friendship as "the more precious for its tenderness being intentionally concealed, especially when we were alone,

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[117] John Haegert. "The Author as Reader as Nabokov: Text and Pretext in *Pale Fire,*" 421.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Nabokov, *PF,* 26.

by that gruffness which stems from what can be termed the dignity of the heart."[120] He sees his relationship with Shade in this way because it is essential to him to believe that they have a mutual friendship, but, as many critics have pointed out, this mutual friendship is quite dubious. It seems that Kinbote is actually solely responsible for constructing Shade's mask, but in reality, Nabokov only allows Kinbote a tenuous grasp on the direction of the other characters in the novel. As one reads more of Shade's poem, one quickly realizes that the man is a straightforward contrast to Kinbote's multilayered, confused identity. As Brian Boyd writes in *Nabokov's Pale Fire,* "As 'Pale Fire' shows us, he is stability itself, living all his life in his parents' home, in the same comfortable small academic town, marrying his childhood sweetheart and in forty years never wavering in his love."[121] Not only does Shade's personality appear to be entirely opposite to that of Kinbote's flamboyant manner, it becomes clear that his artistic interests are different too. As Boyd points out, Shade "can make the ordinary extraordinary." Although, later on, Shade refers to Kinbote (or perhaps to the madness of Kinbote) as "a fellow poet," their artistic goals are quite different. Shade makes subtle use of language as an individual poet in control of his writing and of his own identity. Meanwhile, Kinbote also must be considered as an artist, but one typified by lack of control.

Kinbote truly sees himself as an artist. He writes, "I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art."[122] As much as this description also appears to match the state of Nabokov himself when he first arrived in America, Kinbote's view of himself as a writer

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[120] Nabokov, *PF*, 25.

[121] Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 27.

[122] Nabokov, *PF,* 300-01.

in search of an audience suggests that he has no outlet for his madness, especially after Shade's death. Nabokov, here, interferes with the intratextual narrator, inserting an image of himself into his novel. In doing so, he does not merely insert his signature at the end of the text, he reasserts control of the text in a work where his authorship is threatened by characters who are writers and commentators. It is easy for reader and critic alike to forget that Nabokov is, in fact, the author of *Pale Fire,* the composer of both poem and commentary, rather than John Shade and Charles Kinbote.

However, Kinbote's conception of himself as a Nabokov-like author in exile also offers an explanation for his attempt at a transformation of Shade into a theatrical actor-character such as himself. Kinbote's vision of a true artist is indeed himself, although he makes himself work as a commentator and a scholar. Kinbote's absurd scholarly edition of Shade's poem may fail as a scholarly work, but it is far from failure as a piece of art. Moreover, Kinbote takes his identification with the Shakespearean tragic hero a step further. When he casts himself as Timon, an exiled nobleman, or when he acts out kingship according to the model of Shakespearean history, he takes on a new relation to the work in which he exists. Not only are Shakespeare's kings, along with tragic heroes like Timon or Prospero, prototypes of dramatic character acting whose aspects Kinbote can absorb into his own masks and disguises: They are models of the artist himself, self-proclaimed directors of the staged action that surrounds them. They are at once creations of an author and representations of an artistic creator themselves. This aspect, too, is absorbed by Kinbote.

Kinbote interacts with a great variety of Shakespearean models of kingship, especially with the association between a Shakespearean king and the author himself. In Shakespeare's histories, the metadrama of the plays lies in the way that the kings are forced to become actors in

