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REALIZING AND IMAGINING “AESTHETIC BLISS” IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S *LOLITA* AND *PALE FIRE*

Jessica J. Goddard*

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* are exemplary works of art that continue to push the boundaries of aesthetic and ethical literary theory. Critics and theorists alike once strove to categorize these tenets so central to Nabokov’s work, but in current reviews many have chosen to defer a deterministic analysis of the novel’s themes and instead relegate the philosophical and artistic value of his texts to the realm of “potustoronnost” (“otherworld”). This paper argues that the artistic puzzle that motivates such a critical assessment is in fact more complexly related to Nabokov’s strong opinions about art, aesthetics, and ethics, and ignoring a finer analysis of these themes renders a general term such as “otherworld” unsatisfactory. My research explores two principle motifs—reality and imagination—in an attempt to join Nabokov’s artistic mechanisms with his well-established aesthetic and ethical axioms. Additionally, I invoke the preceding work of Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, in order to demonstrate how Nabokov has, almost a century later, complemented Flaubert’s negative representation of art’s integration into his characters’ average realities (via a literary critique of interested aesthetics) with a positive, humanistic perspective that invokes moral sentiment. This essay strives to show how beauty and morality connect reality and imagination to aesthetics and ethics; and ultimately, how these interrelationships provide a dimensionality to art that invites the thoughtful reader to an elevated state of “aesthetic bliss.” I offer a refreshing perspective on Nabokov’s artistic priority of attaining “aesthetic bliss” that synthesizes and expands upon the current dialogue.

Subject categories: Literary Criticism & Theory

Keywords: Nabokov, Aesthetics, Ethics

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For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.

—Vladimir Nabokov

INTRODUCTION: THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Any paper trying to tackle the abstract qualities of Nabokov's art must start with the details that spark "the tingle in the spine [that] really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel."¹ In Nabokov's fiction, the recurrent concepts of reality and imagination develop as motifs that motivate an aesthetic experience unique to art—an experience that requires a deliberate surrender to the ineffability and unanswerability of art's true value. The author said of *Lolita*: "She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle—its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look."² I argue that we can learn the most about Nabokov's literary puzzles with the aid of his well-documented critical opinions, which cover the aesthetic, ethical, and metaphysical aspects of art.³ Nabokov's most illustrious definition of art, reproduced in the epigraph,

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 40.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ David Andrews claims that Nabokov's "works are unambiguously intended to be read for intention, and he hints that this literary intentionalism corresponds to a larger, transcendent intentionalism." *Aestheticism, Nabokov, and Lolita*, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 63. Yet New Critics William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley and post-structuralist Roland Barthes, among others, argue that reading for literary intentionalism leads literary analysis away from the text and therefore constitutes a poor approach to criticism. In their essay "The Intentional Fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that the author's statements, autobiographical works, and the like are "external evidence" and therefore do not belong to the practice of literary criticism. In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent Leitch, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001), 1374-87. Barthes take his claim yet farther in his essay "The Death of the Author," in which he contends that a work of literature exists between itself and its reader, completely severed from the author. *Ibid.*, 1466-70. He argues that analyzing a text with the author's intention restricts the interpretive possibilities of the text. I want to stress that *my* use of Nabokov's literary intentionalism is to illuminate the complicated transcendental motifs—

demands a standard of “curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy,” all of which presuppose an ethical responsibility to humanity and goodness. It is in this world that Nabokov experiences “aesthetic bliss,” a state that he also offers the attentive, detail-oriented reader.⁴ Yet despite the explicit use of the key motifs discussed in this paper, neither Nabokov, nor any critic can possibly claim them to be anything but in the periphery of a sufficient articulation of “aesthetic bliss” and the experience of art, for the motifs themselves are inherently inexpressible. The hard work to this understanding requires careful literary analysis, a dictionary, and an open-mind that errs on the side of optimism despite some of the dark and disturbing ironies in Nabokov's texts.

Select readings that best illuminate the conceptual premises for “aesthetic bliss” foreground my claim that the philosophical arguments that Nabokov addresses in *Pale Fire* and *Lolita* are both the author's aesthetic puzzle and its humanistic solution. The stark contrast of Humbert Humbert's aesthetics and John Shade's aesthetics⁵ clarify the somewhat fuzzy boundary between the “good” and “evil” natures of aesthetic ambitions among artists. Nabokov presents his protagonists views on reality and imagination both explicitly and implicitly through their artistic aspirations. These essential concepts—imagination and reality—carry weighty philosophical and literary meanings. I use the

reality and imagination—through which he actively promulgates his artistic views. Nabokov's fiction parodies the humorous yet strained relationship between author-character-reader. Inevitably the discerning reader finds him or herself in conversation with an author whose central argument is about the ineffability of what truly constitutes “aesthetic bliss” afforded by a masterpiece of literature, and thus intentionalism becomes an essential piece to the interpretive puzzle. We find that “external evidence” provides Nabokovian criticism with clarification that *opens* and does *not limit* the interpretive possibilities of his literature.

⁴ When asked about the pleasures of writing in a 1964 interview, Nabokov responded: “They correspond exactly to the pleasures of reading, the bliss, the felicity of a phrase is shared by writer and reader: by the satisfied writer and the grateful reader, or—which is the same thing—by the artist grateful to the unknown force in his mind that has suggested a combination of images and by the artist reader whom this combination satisfies.” *Strong Opinions*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 40.

⁵ Nabokov writes in *Strong Opinions*: “It is also true that some of my more responsible characters are given some of my own ideas. There is John Shade in *Pale Fire*, the poet. He does borrow some of my own ideas” (*Strong Opinions*, 18). Critic Vladimir Alexandrov also notes, “in his seminal article “Inspiration” Nabokov quotes at some length Shade's description of how he composes his verse, without signaling, however, either that Shade is a character in one of his novels, or that the quotation is a passage from Shade's poem that has been reprinted as prose.” *Nabokov's Otherworlds*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 187. This article can be found in Nabokov's *Strong Opinions* on page 308.

definitions of "reality" and "imagination" in the context of Nabokov's own philosophical conception of these terms. "Reality" will be taken to be "a very subjective affair," as well as "an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable."⁶ In the author's fictional worlds, this general definition of reality boils down to four distinct dimensions: true reality, average reality (as Nabokov calls it), solipsistic reality, and human reality. Most importantly, these various forms intersect in the artistic space of Nabokov's novels and highlight the unattainability and subjectivity of reality as the author discusses it in his theoretical criticism and lectures on literature. Reality is meaningfully related to imagination, which Nabokov understood to be the playground of artistic production—the creation and manipulation of reality and memories for use in creative processes. More generally, the imagination is both a tool and a source of creativity—the solid link between reality and the "plexed artistry"⁷ of literature.⁸

⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 10.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 63.

⁸ Coleridge writes in *Biographia Literaria*:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be *the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM*. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. *It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify*. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Emphasis mine) *In The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1854), 363-4.

Coleridge's definition captures both the powers and limitations of the imagination by categorizing imagination into two parts. The "secondary imagination" is bound to the finite, mortal "reality" as perceived in conjunction with the "conscious will." This conveys that the imagination's attempts to "idealize and unify" falter when trying to recreate something—a failure that is defined in the context of the primary imagination's ideal. Coleridge's argues that the primary imagination acts as the vehicle for perception while simultaneously creating the self. For this paper, I do not qualify my use of the word "imagination" by these categories, but this definition helps clarify the scope of imaginative power—to which I will add one thing. The imagination, at the highest level of performance, is the artist's realm of creation; but the imagination's idealized vision of perfection is as unattainable as understanding "reality." The imagination strives to re-create reality in the act of artistic production. This is a critical connection that Nabokov explores in his novels because Shade, Kinbote, and Humbert constantly come up against the limits of the imagination's capacity to re-create the "unattainable" reality.

Nabokov fervently resisted critics' desire to classify and compare him with other contemporaries, yet it is immensely helpful to note that Nabokov's complex artistic values, while original in their execution, follow a similar logic and tone to those of Gustave Flaubert. In his Cornell lectures, Nabokov discusses *Madame Bovary* as a stylistic masterpiece. Exhibiting his "artistic delight" in Flaubert's prose, Nabokov lauds the literary influence of *Madame Bovary*:

Ponder most carefully the following fact: a master of Flaubert's artistic power manages to transform what he has conceived as a sordid world inhabited by frauds and philistines and mediocrities and brutes and wayward ladies into one of the most perfect pieces of poetical fiction known, and this he achieves by bringing all the parts into harmony, by the inner force of style, by all such devices of form as the counterpoint of transition from one theme to another, of foreshadowing and echoes. Without Flaubert there would have been no Marcel Proust in France, no James Joyce in Ireland. Chekhov in Russia would not have been quite Chekhov. So much for Flaubert's literary influence.⁹

There is no doubt that without Flaubert, the Nabokov of Russia and America would not have been quite Nabokov. Flaubert suggests a definition of art and artistic production by writing about its misinterpretation in *Madame Bovary*, and we see that Nabokov frequently uses this model in his meta-fiction. Emma Bovary, a poor rural Frenchwoman enraptured by the fantasy world of novels, precedes Humbert as a character obsessed with aesthetics to the point of delusion. Both Emma and Charles Kinbote, the self-obsessed commentator in *Pale Fire*, are emotionally enchanted by the drama of fairy tale stories; yet they fail to recognize that such stories are deceptive fiction—not to be mistaken for reality. Emma Bovary is *the* bad reader, the self-

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, "Madame Bovary," in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1980), 147.

indulgent one¹⁰, whose sense of aesthetics "cheapens" throughout the novel and degrades her moral character. This is all to frame the greater argument that Bovary, Kinbote, and Humbert all place aesthetics over ethics and consequently misinterpret and misuse art. Such abuse of art takes many forms in all three novels. Through the process of untangling the stylistically and conceptually dense puzzles of Nabokov's novels, the reader actively compares Nabokov's aesthetics with those of his characters to conclude what art is not: the self-indulgent and deluded aestheticism that Flaubert explored 98 years earlier in *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert and Nabokov's characters attempt to apply art to real life, ergo they prioritize beauty over human reality and neglect the essential morality of their actions. Importantly, in Nabokov's work, we see not only a carry-over of Flaubert's negative critique of false aestheticism but also a more complete argument for art and "aesthetic bliss" that encompasses the positive representation of the art world (through characters like John Shade, the talented poet of "Pale Fire" in the eponymous novel) and its philosophical axioms. Coupling these apparent truths about art (they are, after all, claims and comments found in a fictional world) with Nabokov's nonfiction writing, the illusory descriptions of art, reality, and imagination become cogent proxies to the essence of "aesthetic bliss." Such an experience can only be approximated, for it happens in a different reality where "art is the norm," and where ethics and aesthetics coalesce in the wake of Nabokov's "deeply humanistic art [that] affirms man's ability to confront and order chaos."¹¹

"Reality is a very subjective affair,"¹² stated Nabokov in a 1962 interview with the BBC. Nabokov brings the question of reality's subjective nature into his novels and to the forefront of his characters' thoughts. In the postscript of *Lolita* he discusses the

¹⁰ As I explore in the segment titled "Beauty Plus Pity: The Moral Matter of Misreading in *Madame Bovary*," Flaubert demands a disinterested reader (as does Nabokov). I define the importance of disinterestedness in the next section titled "A Kantian Perspective: Aesthetic Judgment and Morality in the Realm of Ends."

