

Emma W. Hamilton

***LOOK AT THE HARLEQUINS!:***  
**A CORPUS COMPENDIUM**

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*“But if I do not cheat, some kind of atrocious obstacle, which would drive me mad if I persevered, prevents me from imagining the twist which transforms one direction into another, directly opposite. I am crushed, I am carrying the whole world on my back in the process of trying to visualize my turning around and making myself see in terms of ‘right’ what I saw in terms of ‘left’ and vice versa.”<sup>1</sup>*

**N**abokov once said of his feelings for his wife and son: “I have to have all space and time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence.”<sup>2</sup> When coupled with Nabokov’s opinion on the value of literature, from his afterword to *Lolita*, –

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* [LATH from henceforward] (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam, 1966), 297.

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.<sup>3</sup>

– Nabokov’s novels emerge as spaces in which his infinity of sensation and thought can be lavished and experienced – a terrain of sensation both for Nabokov as the author and his readers. This experiential, sensory-based approach to literature is what has informed my analysis of Nabokov’s works in general and his final novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, in particular. *Look at the Harlequins!* gives the sense of a deliberate capping of Nabokov’s corpus – a final novel that completes Nabokov’s works as a set. By creating a protagonist, Vadim Vadimovich N., who shares many superficial and biographical similarities with himself, Nabokov is able to allude to the rest of his corpus and fully and finally articulate the ethos of reading and writing that should be applied to this book and all that came before it. *Look at the Harlequins!* both contains the entire corpus and stands alone as its final, unifying piece. Nabokov’s novels all have distinct qualities, and yet they all exist within the same universe and occasionally wander into one another as proof of this shared space. Nabokov said of time in his memoir: “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to impose one part of the pattern upon another.”<sup>4</sup> This carries over into his fiction, so that the universe creases and *Lolita* wanders into *Ada* as a gypsy girl, or into *Pale Fire* as a hurricane. Nowhere does this happen more than in *Look at the Harlequins!* in which every novel is present in some

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, Alfred Appel, Jr, *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 314-315.

<sup>4</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 139.

way, so that the shared universe of Nabokov's oeuvre is expanded and contracted upon itself like an accordion. The dense contraction of his fiction's galaxy in *Look at the Harlequins!* highlights the multi-directional expansion that occurs in the other novels as they are explored individually. The elements of his oeuvre act singularly and collectively as testaments to the exhilarating possibility of an expanding world of "aesthetic bliss" in fiction.

Arguably, the most relevant theory when evaluating Nabokov is his own: a school of reading and analysis that he honed while teaching at Cornell, from 1948 to 1958.<sup>5</sup> While the theory comprises a methodology as well, it aims to address each work individually – its hallmark is a minute attention to the way each text is constructed and functions – judging it in its own context, not another.<sup>6</sup> Nabokov the critic stresses that good literature is that which creates its own world and prizes textual detail in the extreme as the only way to ground and vivify that world: "In my academic days I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead"<sup>7</sup>. This spark is the connection between writer and reader that transforms a book from the dead account of the feelings of others into a palpable, personal experience – the act of reading shifts from a passive voyeurism into participatory engagement. The Nabokovian theory of literature figures the sparking and sparkling details as keys, which, once found and understood, unlock the work of art. That work should also have a harmony of design –

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<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980); *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980); *Lectures on Don Quixote* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> "In a book, the reality of a person, or object, or circumstance depends exclusively on the world of that particular book." Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 156-157.

patterns and structures which give shape and meaning to the sensations aroused.<sup>8</sup> Not every reader is willing to concede to Nabokov's opinion that texts should be analyzed without the application of external theory, but in this case, when examining his final novel, which is in many ways a meditation on writing and his life as a writer, it seems a valuable tool, especially when we can sense Nabokov judging his protagonist, Vadim Vadimovich N., by these same criteria. In fact, it could be said that Nabokov is exemplifying his ethos through the negative paradigm of his protagonist, who, failing to grasp the expansive potentialities of fiction, eventually becomes trapped by his own writing to the point of semi-paralysis. He only breaks free during his final love affair, when he learns to keep his life out of his fiction.

The understanding that his novels were self-contained worlds was a prime element of Nabokov's artistic ethos. He said in an interview, "I think what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture: *The Artists Studio* by Van Bock."<sup>9</sup> The universes of his fiction, when not being visited during a read, should exist in the memory as remote, distinct, and complete. The fact that these novels are their own worlds is what has prompted some critics to dub Nabokov an escapist: bored, or disgusted, with our own world, he must create others. And yet for Nabokov, his fictions must be universes unto themselves to be successful works of art, but as works of art, they are meaningful experiences to his readers who exist outside the realm of his fiction. His books can only truly make an impact in reality if reality does not concern them. Paul Ricoeur, whose theory on the interplay between fiction and reality resonates

