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HOW “EVERYTHING WENT WRONG”:
CONCEPTUAL BLENDING,
AMBIGUOUS CONCLUSIONS,
AND NABOKOV’S “SIGNS AND SYMBOLS”

Taking up Vladimir Nabokov’s advice to literary critics to place the “‘how’ above the ‘what,’” while not mistaking it for the “‘so what,’” the present study examines his notoriously ambiguous short story “Signs and Symbols” through the lens of conceptual blending theory.¹ This approach trains its critical focus on the intricacies of Nabokov’s methods and all the narrative possibilities produced by them. The aim here is not to find the “key” (the “what”) to the text as many others have previously attempted to do.² Instead, re-conceptualizing the elusive “how” opens new insights into the ways Nabokov’s text draws attention to how the imagination construes and continually re-construes a fictional world. At its core, Nabokov’s story may then be seen to be about the various interpretations engendered by its vague ending contradictorily coming to fruition all at once. Analyzing blending’s presence at various levels

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 66.

² For a representative survey of various readings of the story, see Leving 2012. This recent, wide-ranging volume of old and new essays on “Signs and Symbols” testifies to the text’s long-lasting appeal and the intense debate regarding its ultimate meaning. Indeed, “Signs and Symbols” has become a litmus test of sorts for readers of Nabokov; how one reads this text probably says more about the reader-critic’s sensibilities and understanding of Nabokov’s aesthetics than about the story or the author himself.

within and without the text will help elucidate how Nabokov's short story itself reflects the workings of the human mind by prompting for multiple coexistent endings.

COGNITIVE BLENDING IN CONTEXT

First published in *The New Yorker* in 1948, "Signs and Symbols" focuses on a day in the life of a Russian émigré couple and their son, who suffers from "referential mania."³ The narrator describes in densely packed detail the events surrounding a visit to the son's hospital that ends in their learning that he has once again tried to commit suicide and cannot be seen that day. During their trip to and from the institution, the aging pair encounters several seemingly ominous sights: a stalled train, a dying bird, a weeping girl. After making the decision to take their son out of the hospital the next day, they receive two misdialled phone calls at home from someone seeking "Charlie," and the story ends abruptly with the ringing of a third call.

It would be no exaggeration to suggest that critics of "Signs and Symbols" have largely focused on this final call's meaning and its aftereffects on the rest of the story. Various images and circumstances, such as the bird clinging to life in a puddle, are frequently taken to portend the boy's successful suicide, which is in turn suggested by the third unanswered call. These readers use the story's individual parts to envision its absent ending and, thus, one final overarching meaning that is constantly suggested but not explicitly depicted. David Richter, for example, suggests that "[r]eferential mania has become our disease as well [...] And it is then that we see that, if the boy's referential mania has ended in his death, it is we who, in a sense, have killed him."⁴ He imbues the potential omens with a moral value and posits the reader as judge and executioner through a kind of literary divination that involves linking various images together to predict what comes after the call.

Such creation by combination encapsulates the essence of conceptual blending theory as formulated by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in their book *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (2002):

³ Nabokov does not give proper names to any of the protagonists.

⁴ David Richter, "Pnin and 'Signs and Symbols': Narrative Entrapment," in *Anatomy of a Short Story: Nabokov's Puzzles, Codes, "Signs and Symbols,"* ed. Yuri Leving (London: Continuum Books, 2012), 234.

[c]onceptual blending is a basic mental operation that leads to new meaning, global insight, and conceptual compressions useful for memory and manipulation of otherwise diffuse ranges of meaning. [...] The essence of the operation is to construct a partial match between two inputs, to project selectively from those inputs into a novel ‘blended’ mental space, which then dynamically develops emergent structure.⁵

This process involves building connections between mental spaces, a concept developed by Fauconnier to denote packets of knowledge or experience stored in one’s memory, in real time. The mind combines elements of one familiar, previously experienced space with another in order either to comprehend or to create something unfamiliar. Nabokov asks his reader to do just this when in *Ada Van* describes Antiterra, a world that resembles our own in many respects and yet redistributes key features (linguistic, geographical, etc.) in a highly playful manner, especially when it comes to American and Russian culture. To take a more gruesome example, Fauconnier and Turner suggest that mass killings of certain groups have been justified in the past by blending genocide with bureaucratic functions that allow participants to “operate comfortably” in a space that they would otherwise find abhorrent.⁶ Those responsible for David’s death at the conclusion of *Bend Sinister* enact a similar kind of blend when they suggest that sacrificing young children to depraved, mentally unstable prisoners may be a viable path to rehabilitation. They in essence transform murder into science through this twisted blend.

Our use of conceptual blending, also known as conceptual integration, has been identified in everything from counterfactual and hypothetical situations to metaphors and advertising gimmicks. Blending is thus foundational to human cognition, particularly creative ways of thinking. Such creation of new ideas made of older pieces, as it were, is cognitive blending’s key feature: an emergent blended mental space that not only contains parts of the two input domain spaces, but also what William Croft and D. Alan Cruse call “new conceptual material that arises from an elaboration of the conceptual blend on the basis of encyclopedic knowledge.”⁷

⁵ Gilles Fauconnier, “Conceptual Blending,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, vol. 4 (New York: Elsevier, 2001), 2495.