roles, and, in many ways, directors of the action on stage. One of these theatrical aspects of a king, which Nabokov appears particularly interested in, is the medieval doctrine of the King's Two Bodies. As I discussed in the first chapter, he refers to this concept in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* as well. According to this particular doctrine, the regent is in fact composed of two entities, the *Body Natural* and the *Body Politic*: while the body natural may die, the body politic is an immortal incorporeal force which lives on forever in history. In *Pale Fire*, however, the association between this concept and the actor-character duality, that both are present in the same body on stage, and while one may die, the other lives on, is far stronger. It is that duality that is so important to understanding Kinbote's presence in *Pale Fire*. Shade (also signified here by a character heading as in a play text) says, "True, sir. In due time history will have denounced everybody. The King may be dead, or he may be as much alive as you and Kinbote."[123] He continues shortly after as Kinbote writes, "Shade [smiling and massaging my knee]: 'Kings do not die—they only disappear, eh Charles?"[124] The play text style of writing stresses that the theatrical element is present in this scene and provides a clue that Nabokov is making a direct theatrical reference. Additionally, Nabokov provides a further clue as the head of Wordsmith responds to Shade's comment that "Kings do not die:" "'Who said that?' asked sharply, as if coming out of a trance, the ignorant, and always suspicious, Head of the English Department."[125] This further demands an investigation of the explicit reference to Shakespeare, as the scholar of English literature is shaken out of a trance by it.

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[123] Ibid., 266.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

As I argued in the first chapter, Nabokov sees Shakespeare's kings and dukes as mirrored versions of himself as an artist, the ultimate example of which is Prospero in *The Tempest*. Nabokov famously writes in *Strong Opinions,* "I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth." The word "dictator" may not be entirely equivalent to "king," but it is this kind of artistic dictatorship that is modeled by Prospero, who controls with his magic everything from the weather to his success in achieving final object, which is the recovery of his dukedom. Kinbote, as the Zemblan king, may not achieve the same kind of artistic metaphor as can be ascribed to Prospero, but he does attempt something that not even Prospero does, which is to extend his dictatorship to a work that is not even his own. Thus, the king becomes a kind of meta-theatrical artist analogue as he does in Shakespeare and in *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*. Here in *Pale Fire* though, the king comes in contact with the conjuror, the true artist. Whatever criticisms might be made of the poem "Pale Fire," it cannot be argued that it is a work without "control" on the part of its creator. To examine the relationship between Shade and Kinbote in terms of Nabokov's early play, one must compare the two of them to the Foreigner and Morn of *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*. In effect, the conjuror is a truer artist than the king. Nabokov's concern for his own artistic longevity and control over his oeuvre from beyond his death, which is apparent throughout that oeuvre from the poem "Shakespeare" on, finally manifests itself in the conflict between Shade and Kinbote. It is a battle for the defining nature of Nabokov's aesthetic. Nabokov would rather be remembered as a

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[126] Nabokov comments in *Strong Opinions,* "I'd much prefer to speak of the modern books that I hate at first sight: the earnest case histories of minority groups, the sorrows of homosexuals, the anti-American Sovietnam sermon, the picaresque yarn larded with juvenile obscenities. That's a good example of self-imposed classification—books stuck together in damp lumpy groups, forgotten titles, amalgamated authors" (SO 116). Nabokov avoids "self-classification" religiously, claiming to have never belonged to "any club or movement." Doing so would group him in with author authors, bringing him dangerously close to "amalgamation."

monolithic artist than as an "amalgamated author"[126] and he laments that it is potentially Shakespeare's fate to be remembered as the latter.

As Kinbote describes it, the land of Zembla is a land of reflections, doubles and mirrors. Kinbote also describes his exile in terms of reflections, writing, "A king who sinks his identity into the mirror of exile is in a sense doing just that,[127]" that is, destroying a king, as the Zemblan meaning Kinbote's name implies. In this sense, an exiled king like Kinbote or Morn is in effect committing a suicide of the body politic. The mirror as a metaphor of exile also becomes a metaphor for death, as well as a metaphor for the stage. It is implicitly connected to Shade's search throughout his poem for something beyond death. In *The American Years* Brian Boyd subscribes to the view that Shade is in fact responsible for the whole of the text, producing the poem and then the commentary in the voice of the imagined Kinbote. As a result, Boyd suggests that when Shade "leaves the facts of his own life and steps into the looking-glass world of Zembla, he feels free to speculate here as he cannot do in person. One tactic he adopts is to stage Kinbote's escape from Zembla as a transition from one world to another."[128] Whether Shade is author of the commentary or not, the association of exile, with the image of a mirror reality, with death and the nature of the afterlife, is generated by Nabokov, the true implied author of the text, no matter how much power Shade might appear to have. The idea that Kinbote is suicidal is not only true in the metaphorical sense of his choice of exile over imprisonment. Boyd astutely

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[127] Nabokov, *PF,* 267.