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<sup>8</sup> "for the beauty of a book is more enjoyable if one understands its machinery, if one can take it apart," Nabokov, "Mansfield Park," in *Lectures on Literature*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 73.

with and extends Nabokov's own statements, has expertly explicated the importance of invention in fiction. He credits new images created through the linguistic innovations of metaphor with the power to reinvent reality in fiction:

The ultimate role of the image is not only to diffuse meaning across diverse sensorial fields, to *hallucinate* thought in some way, but on the contrary to effect a sort of *epoche* of the real, to suspend our attention to the real, to place us in a state of non-engagement with regard to perception or action, in short, to suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere to which one could give the name of the dimension of fiction. In this state of non-engagement we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world. Imagination is this free play of possibilities. In this state, fiction can ... create a *redescription* of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Far from escaping reality then, fiction is rendered useful and productive by its very difference from that reality. The good writer uses metaphors that create new sensorial associations, thereby creating images and sensations that do not exist in reality outside the book. Looking for a reflection of the world in fiction, ignoring the "epoche of the real" that Ricoeur speaks of, stymies the function of fiction by relegating it to nothing more than a flat and stale reproduction. The "redescription" of reality that Ricoeur describes is akin to Nabokov's "associative stage" that he says follows an artist's careful dismemberment of the world:

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," *Continental Philosophy Review* 12, no. 2 (June 1979): 134.

The passage from the dissociative stage to the associative one is thus marked by a kind of spiritual thrill which in English is very loosely termed *inspiration*...it is like a jigsaw puzzle that instantly comes together in your brain with the brain itself unable to observe how and why the pieces fit, and you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic, of some inner resurrection, as if a dead man were revived by a sparkling drug which has been rapidly mixed in your presence.<sup>11</sup>

The great writer of fiction does not merely take apart the world of everyday reality, but creates a new world, with novel yet affecting associations.

The functionality of fiction for Ricoeur is entirely predicated on the distinction between the image as copy and the image as fiction and invention:

That fiction changes reality, in the sense that it both ‘invents’ and ‘discovers’ it, could not be acknowledged as long as the concept of image was merely identified with that of picture. Images could not increase reality since they had no referents other than those of their originals.<sup>12</sup>

Ricoeur endows fiction with the power to invent, discover, even increase reality, but only on account of its newness and originality, not its ability to faithfully reproduce. Fiction’s ability to increase reality is exactly what I described in the synthesis of Nabokov’s

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<sup>11</sup> Nabokov, “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” *Lectures on Literature*, 377-378.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, “The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality,” 127.

statements about his limitless love for his family and his reason for writing: his love and feelings are so full and bursting that they push against the limits of reality and extend into the worlds he creates in his fiction, which are new grounds for sensation and discovery. Ricoeur is trying to dispel the notion that fiction merely does its best to recreate and reflect images within the world. The distinction between image as copy and image as fiction is the crux of the internal struggle experienced by Vadim Vadimovich N., narrator of Nabokov's last novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974).

Vadim is the author of a body of fiction that appears to be reflective – within his fiction one can see his life, within his life story, one can find his fiction. The merely reflective quality of his fiction is related to the strange mental disorder that plagues Vadim throughout his life. The epigraph I have chosen is Vadim's description of his "madness": an inability to mentally swivel from a vista to its mirror image when dreaming. He can mentally pull up the mirror image of a country road (one of his dream examples), but he cannot move from one to the other, as through space. Vadim claims he cannot turn and "see in terms of 'right' what [he] saw in terms of 'left' and vice versa;" this reversal of direction is the exact effect of looking into a mirror.<sup>13</sup> The inability to move circularly – to turn in space and reverse his directional orientation – is due to the fact that Vadim has reduced his life to a linear shuffling between life and fiction. His fiction, which is derivative of his life, does not have enough originality to create a world, to "expand reality" as Ricoeur says. Vadim's imagination and creative production are not operating above a one-dimensional level, which is why he cannot turn in his dream: there literally isn't

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Barton Johnson's *Worlds in Regression* offers further analysis of the left/right opposition in *LATH*.

enough dimension for him to move through. In Part Six, Vadim's problem shifts from conceptual to actual – when taking a walk, he physically cannot make an about face and return to his love, whom he calls, not coincidentally, “Reality”. Vadim has borrowed too much from his life for his works of fiction, using directly incidents and people from his life as episodes and characters in his work. “Her cheeks and arms, without their summer tan, had the mat whiteness that I was to distribute – perhaps too generously – among the girls of my future books.”<sup>14</sup> This moment evidences the author bleeding the clarity and vitality of his memory into fiction, thus paling reality, without the imagination and originality it requires to make fiction really sparkle and convince, to cause the “shuddering sensation of wild magic” that Nabokov describes. What he is left with is two one-dimensional realities, neither substantial enough to really live in. After Vadim's syncope at the end of Part Six, he is left “from the head down ... paralyzed in symmetrical patches separated by a geography of weak tactility.”<sup>15</sup> This fainting spell seems to be a metaphorical confrontation with the mirror image of his life, which he cannot penetrate, nor turn from – he suffers a physical consequence of this metaphoric problem and is rendered paralyzed, unable to inhabit his fiction and equally unable to turn back to his own life. Vadim himself, after a lifetime of too much borrowing – for there cannot be enough poignant, crucial details in his very eventful life to illuminate both a life and an entire body of prose – confounds his life and his art, and physically takes on a formerly imagined problem.