⁶ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 27.

⁷ William Croft and D. Alan Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 208.

This emergent meaning (or emergent structure) helps separate blending from other theories of cognition. Indeed, Fauconnier and Turner's theory explains the complexities of blended spaces in a way that metaphor cannot. The latter describes a source domain's mapping onto a target domain (e.g., the mind is a computer), while cognitive blending can account for multiple spaces and their resultant emergent meaning and inferences. As Laura Janda writes, "Like metaphor, a blend involves two domains and a mapping relationship [...]. However, in a blend both domains are source domains, and together they contribute to the creation of a third, entirely new domain."⁸ She provides several examples including an imagined, anachronistic discourse between Roman Jakobson and today's cognitive linguists. We might likewise imagine Nabokov's response to Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and to do so would involve blending as we combine one input space — Nafisi's perspective on Nabokov's novel expressed in her memoir — with another — our understanding of Nabokov's ideas and preferences — to create a counterfactual situation in which we can nevertheless speak of Nabokov's views on a book written 26 years after his death.⁹ In this case, we do not simply map one domain onto another as in metaphor, but instead produce a third mental space with entirely new emergent meaning: a nonexistent conversation between Nafisi and Nabokov. Thus, the human mind's capacity for creative thinking is central to the theory of cognitive blending.

NEURO-NABOKOV AND BLENDED NABOKOV

Before exploring the insights provided by cognitive blending when reading Nabokov, it would also be worth revisiting previous neurological/cognitive/psychological approaches to his work. This topic is naturally quite vast, so here I only provide an outline of various trends through key instructive examples to situate my own analysis within this broader scholarship.

On the one hand, there are a number of studies that address the various mental and neurological disorders experienced by some of Nabokov's protagonists and the ways in which

⁸ Laura Janda, "Cognitive Linguistics in the Year 2010," *International Journal of Cognitive Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (2010), 19.

⁹ See, for example, Eric Naiman's chapters "Reading Chernyshevsky in Tehran: Nabokov and Nafisi" and "What If Nabokov Had Written 'The Double': Reading Dostoevsky after Nabokov" in his *Nabokov, Perversely* for instances of such blending-enabled experiments in literary analysis.

they reflect particular themes within his work, particularly artistry and empathy. For example, Naomi Olson has recently examined autoscopic episodes in *The Gift* and *Despair*, finding that how Fyodor and Hermann relate to others “underscores the degree to which empathy serves as the crucial factor that distinguishes the gifted and morally responsible artist from the talentless, morally bankrupt imposter.”¹⁰ Put differently, how these figures interact with others because of their mental states is closely linked for Nabokov to matters of artistry. This pattern—empathy as a marker of one’s artistic ability—can be found in several of Nabokov’s works. Leland de la Durantaye, for example, comes to a similar conclusion regarding Humbert Humbert’s capacity for “imaginative empathy”:

Up until the end of his story, [Humbert] does *not* endeavor to regard each individual as “a totality of marvels and evil,” does *not*, “enter for a moment into a passerby’s soul as one enters the cool shade of a tree,” and it is precisely because he does not engage in this mobile identification and imagination that he can possess such extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity and yet act so brutally and insensitively in his dealings with others.¹¹

He goes on to delineate the multifarious techniques Humbert uses to “seduce” the reader to his side, at least until the end of the novel, and to “tempt the reader to look at [Dolores] as precisely” a work of art in a twisted attempt to shift the blame away from himself.¹² Likewise, Jane Grayson suggests that in *The Eye* Smurov’s “dissociation and projection of successive identities, albeit the product of a disturbed mind, poses fundamental questions about identity and about reality.”¹³ These few examples illustrate how Nabokov both depicts mental disorders across his oeuvre and does so in order to develop his chosen themes and values. Thus, Fyodor’s empathy, embodied by his ability to imagine others’ perspectives very clearly, stands in stark contrast to Humbert’s and Hermann’s narcissistic tendencies, which, in turn, are reflected in the narrative construction itself, challenging the reader to see past their deceptions and to decipher the true reality of the stories.

¹⁰ Naomi Olson, “Doubled Vision: Autoscopic Phenomena in Nabokov’s Fiction,” in *Nabokov Upside Down*, eds. Brian Boyd and Marijeta Bozovic (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 101.

¹¹ Leland de la Durantaye, “Eichmann, Empathy, and *Lolita*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006), 317-318.

¹² *Ibid.*, 321.

¹³ Jane Grayson, “Double Bill: Nabokov and Olesha,” in *From Pushkin to Palisandriia: Essays on the Russian Novel in Honor of Richard Freeborn*, ed. Arnold McMillin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 193.