¹¹ Alfred Appel Jr., "Introduction," in *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), xxxiii.

¹² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 10.

creative process of “obtaining [such] local ingredients as would allow me to inject a modicum of average ‘reality’ (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes) into the brew of individual fancy....”¹³ Jacqueline Hamrit expands on this quotation by noting the potential paradox: “fiction...is interlaced with reality,” but “reality can only be quoted and/or invented.”¹⁴ This paradox has led many critics to stand by Véra Nabokov’s claim that Nabokov’s main theme was “potustoronnost,” or the “otherworld,” and indeed this is a compelling argument. Nabokov’s novels are filled with questions that do not have answers, and the ambiguity of an “otherworld” provides critics with a comfortable space to defer these puzzles. Nabokov prioritizes (and intends for the reader to prioritize) “the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam.”¹⁵ As such, deferring the text to an indescribable, alternate reality succeeds in capturing the essence of transcendence in Nabokov’s art, but risks generalizing the tensions that arise among different manifestations of reality in his novels. Consequently, the specific details of reality’s paradoxical nature in Nabokov’s fiction do not receive the attention they deserve. Hence, Nabokov’s fictional treatment of reality is worthy of a new inquiry according to a finer categorization of Nabokov’s multiple, intersecting, and conflicting realities.

In another BBC interview, Nabokov says, “To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials.”¹⁶ If average reality is not “true reality,” but rather the common, general, and currently accepted reality, then why does Nabokov choose to “inject” it into the fictional worlds of New Wye, Zembla,

¹³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 312, in his postscript “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*.”

¹⁴ Jacqueline Hamrit, “Structure in *Lolita*,” (Zembla, 2008), 172.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

Ramsdale, and *Lolita's* America? Appel considers this question in his Introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* when he writes:

It may seem anomalous for puppeteer Nabokov, creator of the sham worlds of *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, to worry this way about "reality" (with or without quotation marks); yet one extreme does not preclude the other in Nabokov, and the originality of *Lolita* derives from this very paradox. The puppet theater never collapses, but everywhere there are fissures, if not gaps, in the structure, crisscrossing in intricate patterns and visible to the discerning eye...¹⁷

Thus, *Lolita's* average reality and the "fissures" that undermine it are equally important in the novel's structure. Through the abundance of coincidences, self-referencing allusions, images, dates and story lines, the novel's average reality becomes suspiciously artificial. Seeing through "the novel's verisimilar disguise, the reader is afforded a global view of the book *qua* book, whose dappled surface now reveals patterns that seem almost visual."¹⁸ The patterns of the text "seem almost visual" because they *are* visual. Nabokov wrote to Appel in a letter titled "A Note about Symbols and Colors" to assert: "I think your students, your readers, should be taught to *see things*, to discriminate between visual shades as the author does, and not to lump them under such arbitrary labels as "red"..."¹⁹ Here, Nabokov challenges his reader to discriminate among the shades and layers of sensory details in the text. These details are central to Nabokov's style, and therefore they are important to understanding the "matter" of his text. Some of the author's most serious themes involve nearly inexpressible emotions and thoughts, and thus require reading with a heightened sensitivity to the significance of different phenomena.

Nabokov uses several techniques to create and texture the "dappled surface" of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire's* apparent realities. To form the novel's average reality, Nabokov

¹⁷ Appel Jr., "Introduction," lvi.

¹⁸ Appel Jr., "Notes," 352.

¹⁹ VN quoted in *ibid.*, 354. Emphasis mine.

prioritizes chronological events via the authority of timelines, dates and journal entries; the precise and visual physical descriptions of people and places (“functional imagery”); and the over-confident, self-indulgent first person historical²⁰ narrators, Humbert Humbert and Kinbote.²¹ Coincidences, allusions, and word play layer these modicums of reality and destabilize their veridicality—they both indicate and deepen the “fissures” and “gaps” in the novel’s design. By exploring these openings in the text’s fabric, the reader engages with the theoretical backbone of the reality motif. An oft-quoted passage about Nabokov’s definition of reality is reproduced here to set the stage for a reading that brings Nabokov’s description in conversation with the ideas his characters entertain on the same subject,

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it’s hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects....²²

Indeed, ghostly objects—shadows and shades—traverse the pages of *Lolita* and most prominently in *Pale Fire*, guided by the hand of Vivian Darkbloom herself, a faithful mimic of “that good cheat,” “V.N., Visible Nature”.²³ Even as we (readers) strive to get nearer to the “real” intentions of the text, we confront V.N. in his various disguises that

²⁰ Here, I am qualifying Humbert and Kinbote as historical narrators because both are recounting “real” events that occurred in the past. Humbert, a memoir of his infatuation with Lolita and his pursuit of Quilty. Kinbote, the exile of the Zemblan King, his nemesis Gradus, and his relationship with John Shade.

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 288.

²² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11, 153. Full quotation from *Strong Opinions*: “Deception is practiced even more beautifully by that other V.N., Visible Nature.” Vivian Darkbloom is an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov. See page 31 of *The Annotated Lolita* and the corresponding note on page 350.

force us to reevaluate our attachment to the text and its endless "levels of perception." There is a tension built into this argument because the subjective reality is "unattainable" (and thus the individual can never fully know the "real") and yet Nabokov argues that we can move closer to it—as though it is an infinitely small point outside of ourselves.

In *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, this view of reality reigns over the self-serving subjectivity of Humbert Humbert's and Kinbote's solipsistic realities. Nabokov is present throughout his novels as the "anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me,"²⁴ parodying the paths of characters and readers who interpret reality to be a function of the self. The author unrelentingly mocks his readers and characters, not out of cruel intentions, but rather out of a loyal dedication to art, qualified by "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, [and] ecstasy,"²⁵ which the solipsistic Hum and delusional Botkin muddy with their narcissistic tendencies. Brian Boyd writes that "the world is so real that it exceeds our knowledge of its reality,"²⁶ and this statement rings true in the moments where Nabokov scorns his characters' solipsism most harshly. Nabokov captures the humor and irony of the reality to which the reader and his characters subscribe while simultaneously prompting a sense of anxiety that follows the critical reader's questions prodding reality's fragile and subjective nature. This ironic, humorous, and unsettling tone generates a curious inquiry into the philosophical axioms underlying the frequent display of reality's "false bottoms" and seemingly endless "levels of perception." Nabokov's fictional worlds adhere to his insistence that "you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless." As a result, his characters suffer greatly for ignoring the external referent intrinsic to this description of reality. "The artist should

²⁴ VN quoted in Appel Jr., "Introduction," xxxi.

²⁵ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 315.

²⁶ Brian Boyd, one of Nabokov's most eminent scholars, quoted in Leland De la Durantaye, *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 43.

know the given world,"²⁷ for without accepting "the given world" and its complex realities, the artist confines his or her imagination to the self. Nabokov re-creates this mimetically by depicting solipsistic protagonists whose artistic aspirations are constrained by their fictional existence. Consequently, their artistic efforts to surpass their textual confines translate into "a nightmare vision of the ineffable bliss variously sought by one Nabokov character after another."²⁸

The scope of this project exceeds the confines of this paper, so I hope that what is left out of this piece will emerge organically in the mind of Nabokov's readers, who no doubt will place my theories to the test in works beyond *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The abundance of choices for close readings forces one to choose selectively, and in the effort to be concise and persuasive, I will be examining selections that critics before me have frequently quoted. These quotations situate my argument in conversation with those who know Nabokov best and provide me the leverage I need to make some of my bolder claims. The exquisite and complex "textual patterning" in Nabokov's novels resist deterministic categorization of individual motifs. Thus though this paper holds onto the ropes of reality and imagination as distinct motifs, it recognizes their mutual interdependence. Similar to the textual and imaginary connections they induce, these motifs cannot be read independently of one another. It is helpful, however, to structure an argument that disentangles some of the non-linearity in the abstract theories behind the text. Unsurprisingly, this leads to a rather non-linear reading of the text.

Thus having laid out the preliminary groundwork for Nabokov's descriptions of reality and imagination, I turn to Immanuel Kant's powerful logic on ethics and aesthetics to clarify the theoretical basis for the words "aesthetic," "beauty," and

²⁷ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 32. To be clear, Nabokov does not intend to say that one can know the reality of the given world, but rather that one can learn and accumulate *knowledge* about the given world, which the imagination then uses as material in the process of artistic production.

²⁸ Appel Jr., "Introduction," liii. Such "ineffable bliss" is the "aesthetic bliss" Nabokov encourages as a writer and seeks as a reader; it is an inaccessible reality for the fictional artists in his prose.

"morality," which frequent this paper. I subsequently discuss how Nabokov's focus on reality and imagination underlie his artistic representation of aesthetics and ethics in my search for "aesthetic bliss" in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The paper concludes with a reading of *Madame Bovary* that shows how Flaubert's treatment of reality and imagination couple with his stylistic technique to put forth a negative critique on the nature of art. This final analysis exhibits Flaubert's literary influence on Nabokov and provides a literary context for Nabokov's unique and complicated art.

A KANTIAN PERSPECTIVE: AESTHETIC JUDGMENT AND MORALITY IN THE REALM OF ENDS

In reading Flaubert and Nabokov we must have clear definitions of disinterestedness and aesthetic judgment in order to adequately address the relevance of beauty and morality to art. Immanuel Kant's eminent elucidation of these terms in *Critique of Judgment* and *Metaphysical Foundations of Morals*²⁹ avails my analysis of the artistic experience. Ambitious though it might be, I hope to show how beauty and morality connect reality and imagination to aesthetics and ethics; and ultimately, how these interrelationships provide a dimensionality to art that invites the thoughtful reader to an elevated state of "aesthetic bliss."

Flaubert and Nabokov require their readers to remain disinterested as they engage with the text,³⁰ thereby justifying my Kantian reference. Accordingly, Kant's

²⁹ Refer to the following for the complete philosophical reasoning behind these arguments: *Metaphysical Foundations of Morals* (1785) and *Critique of Judgment*: Part I: Introduction & First Book of First Section (1793).

