

Confusing Art with Life, Illusion with Reality: A Metafictional Study of Two Selected Novels by Vladimir Nabokov

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the outstanding postmodern metafictionists of the 20th century. He is a Russian-born American poet and fiction writer, essayist and professor of literature. In writing his novels, Nabokov's main concern is that they should be patterned. One of the patterns on which he builds his novels is the level of the 'reality' they present. The only reality of a text, for Nabokov, is the one which is created by the reader's imagination, as he believes that reality can never be fully attained because of its infinite levels of perceptions. This paper attempts to give an in-depth analysis of how reality can be created through perception despite of the confusion between illusion and reality a metafictional novel usually presents, supported by examples from Nabokov's two novels under study *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), and *Pale Fire* (1962).

INTRODUCTION

Like other metafictional authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov tends to leave traditional forms of narrative in order to emphasize form, pattern and wordplay. He firmly believed that novels should not aim to teach and that readers should not just perceive what is written for them, but that a higher aesthetic enjoyment should be attained by paying attention to the details of style and structure. In that way literary texts can transform reading into an active and creative process through the engagement of the reader's imagination in creating a reality of a text. Thus the primary role of metafiction is to show the reader how to invent his/her world, because the most important thing for the metafictionists to deal with is not the world outside the novel but the one inside. That is why it is called metafictional because it is a meta-art, art about art. Metaliterary works are self-conscious forms of literature; as they draw attention to their status of artificiality in posing questions about the relationship between literature and reality, and they constantly remind the reader that what s/he is reading is purely fictional.

The relation between art and reality is indeed a usual novelistic concern. In her book, *The Meaning of Metafiction* (1981), Inger Christensen argues that metafictionists do not concern themselves with their ability to imitate reality, they rather focus on the "difference between art and reality and display [that] consciousness of this distance"(22), which is different from other novelists' way to reproduce the external world such as the realistic writers who find it important to create an imitation of it as objective and accurate as possible. Metafiction also draws attention to itself as a work of art through the use of self-reference, while exposing the "truth" of a story. Patricia Waugh illustrates that in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1984), she writes:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality . . . such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (16).

When metafictionists write they call the attention to the writing process itself. Christensen assures that in the metafictional novel, "the text is conscious of its own narrative processes and it reflects upon them, therefore, it [clearly] reveals its condition of artifice" (11). This is also evident in John Barth's simple definition of a metafictional novel, in his book *Metafiction* (1995) saying that metafiction is "a novel which imitates a novel rather than the world"(qtd in Currie 161). In that way metafiction blurs the line between a piece of art and a criticism of the very art form it is trying to be. In other words, metafiction is the act of writing about writing. In general terms, the metafictional novel deals with those themes which reflect the artifice of the novel itself reminding the reader in the process that he is experiencing a fictional work. In metafiction "the narrative voice steps out of the action in various ways to remind the reader that they are reading a book, watching a movie, or attending a play"(qtd in Houston 20).

Metafiction can appear in a variety of ways; a narrator reads a story to the reader, sometimes taking breaks to make comments on the story or to introduce characters who are also taking part in listening to the story; a story addressing the specific conventions of story such as title; a story in which the characters are aware that they are fictional and can influence the pattern of the story by avoiding or embracing certain fictional devices; a story is about a writer creating, finding, or writing a story; a story contains another piece of fiction within it; a narrator intentionally appears in the story either as a character or as the author of the story telling the reader what he or she is going to do next; a story written by a character in the story; a story about a reader reading a book. All these methods, a metafictional writer can use to make the reader realize that he is experiencing a fictional world.

It is the author who controls this metafictional universe, he is the creator. However, he leaves the text open so that the reader can draw his or her own conclusions, for the primary role of metafiction is to teach the reader how to invent his/her world. The reader has to cooperate in the creation of the novel. S/He has to remember information, choose what is true from what is not. Thus the reader realizes that reality is shown in this way. There can be no doubt that the author wants to bring his reader to adopt a critical attitude toward the reality portrayed, but at the same time he gives him the alternative of adopting one of the views offered to him, or of developing one of his own. In that way metafiction makes the process of reading an imaginative creative act shared with the author.

The Interaction between the Literary Text and the Reader's Imagination in Creating the Reality of a Text

"In considering a literary work one must take into account not only the actual text, but also the actions involved in responding to that text" (Iser 1), such text – Wolfgang Iser refers in his book *The Implied Reader* (1974) – offers "different 'schematized views' through which the subject matter of the work can come to light"(212) and be perceived by the reader. He argues that the literary work has "two

poles, which we might call the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader" (274). The merging of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this merging should not be identified either with "the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader"(1).