Elsewhere, scholars have stressed this latter point: the interrelations between Nabokov's texts, his views on various schools of psychology, and the ways in which the texts themselves seem to reflect the inner workings of a healthy, curious human mind. In *The Quill and the Scalpel*, Stephen Blackwell traces Nabokov's engagement with science in his art. Blackwell's chapter on psychology suggests that Nabokov followed to different degrees developments in Freudian psychoanalysis, behaviorism, functionalism, and Gestalt psychology.¹⁴ He examines how Nabokov polemicized with or adapted elements of each methodology throughout his work, but more importantly, Blackwell asserts that "Nabokov's works are primarily devoted to exploring how individual minds perceive, interact with, shape and are shaped by the worlds around them. [...] Nabokov presents to us vividly imagined, complex individuals who, usually in their own first-person narratives, demonstrate the intricacies of how mind and world interact."¹⁵ Such an awareness can be derived by paying close attention to "just how much psychological work fiction can involve, or how much Nabokov's swift shifts *make* it involve," in the words of Brian Boyd.¹⁶ We may turn to Nabokov's texts for both depictions of individual human minds, whether healthy or diseased, and insights into the mind's processes as it interacts with art. From this vantage point, cognitive blending provides a means to study Nabokov's work as art that is self-consciously aware of how we think and that makes use of this knowledge to challenge and reward the reader through its narratological complexities.

Considering cognitive blending's pervasiveness, along with Nabokov's well-attested interest in psychological matters, it should not come as a surprise that there is some precedent of applications of blending theory to his work. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, for instance, examines how Nabokov "designed [*Lolita's*] plot, imagery, sound effects, word choice, narration, and narrative structure in order to lead his own readers – or rather, rereaders – toward the satisfying 'logical recognition' of an implicit pattern that can only be attained by combining a text's familiar elements into something new."¹⁷ She refers to the way Humbert Humbert "uses several metaphors and analogies to evoke the sound of Quilty's surname [...] as well as its visual

¹⁴ On Freud and Nabokov, see Durantaye 2005, Elms, Green, and Shute.

¹⁵ Stephen H. Blackwell, *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), 100-101.

¹⁶ Brian Boyd, "The Psychological Work of Fictional Play (2010)," in *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 111-112.

¹⁷ Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "Thinking about Impossible Things in Nabokov," in *Transitional Nabokov*, eds. Will Norman and Duncan White (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 73.

appearance [...] so that readers might combine them in order to come up with the man's identity."¹⁸ Expanding her analysis, Sweeney suggests that Nabokov makes use of these tricks (really, his perception of the way our mind functions) to prompt such fusions, that is, emergent meaning that allows the reader to reconceive of the work's overall significance by gradually piecing together disparate elements spread throughout its pages. Sweeney observes something similar at play in *Pnin*, where the "novel suddenly leaves it up to Nabokov's readers, instead, to construct the impossibility demanded by the text."¹⁹ Her descriptions of *Pnin*'s narrative construction, as well as its effects on and representation of the reader's mental processes, could just as well be applied to "Signs and Symbols" and its omitted ending that elicits readerly cognitive blending.²⁰

Elsewhere, Lisa Zunshine, analyzing *Lolita* through Theory of Mind, advances a similar argument as Sweeney. Nabokov, she maintains, frequently problematizes his stories with complicated forms of metarepresentationality—the ability "to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" by "ascrib[ing] to a person a certain mental state on the basis of her observable action."²¹ We do not, however, always mind-read correctly; for example, we might mistake a person yawning to be tired when she is in fact bored. This ability is nevertheless highly valuable not only in real-life interactions but also in the way we interpret fictional situations, such as when a devious narrator may try to sway our allegiances or to bypass our sense of morality. Turning to *Lolita*, Zunshine proposes that readers must constantly remember that Humbert distributes his version of events through multiple perspectives (minds) but maintains control over all of them in his confessions. The reader becomes aware of this troubling technique and must reassess the "facts" to understand the commonalities and

¹⁸ Ibid., 72-73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 76.

²⁰ See also Sweeney 2008 for a study of *Despair* and *Lolita* through the lens of cognitive blending. She, too, acknowledges that while all literary texts reveal traces of blending, Nabokov in his stories conveys "an unusually profound awareness of the workings of the human mind." Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "'Had I Come Before Myself: Illegitimate Judgments of *Lolita* and *Despair*,'" *Cycnos* 24.1 (2008): 71.

²¹ Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 10. See also Zunshine's books *Strange Concepts and the Stories They Make Possible* (2008) and *Getting Inside Your Head* (2012) for further applications of concepts from cognitive science to literature and popular culture. Even more recently, the *Nabokov Online Journal* published Bruce Stone's account of a course he designed devoted to Nabokov and the connection between cognition and reading. He incorporates Zunshine's work into his syllabus and mentions cognitive blending with regard to "Signs and Symbols" when discussing Nabokov's love of the "virtuality" of chess problems and, by extension, of his literary works. Bruce Stone, "The Lyric Syllabus as Found Object: An Experimental Course on Nabokov and Cognition," in *Nabokov Online Journal* 10-11 (2016/2017), 5.

inconsistencies through a form of blending.²² Humbert “distributes representations testifying to his tortured virtue and Lolita’s demonic sexuality via different, seemingly independent and disinterested, sources throughout the narrative,” but Nabokov “splits his narrator in two—Humbert *before* he started writing the ‘Confession of a White Widowed Male’ and Humbert who *is* writing his ‘Confessions’ and rethinking his story [...]. The ‘present-tense’ Humbert is forced to see things that the ‘past-tense’ Humber managed/chose not to see, and this painful new ‘sightedness’ renders him an increasingly, if fitfully, *reliable* narrator.”²³ As a result, the reader is therefore challenged both to believe and not to believe Humbert by looking into his mind, leading some readers (particularly early ones) to sympathize with Nabokov’s protagonist. Zunshine calls this “the cultivation of a mental vertigo in his readers” Nabokov’s “trademark as a writer.”²⁴ As will be demonstrated below in the analysis of “Signs and Symbols,” Nabokov made use of such narrative vertigo throughout several of his works.

