



# Nabokov's Details: Making Sense of Irrational Standards

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*Nabokov's Details: Making Sense of Irrational Standards*

Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's passion for detail is well-known, central to our very idea of the "Nabokovian." Yet Nabokov's most important claims for detail pose a challenge for the reader who would take them seriously. Startlingly extreme and deliberately counterintuitive -- Nabokov called them his "irrational standards" -- these claims push the very limits of reason and belief. Nabokov's critics have tended to treat his more extravagant claims for detail -- including his assertion that the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is the highest form of consciousness there is -- as just a manner of speaking, a form of italics, a bit of wishful thinking, a mandarin's glib performance, or an aesthete's flight of fancy. This dissertation, by contrast, asserts that Nabokov meant what he said, and sets out to understand what he meant. Nabokov's passion for detail, I argue, represents more than a stylistic preference or prescription for good noticing. Rather, it reflects and advocates for a special way of being in the world, of disposing or orienting oneself to things, and for this reason is best understood as part of a broad program of detailphilic habits, attitudes, practices and attunements Nabokov adhered to throughout his life. In making this argument, I draw on the work of a wide array of thinkers, including Descartes, Heidegger, Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz, and Philip Fisher, and focus on three of Nabokov's texts in particular: *Speak, Memory*, *Lolita*, and "The Art of Literature and

Commonsense.” Making sense of Nabokov’s irrational standards, I argue, helps us to make sense of a number of other critical puzzles as well, from what, exactly, Nabokov means by the word “reality” to what a cruel noticer like Humbert Humbert implies about the moral meaning of passionate attention.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: <i>On the Capacity to Wonder at Trifles</i> .....	4
Chapter Two: <i>Commonsense and Its Logic</i> .....	34
Chapter Three: <i>Speak, Memory and the Highest Form of Consciousness</i> .....	55
Chapter Four: <i>Knowing the World to Be Good: The Riddle of Lolita</i> .....	84
Conclusion: <i>Understanding Nabokov's Details</i> .....	145
Bibliography.....	159

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## INTRODUCTION

Nabokov's love of detail shows itself everywhere -- in his style, of course, so radiant with bright particulars; but also in the many letters, lectures, interviews, and essays in which he asserts that love with an intensity peculiar to him. No other novelist invests "the divine detail" with so much glamour and prestige (*Look at the Harlequins!* (LATH) 24); no other writer's praise is as impassioned, or as final. And yet, on the long shelf of books about his work, among studies of his thoughts on the afterlife, his quarrels with psychoanalysis, his interest in butterflies, games, memory, childhood, and painting, his uses of metafiction, parody, pattern, and deception, one finds no full-length work devoted to his love of detail. It seems that Nabokov's detailphilia is so basic to our sense of who he is, and so well-known, that we tend not to ask too many questions about it. It's something we simply *know* about him, and something he makes it easy for us to know.

Yet if we step back from it for a moment, that love of detail begins to look a little strange. Why, for example, is it so extreme? Consider his claim about the "capacity to wonder at trifles":

these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good (*Lectures on Literature* (LL) 373-374).

What does Nabokov mean, really, when he says that the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is the "highest form[] of consciousness"? Or that it is in this "state of mind" that we "know the world to be good"? Already it seems a little less legible than before. Heidegger has a good phrase for what happens when we step back from familiar things in this way: we make them "worthy of questioning" (*The Essence of*



*Truth* 5).

The following chapters are organized around the parts of this central claim, and are designed to be read in order. Chapter One, "On the Capacity to Wonder at Trifles," begins by rendering Nabokov's claim "worthy of questioning." It works toward a definition of what the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is, using philosophical accounts of wonder from Descartes and Philip Fisher as important points of reference and comparison. Chapter Two, "Commonsense and Its Logic," adds depth to this definition by contrasting it with Nabokov's idea of "commonsense." Here Clifford Geertz's concept of "common sense as a cultural system" and Heidegger's notion of "enframing" help to bring Nabokov's own idea into sharper focus. Chapter Three, "*Speak, Memory* and the Highest Form of Consciousness" explains how this fuller notion of the "capacity to wonder at trifles" might be plausibly deemed the "highest form[] of consciousness," and argues that *Speak, Memory* offers a vision of a world revealed by its light. Chapter Four, "Knowing the World to Be Good: the Riddle of *Lolita*," argues that *Lolita* is best read as the antithesis of *Speak, Memory*, and that through the figure of Humbert Humbert Nabokov explores what it means to be cut off from "the highest form[] of consciousness." This long chapter disputes the claim that Humbert's "artistic gifts" -- his capacity for noticing details among them -- exist on a continuum with Nabokov's own, and in the process examines Nabokov's peculiar notion of "what *reality* is." The study concludes with a short reflection on the implications of Nabokov's claim for how we think about his style.

This study might also be thought of as an elaboration of Michael Wood's definition of style as a "complex but still legible trace" of a "person's interaction with the world" (23). Over the course of its four main chapters, I argue that "the capacity to wonder at trifles" is Nabokov's phrase for a special, privileged attunement to the world, and that his details are best understood in relation to

that attunement. In my view, the "capacity to wonder at trifles" signifies a certain way of being in the world, and consequently I've found Heidegger's language of attunements, revealing, allowing things to show up, and disposing oneself to things useful here. I'm not suggesting that Nabokov was influenced by Heidegger, and I'm not attempting a Heideggerean "reading" of Nabokov. Rather, I've borrowed from the vocabulary of *Being and Time*, because I've found it to be a particularly congenial vocabulary for understanding, and explaining, what Nabokov means.

Most readings of Nabokov put one of his books at their center. For many critics, *Lolita* is really the central Nabokovian work. For some it is *Pale Fire*, for others it is *Ada*, and for still others it is *The Gift*. Each selection orients the conversation around a different set of concerns, tonalities, techniques, images, capacities, and commitments. A study that gives *Pale Fire* pride of place will offer a very different vision of Nabokov than one centered on *Lolita*. This study puts Nabokov's memoir at its center. I see *Speak, Memory* as the major expression of Nabokov's ethos, and *Speak, Memory* and *Lolita*, considered as a unit, as Nabokov's major work of art.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### *On the Capacity to Wonder at Trifles*

#### *I. The Challenge of Extremity*

##### *Strange Superlatives*

Vladimir Nabokov is, famously, a writer with strong opinions. One of those opinions is that few things are more important, for readers or writers, than attention to detail. He tends to frame this promotion of detail as a challenge, an act of opposition. He often depicts himself as a lonely champion of the particular, preserving “the divine detail” from numberless enemies (*LATH* 24): students inclined to abstraction; critics in thrall to theories; seekers of symbols, teachers of types; writers with ideologies to express; readers in want of dictionaries, and imagination. “At a time when American readers are taught from high school on to seek in a book ‘general ideas,’” he wrote with typical force in 1956, “a critic’s duty should be to draw their attention to the specific detail, to the unique image, without which [...] there can be no art, no genius, no Chekhov, no terror, no tenderness, and no surprise” (“To Edmund Wilson” 331).

For the contemporary reader, the challenge of Nabokov’s position persists not so much in the direction of his argument as in the extremity of his terms. His *basic* argument -- that details should be given priority over generalizations -- seems barely contentious today. It’s familiar, and ubiquitous. We see the same argument made by Clifford Geertz in his famous definition of ethnography; by New Historicists and cultural critics; by Richard Rorty, in his description of the liberal ironist’s task; by maximalist writers from Wallace to Roth. Moreover, we’ve been heading in this direction for a while.

As Naomi Schor and others have shown, the critical estimation of detail has been rising steadily within the arts and humanities for the last two hundred years, beginning with Romanticism, intensifying through the nineteenth century, and reaching something of an apotheosis in our time.

Even so, Nabokov's own passion for detail remains unique -- and uniquely challenging -- in its extremity. Details, he insists, aren't just *valuable* or *important*: they're "everything" (*Strong Opinions* (SO) 168). In memory, science, and scholarship, too, "the detail is all" (*Ada* 71). Savoring details constitutes not one but the very *first* rule of reading (*LL* 1), not merely a central but "the main" delight of the mind (374). In his published lecture on "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov describes the act of wondering at details as not merely integral to peak experience but as *the very thing itself*, the "highest form[] of consciousness":

I remember a cartoon depicting a chimney sweep falling from the roof of a tall building and noticing on the way that a sign-board had one word spelled wrong, and wondering in his headlong flight why nobody had thought of correcting it. In a sense, we all are crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns on the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles - no matter the imminent peril - these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good (*LL* 374).

*Everything, highest, main, first, without which there can be no* -- Nabokov's claims for detail tend always toward the superlative and the absolute. There's a puzzle here, something in these superlatives that wants explaining. What can it really mean to believe that details are "everything," in literature and in life? To say that wondering at details constitutes not a "high" but the very "highest" form of consciousness there is? To insist, again and again, not only that details matter, but that nothing else matters as much? What *are* details, for Nabokov, such that assertions like these make sense?

Nabokov challenges us to develop an account of detail commensurate with his most extreme claims for them.

### *Taking Nabokov Seriously*

That challenge, of course, only comes into view if we take Nabokov's claims "seriously" -- that is, if we assume that he means what he says, and acknowledge the strangeness of what he is saying.

Nabokov's critics tend to take his superlatives more lightly than this, often treating them as just a manner of speaking, a form of italics. From this perspective, words like "highest" and "everything" serve to amplify Nabokov's argument without distorting it into something hard to understand.

Brian Boyd, for example, writes wonderfully about Nabokov's "passion for the particular," but never puzzles over the extravagant terms in which that passion is expressed (*American Years* 350). He summarizes the Nabokovian ethos in the form of an imperative -- "*notice* the details of your book or your world and it will enrich your whole life" -- that leaves out the superlative inflection of that ethos altogether (174). For Leland de la Durantaye, too, the vehement quality of Nabokov's expression does little to compromise the essentially reasonable nature of his claims. While noting that "Nabokov is both adamant and militant on the matter of generality," he stresses that "he is also careful not to push his position into incoherence. In philological questions, faithful and loving attention to the particular was a principle and a method, but not a dogmatism" (114). For Michael Wood, the language of superlatives and overstrong opinions belongs to "Nabokov the mandarin," a stylized persona less interesting to Wood than the "real," "diffident, doubting person" he admires. The more confident and unwavering the mandarin's claims become, the more Wood's interest in them wanes (22). Richard Rorty, by contrast, finds himself genuinely perplexed and intrigued by

one of Nabokov's more extreme claims for detail. Yet in the end he finds that claim so difficult and so strange that he decides Nabokov must really not have meant what he said. "Nabokov's best novels," he concludes, "are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas" (168). In this way he, too, reduces Nabokov's extreme vocabulary to a manner of speaking.

The trouble here is that, by making Nabokov's claims less strange, his critics tend to make them less interesting; and they miss an opportunity to pursue the hard questions those claims pose. "Notice the details of your text or your world and you will enrich your whole life" is a statement with which anyone might agree; "Notice the details of your text or your world and you will be engaging in the highest form of consciousness," on the other hand, is a strange and challenging argument. There's value in taking that argument seriously.

The following pages consider the strongest and strangest of Nabokov's claims for detail: his equation, quoted in the passage above, of the capacity to wonder at trifles with the very highest form of consciousness. What makes this claim so hard to accept? What does it mean? In what way might Nabokov have supposed it to be true? I propose to build a way through these questions by hewing closely to the particulars of the claim itself: by asking, for example, what the word "trifles" conveys that "details" does not; or what "commonsense and its logic" has to do, exactly, with the qualities to which it is opposed. By advancing through Nabokov's claim in this way, I hope to more fully reveal its meaning, and, further, the meaning of his tendency to speak of details always in superlative terms.

### *Nabokov's Credo*

In 1941, with nine novels, two novellas, and a slate of stories, plays, and poems behind him, Nabokov prepared a set of lectures on "The Art of Writing" for Stanford University. The course, his

first, had only four students, and only lasted a summer, but Nabokov seems to have imagined that at least some of those lectures would live beyond their Stanford debut (Boyd, *American* 22-23). One in particular did. His lecture “on ‘commonsense’” (Nabokov, “The Russian Professor” 102), a spirited affirmation of his artistic creed, traveled back with him to the East Coast, where he published it under the title “The Creative Writer,” and where it proved popular during a lecture tour he undertook in the following year. The piece remained part of Nabokov’s teaching repertoire, and was eventually republished, in a revised form, with his Cornell lectures as “The Art of Literature and Commonsense.”

“I don’t recall that he lectured in any conventional sense of the term,” said one student of Nabokov’s Stanford course. “He shared with us his creative activity and experience” (Boyd, *American* 32). His lecture on commonsense is an example of such sharing: in it he describes his artistic values and creative process, and encourages his students to embrace those artistic values for themselves. Yet the expansive tone and scope of the piece suggest that Nabokov had always had a broader audience in mind for it than the quartet of creative writers in his Art of Writing class. His later audiences would be comprised mainly of aspiring readers -- students of “the art of literature,” rather than writers -- but the lecture works well for them, too. For the reader, it offers insight into how artists work and what they value, and lends a Nabokovian sense of how to best enjoy and rate the worth of what one reads. And ultimately the lecture speaks to a broader audience still, for in articulating the articles of his artistic faith, Nabokov describes not only a way of approaching books but a way of approaching the world.

Nabokov’s *credo* affirms, above all, “the supremacy of the detail over the general.” Over and over Nabokov asserts the value of the individual over the group, the freak over the mob, rare genius over

mass culture, the “trifle,” the “little thing,” the “footnote,” the “aside.” He dubs these his “irrational standards” (LL 373-374) -- irrational because, in privileging part over whole, they reverse the “linear logic of pedestrian thought” that too often passes for rationality (“The Creative Writer” 21). That plodding logic is the logic of “commonsense” (21). Commonsense tells us that anomalies are only so much statistical noise, and that we ought to privilege collective wisdom over individual truth, the big picture over the small, the abstract over the concrete, the genus over the species, the average over the exception. These are two ways of looking at the world, and the difference between them matters. Nabokov associates his irrational standards with all that is good in the world (heroism, innocence, childhood, freedom, tenderness, imagination, poetry, play) and commonsense with all that is bad (crime, cruelty, dictators, death, madness and mobs, closed-mindedness and mediocrity). “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” is playful, flamboyant, inventive, and funny, more a demonstration of Nabokov’s irrational standards than a lecture “in any conventional sense of the term,” but its argument is serious, and its stakes are high.

### *Unbalanced Equations*

This, then, is the context within which Nabokov submits his claim that “the capacity to wonder at trifles” is the “highest form[] of consciousness” there is. It’s a counterintuitive claim -- but then it’s meant to be. It’s a deliberate affront, after all, to the “monster of grim commonsense” (380).

Does that make any puzzlement on our part a sign that we’re being too commonsensical ourselves? An indication that we’re approaching Nabokov’s claim in too literal, too limited, too “pedestrian” a way? Nabokov’s critics do sometimes suggest as much. David Andrews, for example, argues that Nabokov’s lecture proceeds according to an imperfectly rational, “aesthetic” logic, and



thus ought to be understood in an aesthetic way, as a “thing disclosing its particular truth...through its sensuousness as a thing” (53). This suggests that we have only two responses available to us: irrational acceptance of Nabokov’s claim or commonsensical rejection. But then, commonsense and rationality are not the same. Commonsense, Nabokov tells us in “The Creative Writer,” is not equivalent to rationality but is in fact a “false” or “lower form of” it (21). Neither, then, is the puzzlement of commonsense equivalent to the puzzlement of genuine reason. The first is an endpoint; the second is a beginning. Whereas affronted commonsense will dismiss Nabokov’s odd claim out of hand, our own sense of its strangeness and difficulty will draw us into a deeper engagement with its meaning.

The puzzle of Nabokov’s claim lies in the apparent incommensurability of its terms. Nabokov defines the “the capacity to wonder at trifles” by means of two equations, each as provocatively unbalanced as the other. The first of these is the positive equation he makes between the experience of wondering at trifles and the experience of consciousness in its highest form. Nabokov chooses the word “trifle” (over the more value-neutral “details” or “particulars”) to underscore the counterintuitive quality of his claim. Nothing could be *less* significant than a trifle, by definition “something of little value or importance”; nothing could be *more* significant, in the Nabokovian universe, than the highest form of consciousness, a phenomenon Nabokov once described as “the only real thing in the world and the greatest mystery of all” (*Bend Sinister* (BS) 188). The philosopher Charles Taylor describes something like the “highest form of consciousness” in his history of secularism, *A Secular Age*. Where Nabokov writes of “the highest form[] of consciousness,” Taylor writes of “a place of fullness”:

Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that

place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be...a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually (5-6).<sup>1</sup>

Compared with more typical ways of defining the “place of fullness” or the “highest form of consciousness” -- as a sense of oneness with God, perhaps, or the experience of falling in love -- the act of wondering at trifles seems very slight.

The second strange equation is the negative one Nabokov draws between the experience of wondering at trifles and the experience of “physical danger, pain, dust, death.” Nabokov portrays his irrational standards as a response or counterweight to the “darkest and most dazzling hours” of existence. He describes two different kinds of darkness with which our irrational standards help us to contend. There’s the darkness of war, oppression, police states intent on “turn[ing] the globe into five million miles of terror, stupidity, and barbed wire”; and there’s the more distant and democratic dark fact of our mortality. The first is a matter of historical circumstance, summed up in an image of “crashing buildings in the roaring and whining night”; the second an existential condition, summed in an image of us “all...crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard” (*LL* 373).

For Nabokov, these were concrete evils, with which he was on particularly intimate terms. By the time he drafted the first version of his lecture in 1941, he had lost his childhood home, a

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1. Taylor shifts, in his description, from an aesthetic vocabulary (“fuller, richer, deeper”) to a moral one (“more worthwhile...more what it should be”); the “place of fullness,” like the “highest form of consciousness,” refers to an aesthetically and morally privileged category of experience. The terms are not exactly alike; Nabokov’s phrase suggests a graduated series of forms -- high, higher, highest -- where Taylor’s phrase does not, and a more absolute scale of evaluation. But they are otherwise close in tone and meaning, and the description of one helps illuminate the other.

fabulous inheritance, his country of origin, and a favorite cousin to the Russian Revolution. His father had been killed by an extremist's bullet in Berlin; his mother had died, out of reach and in relative penury, in Prague. He had lost access, in exile, to a whole generation of Russian readers, and had finally given up writing in his beloved native language altogether. He had suffered through years of poverty, depression, attacks of psoriasis, and finally, with the rise of the Nazis, fear for the lives of his Jewish wife and son. He had fled three countries under desperate circumstances.

I rehearse these details of Nabokov's biography only to underscore the fact that his evocation of "physical danger, pain, dust, death" has the weight of lived experience behind it. These very concrete encounters with "badness," "evil," "dictators" and "war gods" lend his claims a solidity and a seriousness beyond what they might otherwise have (373). And the second sort of evil he describes, the basic law of mortality to which "we are all" subject, was one he contemplated often. The routine extinguishment of consciousness in sleep was, for Nabokov, a torture and an insult, a "travesty of the death struggle," a dress rehearsal for the "still more risible disintegration" to come (*Speak, Memory* (*SM*) 109). Every night, as he struggled against "Somnus, that black-masked headsman binding [him] to the block," Nabokov confronted the graver insult sleep presaged: the "utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence" (109; 297).

These, then, are the dark realities against which Nabokov pits his trifles. Nabokov suggests that wondering at trifles is somehow a match for these things, in gravity and power, just as he suggests it is the equal of other, more typical ways of defining the highest form of consciousness -- spiritual enlightenment, creative achievement, falling in love, having a child. These are strange equations, in which one term always seems smaller than the other. They pose a particular challenge: that of

discovering how “the capacity to wonder at trifles” could be equal to those things to which it is compared.

## *II. The Capacity to Wonder at Trifles*

Nabokov’s claim has a simple structure: he proposes one concept (“the capacity to wonder at trifles”), equates it to a second (“the highest form of consciousness”), and opposes it to a third (“commonsense and its logic”). My argument will follow the logic of the claim itself, asking, first, what the “capacity to wonder at trifles” really means; second, what the comparison with “commonsense” reveals; and, finally, in what way such an anti-commonsensual capacity might be said to be the “highest form of consciousness.” These questions will mark out the basic route of our investigation.

Let’s begin, then, with the phenomenon at the center of Nabokov’s claim. To what, exactly, does the “capacity to wonder at trifles” refer? Nabokov’s critics tend to take the meaning of the phrase to be self-evident: wondering at trifles simply means “notic[ing]....external details” (Andrews 62), “recognizing something others would miss” (Alexandrov 54), “noticing things that most other people do not notice, being curious about what others take for granted, seeing the momentary iridescence and not just the underlying formal structure” (Rorty 159). But these definitions aren’t quite sufficient: madmen and nympholepts, after all, are also good at “noticing things that most other people do not notice.” Wondering at trifles must mean something more, or other, than this, something richer and deeper than simply noticing details and taking pleasure in particulars. Until we can identify that meaning, Nabokov’s arguments must always seem somewhat outsized and

“imperfectly rational” (Andrews 53), idiosyncratic at best, incoherent at worst, or, as Richard Rorty thinks, “gallant, splendid, and foredoomed” (Rorty 150).

Each part of the phrase is important to its meaning -- “capacity,” “to wonder at,” “trifles” -- but as a point of entry, that middle term -- *wonder* or *to wonder at* -- is especially promising. The readings above treat Nabokov’s use of the term “wonder at” as an almost arbitrary choice, as though “notice,” “recognize,” “observe,” “be curious about,” or “see” might have done just as well. But “wonder” has particular associations relevant to any interpretation of the phrase. The word is, in fact, a particular Nabokovian favorite, like “throb,” “tingle,” “ecstasy,” and “thrill,” and *wonder* is a particularly Nabokovian subject. Usually Nabokov uses the word to invoke a specific state of mind: the “passion” of wonder, a straightforwardly privileged state of consciousness, likely familiar to us from experience and from poetry and the philosophy of the passions, where its features, mechanisms, and claims to value have been worked out in great detail. In *this* case, though, and as we will see, Nabokov uses the word to invoke a related but different state of mind, a more unusual and specific kind of wonderment. This is a less familiar sort of wonder: improbably focused on trifles; capacitative, rather than passionate. Comparing the two sorts of wonder -- traditional and trifle-centered -- should be useful to us here, for in marking where “the capacity to wonder at trifles” coincides with and departs from the “passion” of wonder, we will have begun to draw a picture of that less familiar state of mind.

I’ll start, then, by reviewing the “passion” of wonder and its place in Nabokov’s own life and work. I’ll then turn to consider these two wondering forms of consciousness alongside one another, the traditional “passion” and the Nabokovian “capacity,” one rooted in rare experiences, the other centered on “little thing[s]” and realized in “asides.”

*The Philosophical Account of the Passion of Wonder*

Much has been written about the passion of wonder: what it is, what it means, how it works, how and why it should be valued. Socrates famously describes wonder as the origin of all philosophy; Descartes orders it first among the passions; Wordsworth movingly commemorates its visionary gleam. More recently, Philip Fisher has argued for the existential and intellectual value of wonder in *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*. In this book, Fisher offers a rich philosophical account of the passion of wonder.

Fisher's account draws on, clarifies, elaborates and amends Descartes's definition of wonder from *Passions of the Soul*:

Wonder is a sudden surprise of the soul that brings it about that the soul goes on to consider with attention the objects that seem rare and extraordinary to it (Descartes 56).