Iser shares Laurence Sterne's view that the author should engage the reader with the text. The author does this by leaving the reader something to imagine, keeping the reader's imagination as busy as the author's. Iser says:

Sterne's conception of a literary text is that it is something like an arena in which reader and author [participate] in a game of the imagination. The author of the text may exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination using his narrative technique – but no author will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader's eyes. If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. (Iser 275)

Therefore it is essential for a literary text to be written in a way that will ensure the participation of the reader's imagination in the task of figuring things out for himself, because reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative.

"The literary text," he illustrates, can activate "our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents" (279). However, the "act of recreation is not a smooth or continuous process", it is a process which depends on interruptions of the reader's flow of thinking to form a complete idea about the work of art; "we look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject, this is the 'dynamic process of creativity'" (qtd in Tompkins 51). He goes further to conclude that the product of this creative activity is "what we might call the virtual dimension of the text," and that the process of creativity gives the text its own reality "(Iser 215). This virtual dimension," Iser continues, "is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination" (215).

"The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the reality of a particular text" (Iser 282) is enough evidence, from Iser's perspective, of the extent to which literary texts can transform reading into a creative process that is more than just perceiving what is written. As a result, each reader will have his/her own version of impressions and conclusions made while making the unwritten part of the text, but only "within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text" (Iser 282). On that Iser concludes:

The unwritten aspects of the text not only draw the reader into the action but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situations, so that these take on a reality of their own. But as the reader's imagination animates these 'outlines', they in turn will influence the effect of the written part of the text.

(qtd in Tompkins 51).

Through this process, the text takes on the shape of an "enduring form of life". What composes this form can neither be pinpointed nor explained in the text. However it is the end product of the interaction between text and reader. "This has the inevitable consequences", Iser concludes that reading becomes a "process of selection, with the

reader's own imagination providing the criteria for the selection"(Iser, *Prospecting* 25). Iser summarizes the process of reading illustrating how a feedback is formed in the reader's perception as follows:

Each chapter prepares the 'horizon' for the next, and it is the process of reading that provides the continual overlapping and interweaving of the views presented by each of the chapters . The reader is stimulated into filling the 'empty spaces' between the chapters in order to group them into a coherent whole. (Iser 226)

This process will lead to the constant modifications of the everyday life conceptions formed by the reader in the reading process. He illustrates as follows,

Each chapter provides a certain amount of expectation concerning the next chapter. . . . As the process continues, a feedback effect is bound to develop, arising from the new chapter and reacting back upon the preceding, which . . . is subjected to modifications in the reader's mind. The more frequently the reader experiences this effect, the more cautious and the more differentiated will be his expectations, as they arise through his realization of the text. Thus what has just been read modifies what has been read before, so that the reader himself operates the 'fusion of the horizon', with the result that he produces an experience of reality which is real precisely because it happens, without being subjected to any representational function.

(Iser 227)

A Metafictional Theory:

Creating a reality of a text through perceiving its infinite layers of perception by the reader's imagination

Reality, then, is a process of realization which only the reader can make it happen because it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to engage him and so realize the intentions of his text. Thus reading becomes a quest in which the reader will never find the object of his search, however, on his way he will come across different possible versions of the reality of everyday life. As these versions or conceptions are not joined together, every picture done by the reader's imagination remains representation of no more than one aspect of reality. The reading process unfolds as a "categorical aspection", as Iser calls it, in the sense that "the aspects of reality that group together into a 'picture' are continually merging and diverging, so that the reader can experience that reality as he goes along, but being thus entangled in it can never hope to encompass it all" (qtd in Amacher and Lange 355). However, the reader's will still strive, even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern.

The illusion of attaining reality is a recurrent 'idea' in Nabokov's fiction. He once gave an example of how reality is unreachable, in a BBC interview with Peter Duval Smith (1962) he said that "a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist who is a specialist in lilies". In other words,

one gets closer to the truth of an object the more intensely one studies it, but no final or pure state of knowledge about lilies, or God, or life, or the mysteries of nature can never be attained. . . you can get nearer and nearer, so to speak to reality, but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of levels, levels of perception, of false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable (qtd in Robert Golla 63).

The subjective concept of a reality is not original, and Nabokov does not claim it to be. One can assume that if perception has an infinite succession of levels one never gets any closer to truth at all.