Perhaps most relevant to the present article, however, Christopher Kilgore, in an unpublished dissertation, uses blending theory to reconsider the structure of *Pale Fire*. Like Zunshine, he shows how in fiction, as in life, we attain compartmentalized units of blended mental space that can then be manipulated, shifted, or even recombined with yet another input to create a second (or second-order) blend or further. They build upon one another continuously, reconfiguring input endlessly. In this regard, his approach aligns particularly well with my analysis. Kilgore makes explicit the idea that a story “*is* a blend.”²⁵ As readers of *Pale Fire*, he argues, we must continually reorganize the various possible narrative layers, for instance Kinbote as sole narrator, John Shade as sole narrator, or dual narrators in different parts of the novel. We refer back to details that re-combine (re-blend) to produce a new interpretation of the text as a whole when we shift our understanding to suggest that one character instead of another is the author of a given section of *Pale Fire*. This experience exemplifies the act of running a blend multiple times to attain new meaning and the continual process of interpreting a text in different ways based on the reconfiguration of input spaces—in other words, Nabokov’s prized rereading.

²² Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 108.

²³ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁵ Christopher Kilgore, “Ambiguous Recognition: Recursion, Cognitive Blending, and the Problem of Interpretation in Twenty-First-Century Fiction,” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2010), 37.

By structuring some of his texts to allow for their surfeit of narrative possibilities, Nabokov achieves what Kilgore calls a “neither/nor” scenario in which only one narrative output blend is possible. It cannot be that Kinbote’s *and* Shade’s versions of narrative reality co-exist, that is, Shade and Kinbote cannot *both* have simultaneously written each other’s portions of the book.²⁶ *Both* Kinbote and Shade did not write the poem *Pale Fire*, for example. What distinguishes *Pale Fire* from “Signs and Symbols” is that the former pushes the reader toward a final solution and assumes, even demands, interpretive conclusiveness, whereas the latter plays with that condition by disrupting it; Nabokov here focuses instead on the principle of uncertainty that motivates the story’s tensions.

Kilgore contrasts *Pale Fire* with later twenty-first century novels that participate in what he calls a “both/and” dynamic, whereby multiple narrative possibilities appear simultaneously before the reader. One of his chosen texts is Mark Z. Danielewski’s dizzying *Only Revolutions* (2006). Consisting of two narratives told by a pair of teenagers, Hailey and Sam, this book forces the reader to engage directly with the physical text by flipping it “upside-down” every eight pages to switch between storylines. (Alternatively, one may read Hailey’s version of the story first, and then switch to Sam’s, or vice versa, much as one may read the commentary of *Pale Fire* while working through the poem or simply read the book cover to cover.) In conjunction with this physical interaction imposed on the reader, Danielewski’s novel “prompts the reader to create potential stories that see the two teenage narrators taking a possibly escapist road trip together, or taking different road trips in different centuries. [...] these stories encourage the reader to integrate two different and seemingly unassimilable possible stories, producing a conception of a simultaneous ‘subjective *and* objective time.’”²⁷ The twin narratives share many characters, events, and locations, and yet they differ in dramatic ways: Hailey begins in 1963, Sam in 1863, and both narrators describe the other’s death at the end of their respective tales. Moreover, a series of dates inserted into the margins of each page refute the possibility of this simply being the same narrative from two perspectives. In the face of such complications, Kilgore argues that blending permits the reader to imagine a sequential world of the text (grounded in real historical time), as well as a simultaneous world (both narratives occurring at

²⁶ Much has been written on *Pale Fire*’s narrative construction, see, inter alia, Boyd (2001), Meyer, and Tammi 1995.

²⁷ Kilgore, “Ambiguous Recognition,” 3-4.

once). Through their interaction these blended worlds question temporality and self-narration as the storytellers try to carve out a space for themselves in history:

Here, the “both at once” position is less an immobilizing contradiction in terms than [...] a way of interpreting textual materials, a “mental space” that remains active along with all of the other blends [...]. It is not a solution to a puzzle posed by the text, but rather a way of reading that the text encourages and rewards with greater insights into the characters, their contexts, and the rhetorical gesture of the book as a whole.²⁸

Much the same may be said of Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols.” As will be shown below, this short story, like Danielewski’s experimental novel, prompts numerous blends at different levels and encourages the reader to partake in such meaning-making by connecting its individual elements. The story’s “rhetorical gesture,” to borrow Kilgore’s term, indeed involves demonstrating the workings of the human mind by having the reader experience blending as the story progresses more or less as expected, but leaving its ultimate construal—the ending—tantalizingly absent. Instead, the reader faces numerous contradictory options all at once.