³⁰ This is a key point in my argument, so I would like to make clear that this "requirement" of the reader is explicit in light of the "external evidence" provided by Nabokov's interviews and lectures and Flaubert's letters. Yet if we wish to analyze this point à la Wimsatt and Beardsley, Flaubert and Nabokov provide ample "internal evidence" by way of negative representation. That is, Humbert, Emma, and Kinbote suffer on account of their internally focused, "interested" approach to almost everything that has a moral consequence, such as nature, personhood, and art.

disinterested observer judges an object to be beautiful because his or her faculty of taste has estimated the object “by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest...*[which] must involve a claim to validity for all men.”³¹ Consequently, an object is not beautiful *because* one takes interest in it, but rather because one delights in it without feeling attached to it and finds that his or her judgment is generally valid for all persons. If we are to apply Kant’s notion of beauty in nature to beauty in art, we note: “for the beautiful...we must seek a ground outside ourselves.”³² This particular philosophical argument is extremely important in Nabokov and Flaubert because Humbert, Kinbote, and Emma consistently judge objects based on their desires and fail (whether knowingly, in the case of Humbert, or not, in the case of Emma and Kinbote) to acknowledge the external world. On these grounds, we can argue that these characters are incapable of true aesthetic judgment, and thus better understand how their attempts at artistry reflect a novelistic representation of failed aestheticism.

One is then likely to question: if aesthetic judgment is a faculty of taste that requires disinterestedness, how is this precondition for reading (or observing reality) in Flaubert and Nabokov related to morality? This connection is better understood when the reader is alerted to how the characters fallaciously aestheticize people and objects consequent to their moral integrity in their attempts to attain “aesthetic bliss.” Before submitting this experience as morally significant in Flaubert and Nabokov, I want to explicate some of Kant’s exceedingly useful conclusions on the nature of human morality. Of particular importance is Kant’s definition of the “practical imperative”³³ in *Metaphysical Foundations of Morals*: “Act so as to treat man, in your own person as well as in

³¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, 2 ed. (London: MacMillan, 1914), 292.

³² Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 294.

³³ Kant defines the “practical imperative” in his development of the well-known “categorical imperative”—a syllogistic argument that reasons the necessary morality of mankind.

that of anyone else, always as an end, never merely as a means."³⁴ Kant bases this imperative on the condition that man is *always* an end, or "something whose existence [is] in itself of absolute value"³⁵; from this human quality arise the common, ethical laws that unite humankind. Morality specifies the nature of this relationship between the individual and humankind:

Morality is the sole condition under which a rational being can be an end in himself, since only then can he possibly be a law-making member in the realm of ends.³⁶ Thus, only good morals (*Sittlichkeit*) and mankind, so far as it is capable of it, have dignity. Skill and diligence in work have a market price; wit, lively imagination and whims have a fancy price; but faithfulness to promise, good will as a matter of principle, not as a matter of instinct, have an intrinsic value.³⁷ Neither nature nor art has anything which, if dignity were lacking, they could put in its place. For, such intrinsic value consists neither in its effects, nor in the utility and advantage which makes it possible, but in convictions; that is, in the maxims of will which are ready to manifest themselves in actions... These actions need no urging by any subjective taste or sentiment to be regarded with immediate favor and pleasure. They need no immediate propensity or feeling; they represent the will that performs them as an object of an immediate respect.³⁸

Thus the will, if it consistently abides by precepts that pertain generally to humankind, has dignity, or intrinsic value that is fundamentally good. This implies that anything but the good will acts in opposition to the ethical laws necessary to humankind, and thereby compromises a person's moral integrity. A common example of someone acting against the practical imperative is the active exploitation of another person by treating him or her "as a means." In this case, we are justified in saying that the act of bad will

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Philosophy of Kant; Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich, The Modern Library of the World's Best Books [266] (New York: Modern Library, 1949), 178.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁶ Because man is "an end in himself," there results "a systematic linking of rational beings through common objective laws, i.e., a realm which may be called a realm of ends." *The Philosophy of Kant*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich, The Modern Library of the World's Best Books [266] (New York: Modern Library, 1949), 182.

³⁷ The notion of "price" here is Kant's appraisal of human characteristics based on their expendability. He defines *fancy price* to be "whatever answers, without presupposing a need, to a certain taste, that is, to pleasure in the mere purposeless play of our emotions." *Ibid.*, 183.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

devalues the exploiter's morality. Such a definition affords explicit references to a character's morality as measured by their relationship to and treatment of humanity.

Nabokov's characters are both aesthetically and morally endowed, and their actions often blur the concrete definitions presented here. Yet the substance of Nabokov's style reigns superior to his characters' attempts at moral and aesthetic autonomy, and we learn of the author's unfaltering belief that the "goodness of man" is "a solid and iridescent truth."³⁹ When Kinbote asks Shade what prevents man from evil if they do not believe in God ("And so the password is—?"), Shade responds: "Pity."⁴⁰ Indeed, pity is an essential emotion that characters like Humbert and Kinbote lack as they actively pursue their aesthetic vision at the cost of human compassion. Similarly, Flaubert's Emma Bovary attempts to ascribe an aesthetic judgment to all that she finds pleasurable in novels (i.e., sex, romanticism, and passion), thereby judging the beauty of an object based on her *emotional* (and thus *interested*) whims and attachments. She then approaches the world with an aesthetic vision that leads to her moral degradation, and ultimately her tragic suicide. For both authors, the relationship between aesthetics and morality is never unequivocal, and thus the discerning reader must work with the author's individual artistic styles in order to better understand how this complex dynamic comes to define their fictional worlds. *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* allow for the exploration of Nabokov's negative and positive artistic representations of the dynamic between aesthetics and ethics, which is expanded in vision and complexity from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

³⁹ Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," 373.

⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 225.

LOLITA: MORALITY'S LIMITATION ON A SOLIPSIST'S AESTHETICS

Humbert's *Lolita*—a fictional, posthumously published memoir—claims to reflect “events” that “really” happened, and if some of these events are falsified, then the reader blames the unreliable narrator. Capricious or not, however, I propose that these episodes of hypocrisy and falsification are cues to investigate the interpretive possibility that these moments of unreliability are actually real to Humbert, and thus necessitate the consideration of Humbert's average reality versus his emotional reality. One then finds that Humbert's contradictory statements are often consistent when contextualized in his perspective of reality.⁴¹ I base this observation on the premise that Nabokov's literary world has its own formulas for right and wrong, indices of true, false, and array of values that make up the texture of Humbert's fictional existence. Thus Humbert's incongruous claims—be they emotionally charged or literarily devoid of ethical boundaries and human sensitivity—must be contextualized in the fabric of Nabokov's literary world.

Humbert and Lolita's stay in *The Enchanted Hunters* provides an excellent example of the visual patterning and coincidences that undermine *Lolita's* average reality, pointing both to Nabokov as stagehand and to Humbert's solipsistic reality.

⁴¹ For an example, consider Humbert's self-commentary on his own memory. Though destroyed, Humbert reproduces the journal he kept while living at the Haze house “by courtesy of a photographic memory”; yet later he qualifies his memory as “sensational but incomplete and unorthodox.” *Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 40; 217. If contextualized in Humbert's reality, these two descriptions do not fault one another. In the solipsist's mind, the journal is a reproduction of the internal self and therefore does not require sensitivity to outside events. It is thus very plausible that Humbert does possess a photographic memory of the world he creates within himself and projects onto the pages of his diary. However, the memory of Clare Quilty's secretive presence throughout his road trip across America requires Humbert to consider an external reality, out of his control, that threatens his solipsistic perspective. Humbert's emotional preoccupation with aestheticizing his world precludes him from recognizing or believing in an average reality that interferes with his own; and retrospectively, Humbert blames his oversight on his memory, qualifying it as “unorthodox,” for he remembers *selectively* according to *his* self-focused reality. This is all to show how Humbert's contradictions are not merely Nabokov's way of weakening or discrediting Humbert's narrative ability, but the author's way of critiquing Humbert's solipsism, which limits his ability to perceive and know the “given world.”

Their entrance into the hotel begins with a comedic interaction with Mr. Swine and Mr. Potts⁴²—“two pink pigs” running the hotel. After a sequence of playful rhymes—“Mr. Potts, do we have any cots?...—would there be a spare cot in 49, Mr. Swine?”—the recurrence of the number “342” captures both Lolita and Humbert’s attention:

In the slow clear hand of crime I wrote: Dr. Edgar H. Humbert and daughter, 342 Lawn Street, Ramsdale. A key (342!) was half-shown to me (magician showing object he is about to palm)—and handed over to Uncle Tom. Lo, leaving the dog as she would leave me some day, rose from her haunches; a raindrop fell on Charlotte's grave; a handsome young Negress slipped open the elevator door, and the doomed child went in followed by her throat-clearing father and crayfish Tom with the bags.

Parody of a hotel corridor. Parody of silence and death.

"Say, it's our house number," said cheerful Lo.⁴³

This passage typifies how Nabokov, “the magician,” uses coincidence to presuppose meaning between details, such as the Haze house number and the hotel number; more specifically, however, Nabokov is placing a hermeneutic marker, signaling the reader to consider and “fondle the details” both of and around the coincidence.⁴⁴ Humbert fraudulently identifies himself as Dr. Edgar H. Humbert, an allusion to Poe that references Humbert’s desire to be an artist and also confirms his existence as bound to and defined by literature. Humbert’s recognition of the coincidence—342!—appears to

⁴² The quotations here and the full dialogue can be found in Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 118.

⁴³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 118-19.

⁴⁴ Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” 4. In Alexandrov’s essay, “How Can Ethics Exist in Nabokov’s Fated Worlds?” he maintains that “the same kinds of “coincidences” of meaning and detail in a work that seem to support a metaliterary reading...can also be interpreted in a completely different way.” *Cynos*, no. 1 (1993), 3. For Alexandrov, this “way” is to interpret Nabokov’s hermeneutic indicators (e.g. coincidence) as signals that “the metaliterary in Nabokov is not an end in itself, but emerges as a model for the metaphysical” (3). I would like to add to this astute observation that it is not just the metaliterary details and their meaning that effects a metaphysical understanding, but also our “capacity to wonder at trifles...and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good.” Nabokov, “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” *In Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, 371-80, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1980), 373. Thus in the passage examined here, it is the trivial details (alongside the coincidental “342”) that parody the suffering that engenders Humbert’s “moral apotheosis”—arguably Humbert’s most important metaphysical experience.

induce a solemn tone that contrasts the previous comedy of Mr. Potts and Mr. Swine. Humbert alludes to Lolita's betrayal and to Charlotte's grave in a crescendo of dismal observations that lead to a pivotal shift in perspective. The fragmented lines that introduce the hallway leading to Humbert and Lolita's first night of consummation also introduce the dark nature of Humbert's problematic perception—a solipsistic thinker "most artistically caged" in Nabokov's fictional world.⁴⁵ As though Nabokov anticipates the reader's desire to interpret the true reality attached to the "real suffering" implied by Humbert's tone, the author has only left us a fragmented, incomplete, and sardonic interpretation of the scene as a "Parody of silence and death."⁴⁶ The reader, casually enjoying the literary play of Swine and Potts, finds him or herself at a loss when attempting to interpret the significance of this phrase. Whose silence? Whose deaths? One might speculate that Humbert is referring to the silent death of Lolita's girlhood, but she chimes in as "cheerful Lo" in the next line. It is only at the novel's close that we realize "cheerful Lo," number 342, and the platitudinous elevator routine are the details of parody that mock the "silence and death" consequent to Humbert's illicit love.⁴⁷

Herein lies the textured reality of *Lolita*. As if triggering the puppeteer's strings, Lolita brings up the coincidental room number and Humbert's moment of self-reflexivity is lost to a solipsistic metaphor:

There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bedtables, a double bed....⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 37.