Some may see here a link to Nabokov, a worry of his own, that he has written too much and lived too little – that there is perhaps not enough of him to have both a

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<sup>14</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

wonderful life and a successful oeuvre. But Nabokov himself makes it clear that he does not commit the same sins as Vadim. Nabokov admits that the few times he has borrowed details and personages from life for his work it has tarnished somehow the memory. Likewise, he scorns those who try to find real life roots to all his major characters or events. In his memoir, he describes the vying forces of his life and his work, realizing the danger of losing a memory to his fiction:

... the portrait of my old French governess, whom I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast, now that it is engulfed in the description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own. The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle.<sup>16</sup>

The transfer of Mademoiselle straight from his memory to his fiction seems to be a literary technique that Nabokov tried in that instance and then abandoned after realizing the extent of the personal sacrifice he made for his writing. He also clearly stated that he never modeled his characters on himself: "I am very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity. Only the background of the novel can be said to contain some biographical touches."<sup>17</sup> Nabokov carried his story of Mademoiselle with him through many appearances and iterations, starting with the eponymous story and ending in *Speak, Memory*. It is unclear whether he felt further from her with each successive fictional appearance, but either way, he learned through this experience the

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<sup>16</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 13.

sense of loss caused by giving details of his life to a character, and understood even further the importance of separating his life and his fiction. Despite this success where Vadim has difficulty, Maurice Couturier, in an article about *Look at the Harlequins!* aligns Nabokov with Vadim's sense that he has bled too much of his life into his works:

In *Look at the Harlequins!*, the distance between narrator and author turns out to be comparatively small, though McNab is obviously less talented than his creator, whom he is desperately trying to defeat or free himself from. At the end of a long and successful career as a novelist, Nabokov, like McNab, seems to be reviewing his printed books with a sense of *unheimliche*, realizing that he has scattered fragments of his personal story and identity throughout his books and fed millions of readers with his own flesh and blood.<sup>18</sup>

This sense of homelessness and deconstructed, disseminated identity, is exactly the sense that Vadim has, but it does not apply to Nabokov, who seems to have learned the bounds of life and fiction and not crossed them. Where Nabokov has a home within his fiction, as another realm for him to roam, Vadim has a pale imitation of his non-written life. It is a mistake to read Vadim's conundrum, *his* sense of "*unheimliche*" as Nabokov's, for *Look at the Harlequins!* is a novel which attests to the possibilities and joys of fiction, not its limitations and pitfalls. Those pitfalls only occur when a writer mistakenly draws too

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<sup>18</sup> Maurice Couturier, "I, X Does Not Equal Nabokov," *La Figure de L'auteur* (Paris: Seuil, 1995, accessed April 31 2006); available from <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/coutnar.htm>; Internet.

much from his own life, as Nabokov did by giving away his memory of Mademoiselle to a character, as Vadim does throughout all his fiction.

How is Nabokov able to achieve success in both life and art, while Vadim is able to achieve success in neither, and how is Vadim, who pens the entire text of *Look at the Harlequins!* a second-rate writer and Nabokov, who lends dimension to the text by having his name on the cover, a first-rate one? It is a matter of intentionality. Nabokov carefully constructed *Look at the Harlequins!* while Vadim's novel is interrupted by his life, throwing off his intended six-part structure and creating a seventh. Nabokov makes references in the novel that Vadim, their conduit, does not himself understand. Nabokov can be seen behind Vadim's words, often in a mocking and disapproving manner. This is how Nabokov treats all of his first-person narrators, although they do not all resemble him as closely. Martin Amis, writing about *Lolita*, describes how through the linguistic universe of the text, Nabokov is able to convey his own feelings within the words of his narrators. For example, he describes how Nabokov is actually able to inflict cruelty on Humbert Humbert through the text of *Lolita*:

However cruel Humbert is to Lolita, Nabokov is crueler to Humbert – finessingly cruel. We all share the narrator's smirk when he begins the sexual-bribes chapter with the following sentence: 'I am now faced with the distasteful task of recording a definite drop in Lolita's morals.' But when the smirk congeals we are left staring at the moral heap that Humbert has become, underneath his arched eyebrow. Irresistible and

unforgivable. It is complicated, and unreassuring. Even so, this is how it works.<sup>19</sup>

It is this ability to cause simultaneous collusion and aversion, to incite layered reactions to the text, that makes Nabokov's narrators both attractive and, like Humbert, detestable, or, like Vadim, at times ridiculous. It is in moments like these, where Nabokov is pointing a derisive finger at his narrators, that he wishes to remind the absent-minded reader not to conflate him with his protagonists.