LAYERS OF BLENDING IN “SIGNS AND SYMBOLS”

Insofar as Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” displays how some endings hint at such overlapping possibilities, it, too, engages the reader through both/and logic. This “both” construction may be understood as what Kilgore calls a “positive affirmation” that allows readers to “accept ethical, ontological, or sociopolitical contraries simultaneously.”²⁹ The meaning of the third call exists in a space where options overlap, at least until the reader makes a final connection that closes the circuit: it is an innocuous third misdeal, it is a portentous announcement of the son’s death, it is a message from the dead son from beyond the grave.³⁰ Until then, however, we are caught in a

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76. Depending on one’s interpretation of “Signs and Symbols,” ontological, epistemological, or even ethical contradictions take precedence. Is the reader in charge of the boy’s death? Does he die at all? How can we be certain?

³⁰ *Pale Fire*, too, allows the reader to close the circuit, and yet with its multiple narrators it presents this problem in a form different than that of “Signs and Symbols.”

blending limbo, eager to make sense of the call while concurrently enjoying the experience of making links between Nabokov's signs and symbols.

The way blending functions can be seen in (and outside of) Nabokov's short story at all levels, from the characters' perspectives to the overarching narrative structure. To take an unexceptional example, the parents nickname their benefactor, the father's brother, "the Prince."³¹ In this blend the parents (with the reader in tow) combine elements of one input space—royalty—that includes wealth, power, and social status with a second input space—family relations. Other elements such as ascendancy to a throne via a blood lineage and sovereignty over a locality are ignored, a regular occurrence in this cognitive procedure, because the mind accepts and uses only those pieces of a source domain necessary to make sense of a metaphor or counterfactual.³² What results is the emergent meaning: the blended image of an affluent family member who, at least implicitly, exerts power over the impoverished parents with his money and social standing. This moniker is a simple example, one of many such blends that act as the foundation for all of the story's developments. In the textual, fictional universe of "Signs and Symbols," the protagonists — mother, father, son — undertake both positive and dubious forms of blending as they attempt to make sense of their world(s), much as the reader does at a higher level when interpreting the various components of the text and ascribing a meaning to the final phone call.

In fact, the fundamental narrative push toward blending results in the story's inherent indeterminacy. For the purpose of analyzing Nabokov's ingenious emplotment of blending throughout "Signs and Symbols," I propose a three-tiered system. First, at the diegetic level, the characters engage in blending when they call the uncle "the Prince" or the boy sees meaning related to himself in inanimate objects as a result of his referential mania. This kind of blending can be called micro-level blending in the sense that it takes place in the characters' minds as reported by the narrator. (What allows the reader to make sense of the "Prince" so quickly, though, is the ability to blend inputs and understand the parents' wry humor.) Next, through what might be termed mid-level blending, the reader links details from various sections of the text to

³¹ Nabokov, "Signs and Symbols," 598.

³² Furthermore, Fauconnier and Turner argue that cultures "work hard to develop integration resources that can then be handed on with relative ease" and "offer us methods [and] loci" that others can make use of later. The nickname the "Prince" with all its cultural-cognitive baggage is one good example of this process. Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 72.

make connections between characters, images, and themes. This process is no different from what the characters do; after all, blending is a universal, distinctly human function. However, given his perspective the reader is privy to connections or parallels and, thus, potential blends to which the characters are not. Finally, the numerous narrative arcs of Nabokov's exquisitely dense text add up to the story's macro-level blends; they are again formed not by the characters, but by the reader who both possesses the perspective required to notice links between scenes (as in mid-level blends) and wields extra-textual knowledge that might be brought into an interpretation of Nabokov's text as a whole. At this level, blends include "normal" semiosis vs. overactive semiosis (i.e., the boy's disease); the blending of fictional worlds via allusions; the lyrical vs. the everyday; fathers and sons; ghostly intervention; and violent European history overlaid upon the family chronicle and the son's childhood, among others. These examples, unifying all layers of the story, represent the ultimate construals that the reader, who can access extra-textual (biographical, historical, etc.) input spaces unavailable to the characters, achieves through blending. Each level, from character to reader to narrative architecture, builds upon the previous one, and at every step blending unites the immediately perceptible to produce something hidden or new: emergent meaning based on the reader's construal of the story's progression. This process points to an ambiguity essential to the text, as the macro-level blends offer answers regarding the meaning behind the ominous details but refrain from closing in upon themselves without the reader's involvement. Taken as a whole, Nabokov's blends and macro-level blends contribute to the story's destabilizing effects and the reader's experience of being "suspended" in the process of meaning-making. Through such techniques, Nabokov, a master of intrigue, foregrounds both the pleasures of interpretation and the healthy human mind at work.

To return briefly to the micro-level, beyond their nicknames, character engagement in conceptual blending can also be observed in the son's unusual sickness. According to Dr. Herman Brink, his patient imagines that "everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. [...] Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information [...]." ³³ If we take the doctor's words at face value, then we see how the son continually brings together—blends—domain spaces that actually have little relation to each other. While this process can produce fascinating, creative emergent

³³ Nabokov, "Signs and Symbols," 599.

meaning, it also overwhelms the boy, who can no longer prioritize his blends, nor omit features of inputs that are irrelevant to the blend at hand. It furthermore sets him apart from those around him. In other words, he does not achieve the typical culturally-approved type of blend while cloud-gazing, an example offered by Fauconnier and Turner to explain the balance that humans achieve as their natural ability to blend progresses with age.³⁴ They write that young children see purpose in nature, essentially deploying the pathetic fallacy at large. An adult who does the same typically uses metaphor in order to express some other, likely poetic, meaning. The son in “Signs and Symbols,” on the other hand, experiences arrested development because he imagines meaning or intentionality everywhere, even in inanimate objects. The blends he runs while studying nature push through more meaning than really exists. While the goal here is not to re-diagnose the son’s condition — there are enough second opinions — understanding the micro-level blending that Nabokov’s characters run helps underscore the fact that this process plays a central role in his narrative technique. The son’s warped blending constitutes his fundamental problem; likewise, the story both depends on and, in a sense, cautions against such over-reading through blending. Nabokov certainly understood this power of the human imagination and its potential for perverted distortions either through sickness or moral depravity. At the same time, the narrative acknowledges how we think and read by combining and reformulating new input.