⁴⁶ Appel Jr., "Notes," 378.

⁴⁷ Humbert's proximity to death pervades *Lolita* (1991): Annabel's premature death (13), Charlotte's death after finding Humbert's diary (97), the murder of Quilty (301-305), Lolita (now Mrs. Richard F. Schiller) dies "giving birth to a stillborn girl" (4), and Humbert himself dies of coronary thrombosis in jail—only 39 days before Lolita dies (3).

⁴⁸ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 119.

Appel comments that: “the room is a little prison of mirrors, a metaphor for his solipsism and circumscribing obsession,” calling “the attempt to transcend solipsism [one] of Nabokov’s major themes.”⁴⁹ However, this metaphor is all the more effective because of its short, tongue-twisting alliterations of “b” and “d” that necessitate a re-read to overcome the obstructive language. Nabokov’s style and form strengthen the significance of the metaphor by forcing the reader to re-read and focus on the detail of the scene. The list begins and ends with “a double bed,” as though Humbert is about to repeat the exercise of describing the room’s total internal reflection; therefore, if the reader re-reads the passage just once, he or she has read the word “double bed” six times. The obsessive repetition suggests that the dizzying “prison of mirrors” is also a physical representation of Humbert’s imagination as he stands in the hotel room, anticipating his night in the “double bed”: “by stacking level upon level of translucent vision, [I] had evolved a final picture” of Lolita, “emprisoned in her crystal sleep.”⁵⁰ Humbert subsequently connects his vision of Lolita and the prison metaphor with the coincidental key number “342”: “The key, with its numbered dangler of carved wood, became forthwith the weighty sesame to a rapturous and formidable future.”⁵¹ The development of this compound symbol shows how Humbert attaches meaning to the textured patterns of his “average reality”; of course the reader knows, from the vantage point of dramatic irony, that the patterns are Nabokov’s metaphors and coincidences—“McFate’s way”—which have no “true reality.”⁵²

In mimesis of Nabokov’s limitation on Humbert’s artistic material, Humbert’s first lover, Annabel Leigh, is actually the artistic property of Edgar Allen Poe, author of

⁴⁹ Appel Jr., “Notes,” 378.

⁵⁰ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 125; *ibid.*, 123.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 215. This is problematic for Humbert when he attempts to transcend the insular nature of his solipsism in order to retrospectively imagine the external reality he ignored or misperceived when he traveled with Lolita. A pertinent example of this conflict is Humbert’s struggle to “fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” without resorting to self-absorbed, sexually charged language. See pages 134-5 of *The Annotated Lolita* (1991).

the poem, "Annabel Lee." Of "his" Annabel, Humbert writes: "her seaside limbs...haunted me...until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another."⁵³ This is Humbert's first statement of artistic intention: to *re-create* Annabel, Humbert needs to aestheticize Lolita to give her the immortal, artistic reality that poetry has given "Annabel Lee." This endeavor reflects Humbert's misuse and misinterpretation of art as applicable to human reality—a reality distinct in its ethical nature from the true, the average, and the solipsistic realities discussed heretofore. The quotation that follows is the final development in a series of Humbert's attempts to realize his Lolita by giving her existence through art:

Thus, neither of us is alive when the reader opens this book. But while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am, and I can still talk to you from here to Alaska. Be true to your Dick. Do not let other fellows touch you. Do not talk to strangers. I hope you will love your baby. I hope it will be a boy. That husband of yours, I hope, will always treat you well, because otherwise my specter shall come at him, like black smoke, like a demented giant, and pull him apart nerve by nerve. And do not pity C.Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.⁵⁴

Humbert concludes with an address to Lolita that is devoid of his normally florid prose, but true to his own beliefs in art's ability to create and immortalize. The concept of existence is considered in three ways in this passage: life in average reality, life in Humbert's internal reality, and life in art. These three places are of course joined in their fictional context, but it is apparent that Humbert has created the Lolita of his memoir from his interpretation of reality and transformed her into an artistic piece ("to have him make you live in the minds of later generations"). Any sensitivity that might

⁵³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

prompt Humbert to postpone publishing the memoir until Lolita dies is secondary to the fact that his memoir gives her a form of existence that belongs only to Humbert's reality—"while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am." Humbert knows he is ascribing an existence to Lolita that stems from his writing pen; yet as Appel comments in his note to the last sentence, the archaic images of the Old Master paintings ("durable pigments") and the unintelligible allusion to the cave paintings of Lascaux (the "aurochs") are "too obscure."⁵⁵ They relate his memoir and Lolita to paintings from ancient Europe—a far cry from the America of *Lolita*—and draw attention to Humbert's shifting conception of his own reality. This final image underscores his failure to reconcile his internal perception of Lolita and what he retrospectively discovers about her, that he did not allow her an innocent childhood. In his last sentence, Humbert is careful to call upon "my Lolita," the Lolita of his solipsistic creation, suggesting that he is resigned to the loss of the "Lolita" that opens the novel. This prompts one to look back through the text in search of those moments that distinguish Humbert's manifestation of Lolita as an extension of his solipsistic reality from the rare episodes of his sobered recognition of her human reality.

Before relegating their past to the realm of art, "Humbert's moral apotheosis, so uniquely straightforward, constitutes the end game and Nabokov's final *trompe-l'oeil*."⁵⁶ One of the most beautiful passages in the novel, Nabokov surprises the readers' expectations and prompts the legitimate re-consideration of Humbert's entire character. His "last mirage of wonder and hopelessness"⁵⁷ bespeaks the thematic centrality of reality's often-painful subjectivity:

⁵⁵ Appel Jr., "Notes," 452.

⁵⁶ Appel Jr., "Introduction," lxiv.

⁵⁷ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 307.

One could make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and gray roofs, and green puffs of trees, and a serpentine stream, and the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump, and beyond the town, roads crisscrossing the crazy quilt of dark and pale fields, and behind it all, great timbered mountains. But even brighter than those quietly rejoicing colors—for there are colors and shades that seem to enjoy themselves in good company—both brighter and dreamier to the ear than they were to the eye, was that vapory vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood wiping my foul mouth. And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.⁵⁸

Aside from the beautiful flow of prose, the passage is preoccupied with a distortion of senses that mirrors Humbert's painfully dizzying recognition that Lolita's existence is as much of a mystery to him as the magically colorful choir of sound that resounds from the "transparent town" in front of him. Humbert's kaleidoscopic experience is completely auditory and tactile, reminding us of his intentional blindness to Lolita's empty, unhappy childhood. Humbert dwells on the "vapor of blended voices" that disorients him because it comes to him in waves and "spurts." The sound is "almost articulate," a "demure murmur" that refuses him a distinct visualization but rather inspires a deep and epiphany-like moment ("and then I knew") of moral sensitivity for the ghost of Lolita's girlhood.⁵⁹ It is in this moment that the reality of Lolita's

⁵⁸ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 307-08.

⁵⁹ Following Humbert and Lolita's first night at the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert feels as though he has killed Lolita, and he speaks in the third person, perhaps to alleviate his sense of responsibility: "More and

personhood is recognized, for it was never allowed to exist previously, and Humbert shows, if but for a moment, compassion. The final lines of the memoir do not reconcile Humbert's realization, but their curt tone suggests that Humbert remains cognizant of his predicament. He attempts to immortalize not the real Lolita but his Lolita, only to find that the two are not inseparable, and that by solipsizing her he has sacrificed her reality. Pifer writes, "True consciousness is a gift realized by its operation—not by mere possession; lacking exercise, the faculty atrophies."⁶⁰ This aptly describes Humbert's muted dilemma in the final pages of *Lolita*, from Humbert's moral apotheosis to his constricted voice at the close of the novel. Humbert's proximity to the reality he denied Lolita is "hopelessly poignant" because he feels the consequences of ignoring her true existence. "True consciousness" lurks both "remote and magically near,"⁶¹ but will forever remain hidden from Humbert, "because consciousness is dependent on the *visual discovery* of interrelations among phenomena" to which Humbert has been knowingly blind.⁶²

Following his poignant epiphany on the "lofty slope," Humbert explains his requirement for the memoir's posthumous publication as the result of a sensitive realization "mid-composition" that he "could not parade living Lolita"⁶³—a tribute to his acceptance that a meaningful search for Lolita's true reality is in fact as "hopeless" as he admits it to be. Given Nabokov's meticulous style, we are not unwarranted to take

more uncomfortable did Humbert feel. It was something quite special, that feeling: an oppressive, hideous constraint as if I were sitting with the small *ghost* of somebody I had just killed." (Emphasis mine) *Lolita*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 140.

⁶⁰ Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 28.

⁶¹ Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworlds* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 32. Emphasis mine.

⁶² Nabokov, *Lolita*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 44. For example, in his diary, Humbert writes: "I would like to describe her face, her ways—and I cannot, because my own desire for [Lolita] blinds me when she is near." Humbert recalls a decision he makes on the first day of his journey with Lolita: "I firmly decided to ignore what I could not help perceiving, the fact that I was to her not a boy friend...not even a person at all." *Ibid*, 283.

⁶³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 308.