Nabokov also distances himself from his narrators by structural moves that highlight his omnipotent hand skewing the intentions he gives to his narrators. Vadim intended his novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* to have six parts. However, Nabokov has him swoon at the end of Part Six, which transforms the book structurally from two reflective halves to a chiasmus refracted through the central prism of chapter four. Vadim has to append a final chapter to detail his recovery from the surprising incident. This moment, which is the summation and consummation of the dynamic between Vadim's life and work, that is, the preceding content of *Look at the Harlequins!*, is a fitting place to begin my analysis, for the view of the rest of the work sharpens from this retrospective vantage-point.

Nabokov creates Vadim as a negative paradigm of how fiction should be created and experienced: his reflective fiction is limiting and ultimately immobilizing. Vadim has just left his current love with his new novel, still in note-card form, and gone out for a walk. He chooses to admit his "mental irregularity", something he feels he must do

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Amis, Books@Random, Everyman's Library "Martin Amis on *Lolita*," Vintage Books, 1992. available from <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/nabokov/amis.html>; Internet; accessed April 31, 2006.

before marriage, by giving it to one of the characters in his novel. While imagining her reading his work, the image of his physical writing, the cards, takes over his mind:

A tactile something, or the recent ra-ta-tac, brought back and completed the image of my 733, twelve centimeters by ten-and-a-half Bristol cards, which you would read chapter by chapter whereupon a great pleasure, a parapet of pleasure, would perfect my task: in my mind there arose, endowed with the clean-cut compactness of some great solid – an altar! a mesa! – the image of the shiny photocopier in one of the offices of our hotel. My trustful hands were still spread, but my soles no longer sensed the soft soil. I wished to go back to you, to life, to the amethyst lozenges, to the pencil lying on the veranda table, and I could not. What used to happen so often in thought, now had happened for keeps: I could not turn.<sup>20</sup>

It is crucial that at Vadim's moment of seizure, the image in his mind's eye is his production but what he wants to return to is his experience, his extra-fictional life. His inability in dream to switch from an image to its reflection has become real, he becomes the incarnation of his imagination: fixated on the reflection of his life (*Ardis* is his "most personal novel"), he cannot switch to the image that inspired it – his own life. It seems that Vadim has always been working and living within the formula *life* → *writing*; when he reverses the formula so that his fiction plays a role in his life (admitting his handicap through his character) to *writing* → *life*, he becomes so disoriented by the shift in

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<sup>20</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 235-236.

perspective that he is rendered immobile. After realizing that he cannot turn, Vadim panics: "I performed, or imagined performing, a wild wrenching movement – and the globe did not bulge. I must have hung in a spread-eagle position for a little while longer before ending supine on the intangible soil."<sup>21</sup> Although there is no physical mirror present, it seems that Vadim has hit a metaphorical mirror: he and his fictional self have been approaching one another throughout the text, culminating in this collision: it is the image of the photocopier, which is about to photocopy and disseminate his fictional self that he cannot turn from, that he effectively smacks up against.

This reading of a physical confrontation with a metaphorical mirror is supported by Nabokov's respect for *Alice in Wonderland* and the preponderance of mirrors that can be found in his work.<sup>22</sup> It seems that as *Alice in Wonderland*'s translator and lauder, Nabokov would champion the idea of traversing the mirror, entering the world of reflection and realizing that there is much more behind there (?) than a simple reversal of a static image. But if literature can refract a world image, it creates a new world that is expansive instead of merely reflective. When Alice goes through the Looking-Glass, she finds that the differences there abound and are far more than mere inversions:

Then she began looking about and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all rest was as different as possible. For instance, the pictures on the wall next to the fire seemed to be all alive, and the very clock on the chimney-piece (you know

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<sup>21</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> "If read very carefully, it [*Alice*] will be seen to imply, by humorous juxtaposition, the presence of a quite solid, and rather sentimental, world, behind the semi-detached dream." Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 184.

you can only see the back of it in the Looking-glass) had got the face of a little old man and grinned at her.<sup>23</sup>

Alice is the prototype of mirror-traversers, and what she proves is that Looking-glass land is far more than opposites land – opposites are too easy – instead it is a space of invention, subverting our expectations, created from the familiar pieces of our world recombined into something foreign, startling, and yet somehow applicable, meaningful.