Descartes's compact description sums up three crucial facts about wonder: that it takes us by surprise; that it leads to thought; and that it tells us something about our present understanding of the world. We can see all three elements at work in our response to the appearance of a rainbow, a classic instance of wonder and the central example of Fisher's book. Rainbows are rare and unpredictable enough that they usually take us by surprise; we don't expect them or go looking for them. We don't strike wonder, the way a miner strikes gold: wonder strikes us, happens to us. We "find ourselves in" wonder, we "are wonderstruck," all at once and of a sudden. Partly for this reason, the most powerful experiences of wonder tend to be visual ones. A novel or a piece of music unfolds in time, but a purely visual experience may impress itself upon us, in all its detail, in an

instant. The visual nature of the rainbow supports the immediacy of its impact, the suddenness of its surprise.

What distinguishes this feeling from mere shock or surprise is that it also contains an element of delight. The characteristic “ah!” of wonder expresses both surprise and pleasure. An object of genuine wonder has aesthetic appeal, a delightful quality that attracts and interests us, as the beauty of the rainbow -- the grace of its form, the brilliance of its colors -- attracts and interests us. This quality inspires us not only to attend but to “consider,” to question, reflect, explain. Wonder, in other words, moves us to make sense of the thing wondered at, as Aristotle, and later Descartes and Newton, were moved to make sense of the rainbow. Fisher draws attention to these explanatory efforts in *Wonder, the Rainbow*, emphasizing the intimate connection between the aesthetics of wonder and the poetics of thought, between wondering *at* and wondering *how* and *why*, between the pleasure of surprise and the pleasure of investigation. In demonstrating the close connection between the aesthetics of wonder and the poetics of understanding, Fisher counters the objections of those who, like Keats, would see explanation as an enemy of wonder, a technique for unweaving the rainbow and disenchanting the world.

The pleasure of surprise depends on the “rare and extraordinary” nature of the wonderful thing, its strangeness; but the pleasure of investigation depends on the possibility of our coming to know it, its knowability. The order and symmetry of the rainbow, for example, suggest the explicability of that phenomenon by means of physical and mathematical laws, or at least they do for a person within a culture used to explaining things by such means. The wonderful, in other words, exists for us in the realm of the as-yet-unknown, between what we already know and what we cannot know, between the ordinary and the unknowable. But both ordinariness and knowability are variable

quantities; what seems extraordinary to us now, or unknowable, might not seem so five years from now, and might not seem so to you, or to a person in a different culture. For this reason wonder tells us something about our own present understanding of the world. It shows how we define the knowable and the known; it reveals to us the shape of our own experience and knowledge.

The passion of wonder, in sum, is brought about by something rare and extraordinary that arrests us, often visually, with “its beauty, its strangeness, and its order” (Fisher 121); is characterized by a sudden feeling of surprise and delight; moves us to consider with attention the object or phenomenon that has stirred us; and contributes to our self-understanding by showing us what lies within and beyond our present understanding of the ordinary and knowable.

There is one final fact that must be included in any précis of passionate wonder. Wonder fades -- with repetition, with experience, with age. An extraordinary thing cannot remain extraordinary for long. As freshness turns into familiarity, and the new into the known, the possibilities for passionate wonder diminish. Fisher cites this susceptibility to decay as a “deep problem with and limit to the use of wonder,” “essential to any accurate definition of its nature” (55). The problem of decay finds its most powerful, and likely most familiar, expression in Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” the poet’s moving meditation on the erosion of wonder within experience. Wordsworth’s speaker imagines wonder as a “celestial light” that clings to us from heaven (4), a kind of luminous residue from a previous life that brightens the world around us in childhood but gradually “fade[s] into the light of common day” (77). By the start of the poem, that light has dimmed to nothing, and the speaker’s world has wholly lost its “visionary gleam” (56). Even the rainbow has ceased to show up as an occasion for wonder (now it simply “comes and goes”) (10). The poem registers the speaker’s complex response to this depleted world: his nostalgia; his



grief; his desire to recover some part of the “glory” that once was (5); his cooler desire to understand the nature of that glory; his brave effort to accept its passing; his resolution to find strength in what remains. As it traces out these patterns of emotion, the poem renders both the bright pleasure of wonder and the dark problem of its decline.

What compensation, if any, exists for the loss of passionate wonder? Wordsworth suggests that maturity may provide its own forms of compensation, that the same years of experience that narrow our capacity for wonder may enable other, possibly richer, ways of seeing. The mature observer encounters a world enriched by memories and associations, resonant with personal meaning and poetic possibility; for him, the sky at daybreak, a rose in bloom, a gathering of clouds around a setting sun, though no longer occasions for wonder, have an emotional power and a symbolic suggestiveness they cannot have for a child. The speaker of the Immortality Ode goes so far as to insist that he delights in the world now as much as ever, only in a different, more “philosophic” and “habitual” way (187; 192). Still, the poem concludes with an image of inexpressible loss, a grief deeper than grief, suggesting that the compensations of age for the loss of wonder can only ever be partial.

Fisher offers a different answer to the problem of decline. In *Wonder, the Rainbow*, he points to the “wonder-preserving” quality of explanation (119), showing how wonder conserves and perpetuates itself in the very processes of investigation and discovery to which it gives rise. The “ah!” of wonder reproduces itself in the “aha!” of understanding, in the click of intelligibility that, like wonder, is marked by a feeling of surprise and delight, of sudden apprehension and aesthetic satisfaction. A robust explanation is made up of a series of such moments, one leading energetically to the next in a “chain of...ever repeated, small-scale repetitions of the experience of wonder” (41).

Wonder persists -- beyond its inception, into the processes of inquiry and explication that succeed it, and beyond childhood into the maturity that makes such “disciplined thought” possible (120). Still, as an answer to the “deep problem” of erosion Wordsworth so vividly evokes, Fisher’s account is not and does not claim to be final. Fisher shows us that wonder has a longer and more complex career than it is often said to have, but he does not deny the reality of its “slow decline” (120), the difficulty of recapturing the pleasure and surprise of first encounters, the unrepeatability of the feeling of having “never seen anything like this before” (150), the inevitable dimming down of passionate wonder over time.

Even as they register its limitations, these poetic and philosophical accounts of wonder emphasize the value of that passion for our happiness, for our self-knowledge, for the creativity and vitality of our thinking, and for our efforts to better understand our world. Descartes, Wordsworth, and Fisher help us to recognize the passion of wonder as a privileged form of consciousness: a “place of fullness,” surely, in which “life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be”; a state of being characterized by unsought-for, unmediated delight; a vital engine of knowledge and discovery; a model for the poetics of thought itself. From here it is not hard to see how *passionate wonder* might be plausibly described as the “highest form[] of consciousness.”

### *Nabokov and the Passion of Wonder*

These accounts, moreover, help us to recognize passionate wonder as a central *Nabokovian* value. In *Wonder, the Rainbow*, Fisher describes the aesthetics of wonder as an aesthetics of surprise, discovery, delight, and also -- because wonder is so closely tied to novelty and youth -- as an aesthetics of

freshness, quickness, spontaneity, experimentalism and innovation, optimism and openness to the new. It's an aesthetics, he argues, appropriate to a confident, modern age, exemplified by the skyscraper and by the bold visual experiments of Monet, Cezanne, Pollock, and Twombly. These are all distinctly Nabokovian qualities, definitive not only of Nabokov's art but of his personality, his values, his whole ethos. Consider, for example, Nabokov's response to the moon-landing in this interview from 1969:

**Interviewer:**

Did you sit up and watch the Americans land on the moon? Were you impressed?

**Nabokov:**

Oh, "impressed" is not the right word! Treading the soil of the moon gives one, I imagine (or rather my projected self imagines), the most remarkable romantic thrill ever experienced in the history of discovery. *Of course*, I rented a television set to watch every moment of their marvelous adventure. That gentle little minuet that despite their awkward suits the two men danced with such grace to the tune of lunar gravity was a lovely sight. It was also a moment when a flag means to one more than a flag usually does. I am puzzled and pained by the fact that the English weeklies ignored the absolutely overwhelming excitement of the adventure, the strange sensual exhilaration of palpating those precious pebbles, of seeing our marbled globe in the black sky, of feeling along one's spine the shiver and wonder of it. After all, Englishmen should understand that thrill, they who have been the greatest, the purest explorers. Why then drag in such irrelevant matters as wasted dollars and power politics? (SO 149-150)

One might have responded to the *Apollo* mission in any number of ways: with the sort of restrained appreciation Nabokov's interviewer seems to expect; with the cynicism and pragmatism on display in the papers; or perhaps with the feelings of fear and anxiety that infinite spaces can sometimes inspire. But these would all be distinctly un-Nabokovian responses. Nabokov responds, instead, with unalloyed wonder, a response in keeping with his love of discovery and surprise, his enthusiasm for

new experiences, his optimism and confidence and keen sense of delight. His account emphasizes the surprising grace of the astronauts, the surprising lightness of their movements; the wonder of seeing the earth from a wholly fresh perspective; and above all the projected thrill of being the first person to set foot on undiscovered lunar land. He imagines a “shiver” of strangeness “along one’s spine,” but even this belongs more to the aesthetics of wonder than the aesthetics of the sublime, to that category of “artistic” “shiver[s]” and “telltale tingle[s]” he associates with a poet’s ingenious imagery or a grandmaster’s brilliant move (*LL* 382; 6).

Two more examples should suffice to confirm the privileged role of wonder in Nabokov’s ethos and aesthetics. The first involves his famous love of butterflies and moths. Nabokov could vividly imagine the awe and exhilaration of the astronauts on the moon in part because he knew the “romantic thrill” of discovery so well himself, having had many “marvelous adventures” of his own in the field of lepidopterology. “The pleasures and rewards of literary inspiration are nothing,” he once claimed, “beside the rapture of discovering a new organ under the microscope or an undescribed species on a mountainside in Iran or Peru” (*SO* 100).<sup>2</sup> In Nabokov’s responses to lepidoptera we find all the classic features of wonder: the element of surprise; the perception of beauty and undiscovered order; the impetus to inquiry; the revelation of the ever-shifting boundaries of one’s experience and knowledge. He lives for the rare encounter, for the unfamiliar insect that will cause him “to stop with a quick intake of breath” (*SM* 132), for the “precious” “aberration” (127), the “striking sport...the delightful rarity” (274), for creatures “very scarce” and “rarely met with” (12). They are

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2. The pleasures and rewards of literary inspiration were less, but their demands were greater: “the miniature hooks of a male butterfly are nothing,” Nabokov said in another interview a few years later, “in comparison to the eagle claws of literature which tear at me day and night” (*SO* 190).

for him objects of intense aesthetic delight, “spectacular” (121), “incomparably beautiful” (122), “incredible” (135), and of intense scientific interest as well. In these encounters, surprise and appreciation lead naturally into inquiry and investigation. The sudden beauty of a Swallowtail -- “a rare visitor, a splendid, pale-yellow creature with black blotches, blue crenels, and a cinnabar eyespot above each chrome-black tail” (120) -- soon leads Nabokov to reference books and periodicals, to the net and the spreading board, and, eventually, to the microscope and the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard.<sup>3</sup> Pleasure, astonishment, and satisfaction are constant features of his experience at all of stages of engagement, from sighting to dissection, and just as he evokes, in *Speak, Memory*, the “delight[]” of observing butterflies in childhood (135), he describes his years at the Museum as “the most delightful and thrilling” of his “adult life” (SO 190).

The second example involves his autobiography, every page of which testifies to a life “orient[ed]...spiritually” and strongly toward the passion of wonder. *Speak, Memory* registers, as it progresses, a rich, full scale of human feeling, from ecstasy to bereavement, but its dominant mood by far is one of wonder. It presents the world, or, more precisely, the “embrace[ment]” of the world by consciousness (218), as a continual source of surprise and delight; and it offers itself as a source of wonder, too, by setting up a seemingly endless series of happy surprises for the attentive reader: thematic correspondences, chronological puzzles, structural symmetries, intellectual jokes and games.

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3. Nabokov worked as a Research Fellow in Entomology at the M.C.Z. throughout the 1940s, and made, while he was there, significant contributions “not only to taxonomic knowledge but also to theoretical notions of how different species were likely to be related or to evolve,” contributions that continue to be of interest to lepidopterists today (Blackwell 23). Most recently, scientists at Harvard and Texas State University have used DNA sequencing to test -- and vindicate -- Nabokov’s identification of the Karner blue as a distinct species of butterfly as well as his sweeping explanation of how the *Polyommatus* blues evolved (Zimmer D3).

It's no coincidence, then, that the central image of *Speak, Memory* is a rainbow, that classic emblem and object of passionate wonder. Nabokov does not include "Rainbows" in his cheeky index to *Speak, Memory*, though he does draw attention to "Mushrooms," "Great Danes," "Honeysuckle," "Jewels," and all manner of other "thematic designs" (27). Still, rainbows are everywhere, in every chapter. The whole book is steeped in color. There are rainbows in the aquarelles his mother paints for him as a child, blue, lilac, red (36), and in the watercolor "treats" a teacher "gives" him, red, orange, yellow (92); in the "beautiful device" a governess shows him of arranging fallen leaves in color order, "green shading into lemon, lemon into orange and so on through the reds to purples, purplish browns, reddish again and back through lemon and green (which was getting quite hard to find except as a part, a last brave edge)" (97), and in the "detailed spectrum" of hues advertised on a box of colored pencils (100). There are rainbows in the "vague iridescence" of a moonlit cloud on an imagined winter evening (99) and in the "dewy brilliancy" of a remembered summer day (119). In the varicolored pavilion that rises "like a coagulated rainbow" above a river on his family's Vyra estate (216); in the "mother-of-pearl plated revolver" of his cousin Yuri (197); in a half-remembered detail of a young girl's dress -- a ribbon maybe, or a patterned stocking -- that reminded him, as a child, of a "rainbow spiral in a glass marble," and which now lingers, a "wisp of iridescence," in his mind (152). In the figures produced by the idle, "metronomic motion" of his butterfly net on "brownish sand; earthen rainbows, with variations in depth of stroke rendering the different colors" (222). In the resplendent wings of "Fra Angelico's Gabriel" (120). In a poem, "blue, green and orange, wonderstruck/ with its own loveliness and luck" (165), and in a painting: "young birch trees, the half of a rainbow - everything very melting and moist" (226). There are metaphorical rainbows: Nabokov views his father's life through a "prism" that splits "into many

enchancing colors the rather austere light” others perceive (186), and he likens his own life to a “colored spiral in a small ball of glass” (275). There is a “private rainbow” spotted in a park in Paris, hanging in the spray of a sprinkler “above gemmed grass” (304). And there is an even more private rainbow, *kzspygu*, a string of letters that, in Nabokov’s private world of “colored hearing,” form a “primary, but decidedly muddy, rainbow,” huckleberry, thundercloud, iridescent azure, unripe apple, bright gold, rich brown, Rose Quartz (35).

Yet these private, painted, miniature, metaphorical, half-formed, half-remembered rainbows -- these minor emblems of wonder -- are not the main event, the “central image” I mentioned, though they gesture toward and echo it. The main event is the appearance of an actual rainbow, the only such appearance in the book. Nabokov recounts how, when he was fifteen, he sought shelter from a summer storm in “the pavilion,” a wooden structure with “chapel-like” windows comprised of “wine-red and bottle-green and dark-blue lozenges of stained glass,” set on a bridge above a ravine in Vyra park. The storm passed, and then,

[b]eyond the park, above steaming fields, a rainbow slipped into view; the fields ended in the notched dark border of a remote fir wood; part of the rainbow went across it, and that section of the forest edge shimmered most magically through the pale green and pink of the iridescent veil drawn before it: a tenderness and a glory that made poor relatives of the rhomboidal, colored reflections which the return of the sun had brought forth on the pavilion floor.

“A moment later,” he tells us, “my first poem began” (215-216).

“Glory” is Wordsworth, but the rest is pure Nabokov. The rainbow heralds the beginning of Nabokov’s career, and henceforth his writing will always aspire to the qualities of that vision: its iridescence, its “beauty and surprise” (290), its “shock of wonder” (217). It heralds the coming of another era, too, as it is around this time that Nabokov begins to notice a girl’s name -- “Tamara” --

scribbled here and there around his family's estate, and it is here, in the "rainbow-windowed" pavilion, that he will eventually meet her and begin his first real love affair (230).

Viewed, then, within the context of the chapter in which it appears, the rainbow serves as a form of poetic emphasis: it signals Nabokov's emergence as a poet and a lover in the summer of 1914. But viewed "artistically," as Nabokov might say, as the central instant of *Speak, Memory's* rainbow motif, it takes on a different, deeper meaning. All the partial, putative, vague and wispy rainbows in the book serve to emphasize the memoir's basic theme, the pleasure and surprise of consciousness and of the "veritable Eden of visual and tactile sensations" to which it gives rise (24). This rainbow, then, the core instant to which those many scattered rainbows allude, seems to stand for the "tenderness and...glory" of consciousness itself, *its* "magic[]" and "shimmer[]" and close association with the passion of wonder. Here it seems relevant to note that Nabokov considered calling his memoir "Rainbow Edge," a reference to the side of a glass or the edge of a jewel where light bursts prismatically into color (Boyd, *American* 192).<sup>4</sup>

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4. If the rainbow of Chapter Eleven is really the central image of Nabokov's autobiography, why does he not place it at the center of his fifteen-chapter book? There's no reason why he should necessarily have done so, though such a move would have had a certain Nabokovian neatness or "snugness" about it (291), especially when combined with his reticence about rainbows in the memoir's paratextual apparatus. Still, an answer might be found in his projections for *Speak On, Memory*, the sequel Nabokov planned to *Speak, Memory* but never wrote. *Speak On, Memory* (or *Speak, America*) was to chronicle Nabokov's years in America, and by 1968 Nabokov had sketched out ideas for seven chapters, on such topics as the Wellesley carpool and his relationship with Edmund Wilson (Boyd, *American* 564). There might, of course, have been more chapters, eventually, or less, but there's a certain logic to the number seven. *Speak, Memory* covers Nabokov's twenty years in Russia and twenty-one years in Europe in fifteen chapters, so about half as many chapters, one-third of the total, seems an appropriate number to devote to the twenty years he spent in the United States. Such a structure might even have been visible to Nabokov in the early fifties, when he assembled the chapters of his memoir into their final order. A little fancifully, then, though not, I think, implausibly, we might imagine a final, two-volume version of Nabokov's life of some twenty-two chapters, with that "tender[]" and "glor[ious]" rainbow appearing precisely halfway



*The Capacity to Wonder at Trifles Distinguished from the Passion of Wonder*

So far, we've been discussing the "passion" of wonder, taking note of its properties and its central place in Nabokov's work. Let's turn, now, to that *other* form of consciousness, the one he deems the very "highest" -- the "capacity to wonder at trifles." What does our discussion of passionate wonder help us to see about this other state of mind?

Here, again, is Nabokov's description of the "capacity to wonder at trifles" in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense":

What exactly do these irrational standards mean? They mean the supremacy of the detail over the general, of the part that is more alive than the whole, of the little thing which a man observes and greets with a friendly nod of the spirit while the crowd around him is being driven by some common impulse to some common goal. I take my hat off to the hero who dashes into a burning house and saves his neighbor's child; but I shake his hand if he has risked squandering a precious five seconds to find and save, together with the child, its favorite toy. I remember a cartoon depicting a chimney sweep falling from the roof of a tall building and noticing on the way that a sign-board had one word spelled wrong, and wondering in his headlong flight why nobody had thought of correcting it. In a sense, we all are crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns on the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles -- no matter the imminent peril -- these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good (*LL* 373-374).

Our discussion up to this point, in articulating the specific features of the "passion" of wonder, provides us with a structure for thinking about the "capacity to wonder at trifles," too. It helps us to see, for example, that the "capacity to wonder at trifles" also involves a sudden, present-tense response "of the spirit" to something in the world; that it, too, leads on to acts of contemplation,

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through.

questioning, investigation, “specula[tion]”; and that it, too, is a form of consciousness that does not necessarily depend on the presence of other people. Alice, the chimney sweep, the man standing apart from the crowd are all, notably, alone. Finally, it, too, is associated with youth. Nabokov describes “the capacity to wonder at trifles” as a “childishly speculative” state of mind. The whole passage, in fact, is built around images and reminders of childhood: a child, a toy, a cartoon, a children’s book, another child.

What Nabokov calls the “highest form[] of consciousness,” then, resembles passionate wonder in many respects. But it also departs from it, in important and even definitive ways. The first and most obvious difference between the two is the difference of object: “delightful rarit[ies]” on the one hand, “trifles” on the other. The moon-landing, the rainbow, and the rare butterfly are all archetypal objects of passionate wonder: splendid, surprising, unusual; and Nabokov clearly counts his responses to these “rare and extraordinary” things as a highly privileged form of consciousness. And yet the very *highest* form of consciousness, he says, though also a kind of “wondering...at,” takes a very different sort of object: trivial, unsurprising, everyday. Nabokov’s examples of *this* form of consciousness, the “capacity to wonder at trifles,” center on simple objects, “little thing[s],” encountered not rarely but all the time: toys, cartoons, billboards, spelling errors, the jars of marmalade and humble “pictures hung on pegs” Alice encounters on her way down the rabbit-hole, rather than the strange sights she will soon see (Carroll 3).

Because the object is different here, the situation of wondering-at is different, too. The rainbow, as we’ve noted, strikes us; it seizes our attention; as long as we haven’t seen too many rainbows before, we cannot help but respond to it. In the passage above, however, Nabokov’s wonderers attend to precisely the thing that would seem, at that moment, least likely to command their

attention. They remark the unremarkable. The world seems to have been made over for them, or they have made it over, in such a way that peripheral things seem central and little things seem big. This suggests that the “capacity to wonder at trifles” is not only a kind of experience but also a more general kind of attitude, a way of comporting oneself toward the things of the world so that they show up in a certain way. Similarly, we might say, recalling Charles Taylor, that the “capacity to wonder at trifles” is not only a kind of “activity” but also a kind of “condition.” Taylor explains that we tend to identify heightened experiences of consciousness with either one or the other:

Somewhere, in some *activity, or condition*, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (*activity or condition*), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be...a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually (5-6; my italics).

An activity might be a special kind of work or play or life event: completing a painting, fly-fishing, getting married. A condition might be a state of mind, a mode of being, a way of orienting oneself in the world: experiencing a state of grace, perhaps, or enjoying a sense of really knowing and feeling known by another person. Nabokov’s critics tend to describe his “highest form[] of consciousness” in the first way, as a kind of activity, a special sort of “noticing” or “recognizing” or “seeing” or observing; but we should note that Nabokov *also* describes it as a kind of condition, as a “capacity” and a “state of mind.” A funny lapse in parallelism allows him to have it both ways:

This capacity to wonder at trifles - no matter the imminent peril - these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness [...]

Nabokov, in other words, identifies his “highest form[] of consciousness” as both a capacity for a certain kind of wonder and the realization of that capacity in specific acts of wondering-at,

experiential “footnotes” and spiritual “asides.” The capacity seems to me prior, as it is the condition that makes those elevating footnotes possible. This privileged form of consciousness, then, refers to something greater than an act or even practice of “good noticing” (James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (HFW) 63). It suggests a whole way of disposing oneself toward the things of one’s world, a certain kind of openness or readiness, a special attunement that allows “trifles” -- the smallest, most under-noticed, undervalued parts of that world -- to show up as occasions for wonder.