Humbert's unelaborated reference seriously and flip to the middle of the novel. As expected, there is evidence of an event that likely prompted Humbert to postpone the memoirs publication. A subtle, but telling moment amidst the thick of Humbert and Lolita's travels, Humbert writes about their stop at Magnolia Garden:

O, Reader, My Reader, guess!...because children (and by Jingo was not my Lolita a child!) will "walk starry-eyed and reverently through this foretaste of Heaven, drinking in beauty that can influence a life." "Not mine," said grim Lo...⁶⁴

Echoing the novel's well-known focus on America's consumerist tone and tourist attractions, the guidebook's inflated description of the attraction distracts the casual reader from the genuine irony that it motivates. At this point in the novel, the reader is familiar with Lo's chronic pessimism and Humbert's persistence to ignore its origins. Why, then, might this instance prompt the realization that forestalls the book's publication while they are alive? Looking closely at Humbert's vocabulary throughout the novel, one finds that amid the complex and often arcane selection of adjectives and nouns, Humbert attaches "beauty" to Lolita as a common epithet. Humbert's preoccupation with beauty, though cheap and problematic,⁶⁵ is the source of his imaginative prose and his desire to aestheticize all of his experiences. Lolita's morose rejection of the garden's beauty thus disturbs Humbert, who commits his talents to aestheticizing his surroundings in the hopes of capturing their beauty and experiencing "aesthetic bliss." The garden's suggestive description as a "foretaste of Heaven," appeals to Humbert's sense of beauty and nymphet love, which he enjoys in his own "elected paradise."⁶⁶ Humbert's pedophilic love for Lolita leads him to ignore the details of her human reality, however, thereby limiting the scope of his artistic ability as he attempts to aestheticize only the sensual aspects of Lolita's existence. Consequently,

⁶⁴ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 155.

⁶⁵Taking a Kantian perspective, I qualify Humbert's aesthetics as "cheap" because his aesthetic judgment of the beautiful is based almost entirely on his sexual interest.

⁶⁶ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 166.

when Lolita grimly retorts that her life will not be influenced by the garden's beauty, one might argue she is defying any influence of beauty. Thus her indifference to beauty and pleasure ("this foretaste of Heaven") threatens Humbert's modus operandi. It is highly possible that Humbert's decision not to "parade living Lolita" originates with a memory such as this, where the "true" Lolita's voice rings through to stand against Humbert's abusive aesthetic obsession, and it works.

Lolita, an emotionally objectified and nearly voiceless character,⁶⁷ reflects the limitation of Humbert's artistic success. This is not because Lolita is as shallow as he presents her, but rather because the reader is constrained to the Lolita of Humbert's solipsistic reality—a reality that denies Lolita the ethical respect that all human beings deserve. Humbert first violates Lolita by positioning her on his "surreptitiously laboring lap"⁶⁸ until he orgasms. He describes her afterward:

Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own.⁶⁹

Humbert might insert this observation as a retrospective detail, but it builds the case that Humbert *created* the Lolita of his memoir and desired his own creation. James Tweedie notes that "Humbert's solipsism aims at near-complete isolation, and the world beyond his insular existence is always confronted as a threat."⁷⁰ This is clear from Humbert's reassurance that both he and Lolita are *safe*, but from what? The threats are numerous as the novel continues, and Humbert deals with them accordingly: their love

⁶⁷ "Dick, this is Dad," cried Dolly in a resounding violent voice that struck me as totally strange, and new, and cheerful and old, and sad." Nabokov, *Lolita*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 273. Humbert is struck precisely by Lolita's voice many years after she had left him. The progression from "totally strange" to "old, and sad" reflects an emotional recognition of this "new" voice he had not listened to beforehand.

⁶⁸ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 60.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

affair could be exposed, so they road trip across America; Clare Quilty steals Lolita, so Humbert hunts him down; even the *real* Lolita threatens his solipsized version, so he drugs her with purple pills and buys her what she wants. It is only later that Humbert faces the fact that "his insular existence" is the greatest threat to the success of his love affair with Lolita.

By denying Lolita a valid existence in *his* reality, Humbert only acknowledges Lolita's internal consciousness as it presents itself in the context of Humbert's solipsized world. As his memories unfold at the end of the memoir, Humbert recalls an episode that parallels Lolita's dour response to the garden that foretells of Heavenly beauty:

"You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own"; and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that *I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions....*⁷¹

In his memory, Humbert allows Lolita the *possibility* of a life, but not even his imagination seems capable of expressing that life to the reader. The gardens of *Lolita* connect Humbert's first and last encounter with Annabel Lee, the private sphere of Humbert's nymphet fantasies in the public park ("my mossy garden"), his first meeting with Lolita in the Haze's "breathless garden," his hallucination of Lolita with Quilty "through the speckled shadow of a garden path," and the "wormy vegetable garden" of Dolly Schiller's town.⁷² Humbert describes himself in the Haze house: "I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. *My web is spread all over the house...*"⁷³ The garden functions as a coherent image linking Humbert's nymphets, an

⁷¹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 284. Emphasis mine.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 21; 40; 269.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 49.

authorial move that allows the reader to connect with Nabokov's narrative direction. These functional images show that Humbert sees himself as the center of each garden referenced here, save for the "garden path" hallucination. Humbert's reference to Lolita's private, "forbidden" internal space as a "garden" reminds one of his "elected paradise—a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames."⁷⁴ I do not wish to argue for any religious symbolism here, but the notion of Lolita's forbidden garden echoes Humbert's "elected paradise" both in tone and imagery. Humbert "dwells deep" in his paradise "despite the vulgarity, and the danger, and the horrible hopelessness of it all."⁷⁵ Recalling "smothered memories," Humbert arouses the striking thought that Lolita has a Humbert-less garden of her own, a prospect that brings about a self-conscious anxiety: he feels dirty ("polluted rags") and physically ill ("miserable convulsions"). Humbert's inferences about Lolita's forbidden garden, her internal space of privacy and imagination, show his re-consideration of Lolita's human reality, a process of learning that draws Humbert closer to his moral awakening at the conclusion of the novel.

With a solid understanding of Humbert's solipsistic reality and its consequences, we can adequately address how Nabokov depicts the role of imagination in the artistic process via Humbert's misuse of this artistic tool. Humbert wishes to immortalize "the perilous magic of nymphets"⁷⁶ in art, but he acknowledges his own failure to do so on multiple accounts. Nabokov writes that, "Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art."⁷⁷ This is an apt explanation for Humbert's failure, because he *chooses* not to know Lolita's "internal garden": "it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base

⁷⁴ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 166.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷⁷ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 32.

self."⁷⁸ Consequently, he imagines Lolita as he "dwells deep in [his] elected paradise"⁷⁹—blinded by his solipsism from truly knowing her. By using Lolita as the material for his imaginative prose, Humbert treats her as a means to his artistic end. This disrespect for Lolita's personhood translates into Humbert's aestheticized sexual fantasy that fails to capture the "perilous magic" of his illicit love.

Conscious of this failure as he writes his memoir, Humbert struggles to put himself in the perspective of the old Humbert Humbert he asks his reader to understand. This insecurity manifests itself in his additional attempts to aestheticize his past (e.g. mural paintings discussed below)—as though by doing so the reality of his actions will be exonerated. He admits this challenge to understanding and managing a retrospective perspective in his writing:

I leaf again and again through these miserable memories, and keep asking myself, was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity? When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past. I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel.⁸⁰

Humbert brilliantly summarizes the concept of "retrospective imagination," where the imagination fills in the details that Humbert clearly overlooked in "real" life. It is significant that Humbert's attempts to know his own reality (of his past, in this case) force him to "surrender" to the "boundless alternatives" that his imagination presents. The language here ("boundless") reminds one of the hopelessness of attempting to know the infinite realm of one's reality. Yet among the endless options, Humbert senses

⁷⁸ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 287.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁸⁰ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 13-14.

Nabokov's presence and thus attributes his creation of Lolita from Annabel to "a certain magic and a fateful way." Humbert does not rise to the intellectual occasion of recognizing the falsity of fate, the puzzle-like nature of coincidence for the deception it really is. There is no magic or fate involved in the "retrospective imagination" that recalls and redesigns his Lolita. The numerous coincidences are in fact part of *Lolita's* design as both a "beautiful puzzle"⁸¹ and its multipart solution, but Humbert is victim to these traps of artifice.

In one such instance of retrospective imagination, *Lolita* arrives at the pseudo-climax of Humbert and Lolita's sexual rapport. "Pseudo" is key here, because Humbert cuts the erotic scene short with his ivory-tower tone: "I am not concerned with so-called "sex" at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets."⁸² In *Aestheticism, Nabokov and Lolita*, David Andrews distinguishes "Humbert-the-artist," who narrates the story of Hum's life after meeting Lolita, from "Humbert-the-character," the protagonist of Humbert-the-artist's memoir.⁸³ Andrews uses this division to separate the stylistic aestheticism and moral come-around of Humbert-the-artist from Humbert-the-character's "imperceptive, self-indulgent aestheticism."⁸⁴ While Andrews accurately captures some of Humbert's aesthetic failures, this categorization overlooks a more likely explanation for Humbert's character in terms of the reality and imagination argument discussed here. Rather than describing Humbert as being two separate character-types, I have argued that Humbert's solipsistic reality comes into conflict with what he learns about Lolita's true reality retrospectively. Thus "Humbert-the-character" is still aesthetically akin to "Humbert-the-artist," yet Humbert's current-self is more

⁸¹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 20.

⁸² Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 134.

⁸³ Andrews, *Aestheticism, Nabokov, and Lolita*, 67.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

knowledgeable of his past failures to recognize reality's external referent and therefore his imagination attempts to accommodate for this loss.

Andrew's distinct terms collapse and the explanation of Humbert's sole solipsism prevails when Humbert interrupts his memoir to suggest how his "greater endeavor" might be achieved "Had [he] been a painter"⁸⁵—setting the reader up for a visual display of his work to "fix" the elusive nature of what drives his nymphet mania. In my argument, Humbert's imagination, through which he sees the past as having "boundless alternatives," accommodates for this narrative digression from his serious statement of intent. In Andrew's terms, however, "Humbert-the-artist" takes on the self-indulgent and unaware personality of "Humbert-the-character," and the distinct terms become conflated. Thus, the images that follow represent Humbert's effort to re-imagine how he would aestheticize his Lolita and eternalize the "borderline" between "the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love."⁸⁶ Yet on account of the solipsistic reality from which his imagination stems, the beauty of his language fails to transcend the page, and the picture he paints is absurd, disjointed, and digresses into sexually charged and unpaintable prose: "There would have been...a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child."⁸⁷ He fails as an aesthete because "his beautifying perception is utilitarian in that it disguises a crude, criminal intent,"⁸⁸ and Nabokovian aesthetics prize uniqueness and nonutility. He goes on to deny that this description allows him to relive sex with Lolita, because this would compromise his appeal to the reader for sympathy. Of course, the "murals of [his] own making" are impossible to visualize *because* Humbert is reliving the sexual act and carelessly

⁸⁵ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 134.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Andrews, *Aestheticism, Nabokov, and Lolita*, 72.

working for a sincere artistic rendition of the event, evinced in his paradoxical attempt to paint sound (“sigh”) and sensation (“stinging” and “throb”).