Nabokov's interest in mirrors, doubles, and reflection has been the focus of much commentary. *Reflections of Fantasy: the mirror-worlds of Carroll, Nabokov, and Pynchon*, "The Semiotic Validity of the Mirror Image in Nabokov's *Despair*," and "Splitting the ego: Freudian doubles, Nabokovian Doubles," are just a sample of the titles written on this subject. Alfred Appel, Jr. in his article "*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody"<sup>24</sup> tracks some of the most significant mirrors in Nabokov's oeuvre. He highlights the mirrors in the hotel room at the Enchanted Hunters in *Lolita* and the way they reflect the solipsistic prison that Humbert has created for himself; the Zemblan language in *Pale Fire*, which is referred to as "the tongue of the mirror"<sup>25</sup> (*Pale Fire*, 242); and the crooked mirrors that Hermann loathes in *Despair*. Appel's account, which is a useful tracking of some of the most major mirrors in Nabokov's work, focuses on mirrors as negative objects – tools of mimicry and solipsism. These pejorative contexts for mirrors in Nabokov's corpus trouble the notion that Nabokov would value mirror-entering as Lewis Carroll has Alice do. What these critics seem to be missing is the fact

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; and, Through the Looking-glass and what Alice Found There* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 158-159.

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Appel Jr., "*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8, no. 2 (1967): 204-241.

<sup>25</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam, 1962), 242.

that mirrors have a double role: they contain both limiting reflection *and* prismatic expansion. Sergei Davydov, writing on Nabokov's use of reflection in *Despair*, goes as far as to call Nabokov a mirror smasher:

In Nabokov's novel *The Gift*, the accredited hero-writer Fedor states that 'any genuinely new trend (in art) is a knight's move, a change of shadows, a shift that displaces the mirror.' If Hermann may be called a 'mirror-worshipper,' then Nabokov is certainly a 'mirrorclast'. Having confronted the hero with his error, Nabokov actually forces Hermann to ruin the tale's symmetry. Hermann's tale can no longer end with a happy conclusion in Chapter X, as planned, and he must add an extra chapter.<sup>26</sup>

Nabokov certainly does ruin purposefully the symmetry of Hermann's tale, but this does not make him a "mirrorclast" – he does not smash mirrors, he traverses them. Though Vadim and Hermann's motivations and desires are very different, they both make the mistake of trying to find or create a replica, a perfect reflection. What Nabokov wishes to ruin is the fallacy of simple, symmetrical reflection – more interesting is the world of possibilities in the refraction of Carroll's Looking-glass land. A refracted image contains the elements of its original, but it skews and redesigns them in a way that multiplies and intensifies possibilities and perspectives instead of merely recreating them. Davydov is crucially mistaken because mirrors are of the utmost interest and significance to

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<sup>26</sup> Sergei Davydov, "Dostoevsky and Nabokov: The Morality of Structure in 'Crime and Punishment' and 'Despair'," (University of Toronto, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures): 166; available from <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/DS/03/157.shtml>; Internet; accessed April 31, 2006.

Nabokov, as evidenced in their frequent appearances in his work, but their qualities of *refraction* in addition to those of *reflection* must not be forgotten.

There are those who do not see the critical divide between Nabokov and Vadim as authors so distinctly. Many feel that Vadim is a portrait of the triumphs and pitfalls of being a writer, and that his successes and failures are akin to Nabokov's, even if he may seem to be more of a "minor writer". Indeed, Paul Bruss sees Nabokov and Vadim as two forces vying for authorship, circling each other, lunging and feinting, forever embroiled with no one clearly coming out on top: "[T]he passage alludes to a 'main plotter,' who, as opposed to Vadim himself, initiates certain actions that resemble a 'clumsy conspiracy' of whose existence even the plotter himself is unaware. Despite all their complex posturing in full view of each other, apparently neither Vadim nor the 'main plotter' possesses an authoritative text of experience to which he is committed."<sup>27</sup> Bruss is addressing the opening passage of *Look at the Harlequins!* in which Vadim refers to the events of his life as a "clumsy conspiracy, with nonsensical details and a main plotter who...insisted on making inept moves...yet unwittingly wove a web."<sup>28</sup> Bruss is falling into the prototypical Nabokovian trap of colluding with the narrator and unquestioningly taking his word. And yet the very crucial difference between Vadim and Nabokov (indisputably the 'main plotter') is that Nabokov *is* aware of the main object of the narrative and is very consciously, not at all unwittingly, weaving his web. Vadim may underestimate and try to undermine his creator, but he never succeeds, for while he may think that the 'main plotter' does not have a clear plan in mind, the reader is aware that

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Bruss, "The Problem of Text: Nabokov's Last Two Novels," *Nabokov's Fifth Arc* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 304.

<sup>28</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 3.

the structure of the book is very carefully planned by Nabokov who shows himself to be very “committed” to this authoritative text that he deliberately executed.