As the act of perception becomes in Nabokov's fiction, the focal point for examining reality, the real world tends to fade into the relatively unreal. True reality, for him, is the unique recreation of the world through individual perception. John Dewey illustrates Nabokov's belief, in his book *Art as Experience* (1934), he states; "for to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience and his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent"(56). The experience of the reader is different from that of the author's. However, the perceiver undergoes a similar process to that of the creator of the work mainly in the "ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in detail" (Dewey 56). To Nabokov without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.

In short, Nabokov believes that the only reality of a text which can be found is the one created by the reader's imagination through the process of selection. Instead of providing an illusory coherence of the reality a metafictional novel presents, it offers only a suggestive presentation, the working out of which has to be actively done by the reader, as he is not led into a ready-made world of meaning, but he is made to search for this world.

In his search, the reader will come across different metafictional aspects, that when used in a text can even threaten the borderline between fiction and reality and makes it difficult and confusing for the reader to decide which is real and which is not. Some of these metafictional techniques will be discussed in detail. The first one is the writing about writing technique revealing in the process how the writer, as well as the reader, can recreate his identity and reality through art. Also Nabokov's technique of blending appearances with reality helps him stressing the idea of the real and the unreal, i.e. what may seem true may not necessarily be one, and only the careful reader can find out the truth. Also, a very important technique which Nabokov tends to use in most of his novels is the "spirality of all things in their relation to time" technique. In Nabokov's spiral world, the completed syllogism leads the reader back to where he began, creating an endless repetition and a type of circularity. In fact many of his novels and stories make a 360-degree turn, ending where they began or in fact never ending at all creating a sense of timelessness. When the spiral unwinds things wrap into new dimensions – space into time, time into thought, thought into a new special dimension. What seems most vivid, bright and 'real' is typically most certain to prove illusory or deceptive.

The Writing about Writing Technique

The metafictional novel turns towards novel-writing conventions and draws the reader's attention to the creation of fiction. The most important point to deal with is not the world outside the novel but the one that it creates "by focusing on the pure act of writing"(171), as Michael Boyd states in his book *The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique* (1983). In the metafictional novel, the text is conscious of its own narrative processes and it reflects upon them. Therefore, it reveals its condition of artifice. It does not attempt to mirror real life but the novelistic act itself.

One of the best examples of a Nabokovian novel about researching and writing is *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), Nabokov's first English novel. As the title implies, it is a novel of a narrator's quest – whom the reader knows only as V. – of the true real life of his dead half-brother Sebastian Knight who is a well-known novelist, in the process he has to rectify and edit what he considers to be the inaccurate biography of Sebastian Knight written by a hack called Goodman who was Sebastian's former secretary. To achieve this, he travels from place to place following his brother's footsteps attempting to find the truth.

What we are presented with, in fact, is Nabokov writing about V. writing about Sebastian (written about by Mr. Goodman), and writing his own novels. In his biography, V. inserts extensive passages from the work of these different writers: from Sebastian's novels, and Goodman's biography. V.'s primary relationship to Sebastian then becomes not that of a brother but that of a reader, or to take things farther, that of a fellow man of letters considering V. as an author himself. The novel is, thus, about the mystery, ambiguity and generally the conflict that attends the writing of any life. V. describes his quest as he carries on with it by saying "my quest had developed its own magic and logic . . . that quest, using the pattern of reality for the weaving of its own fantasies . . ." (*The Real Life* 26). Indeed, this is no longer a biography of Sebastian's life, with his works the key to it, it is rather a quest of a different color, not just Sebastian's life, but V.'s and perhaps to life and reality in general.

The fact that this is a book about the writing of a book about a writer of books makes us suggest that the "real life" we are dealing with is the life that is art. While readers know very little about Sebastian the man, they do know a considerable amount about Sebastian the artist, and that is because V. devotes a good many pages to discussing his brother's fictional techniques, artistic concerns, use of language and image, and gives the readers as well a detailed explanation of his novels. Sebastian's real life is his art; his only immortality is in his books. Even during his life he seems to have withdrawn into purely aesthetic concerns. Madame Lecerc tells V. that Sebastian was the kind of man who "is much too preoccupied with his own sensations and ideas to understand those of others" (*The Real Life* 159 – 160). He was rude and pessimistic and he hated all things modern because he found them vulgar and cheap. His response to the vulgarity around him was to escape into aesthetics. She continues saying that he would make "somesong and obscure speech about the form of an ashtray or the color of time – and there he would be left on that chair all alone, smiling foolishly to himself, or counting his own pulse" (*The Real Life* 160).