Nabokov initiates the call for blending quite early in the story, shifting the focus from the characters’ comprehension of the world around them to the reader’s construal of individual components of that same imagined world, when he has the narrator state, “That Friday everything went wrong.”³⁵ The lexical trigger “wrong” creates a blended space with what Fauconnier and Turner call a disanalogy between two input spaces: what happens on that Friday when the parents visit the son compared to what *might* or *should* happen, a real situation on the one hand and an unreal scenario on the other. This declaration sets up an expectation within the text and, more importantly, within the reader’s mind, that all proceeding events must be negative in some way. Seemingly grim details quickly accumulate: a train loses its “life current,” things are mislaid in the hospital.³⁶ It should be noted, however, that this single line about Friday not only may lead the reader to view everything that follows as intrinsically tainted, as has been

³⁴ Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 391-2.

³⁵ Nabokov, “Signs and Symbols,” 598.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

pointed out by Paul Rosenzweig and others, but also forces her to imagine an entirely original, if counterfactual, reality.³⁷ In comparison with the events as actually narrated throughout “Signs and Symbols,” this illusory world in which things did *not* go wrong is no less valid for the reader, who adopts all the details as evidence of its potential existence. We can picture these two opposite realities as Fauconnier and Turner write, “Often the point of the blend is not to obscure incompatibilities but, in a fashion, to have at once something and its opposite.”³⁸ Such a “something” (the wrong Friday) and its “opposite” (what *should* have been) loom large over “Signs and Symbols.”

The reader is thus constantly prompted to bring together discrete items through blending in order to build a version of the story-world that explains these seemingly malevolent elements. For example, one recurring image that unites the tragic and the humane is the “half-dead unfledged bird [...] twitching in a puddle.”³⁹ It finds its parallel in the next paragraph when the mother, in a telling repetition of words, notices the father’s hands “twitching” and later when the text refers to the son’s childhood drawings of “wonderful birds with human hands and feet.”⁴⁰ In this blend, the reader first brings together the dying bird with the father and then with the son’s drawings. The son’s drawings are likewise a blend that invites the reader to imagine a human-bird hybrid, which is further strengthened by another patient’s interpretation of the son’s plan to commit auto-defenestration as the desire to “fly.”⁴¹ These blends stress the boy’s unstable mind, the family’s tragedy, and the father-son connection. Through blending of the wounded bird image and the boy’s two suicide attempts, the reader can conjure up a reality in which the boy *has* leapt to his death.

Here, Gary Saul Morson’s “sideshadowing,” in some ways a narratological equivalent to conceptual blending, acts as a useful parallel: “Whereas *foreshadowing* works by revealing apparent alternatives to be mere illusions, *sideshadowing* conveys the sense that actual events might just as well not have happened. [...] Along with an event, we see its alternatives; with each present, another possible present. Sideshadows conjure the ghostly presence of might-have-

³⁷ In Leving’s collection, see, for example, Rosenzweig, Barabtarlo, and Quinn for different approaches to this problem.

³⁸ Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 29.

³⁹ Nabokov, “Signs and Symbols,” 599.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 599, 601.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 598.

beens or might-bes.”⁴² Morson’s use of the adjective “ghostly” is quite apposite, as what is at stake in the story’s “hypothetical” scenario is the boy’s death. If foreshadowing prescribes (in hindsight) a definitive course for time/narrative, then sideshadowing underscores the open-ended possibility of plot. Thus, the dying, twitching bird might be seen as a harbinger of the son’s death, and yet, because of the way we blend numerous elements and portions of the text together due to Nabokov’s narrative structure, it remains a potentiality alone. The story is composed of such micro-blends as the “Prince” and the bird-boy that when added up comprise the mid-level blends, those that only the reader may run in the effort to piece together seemingly disparate elements from various sections of the story.

But what is the reader to do with the fact that the boy seemingly *has* and *has not* committed suicide? The inconclusive ending seemingly forces a choice regarding possible larger connections, that is, the macro-level blends that provide a comprehensive meaning to the text. To achieve this equilibrium involves performing blending at the highest narrative level by creating second- and third-order blends, that is, those that build upon previously blended material. The reader collects and arranges the input spaces of the text, such as the bad omens or the son’s madness, and then construes what might come after: the suicide, a message from the dead, reflections on the Holocaust and World War II.⁴³ “Signs and Symbols” itself is composed of such *latent* macro-level blends; Nabokov’s narrator and the plot’s open structure continually offer inputs but leave a final running of the blend up to the reader with the unanswered third call.