This marks the second major difference, after the difference in object, between the “passion” of wonder and the “capacity to wonder at trifles.” If the second is, at least in part, a “dispositional” state, the first is a wholly “occasioned” one. Fisher distinguishes between occasioned and dispositional states in *The Vehement Passions*:

We need to notice first the difference between the eruptive momentary impassioned state and the more enduring underlying states of which we sometimes speak when thinking of the passions, the difference between occasioned, onetime events and the passions as we experience them in settled, persistent, temperamental facts (or, in Kant’s term, inclinations). Grief felt at the unexpected and sudden death of the central person in one’s life might be the best example of an occasioned vehement state. We always distinguish a general disposition, like the fear of heights, from a moment of fear when we see a large snake in front of us on a path...

Ambition and avarice are passions commonly invoked as settled, underlying dispositional facts about a person. Grief and fear are examples, on the other side, of passions we think of first by means of single, experiential moments. When you hear the word, you think of an occasioned grief or fear. In other words, even within any ordinary list of the passions some are likely to seem essentially occasioned, eruptive, and eventlike, even while also having a dispositional form, while others are the opposite, primarily dispositions, and only rarely eventlike. Among the most clearly episodic, it is hard to think of wonder as anything but a momentary event in which we feel surprise and pleasure at something noticed just now (18-19).

From Fisher’s point of view, wonder is so clearly an occasioned, episodic, eruptive, vehement state that it is hard to imagine a dispositional version of it at all. The very idea of being “disposed to” or

“ready for” the passion of wonder has something incoherent about it, as that readiness would seem to work against the sense of rarity and surprise central to the experience of that passion. The “capacity to wonder at trifles” then, can’t really be understood as a type or instance of passionate wonder. Instead we should think of it as a close cousin, one that shares with it some phenomenal characteristics -- some part of the surprise and pleasure, curiosity and awe characteristic of the “passion” of wonder -- while remaining a distinct form of consciousness in its own right. If Nabokov’s rapt response to the extraordinary rainbow in Chapter Eleven of *Speak, Memory* emblemizes the vehement passion of wonder, his habit of perceiving small prismatic patterns, minor rainbows everywhere emblemizes this other state of mind.

Further differences follow. Once we identify the “capacity to wonder at trifles” as not only a response to the world but also an attitude that makes such responses possible, we might ask whether it is possible to actively *cultivate* such an attitude. Nabokov suggests that it is. He certainly thought it possible to cultivate such an attitude toward *texts*. His lectures on literature aim, in large part, to cultivate his students’ “capacity to wonder at” textual trifles. Through a combination of instruction, encouragement, and example, Nabokov endeavored to increase his students’ capacity for experiencing literary details -- original epithets, unusual gestures, brief, bright images, striking “evocations” and “particular revelations” -- as occasions for surprise and delight (*LL* 116). His inclusion of “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” among these lectures suggests an analogy between literary matters and existential ones, between the question of how to read well and the question of how to live well, between our way of relating to books and our way of relating to the world. Among other things, that analogy suggests that if our capacity for wondering at the “sunny trifles of the book” can be improved and increased (*LL* 1), then perhaps our capacity for wondering

at the trifles of everyday life can be improved as well.

The hortatory tone of “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” further suggests Nabokov’s belief that the capacity to wonder at trifles may be expanded, encouraged, increased. Nabokov characterizes his lecture as an “advertise[ment]” for a certain “divinely absurd,” “emphatically and unshakably illogical” way of thinking, one that privileges “detail[s],” “part[s]” and “little thing[s]” far above the general, the aggregate, and the abstract. In “advertising” this way of thinking as a “home for the spirit,” he implies that we may, if we choose, embrace that way of thinking and take up its “irrational standards” for ourselves (373). Both the pedagogical context and exhortative quality of the “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” then, suggest that we can actively cultivate our capacity to wonder at trifles, increase our lot of spiritual footnotes and asides, and, in this way, court the highest form of consciousness there is. Our capacity for the “vehement passion” of wonder, on the other hand, though variable (over time, with experience and exposure, across cultures, with one’s shifting sense of the familiar and the unknown), is not directly manipulable in this way. One can learn to recognize the passion of wonder, to analyze and appreciate it, but not to wonder “more” or wonder “better,” to experience the vehement passion of wonder more fiercely or frequently. This is true for the same reason it is true that you cannot “dispose” or “incline” yourself to passionate wonder: such learning, disposing, and inclining would moderate the drama of surprise central to that passion.

There is one last difference worth noting here. Time, as we noted earlier, poses a problem for the passion of wonder. Passionate wonder depends on the “rare and extraordinary” quality of the thing wondered at, but what seems rare and extraordinary, strange and surprising to us now is unlikely to seem so for long. Wondering at trifles, however, does not depend on the obvious rarity and

extraordinariness of its object. It begins with what is already common, ordinary, unimportant, trifling, and for this reason would seem to be less vulnerable than passionate wonder to diminishment over time. It is as though, in this case, the threshold for the feeling of wonder has been pushed back to and fixed at its position at an earlier age, when even the most ordinary things presented themselves as occasions for wonder. And, indeed, Nabokov describes “the capacity to wonder at trifles” as a “childishly speculative state of mind” that remains available to us long after we’ve grown up. He even likens our wondering experience of the world to that of a child suspended in time, an “immortal Alice in Wonderland.”

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We can sum up the features of Nabokov’s “highest form[] of consciousness,” then, in the following way. “The capacity to wonder at trifles” refers to *a cultivable, durable attunement or way of disposing oneself toward the things of the world that allows the most undervalued, under-noticed parts of that world to show up as occasions for surprise, delight, curiosity, and speculation.* Nabokov’s “highest form[] of consciousness” refers to this dispositional state as well as to the occasioned states of wonder it enables, those experiential “footnotes” and spiritual “asides.”

Already we should be able to see how different this is from merely “notic[ing]....external details,” “recognizing something others would miss,” or “being curious about what others take for granted.” The “capacity to wonder at trifles” refers, instead, to a whole way of being in the world. More than a healthy habit of “good noticing,” it speaks to a far-reaching, transformative way of relating to and valuing things. It also speaks to a way of responding to things, not merely with interest or pleasure

but with the richer, more complex response of wonder.

And yet the lateral comparison of the “passion” of wonder with the “capacity to wonder at trifles” only gets us so far. It helps us to see what “the capacity to wonder at trifles” is and even why, like the “passion” of wonder, it might be valued, but it doesn’t explain why it should be considered the very *highest* form of consciousness of all. We have yet to answer the question with which we began: how might this special state of mind, part activity, part condition, focused on trifles and realized in asides, be said to be the highest form of consciousness there is? And what, for that matter, distinguishes this special attentiveness to under-noticed things from other states of mind -- generally considered defective or inferior -- that also involve an exaggerated amount of attention to “trivial and insignificant matters” (Augustine 243)? From what Descartes calls “astonishment” (58), for example, what Augustine calls “curiosity” (243), or what Heidegger refers to as curiosity or “distraction” (*Being and Time (BT)* 216)?<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately Nabokov offers us another angle from which to make sense of his claim. He defines his highest form of consciousness, after all, in more than one way, both in terms of what it is like -- “wonder” -- and in terms of what it is utterly unlike -- “commonsense and its logic.” This alternative definition provides us with another way into the question of why Nabokov values “the capacity to wonder at trifles” as highly as he does. Let’s turn, then, to the “monster of grim commonsense” (*LL* 380). Understanding Nabokov’s low evaluation of commonsense should help us better understand his high evaluation of its opposite, the capacity to wonder at trifles, “so different from” it.

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5. I will return to these questions in my conclusion.



## CHAPTER TWO:

### *Commonsense and Its Logic*

Nabokov portrays commonsense as a “grim” and “lumbering” beast; the enemy of everything artistic and good; a “monster” to be spotted, stalked, and, in the lecture’s final moments, coolly slain. What, exactly, is Nabokov targeting when he targets commonsense? What is “commonsense,” and what makes it so monstrous?

### *Two Faces of “Commonsense”*

“Commonsense” actually stands for more than one thing in this lecture: a general shape, style, and context of thought on the one hand, and a particular way of orienting oneself toward the things of the world on the other. Let’s take each of these two ways in turn.

First, Nabokov often seems to use the term “commonsense” to refer to a general style of thought, rather than to some particular commonsensical notion or other. This use of the term recalls Clifford Geertz’s description of common sense as a “cultural system” in his essay by that name. Geertz observes that while the particular *content* of common-sense wisdom varies widely from culture to culture -- whether “make hay while the sun shines” or “it is the prudent hyena that lives long” -- the general *style* and *attitude* of common sense are largely consistent between them (90). “[W]hat simple wisdom has everywhere in common,” he writes, “is the maddening air of simple wisdom with which it is uttered.” Geertz identifies five basic, cross-cultural “stylistic features” or “marks of attitude” that give common sense its “peculiar stamp”: naturalness, practicalness, thinness, immethodicalness, and

accessibility. *Naturalness* refers to the way common sense “represents matters -- that is, certain matters and not others -- as being what they are in the simple nature of the case...inherent in the situation, intrinsic aspects of reality, the way things go,” in other words, to its general “air of ‘of-courseness’” (85). *Practicalness* refers to its typical emphasis on prudence, sensibleness, and all-around levelheadedness, apparent in such admonitions as “don’t buy any wooden nickels” or “stay away from slow horses and fast women,” and in the fact that when we say that something or someone lacks common sense, “what we most often mean...is that they are impractical” (87).

*Thinness* (or “simplicity”) refers to the way common sense has of taking things to be “precisely what they seem to be, neither more nor less,” of insisting that “the world is what the wide-awake, uncomplicated person takes it to be,” that “[s]obriety, not subtlety, realism, not imagination, are the keys to wisdom,” and that “the really important facts of life lie scattered openly along its surface, not cunningly secreted in its depths” (89). *Immethodicalness* refers to the *ad hoc* quality of common sense, its casual inconsistency, the way it “shamelessly and unapologetically” embraces contradiction to include, for example, both “seize the day” and a “stitch in time saves nine,” “he who hesitates is lost” and “look before you leap” (90). And *accessibility*, finally, refers to the notion that common-sense wisdom is readily available to “any person with faculties reasonably intact” -- no special training, knowledge, technique or “peculiar giftedness” required. Common sense, in short, “represents the world as a familiar world, one everyone can, and should, recognize, and within which everyone stands, or should, on his own two feet” (91).

When Nabokov declares that “[c]ommonsense is square whereas all the most essential visions and values of life are beautifully round,” it is to this general shape or style of thought that he refers (*LL* 372). It’s not hard to see why this “genre[] of cultural expression” (Geertz 92), with its preference for

the literal and the plain, its mistrust of complexity and contempt for expertise, would be especially offensive to someone like him. (He would surely have taken pleasure in Geertz's choice of example of an *un*-commonsensical activity: "chasing butterflies") (Geertz 88). Nabokov objects to commonsense on intellectual, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual grounds: its methods are lazy, its conclusions specious, its logic pedestrian, trite, and dull; it obscures the truth and compromises the moral instrument of the imagination; it narrows our sense of what is possible and, in the process, our freedom, our creativity, our capacity for joy, our very humanity.

"Commonsense," moreover, signifies not only a certain *style* of thought but a certain *context* or *situation* of thought as well. It's what "everyone can, and should recognize," the set of beliefs "we all" have in common (Geertz 91). Nabokov sometimes emphasizes this aspect of commonsense in his lecture, so that the term reads as a synonym for groupthink, collective belief, popular opinion, the wisdom of the crowd. (For him, of course, that last phrase always has the status of an oxymoron.) Nabokov's case against the communal aspect of commonsense is threefold. First, collective thought tends to reflect a lower common denominator of thought -- hence the "thin," reductive, "accessible," anti-intellectual quality of commonsense, its incomprehension in the face of ambiguity and complexity. Second, crowds are always, in Nabokov's view, hostile to individuals. They're intolerant and parochial, suspicious of difference and independence; they demand conformity. Third, the sheer volume of commonsense opinion lends it a kind of easy and false authority that can turn brutal if left unchecked. Together these traits make for an ugly -- and menacing -- combination. Hence Nabokov's pointed reminder that

there is not a single person in this room, or for that matter in any room in the world, who, at some nicely chosen point in historical space-time would not be put to death there and then, here and now, by a commonsensical majority in righteous

rage. The color of one's creed, neckties, eyes, thoughts, manners, speech, is sure to meet somewhere in time or space with a fatal objection from a mob that hates that particular tone. And the more brilliant, the more unusual the man, the nearer he is to the stake. *Stranger* always rhymes with *danger* (LL 372).

Here "commonsense" stands not only for a "genre of cultural expression" characterized by "naturalness," "thinness," and so on, but also for whatever it is that some bullying majority happens, at some moment in space-time, to believe. In both cases the particular *content* of that belief or expression is beside the point. Nabokov's concern is instead with the general style, shape, and context of commonsense thought, its crude logic and troubling association with the senseless, insensitive judgement of the crowd.

This vision of commonsense doesn't present us with a particularly "flattering view of the creature" (LL 372). But neither is that vision wholly formidable. After all, there are many ways available to us of undermining "commonsense" as so defined. We can challenge its claims of authority, for example, by showing the wide range of what counts as "common sense" in different cultures, as Geertz does in "Common Sense as a Cultural System." We can show how the content of common-sense wisdom changes over time, like fads in "neckties...manners, speech." Or else we can go after commonsense with what Jonathan Culler calls a "pugnacious critique," interrogating its assumptions and exposing its logical flaws. This, after all, as Culler explains, is the basic aim of critical theory:

The main effect of theory is the disputing of 'common sense': common-sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience...Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as 'common-sense' is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don't even see it as a theory (4).

Satire, of course, is yet another powerful weapon against the "cultural system" of "commonsense," as

Flaubert in particular shows. And as for debunking one's faith in popular opinion and the "common impulse" of the crowd, Nabokov simply points us to the historical record (*LL* 373). Even the most cursory examination of history, he implies, should assure us that the wisdom of the crowd is often anything but wise.

Commonsense, then, understood in this general way, is a forbidding but vulnerable foe, stalked and "shot dead" -- or at least wounded -- many times over (*LL* 380), not only by Nabokov but by anthropologists, philosophers, novelists, historians, psychologists and "theorists" of every stripe. But "commonsense" *also* means something more specific in this lecture -- more specific and, I would submit, more formidable. In addition to using the term to invoke a general, transcultural, transhistorical system or style of thinking -- the "good sound ordinary...horse sense" Webster's dictionary describes (*LL* 372) --, Nabokov uses it to invoke a particular, and particularly modern, collection of ideas, values, beliefs, patterns of thought and behavior. These are *particular* precepts that qualify as "commonsense" in our modern and modernized world. Among them Nabokov includes the notion that the real value of something adheres in its practical, instrumental, material value, in how it may be used or for what it may be exchanged, in what material benefit it may ultimately provide; that the best view of reality is always the widest view, the aggregate view, the general picture; that statistical analysis provides the readiest way to truth; that the world is fully knowable, measurable, calculable, accessible; that whatever lies beyond our calculations -- "inevitable indeterminism[s]" (*LL* 374), intangible qualities, untestable intimations of immortality -- is either unimportant or unreal, and that the contrapositive of that is also true: nothing important is beyond

us; there is no limit to what we can know or do.<sup>6</sup>

Nabokov indicates that these precepts, like all particular iterations of commonsense, have a history:

Man at a certain stage of his development invented arithmetic for the purely practical purpose of obtaining some kind of human order in a world which he knew to be ruled by gods whom he could not prevent from playing havoc with his sums whenever they felt so inclined. He accepted that inevitable indeterminism which they now and then introduced, called it magic, and calmly proceeded to count the skins he had bartered by chalking bars on the wall of his cave. The gods might intrude, but he at least was resolved to follow a system that he had invented for the express purpose of following it.

Then, as the thousands of centuries trickled by, and the gods retired on a more or less adequate pension, and human calculations grew more and more acrobatic, mathematics transcended their initial condition and became as it were a natural part of the world to which they had been merely applied. Instead of having numbers based on certain phenomena that they happened to fit because we ourselves

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6. Nabokov's critique is at least as relevant today as it was at midcentury. Kathryn Schulz, in a recent *New York Times* piece -- with which Nabokov surely would have agreed -- on Franco Moretti and the Stanford Literary Lab, describes the modern faith in statistics, data, aggregation and generalization as the "theology of the 21st century":

...Moretti isn't interested in the unquantifiable, inscrutable actions of intelligent human beings trying to write stuff. There will always be some people for whom new technologies seem to promise completeness and certainty, and Moretti, enthusing over the prospect of "a unified theory of plot and style," is one of them. Literature, he argues, is "a collective system that should be grasped as such." But this, too, is a theology of sorts - if not the claim that literature is a system, at least the conviction that we can find meaning only in its totality.

Moreover, as theologies go, Moretti's is neither new nor, at present, rare. The idea that truth can best be revealed through quantitative models dates back to the development of statistics (and boasts a less-than-benign legacy). And the idea that data is gold waiting to be mined; that all entities (including people) are best understood as nodes in a network; that things are at their clearest when they are least particular, most interchangeable, most aggregated -- well, perhaps that is not the theology of the average lit department (yet). But it is surely the theology of the 21st century (BR14).

happened to fit into the pattern we apprehended, the whole world gradually turned out to be based on numbers, and nobody seems to have been surprised at the queer fact of the outer network becoming an inner skeleton. Indeed, by digging a little deeper somewhere near the waistline of South America a lucky geologist may one day discover, as his spade rings against metal, the solid barrel hoop of the equator (*LL* 374).

Nabokov's fable traces the origins of commonsense back to a certain moment in time when "the gods retired" and "the whole world...turned out to be based on numbers." He doesn't punctuate his just-so story with dates and place names, but one could reasonably say that "the...world turned out to be based on numbers" about three or four hundred years ago, with the advent of the Scientific, and later Industrial, Revolutions. The rise of commonsense -- that is, this particular form of commonsense, these particular precepts -- is therefore coincident with the rise of modernity; let's call it "modern commonsense." And yet it's important to see that Nabokov's position is, at root, neither anti-scientific nor anti-modern. His wonder at the *Apollo* mission is too complete, his rapture in the laboratory too profound for his case against commonsense to be mistaken for a case against science or even modernization per se. Modern commonsense, as Nabokov describes it, is a collection of attitudes, values, habits of mind, a way of approaching and encountering things, and it is more readily associated with number-crunching technocrats, businessmen obsessed with bottom lines, closed-minded materialists and cynical statesmen than with physicists, mathematicians, biologists or inventors. It can, of course, co-opt the language and tools of science just as it can co-opt everything else; but science, at its best, is, in Nabokov's view, as far from commonsense as is the

art of literature: open-minded, imaginative, creative, inspired, reverent and attentive to detail, difference, and design.<sup>7</sup>

Modern commonsense, by contrast, is narrow, rigid, "matter-of-fact" (*LL* 377), routine, hubristic, dismissive of detail and difference, and in thrall to the power of "numbers," "statistics,"

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7. After all, the practice of science -- especially the sort of natural, empirical science Nabokov was himself involved in -- depends very much on the scientist's "capacity to wonder at trifles." That phrase, in fact, recalls -- and very possibly alludes -- to a particular passage in Alexander Pope that is concerned with just this sort of scientific wonderment. Among the many forms of contemporary stupidity or "dulness" Pope lampoons in *The Dunciad* is the study of natural history, with its excessive, mundane interest in the "trifles" of the natural world. In Book Four of Pope's mock-heroic, he describes a "tribe" of naturalists, come to pay homage to the Queen of Dulness:

Then thick as Locusts black'ning all the ground,  
A tribe, with weeds and shells fantastic crown'd,  
Each with some wond'rous gift approach'd the Pow'r,  
A Nest, a Toad, a Fungus, or a Flow'r.

A horticulturalist and a butterfly collector come forward, and ask the Queen to settle a dispute. The horticulturalist's prize carnation has been destroyed by the collector, who in his "insect lust" has managed to trample it. He defends himself as Nabokov might in such a situation:

Th' Accus'd stood forth, and thus address'd the Queen.  
Of all th' enamel'd race, whose silv'ry wing  
Waves to the tepid Zephyrs of the spring,  
Or swims along the fluid atmosphere,  
Once brightest shin'd this child of Heat and Air.  
I saw, and started from its vernal bow'r  
The rising game, and chac'd from flow'r to flow'r.  
It fled, I follow'd; now in hope, now pain;  
It stopt, I stopt; it mov'd, I mov'd again.  
At last it fix'd, 'twas on what plant it pleas'd,  
And where it fix'd, the beauteous bird I seiz'd:  
Rose or Carnation was below my care;  
I meddle, Goddess! only in my sphere.  
I tell the naked fact without disguise,  
And, to excuse it, need but shew the prize;  
Whose spoils this paper offers to your eye,



“generalization[s]” and “calculating machine[s]” (*LL* 374). The real trouble with this attitude is that it radically devalues everything it apprehends. It insists that value is primarily instrumental, and that everything is ultimately interchangeable. From this perspective, the child’s “favorite toy” is, in the context of the rescue, useless, and recovering it would be a useless act -- and the child can always get

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Fair ev'n in death! this peerless *Butterfly*.

Dulness acquits them both ("My sons! (she answer'd) both have done your parts:/Live happy both, and long promote our arts"), and muses:

O! would the Sons of Men once think their Eyes  
And reason giv'n them but to study *Flies!*  
See nature in some partial narrow shape,  
And let the Author of the Whole escape:  
Learn but to trifle; or, who most observe,  
To wonder at their Maker, not to serve (4:397- 458).

"Learn but to trifle...to wonder at": Pope's satirical poem implies that merely wondering at trifles is but a dull and misguided distraction from more important things -- such as, for example, the First Cause of all those trifles. Nabokov's scrupulous attention to butterfly wings -- and, moreover, the arrangement of *scales* on butterflies' wings -- makes him an even more fervid disciple of "Dulness," from *The Dunciad*'s point of view, than Pope's collector. Nabokov was undoubtedly familiar with the passage. First, he knew Pope's work well (and would later make one of his better-known characters a Pope scholar); he was especially alert to poetic descriptions of butterflies, as he tells us in *Speak, Memory* (*SM* 128-129); he was also particularly alert to 18th century slights against butterfly collectors, "those happy hunters with their captures pinned to the crown of their hats, of whom the Age of Reason made such fun" (*SM* 278). And, finally, there's the close textual correspondence between the two passages -- "wonder at," "trifles." Nabokov's position is precisely the opposite of that implied by *The Dunciad*, and it may be that he's folded a bit of 18th century commonsense directly into his argument here, cheekily appropriating Pope's language, scrubbing it of irony, and presenting the spurious wisdom of Dulness as truth. Of course, Nabokov admired Pope, even in spite of his distaste for certain 18th century habits of mind. Neoclassical "commonsense" isn't the primary, or even secondary, target of Nabokov's essay, which is mainly concerned with two other, grimmer and duller, incarnations of that beast: the "good sound ordinary sense" (*LL* 372) of Webster's dictionary (Geertz's "common sense as a cultural system") and what I am here describing as "modern commonsense."

another toy, anyway. But if value is instrumental, and everything is interchangeable, then nothing ever really *matters*, in a deep sense. Nothing matters *in itself*, that is, nothing is allowed “to show up as having an intrinsic worth...a significance independent of [its] usefulness to our current projects”; and nothing really matters *for us*, for our “self-realization” (Wrathall 204; 200). Mark Wrathall’s distinction between “instrumental” and “existential” importance helps clarify this latter point:

Things have an instrumental importance anytime we take up some of the purposes made available by the intelligible structure of the world. In a world where it makes sense to be a doctor, for instance, one can take up the objects that a doctor employs, and come into relation with the people a doctor relates to in her doctoring activities. These people and objects will matter to her, just as long as she continues to be a doctor. But outside of her doctoring activity, these devices and people need not make any claim on her.