It is important to note the cheap and insensitive context of these hypothetical paintings: *murals* in the *dining room* of The Enchanted Hunters hotel! Humbert’s fantasy of painting this scene where travelers sit to dine falls in line with his drive to keep Lolita “in the minds of later generations.”⁸⁹ Yet attempting to eternalize their love by exposing Lolita’s sexual vulnerability alongside a swallowed “shoat” and “a callypygean slave child”⁹⁰ reveal Humbert’s weakness as an artist striving for beauty. Even he acknowledges this when he writes about his attempt to “fix” the point where “the beastly and the beautiful” meet: “...I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why?”⁹¹ To which Nabokov would respond: “*Beauty plus pity*—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die....”⁹² Thus although Humbert feels pity for Lolita on the “lofty slope,” his regret and sympathy are not adequately developed until this point, and his retrospective imagination—working with the material of his solipsistic reality—cannot successfully “fix” this nymphet purgatory.

Nabokov’s formulation of art as the synthesis of beauty and pity serves as an eloquent description of Nabokov’s own aesthetic achievement. The novel’s mastery of illusion and language is of the highest literary quality, but more interestingly, *Lolita* is exactly the junction where “the beastly and the beautiful [merge].”⁹³ Humbert’s literary eloquence, articulation, and humor make him one of “Nabokov’s most “humanized” character[s],”⁹⁴ and thus even as we are meant to pity Lolita and shun Humbert for both his pedophilia and his murder, we cannot help but delight in Humbert’s “fancy prose

⁸⁹ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 309.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁹² Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” 251.

⁹³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 135.

⁹⁴ Appel Jr., “Introduction,” lvi.

style"⁹⁵ and outrageous wit. Nabokov adjusts his style to engender the reader's emotional response, thus allowing him to write about subjects as offensive as pedophilia and murder without compromising the ethical effect of his own aesthetics. Humbert, on the other hand, fails to transcend the level of the cheap murals he imagines in the dining room of the Enchanted Hunters because his aesthetics are so self-involved. The core issue underlying Humbert's aesthetic and ethical failings is his solipsistic view of reality. For Humbert, "the red sun of desire and decision" are "the two things that create a live world,"⁹⁶ and thus his evil treatment of Lolita and his dedication to art are all motivated by desires that perpetuate his own reality. Additionally, Humbert's imagination floats on this rising sun of wants and resolutions and can create no further than the bubble of his own fabricated reality. At the core, Humbert's aesthetics are morally reprehensible because they stem from his solipsistic wish to create an artistic end by means of a human life. Hence, I submit that the aesthetic and ethical dimensionality in Nabokov — while often at odds in the intellectualized art world — share the selfsame root from the seeds of perceptual reality and imagination.

PALE FIRE: THE DETAILS OF "PLEXED ARTISTRY"

In *Pale Fire*, the novel and its characters exist in a misleading and unconventional artistic structure that has fueled critical debate over Nabokov's novelistic treatment

⁹⁵ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

of the thematic precepts discussed thus far. Unique to *Pale Fire's* structural consequences,⁹⁷ the (now) well-established descriptions of reality as unattainable and the imagination as “boundless” are developed through Nabokov’s novelistic treatment of aesthetics and morality within a 999-line poem and the corresponding Commentary. More specifically in the case of *Pale Fire*, John Shade’s aesthetics focus on human life, death, nature, and art—drawing from his love of natural history and “The melancholy and the tenderness / Of mortal life; the passion and the pain.”⁹⁸ Contrary to Shade’s thoughtful assessment of the world around him, Charles Kinbote, much like Humbert Humbert, is fixated on immortalizing his own, solipsistic world by means of art. Of course, Kinbote does not have the prosodic prowess of Humbert, and thus he exhorts John Shade to exalt his tale, chronicling the exiled King of Zembla (or rather, Kinbote himself). Yet when Shade is accidentally murdered,⁹⁹ Kinbote rushes into the house and purloins the manuscript of Shade’s poem (before calling for help!) only to find later that Shade’s poem does not involve “the wonderful incidents I had described to him, the characters I had made alive for him and all the unique *atmosphere* of my kingdom.”¹⁰⁰ The atmosphere of Zembla, the characters, and “the wonderful incidents” are present in the commentary, however, because Kinbote decontextualizes the lines (and words) of Shade’s poem, coercing them to reflect his Zemblan fantasy. Kinbote’s method of decontextualization is one of interpretation by association, which allows him to freely

⁹⁷ Within Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, there are two (or one, as some debate—see chapter 8 of Brian Boyd’s (1999) *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*) authors: Dr. Charles Kinbote, who describes himself as “an intimate friend of [Shade], his literary adviser, editor and commentator,” writes the novel’s Foreword, Commentary, and Index; and John Shade, a professor at Wordsmith University, writes the novel’s eponymous poem, “Pale Fire.” *Pale Fire*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 308.

⁹⁸Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 53.

⁹⁹ Kinbote asserts that Shade’s murderer was actually a Zemblan assassin (Jakob Gradus) in search of the exiled King. Yet having killed Shade, the murderer sits and smokes a cigarette with the gardener and ignores Kinbote, his supposed target; further, when the police arrive, he announces himself as Jack Grey from “the Institute for the Criminal Insane.” *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

jump from a line of Shade's poetry to a memory of Zembla.¹⁰¹ In addition to this associative story-telling, Kinbote often connects the lines of "Pale Fire" to his memories of Shade. These stories reveal how Shade's intrinsic curiosity and compassion lead him to question the nature of reality through the aesthetic medium of poetry. For the purpose of this analysis, Kinbote's insanity and solipsism will be discussed anecdotally, for it is most useful to see how Shade's character exemplifies Nabokov's positive representation of artistic production and the essential elements to successfully experience "aesthetic bliss."

Shade—who shares the artistic vision of his creator—has a heart attack which affords him a glimpse of "the strange world" beyond our own, where he discovers "that the sense behind / The scene was not our sense."¹⁰² As I will show, Shade's poetic search for true reality parallels his later experience with death; and in his attempt to articulate the phenomena of his metaphysical experience, Shade has an epiphany that parallels Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss....a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."¹⁰³ I will discuss several passages that I find to be particularly useful in demonstrating how the "plexed artistry"¹⁰⁴ of *Pale Fire's* design brings the reader through Shade's search for understanding in such a way that we too are compelled to be attentive, patient pursuers of the truth that underlies "Nature, the grand cheat,"¹⁰⁵ and its double, artistic deceit.

Shade opens Canto Two with a question that defines the basis of his philosophical inquiry for the rest of the poem:

¹⁰¹ For example, see line 149 on page 38: "One foot upon a mountaintop." Shade is describing his first of many experiences that resemble epileptic fits or moments of inspiration: "There was a sudden sunburst in my head." Ibid, 38. Kinbote's commentary is not on line 149 but on his own modification: "Line 149: One foot upon a mountain." Ibid, 137. Manipulating the line ever so slightly, Kinbote affords himself an association with the poem; his commentary proceeds to recount the King's escape over The Bera Range in Zembla.

¹⁰² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 59.

¹⁰³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 315.

¹⁰⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 59.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 253

*There was the day when I began to doubt
 Man's sanity: How could he live without
 Knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom
 Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb?*¹⁰⁶

This formidable question prefigures the ambivalent tone that pervades Shade's "survey / Of death's abyss."¹⁰⁷ Although the question must be considered in its entirety, it is interesting to note that each line of this question begins with an affirmative phrase that bespeaks confidence (see italics); even the anticipatory verb, "awaited," suggests a foreknowledge of events. The lines tail spin from words of ambivalence and loss to fear and death—*doubt, without, doom, tomb*—as Shade anxiously begs to know "what" lies beyond the physical world. Yet unlike Kinbote, who in his note on Hazel Shade's suicide writes about the "sweet urge" to join God in "the universal unknown,"¹⁰⁸ Shade claims, "My God died young"¹⁰⁹ and chooses "to explore and fight / The foul, the inadmissible abyss."¹¹⁰ This metaphorical chasm, referring to life and death, is wholly contingent on Shade's interpretation of consciousness. The poet's resultant preoccupation with existence and reality mirrors Nabokov's own views on these illusive, subjective, and unattainable concepts and direct my reading of Shade's artistic development. As with all of Nabokov's characters, Shade "[has] only words to play with,"¹¹¹ and thus he fights the unknown by attempting to know and express it through his art.

¹⁰⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 39

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 57

¹⁰⁸ Kinbote writes: "I would certainly make an ode to the sweet urge to close one's eyes and surrender utterly into the perfect safety of woody death. Ecstatically one forefeels the vastness of the Divine Embrace enfolding one's liberated spirit, the warm bath of physical dissolution, the universal unknown engulfing the miniscule unknown that had been the only real part of one's temporary personality." *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 36

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹¹ Humbert exclaims in his writings, "I have only words to play with!" Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita.*, 32

Shade's most perspicacious observations on the nature of existence reveal that his dedication to detail underlies his aesthetic vision. In the first segment of interest, Shade begins with a transcendental question presupposing an out-of-body, out-of-mind perception, and only two stanzas later he brings his poetry down to the detailed level of empirical observation:

Yet, *if* prior to life we had
 Been able to imagine life, what mad,
 Impossible, unutterably weird,
 Wonderful nonsense it might have appeared!

.....
 How ludicrous these efforts to translate
 Into one's private tongue a public fate!
 Instead of poetry divinely terse,
 Disjointed notes, Insomnia's mean verse!

Life is a message scribbled in the dark.
 Anonymous.

Espied on a pine's bark,
 As we were walking home the day she died,
 An empty emerald case, squat and frog-eyed,
 Hugging the trunk; and its companion piece,
 A gum-logged ant.¹¹²

A true poet, Shade delights in the possibility of imagination's perspective; yet the anonymous aphorism confirms that this "*if*" is quite "impossible." The unattainable goal of conceptualizing life from this external perspective renders the art of translation a "ludicrous" effort resulting in "disjointed notes" and "mean verse"; in short, a futile attempt to decipher "a message scribbled in the dark." The spatial structuring of the following stanzas initially scans to suggest that the anonymous saying was "espied" on the tree, thereby prompting the transition to this natural imagery. The grammatical inversion of the stanza's sentence (verb, subject, object) does link the message in the

¹¹² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 40-41

dark to the beautiful, microcosmic world “espied on a pine’s bark.” Such a connection, left anonymously, alludes to the essence of a true reality hidden behind the cloak of the natural world. The “empty emerald case”¹¹³ of a newly born cicada still hugs to the tree trunk where “the ant,” as Kinbote writes in his commentary, “is about to be embalmed in amber”.¹¹⁴ In an allusion to Jean de La Fontaine’s poem *La Cigale et la Fourmi*, Shade reverses the fate of the poem’s *ciagle* (cicada) and *fourmi* (ant); yet more importantly, Shade describes the ant as the cicada’s “companion piece,” noting that life and death are necessary complements. The eloquence of Shade’s careful observation is an excellent demonstration of Nabokov’s prized aesthete—one who cherishes the details of the external world.