Sebastian lived through his fiction in a very powerful real way. Thus the "real life" of Sebastian Knight might well be his fiction. Here is an example of Sebastian Knight's next to last novel *Lost Property*, where the line between life and fiction threatens to collapse. In the novel, a chapter deals with an airplane crash. Some letters that have fallen out of the plane are later discovered, and one is a love letter that has somehow gotten into an envelope directed to a business firm. In it, a man says goodbye to a woman he loves, admits that it was because of another woman, and tries to tell her how he feels and why it happened. V. believes that at least some of the things said in this letter are expressions of things Sebastian feels for Clare, perhaps even things that he wrote to her. What he does not understand is how Sebastian could have taken

such real important feelings and built from them a "fictitious and faintly absurd character."(*The Real Life* 114)

At the end of the novel, when V. rushed to the hospital to be with his brother Sebastian before dying only to find out that it was too late and that Sebastian passed away the day before. He then started to speak strangely about suddenly feeling as if he has captured Sebastian's soul, referring to the power of the writer, he says:

So I did not see Sebastian after all, or at least I did not see him alive. But those few minutes I spent listening to what I thought was his breathing changed my life as completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying. Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that the soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state – that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. . . . Thus – I am Sebastian Knight. . . . the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows (*The Real Life* 173)

In one sense his words seem true, V. has learned the power of the writer; that is by writing Sebastian's life he has taken possession of it. Despite his title for the biography he wrote, he does not care whether or not the Sebastian he has described has any "real" relation to the man he really is. Julia Bader captured that meaning in her book *Crystal Land* (1972):

It becomes clear that "real life" of Sebastian was contained not in external circumstances but in his writing, and since these writings exist, for us in V.'s retelling of them, Sebastian lives in V. who has created his brother's artistic [world] and personal life in his own imagination (67).

As for *Pale Fire* (1962), the matter is different. In fact, *Pale Fire* is considered one of the early novels of postmodernism because of the complicated narrative structure. The novel consists of two parts written by two different authors. The first part is a 999 line autobiographical composed by John Shade, carrying the same title "Pale Fire", on life and death dealing with one of the main themes of Nabokov's fiction, death and the afterlife. The second part, which is considered to be a comment on the poem, consists of three subparts; foreword, commentary and index, supplied by Charles Kinbote. The main plot of the story consists of three major layers. Firstly, John Shade writes "Pale Fire" to come to terms with the afterlife, understand the death of his daughter and reaffirm his love for his wife. The second layer is the story of his commentator, Charles Kinbote, who believes he is the isolated king Charles II of Zembla. The king's life is in danger from assassination (his life is threatened to be assassinated) by a group of called 'the shadows'. It is believed that Zembla is just an imaginary place invented by Kinbote's mind. The third motif running through the text is the reported death of John Shade at the hands of a madman Jack Gray alias Gradus, one of 'the shadows', in Kinbote's narrative, either avenging his imprisonment by killing the man who sent him to prison, instead shooting Shade, or the awkwardly confused assassin who hits the poor poet rather than the king-in-hiding.

Metafictionists sometimes escape from the real world into fiction. This is the case of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. The author escapes from the violence of the real world and creates his own world. Also, Kinbote's sanity and reason are called into question from the very beginning. The readers' estimation of Kinbote's sanity depends upon whether or not they think Zembla is an actual place (within the fictional world). Of

course, there is no country called Zembla on the real map, but that doesn't mean that there isn't a Zembla within the novel *Pale Fire*. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* deals with the same concept of writing about writing on a larger scale. On the one hand, Shade is a character within a fictional work *Pale Fire* writing "Pale Fire" the poem. Plenty of books feature writers as characters, but in *Pale Fire* the reader can read what the character wrote. On the other hand, Nabokov is the author of *Pale Fire*, and the poem "Pale Fire" as well. In an attempt to recreate his identity, to reach a sense of peace and come to terms with the death of his daughter and earlier his parents, Shade wrote his poem. The poem, Brain Boyd describes it, in his book *Nabokov's "Pale Fire": The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (2001), as "lifelong quest to discover what lies beyond the self, especially in the ultimate, all-resisting secret of death, and to make what he can of life in the face of the uncertainty of death" (71). At the end of the poem, Shade claims that he needed poetry in order to understand life. Poetry is not one of several methods; it is the "only" option. He seeks to explain to the reader why he writes. He is a writer writing about writing.