[128] Boyd, *VNAY,* 449.

observes in *The American Years*, that the madness of the Russian Professor Botkin, who is, in effect, yet another identity of Kinbote, is caused by the very fact of his exile. Boyd writes, "Kinbote has built up his Zembla to cope with an overwhelming sense of loss—and that it is the loss of Russia emerges irresistibly…Shade's poem conjures up a dying exile who 'suffocates and conjures in two tongues/The nebulae dilating in his lungs.'"[129] If Kinbote is indeed the alter-ego of an insane Russian man, this fact only serves to strengthen the power of the theme of exile throughout the novel. Botkin has no recourse other than the insane creation of Kinbote and his magical mirror realm.

In the same way that he feels he must supply Shade with a mask, Kinbote transforms Shade's life into theatre. He becomes playwright and director quite literally, presenting several of the episodes of Shade's life described in the commentary as theatrical vignettes. One of these, however, is definitively the most literal of the theatrical elements of the novel. Kinbote titles his play "*The Haunted Barn.*" It is complete with stage directions, character name headings and a description of the stage set. The play consists of a single scene in which Shade, his wife Sybil and his daughter Hazel sit, mostly in silence, in a darkened barn awaiting a ghost. The ghost never materializes and Shade and Sybil grow weary of the silence, bringing the scene to a close. Kinbote writes, "The minutes of that third session in the barn have not been preserved but I offer the reader the following scene which I feel cannot be to far removed from the truth."[130] The scene is, or must be, a complete fabrication. Kinbote cannot know what was spoken of in the barn on that night, though he does have access to Hazel's notes taken during two other nights spent in that barn without her parents. This fallacy inherent to the play, that it cannot be a true

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[129] Ibid., 434.

[130] Nabokov, *PF,* 190.

account of what happened in the haunted barn between Shade, Hazel and Sybil, suggests that Kinbote is trying to dramatize a life that is inherently undramatic. Between the mask, this scene and another theatrical dialogue in which Kinbote and Shade discuss their religious and metaphysical ideas, Kinbote presents Shade as a character in a play or as an actor with the same tensions between his position as a creator of art and as a creation of an artist. However, this is a blatant falsehood that runs counter to the John Shade who is revealed through the poem and in other anecdotes told by Kinbote which the commentator cannot transform into theatre as he transforms the episode of the barn.

The Haunted Barn becomes another iteration of the play-within-a-play motif that so often occurs in Nabokov's work. The first chapter of this work discussed briefly how, within *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, Ganus dresses as Othello and performs a kind of theatre piece at the party where he confronts Morn and his wife Midia. In the second chapter, I referred to several scenes in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* that are short theatrical vignettes or plays within plays. There is the short Chekhovian drama of the young Sebastian in the throws of his first love. The scenes where V. interviews Nina are also a theatrical episode that resides within the rest of the novel, but is separated from it as a play within a play is in Shakespeare's dramas. *The Haunted Barn* however, is much stranger than the episode in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Its theatrical model is not Shakespeare or Chekhov, but minimalist theatre like that of Samuel Beckett. It becomes, in effect, a parody of Beckett's modernist theatre. Everything is as minimalist as possible; the characters are only referred to as Father, Mother and Daughter. Kinbote includes such un-Shakespearean directions as "Another fifteen minutes elapse. Father, deep in workshop thoughts, heaves a neutral sigh." "Daughter" says only "Must we sigh all the

time?"[131] This is followed by another fifteen minutes of silence. That Kinbote's play would resemble Beckett is fitting, considering Nabokov's opinion of Beckett expressed in *Strong Opinions*: "Beckett is the author of lovely novellas and wretched plays in the Maeterlinck tradition."[132] Kinbote's farcical ineptitude as a literary commentator extends to his playwriting. He produces a static theatre that can be read in the "Maeterlinck tradition" of static theatre into which Nabokov also places Beckett's plays.