Existential importance, by contrast, would consist in some practice or object or person having an importance for our self-realization. That is, the object or person or practice is something without which we would cease to be who we are. Such objects or persons or practices thus make a demand on us -- require of us that we value them, respect them, respond to them on pain of losing ourselves (200).

Nabokov’s irrational hero -- the man who “squander[s] a precious five seconds” to find and save both child and toy -- lives in such a way that things still show up for him as having existential importance. The beloved toy has existential importance for the child, and the act of acknowledging and honoring that fact has existential importance for the man. The toy, in other words, “make[s] a demand” on them both: it requires them to value it, respect it, respond to it.

### *Kaufman’s Birder*

Valuing things solely in terms of their “usefulness to our current projects,” by contrast, drains the world of meaning and, with it, joy. The impoverishing effect of this approach is vividly illustrated by an anecdote from Kenn Kaufman’s “One and a Half Cheers for List-Keeping,” recently published in

*Field Notes on Science and Nature*, an edited collection of essays about naturalists and their field notebooks. In this essay, Kaufman, “one of the most accomplished and revered birders in the world” (Canfield 289), warns against the dangers of taking “an extreme list-chasing approach” to birding (Kaufman 54):

...a continued emphasis on just finding and checking off new species can eventually stunt a person’s development as a naturalist and limit her ability to learn more. I worked for several years as a leader of birding tours, and I met a few sad individuals who were so focused on adding to their life lists that they would refuse to look at a bird species that they had seen before, no matter how spectacular the view or how fascinating its behavior of the moment might be. “I don’t need that bird” was their standard reply. I knew one man who went repeatedly on organized spring birding trips to St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, hoping to see strays from Siberia to add to his North American life list. He would sit in the lodge by the radio, waiting for one of the other birders to call in and report some rarity that would be new to him. One year there was nothing found that he hadn’t already seen before, so as far as we could tell, he didn’t look at a bird the whole time he was there. And this at a place where the “everyday” birds, utterly different from those in most of the United States, occur in mind-blowing concentrations (Kaufman 54).

Kaufman’s stunted birder, sitting alone, indoors, beside a silent radio, cut off from the infinitely rich world of experience outside, provides us with an image of what it means to live in a such a way that things no longer “make a demand on us.” Among other things, the birder’s “sad” story highlights the transformative quality of the instrumentalist approach, the way it seems actually to affect how birds show up for him, to change what, in effect, they *are* for him. His life lists and checklists transform the birds into items to be recorded or checked off, and, once checked off, they *are* very little, and they *mean* almost nothing; one year they simply don’t show up for him at all.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Of course it’s not the lists alone that do this; but part of Kaufman’s point in this essay is that the tools we use really can have an effect on what we do. Hence his half-cheer against list-keeping. The very idea of a “life list” can change how we approach birds (or trees, or wildflowers), think about what they are, what they “are for,” what we should “do with” them. A list can’t create an atmosphere

Depleted of value, the birds become interchangeable. For the purpose of crossing a species off a list, one Cedar Waxwing is as good as any another; and, once crossed off, as meaningless as any other. The response of the jaded birders -- "I don't need that bird" -- does not in fact refer to any particular bird but rather looks through "that" bird to the whole species. (An interesting aspect of the anecdote is that, in Kaufman's telling of it, this aura of interchangeability begins to envelop the list-keepers themselves, so that they all respond to the birds in the same way, with the same "standard reply.") The list-keepers' casual dismissal of difference might put us in mind of Mademoiselle O, Nabokov's sometime governess, who, in one memorable scene from his autobiography, dismisses a carefully delineated series of Large Whites as just a bunch of "papillons de potager":

One summer afternoon, in 1911, Mademoiselle came into my room, book in hand, started to say she wanted to show me how wittily Rousseau denounced zoology (in favor of botany), and by then was too far gone in the gravitational process of lowering her bulk into an armchair to be stopped by my howl of anguish: on that seat I had happened to leave a glass-lidded cabinet tray with long, lovely series of the Large White. Her first reaction was one of stung vanity: her weight, surely, could not be accused of damaging what in fact it had demolished; her second was to console me: *Allons donc, ce ne sont que des papillons de potager!* -- which only made matters worse. A Sicilian pair recently purchased from Staudinger had been crushed and bruised. A huge Biarritz example was utterly mangled. Smashed, too, were some of my choicest local captures. Of these, an aberration resembling the Canarian race of the species might have been mended with a few drops of glue; but a precious gynandromorph, left side male, right side female, whose abdomen could not be traced and whose wings had come off, was lost forever: one might reattach the wings but one could not prove that all four belonged to that headless thorax on its bent pin. Next morning, with an air of great mystery, poor Mademoiselle set off for St. Petersburg and came back in the evening bringing me ("something better than your cabbage butterflies") a banal *Urania* moth mounted on plaster. "How you hugged me, how you danced with joy!" she exclaimed, ten years later in the course of inventing a brand-new past (*SM* 127-128).

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of instrumentalism out of nothing -- no list could disrupt Nabokov's way of being with butterflies -- but it can enable such an atmosphere, encourage it, amplify it, help it along.

To Nabokov each White is unique, while to Mademoiselle they are all the same. Like Kaufman's birder, she never really *sees* the different specimens, and, in truth, she isn't really all that interested in seeing them. (Part of the comedy of the scene involves the fact that, having literally failed to see the butterflies at first -- with disastrous results -- she persists in her blindness to them until the end.)

Yet there's a crucial difference between the birder and Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle's response, one feels, derives from simple ignorance, a lack of knowledge, a gap in her experience. She simply doesn't know anything about butterflies -- or, presumably, "zoology" in general.<sup>9</sup> The birder's blindness, by contrast, derives not from a lack of knowledge or even interest but rather from an outright *refusal* to look. His is an *active* turning away: he rejects his fellow birders' invitations to examine this or that bird in closer detail; he opts to stay indoors; he makes it through one trip without "look[ing] at a bird the whole time" (Kaufman 54) -- which, one supposes, must have taken some effort. Among other things, his example helps us to see how this way of valuing and encountering things only in terms of their instrumental value, their "usefulness to [one's] current projects" (Wrathall 204), closes down other ways of valuing and encountering those same things. It actively precludes the birder from delighting in the "spectacular" appearance or "fascinating...behavior" of a given bird, and, indeed, from recognizing its profound distinctness from any bird he has "seen before" (Kaufman 54). Being one sort of thing -- an item on a list to be crossed off -- a bird can't be something else -- an existentially important object of beauty and wonder,

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9. And, in fact, her larger response to the situation suggests anything but an instrumentalist attitude: she quickly recognizes the collection's existential importance to Nabokov; the situation "make[s] a demand" on her; irrationally, uncommonsensibly, she travels one hundred miles in one day to find some compensation for his loss; and she returns from her journey with an exotic *Urania* moth (another rainbow!), "banal" to the young expert but, one assumes, quite wonderful to her.

for example; or an independently significant, intrinsically worthwhile being, valuable simply in itself.<sup>10</sup>

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The example of Kaufman's birder sheds light on what I have been calling "modern commonsense," since modern commonsense, too, values things according to their "usefulness." It, too, represents an active, transformative way of orienting oneself toward things in the world. It, too, reveals things to be interchangeable, scrubbed of distinctness and difference. And it, too, closes down other ways of revealing what things are. But commonsense goes one step further than this, for in addition to evaluating things in terms of their "usefulness to our current projects," it also evaluates the projects themselves. By the standards of modern commonsense, a worthwhile project is one that benefits our material well-being: writing a book is only worthwhile if the book will "*s-e-double-l*" (Nabokov, *LL* 380), and stopping to retrieve a child's toy from a burning house is not worthwhile at all. From this perspective, Kaufman's birder represents a good example of the instrumentalist attitude but an

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10. Kaufman's anecdote also illustrates the close connection between intrinsic value and existential importance. When something is deeply important to our self-realization, it is easier to recognize its own intrinsic worth; and, conversely, orienting ourselves toward things in a way that allows them to show up as being inherently worthwhile makes it more likely that they will become existentially important for us. The more time a birder spends acknowledging the birds' "significance independent of their usefulness" to her practice of birding -- by, for example, learning about and closely observing them, attending to their "fascinating...behavior of the moment" -- the dearer they will become to her, the more central to her birding practice and to her identity as a birder. By the same logic, orienting herself toward the birds in a way that denies or occludes their intrinsic value -- by, say, maintaining "a continued emphasis on just finding and checking off new species" and otherwise "refus[ing] to look" at them -- will stunt and limit her "development as a naturalist and...ability to learn more," and thus diminish their existential importance for her as well.

imperfect example of commonsense. For though he approaches his project in an almost absurdly “commonsensical” way, the project itself serves no obvious material purpose. Why does he go on those birding trips year after year? What point is there, really, to accumulating bird names on a list? His situation contains a redemptive dash of “the irrational, the illogical, the inexplicable” after all (Nabokov, *LL* 377).

### *The Monstrousness of Modern Commonsense*

To this point modern commonsense, with its emphasis on material realities, instrumental value, generalization and quantification, might yet seem like mere, as Nabokov might say, “philistinism,” or else a pitiable affliction of a “few sad individuals” (Kaufman 54). But modern commonsense is really more formidable than this. Acknowledging the full extent of its “monst[rousness]” is important for us here (Nabokov, *LL* 380), as it helps us to recognize commonsense as a genuine counterweight to “the highest form[] of consciousness,” and generally to appreciate the gravity of Nabokov’s argument, the seriousness that undergirds his lecture’s play and humor.

Heidegger’s essay on “The Question Concerning Technology” helps bring the full “threat” and “danger” of modern commonsense to light (332). Heidegger’s essay, drafted, like “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” in the 1940s, similarly draws attention to the “monstrousness” of the modern-technological “way of revealing” what things are (321; 318). Heidegger’s vision is darker than Nabokov’s, and generally more extreme, but the comparison is especially useful for this reason. Heidegger shows us modern commonsense at its *most* monstrous. His essay helps to clarify the stakes of Nabokov’s argument, by showing what the very highest possible stakes of such an argument might be.

In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger argues that modern man, through a mysterious process called “enframing,” finds himself “challenge[d]...forth...to reveal the actual...as standing-reserve” (324). That is, he finds himself called upon to “exploit the energies of nature” and, moreover, to reveal nature to be a mere resource, a supplier of energy, something to be regulated, ordered, and secured, so that it is always “at our command” (323), “immediately on hand” and “on call for a further ordering” (322). This revealing is enabled by the rise of modern math and science, whose “way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces” and which insists that “nature report itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remain orderable as a system of information” (326; 328). To illustrate what this modern way of revealing looks like, Heidegger offers the example of a “hydroelectric plant set into the current of the Rhine”:

It sets the Rhine to supplying its hydraulic pressure, which then sets the turbines turning. This turning sets those machines in motion whose thrust sets going the electric current for which the long-distance power station and its network of cables are set up to dispatch electricity. In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command. The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather, the river is dammed up into the power plant. *What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station* (my italics).

The “revealing that rules throughout modern technology” changes what the river is, transforms it into a resource, into “standing-reserve” -- an outcome Heidegger describes as “monstrous[]” (321).

Here a comparison with Nabokov’s critique of “commonsense...and its calculating machine” is hard to resist (*LL* 374): modern commonsense, too, presents things as being “orderable,” available, “identifiable through calculation,” valuable because useful; it, too, is enabled by the progress of



modern math and physics; it, too, is “monstrous[.]” In “The Question Concerning Technology,” though, Heidegger describes this ordering phenomenon as a deep, pervasive, powerful, transformative “way of revealing” what things are. The comparison suggests that Nabokov’s modern commonsense might be even more formidable than it first appears. It suggests that modern commonsense, at its worst, might represent more than just a collection of pernicious habits, values, attitudes, and precepts, easily dropped, picked up, or, as in his lecture’s cathartic conclusion, “shot dead” (*LL* 380). It might, instead, represent a whole, entrenched way of being in the world, expressed in what we do, how we think, how we value things, who we are -- a way of being that changes, in a deep way, what the world *is* for us. Not just birds, but everything; not just for a few sad individuals, but for everyone. And Nabokov does, in fact, occasionally describe commonsense in this way, as a pervasive, transformative way of approaching the world. This, I think, is the meaning behind his warning that “everything is comfortably cheapened by its touch” (*LL* 372): commonsense touches everything, devalues everything, changes what “everything is.” His joke about the geologist who “may one day discover, as his spade rings against metal, the solid barrel hoop of the equator” speaks to the scale and the completeness of this change. Over time, he suggests, the “whole world...turned out to be based on numbers” not just for a few sad individuals, but for everyone save a few thousand “fellow dreamers” (*LL* 373). The image of the “solid barrel hoop equator” suggests that this commonsensical sensibility may run deeper than we know.

But Heidegger goes further than this in “The Question Concerning Technology.” He draws attention to two further problems with the modern-technological “way of revealing.” One is that, in revealing everything “exclusively as standing-reserve,” we may eventually come to reveal ourselves in the same way:

As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve (332).

The other is that we may find ourselves without access to any *other* way of revealing. This, Heidegger writes, is the “extreme danger.” The modern way of revealing “drives out every other possibility of revealing” and thus “blocks the shining-forth and holding sway of truth” (332-333).

Here, too, Heidegger’s essay alerts us to darker possibilities within Nabokov’s discussion of modern commonsense. For example, it helps us to see that commonsense, too, threatens to reveal not only things but people in a commonsense way. It prompts us to understand our “fair but frail neighbors” in instrumental terms, as resources to be “exploit[ed]” (Nabokov, *LL* 372), and it invites us to think of even the “loveliest woman” as a mere complex of biological processes and chemical “formula[s]” (378). And it, too, threatens to close down other possibilities of revealing what things are. Nabokov suggests that commonsense, with its authoritative explanations, its confidence in its own methods and rationalized standards of proof, may preclude us from experiencing other, deeper -  
- Heidegger might say “more primal” (“Question” 333) -- truths:

...[C]ommonsense will point out that life on earth, from the barnacle to the goose, and from the humblest worm to the loveliest woman, arose from a colloidal carbonaceous slime activated by ferments while the earth was obligingly cooling down. Blood may well be the Silurian sea in our veins, and we are all ready to accept evolution at least as a modal formula. Professor Pavlov’s bell-hopping mice and Dr. Griffith’s rotating rats may please the practical minds, and Rhumbler’s artificial amoeba can make a very cute pet. But again it is one thing to try and find the links and steps of life, and it is quite another to try and understand *what life and the phenomenon of inspiration really are* (*LL* 378; my italics).

Heidegger, then, helps us to appreciate just how formidable a foe modern commonsense, at its

worst, might be. For if commonsense represents a deep, pervasive way of understanding what things are; if it threatens to reveal people in a commonsense way; if it deprives us of un-commonsensical ways of revealing, then how can it be overcome? If “newspaper editors” only run commonsensical stories (Nabokov, *LL* 373); if their op-eds always take a commonsense point of view; if publishers refuse to publish books that will not “*s-e-double-l*” (380); if commonsense “back-kick[s] dirt” over all the new artists; if it silences the “prophet,” turns on the “enchanter,” puts the poet “to death” (372); if “ugly but strong nations” disrupt old ways of life and institutions (372-373); if everything is so cheapened by commonsense that it can no longer so much as make a demand on us -- what will be left for us to encounter *but* commonsense? From here we can see that the truly awful thing about commonsense is its potential to so dramatically reshape the world in its own image, right down to the “inner skeleton,” that it can seem impossible to get outside of or around (374).

And yet we shouldn't confuse the worst possible scenario for commonsense with what Nabokov actually says. Heidegger's essay is helpful because, in showing us just how monstrous commonsense *might* be, it helps us recognize modern commonsense as something more serious, threatening, and formidable than Nabokov's playful tone and confident posture can sometimes make it seem. But it is also helpful inasmuch as it allows us to appreciate how far Nabokov's vision falls short of Heidegger's own. The point of Nabokov's lecture isn't that there will soon be no escape from commonsense, but rather that, strangely enough, in spite of its persistence and danger, its pervasiveness and power, the rule of commonsense will never be complete. There will always be those few fellow dreamers, irrational optimists, freaks and indignant artists lodging their quiet, or not-so-quiet, protests against the monster of grim commonsense. Just where their freedom comes from is a mystery that belongs in the lecture's “[*two pages missing*]” with other “irrational...illogical...inexplicable” mysteries of life

(*LL* 377). But Nabokov's trust in it remains a central part of his creative creed.

*So Different from Commonsense*

Let's return, then, to the question that prompted this chapter. What does all this -- this elaboration of the meaning of "commonsense" -- tell us about the form of consciousness that lies *opposite* "commonsense and its logic"? What would it mean to be "so different from" commonsense?

First, it tells us that such a form of consciousness would allow things (and people, and practices) to show up as having more than just instrumental importance; as being both valuable to our own self-realization and valuable in themselves; as being capable of "making demands" on us. It would attune us to singularity and difference, and reveal things as being unique, rather than interchangeable. It would also be essentially "reverent," in the philosopher Paul Woodruff's sense of the term. Woodruff defines reverence as a "capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control," a capacity often expressed in, but without any *necessary* connection to, religious ritual and feeling (3). Commonsense, in its conviction that everything is either explicable or else unreal, is, from this perspective, irreverent. Nabokov's alliance with "the irrational, the illogical, the inexplicable," on the other hand, suggests a reverent capacity for awe at what lies beyond our control: the "wild magic" of artistic inspiration, for example (*LL* 378); the question of what happens to us when we die; the "miraculous" processes of nature, and the uncanny "subtlety, exuberance, and luxury" of its design (*SM* 125).

Second, it tells us that this form of consciousness must represent more than just a collection of assertions and beliefs. If commonsense is best understood as a way of disposing oneself toward the world, and, moreover, a way of revealing and understanding what things are, then this form of

consciousness must be too. As such it can't be something about which we can simply be convinced by means of isolated arguments and examples, no matter how good those examples and arguments may be. To the extent that it can be acquired, it must be by a more comprehensive means: by example and argument, yes, but also by a fuller, perhaps vicarious, immersion in this way of orienting oneself toward things, and in the enactment of certain uncommonsensual habits and practices of our own.

Insofar as it would intensify our sense of the degree to which things *matter*, both to us and in themselves, and insofar as this heightened sense of value represents a deeper truth about the world than that revealed by commonsense, this form of consciousness would seem a plausible candidate for the "highest form[] of consciousness" there is.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### *Speak, Memory and the Highest Form of Consciousness*

By this point we've defined the "capacity to wonder at trifles"; we've described the opposite of "commonsense"; and in the process we've suggested what it might mean for something to be, in Nabokov's view, the "highest form[] of consciousness." If we put these explanations together, we have an answer to our original question: how should we understand Nabokov's most extravagant statements? How should we make sense of his "irrational standards"? How can the "capacity to wonder at trifles" be the "highest form[] of consciousness" there is?

We can make sense of those statements, I have argued, by understanding the "capacity to wonder at trifles" as an attunement -- a cultivable, durable way of disposing oneself toward the world that allows the most undervalued, under-noticed parts of that world to show up as occasions for surprise, delight, curiosity, and speculation. We can now see that what makes this attunement a plausible candidate for the "highest form of consciousness" is that it allows things -- even seemingly useless, unremarkable things -- to show up as intrinsically and existentially worthwhile. In short, it locates us in a world in which things really *matter*, for us and in themselves.

It does all this in defiance of "commonsense," which would have things show up as mattering less, in fewer ways, or not at all. Commonsense -- particularly what I have been calling "modern commonsense" -- is, as we've seen, a formidable, robust, transformative orientation toward the world that threatens to "cheapen[]" "everything" (Nabokov, *LL* 372), to deplete things of meaning and value. By pitting "the capacity to wonder at trifles" against commonsense, then, Nabokov suggests

that it, too, is formidable, robust, transformative. This power would be less apparent if Nabokov had opposed the “capacity to wonder at trifles” to states of simple loss or lack, states defined less by what they are than by what they are not: jadedness, for example (a diminishment of the capacity for surprise); dullness (a diminishment of the capacity for delight); indifference, apathy, boredom, enervation. Instead, he opposes the capacity to wonder at trifles to a forbidding, pervasive, ideologically powerful sensibility -- one which has real effects in the real world, and which is animated by clearly outlined values of its own. For Nabokov, the capacity to wonder at trifles isn't just a pleasant mood, a vague sense of openness and appreciation. It's a strong and active stance toward the world, set over against a strong and serious foe.

But how, exactly, does one become attuned to the world in this way? And how, exactly, does a readiness to “wonder at trifles” attune us to the extra-instrumental importance of things? This is a major topic of Nabokov's autobiography, a book that begins, fittingly, with a rebuke to “common sense” and concludes with a “blissful shock” of wonder (*SM* 19, 309). In between, it shows us, with great specificity, a world revealed by the attunement we've been describing, and offers a detailed, coherent account of how Nabokov came to have this particular orientation toward things, this particular way of being in the world. As it traces the development of Nabokov's own “capacity to wonder at trifles,” *Speak, Memory* shows us what it is to see, feel, encounter, experience things in this way, to live so that even trivial things “make...demand[s]” on oneself (Wrathall 200), in a world lit up by meaning.

### *A World Lit Up*

*Speak, Memory* presents us with a vision of the world which is polemically opposed to modern commonsense, as it appears in the light of the “highest form[] of consciousness.” From the outset of his memoir, Nabokov frames this way of orienting oneself, this readiness for wonder and meaning, as a rebellious inversion of common sense. Common sense tells us that “our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness,” and would have us accept the final insignificance not only of trifles but of everything (19); Nabokov’s irrational standards insist that the opposite is true, that those “two black voids” are mere peripheral matters, and that the real story, the main story, adheres in the “extraordinary visions in between” (20). They imply that even the tiniest and most trivial of these visions have something remarkable about them, simply because they *are* or *have been* - - are felt, are experienced, have been encountered, have been seen. It’s easy, of course, to be skeptical about the claim that things matter, and are in a sense wondrous, just because they “are.” It can seem indulgent, capricious, and decadent. But, Nabokov believes, “indulgent,” “capricious,” and “decadent” are exactly the sorts of terms used by the ideological regime of modern commonsense to prevent us from taking the possibility of such mattering seriously.

Let’s start with an example. Near the end of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov presents an image of his son Dmitri playing, as a small child, by the seashore. The passage shows us what it means for trifles to show up as occasions for wonder, and for things generally to show up as “important,” as having value outside of their “usefulness to our current projects,” as capable of making demands on us. The “you” invoked here is, of course, his wife Véra:

Graded gardens on hillsides, a succession of terraces whose every stone step ejected a gaudy grasshopper, dropped from ledge to ledge seaward, with the olives and the oleanders fairly toppling over each other in their haste to obtain a view of the beach. There our child kneeled motionless to be photographed in a quivering haze of sun against the scintillation of the sea, which is a milky blur in the snapshots we have



preserved but was, in life, silvery blue, with great patches of purple-blue farther out, caused by warm currents in collaboration with and corroboration of (hear the pebbles rolled by the withdrawing wave?) eloquent old poets and their smiling similes. And among the candy-like blobs of sea-licked glass -- lemon, cherry, peppermint -- and the banded pebbles, and the little fluted shells with lustered insides, sometimes small bits of pottery, still beautiful in glaze and color, turned up. They were brought to you or me for inspection, and if they had indigo chevrons, or bands of leaf ornament, or any kind of gay emblemata, and were judged precious, down they went with a click into the toy pail, and, if not, a plop and a flash marked their return to the sea. I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scrollwork fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by *her* mother a hundred years ago -- and so on, until this assortment of parts, if all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl, broken by some Italian child, God knows where and when, and now mended by *these* rivets of bronze (308-309).