*I feel I understand
Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of combinatorial delight;
And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine
Which I suspect is an iambic line.* (lines 971 - 977)

Shade, then, speaks of the effect of text on human's life. He then describes a real life situation where he experienced that impact. He has had a near death experience in which he suffers some sort of a heart irregularity. He falls and loses consciousness, but soon recovers. Despite the doctor's explanation of what actually happened (a minor irregularity in heart beat), Shade is convinced that he died. During his few minutes in the afterlife, Shade saw a "white fountain." Sometime later, he recounts reading a newspaper article about someone who had an experience precisely parallel to his: a heart attack, a few moments of "death" before the heart resumes beating, and a vision during those moments of "a tall white fountain". The two appearances of that fountain, Shade sees as "a signpost and a mark" convincing objective proof of a world beyond the grave.

Eagerly, Shade makes contact with both the journalist who covered the story and the woman who was featured. Much to his consternation, Shade learns that there was a typographical error in the printed article. The woman didn't see a "white fountain;" she saw a "white mountain." When Shade discovers that the "fountain" he read about was a misprint for "mountain", his reaction was a shattering disappointment.

*Life Everlasting – based on a misprint!
I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
And stop investigating my abyss?
But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: nit text, but texture; not the dream* (lines 803 – 808)

However, the matter is different in Kinbote's case as he tries to steal the credit of composing the poem claiming that he was the main source of inspiration with his imaginative stories about a legendary land called Zembla. In fact, Kinbote's commentary undoes all of Shade's work. What Kinbote is actually trying to do is to discover himself immortalized in Shade's poem, rather than having to create a place for him there. Maddox argues that "Kinbote's belief in the literary life-giving and life-sustaining power of art is a function of his need to establish a satisfying version of his own identity" (Maddox 18). Kinbote tells Shade that "once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff will be true and the people will come alive" (*Pale Fire* 214).

Charles Kinbote's true identity is V. Botkin – an American scholar of Russian descent – who is an ordinary, vulnerable and lonely mortal. However, Kinbote believes that he is actually an exiled king named Charles the Beloved, the only disadvantage to him is that even exiled kings are vulnerable and mortal, and their lives are in constant danger. He realizes that his only chance for immortality is to be safely preserved in art. He can live forever that way if only he can find an artist willing to write about Zembla. He believes he found that artist in Shade. Kinbote compared Shade with his ability of transforming the world through his art to a magician who could "turn his plate into a dove by tossing it up in the air" (*Pale Fire* 28). He believes that Shade's power as a poet might be useful for Kinbote's own salvation – the capacity for "perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combing its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle" (*Pale Fire* 27). The particular miracle Kinbote needs is the transformation of his own past into a tale of high tragic heroism that would justify and ennoble his present terrified isolation.

That's why Kinbote became so persistent in telling Shade the Zemblan stories. In fact, this is the reason why possession of the finished poem became a fatal matter to him. He is only interested in what Shade's poem can be made to say about Zembla. He even gave himself permission to finish the poem once he reaches the end of the commentary. Kinbote somehow tries to twist the subject of the poem to serve affirming his fabricated vision and to allow him to escape the prison of his identity and the terrifying knowledge of his mortality. Maddox states that "with the note cards on which the poem is written distributed about his body, the exiled king is invulnerably, as Kinbote describes, 'plated with poetry, armored with rhymes, stout with another man's song, stiff with cardboard, bullet-proof at long last'" (Maddox 18). When Shade's poem fails to perform this specific miracle, Kinbote takes over the task himself in the commentary.

Kinbote began to write his own commentary, after Shade's death, to achieve that goal of immortalizing himself in Shade's poem. He is attempting to re-create through art (in his case not his own) the past from which he has been excluded, the past which exists only in his imagination and his memory. As Patricia Waugh once remarked: "postmodernism represents the dissolution of the self into language" (qtd. in Amani 372), and Kinbote desires to dissolve his self into his writing to create a new identity, considering that metafiction is postmodern feature. What Kinbote does is a creation of a long commentary which is an attempt to fix himself through his self-conscious commentary on Shade's poem. He did it using his vivid energetic

imagination; he has exactly the kind of imagination that he says the assassin Gradus lacks, the kind that is capable of contemplating "ghost consequences, comparable to the ghost toes of an amputee or to the fanning out of additional squares which a chess knight (that skip-space piece), standing on a marginal file, 'feels' in phantom extensions beyond the board, but which have no effect whatever on his real moves, on the real play"(*Pale Fire* 639). Lucy Maddox supports that notion, in her book *Nabokov's Books in English* (1983), she argues that Kinbote's purpose in writing the commentary was to "discover and solidify an acceptable identity for himself through another man's life and art, to translate that man's art into signs and symbols of his own personal significance"(29).