A few examples will suffice to show how this process works. The story includes several references to the family’s time in Europe: “From a fold in the album, a German maid they had had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiancé fell out. Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin, Leipzig, a slanting housefront badly out of focus. Four years old, in a park [...]”⁴⁴ Nabokov thus conditions his readers to blend the boy’s youth with the family’s travels, and their experiences merge with his growth. Each new city represented by photographs—themselves a form of blending that compresses memory and space—marks a change in the boy’s demeanor.⁴⁵ Understated allusions and clear references to the Holocaust are then overlaid upon this already complex narrative arc. Here, one may combine the input space of the child’s life with another

⁴² Gary Saul Morson, “Sideshadowing and Tempics,” *New Literary History* 29.4 (1998): 599-624.

⁴³ On those topics, see Richter and Carroll, Dolinin, and Drescher, respectively, in *Anatomy*.

⁴⁴ Nabokov, “Signs and Symbols,” 600.

⁴⁵ Cf. Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 5, 264-5, 315.

input space consisting of Europe in the 1940s. This blend results in a narrative line that lurks beneath the veneer of a story about a day gone wrong in the life of an old émigré couple. The boy's madness reflects and is a product of the terror his family fled in Europe. A statement on the madness of modern history therefore emerges.

But this is only one possible blend. By using different input spaces, Alexander Dolinin reaches the more optimistic conclusion that the deceased son uses the girl looking for Charlie as a medium to place the three phone calls. He argues that the mother's pointed explanation of the girl mistaking the letter O for the number zero near the end of the story should prompt the reader to realize that a standard rotary phone features the letters O, M, and N on the number 6. With the addition of an "e," the boy's "OMeN" may be deciphered. This macro-level blend requires careful attention to all numbers, as well as circular motions, mentioned in the story. Dolinin goes on to read the ending as an announcement of the boy's death; he, however, posits that the call is not cruel but rather benevolent as the boy attempts to make contact with his suffering parents.⁴⁶

THE REAL AND THE POSSIBLE OF "SIGNS AND SYMBOLS"

The sheer number of interpretations regarding the third call and the way they are achieved reflects the deceptive structure of "Signs and Symbols." They furthermore speak to how Nabokov's open-ended conclusion challenges, rewards, and frustrates the reader at the same time. Every text, of course, contains a measure of ambiguity. What makes Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols" exceptional is its continual prompting and negating of possibilities through signals for blending. Something similar appears in Jorge Luis Borges's "The Library of Babel," in which the Argentinian author presents a vision of the universe as an infinite library containing all possible words, sentences, and books. The narrator-librarian writes: "in order for a book to exist, it is sufficient that it be *possible*."⁴⁷ This typically playful footnote from Borges's short story

⁴⁶ Leving follows up this interpretation with a theory that blends chess moves with the characters' actions throughout the story. Here, again, knowledge of Nabokov's extra-textual interests and his literary representation of an otherworld combines with individual components of "Signs and Symbols" to offer a new macro-blend. Yuri Leving, "The Castling Problem in 'Signs and Symbols,'" in *Anatomy of a Short Story: Nabokov's Puzzles, Codes, "Signs and Symbols,"* ed. Yuri Leving (London: Continuum Books, 2012), 270-6.

⁴⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin), 117.

provides an aesthetic representation of what is at stake in Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols": what happens after that third phone call is a matter of the reader blending previous moments to produce a new "possible" world. In crafting his text in this way, Nabokov both represents the working human mind and, by prompting the reader to engage in blending without a predetermined end in sight, allowing for multiple possibilities to come to fruition at once. Paraphrasing Borges, in order for the story's seemingly missing ending to exist, it is sufficient that the reader's mind craft possible emergent meaning through blending.

Fauconnier and Turner, in a passage that recalls Nabokov's powerful brevity in "Signs and Symbols," write that each blend reconciles conceptual systems that are "vast and rich and open-ended" with linguistic systems that are "relatively quite thin."⁴⁸ Blending, however, allows for the creation of nearly countless ideas through the constant recirculation of a multitude of things we once thought complete. A particular grammatical construction will "prompt different infinities of conceptual mappings."⁴⁹ Nabokov's language in "Signs and Symbols" produces this particular effect. He renders his text—an amalgam of language, image, and plot—in such a way as to elide the emergent meaning in any certain terms, all within the space of a few pages. Such a scheme effectively allows a particular set of macro-level blends, for which the reader adopts input spaces, whether they are the son's otherworld or the grim sign-objects or the haunting of the family by European history, to supplement the basic plot and provide a desired ending. The "possible" of "Signs and Symbols," to borrow once more the Borgesian librarian's term, consists of these configurations.