As I have already said, the structure of the book further delineates the distinction between author, Nabokov, and narrator, Vadim. A closer look at the structure and the elements that it hangs on uncovers the reflective structure that Vadim intended, the chiasmic structure that Nabokov imposes, and the ultimate failure of this structural description to encompass the complexity of the novel. Vadim intended a six-part structure: two reflecting halves of three parts each. When Nabokov includes his syncope during Part Six, a seventh part is added so that Vadim can explain his recovery. The parts of the book no longer divide into two equal halves, but if the central section, part four, is viewed as a prism of reflection, the two halves on either side can be seen to contain inverted reflections: a chiasmus. A chiasmus is more sophisticated and complex than a mere reflection, but it may still be too limiting of a structure to satisfy Nabokov’s expansive aims. The chiasmus must be examined in detail to determine what structural significance it may impart.

Vadim discloses the major subjects and structuring elements of his text saying: “In this memoir, my wives and books are interlaced monogrammatically like some sort of watermark or *ex libris* design.”<sup>29</sup> This watermark of interplay between his loves and his fiction forms a chiasmus that stretches spatially and temporally across the whole book. Vadim’s relationships with his second two wives are inverse reflections of his relationships with his first two wives, separated by his affair with his daughter. The difference between the two halves lies in the inversion of the primacy of fiction over love in the second half. Vadim is intensely committed to, and jealous over, his first wife, Iris.

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<sup>29</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 85.

She cheats on him and is eventually killed by her lover, but despite her infidelity, Vadim remains devoted to her good memory. Vadim infuses his fiction with elements of Iris, she seems to be a general female prototype that he modifies and uses in many of his books, as he admits when he says that he lends her complexion “perhaps too generously [to] the girls of [his] future books.”<sup>30</sup> She is also more directly the subject and inspiration for *Ardis*, as when Vadim writes of a breakfast with her: “She fitted her palm for a moment to the cheek of the teapot. And it went into *Ardis*, it all went into *Ardis*, my poor dead love.”<sup>31</sup> Even Vadim’s pen name, V. Irisin, derives from Iris (though it also derives from Nabokov’s pen name during his ex-patriot career in Europe, V. Sirin, Vadim himself is not aware of this)<sup>32</sup>. Vadim’s second and third wives, Annette and Louise, are the two who seem to understand his work the least but care the most about his status as a writer. Though Vadim is very fond of both of them, neither is a great romance. He is not in the least distraught over the death of Annette, nor his divorce from Louise. Neither pays much attention to, or understands, his admission of his mental disorder.

Vadim’s affair with his daughter, Bel, divides both the book and his romantic relationships into two parts. This is the romance in which Vadim brings his life and his art too close together – the transposition of his romance with Bel into his novel *A Kingdom by the Sea* seems to be virtually unaltered. Bel is the daughter of Annette and the stepdaughter of Louise and the affair with her acts as a passionate transition between those two most beautiful, least tender wives. Part Four, which encompasses the entire relationship with Bel, is a wonderful blending of Vadim’s past and prototypes for this

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<sup>30</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>32</sup> This is one of Nabokov’s “winks” in which he asserts his supremacy as the all-knowing author over the narrator, Vadim.

relationship, and *Lolita*. In this chapter, Nabokov gives Vadim a book that has the closest and most overt similarities with his own: *A Kingdom by the Sea* is incredibly close in premise to *Lolita* except, of course, that Vadim's novel is the Looking-glass land version of Nabokov's, so that the little girl in *A Kingdom by the Sea* is sold by her unstable brother to her rapist, and ends up happily marrying him at eighteen. Creating a book so similar to his own allows Nabokov to parody the suggestion that *Lolita* was somehow a reflection of an early love of his, or a personal predilection for little girls.<sup>33</sup> Nabokov's sarcasm is dripping from Vadim's words when he says:

As late as the start of the 1954-1955 school year, with Bel nearing her thirteenth birthday, I was still deliriously happy, still seeing nothing wrong or dangerous, or absurd, or downright cretinous, in the relationship between my daughter and me. Save for a few insignificant lapses – a few hot drops of overflowing tenderness, a gasp masked by a cough and that sort of stuff – my relationship with her remained essentially innocent.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, his lapses are anything but insignificant and his relationship with his daughter – entirely cretinous. Bel is Vadim's daughter, and her relationship with him seems to mirror that of *Lolita*'s with her stepfather, Humbert Humbert. Louise accidentally calls her Annabel, a reference to Poe's poem "Annabel Lee," a poem much cited by Humbert in *Lolita* and also the inspiration for the title of Vadim's novel. Vadim accidentally calls Bel "Dolly", which is a reference to his first underage lover, but it is also a reference to

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<sup>33</sup> "Someone, for instance, discovered telltale affinities between Humbert's boyhood romance on the Riviera and my own recollections about little Collette..." *Strong Opinions*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 173.