This kind of play implicitly rejects or avoids the verbal complexity of Shakespearean theatre. It looks to Beckett's theatre both in the spareness of its language and the deliberate ambiguities of its plot and characterization. As in Becketts plays like *Waiting for Godot* (1953) or *Endgame* (1957), Kinbote fills his text with pregnant pauses and purposefully does not elaborate on the setting or the plot. Hazel's question, "Must we sigh all the time?"[133] reads as the most overt jab at Beckett and minimalistic theatre in general, in what is a relatively disguised parody. *The Haunted Barn* perhaps plays directly off of some of the dialogue in Beckett's *Endgame*, where there are also long sighs written into the stage directions. Beckett's Hamm says, "My father? (Pause)/ My mother? (Pause)/ My…dog? (Pause)/ Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt."[134] In Beckett's theatre, the controlled ambiguity of the dialogue erupts into anger, gallows humor or vague philosophizing. Kinbote's small theatre piece of Shade's humoring of Hazel's search for ghosts uses a similar technique. Although Kinbote processes so many deeply

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[131] Nabokov, *PF,* 191.

[132] Nabokov, *SO,* 172.

[133] Nabokov, *PF,* 191.

[134] Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Random House, 1958), 1.

Shakespearean qualities as his confused identity and his associating himself directly with Shakespearean characters, he cannot be allowed to share, or even pretend to share, the full artistic genius of Shakespeare.[135] That Kinbote's play echoes Beckett perhaps suggests a limit to his abilities as a playwright, taking into account Nabokov's distaste for Beckett's plays. Kinbote's play is an antithesis to Shakespeare; it is minimalist theatre without much language or action. However, Kinbote connects the conclusion of *The Haunted Barn* to a poem written by Shade entitled "The Nature of Electricity," in which Shakespeare is indeed featured.

In "The Nature of Electricity" Shade describes how incandescent bulbs might contain the souls of the dead. He writes "the dead, the gentle dead—who knows?—/ In tungsten filaments abide." Shade sets up a vision of the afterlife in which each electrical light would contain the soul of a particular individual. However, when it comes to Shakespeare, Shade doesn't stick to this pattern. He writes, "And maybe Shakespeare floods a whole/ Town with innumerable lights."[136] This would suggest that Shade is considering Shakespeare to have a multiplicity of souls within his being, or that as an author Shakespeare is a collaborative product of the work of a large number of creative people, whether they are writers, actors or other artists necessary to the working of theatre. Shade seems to contrast himself with Shakespeare, as another artist mentioned in the poem, Percy Shelly, only has one soul with which to illuminate an incandescent bulb. Shade would likely, like Shelly, become a beacon for moths on a summer night, but

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[135] In another of Kinbote's transformations of Shade's life into play text, he again eschews the Shakespearean prototype of drama, creating instead a socratic dialogue in which he and Shade discuss religion and the afterlife in stilted language that borders on absurdity (*PF* 225-227). Again, Kinbote is a dramatist of sorts, a man of many identities, but he cannot write like Shakespeare. Also Plato's dialogues, like Beckett's plays, are a subject of Nabokov's criticism: "I am not particularly fond of Plato, nor would I survive very long under his Germanic regime of militarism and music. I do not think that this cave business has anything to do with my Shade and Shadows" (*SO,* 68).

[136] Nabokov, *PF,* 192.

Kinbote might have enough distinct identities within him to light up a whole city. Shade's final poetic project, *Pale* Fire, does seem much more in the tradition of poets more modern than Shakespeare, though its heroic couplets do not exactly place him on the avant-garde of poetic form. Despite Kinbote's commentary, Shade is a grand example of the individual artist who is in control of his whole work, which is essentially different to the view that Shakespeare's plays are the work of a collaboration of enough authors for their souls to light up a whole town. *The Haunted Barn* ends with a kind of counter to the metaphysical conclusions of Shade's poem, in which he insists on an afterlife and an immortality of the soul. In the stage directions, Kinbote writes, "Life is hopeless, afterlife heartless. Hazel is heard quietly weeping in the dark." Shade, as evidenced by the poem Kinbote transcribes just below these stage directions, is hopeful for some kind of afterlife. As a result, Shade becomes a believer in the ability of his art to transcend his own death and continue to exist as a second kind of afterlife.