To claim that the point of Nabokov's story is less the solution than the process, in a sense, runs contrary to some major approaches to his fiction. Even today a frequent view examines his texts in terms of puzzles meant to be uncovered, explored, and finally resolved using textual clues. Nabokov basically canonized this mode of reading when he wrote to *New Yorker* editor Katherine White expressing his disappointment that she did not understand "The Vane Sisters," a tale involving messages from the deceased titular characters. In his letter, he explains that this story, along with others including "Signs and Symbols," is written according to a scheme in which a "second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial

⁴⁸ Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 277.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

semitransparent one.”⁵⁰ With regard to “Signs and Symbols,” this assertion has often been taken to mean that there is in fact a ghostly presence or, potentially, a layer devoted to the family’s connection to the Holocaust. Such answers are all certainly possible given the ambiguous nature of the story, though we might also view it as part of the tradition of Alexander Pushkin’s “Queen of Spades.”⁵¹ Even as “Signs and Symbols” prompts the reader to interpretation, it cuts down seemingly conclusive evidence. Nabokov’s text however, goes a step further than Pushkin’s short story in that it develops what Kilgore calls “both/and” logic by allowing for multiple endings and possibilities to exist all at once. “Queen of Spades,” of course, belongs to the tradition of the literary fantastic, in which one alternative must be chosen at the expense of the other. While Hermann cannot be *both* insane and sane, “Signs and Symbols” with its elided ending asks the reader to imagine a literary reality in which multiple contradictory possibilities coalesce, in the process reflecting the mind’s capacity for imaginative thought.

Herein lies the pleasure of reading “Signs and Symbols.” This text is neither simply “narrative entrapment,” as David Richter puts it, nor a puzzle box.⁵² Nabokov instead provides tantalizing material that the reader picks up and completes through blending of the textual and extra-textual fabric. By providing no fixed endpoint with his third phone call, at least at the conclusion of the story proper, Nabokov pauses, leaving the reader in a state of delayed semiotic comprehension. The reader remains suspended mid-blend.

⁵⁰ He calls “Signs and Symbols” the “one about the old Jewish couple and their sick boy.” Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters: 1940-1977*, eds. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 117.

⁵¹ Pekka Tammi has also made this intertextual connection in a brief statement. Pekka Tammi, “Cards,” in *Anatomy of a Short Story: Nabokov’s Puzzles, Codes, “Signs and Symbols,”* ed. Yuri Leving (London: Continuum Books, 2012), 151. Discussing the reader as the target of Pushkin’s parody in his later works, Caryl Emerson writes, “What is parodied is the reader’s search for a system or a key, and in this search, the more numerous the partial hints and tantalizing fragments provided by the author, the more challenging and irresistible the search becomes.” Much the same might be said of Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” in the way it challenges readerly expectations. Caryl Emerson, “‘The Queen of Spades’ and the Open End,” in *Puškin Today*, ed. David M. Bethea (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 32. See also Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of the fantastic as the moment in which the reader hesitates between belief in the supernatural and rejection of the same: “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.” Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25.

⁵² Richter, “*Pnin* and ‘Signs and Symbols,’” 224. Similarly, Yuri Leving in his introduction to *Anatomy of a Short Story* calls the text “an open-ended *tour de force* in prose which challenges readers to break its mysterious code.” Yuri Leving, “Breaking the Code: Nabokov and the Art of Short Fiction,” in *Anatomy of a Short Story: Nabokov’s Puzzles, Codes, “Signs and Symbols,”* ed. Yuri Leving (London: Continuum Books, 2012), 1.

As a theoretical approach to literature with concrete outcomes, conceptual blending theory allows readers to foreground the process of riddle-making in Nabokov's art while also deemphasizing the solutions. The difference between riddle-making and riddle-solving in the work of Nabokov, who once said that he simply "enjoys composing riddles [his texts] with elegant solutions," is a fine line.⁵³ One of the reasons why the former — riddle-making — is so central in his art is because it sheds light on the workings of the human mind. From this standpoint, conceptual blending theory serves as a powerful critical tool as it draws attention to the ways in which Nabokov tasks the reader with creative potential (the "how"). Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols" therefore is about how the human mind functions by making links between disparate items and in the process crafting new meaning.

"Signs and Symbols," then, requires, even champions, over-reading into signs and symbols, all those scribbles on the page.⁵⁴ Without making connections, that is, blending at every turn, we are unable to appreciate the intricate beauty of the story's structure. We are moreover incapable of making sense of it in any constructive way. One must blend to conceive of *any* literary text, as well as many other forms of writing, yet Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols" foregrounds this process by allowing, even encouraging, a profusion of conclusions. It is not a matter of interpreting the ending's mysterious third call, but of reconsidering the narrative, reconstructing a seemingly missing ending, and then repeatedly reinterpreting that ending based on what came before. Nabokov in this way forces the reader to revel in the process of meaning-finding or meaning-making, which in this particular case are much the same thing. Our goal therefore should not be to discover a closed-looped solution — a "what" — but to enjoy the *process* of piecing together the narrative blend that unites everything at its conclusion, in other words, that demanding "how" with which Nabokov repeatedly teases his readers.

⁵³ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 16.

⁵⁴ Meghan Vicks in her work on Nabokov's short story has developed an intriguing metatextual reading that explains the boy's sickness by aligning him with some of Nabokov's other heroes who become cognizant of their maker: "if we interpret all of the codes to indicate something about the boy, then we legitimate his madness, transforming it into lucid reality: he is indeed trapped in a world in which 'everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme,' and his belief of this could be regarded as an awareness of Nabokov's pen, and of the various readers and critics who pore over his story and continually reinterpret it. His referential mania, then, is otherwise understood as his tuning in to the scratchings of Nabokov's thick pencil along the page [...] and as his reception of the wavelengths of readers' thoughts [...]." Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in 20th-Century Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 103.

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