*Lolita* as “Dolly” is one of many forms of “Dolores” used in the text. Part Four, which details the relationship between Vadim and Bel, is therefore a nexus of allusions that point both out of the text to Nabokov’s writing, within the text to Vadim’s Bel prototype, and through the text to assumptions about Nabokov which he gives to Vadim as way to demonstrate their ridiculousness. As Vadim begins writing *A Kingdom by the Sea*, while Bel is at boarding school, he must sacrifice the love he is cataloguing for the sake of its record:

It [*A Kingdom by the Sea*]’s demands, the fun and fancy of it, its intricate imagery, made up in a way for the absence of my beloved Bel. It was bound to reduce, though I was hardly conscious of that, my correspondence with her (well-meant, chatty, dreadfully artificial letters which she seldom troubled to answer). Even more startling, of course, more incomprehensible to me, in groaning retrospect, is the effect my self-entertainment had on the number and length of our visits between 1957 and 1960.<sup>35</sup>

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

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<sup>35</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 193.

After Vadim has lost Bel forever to Karl and the Soviet Union, his relationship with her stepmother, Louise wanes even more – they both carry on extramarital affairs and spend very little time together. During this time, he meets his final love in the text, a woman who is never named, but only called “You” or “Reality”. (“You were pained you said later...to smell the liquor on my breath...although in the logic of life you were not “you” yet, for we were not actually acquainted<sup>36</sup>). This tactic is a reflection of Vadim’s realization that he cannot bleed his personal life into his text, because though it will vivify his writing, it will sap and kill his relationships. He admits this, saying, “reality would only be adulterated if I now started to narrate what you know, what I know, what nobody else knows, what shall never, never be ferreted out by a matter-of-fact, father-of-muck, mucking biograffitist.”<sup>37</sup> (Nabokov detested his own biographer, Andrew Field, whose book was one of the main stimuli for *Look at the Harlequins!*). “Reality” here is both the reality of Vadim’s life, and his love herself, for she would be adulterated if transposed into the world of text, as Mademoiselle O was for Nabokov, as Bel was for Vadim. “You” is kept so far out of the text that although we know about Vadim’s relationship with her, we only hear her speak a small handful of times and have no physical description of her besides her age, which is the same as Bel’s. His relationship with “you” seems to resemble most closely the feelings that he had for Iris, and in a similar way to his descriptions of Iris, Vadim’s language and images seem to sharpen where “you” is concerned. When Vadim departs for his fateful walk, he describes his most recent love waiting for him, reading his fair copy:

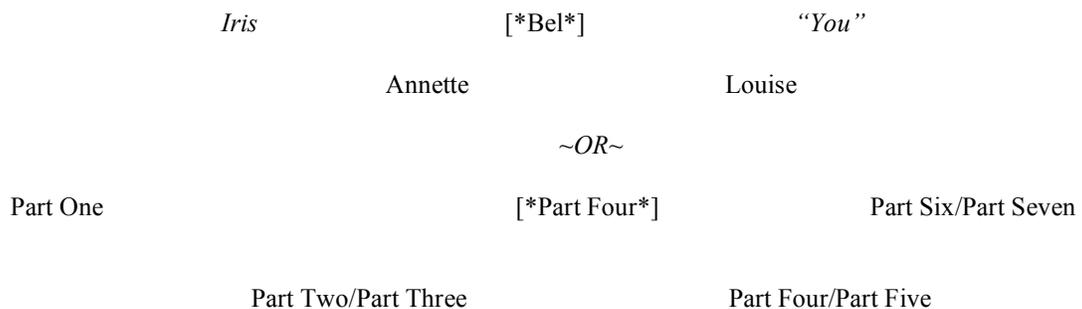
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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

I left you reclining in a lounge chair with the sun reproducing the amethyst lozenges of the veranda windows on the floor, and barring your bare shins and the insteps of your crossed feet (right toe twitching now and then in some obscure connection with the tempo of assimilation or a twist in the text).<sup>38</sup>

Although this image is crisp and compelling, and conveys Vadim’s adoration of “you,” it does not give any of her away – the reader could fill in that image with any woman, but he certainly cannot fill it in with “you,” because the reader knows next to nothing about her. Vadim ends the novel with a relationship that has many of the qualities of his first marriage: an intellectual affinity, an appreciation of his work on her part, a true tenderness on his; yet since Vadim has learned to preserve his love life by separating it from his text, this relationship is not plagued with infidelity and eventual destruction as was his relationship with Iris. The image of the reflective chiasmus I have just described can be shown as follows:



Although this diagram is accurate, it cannot satisfyingly encompass the complexity of *Look at the Harlequins!*. Vadim’s romantic relationships, though admittedly forming a

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<sup>38</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 231.

pattern, are weak hooks upon which to hang a chiasmus that supposedly contains the entire novel. The way the book is divided into parts makes it relatively easy to see the reflective structuring. Nabokov devises this chiastic structure as a *parodic* mirror: everything in Vadim's life is about reflection, even his life story itself. Vadim is trapped within this closed linear structure, limited by reflection. Recognizing the chiastic structure is key to an understanding of the text, but only with the accompanying subsequent realization that the novel's spikes and curves, glimmers and fades cannot be contained or appreciated within this restrictive plan. *This* is the type of mirror that Appel describes, "there is for [Nabokov's] characters "no exit" from *their* prison of mirrors"<sup>39</sup> – a limiting prison.