Kinbote, as a person made up of so many multiple roles and possible personalities, becomes a kind of analogue to Shade's vision of Shakespeare as a being with multiple souls. Shade becomes a kind of artistic ideal for the Shakespearean Kinbote,[137] but this difference between Shade as a singular artist and Kinbote as artistic community seems to cause the complete rift between the two of them as Kinbote ultimately fails to understand Shade's poem in its entirety. As a result, Shade becomes an ideal artist presented by an imperfect artist. Kinbote often refers to Shade as a "conjuror," which, after its appearance in so many of Nabokov's works preceding *Pale Fire*, becomes a term that can only be associated with Nabokov's vision of his

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[137] Kinbote's homosexuality also serves to associate him with Shakespeare, or at least with some version of a disputed historical Shakespeare. Many have commented on Shakespeare's own potential homosexuality, especially in the Sonnets, but it remains an area of contention, perhaps even less accepted in 1962 as *Pale Fire* was published. In this way, Kinbote and Shakespeare's potential homosexualities are in fact further iterations of the confusion surrounding the identity of both of them.

own artistry. Kinbote writes in the forward, "Shade's poem is, indeed, that sudden flourish of magic: my gray-haired friend, my beloved old conjuror, put a pack of index cards into a hat—and shook out a poem."[138] The presence of this image seems to associate Shade with Nabokov himself, or at least more with Nabokov's conception of artistry.

I have shown, so far, how Kinbote becomes a Shakespearean entity in opposition or in contrast to the singularity of Shade's existence as an artist like Percy Shelley or Robert Frost,[139] whose authorship is indisputable. While Kinbote is a multitude, Shade is singular. Kinbote is an actor, a writer, a director, editor and commentator, while Shade stands above him as a "Conjuror," a supreme artificer. This opposition between the type of artist embodied by Shade and the type of artist embodied by Kinbote, cuts to the heart of a dichotomy that is present throughout Nabokov's oeuvre. Even though Nabokov seems to prize complete artistic control and harmony above all else, theatrical references appear throughout his work, from its very beginning. He both embraces and disavows theatre at different times during his career. Nabokov's interest is meta-textuality, that is, text that refers to itself as text exists alongside his interest in a kind of artistic harmony resulting from his own complete creative control. As Siggy Frank argues in *Transitional Nabokov*, "His dramas, just like his novels, play with their own form; they interrupt the theatrical illusion, undermine the fourth wall convention, extend the reality of the star into the auditorium and challenge the spectator to reassess his or her own

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[138] Nabokov, *PF*, 28.

[139] A very convincing argument can be made that Shade is modeled on the poet Robert Frost. As Abraham Socher writes in his article, "Shades of Frost, a Hidden Source for Nabokov's Pale Fire," the Nabokov's rented Frost's house in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1952 and that "Nabokov almost seemed to shadow the great American poet through his early years in America" reading poetry along with Frost at two poetry readings in the late 1940's.

position in relation to the fictional reality of the stage."[140] This seems to be precisely the reason why Nabokov goes to such great lengths to include theatre in a novel that so challenges the form of the novel itself. The inherently layered reality holds Nabokov's interest even as he fully matures as a novelist in the English language.

[140] Frank, *Transitional Nabokov,* 168.