The scene is built up almost entirely out of “trifles” -- small, useless, ordinary things “of little value or importance”: pebbles and shells, pieces of glass, small bits of pottery, “parts” and “patches,” “chips” and “fragment[s].” Common sense wouldn’t make much of these things, if it made anything of them at all. But for Nabokov they show up quite differently. For him, the patches of sea, the blobs of glass, and the bits of pottery show up as occasions for surprise, delight, curiosity -- wonder. The purple-blue patches of sea stand out for him, surprising and satisfying in their corroboration of Homer’s lines. The sea glass stands out for him, too, delightful in its unlikely resemblance to candy, whose color, shape, size, texture, and translucence it cheerfully mimics. Together the sea and the sea glass form another of those minor rainbows, those modest emblems of wonder collected in the first chapter of this study: cherry red, lemon yellow, minty green and purple-blue. Even the pebbles and shells are striking in their way. “Banded” and “lustered” like the majolica ware, with its beautiful glazes and “bands of leaf ornament,” they are intriguingly evocative of “man-wrought things” (*SM*

124).

A fuller example of what it means to “wonder at trifles,” though, can be found in Nabokov’s response to those chips of majolica, those little bits of pottery that just “turn[] up” on occasion on the shore. These, too, are surprising, beautiful, intriguing; and these, too, provide Nabokov with a certain delight of recognition, inasmuch as they remind him of similar pieces he found and “judged...precious” as a child. They’re a little mysterious; they stir his curiosity: he wonders about where they came from, how and when they came to be broken. The passage concludes in a richly “speculative” mood, with Nabokov seeming to wonder about other, stranger things: the patterns of family history and inheritance; the larger picture into which he fits; the limits and possibilities of what can be recovered and restored.

Here, as in “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov implicitly identifies this wondering mood as the natural attunement of young children (Dmitri seems to be “about four”) (307), for whom trifles show up as wonderful much the time, and who naturally deem “precious” precisely those things that common sense would ignore. Nabokov portrays these two “childish[]” capacities -- the capacity to experience trifles as occasions for wonder, and the capacity to experience things as deeply, intrinsically worthwhile -- as two parts, or two faces, of the same attunement. Wondering at trifles *is* valuing things apart from their “usefulness.” It presupposes that value, and it also helps to reveal that value, by encouraging us to admit things to “inspection”; to carefully distinguish one thing from another; to handle things with attention and care; to approach things as though they had already been judged by someone to be “precious.” In taking time to attend carefully to each piece of majolica, to “wonder at” it, to note the unique details of its design and its unique place in some as-yet-unrecovered whole, Nabokov and Véra and Dmitri affirm the value and reality

of *that* specific piece, its irreplaceability by any other. Even the chips they decide not to keep have a certain weightiness about them, reflected in the satisfying “plop and...flash” they make as they are thrown back into the sea, and in the fact that they, too, have been held and inspected, and that they, too, will be remembered one day. We might compare the fate of those unwanted chips to that of the birds in Chapter Two, unlooked at and unconsidered, rejected in advance, and which therefore seemed to have, for Kaufman’s birder, hardly any existence at all.

Finally, the scene shows us how this attunement allows things to show up as not only intrinsically but “existentially” important. Once we allow things to show up as having value apart from their “usefulness to our current projects,” then they can begin to make real demands on us, really matter to us, show up as important for our “self-realization” (Wrathall 204; 200). The chips are shown to have this sort of deep, personal importance for Dmitri and for his father, too. Dmitri, for example, puts them at the center of a whole rich, absorbing, pleasurable activity of hunting, encountering, collecting, sharing, inspecting, comparing, appraising, admiring, sorting, rejecting and keeping. His activity recalls, and I think is meant to recall, the activity of two other hunters in the book: Nabokov, who hunts butterflies, and Nabokov’s mother, who hunts mushrooms. The connection suggests that Dmitri’s activity really matters to him, or at least that it might, in the way that Nabokov’s butterflies really matter to *him* or Elena Nabokov’s boletes really matter to *her*. (In Nabokov’s case, certainly, it would not be an exaggeration to say that his passion for butterflies is integral to his “self-realization,” and that without it he would “cease to be who [he is]”) (Wrathall 200). The majolica chips assume existential importance for Nabokov as well. For him, these “slightly convex chips of majolica ware” matter because they assert the continuity of his son’s life with his own, and theirs with his mother’s, and *theirs* with *her* mother’s, “and so on.” They testify to a whole family history and context --

shared patterns of experience, shared temperaments, shared memories -- without which he would “cease to be who [he is].” In this way, these broken bits of pottery, valueless from any commonsensical point of view, “make a demand” on both the father and the child (Wrathall 200).<sup>11</sup>

The passage, then, shows what it means to be disposed to the world in such a way that trifles show up as occasions for wonder, and things generally show up for us as “important,” as capable of making demands on us. This is, of course, ultimately an argument about Nabokov’s *style* as much as it is about his way of being in the world, for it describes that style as an evocation of that way of being. It might, however, be objected that Nabokov’s way of representing things in this passage is actually *nothing more* than a way of representing, that his obsessively precise, intensely visual, detail-oriented style is actually *nothing more* than style. From this perspective, the passage, and by extension *Speak, Memory*, doesn’t reveal how things “show up” for Nabokov at all. Instead, it shows how he manages to transform those things later, in the process of writing. It tells us something about the eye of Nabokov the artist, in his bathtub, on his bed, in a car, on a lounge chair with his pencil and his index cards, not Nabokov the man, encountering things in the world, whoever and whatever *that* is.

We’ll be looking more closely at the meaning of Nabokov’s style at the close of this study; for now, though, suffice it to say that seeing the passage as pure style would be just as wrong as seeing it

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11. Here it is worth noting that while Nabokov associates the capacity to wonder at trifles with the life and mind of the child, his own wondering activity exceeds the capacities of a child’s consciousness. Nabokov’s relationship to the majolica chips is elegiac, historical, richly imaginative, the work of an adult consciousness with a broader awareness of time and of the world. In this way the passage, though focused on Dmitri, gives us a sense of sophisticated, and how enduring, this wondering activity can be.

as a record of pure, unmediated experience. *Of course* it's true that no one, apart from Nabokov himself, could say how things *actually* showed up for him -- whether the sea glass really stood out for him so brightly on that beach, or whether the pieces of pottery really seemed so weighted with importance. What we *can* say is that Nabokov *tells* us that this is how things show up for him, not just in writing, not just in retrospect, but in real life. He tells us in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" when he describes his irrational standards; and he *also* tells us by means of his stylistic choices, by the way he draws attention to things, and by the words he uses to describe them. When he recalls, early on in *Speak, Memory*, that "there was usually a carnation in the buttonhole of" his Uncle Ruka's "dove-gray, mouse-gray or silver-gray summer suit" (*SM* 69), he tells us something about his Uncle Ruka, and he tells us something about himself: that he, Nabokov, is someone on whom trifles are not lost; that he registered the different shades of his uncle's suits back then; and that, moreover, it was important to have registered those subtle differences in color, just as it is important to retrieve them with precision now. When he tells us that the majolica chips "click[ed]" on their way into the pail and "plop[ped]" on their way into the water, and the sea glass was red and yellow and green, and the pottery sometimes had indigo chevrons on it and at other times had little leaves, he's telling us much the same thing: that this is actually how the world shows up for someone who, unfettered by commonsense, has learned to wonder at trifles.

Nabokov's style, in other words, is always polemical -- always expressive of his irrational standards, and an argument for them. This is true in *Speak, Memory*, and often true, in a more complicated way, in his novels. It's important, though, to see that this expressive, implicitly polemical style represents more than "propaganda on behalf of good noticing" (James Wood, *HF*W 63), or an affirmation of the fact that such noticing will help us to "enrich [our] whole li[ves]"

(Boyd, *American* 174). Instead, it's expressive of a whole way of being, of approaching and encountering things, of orienting oneself in the world. This attunement can't be reduced to a set of propositions, easily taken up or cast aside; and so it isn't best represented by means of propositions. Better simply to show us what things look like in the light of it, better to show us by means of style.

*Loving, Learning, Looking: a History of an Attunement*

*Speak, Memory*, however, is more than a description of an attunement. It is also a history: it shows us how one *comes* to be attuned to the world in this way. The memoir is strewn with clues to the mystery of where Nabokov's own prodigious "capacity to wonder at trifles" came from. Overall these clues suggest that that attunement is partly something that finds Nabokov, and partly something he finds his way into. It's a product of his particular circumstances: the temperament he's born with; the environment he grows up in; the examples he's exposed to and absorbs. And it's also a product of what he chooses to involve himself in, of his experiences and habits and practices.

What are some of the more important parts of that history? First, *Speak, Memory* suggests that Nabokov was raised by people for whom things, even trifling things, showed up as having existential importance, and who modeled this orientation for him. His mother is one such person:

To love with all one's soul and leave the rest to fate, was the simple rule she heeded. "Vot zapomni [now remember]," she would say in conspiratorial tones as she drew my attention to this or that loved thing in Vyra -- a lark ascending the curds-and-whey sky of a dull spring day, heat lightning taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night, the palette of maple leaves on brown sand, a small bird's cuneate footprints on new snow. As if feeling that in a few years the tangible part of her world would perish, she cultivated an extraordinary consciousness of the various time marks distributed throughout our country place...Her special tags and imprints became as dear and sacred to me as they were to her. There was the room which in the past had been reserved for her mother's pet hobby, a chemical laboratory; there was the linden tree marking the spot, by the side of the road that sloped up toward

the village of Gryazno (accented on the ultima), at the steepest bit where one preferred to take one's "bike by the horns" ...as my father, a dedicated cyclist, liked to say, and where he had proposed... (40).

Elena Nabokov is oriented to the world in such a way that things -- even very ordinary, trifling things -- show up as deeply important, as mattering to her, as capable of making demands on her. The lark, the lightning, the linden, the leaves, the old laboratory and the little bird's tracks all seem to require of her that she "value them, respect them, respond to them," and also that she share that sense of value with her son. Some of these things, like the old room and the linden tree, matter because of their connection to some remembered person or event. Memories, of course, always have "existential importance" for Nabokov -- even, especially, the earliest ones, and the most trifling ones, the ones we are most likely to forget. Every page of *Speak, Memory* implies that without our memories "we would cease to be who we are," and that we need to value and respect them "on pain of losing ourselves." Here his mother extends that sense of deep importance to the objects connected with those memories: a certain room, a certain tree. The other "loved thing[s]" in this passage matter to her in a different way. They have value now, in the present, and not because of any intimate connection with the personal past: the strange and stunning lightning, the curious footprints, the cheering lark and pretty palette of leaves. These things, too, are worth noticing, worth remembering.

Nabokov, in fact, describes a whole early milieu in which ordinary things were routinely imbued with importance. He remembers how his father would "piously pause" in a "certain spot in the forest, a footbridge across a brown brook" where a rare butterfly had once been caught for him (75). He recalls an early tutor's manner of handling his toys -- some alphabet blocks -- "as if they were infinitely precious things, which, for that matter, they were..." (28). He connects Dmitri's childhood

activity at the beach to his own in a way that suggests that he, too, was used to having his seaside finds confirmed by someone -- perhaps a governess -- as "precious." Most often, though, it is his mother who is at the center of such scenes. Part of what her particular example adds to our understanding of the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is that it connects this attunement -- this way of allowing things to "show up" -- to attitudes of affection, tenderness, adoration, to the habit of loving things and holding them dear. Nabokov describes his mother's basic, even exclusive, orientation toward the world as one of "love": "[t]o love with all one's soul and leave the rest to fate was the simple rule she heeded." She approaches things with tenderness, devotion, and gratitude, a stance movingly summed up later by Nabokov in a single cherished image: that of his mother "getting down on her hands and knees to kiss the earth every time we came back to the country from town for the summer" (*SM* 249). From this position, even the tiniest and most ordinary things show up for her as capable of being "loved," of being held "dear" and "special" and "sacred." Her example suggests this feeling of "love" as an affective component of what Nabokov calls the "highest form[] of consciousness," as part of the attunement that allows trifles to show up as occasions for wonder, and things generally to show up as important, as capable of making demands on us.

Nabokov's mother, then, "wonder[s] at trifles" herself, and models this attitude of wondering-at for him. She also translates that attitude into a kind of practice. She actively draws her son's attention to "this or that" little thing at Vyra and encourages him to observe it, appreciate it, commit it to memory, in the hope that he will acquire some of her own natural feeling for those things. And, eventually, he does. Eventually "her special tags and imprints" become, as he says, "as dear and



sacred” to him as they are to her.<sup>12</sup>

Nabokov describes two other childhood pastimes or practices that seem likely to have expanded or at least supported his “capacity to wonder at trifles,” and which help to elucidate the connection between attending to trifles and allowing things to show up as important. Hunting butterflies is one. Earlier we noted that butterflies are objects of passionate wonder for Nabokov -- he prizes the “rare visitor” (120), the “uncommon” insect, the “remarkable new species” that will cause him to “stop with a quick intake of breath” (136; 132). But he also wonders at these creatures more routinely: every venture into the “grassy wonderland” surrounding Vyra affords some interest and surprise (136); “every hour and every season” of lepidopterological activity “ha[s] its delights” (135). In both cases, his pleasure in butterflies depends on particular practices of close attention.

This is, in fact, a very special sort of attention, aimed at attuning oneself to very minute differences between things. The goal here is to be able to distinguish one thing from another, so that a given butterfly can show up as a member of a particular species, or subspecies, or rare aberration of that subspecies, rather than as just a Blue, or a butterfly, or a bug. It requires acts of close attention

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12. He’s brought up, moreover, in a world that is easy to love. As the eldest son of two adoring parents, endowed with an expansive intelligence and with what Richard Rorty aptly describes as an “eccentrically large capacity for joy” (Rorty 155), Nabokov really does seem to have enjoyed, as he claims, “the harmonious world of a perfect childhood” (*SM* 24). The elegant interiors of Morskaya Street, the Arcadian environs of Vyra, the sparkling beaches of Biarritz could hardly have been resistant to being loved, down to the smallest detail, by a well-loved child. Nabokov, of course, writes *Speak, Memory* with a keen and even painful awareness of his own privilege. He observes, for example, that his younger brother Sergey, though also intelligent, sensitive, and artistic, and very close to Nabokov in looks and age, was not quite as well-loved. “I was the coddled one,” he asserts, “he, the witness of coddling.” Nabokov seems to imagine that for Sergey, with his stammer, his inconvenient homosexuality, and his “bully” of an older brother, the world must have shown up as harsher and less perfectly harmonious place (257). In drawing attention to Sergey -- something he does throughout *Speak, Memory* -- Nabokov underscores, among other things, his awareness of the contingency of his own early happiness.

and comparison -- attention to the details of a butterfly's appearance or behavior, comparison with other butterflies like it. Notably, Nabokov suggests that in order to really see a thing you need to be familiar with the general category of thing to which it belongs: to appreciate the aberration, you have to be acquainted with the norm. In this case, you have to have some familiarity with butterflies, whether from books, or journals, or museums, or experiences in the field, and the more you know about them, the better. Nabokov implies that such knowledge, far from inhibiting one's perception of the particular, is in fact often necessary for it: it's the background against which particular things show up as what they particularly are.

These practices of close attention and informed comparison are part of a general stance or attunement that allows things to show up as highly specific, one-of-a-kind. Thus what shows up as just a brown butterfly for Mademoiselle shows up as one particular Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary to Nabokov, and what is "just another gray moth to the reader" shows up as a "dark aberration of Sievers' Carmelite" for him (132). Here the contrast between Nabokov and Kaufman's birder is immediate and obvious: Nabokov always attends closely where the birder would turn away, because even the most ordinary animal, even an animal of a type or species one has already seen, might turn out to be extraordinary -- particularly rare, or beautiful, or otherwise interesting. Nothing can be dismissed out of hand; every creature must be looked at, considered; and its details must be so closely observed that even the slightest variation can impress itself upon the observer. Eventually this attunement -- this alertness to and expectation of difference -- enables things to show up as new, surprising, wonderful:

That summer I had been collecting assiduously on moonless nights, in a glade of the park, by spreading a bedsheet over the grass and its annoyed glowworms, and casting upon it the light of an acytelene lamp...Into that area of radiance, moths

would come drifting out of the solid blackness around me, and it was in that manner, upon that magic sheet, that I took a beautiful *Plusia* (now *Phytometra*) which, as I saw at once, differed from its closest ally by its mauve-and-maroon (instead of golden-brown) forewings, and narrower bractea mark and was not recognizably figured in any of my books (134).

In the figure of the acytelene lamp, Nabokov offers an elegant image for this attunement: an “area of radiance” which draws things out of darkness and allows them to show up “at once” as rare, beautiful, distinct, individual, unprecedented, delightful, curious, and strange.

These practices of attention, then, allow rare and peculiarly beautiful things, like the unusual *Plusia* and the uncommon Carmelite, to show up as rare and peculiarly beautiful. But they also allow more common, everyday creatures to show up as individual and unique -- and unique things, especially unique living things, are always, for Nabokov, compelling. Thus even the most resolutely ordinary species show up for him as worthy of notice. Sometimes, in fact, he tells us, the most “exquisite pleasure” is to be found in the most familiar things:

...when you walk, especially in a region you have studied well, there is an exquisite pleasure in departing from one’s itinerary to visit, here and there by the wayside, this glade, that glen, this or that combination of soil and flora - to drop in, as it were, on a familiar butterfly in his particular habitat, in order to see if he has emerged, and if so, how he is doing (137).

It’s not so much that “this” butterfly, in “this or that” particular location, doing “this” particular thing, shows up for Nabokov as being as strikingly rare, as stunning and memorable, as the member of a species he has never encountered before. The truth is simpler and more plausible than that. It’s simply that this “familiar butterfly” shows up for him as being utterly individual, utterly itself, and that that perfect, irreproducible individuality, apparent even in so common a thing, is, for Nabokov, always remarkable.

For this reason, Nabokov, though he prizes rarities and longs to catch some as-yet-undiscovered thing, never finds himself in the position of Kaufman's birder -- dismissive of common things he knows too well, jaded, bored, inert, waiting around for something new and unusual to manifest itself. At one point, recounting a particular outing in the fields around Vyra, he does distinguish between some "familiar insects" and the promise of finding "something better" -- that is, rarer; something like the "uncommon Hairstreak" he once reached for but failed to catch. Yet even these familiar, usual, common, everyday, ordinary insects show up as fascinating in their way:

Very fresh, very dark Arran Browns, which emerged only every second year...flitted among the firs or revealed their red markings and checkered fringes as they sunned themselves on the roadside bracken. Hopping above the grass, a diminutive Ringlet called Hero dodged my net. Several moths, too, were flying -- gaudy sun lovers that sail from flower to flower like painted flies, or male insomniacs in search of hidden females, such as that rust-colored Oak Eggar hurtling across the shrubbery. I noticed (one of the major mysteries of my childhood) a soft pale green wing caught in a spider's web (by then I knew what it was: part of a Large Emerald). The tremendous larva of the Goat Moth, ostentatiously segmented, flat-headed, flesh-colored and glossily flushed, a strange creature 'as naked as a worm' to use a French comparison, crossed my path in frantic search for a place to pupate (the awful pressure of metamorphosis, the aura of a disgraceful fit in a public place)...From a flower head two male Coppers rose to a tremendous height, fighting all the way up - - and then, after a while, came the downward flash of one of them returning to his thistle. These were familiar insects, but at any moment something better might cause me to stop with a quick intake of breath (131-132).

These are familiar insects, but not overly familiar; there's no aura here of weariness here, no boredom, no shrug of "just another": *just another* Arran Brown, *just another* Oak Eggar. The gesture is instead, here and always, "this particular": *this particular* Copper, flying upward, flashing down; *this particular* Ringlet, artfully dodging the net. Each creature is shown to be doing something distinct and unrepeatable in space and time, as exhibiting some interesting behavior or another. And each shows up for him as an occasion -- a small occasion -- for surprise, delight, curiosity, or speculation. The

newborn Arran Browns surprise and delight him; the comical Oak Eggar amuses him; the mysterious moth wing stirs his curiosity; the larva's behavior is a source of interest and speculation. In short, his practice of attending closely to things, of noticing small details and small differences, allows the fields and forests of Vyra to show up for him as, in his words, a "wonderland" (136).

Nabokov describes one last childhood activity that seems likely to have supported the development of his "capacity to wonder at trifles." In "1907 or 1908," just a short while after catching his first butterfly, Nabokov began to study with a series of drawing masters: his mother's former teacher, Mr. Cummings; S. P. Yaremich, a "well-known 'impressionist'"; and, finally, "the celebrated" Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (92), described by Brian Boyd as a "master of the fine line, who did for St. Petersburg what Canaletto did for Venice" (*Russian Years* 103). Drawing and painting were, for Nabokov, very pleasurable activities, and he seems to have spent much of his childhood engaged in them. He seems also to have seriously considered painting as a vocation. "I think I was born a painter," he once told an interviewer. "[U]p to my fourteenth year, perhaps, I used to spend most of the day drawing and painting and I was supposed to become a painter in due time." Eventually, though, he decided that he didn't have "any real talent there," and by fifteen was spending more time writing poems than making pictures (*SO* 17).

Still, he tells us, these experiences had a lasting effect on him, inasmuch as they initiated him into new habits and practices of attention. Training his hand meant training his eye; learning to draw meant learning to see things better. Dobuzhinski in particular encouraged Nabokov to attend very closely to the world around him, reinforcing the pattern set by his mother and his "mania" for butterflies (*SM* 126). Here, though, the immediate purpose of that attention is somewhat different. Dobuzhinski encourages him to study things closely not in order to "cherish[]" them or to

distinguish them from one another, but in order to render them later, with absolute precision:

...Dobuzhinski...liked to give me his lessons on the *piano nobile* of our house, in one of its pretty reception rooms downstairs, which he entered in a particularly noiseless way as if afraid to startle me from my verse-making stupor. He made me depict from memory, in the greatest possible detail, objects I had certainly seen thousands of times without visualizing them properly: a street lamp, a postbox, the tulip design on the stained glass of our own front door. He tried to teach me to find the geometrical coordinations between the slender twigs of a leafless boulevard tree, a system of visual give-and-takes, requiring a precision of linear expression, which I failed to achieve in my youth, but applied gratefully, in my adult instar, not only to the drawing of butterfly genitalia during my seven years at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, when immersing myself in the bright wellhole of a microscope to record in India ink this or that new structure; but also, perhaps, to certain camera-lucida needs of literary composition (92).