Recalling Nabokov’s description of reality “as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization,” we note that Shade’s aesthetic results from his inquisitorial approach to the world around him. Kinbote’s commentary on the “empty emerald case” digresses into a revealing anecdote about Shade’s love of the natural world. Kinbote recalls that Shade:

had a rather coquettish way of pointing out with the tip of his cane various curious natural objects. He never tired of illustrating by means of these examples the extraordinary blend of Canadian Zone and Austral Zone that “obtained,” as he put it, in that particular spot of Appalachia where at our altitude of about 1,500 feet northern species of birds, insects and plants comingled with southern representatives.... By means of astute excursions into natural history Shade kept evading me, me, who was hysterically, intensely, uncontrollably curious to know what portion exactly of the Zemblan king’s adventures he had completed in the course of the last four or five days.... One would imagine that a poet, in the course of composing a long and difficult piece, would simply jump at the opportunity of talking about his triumphs and tribulations. But nothing of the sort!¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Kinbote’s commentary on this segment in line 238 identifies the “empty emerald case” to be “the semitransparent envelope left on a tree trunk by an adult cicada that has crawled up the tree trunk and emerged”; he also identifies Lafontaine’s poem, *La Cigale et la Fourmi*. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 168.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 168-169.

Kinbote's petty fit of self-absorption ("me, me") recalls the debilitating solipsism that blinds Humbert from seeing Lolita's human reality. Similarly, Kinbote fails to realize that Shade's naturalistic excursions are also poetic endeavors "to *know* the given world"¹¹⁶ he wishes to transcend with his art. For example, Kinbote later states his belief that "'reality' is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye."¹¹⁷ The quotation marks around reality, its implications for "true art," and formulation of multiple realities are clearly stamps of Nabokov's own beliefs—but only partially so. This artistic truth does not imply that "average reality" is unimportant, as critic L. S. Dembo contends in response to Kinbote: "For the purposes of art, truth and reality are unimportant, and it is on this principle that Kinbote (whoever he is) is justified."¹¹⁸ What Dembo and Kinbote fail to acknowledge is that pursuing knowledge of reality—no matter how unattainable it might be—is fundamental to the process of artistic production. Through Nabokov's "irrational standards," which treasure "the supremacy of the detail over the general, of the part that is more alive than the whole," the curious artist looks into the crevasses of life's textured reality and "no matter the imminent peril—these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness."¹¹⁹

It is exactly in the heat of Shade's most "imminent peril" that he embraces the minutiae of experience and returns, from a heart attack, with a new phenomenal acuity:

.....And dreadfully distinct
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.

¹¹⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions.*, 32

¹¹⁷ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 130

¹¹⁸ L. S. Dembo, "Vladimir Nabokov, an Introduction," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8, no. 2 (1967), 118

¹¹⁹ Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense.", 373-374

I realized, of course, that it was made
 Not of our atoms; that the sense behind
 The scene was not our sense. In life, the mind
 Of any man is quick to recognize
 Natural shams, and then before his eyes
 The reed becomes a bird, the knobby twig
 An inchworm, and the cobra head, a big
 Wickedly folded moth. But in the case
 Of my white fountain what it did replace
 Perceptually was something that, I felt,
 Could be grasped only by whoever dwelt
 In the strange world where I was a mere stray.¹²⁰

This passage brings the reader through the spiral of Shade's perceptual transformation. The white fountain is for him "a signpost and a mark / Objectively enduring in the dark"¹²¹ of true reality. Unlike the "Natural shams" abundant in life on earth, Shade contends that this fountain had a "quiddity and quaintness of its own / Reality. It *was...*"¹²² Additionally, Shade's experience is phenomenally different than any physical experience on earth. The eyes and the mind decipher nature's deceptive images, yet Shade's white fountain actually reveals and replaces "something" in his person that is indescribable beyond the realm of this "strange world." Shade is elated when he reads about a woman who also temporarily experienced death and envisioned a white fountain. His pursuit of Mrs. Z (who allegedly saw the fountain) reveals his desire for human validation of his sublime experience.¹²³ Yet only after his visit does Shade learn that the magazine had misprinted her vision — "*Mountain, not fountain.*"¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 59

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 61

¹²² *Ibid.*, 60

¹²³ Shade writes: "If on some nameless island Captain Schmidt / Sees a new animal and captures it, / And if, a little later, Captain Smith / Brings back a skin, that island is no longer a myth. / Our fountain was a signpost and a mark..." *Ibid.*, 61.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

This misprint triggers John Shade's epiphanic moment of consciousness, which I argue is, in the fictional world of *Pale Fire*, akin to Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss." Furthermore, the context of his realization indicates that Shade's aesthetic sensibility and his human sensitivity explain his ability achieve a greater sense of enlightenment. Shade's realization is so useful in our understanding of Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss" that I reproduce it in full here:

Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!
 I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint
 And stop investigating my abyss?
 But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;

Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
 But topsy-turvical coincidence,
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
 Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
 Some kind of link and bobolink, some kind
 Of correlated pattern in the game,
 Plexed artistry, and something of the same
 Pleasure in it as they who played it found.
 It did not matter who they were. No sound,
 No furtive light came from their involute
 Abode, but there they were, aloof and mute,
 Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns
 To ivory unicorns and ebony fauns;
 Kindling a long life here, extinguishing
 A short one there; killing a Balkan king;
 Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-
 Flying airplane to plummet from the sky
 And strike a farmer dead; hiding my keys,
 Glasses or pipe. Coordinating these
 Events and objects with remote events
 And vanished objects. Making ornaments
 Of accidents and possibilities.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 62,63.

Shade's moment of conscious clarity is one of the greatest among all of Nabokov's characters, for he realizes that he is but one player in a "game of worlds" — and as we know, this is Nabokov's game. The importance of this recognition is strengthened when we turn to the commentary to see that Kinbote misreads Shade's line to be about "word games."¹²⁶ While a game of words certainly abounds in the novel, this simulated reality is but one, confined reality that Shade has seen beyond. The "game of words" and the "Natural shams" give way to "a game of worlds," where the "real point" is one of design and "Plexed artistry." Shade glimpses the "gaps" in the texture of his existence, and it is the experience of exploring and imagining these counterpoints that provides him "something of the same / Pleasure in it as they who played it found." In Canto Four, Shade writes about the artistic process of creation, and he claims: "I feel I understand / Existence, or at least a minute part / Of my existence, only through my art."¹²⁷ This conclusion suggests that it is through the process of creation that the "texture," the "coincidence," and the "sense" of life's patterned reality becomes clear; yet Shade's epiphany — triggered by a "hint" from a "misprint" — also reveals that these truths can present themselves to the discerning, detailed observer.

BEAUTY PLUS PITY: THE MORAL MATTER OF MISREADING IN *MADAME BOVARY*

Nabokov's novelistic representation of art and the search for "aesthetic bliss" is both negatively and positively embodied in the characters of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, allowing readers and critics to engage in the challenging and elusive concepts that underpin art — reality and imagination. Drawing from Nabokov's definition of art, we

¹²⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 262.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

can evaluate Flaubert's artistic priorities and the evolution of Emma Bovary's search for beauty and love in *Madame Bovary* as proxies for defining a Flaubertian intention of art. This exercise illuminates how prominently the work of Flaubert influences Nabokov's strongest opinions about art and provides us with a unique historical comparison of literary approaches to a novelistic representation of the artistic process. By pursuing a disinterested reading of the text, the reader can engage critically with Flaubert's stylistic techniques and understand how the concepts of beauty, love, and pity come to shape the design of literary art. Specifically, Flaubert's narrative style and word choices create ambiguity between the pitiful and the pathetic¹²⁸ dimensions of Emma Bovary's character. Flaubert works closely with the concept of artistic sensibility via the agency of the reader—represented in a negative argument through the "bad" readings of *Bovary's* protagonist, Emma. Nabokov, in his afterword "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," asserts that he is "the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination..."¹²⁹ Such claims about art's non-utility echo Flaubert's expressed desire "to write a book about nothing."¹³⁰ These arguments *require* a disinterested stance that resists any predisposition to reading or writing for some type of moral message. Imposing an interested judgment on the text, the reader or writer diminishes art's potential and precludes the aesthetic experience. Yet by reading with consideration and open attentiveness, the reader is provided with "an "outside" view of a novel [which] inspires our wonder and enlarges our potential for compassion."¹³¹

¹²⁸ I will use the Oxford English Dictionary definition of "pathetic" that connotes: "Miserably inadequate; of such a low standard as to be ridiculous or contemptible." (www.oed.com)

¹²⁹ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 311.

¹³⁰ Gustave Flaubert, "Letters About *Madame Bovary* " in *Madame Bovary*, ed. Margaret Cohen (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 300.

¹³¹ Appel Jr., "Introduction," xxxiii.

Close reading reveals that Emma's understanding of beauty degenerates with her adulterous experiences, permitting the reader's scornful pity of her behavior. Yet, there are many instances in which the narrator reveals Emma's ignorance and naïveté, engendering a more gentle sense of pity for her delusions. I argue that these two perceptions of Emma's persona are directly linked to her sensitivity to art and beauty. Textual evidence supports that the dual nature of Emma's character development (the pitiful and the pathetic) functions more clearly as a critique on the constitution of artistic sense: to recognize art's non-transferability to reality, its impracticality, its deceptive ephemerality, and its power to immortalize beauty while simultaneously provoking sorrow and pity for *our* "mortal sense of beauty."¹³²

Nabokov asserts that "the authentic instrument to be used by the reader" is his or her "impersonal imagination and artistic delight."¹³³ Flaubert presents Emma the Reader as a woman incapable of decoupling her personal imagination from the "artistic delight" found in literature. We first see Emma's self-indulgent, emotional reading when she is only thirteen years old. In the context of ignorant adolescence, her unsophisticated quest to "catch a glimpse of the tantalizing phantasmagoria of sentimental realities" inevitably escapes criticism—who can blame a child for lacking refined artistic sense?¹³⁴ Nabokov once remarked that "the imagination of a small child—especially a town child—at once distorts, stylizes, or otherwise alters"¹³⁵ what he or she is told. This is similarly true for Emma, who, incidentally, is a small town girl. The historical exposition of Emma's youth follows an oft-quoted passage in which the narrator switches from Emma's thoughts to a limited omniscient perspective, providing details that compensate for the insufficiency of her introspection:

¹³² Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 283.

¹³³ Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," 4.

¹³⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. Margaret Cohen, trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling and Paul de Man, 2 ed. (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 33.

¹³⁵ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 25.