*Look at the Harlequins!* is both a microcosm of Nabokov's oeuvre and its integral last piece that completes the circuit. It is a refraction of Nabokov's earlier novels all of which appear within the text in varying degrees of mutation, disguised as Vadim's novels. *Look at the Harlequins!* abbreviates to LATH, as Vadim refers to his novel several times in the text. A lath is a thin strip of wood used in construction, but just one letter away and far more interesting, a *lathe* is a machine used to shape wood and metal, "chiefly used for circular or oval work."<sup>40</sup> Nabokov's final novel is indeed a lathe, a circular honing device for his corpus – all of his previous novels are processed through it, leaving different-sized shavings behind. Nabokov voices this need for a final novel that solidifies and elucidates the collection of his works as a whole through Vadim:

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<sup>39</sup> Appel, "Lolita: Springboard of Parody," 2.

<sup>40</sup> Oxford English Dictionary

...the contours of my American production looked blurry to me; and they looked that way because I knew I would always keep hoping that my *next* book – not simply the one in progress, like *Ardis* – but something I had never attempted yet, something miraculous and unique, would at last answer fully the craving, the aching thirst that a few disjunct paragraphs in *Esmerelda* and *A Kingdom* were insufficient to quench.<sup>41</sup>

Vadim standing naked in his bathroom, looking into the mirror and seeing his literary corpus stretch before him, is certainly a ridiculous image, but there is weight to what he says. It is not that Nabokov needed *Look at the Harlequins!* to address the failings of the other novels, but it does lend shape and unity to the corpus.

As *Look at the Harlequins!* is a microcosm of Nabokov's oeuvre, the idea of structure as a parodic mirror can be extended to the shape of the corpus as a whole. It begs to be divided into two reflecting halves along the most obvious line: the switch in language from Russian to English. This, however, is an absolutely surface distinction that is devoid of any support in terms of substance. Rather than being reflective, Nabokov's corpus is a circular circuitry; not the closed circle that torments, but the eternal and open spiral: "The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free."<sup>42</sup> Nabokov's corpus is essentially and ethically circular, and a reflective structure would go against his opinion on literature as creating independent worlds. It would surely be possible to tease out thematic threads that could be stretched to create a reflection across the language barrier,

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<sup>41</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 229.

<sup>42</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 275.

but it would be nothing more than an exercise without any real significance or truth. Nabokov does not value this type of reflection, but gives to some of his least appealing characters an obsession with mirror-imaging. Humbert Humbert, when choosing his pseudonym considers the name Otto Otto, which mirrors itself not only between first name and last, but also between the first and second syllable. Furthermore, the first syllable “ot” is Russian for “from” and the second syllable “to” is the same in Russian as “that” is in English, so that his name represents an endless shuttling back and forth: a trapped and repetitive movement that never leads anywhere.<sup>43</sup> This is a fruitless outcome of an obsession with mirrors as mere reflectors.

The Vintage edition of *Look at the Harlequins!* has a listing of other works by the author, and then a couple of pages later, after the title page, there is another list of books, this time “Other Books by the Narrator”. This list, though slightly shorter (Nabokov wrote nine novels in Russian, eight in English, Vadim an even six and six) contains all of Nabokov’s novels in some way, though sometimes two or more are compressed into one. The extent of similarity varies; as I have already said, *A Kingdom by the Sea* is very close to *Lolita*, while, on a titular basis, Vadim’s *Camera Lucida (Slaughter in the Sun)* is the exact reverse of Nabokov’s *Camera Obscura (Laughter in the Dark)*. Each work in Nabokov’s oeuvre sends a representative into *Look at the Harlequins!* so that it becomes a literal compaction of all the works in one. The works do not appear in full, nor necessarily in their proper guise – their sense and texture is often left out or skewed in the bizarre refraction of Vadim’s world (a *Lolita*-Humbert inspired relationship could never

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<sup>43</sup> This is a phonetic analysis, “to” is “do” in Russian, but if pronounced in the name Otdo, the d would be softened to a t, so that it would sound like “Otto”.

end with their marriage “in a warmly described religious ceremony”<sup>44</sup>). This is due to the fact that *Look at the Harlequins!* is not merely a self-congratulating collection of highlights from Nabokov’s work, but a fully-evolved work in its own right, which meditates on fiction’s possibilities and limitations. Nabokov is able to display his own overlapping fictional universe while demonstrating Vadim’s problematic approach to his work, which has a parasitic and derivative relationship to his life. There are those who criticize *Look at the Harlequins!* for being too self-referential, too egotistical, but that is not its aim at all. Nabokov uses his fictional oeuvre as the basis for Vadim’s because he is trying to unify the universe of his fiction, but the point that he is making is about literature as a whole.



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<sup>44</sup> Nabokov, *LATH*, 216.