Nabokov credits these lessons -- and, presumably, all those many hours he spent “drawing and painting” as a child -- with showing him the difference between just “see[ing]” things and really “visualizing them properly.” Apprehending things with sufficient clarity to accurately reproduce them later, whether in paint or in prose, requires a special kind of attention: close, deep, patient, prolonged. In *How to Use Your Eyes*, a kind of manual for “visualizing [things] properly,” the art historian James Elkins describes this way of looking as a way of “us[ing] your eyes more concertedly and with more patience than you might ordinarily do. It’s about stopping and taking the time simply to look, and keep looking, until the details of your world slowly reveal themselves” (viii).<sup>13</sup>

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13. The idea that “the details of the world” require time and patience to “reveal themselves,” and that this way of looking represents a departure from our more “ordinarily” rushed way of encountering things, is a familiar one. “But we haven’t time, in this world of ours” laments Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, “to love things and see them at close range, in the plenitude of their smallness...” (163). In “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov takes this notion one step further, figuring the registration of detail as not only a departure from, but a form of irrational resistance to, the onslaught of time. So Alice and the chimney sweep, in “stopping and taking the time simply to look, and keep looking” at things in spite of the fact that they “haven’t time,” in spite of the “imminent peril,” are shown to be engaged in an act of defiance against the tyranny of both time and

This is different from the loving attention Nabokov's mother pays to things, inasmuch as it's less colored by feeling, and more firmly grounded in the present. It's also different from the comparative, informed, passionate attention Nabokov pays to butterflies, again because it's less "existentially" engaged -- the street lamp and the postbox surely mean less to him than his butterflies -- and because it focuses so completely and exclusively on the thing itself, rather than on the relation of that thing to other things -- nearby postboxes, remembered postboxes, the "general category" of the postbox. It directs itself squarely and unhurriedly to the thing at hand, seeking out the particular qualities of form, color, texture, luminance, and position that help make it what it uniquely is.

This manner of looking at things supports the "capacity to wonder at trifles" in a couple of ways. First, by helping details to show up, it helps make things, even trifling things, *available* for wondering-at:

I especially love the strange feeling I get when I am looking at something and suddenly I understand -- the object has structure; it speaks to me. What was once a shimmer on the horizon becomes a specific type of mirage, and it tells me about the shape of the air I am walking through. What was once a meaningless pattern on a butterfly's wing becomes a code, and it tells me how that butterfly looks to other butterflies. Even a postage stamp suddenly begins to speak about its time and place, and the thought of the person who designed it (Elkins viii).

Elkins suggests that even trifling things, looked at closely and intensely enough, will "reveal themselves" as occasions for surprise, delight, curiosity, and speculation. What's true for Elkins of a postage stamp -- that by looking at it long enough he will reveal it as an occasion for wonder -- might be true for Nabokov of a postbox; it's certainly true for him of the "pattern on a butterfly's wing." In any event, this sort of deep, sustained, concentrated, clear-sighted attention to things

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commonsense.

surely increases one's *chances* of having trifles show up as occasions for wonder.

Second, this particular kind of deep, artistic attention represents yet another way of revealing things to be unique. Here, though, that uniqueness is revealed not by comparing one thing to another but rather by looking at things in an extra-“ordinarily” close, deliberate, patient, concerted way. Reproducing the image of something on paper with precision requires one to see it clearly, to apprehend the very precise configurations of line and color that make *it* what *it* is. Dobuzhinski pushes Nabokov to apprehend things with even greater clarity than this, by challenging him to examine things with such intensity, and to get to know their particular characteristics so intimately, that he can accurately reproduce them even when they are no longer at hand. For these exercises, he purposely selects very ordinary, commonly encountered subjects -- things Nabokov has seen “thousands of times before” -- and pushes him to see them as totally singular. That sense of singularity comes about not by differentiating things from one another (by, for example, noticing how this bare tree is different from that one) but rather by observing it (“the geometrical coordinations between [its] slender twigs”) in such perfect detail that it simply could not be mistaken for anything else.

Finally, this perceptual training, in allowing things to show up as unique, contributes to an attunement that allows things to show up as important, as intrinsically significant and capable of making demands. So long as we see a postbox as just “a” postbox, interchangeable with any other, we’re likely to value it only in terms of its instrumental value, its “usefulness to our current projects” (Wrathall 204). The postbox gets my letter from here to there, and it doesn’t matter if I use this one, or if I use that one. But if I attend to it in a way that invites it to show up not as *a* postbox but, rather, as *this particular* postbox, it now becomes possible to value it in other ways. It now assumes,



or is at least now capable of assuming, a significance in excess of its significance to my current project of mailing a letter. In this way it assumes a presence, a weightiness and a solidity, that it didn't have earlier, and in this way it becomes really capable of "mak[ing]...demands." It might seem absurd to imagine Nabokov going around gaping at postboxes, "valu[ing]," "respect[ing]" and "respond[ing] to them" (Wrathall 200). Easier and more plausible to simply say that this deep attention *readies* us for the apprehension of meaning; it makes it possible for things, more things, a wider range of things, to really matter to us. In a sense, though, the image isn't all that far-fetched, for this is, after all, precisely what it means to wonder at trifles. In *Speak, Memory*, we don't find Nabokov responding to any postboxes, but we do find him responding in a profound way to all manner of unlikely things: "a basket (stained blue on the inside by somebody's whortleberries)" (44); "the bright, wet rubber of a gardener's hose to which some of the gravel over which the hose has just slithered appears" (305); and, "[i]n a sweating glass jar, several spiny caterpillars...feeding on nettle leaves (and ejecting interesting, barrel-shaped pellets of olive-green frass)" (80).

### *Between a Gift and a Choice*

*Speak, Memory*, then, describes three childhood pastimes that seem likely to have contributed to Nabokov's "capacity to wonder at trifles": his observation and emulation of his mother's affectionate attitude toward the little "loved thing[s]" in Vyra; his passion for and pursuit of butterflies; and his early training in the visual arts. Each directs the attention to trifles -- tiny bird tracks on snow, the markings on a moth's wing, the slender twigs of a tree; and each does so in a different way, and for a different reason -- whether to express one's love for a place and to lovingly store up one's experiences

of it for the future; or to minutely distinguish similar things from one another; or visualize things so well that they can be depicted later, from memory, with perfect accuracy. In allowing trifles to show up as worthy of notice, moreover, these different practices help to allow things generally to show up as unique and important -- intrinsically important, existentially significant, weighty, distinct, capable of making demands -- capable, in short, of having real meaning for us, of mattering to us.

These examples, then, suggest how Nabokov came to be attuned to the world in a way that allowed trifles to show up for him as occasions for wonder. They draw a connection between “the capacity to wonder at trifles” and particular practices of loving, learning about, and looking at things in the world, and they show that Nabokov was introduced to these practices at a very early age. These were habitual, rather than just occasional, practices: painting and butterfly collecting were the twin passions of his youth, the activities that occupied him for “most of the day” as a child; and his whole early milieu seems to have been one in which little things routinely showed up as having existential importance, and one in which that importance was routinely pointed out, especially, but not exclusively, by his mother.

On the whole, these examples suggest that this is an attunement Nabokov found himself in, rather than consciously chose, one day, to have; gradually embraced, rather than deliberately willed himself into. His mother’s example, her way of prompting him to notice, love, and remember the things around him, his whole meaning-oriented milieu, were there for him from the beginning. So were butterflies: he caught his first butterfly in 1906, just a few years after “the birth of sentient life” (*SM* 22), following in the footsteps of his father, who had been a passionate collector himself. “They chose me, not I them,” Nabokov once responded in answer to the question of why he had chosen butterflies to study (qtd. in Boyd, *Russian* 68). Art lessons began just a year or two later, with his

mother's former drawing master. In adopting these habits and passions and practices he followed a path laid out for him years before, fitting his life into a pattern drawn long ago, like that adorning the ancient, "complete...absolutely complete" majolica bowl he envisions in the final pages of his memoir. Nabokov never resents or denies the fact of this inheritance, this sense of his life's conformation to some larger whole. On the contrary, the idea that his life might fit into to some much larger pattern, some larger design, is for him a source of comfort, pleasure, and speculation. Finding evidence of such design -- in, say, the similarity of a piece of pottery found by his son to one found by himself, or to one found by his mother -- is, after all, an explicit goal of *Speak, Memory*: Nabokov identifies the "following of such thematic designs through one's life" as "the true purpose of autobiography" (27).<sup>14</sup>

It's important, though, to see that that inheritance doesn't make his attunement any less individual: Nabokov's circumstances are still peculiarly his own, different even from those of his

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14. Michael Wood, for whom *Speak, Memory* is finally a dark book, more about what pattern and memory cannot redeem than what they can, notes that "[w]hat is striking about these 'thematic designs,' as Nabokov calls them, is their flimsy and incidental nature":

Or at least this is what strikes us if we resist Nabokov's stylish insistence on their importance, and our own attraction to the elegance of the coincidences. These coaches and matches and gestures are not large moments or bearers of grand meanings, and in the case of the pot there is not even a coincidence, only an act of the writer's mind (94).

I think Wood is right about coaches and matches and gestures: there *is* often something strained about these connections, and moving because strained. But "the pot" -- that imagined majolica bowl -- is different. It refers to more basic familial and cultural patterns that have nothing fanciful or flimsy about them: shared sights, shared experiences, shared lifestyles and habits, shared dispositions, shared ways of parenting and of being a child. The link between his father's love of butterflies and his own, or between his mother's vacation spots and his son's, are actual connections and not elegant coincidences; and it's these substantive patterns that I have in mind when I refer to Nabokov's position within a larger structure of inheritance and design.

brother Sergey, so close to him in age. And his receptiveness to those circumstances, the way he responds to his mother's example, the way he takes to drawing and painting and collecting butterflies, the ease with which he adopts these early habits of loving and learning and looking -- that's his own, too, part of the "individual mystery" that makes him who he is (*SM* 25). Nor does it mean that this attunement is merely a passive, inevitable way of being for him, one that Nabokov just unthinkingly and unwillingly stumbles into. He energetically embraces the path he finds himself on; he takes to certain practices and not others; he hones and deepens his "capacity to wonder at trifles" through a passionate engagement in particular activities. To say that his capacity to wonder at trifles is entirely *given* to him would be too simplistic, just as describing it as something *chosen* by him would be wrong. It's a little of both, something between a gift and a choice.

It's worth noting that this implies a somewhat different answer from "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" to the question of how easy this attunement is for others to acquire. As we noted in Chapter One, Nabokov's lectures portray the "capacity to wonder at trifles" as a cultivable attunement: his lectures on literature are generally predicated on the idea that his students can come to dispose themselves in this way toward texts, and the exhortative stance of "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" implies that his audience can come to dispose themselves in this way toward things in the world. But *Speak, Memory*, by linking Nabokov's own "capacity to wonder at trifles" to a whole rich familial and cultural context, to particular childhood practices and the natural features of Nabokov's temperament, suggests just how much more must be involved in developing such attunement than sitting in on a few lectures. The memoir shows us that Nabokov didn't simply decide to start wondering at trifles one day, to start imbuing little things with importance, to start allowing things to matter deeply to him, to take up arms against commonsense. And so, it would

seem, neither can we.

That doesn't mean that coming to dispose oneself to the world in this way is impossible. It just means that it's harder, that it takes more time and effort, than "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" suggests. Just what sort of effort might be involved, then, in adopting these irrational standards for ourselves? Nabokov doesn't offer any explicit guidance here, but one answer might be to adopt the postures associated with this way of being, the habits of attention, the standards of value, and -- importantly -- to practice them for a sustained period of time. This would also involve engaging deeply with the work of those who seem to enjoy a "capacity to wonder at trifles" -- Nabokov, most obviously, but other artists as well: some novelists; some painters; many poets -- in order to find out what those postures are, to discover what it looks like and feels like to experience things in this way. Nabokov's own example suggests that it might not be possible to develop such an attunement out of nothing; it may be that some basic capacity for wondering at unlikely things, some basic experience with allowing things to show up as "important," and some basic skepticism about the authority of commonsense, must already be in place before that attunement can take hold. But while the full enjoyment of that attunement might only belong to Nabokov and the few thousand "fellow dreamers" he names in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," the number of those capable of acquiring it, with time and exposure and practice, is surely larger.

### *The Highest Form of Consciousness*

Thus far, we've shown the "capacity to wonder at trifles" to be a whole, rich, deep way of being in the world; a way of disposing oneself that could plausibly be understood as the "highest form of

consciousness”; an orientation with origins that stretch back to the beginning of Nabokov’s childhood; an attunement partly given and partly made. I’ve also argued that *Speak, Memory* shows what the world looks like to someone with this attunement, a world revealed by the “capacity to wonder at trifles.” This is different from saying that *Speak, Memory* shows us a lost and lovingly remembered world, whose details show up as important simply because they’ve been recovered, or else a childhood world reorganized and enhanced by an artist’s mature imagination. It’s true that the memoir also shows us these things; the world of *Speak, Memory* is, of course, a restored world, and it is illuminated by memory and by art. But there’s also an effort here to capture something about, or persuade us of something about, Nabokov’s present-tense experience of the world: how things show up for him, how they showed up for him in the present-tense of the past, how the world reveals itself in the light of the “highest form[] of consciousness.” As it’s important that we see this before moving on to the next chapter, I want to offer one final example here.

Early in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov describes one of his mother’s “greatest pleasures” -- hunting for mushrooms at Vyra. The scene anticipates Nabokov’s description of the pleasure he takes in hunting butterflies, and his description, examined earlier, of the pleasure his son Dmitri takes in collecting bits of pottery by the sea. Elena, her son, and her grandson share the same irrational passion, surely incomprehensible to common sense, for hunting and finding, collecting and discarding, curating and admiring for its own sake, for the pleasure of it. Here is Nabokov’s description of his mother’s own enchanted hunting:

Rainy weather would bring out these beautiful plants in profusion under the first birches and aspens in our park, especially in its older part, east of the carriage road that divided the park in two. Its shady recesses would then harbor that special boletic reek which makes a Russian’s nostrils dilate - a dark, dank, satisfying blend of damp moss, rich earth, rotting leaves. But one had to poke and peer for a

goodish while among the wet underwood before something really nice, such as a family of bonneted baby *edulis* or the marbled variety of *scaber*, could be discovered and carefully teased out of the soil.

On overcast afternoons, all alone in the drizzle, my mother, carrying a basket (stained blue on the inside by somebody's whortleberries), would set out on a long collecting tour. Toward dinnertime, she could be seen emerging from the nebulous depths of a park alley, her small figure cloaked and hooded in greenish-brown wool, on which countless droplets of moisture made a kind of mist all around her. As she came nearer from under the dripping trees and caught sight of me, her face would show an odd, cheerless expression, which might have spelled poor luck, but which I knew was the tense, jealously contained beatitude of the successful hunter. Just before reaching me, with an abrupt, drooping movement of the arm and shoulder and a "Pouf!" of magnified exhaustion, she would let her basket sag, in order to stress its weight, its fabulous fullness.

Near a white garden bench, on a round garden table of iron, she would lay out her boletes in concentric circles to count and sort them. Old ones, with spongy, dingy flesh, would be eliminated, leaving the young and the crisp. For a moment, before they were bundled away by a servant to a place she knew nothing about, to a doom that did not interest her, she would stand there admiring them, in a glow of quiet contentment. As often happened at the end of a rainy day, the sun might cast a lurid gleam just before setting, and there, on the damp round table, her mushrooms would lie, very colorful, some bearing traces of extraneous vegetation -- a grass blade sticking to a viscid fawn cap, or moss still clothing the bulbous base of a dark-stippled stem. And a tiny looper caterpillar would be there, too, measuring, like a child's finger and thumb, the rim of the table, and every now and then stretching upward to grope, in vain, for the shrub from which it had been dislodged (43-44).

There is much to say here, but I'll confine myself to pointing out what are, for our purposes, the three most important aspects of the passage. First, the activity it represents is entirely in keeping with "irrational standards" and deliberately, even polemically, opposed to common sense. Elena Nabokov values the mushrooms in an utterly non-instrumental way. Though "delicious," as Nabokov notes a little earlier, "the gustatory moment" doesn't "matter[] much" to her (43); their transformation from find to food doesn't "interest her." They matter to her in a deeper way, as part of a game, a "delight[ful]" quest, that brings her a great deal of personal pleasure, and which she

engages in, routinely, every summer. If the mushrooms showed up for her as they would for common sense -- that is, in their "gustatory" aspect -- then the speed of the hunt would matter more than the art of it, and the quantity of her finds more than their quality, and agarics would not be ruled out, and the mushrooms would likely seem largely the same, and neither the hunt nor the finds would mean much to her, or, at least, not nearly as much. She sorts out the old boletes from the younger, crisper, presumably tastier ones, but Nabokov tells us that this, too, is for her a kind of game, and that the game has more to do with the pleasure of arranging, admiring and perfecting her finds than with their consumption. The color and form and uniqueness of the mushrooms, and the delight she takes in hunting them, matter more to her than any material use she could find for them. That's it, and that's everything.

Next, and most importantly, Nabokov presents the scene as it appears to him in the light of the "highest form[] of consciousness." The scene isn't a photograph; Nabokov tells us how things would have been, what might have shown up, what sort of thing would have happened and how things were likely to have appeared. And, he implies, they would have appeared distinct, unique, weighty, wonderful. Memory, certainly, casts its own illumination: the details of the scene are especially precious to him now that his mother, and Vyra, and his childhood, and the whole world to which they belonged, are gone. But there's also a sense that that illumination, that sense of delight and importance, isn't just the work of memory. There's a sense that this is also, to some extent, how things would have, might have, shown up then -- maybe a somewhat intensified and idealized version of how, but still how -- in the light of the highest form of consciousness.

Above all, in this scene, trifles stand out as occasions for wonder. His mother's basket shows up as an occasion for surprise, delight, curiosity, and speculation: why is it blue? stained with what?



when and by whom? The richly textural, unusually specific, unexpected, digressive detail is there not just to render the image, and the memory, precise; and not just to call up for the reader a whole happy, pastoral family context in which the same objects are used and reused, by different people, season after season, the same fruits and fungi collected and shared; but also, and I think primarily, to invoke the attunement we've been describing, this way of orienting oneself toward things and allowing them to show up in certain ways. In every instance this wondering vision draws attention to the common sense vision it defies. Nabokov's parenthesis here -- "(stained blue on the inside by somebody's whortleberries)" -- has a faint aura of insistence about it; it seems to assert itself against the common sense perspective that would have it ignored or excised. This is true, too, of his observations about the particular way his mother looked in her cloak, or the very particular face she made, both presented as surprising, charming, curious features of the scene, and which show up for him as causes for speculation. It's true of the needlessly precise vision of those mushrooms, "very colorful, some bearing traces of extraneous vegetation -- a grass blade sticking to a viscid fawn cap, or moss still clothing the bulbous base of a dark-stippled stem," which commonsense would neither see nor represent so distinctly.

Finally, it's worth noticing how this scene evokes, not only in an actual but in a figural way, what it is to be attuned to things in the way we've been describing. The image of the rain "bring[ing] out" the "beautiful mushrooms" from the dark earth, as if out of nowhere, is a lovely image for how the capacity to wonder at trifles allows things to show up and present themselves as occasions for surprise, delight, and speculation. The image of his mother stressing the "weight" of her basket, its "fabulous fullness," is an potent image for the sense of weightiness and solidity, of meaningfulness and mattering, that this wondering form of consciousness confers on the objects it attends to. And,

finally, the tiny looper caterpillar helps us to see the scene as being about more than his mother and her mushrooms. It helps us to see it as being about existential importance, about the things that matter to us so deeply that without them we would cease to be who we are, inasmuch as it links his mother's pursuit of boletes to Nabokov's pursuit of butterflies, which we know to be, especially at this stage in his life, more important to him than almost anything else.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### *Knowing the World to Be Good: The Riddle of Lolita*

Nabokov rounds out his description of "the highest form[] of consciousness" with an assertion of its moral import:

...and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we *know the world to be good* (LL 374; my italics).

Nabokov's readers have questioned the plausibility of this last clause, what it means, whether Nabokov really believed it to be true. Richard Rorty in particular has asked why, if Nabokov truly did believe in some connection between trifles and goodness, he went out of his way to create "characters who are both...noticing and heartless..., obsessives who are as sensitive as they are callous" (160), fastidious, "artistic" observers like Humbert Humbert (168). To Rorty and others, *Lolita* is in this respect a puzzle, an open contradiction of the claim above. What should we make of it? Why does Nabokov contradict, or seem to contradict, himself in this way?

Rorty solves the puzzle by seeing Humbert Humbert as a kind of self-critique. In *Lolita*, he argues, we see Nabokov correcting himself, moderating his sense of what "artistic gifts" like "noticing things that most other people do not notice, being curious about what others take for granted, seeing the momentary iridescence and not just the underlying formal structure" can do (168; 159).

Humbert's narrative confirms that these gifts don't have any "special connection" with goodness and that, at the end of the day, Nabokov knows it. From this perspective, Nabokov's assertion of a

connection between the "capacity to wonder at trifles" and coming to "know the world to be good" is finally an aesthete's fancy, a bit of posturing or wishful thinking. "Nabokov's best novels," Rorty concludes, "are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas" (168).

Other critics, too, have seen in *Lolita* a refutation, or complication, or moderation of the opinions Nabokov expressed so strongly in his lectures, interviews, prefaces and afterwords. Nabokov the lecturer insists on the authority of the subjective view, the primacy of one's own unique vision; but the novelist warns us about what can happen if we cherish that vision too much. The interviewee prizes, above all, personal freedom, independence, individualism, self-determination; but the novelist shows us how the pursuit of personal autonomy can be destructive if left unchecked. The aesthete celebrates the imagination and the senses, but the novelist teaches us that "the imagination and the senses that fire it must be reined in, must learn to limit themselves to the artistic sphere so that they may remain an instrument of widening and deepening perception, not of pain and loss" (de la Durantaye 187). In his novels, and especially in *Lolita*, we find Nabokov checking himself, softening his strong opinions, emphasizing the distinction between artistic gifts and moral ones, and telling us that "the artist cannot live in the world as he lives in the world of words" (de la Durantaye 95).

Another way of resolving the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, Nabokov's claim that the "capacity to wonder at trifles" gives us access to the good, and, on the other, his creation of a heartless noticer like Humbert Humbert, is to say that Humbert is actually not a very good noticer at all. David Andrews takes this approach, arguing that Humbert's moral failure is in fact tied to a failure of noticing: his "failure to notice the pain of others":

[Humbert] concentrates on his own uniqueness and pleasure to such a degree that

he loses sight of people who are likewise unique but often suffering. This idea inverts "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" in that Humbert's incapacity to notice trifles, i.e., external details, is connected to his incapacity for pity. While his self-indulgent aestheticism does not destroy his talent...it does finally destroy his capacity for joy. Talent may exist independently of pity, but over the long term, internal pleasure is contingent on external pity, and pity is in turn contingent on attention to detail (62).

But this seems too easy a solution. After all, Humbert is quite a good noticer and narrator of "external details." And he *does* notice Lolita's suffering -- "her sobs in the night -- every night, every night" (*Lolita* 176), the many shades of her unhappiness: her "childish despair" (171) and "distract[ion]" (174), her "limp[ness]" (159) and "moodiness" (169), her anger and "helplessness" (283), her "bored[om]" (161) and "hopeless[ness]" (157). He just doesn't take that suffering seriously. Or else he does, and takes pleasure in it, as when he recalls the "smooth tender bloom" of her face, "*so bright with tears*, when I used to roll, in play, her tousled head on my knee..." (204; my italics). It is, in fact, his ability to notice these things about Lolita even while "terrorizing" her that makes him so darkly and dazzlingly diabolical (151).

Both Rorty and Andrews seek to resolve the contradiction between what Nabokov says in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" and what he shows in *Lolita* by declaring one of those propositions to be false. Either Humbert Humbert is a bad man and good noticer, and Nabokov doesn't really believe his own claim; or else Humbert Humbert is bad man and a bad noticer, and he really does believe it. I want to suggest another way of resolving the problem, one that shows the character to be compatible with the claim without denying Humbert's skillfulness as an observer.