However, this commentary begins to slip out of his control as Kinbote sees his own words more interesting and promising possibilities than he finds in Shade's. At the end of the Foreword, Kinbote claims that "without my notes Shade's text has no human reality at all" and continues to affirm that the "reality" granted to the poem is provided by "only my notes" (*Pale Fire* 25). He gradually gave in to the attractions of his own narrative and, in the process, to the requirements of the pattern of Nabokov's novel. To Nabokov "the writing designates no other reality than the novel itself". His novels do not have a function rather they have an "impact", in telling the reader "about nothing except [their] own making"(Nabokov 55).

Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary, in a way, are reflecting one another. In his article "The Viewer and the View"(1976), David Walker maintains that "the novel's two parts, like life and art, are necessary and complementary mirrors, but it is impossible to identify one as the primary object and the other as its mirror" (210). In Nabokov's terms, one of the chief values of art is its ability to speak of two things at once to juxtapose "the irreconcilable inner and outer realities in a single version as *Pale Fire* juxtapose Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary" (Maddox 31). Both men have suffered shocking losses, that left them full of doubts and questions about their own identities, and both reacted by experimenting with interpretations of human experience that will make their losses and their fears more tolerable (Maddox 41). Waugh believes that —the fictional content of such a metafiction work as *Pale Fire* is "continually reflected by its formal existence as text, and the existence of that text within a world viewed in terms of textuality" (qtd. in Currie 15). Waugh refers to McHale's suggestion that such contradictions are "essentially ontological (posing questions about the nature and existence of reality)" (qtd. in Currie 16). Perhaps mad Kinbote speaks partly like Nabokov when he mentions "the basic fact" that "'reality' is neither the subject nor the object of the art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the common eye"(*Pale Fire* 130).

Also, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* which is a book about the changing appearance of reality and the enduring qualities of art, one can find that V.'s discovery, that any soul can be yours if you chase it long enough, is a little vague and unsatisfying. Fortunately, V.'s intelligence as well as his consciousness is limited, and once this becomes apparent the readers no longer rely on him for their ultimate perceptions about Sebastian's reality and its inseparableness from his art. Nabokov's purpose in placing the point of view in a confused observer, in spite of the originality of his methods, seems clearly intended to break down the reader's conviction that

reality and truth are scientific facts, to point out that reality is an infinite variety of perceptions and impressions that are conditioned by an infinite variety of stimuli-intelligence, mental attitude, health, and so on.

Blending of Illusion and Reality Technique

According to Nabokov himself upon completing one of his novels the reader should experience "a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there suspended afar like a picture in a picture." (qtd. in Shapiro 72). A. Roth supported that tendency of Nabokov he said, "Nabokov's novels do not directly imitates life but are imitations of imitations of life." (A. Roth 68). In fact, Nabokov's blending of appearance and reality is a deliberate strategy which only the careful reader can pick it up through the hidden clues in the pattern of the novel. In an example in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the main character, V., finds himself in a situation taken from one of Sebastian's novels. While he was in the midst of his mystery search for the femme fatal whom Sebastian had an affair with, he did not have any detective skills. His first and only plan was to ask the hotel manager, which proved to be a fail as the hotel manager refused to give him any information about his clients. It was only with the coincidental help of a "real" private investigator, Mr. Silberman, that V. could manage to get the information he needs.

Nabokov, rather than Sebastian, seems to be in full control of these events, giving the reader a "life imitates art" moment in which Sebastian's style of writing detective stories materializes before V.'s unseeing eyes. It seems as if V. is caught up in a plot authored by Sebastian, complete with characters straight out of Sebastian's fiction, like Mr. Silberman, whose name and mannerisms recall one of Sebastian's creations Mr. Siller. Another possible theory is that perhaps V. is making the whole thing up, just as when he was tempted to release his imagination and fabricated an account in Cambridge visit. It seems possible that as V. builds confidence as a fiction writer, he feels that he can simply invent the rest of his "real" life of Sebastian. Perhaps when the hotel manager refused to offer any help V. sought this method depending more or less consciously on a Sebastian style plot, full of coincidence and absurd characters, as a way of keeping his story from falling apart, perhaps V.'s sources are misleading him and perhaps he is misleading the readers. It has always been a thrill and a source of joy to Nabokov to confuse his readers as he did in this situation when he invited the reader to choose between these two views of the unfolding tale; the V. is blind view and the V. is making it all up view.