Conclusion: Nabokov's Evolving Theatricality

The reader is continually reminded throughout *Pale Fire* that Nabokov, in addition to being a writer of prose fiction, is also a poet and a dramatist. *Pale Fire* is full of relics of the fact that Nabokov was indeed first a poet, and then a dramatist, before becoming a writer of short stories and novels. The reader is often invited to recall Nabokov's claim that, just as Pushkin is integral to Russian literature, casting a shadow over all the works that came after him, Shakespeare is the lifeblood of English literature.[141] Nabokov certainly fulfills this claim by allowing the blood of Shakespeare to flow through the veins of his own works in English. However, Shakespeare is inherently flawed as a prototype for Nabokov's fiction. As Brian Boyd comments in "Nabokov, Pushkin, Shakespeare: Genius, Generosity and Gratitude in 'Dar' and 'Pale Fire,'" "Shakespeare is as sophisticated and sly a craftsman as Nabokov, if also much more spontaneous, intuitive, improvisatory, and unrevised."[142] Another difference, though, is that the implied author of Shakespeare's texts seems entirely unconcerned with his own existence, while Nabokov's authorial persona is constantly asserting the dominance of his will over his fictional realms. Boyd goes on to write that Nabokov was "fascinated by the unknownness and remoteness of Shakespeare the man, by his invisibility in his work and his life."[143] It is all too easy to consider that Shakespeare never wrote the works that caused him to be an indelible presence throughout English speaking culture. While in the present critical climate, Anti-Stratfordian theories of Shakespeare's authorship may be rather unfashionable or irrelevant, they

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[141] Nabokov, *SO,* 63.

[142] Brian Boyd, "Nabokov, Pushkin, Shakespeare: Genius, Generosity and Gratitude in '*Dar*' and '*Pale Fire*,'" *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 33 (1999), 3.

[143] Ibid.

have been proffered from many directions since the nineteenth century.[144] Whether he subscribed to one of these theories or not, Nabokov himself imagines their possibility repeatedly, in poetry like "Shakespeare" and in novels like *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire*. In the former, he even goes so far as to have one of his characters suggest the possibility that Shakespeare, the man and the body of work, could conceivably be entirely fabricated in the modern era, with librarians and critics bribed to go along with the project.[145]

Therefore, Nabokov's admiration for Shakespeare and his persistent allusion to his works and biography does not seem out of place for a writer so concerned with his own "dictatorial"[146] control over his oeuvre. Theatre, too, as a form of art, is supremely associated with Nabokov's authorial anxiety. He fears that he will be unrecognized as the creator of his works and that others will wrest control away from him. And yet, both Shakespeare and theatre itself seem to hold a strong attraction for Nabokov and are as a result unavoidable in his works. Perhaps this magnetism that draws Nabokov toward Shakespeare stems from a fear that he too would lose control over his posthumous existence, like Shakespeare did. Whether that is true or not, from *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* to *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's use of Shakespeare enables him to draw in so many of the themes that enrich his drama and fiction, linking them to the great theatrical and literary traditions of the past. One motivation to explore theatricality in Nabokov's work is the dissonance that arises from Shakespeare and theatricality contrasting with authorial concerns. By the time he begins writing his English language masterworks, theatre as a device becomes a shorthand for all of the concerns about authorship that Nabokov associates with it. Another

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[144] Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), 70.

[145] Nabokov, *BS,* 73.

[146] Nabokov, *SO,* 63.

motivation is that specific motifs, like masks, evolve into signs of this rich, wide range of concepts that Nabokov becomes able to draw into focus simply by describing a character wearing a mask. For example, by selecting *Pale Fire* as the title for his novel, Nabokov immediately raises the issue of the incongruity of art and its source in reality, of the fact that art is indeed artifice and that it is, by its nature, ephemeral. Theatre takes on so much power in Nabokov's writing because, in it, these facets of the nature of art are especially palpable.

And yet, is important to realize that theatre is just one of several fields that Nabokov can reference in any given work. His repertoire of allusion contains everything from Shakespeare, to contemporary poetry, detective stories like *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,* horror tales like those of Edgar Allan Poe, the works of H.G. Wells, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and the great novels of nineteenth century English, French and Russian literature. Nabokov's work therefore becomes a rich palimpsest of references and allusions, which alert the reader in the same way that masks do when referring to all that theatre entails in Nabokov's work. Thus, the very nature of theatre as an ephemeral art form characterized by inherently layered fictional reality can become an analogy for Nabokov's working through of his authorial control issues. And those problems in turn become, for the author, an expression of the fundamentally alienating qualities of life as an exile. But the chain of references and overlapping themes does not end here: every one of them transforms into an even further analogy; exile, for example, becomes a way of looking at death and the afterlife. In other words, the paradigm of authorial self-awareness begins with Nabokov's experience as a dramatist and his carrying forward of his theatrical devices and ends with his philosophical and metaphysical statements.