My argument can be summed up in a simple way. *Lolita* corroborates Nabokov's claim that the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is a state of mind in which we "know the world to be good," but it

does so by offering us a vision of how the world shows up for someone *without* access to that "highest form[] of consciousness," someone for whom the world does *not* show up as good, and someone who actively compromises, moreover, another person's access to that vision. In this reading, *Lolita* doesn't undermine the central thesis of "The Art of Literature and Commonsense." Rather, it deepens our understanding of it, by helping us to see the difference between Nabokov's "artistic gifts" and Humbert's linguistic ones; between wondering at trifles and merely noticing them; between tuning in to the world in a particular way and imposing a particular vision upon it; between encountering a style that tells us something about the stylist, and encountering a style that, perhaps, only tells us about itself.

*From Speak, Memory to Lolita*

What exactly does Nabokov mean when he says that "in this childishly speculative state of mind" we "know the world to be good"? I think he simply means what we've been saying he means all along: that the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is a special way of disposing ourselves toward things that allows those things -- even the most apparently trivial, least obviously wonderful among them -- to show up as sources of wonder, joy, value and meaning. Surely another way of putting this would be to say that, in disposing ourselves to the world in this way, we allow it to show up as "good" -- more finally a source of wonder than of fear, joy than of pain, meaning than of meaninglessness, or indifference, or confusion. Nabokov's claim, of course, is slightly stranger than this, for he suggests that in experiencing the world in this way, we're actually recognizing a deep truth about it, how it really "is," how things really "are." He describes the goodness we apprehend as something already present, something we reveal or confirm about the world by tuning in to it in the right way, rather

than something we merely project onto it. In this specially attuned state of mind, he says, we don't *feel* that the world is good, or *believe* the world to be good; it doesn't *seem* or *appear* to us *as though* the world were good. Rather, we *know* the world to be good -- "fundamentally good," as he says, a little later -- war gods, police states, Humbert Humberts notwithstanding (LL 377) .

To *really* understand what Nabokov means by "know[ing] the world to be good" we'll need to understand what, exactly, he means by "the world" -- a question that remains a source of debate among his readers. For now, though, we can say that the phrase describes the "highest form[] of consciousness" as a moral phenomenon as well as an aesthetic one. "Wondering at trifles" is a moral act inasmuch as it gives us access to certain kind of moral knowledge, and inasmuch as that knowledge has moral effects. Nabokov proposes that that knowledge can, for example, serve to reassure us, give us solace and strength, at precisely those moments when the "goodness" of the world seems most obscured, that is, "during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death" (LL 373).

In "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov's provocative connection between trifles and goodness remains, for the most part, a matter of faith and assertion. In support of it Nabokov doesn't and, perhaps, can't, offer any formal proof. But he does something much better. He dedicates his two best books -- *Speak, Memory* and *Lolita* -- to exploring the connection between the special attunement we've been describing and its relationship to the good. These books, two memoirs of roughly the same length, one written right after the other, in the very middle of his career, form a pair. They're paired approaches to the same theme, twinned investigations into the nature of the "highest form[] of consciousness" and its moral import.

*Speak, Memory*, as we've already seen, offers a *positive* account of this connection between trifles

and goodness. It shows us how the "capacity to wonder at trifles" locates us in a world in which things are revealed as important, as capable of making demands on us, as mattering. It expresses what Nabokov says all poetry expresses -- "one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness" -- and it reveals that "embraced" universe to be a rich, complex, inexhaustible source of joy and meaning (*SM* 218). *Speak, Memory* also proves, or is, at least, designed to prove, the durability of that vision in the face of "danger, pain, dust, death," for it insists on the truth of that account even while chronicling some of the very "darkest and most dazzling hours" a person could be made to endure: the loss of home and homeland; twenty years of flight and exile; and, most painfully and senselessly of all, the assassination of a beloved parent (*LL* 373).<sup>15</sup> Yet more than it

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15. This is a hard thing to do, and at least one critic -- Michael Wood -- suggests that Nabokov doesn't quite succeed in the effort. To Wood, the record of pain and loss in *Speak, Memory* finally undercuts its vision of redemption and joy, in spite of Nabokov's wish that it should not:

[Nabokov] is saying, I think, and may himself half-believe it, that pattern is a redemption of loss, and perhaps the only redemption of loss there is, however fragile and unlikely and insignificant that pattern may be. But he is also saying, or his text is saying, that loss is irredeemable, that loss goes on and on, an endlessly discomposed face in the mirror...The purpose behind the purpose of autobiography, perhaps, is to tell us what the tracing of designs *can't* do for us (94-96).

Wood's reading is illuminating inasmuch as it sensitizes us to the currents of pain and loss that run beneath *Speak, Memory's* sparkling surface. But he goes too far, I think, in implying that the record of "danger, pain, dust, death" preserved in *Speak, Memory* is finally bigger than, or more central than, its vision of meaning and joy. Wood suggests that no amount of noticing, and wondering, and remembering, and tracing could be equal to the loss Nabokov describes; that these efforts could only ever be "flimsy and incidental" in comparison with the pain they aim to redeem; and that this something that Nabokov -- or, at least, *Speak, Memory* -- knows (94). We need to be wary of this conclusion, I think, not least because it's a conclusion with which commonsense would agree. *Nabokov* surely isn't saying this: he opens *Speak, Memory*, after all, by rejecting commonsense, and with it, implicitly, the commonsense interpretation of what his experience of "danger, pain, dust, death" finally means. Is "his text"? This argument is more subtle and more difficult to refute, but as a start I would point to the structure of Nabokov's memoir, the way it begins and ends with scenes of surprise, delight, wonder, discovery, revelation: the surprise of consciousness appearing, out of



expresses and proves and insists on all this, it shows it. *Speak, Memory* shows what the world looks like when one relates to it in the right way, in the light of the "highest form[] of consciousness." It shows a world whose smallest components are full of interest, surprise, delight, meaning, value, importance -- a world that is, in a word, good.

*Lolita* shows us something very different. Nabokov had been thinking about and making notes toward *Lolita* even while he was composing, in the late 1940s, the pieces that would become the chapters of *Speak, Memory*; the creation of those two memoirs overlapped, the way Nabokov's *Onegin* commentary would later overlap with the generically similar *Pale Fire*. In 1951, he exchanged his own bright memoir for Humbert Humbert's darker one. Here he continued to explore the meaning, especially the moral meaning, of finding the right attunement to the world, only now he explored it from a wholly different angle. In his lectures he had defined "the highest form[] of consciousness"; in his autobiography he had shown what it meant to attune oneself to the world in this way; now, in *Lolita*, he would show what it meant to be wholly *cut off from* this attunement. *Lolita*, like *Speak, Memory*, helps us to understand what the "highest form[] of consciousness" is and what it means, but it does so by showing us a world utterly untouched by its light. The novel is, in this sense, the obverse of the book that comes before it, its haunting negative image, *Speak, Memory* shown from the "queer mirror side" (*Lolita* 306).

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nowhere, between two eternities of darkness in the book's beginning, the surprise of a "splendid ship's funnel" suddenly appearing between two buildings at its end (310), both phenomena figured as "blissful" occasions for wonder ("shock...enchantment and glee") (309). And I would point to the rainbow theme discussed in Chapter One, by means of which Nabokov subtly and repeatedly presents ordinary experience as a continual source of wonder and joy.

*A World Gone Dark*

So the "wonderland" of *Speak, Memory* gives way to the "umber and black Humberland" of *Lolita*, Nabokov's lucid vision to Humbert's lurid one (*SM* 136; *Lolita* 166). Humberland is very, very dark, "a world," as Humbert says, "of total evil" (*Lolita* 284). Nabokov tends to use a less theological vocabulary when describing Humbert -- he describes him as "hateful," "a vain and cruel wretch who appears to be 'touching'" (*SO* 26; 94) -- but these epithets seem to understate the case. Nabokov's portrait of Humbert is about as close to a portrait of evil as anything we get in Nabokov's work, and, indeed, in literature.

"Which is the worst thing men do?" an interviewer once asked Nabokov. "To stink, to cheat, to torture," he replied (*SO* 152). Humbert cheats and tortures; he also kills. He doesn't "stink," but then, evil rarely presents itself this way, "in some sort of red glow," as the Devil says to Ivan Karamazov, "'in thunder and lightning,' with scorched wings" (Dostoevsky 647)<sup>16</sup>. And, of course, in a figurative sense, a moral sense, Humbert does "stink": this, after all, is part of the joke of his going into the perfume business. The list of his crimes against Lolita is long,<sup>17</sup> but we can sum them

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16. Humbert Humbert, in fact, resembles Ivan's hallucination in many ways: middle-aged, single, of modest means, fastidious, elegantly dressed, old-fashioned, eloquent, manipulative, self-contradictory, given to visiting doctors' offices and peppering his speech with fragments of French, able to "tell a story or two" (Dostoevsky 636). It's worth noting that Nabokov, though he famously disliked Dostoevsky, once agreed to "a surprising project: a translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*, with his own introduction and notes, for Pascal Covici of Viking Press" -- possibly, his biographer implies, because he was "short of money" at the time (Boyd, *American* 146). This, moreover, occurred in 1950, while Nabokov was finishing *Speak, Memory* and beginning to make notes toward *Lolita*. Nabokov became ill a few months later and ended up abandoning the translation, but something of the encounter with Dostoevsky's Devil lingers, perhaps, in his own diabolical character.

17. Most, though not all, discussions of Humbert's sins center on his crimes against Lolita, and this, I think, is the right approach: Quilty's death is too farcical and unreal, and Humbert is too plainly mad at the moment of it, for it to occupy the reader's moral imagination in the same way.

up by saying that he robs her, during their two hellish years together, of her rightful portion -- practically her entire portion -- of joy, freedom, security, and, for a long while, hope. The shape and texture of her life, during their time together, are largely defined by Humbert's breathtaking cruelty towards her; and, whatever one makes of his "moral apotheosis," his belated sense of horror at what he has done, it's worth noting that he never says that he would not, if given the chance, do it all over again (*Lolita* 5).

There are ambiguities here -- where does Humbert's evil come from? could he have acted differently? what is the moral value of contrition? are there some sins that cannot be "reprieve[d]"? -- but Nabokov seems less interested in these questions than he is in simply showing us what real, human evil looks like, what it sounds like, how it thinks and how it acts. Most importantly, though, at least for our purposes here, Nabokov associates Humbert's cruelty with a certain way of orienting oneself toward the world, of disposing oneself to things, of allowing things to "show up," and he directly opposes that orientation to "the highest form[] of consciousness." In *Lolita*, Nabokov is less interested in asking traditional moral-philosophical questions about evil than he is in bringing us fully and persuasively inside an evil consciousness -- in capturing the texture of that consciousness in prose and imagining what it would feel like from the inside. Just as he is interested in the "highest form[] of consciousness," he is also interested in the lowest.

Elsewhere Nabokov opposes his highest form of consciousness to the "monster of grim commonsense."<sup>18</sup> Here he considers a different sort of monster: the strange, private, *uncommon*

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18. Commonsense is, as we've seen, the explicit target of "The Creative Writer"/"The Art of Literature and Commonsense" and the implicit interlocutor of *Conclusive Evidence/Speak, Memory*. It appears again in *Bend Sinister*, the last novel Nabokov wrote before *Lolita*, in the form of a

dispositions that can inhibit one's access to the radiant vision *Speak, Memory* describes. Where commonsense inhibits that vision by allowing things to show up in a very limited way, Humbert's uncommon sensibility inhibits it by actually distorting what he sees, so that things show up for him as something other than what they are. Where commonsense is easy to tell apart from the "irrational" attunement Nabokov depicts in *Speak, Memory*, Humbert's way of seeing things can sometimes look unnervingly -- if only superficially -- like it: singular, precise, ecstatic. Where commonsense is popular and pervasive, Humbert Humbert's way of relating to the world is all his own. And where the origins of commonsense are located, necessarily, in the social world, the origins of Humbert's weirder sensibilities are harder to place. Humbert provides a convoluted history of his "nympholepsy" early on in the book (seashore, sea monsters), but his simplest explanation is the most convincing: "that is the way I am made" (178). This, too, we should see in relation to *Speak, Memory*. If *Speak, Memory* shows us what it is to be blessed with the gift of a right attunement, *Lolita* imagines what it is to be cursed with a wrong one.

Humbert insists that the world shows up *very* differently for him than it does for other people. He might, of course, be lying about this, but the idea is woven very deeply into his narrative, and I'm not sure why we should doubt him. It is possible, after all, to accept his basic claim without accepting the aura of glamor and dark romance he attaches to it:

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I

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murderous political regime that, with its lack of imagination, its literalism and materialism, its dismissal of detail, and its contempt for difference resembles nothing so much as "modern commonsense" gone amuck.

propose to designate "nymphets"...

A normal man given a group photograph of school girls or Girl Scouts and asked to point out the comeliest one will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs -- the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears and tenderness forbid me to tabulate -- the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power (16-17).

Humbert tells us that his nympholepsy "reveal[s]" the world to him in a certain way, just as Nabokov's "highest form[] of consciousness" reveals it in another. Most obviously, it reveals, as Humbert puts it, the deadly daemon among the wholesome children, the demoniac nymphet within the wholesome child, Lolita within Dolores Haze; but it also makes men and women, places and things show up for him in peculiar ways. Parks and playgrounds, from Paris to New York, show up for him as places of special interest. Men show up mainly as potential threats, as practical impediments (John Farlow) or romantic rivals (Clare Quilty). Even Gaston Godin shows up not so much as a friend as someone Humbert knows will not get in the way of his desire for nymphets. Ordinary ("terrestrial") women show up for him as generally repulsive and beside the point, more vegetable or animal or perhaps mineral than human, with their "pumpkins or pears for breasts" (18), their "long, brown" "chestnut mare" legs (89), their "phocine" thighs (42), their dyed hair and coarse skin, their "big," "fat," "puffy" "large-as-life" bodies (54; 43; 26; 76). The most conventionally attractive among them are all "hopelessly unattractive" to him (104), and college girls are especially repellent. "[T]here are few physiques I loathe more," he confides, "than the heavy low-slung pelvis, thick calves and deplorable complexion of the average coed (in whom I see, maybe, the

coffin of coarse female flesh within which my nymphets are buried alive)" (175).

At first, this way of experiencing things seems to have a lot in common with seeing things in the light of the "highest form[] of consciousness" -- not thematically, of course, but structurally. There's a great deal of rapturous attention to detail in Humbert's narrative, albeit to a certain kind of detail (the "slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb"); and there's what looks like a familiar, Nabokovian insistence on the primacy of subjective experience, of one's own private way of encountering things. Readers who see *Lolita* as a complication or retraction of Nabokov's claims in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" do so, I think, in part because they see in Humbert Humbert's subjective, ecstatic, detail-oriented approach to the world something very similar to the subjective, ecstatic, detail-oriented approach Nabokov seems to endorse in his lectures and interviews. If this "artist[ic]" (as Humbert calls it) way of seeing can be associated with the creation of a "world of total evil," then there can't be anything intrinsically good about it; or else there must be something wrong with it, or, at least, something in need of restraint.

Yet if we look closely at Humbert's way of orienting himself to things, what should strike us isn't the closeness of this orientation to Nabokov's "highest form[] of consciousness," but rather its deliberate estrangement from it. It isn't just that Humbert applies his "artist[ic]" vision to the wrong objects, or that he approaches things "artist[ically]" but happens to be cruel. It's that the very *structure* of his way of encountering things is different from the form of consciousness Nabokov prizes in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" and shows us in *Speak, Memory*. The madman, the cruel wretch, the hateful person are finally more prominent in Humbert than the artist. And the madman, as Nabokov imagines him, is cut off from the possibility of that superior attunement and its higher moral vision of the world.

### *Wondering vs. Noticing*

How, exactly, is the structure of Humbert's way of orienting himself to things different from the "irrational," uncommonsensical, detail-oriented attunement Nabokov describes in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense"? The first thing to see is that while there is plenty of *noticing* and *attending* to "trifles" in *Lolita*, there is no *wondering* at them. Humbert's universe is, crucially, a wonderless universe. The "capacity to wonder at trifles" involves, as we've seen, not just noticing things but delighting in them, being surprised by them, being curious about them, speculating about them. Three out of four of these components are usually missing from Humbert's interactions with the details of his world. In the end, Humbert's way of disposing himself to the world actually has very little in common with Nabokov's.

Humbert rarely, if ever, responds to things with surprise, or curiosity, or speculation. Instead of surprise we tend to get recognition; instead of curiosity, indifference or contempt; instead of speculation, brief and often cynical explanations. His responses to Lolita, or at least to her physical person, would seem to be an exception to these rules, but a closer look shows that even here what appears to be wonder is almost always only delight. I'll aim to show this by focusing on one such scene of passionate attention: Humbert's vision of Lolita when he picks her up at camp after Charlotte has been killed, right before her whole world is about to be reduced to the confines of the "family" car.

Humbert's first moments at Camp Q capture, in microcosm, how things usually show up for him:

Let me retain for a moment that scene in all its trivial and fateful detail: hag Holmes writing out a receipt, scratching her head, pulling a drawer out of her desk, pouring change into my impatient palm, then neatly spreading a banknote over it with a bright "...and five!"; photographs of girl-children; some gaudy moth or butterfly, still alive, safely pinned to the wall ("nature study"); the framed diploma of the camp's dietitian; my trembling hands; a card produced by efficient Holmes with a report of Dolly Haze's behavior for July ("fair to good; keen on swimming and boating"); a sound of trees and birds, and my pounding heart...I was standing with my back to the open door, and then I felt the blood rush to my head as I heard her respiration and voice behind me. She arrived dragging and bumping her heavy suitcase. "Hi!" she said, and stood still, looking at me with sly, glad eyes, her soft lips parted in a slightly foolish but wonderfully endearing smile (110-111).

Humbert presents his alertness to the "trivial and fateful detail[s]" of the scene as an effect of his heightened state of desire, his keen anticipation of Lolita's arrival, his anxiety that something will suddenly prevent him from taking her away. But Humbert is generally attentive to the "trivial" aspects of his environments and experiences, and those trivial aspects typically present themselves to him in the way they present themselves here. Trifles show up for Humbert; but they typically show up as occasions for humor or contempt, and often serve to confirm what Humbert already expects or knows. When Humbert, for example, notices, in the bathroom of the Haze house, "the expected coils of the rubber snake, and its complement -- a pinkish cozy, coyly covering the toilet lid" (38), these trifles merely serve to confirm his "expect[at]ions": that 342 Lawn Street is the just the sort of shabbily genteel place that "you know will have a rubber tube affixable to the tub faucet in lieu of a shower" and a cover for the toilet (36). ("Pinkish" is an inspired touch, conveying both Humbert's squeamishness -- is the toilet cover, like the "more gray than white" house (36), not quite clean? -- and his sense that everything about Charlotte Haze is approximate: her face like a "weak solution of Marlene Dietrich" (37), her indirect gaze, her ersatz tastes and uncommitted conversation.) Here,



too, the camp office confirms Humbert's low expectations for it, with its not-too-"bright" camp mistress, scratching her head, wasting his time, (and oblivious, as Humbert later learns, to what her charges are up to, to what all that "keen[ness] on swimming and boating" is really about); its useless report cards and silly diplomas; its self-important procedures and efficiencies. Other trifles are of a kind that always show up for him in the same way: photographs of girl-children are always interesting; women over thirty-five always have a haggard look. Even the "gaudy moth or butterfly," still alive and "safely pinned" to the wall, seems strangely expected, a "fateful" confirmation of the live capture Humbert himself is about to make.

This is how trifles tend to show up for Humbert Humbert: as the flotsam and jetsam of a fallen, predictable, ridiculous, amusing but mostly un-wonderful world. The effect here is often darkly, splendidly comic, and it's true that some of part that comic vision, that sense of the "exhilarating" nature of "philistine vulgarity," coincides with Nabokov's own view of things (315). But the orientations of their views are, ultimately, very different. For the most part, Humbert's perspective tells us more about how Humbert sees things than it does about the things he sees. Of course, Humbert *wants* us to see that the world shows up for him in this way, especially before Lolita enters it. These fallen details, after all, perform a polemical function within his narrative, inasmuch as they emphasize the difference between the "dull, dingy," colorless world of "stock characters" and "deadly conventionalit[ies]" Humbert lives in most of the time and the resplendent world Lolita opens up for him (27; 27; 37). In the passage above we find Humbert negotiating the transition from one world to the other, from the musty old world of framed and frozen things to a fresh world of "rosy sunshine" (119), of swaying trees and singing birds, a "wonderful[]" world with Lolita in it. The scene of his first vision of her at camp rehearses the scene of his first vision of her at home, in which

he steps out of the ugly Haze house into the "bright beauty" of the backyard, like Dorothy (another gingham-clad girl-child) stepping out into the Land of Oz (40). There *is* wonder in Humberland, but it's maddeningly, demoniacally wrapped up in the smile of a twelve-year-old girl.

So Humbert argues, both on the surface of his text and more deeply, in the way he presents his experience of things, in the line he draws between the dingy, if amusing, details of everyday life and the radiant details of Lolita's person. Yet even here, where we might expect to find it, Humbert's narrative offers little evidence of what Nabokov describes as the "highest form[] of consciousness." Humbert takes pleasure -- "unspeakable" pleasure (59) -- in the smallest details of Lolita's demeanor and her dress, but he never *wonders at* them. The scene continues:

She was thinner and taller, and for a second it seemed to me her face was less pretty than the mental imprint I had cherished for more than a month: her cheeks looked hollowed and too much lentigo camouflaged her rosy rustic features; and that first impression (a very narrow human interval between two tiger heartbeats) carried the clear implication that all widower Humbert had to do, wanted to do, or would do, was to give this wan-looking though sun-colored little orphan *aux yeux battus* (and even those plumbaceous umbrae under her eyes bore freckles) a sound education, a healthy and happy girlhood, a clean home, nice girl-friends of her age among whom (if the fates deigned to repay me) I might find, perhaps, a pretty little *Mägdlein* for Herr Doktor Humbert alone. But "in a wink," as the Germans say, the angelic line of conduct was erased, and I overtook my prey (time moves ahead of our fancies!), and she was my Lolita again -- in fact, more of my Lolita than ever. I let my hand rest on her warm auburn head and took up her bag. She was all rose and honey, dressed in the brightest gingham, with a pattern of little red apples, and her arms and legs were of a deep golden brown, with scratches like tiny dotted lines of coagulated rubies, and the ribbed cuffs of her white socks were turned down at the remembered level, and because of her childish gait, or because I had memorized her as always wearing heelless shoes, her saddle oxfords looked somehow too large and too high-heeled for her. Good-bye, Camp Q, merry Camp Q. Good-bye, plain unwholesome food, good-bye Charlie boy. In the hot car she settled down beside me, slapped a prompt fly on her lovely knee; then, her mouth working violently on a piece of chewing gum, she rapidly cranked down the window on her side and settled back again. We sped through the striped and speckled forest (111).

There are so many trifles noticed, attended to, celebrated, delighted in here: the pattern of little red apples on Lolita's bright gingham dress, the tiny scratches on her arms, the ribbed cuffs of her socks, the slightly foolish but endearing smile. Yet there's little surprise here, little curiosity or speculation. Lolita seems a little thinner and taller to Humbert, her shoes a little larger; but he doesn't spend much time dwelling on these changes, and quickly declares her "more of [his] Lolita than ever." Instead of surprise there's mainly recognition: her socks are turned down to the "remembered level," and even the pattern on her dress has a strangely familiar feeling about it, recalling as it does the "Eden-red apple" she once ate while he "safely solipsized" her on the sofa (60). He doesn't wonder how she came to get those precious, ruby-like scratches, though he probably should; he doesn't speculate about her thoughts as she settles down next to him. Humbert's madness, in short, disposes him to Lolita in a way that allows the details of her person to show up for him as objects of intense pleasure, ecstatic fascination, irrational delight, but never more than this, never wonder.