Pale Fire questions the reader's understanding of what is "real" and "true", even the name of the poet "Shade" can be taken as a symbol of confusion. The details of what actually happened and what is imagined become shady and hazy. The reader should be able to differentiate what is true and what is not. A good example for that is the character Gradus. Gradus, the assassin, does not exist; he is a fantasy which belongs to Kinbote. Shade's shooter is the vengeful lunatic Jack Grey, who fatally mistakes Shade for Judge Goldsworth. Gradus as assassin is as "real" in the novel as Grey is real. He is real in moral and esthetic terms, if not in objective ones. His meaning and presence in the novel are not canceled just because he is not of the same level of reality as Shade and just a character in a book.

The Unreality of Time and Space concept

In an interview with Alfred Appel, Nabokov offered some advice to literary critics. He suggested that they should "by all means place the "how" above the "what," but do not let it be confused with the "so what" (qtd. in Golla 56). This means that not only do Nabokov's characters misleadingly (but instructively) perceive "how" things happen, the reader as well is often encouraged to draw premature mistaken conclusions about "what" is taking place. The effect seems best explained in Nabokov's famous illustrations from his book *Laughter in the Dark*:

Uncle alone in the house with the children said he'd dress up to amuse them. After a long wait, as he did not appear, they went down and saw a masked man putting the table silver into a bag. "Oh, uncle," they cried in delight. "Yes, isn't my makeup good?," said uncle, taking his mask off. Thus goes the Hegelian syllogism of humor. Thesis: uncle mad himself up as a burglar (a laugh for the children); antithesis: it was a burglar (a laugh for the reader); synthesis: it was uncle (fooling the reader) (78).

Nabokov, in his novels, always forces the attention of his reader to the "how" and not the "what." Moreover, this reinforces the theme of deceptive reality which is central in all of his works.

Nabokov considers poetry and prose as an attempt to "try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness" (qtd. in Golla 45). In Nabokov's world all phenomena are linked in a spiral relation to time. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* he remarks that when he was a boy, he discovered that Hegel's triadic series was simply as expression of "the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time." (39) He continues:

Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages . . . :we call "thetic" the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; "antithetic" the larger arc that faced the first in the process of continuing it; and "synthetic" the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. (Ch. 14)

Syllogistic development is basic to Nabokov's mode of thought and expression. What seems most vivid, bright and "real" is typically most certain to prove illusory or deceptive. Appearances may be calculated to punish mere cleverness, to turn it directly away from what is "real" like the antithetic arc of a spiral. When the spiral unwinds, things wrap into new dimensions – space into time, time into thought, thought into a new spatial dimension. His disbelief in time arises, no doubt, from that infinity of sensation that exists in the creative imagination. This may provoke endless repetitions and a type of circularity (Waugh 11).

In Nabokov's spiral world, the completed syllogism leads the reader back to where he began, but with a disturbing insistence that he is now somewhere else. The "spiral" unwinding of things," seems to suggest to Nabokov a basic design of much of his fiction. Many of the novels and stories make a 360-degree turn, ending where they began, or in effect not ending at all. For example, the search for identity in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, as far as V. is concerned, ends in as much confusion as it begins in. As readers accompany the narrator on his search for knowledge, the more they investigate the past, the less they learn about its subject, until eventually it

becomes apparent that Sebastian's "real life" will never be known, and that they have been following a circular path to end at the death scene. Another example at the end of the novel, readers rush with V. to the bedside of his dying brother, but it is too late. In fact, he died before the book even began and they are back at the point from which they started. However, the novel does not end in nothingness. There is a revelation, a philosophical statement of a kind, which the movement away from fact, the illusions and mistaken identities all lead toward that revelation. V.'s secret discovery is that any soul can belong to anyone if you come to understand it, he says:

I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that the soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state – that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. . . . Thus – I am Sebastian Knight. . . I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows (*The Real Life* 173).

Nicholas Rowe described, in his book *Nabokov's Deceptive World* (1971), the sense of timelessness in Nabokov's works as it "derives from carefully controlled echoes; a tiny detail, a shape, a vivid little phrase will appear and reappear almost unnoticed" (78). For example the repetition of the word "violets" in many places throughout the novel, like when V. said "she [his mom] thrusts into Sebastian's hand a small parcel of sugar-coated violets," (*The Real Life* 9) and then mentions "a small muslin bag of violet sweets in Sebastian's drawer," (*The Real Life* 15) and also while mentioning Sebastian words "I well remember the day my father told me of her death and the name of the pension where it occurred. The name was 'Les Violettes' . . . I noticed a bunch of violets clumsily painted on the gate" (*The Real Life* 19). And finally he mentions that word in describing what he found in Sebastian's apartment "an empty talc-powder tin with violets" (*The Real Life* 37).