In drawing this project to a close, I am forced to recognize how much more there still is to be discovered when one decides to follow the theatrical motifs through Nabokov's work. I

have sought to trace the evolution of theatrical devices through Nabokov's career to his mature work, taking a path largely not taken by Nabokov scholarship. Nabokov's novels are full of possibility for the type of analysis that I have engaged in. Hopefully, future scholars will be able to take a similar approach as I have toward the analysis of the several novels that contain the kind of theatricality I have observed, but that neither I, nor Siggy Frank, to whom I owe very much, have touched on. There is a lot more that can be written on the metatheatrical techniques Nabokov borrows from Shakespeare, specifically the way that theatre about kings can be considered metadramatic (similar to James Calderwood's arguments on the history plays in *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad)*. My observation of the references to the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies in Nabokov's kings, Charles II and the masked Morn, can be connected to several of his other works and more fully discussed in terms of Nabokov's sense of authorship. Furthermore, in *Lolita*, for example, theatricality and Shakespeare have their role to play, though the many volumes that have been written on Nabokov's most famous novel do not follow that path. *Pnin* also works on a similar principle of character and actor as I have shown in *Pale Fire* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

I hope that work on this area of Nabokov's oeuvre will lead to the staging of some of his plays. *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* has never been staged in the English language. On its artistic merits alone it deserves to be both read and performed. Nabokov's other theatrical works, shorter pieces like *The Granddad* (1924)*, The Event*, as well as another full length theatrical piece, *The Waltz Invention,* are all pieces that could benefit from being performed. Further critical study into the dramaturgy of these works might be necessary to see them staged. The richness of Nabokov's body of work will continue to draw critics, including myself, toward further analysis. Even within *Pale Fire,* one of Nabokov's most critically considered works, there is still much more to

be discovered in the vein of theatricality that runs through it. This is therefore more of a beginning than a conclusion. Nabokov's dramas deserve a place nearer to the center of scholarship of his works, alongside his poetry and prose fiction. His theatrical works are of artistic merit in their own right and their legacy in his novels is even greater.

A Note on Bibliography:

Scholarly writing on Vladimir Nabokov often uses a series of standard abbreviations of the titles of his works. These abbreviations are taken from *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives,* edited by Julian W. Connolly. He includes the title of the work with its original date of publication and, if possible, the date and bibliographical information for the first printing of the text in its Vintage International Edition. I include the same information here, but only for the texts that I have used in the course of this project. A full bibliography follows this note.

Table of Abbreviations:

Abbreviation	Full Title and Bibliographical Information
AnL	*The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. with preface, introduction, and notes by Alfred Appel, Jr., 1970.
BS	*Bend Sinister*. 1947. New York: Vintage International, 1990.
Def	*The Defense*. Trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author. 1964. New York: Vintage International, 1990.
LL	*Lectures on Literature*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / Bruccoli Clark, 1980.
Lo	*Lolita*. 1955. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
LoScreen	*Lolita: A Screenplay*. 1974. New York: Vintage International, 1997.
PF	*Pale Fire*. 1962. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
Pnin	*Pnin*. 1957. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
PP	*Poems and Problems*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.
RLSK	*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. 1941. New York: Vintage International, 1992.

Abbreviation	Full Title and Bibliographical Information
SM	*Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. 1967. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
SO	*Strong Opinions*. 1973. New York: Vintage International, 1990.
SP	*Selected Poetry*. Ed. and Introduction by Thomas Karshan. New York: Knopf, 2012.
Stories	*The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. 1995. New York: Vintage International, 1997.
TMM	*The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,* trans. Thomas Karshan and Anastasia Tolstoy. New York: Knopf, 2012.
USSR	*The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*. Introduction and Translations by Dmitri Nabokov. New york: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / Bruccoli Clark, 1984.
VNAY	Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*.
VNRY	Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*.

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