Before marriage she thought herself in love; but since the happiness that should have followed failed to come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken. And Emma tried to find out what one meant exactly in life by the words bliss, passion, ecstasy, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books.¹³⁶

In this passage, we learn that after marriage, Emma's expectations of love and happiness are still rooted in her emotional attachment to the art and beauty found in books. Flaubert allows the reader to witness Emma in a moment of self-recognition but then interjects to stress her persistent desire to define—"in life"—what "had seemed to her so beautiful" in literature. The smooth, but rapid transition between the internal and external point of view deliberately obscures a definite reading of Emma's integrity at this point in the novel. Does her failure to act on this realization merit the reader's empathy? Or does Flaubert's narrator interrupt her thoughts to repudiate this "[moment] of tenderness and understanding"?¹³⁷

As suggested above, the subsequent scenes from Emma's girlhood seem to exonerate her inability to divorce herself from the imaginary world of books. However, the narrator's interruption with "And," as well as the use of *l'imparfait*, strongly suggests that Emma's astute introspection is momentary, eclipsed by the continuation ("And," "*Et Emma cherchait*") of both the narrative and her misguided sense of art.

¹³⁶ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 30. "Avant qu'elle se mariât, elle avait cru avoir de l'amour; mais le bonheur qui aurait dû résulter de cet amour n'étant pas venu, il fallait qu'elle se fût trompée, songeait-elle. Et Emma cherchait ce que l'on entendait au juste dans la vie par les mots de félicité, de passion et d'ivresse, qui lui avaient paru si beaux dans les livres." From the Project Gutenberg EBook. Notice the predominance of *l'imparfait*. Nabokov notes in his lectures the usefulness of this tense, expressing "an action or state in continuance, something that has been happening in a habitual way," in *Madame Bovary*. Nabokov, "Madame Bovary," in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1980), 173. The translation, "Emma tried to find out," does not adequately capture the essence of her ongoing search (did it begin when she recognized her mistake? as a child?): "*Emma cherchait*."

¹³⁷ Nabokov, *Madame Bovary*, 142. In Phyllis Roth's article, "In Search of Aesthetic Bliss: A Rereading of *Lolita*," she notes that the reader-character relationship is broken by Nabokov's "authorial intrusion," forcing the reader to "repudiate an identification between the characters and the readers and between the fictional world and reality." *College Literature*, no. 1, 1975, 29. Flaubert also demanded this of his readers and was one of the first writers (after Jane Austen) to use free indirect discourse to create a tension between his narrative and Emma's, a form of "authorial intrusion" that highlights Emma's unsophisticated and self-focused views on art.

Nabokov draws attention to Flaubert's artistic success in the following passages: "The subject may be crude and repulsive. Its expression is artistically modulated and balanced. This is style. This is art. This is the only thing that really matters in books."¹³⁸ The narrative is exemplary of art because it veils its subject, Emma's lack of artistic sense, in beautiful prose. This incongruous pairing of Emma's fallacy and Flaubert's refined style (hopefully) provokes the reader's artistic sense and illuminates Emma's shallow appreciation for art and Flaubert's superior mastery of aesthetic beauty. Consequently, it submits the question: how is the reader to reconcile Emma's pathetic, "philistine" value of art with her pitiful ignorance, grounded in childish dreams? Flaubert creates this tension, but intends the narrator to withhold judgment on this issue so that we, the readers, probe and refine our critical inquiry: How does the development of Emma's search for the meaning of "bliss, passion, [and] ecstasy" — in other words, her attempt to *live* art — directly engage with Flaubert's essential artistic principles?

Investigating the reader's role as a judge (is Emma pathetic or pitiful?) leads one to consider the moments where he or she pities or scorns Emma; and it is helpful to consider this reader response to Emma's morally questionable delight in her affair with Rodolphe Boulanger, a wealthy local landowner. In a scene that focuses on her obsession with novelistic passion and recalls her childhood dreams, Emma looks at herself in a mirror and,

She repeated: "I have a lover! a lover!" delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her. So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon a marvelous world where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium....She became herself, as it were, an actual part of these lyrical imaginings; at long last she saw herself among those lovers she had so envied she fulfilled the love-dream of her youth. Besides, Emma felt a satisfaction of revenge. How she had suffered! But she had

¹³⁸ Nabokov, *Madame Bovary*, 138.

won out at last, and the love so long pent up erupted in joyous outbursts. She tasted it without remorse, without anxiety, without concern.¹³⁹

Returning from her first act of sexual infidelity, Emma revels in what she thinks to be success at understanding bliss, passion and ecstasy, but Flaubert substitutes the word "bliss," from the passage above, with "delirium" (*délire*). The connection between "delirium" and "bliss" is stronger in the French text, which uses the word *ivresse* for "bliss," because it introduces the connotation of intoxication that is later present in the post-Rodolphe scene reproduced here. Emma's fallacy lies in her inability to recognize that art cannot be translated into a definition "exactly in life"¹⁴⁰—and her belief that she is entering another world and is "an actual part of these lyrical imaginings" shows how Emma's understanding of art has degenerated from a once excusable misconception. Her devotion to fulfilling her desires and perpetuating her passionate experiences necessitates the adjective "delirium" over "bliss" or *ivresse*, because she truly loses touch with reality in her attempt to live vicariously through art and literature. She feels and believes that she can be a part of art, and thus denies the important discrepancy between beauty immortalized in art and the mortal beauty seen and experienced in life.

Unsurprisingly, arrogance and entitlement accompany Emma's temperament, insinuating that her materialistic values surpass the maturity of her artistic sense. Once again turning to the initial description of Emma's forgivably fatuous dreams, we find evidence of the greed that debases her appreciation for art: "She had to gain some personal profit from things and she rejected as useless whatever did not contribute to the immediate satisfaction of her heart's desires—being of a temperament more sentimental than artistic, looking for emotions, not landscapes."¹⁴¹ The word "profit" (*profit*) indicates Emma's strong attachment to materialist culture and things. She

¹³⁹ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 131.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

approaches literature and art with a similarly utilitarian aim from her childhood to her suicide. These superficial values drive her search for the beauty she finds in literature, and the reader is meant to find the seed of this theme veiled in Flaubert's elegant account of Emma as a girl. As we delve deeper into the novel, Flaubert seemingly leads the reader to a point of no return, where the reader begins to lose sight of Emma's earlier acquittal and cannot help but scorn Emma's character as pathetic. Her thirst for bliss, passion, and ecstasy degrades her artistic taste and propels her to "such contradictory ways, that one could no longer distinguish [her] selfishness from charity, or corruption from virtue."¹⁴² As Nabokov puts it: "Emma's adultery is cheapening."¹⁴³ Her sense of self-worth, her style, and her imagination lose the cloak of pity that the narrator initially provides her, giving the reader a clear perspective on the most extreme consequences of reading for profit and mistaking art for truth.

The examples discussed here suggest that reading *Madame Bovary* as a "good reader" should, with as much of an "impersonal imagination" as one can, allows the reader "an artistic harmonious balance between the reader's mind and the authors mind."¹⁴⁴ To reach this equilibrium, the reader must work with the challenges that Flaubert poses; Emma is a complex woman whose shallow values increasingly incite condescension, but whose passion and self-destruction affects pity. The reader's equivocal responses to Emma's actions and desires—be they pitiful or pathetic—or both, demand a critical reading to grasp their grounding in Flaubert's narrative structure. The designed tension between Flaubert's style and the novel's content effects in the good reader an understanding about the intention of art and the conditional limits of the reader's imaginative engagement. As such, the generalizations posed here inevitably run amuck if conceived of via indignant and moral disapproval of Emma's

¹⁴² Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 173.

¹⁴³ Nabokov, "Madame Bovary," 165.

¹⁴⁴ Nabokov, "The Metamorphosis," 251.

character; for such a reading shields the reader's appreciation of the novel's beauty. Our last images of Emma are painful: she dies slowly from self-poisoning, subjected to the physical agony of the arsenic and the mental torture of her past. The scene of her death spans nine pages,¹⁴⁵ in which the reader witnesses Emma's protracted suffering—"Drops of sweat oozed from her face, which had turned blue and rigid as under the effect of a metallic vapor"¹⁴⁶— and thoughts of escape: "Emma thought that, at last, she was through with lying, cheating and with the numberless desires that had tortured her."¹⁴⁷ The effect of this scene unsettles the reader who forgets the pity Emma's youthful ignorance previously engendered. One is tempted to recognize and pity her suicide as an escape from "desires that had tortured her" rather than from the village lender, Monsieur Lheureux, and the shame of failure. Yet shortly after her death, the reader pities the fatal love of Charles and the sad fate of Berthe—both victims of Emma's selfish choices to use them "merely as a means."¹⁴⁸ Thus though the book takes the reader from pity to scorn in a way that obfuscates a moral conclusion,¹⁴⁹ it is clear that Emma's pursuit of a literary reality leads to her false aestheticization of emotions, objects, and people. As such, the damage Emma imposes on her own life and those in it comes to embody the consequence of her deluded conflation of art and reality.

Emma Bovary's catastrophic misunderstanding of literature evokes moments of sorrow and contempt, prompting the reader to work with the text and engage with its beauty. Flaubert narrates both the literary and physical deterioration of the beautiful through the complex nature of human failure in Emma. Additionally the novel's

¹⁴⁵ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 249-58.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁴⁸ Kant, *The Philosophy of Kant; Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings*, 178.

¹⁴⁹ After all, the village pharmacist, Monsieur Homais, whose practices are suspicious and who encourages Emma's adultery and Charles's downfall, is bestowed the most reward of all the characters at the close of the novel: "He has more customers than there are sinners in hell; the authorities treat him kindly and he has the public on his side. He has just been given the Croix de la Légion d'Honneur." Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. by Margaret Cohen, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 275.

beauty—found when one “[notices] and [fondles the] details”¹⁵⁰ of Flaubert’s style—also comes to an end when the reader leaves the fictional world of the novel. Through such a reading, the reader realizes the artistic intention that Emma does not, that the wonderful beauty we find in art is not tangible or useful, but ephemeral and “must die [because] beauty always dies, the manner dies with matter, the world dies with the individual.”¹⁵¹

CONCLUSION: “MAN’S LIFE AS COMMENTARY TO ABSTRUSE / UNFINISHED POEM.”¹⁵²

The “aesthetic bliss” that motivates Nabokov’s characters and readers will forever be an illusive term, for the principle determinants of its attainment are in themselves subjective and indefinite in nature. Yet equipped with an understanding of Nabokov’s artistic values, the perceptive reader can better manage the complex structure of the author’s puzzle worlds. Further, in light of Flaubert’s treatment of ethics and aesthetics in *Madame Bovary*, Nabokov’s novels stand out as significant masterpieces that complicate the novelistic representation of aesthetics and morality. As such I hope that this paper has illuminated how two of Nabokov’s central literary themes—reality and imagination—determine the aesthetic and moral identity of his characters, and consequently determine the success of their artistic endeavors.

¹⁵⁰Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” 4.

¹⁵¹ Vladimir Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” *ibid.*, 251.

¹⁵² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 61.

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