Nabokov telescopes time by treating the (unreal) past or future as if it were at least partially "real" present. The present is, thus colored by the past and the reader himself tends, with a timeless sensation of déjà vu, to experience and re-experience the story within its own perceptual framework and the future is continually prefigured. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a trip into the past, but instead of finding a comfortable reality that V. can grasp, the past gives only illusory shimmers that leave him as much confused at the end of his search as when he began. Time becomes a series of overlapping transparent layers, shifting just enough to reveal unexpected familiar glimpses.

Due to the "spiral unwinding of things" effect, the components of "reality" are then loosened from strict and static interconnection, and seemed to float more freely. On that says Nabokov, "The spiral is a spiritualized circle . . . In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free" (31), this explanation from *Speak, Memory* (1951) applies even to the relationship between "reality" and Nabokov's style. Nabokovian echoing and syllogistic twists undermine the structure of the traditional fictional world, freeing the reader to experience a more consciousness-expanding "reality" i.e. extending the "arms of consciousness", as he calls it, as far as possible to include a single point of time.

The refusal to take this world and its time and death as facts is one of the sources of Nabokov's most important tension. Nabokov believes that it is "only in art that transcendence can be achieved", and "even that escape", Page Stegner argues in

his book *Escape into Aesthetics* (1966), "is a false solution: Kinbote's madness is not a solution of time and death, but only temporary escapes. Nabokov's characters, like their creator, realize that "the prison of time is spherical and without exists"(110). However, they cannot stop trying to find a means out of time. Time is central in the poem *Pale Fire*, John Shade is a disbeliever in time and comment on the unreality of the concept: *Time means succession, and succession, change:/ Hence timelessness is bound to disarrange/Schedules of sentiment. . .* (lines 567 – 569). Also Kinbote's insistence on adjusting the poem's topic to serve his purpose is because he needs to return to the past and reconstruct it. Nabokov, himself, in the course of his own commentary on Eugene Onegin, noted that "the pursuit of reminiscences may become a form of insanity on the scholiast's part" (qtd in Maddox 17). Kinbote's quest for meaning in his past leads him into a shadowy kingdom of the imagination, where "the miraculous possibilities that are hinted at in the 'plexed artistry' are realized in the actualities of everyday life" (Madox 18).

The metafictional novel constantly turns into itself rather than into reality; it pauses to look at itself, to consider itself; it has a self-reflexive quality. Consequently, this also leads to the use of other themes such as images of reflexivity and the reflexive behavior of the character (Stonehill 31). In fact Maddox states that "Kinbote's commentary in *Pale Fire* acts as a kind of mirror, transforming another man's autobiographical poem into a story full of hidden messages of Kinbote's glorious and purely imaginary past" (Maddox 30). Kinbote has found the way to escape a sad and lonely life through his magic mirror. But there is always this trap, for the mirror has someone waiting on the other side and that is Gradus. He will be there, a "bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus" (*Pale Fire* 313), no matter how often the story is changed.

Conclusion

In general terms, the metafictional novel deals with those themes which reflect the artifice of the novel itself. It is clear in Nabokov's novels that they do not reflect reality but instead they express their own individual reality. Also his narrator's awareness of themselves as writers (they all are self-consciously writing a book) serves to remind us that a "distinction is being made between art and life, between the reality of the imagination and the reality of daily existence" (Vujnovic 113). However, there is an implicit paradox in the ultimate fate of Nabokov's aesthetic heroes; V., Sebastian, Kinbote, and Shade. As they find redemption from suffering, they begin to confuse art with life, to turn living into art, and in so doing remove themselves from the reality that is art's source.

Nabokov's novels are mainly concerned with the artistic imagination and consciousness. The only reality, to Nabokov, is the reality of a creative mind, expressing itself in a highly effective and playful way. He stated that belief in an interview for *Vogue* magazine (1969), by saying "I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination – hence my inverted commas around 'reality.' Whatever the mind grasps it does so with the assistance of creative fancy." (qtd. in Hilfer 135). This only can be brought about by an active reader who shares the creation process with the author through an act of recreating the world the novel presents depending on his imagination. In that way the reader manages to recreate a world different from the world created by the author and at the same time

different from his own real world. This is why "the reader often feels involved in events which, at the time of reading, seem real to him even though in fact they are far from his own reality" (Iser 278). That is when the role of the metafictionists comes, to help the reader differentiate between reality and fiction and decide for himself what is realit

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