For a sense of what's missing here, consider Nabokov's equally rapturous description of his first love "Tamara" in *Speak, Memory*:

Seen through the carefully wiped lenses of time, the beauty of her face is as near and as glowing as ever. She was short and a trifle on the plump side but very graceful, with her slim ankles and supple waist. A drop of Tatar or Circassian blood might have accounted for the slight slant of her merry dark eye and the duskiness of her blooming cheek. A light down, akin to that found on fruit of the almond group, lined her profile with a fine rim of radiance. She accused her rich-brown hair of being unruly and oppressive and threatened to have it bobbed, and did have it bobbed a year later, but I always recall it as it looked first, fiercely braided into a thick plait that was looped up at the back of her head and tied there with a big bow of black silk. Her lovely neck was always bare, even in winter in St. Petersburg, for she had managed to obtain permission to eschew the stifling collar of a Russian schoolgirl's uniform. Whenever she made a funny remark or produced a jingle from her vast store of minor poetry, she had a most winning way of dilating her nostrils with a little snort of amusement. Still, I was never quite sure when she was serious and when she was not. The rippling of her ready laughter, her rapid speech,

the roll of her very uvular *r*, the tender, moist gleam on her lower eyelid -- indeed, all her features were ecstatically fascinating to me, but somehow or other, instead of divulging her person, they tended to form a brilliant veil in which I got entangled every time I tried to learn more about her. When I used to tell her we would marry in the last days of 1917, as soon as I had finished school, she would quietly call me a fool. I visualized her home but vaguely. Her mother's first name and patronymic (which were all I knew of the woman) had merchant-class or clerical connotations. Her father, who, I gathered, took hardly any interest in his family, was the steward of a large estate somewhere in the south (231).

Superficially, the two descriptions look very similar. Indeed, Humbert might easily have written the following:

Seen through the carefully wiped lenses of time, the beauty of her face is as near and as glowing as ever. She was short...but very graceful, with her slim ankles and supple waist...A light down, akin to that found on fruit of the almond group, lined her profile with a fine rim of radiance...Her lovely neck was always bare...Whenever she made a funny remark...she had a most winning way of dilating her nostrils with a little snort of amusement...The rippling of her ready laughter, her rapid speech...the tender, moist gleam on her lower eyelid -- indeed, all her features were ecstatically fascinating to me...

But the excised passages make all the difference, because that's where all the wondering is. Nabokov doesn't just delight in these details, he's curious about them; he's capable of being surprised by them, even resisted by them. He wonders where the "slight slant of her merry dark eye" and the "duskiness of [Tamara's] blooming cheek" might have come from; about what her home life is like; whether, at times, she's serious or joking. Her features fascinate him, but rather than conforming to some remembered or idealized image of her, some fixed notion of what she is or ought to be like, they finally resist him, so that Tamara always remains somewhat mysterious to him, out of reach. Above all the passage emphasizes that Tamara has a will, a history, a mind, a world of her own, as Humbert's descriptions of Lolita never do, so that she can threaten to bob her hair, against

Nabokov's wishes, and follow through; eschew the collar other Russian schoolgirls have to wear; bring him down to earth when he starts to speak to her of marriage.

Humbert, in short, delights in Lolita but never "wonders at" her, and never really wonders at anything else, either. Lolita's features are "ecstatically fascinating" to him, as Tamara's are to Nabokov, but he never "trie[s] to learn more about her," as Nabokov tries to learn more about Tamara. This incapacity for wondering-at is very much a part of his disease. Nabokov seems to imagine that Humbert doesn't wonder because Humbert *can't* wonder, because wondering would get in the way of his desire. There's a great moment near the end of their journey together in which we see Humbert *starting* to wonder at some trifling thing Lolita has said, and then instinctively pulling back as if for this reason. Humbert and Lolita are on the road again, and Humbert's begun to suspect that Lolita is in communication with the man who's been following them all day. She denies it; he presses her; then, suddenly, she changes the subject:

"Perhaps he is Trapp. If I were you -- Oh, look, all the nines are changing into the next thousand. When I was a little kid," she continued, unexpectedly, "I used to think they'd stop and go back to nines, if only my mother agreed to put the car in reverse."

It was the first time, I think, she spoke spontaneously of her pre-Humbertian childhood; perhaps, the theatre had taught her that trick; and silently we travelled on, unpursued (219).

"It was the first time, I think, she spoke spontaneously of her pre-Humbertian childhood": here, finally, is a trifle that does take Humbert by surprise. But Humbert doesn't welcome these kinds of surprises, and though he begins to wonder at what Lolita's just said, he quickly interrupts that process of wondering. Her unexpected anecdote alerts him to the fact that she's never talked of her "pre-Humbertian childhood" to him before, and that merits thinking about further. It invites him

to acknowledge the reality -- the ordinary, solid, richly textured reality -- of her childhood, and this, too, merits further reflection. And it suggests that Lolita has an inner life of her own that includes more than loving movie stars and wanting to have parties with boys and being angry with Humbert Humbert: an inner life full of memories, reflections, longings, even the pleasure of wondering at trifles, such as the satisfactory and, to a child, mysterious moment when the numbers on a car's odometer settle into the next round thousand. Finally, it suggests Lolita's desire to go back to that pre-Humbertian era, to put the car in reverse and travel back in time, even while it aligns that desire with a child's impossible fantasy. Some or all of these thoughts and questions, these opportunities for curiosity and speculation, present themselves to Humbert and hang there after that first clause. But he balks: he writes her comment off to duplicity; he converts a rare moment of surprise into a moment of recognition: "perhaps...the theatre had taught her that trick." That's Lolita: just shamming, just conniving, just trying to distract him. But he stops arguing with her, and his silence seems to belie his skepticism, to acknowledge both the weight of what she's said and his inability to wonder at it further.

The absence of surprise, curiosity, and speculation from Humbert's encounters with Lolita, and, moreover, the world, are part of a general disposition that turns away from the world, and this Nabokov imagines as a kind of hell. Humbert's obsession keeps him from fully encountering or truly caring about anything other than himself. Everything other than Lolita seems meaningless, interchangeable -- not because, as under the regime of commonsense, he sees only its instrumental value, but simply because it isn't Lolita.<sup>19</sup> Lolita matters -- Humbert's great theme is that *she* has

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19. Humbert has a tendency to generalize: Valeria, his first wife, is just a "short-legged, big-breasted and practically brainless *baba*," a "stock character" (26; 27); Maxovich, the taxi driver who takes her

existential importance for him, that *she* is utterly irreplaceable, that without *her* he would cease to be who he is. "I knew...that I could not live without the child," he says, early on, and this turns out to be true (64). The problem is that "existential importance" is the *only* kind of importance Humbert Humbert can recognize. Lolita is, to Humbert, unique and irreplaceable, but the uniqueness he prizes is the uniqueness of her effect on him. And the trifles that produce these effects -- the movements he finds so uniquely delightful, the features he finds so ecstatically fascinating -- are the only aspects of her that show up for him, that he is capable of allowing to show up for him, that he wants to show up for him. Consequently they tell us more about Humbert than they tell us, or show us, about Lolita. They lead not to her but to Humbert and his "maniacal gaze," as Nabokov emphasized in one of his many interviews:

It is this sad satyr's imagination that makes a magical creature of this young American schoolgirl, as normal and banal in her genre as Humbert the poet is in his own. Outside of the maniacal gaze of Humbert, there is no nymphet. Lolita the nymphet exists only through the obsession that destroys Humbert. An essential aspect of this singular book (Nabokov, qtd. in de la Durantaye 70)<sup>20</sup>.

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away from him, is "a stocky White Russian ex-colonel with a bushy mustache and a crew cut," one of "thousands...plying that fool's trade in Paris" (28); Charlotte is "one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul" (37); and though he makes an "artistic" effort to properly identify animals, trees and wildflowers, he never gets very far. "Some little animal or other" crosses his path (141); "some gaudy moth or butterfly" is pinned to the camp office wall. (He's especially bad at identifying lepidoptera, as Alfred Appel's annotations to *Lolita* make clear.) Of a grove of trees: "oaks, I thought; American trees at that stage were beyond me" (140).

20. For this quotation I'm indebted to Leland de la Durantaye, who transcribes parts of the interview in his study *Style is Matter*. De la Durantaye quotes from *Apostrophes: Bernard Pivot rencontre Vladimir Nabokov* (Apostrophes: Bernard Pivot meets Vladimir Nabokov). May 30, 1975. Interviewer: Bernard Pivot. Live broadcast by: Antenne 2, Paris. Video version (VHS SECAM): Visions Seuil, Paris.

This, then, is a crucial difference between Nabokov's delighted wonder and Humbert's wonderless delight. Nabokov's "highest form[] of consciousness" turns outward, toward the world, as the chimney sweep turns toward the signboard and Alice turns toward the patterns of the passing wall. Humbert, on the other hand, for all his ecstasy and delight, is finally turned inward, trapped within his own maniacal gaze, cut off from the world around him -- even, especially, from Lolita.

The distance, moreover, between Nabokov's open attunement and Humbert's cramped obsession is "artistically" confirmed by the fate of the rainbow theme in *Lolita*. The rainbows of *Speak, Memory* appear in *Lolita*, too, but in an utterly changed form. In *Speak, Memory*, the rainbows that show up for Nabokov are most often "really there," that is, available for others to encounter as well, if they would only open themselves up to the world in the same way -- there in some lovely watercolors, or a carefully arranged set of leaves, or a box of colored pencils, or a cloud, or a dew drop, or, once, in the colors of a genuine rainbow, tenderly, gloriously spreading itself out against the sky. These are all extant parts of a world that, encountered in a certain way, reveals itself as a source of beauty, joy, and wonder. In *Lolita*, on the other hand, the rainbows that appear are often merely imagined by Humbert, elements of strange metaphors or flights of fancy, and they are almost always gruesome, grotesque, or otherwise unnerving. Humbert envisions Lolita from the inside out: unknown heart, comely kidneys, "nacreous liver" (165). He recounts how he once tried to "attain a beggar's bliss" by staring at her "through prismatic layers of light" ("dry-lipped, focusing my lust and ricking slightly under my newspaper") (42). He waits for her to succumb to a sleeping pill, and feels his "rainbow blood" pulsing through his veins (126). He imagines painting, in the dining room of The Enchanted Hunters, an "opalescent" mural: "There would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes...There would have been a fire opal



dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child" (134-135). He sees the hot springs and "baby geysers" of Yellowstone Park as "rainbows of bubbling mud -- symbols of my passion" (158). He mocks the "rainbow" "mess" of his first wife's make-up, a mixture of cosmetics and tears (she's leaving Humbert and he's thinking, at that moment, of "hurting her very horribly") (29). He practices shooting and kills a hummingbird (he'll later kill Quilty with the same gun): "though I must say not much of it could be retrieved for proof -- only a little iridescent fluff" (216). He prepares himself for murder by donning some "exquisite clothes -- a waistcoat with nacreous buttons, for instance..." (268).

Nabokov includes his "tender[] and...glor[ious]" rainbows in *Speak, Memory* in part to convey a certain tone, a certain atmosphere, a certain mood of limpid wonder. Humbert, too, is aiming for a particular tone, and his lurid rainbows largely serve its purpose. Humbert wants to evoke for his readers an atmosphere of perversity and decadence, of unhinged ecstasy, an atmosphere he simultaneously relishes and deplores, and relishes deploring. This is what happens to wonder in Humberland. It's pared down to delight, twisted in on itself, rendered grotesque. It's fitting, then, that the most dramatic rainbow in the book, the counterpart to the central rainbow of *Speak, Memory*, isn't a natural phenomenon at all. Instead, it's a "self-conscious" image of Humbert's disease, rigged up by Quilty, a rainbow made up of -- what else? -- little girls:

I really could not tell you the plot of the play we saw. A trivial affair, no doubt, with self-conscious light effects and a mediocre leading lady. The only detail that pleased me was a garland of seven little graces, more or less immobile, prettily painted, bare-limbed -- seven bemused pubescent girls in colored gauze that had been recruited locally (judging by the partisan flurry here and there among the audience) and were supposed to represent a living rainbow, which lingered throughout the last act, and rather teasingly faded behind a series of multiplied veils...two of the colors were quite exasperatingly lovely -- Orange who kept fidgeting all the time, and Emerald who, when her eyes got used to the pitch-black

pit where we all heavily sat, suddenly smiled at her mother or her protector (220-221).

### *Subjective Realities vs. Projected Realities*

So far, we've seen two major differences between the Nabokovian form of consciousness and the Humbertian one. First, while trifles do show up for Humbert, they show up only sometimes as occasions for delight, and never as occasions for wonder. This is the first important difference between Humbert's ecstatic, detailed-oriented vision and Nabokov's "highest form[] of consciousness." The second is that Humbert's vision cuts him off from the world, while Nabokov's embraces it; Humbert colors the world in the lurid hues of his own obsession, while Nabokov opens himself up to seeing the colors that are already there. This second point requires further examination, though, because many critics have seen Humbert's self-involvement as an extension, rather than an inversion, of Nabokov's own vehemently individual, subject-centered way of approaching the world. Nabokov, after all, repeatedly emphasizes the primacy of subjective experience in his lectures and interviews, sometimes going so far as to deny that there is such a thing as "objective reality" at all; and for many readers this position looks perplexingly, or perversely, similar to the terrible, mad solipsism of a Charles Kinbote or a Humbert Humbert (*LL* 253). If, as I've been arguing, we're to see Humbert's way of relating to the world in *Lolita* as a dramatic negation of Nabokov's way of relating to the world in *Speak, Memory*, rather than as a dark extension or ironic misapplication of it, we'll have to carefully distinguish his emphasis on the primacy of subjective experience from Humbert's solipsism and selfishness.

In the interviews collected in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov consistently denies the existence of

"common" (118), "average" (118), or "everyday" reality (94), and maintains that "[r]eality is a very subjective affair" (10). At times this argument seems relatively tame. When, for example, he defines "average reality" as "the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials," his dismissal of it in favor of a more "subjectively perceived" reality seems merely to assert the authority of individual experience over "commonsense," an assertion with which many readers would probably agree (118). At other times, though, he appears to be saying something more radical, as when he argues that "the very term 'everyday reality' is utterly static since it presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known" and that no such "situation...exists" (94). This really does sound like a radical denial of "objective reality."

That denial is confusing, if not problematic, in light of Nabokov's pointed condemnation of those who, like Humbert Humbert, have trouble acknowledging that something other than their own "subjective reality" does, in fact, exist; and in light of Nabokov's infatuation with the material world and his penchant for describing its contents as minutely, precisely, vividly, and accurately as possible. Those who perceive a puzzle here tend to frame the problem in either-or terms. Nabokov finally puts his "first emphasis" on either one or the other: either objective experience or subjective experience; "external reality" or internal reality (Andrews 53); the world or our individual experience of it. But this is a false choice, as I hope to show, one that leads Nabokov's critics into positions that are, very often, implausible, and forever vulnerable to attack from the other side.

Brian Boyd, in his criticism and his critical biography, tends to emphasize the first of these two terms. Nabokov, he argues, as against those who would deny it, is firmly committed to the idea of a real, objective world that exists apart from our experience of it. Nabokov's narrative style, moreover, expresses that commitment and serves to confirm the "independence" of things from our thoughts

and feelings about them:

Nabokov particularly values the autonomy, the separate vitality of what he creates, an object or an instant or a character suddenly there and itself, with no purpose whatever in the development of a story or in the assignation of its meaning. In a sense, this is a special kind of realism, a challenge to the principle of artistic selection. Reality is not chosen, it is infinitely detailed, each part of it has its own life whether it affects us or not, and in the same way a flash of light, a gesture, a character is allowed into a Nabokov novel even if it has no part in the protagonists' lives.

Nabokov's style, according to Boyd, suggests the very opposite of a solipsistic approach to the world. It places its "first emphasis" on what lies outside of and beyond us, what exists apart from our experience of it. Here Nabokov's "details of visual description" have an especially important role to play, inasmuch as they help to convey, in their vividness and, often, strange irrelevance, "the crisp autonomy of the thing described" (*Nabokov's Ada* 29-31).

What of Nabokov's denial of "everyday reality" -- his insistence that the notion of a "permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known" "situation" is just a fantasy? For Boyd, such a claim doesn't deny the autonomy of the real; it just describes the limits of our own access to that autonomous reality. It's true, he says, that Nabokov "finds the reality of the external world elusive," but this isn't "at all because he doubts its existence outside the mind":

What makes reality so elusive is that it is infinitely richer than any single person's knowledge of it, or even the sum of science's specifications. The world is so real that it always exceeds our knowledge of its reality...Reality is so elusive not because it is doubtful whether it exists outside the mind, but because it exists out there so resolutely, so far beyond human modes of perception and explanation in its endlessly detailed complexity, so real even in its minutest parts (*Nabokov's Ada* 68).

In sum, Nabokov isn't saying that the world isn't *real*: he's telling us it's *too* real, *too* richly and complexly "there and itself," to be permanently, objectively observed and known by us.

Boyd's account seems right in many ways: Nabokov's narrative style does often serve to convey the "crisp autonomy" of what it describes, and his intense attention to the outside world -- both artistic and scientific -- belies any attempt to describe him as an idealist. Of *course* Nabokov believes in an external world that "exists outside the mind": it was, after all, for the sake of getting to know that world better that he spent all those thousands of hours in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, at a microscope, counting the scales on butterfly wings. On the other hand, though, Boyd's identification of "reality" with the world that exists outside the mind, "far beyond human modes of perception and explanation," seems simply to ignore Nabokov's many, clear, consistent statements to the effect that "reality" is only ever subjective, that "[l]ife does not exist without a possessive epithet," and so on. Even if, as Boyd argues, Nabokov's *style* seems to testify to the "independence" of "reality" from the mind, his many *statements* on the subject of "reality" testify to something different. The fact is that most of these statements locate "reality" firmly *within* "human modes of perception and explanation" and suggest that "reality" is undetachable from our encounters with it.

Leland de la Durantaye takes Boyd to task for precisely this reason in his own discussion of the subject in *Style is Matter*. De la Durantaye represents the other point of view: where Boyd emphasizes the primacy and solidity of the world "outside the mind" in Nabokov's conception of "reality," de la Durantaye emphasizes the primacy of the self. Nabokov, he points out, repeatedly and consistently tells us that "[e]verything that is worthwhile is to some extent subjective" (*LL* 4), and de la Durantaye insists that we take these statements seriously. He suspects that Boyd avoids Nabokov's "numerous statements asserting *reality's* completely subjective aspect" in order to avoid the dark fact that there is something "extreme[ly] solipsis[tic]" about Nabokov's conception of reality, or something dangerously close to solipsism (45). Nabokov, de la Durantaye argues, was

himself aware of this danger, and this is what his interest in self-involved madmen like Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote is all about. By means of such characters, Nabokov explored "a simple and potent danger contained [within his own] aesthetics: solipsism":

What we see reflected in Nabokov's reality is a robust absence of interest in shared visions of the world. This is not simply the ivory tower as aesthetic model, but also as a perceptual one. This position carries with it, however, a certain danger -- and one that finds its place at the center of many of his fictions...Nabokov happily exiles himself to the ivory tower of his singular reality and focuses with rare intensity on the passionate pursuit of an inner vision. But what the case of Kinbote -- as well as other characters in his fiction -- illustrates is the danger of climbing too high or descending too deeply into one's own singular reality. The consequence of such may be innocuous -- such as misreading a poem. But they might also prove more sinister (47).

Here de la Durantaye's argument goes farther than Rorty's. Rorty argues that there's no necessary connection between artistic gifts and moral ones, and that Nabokov knows it; de la Durantaye argues that there *is* a connection between these things, but it's not necessarily, not always, a positive one. *This* is what Nabokov knows, and what we see him worrying about, in books like *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Despair*. These books, de la Durantaye writes, call attention to the "convertible" nature of artistic gifts, the way they can be used for both good ends and bad, and they warn us against applying the "'methods' destined for *art* to *life*." In these novels, "the imagination, courage, dexterity, and single-minded, even solipsistic, focus required for art," he writes, "are exercised elsewhere -- and with disastrous results" (51). *Lolita* is thus "an experiment...an exercise and a lesson in the dangers of art" (53): a vision of what can happen when the imagination, the senses, and, especially, the singular vision of the artist are indulged too much, and in the wrong contexts. It ultimately encourages us to remember how important it is to "draw the fine line between art and life" (192).

Boyd and de la Durantaye represent the limits within which most interpretations of Nabokov's idea of "reality" unfold. Boyd argues that Nabokov's aesthetics and metaphysics finally privilege the "reality" of the world "outside the mind"; de la Durantaye argues that they finally privilege the "reality" of the self -- and that Nabokov is very much aware of the dangers involved in such privileging. They each get something right here, and they each get something wrong, for Nabokov's "first emphasis" falls on both things at once: both the "endlessly detailed" external world and our subjective experience of it. Nabokov's "idea of *reality*" isn't a realist's idea of reality, and it isn't a solipsist's, either. Nabokov has his own unique way of imagining the relation between the self and the world, between consciousness and its objects; and it is utterly unlike Humbert Humbert's way of imagining the relation between these things.

Let's step away from *Lolita* for a moment, then, to consider more closely the question of what Nabokov's "idea of *reality*" really is. We'll then contrast this idea with Humbert's own, in order to show that his solipsism exists not on a continuum with Nabokov's "idea of *reality*," but in marked contrast to it.

### *The Universe Embraced by Consciousness*

We should start by recognizing that Boyd and de la Durantaye, for all their disagreement, each approach Nabokov's "idea of *reality*" from what is an essentially Cartesian perspective. They each frame the question in dualistic terms, as a contest between two alternatives. Does "reality," for Nabokov, inhere more finally in "human modes of perception and explanation" or in "the world outside the mind" (Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada* 68)? Is it more properly thought of as an "adventure in the world" or an "adventure within the self" (de la Durantaye 45)? Which does Nabokov care about

more? Which is more important to him, more "real"?

Boyd emphasizes one side, de la Durantaye the other, and neither is right because the terms of the question are wrong. The fact is that Nabokov associates "reality" with *neither* "human modes of perception" *nor* "the world outside the mind" but, rather, with both. He thinks of it as a kind of meeting place between these two things, or as a kind of combination. And yet even this way of talking isn't quite right, for it suggests, as Boyd and de la Durantaye do, that there are two distinct entities -- the self and the world -- ready and waiting to be combined. It isn't that Nabokov doesn't believe that these things exist. It's just that, for him, they're so utterly uninteresting in themselves, so utterly meaningless, as to be practically unreal. For him, what's "real" is, as he says, the "universe embraced by consciousness" (*SM* 218), and the embracement is the most important thing. Compared to this, Boyd's "world...beyond human modes of perception" is just meaningless matter, and de la Durantaye's "adventure within the self" a groundless fantasy, little better than the "frightful nightmares" Nabokov struggled to avoid, each night, in sleep (*SM* 108).

A good way to imagine that "embrace[ment]" is as a kind of illumination. Nabokov opens *Speak, Memory* by describing conscious existence as a "crack of light" in "darkness," and though he quarrels with the tendency of commonsense to emphasize the permanence of the darkness and the brevity of the light, the metaphor itself is useful. Let's begin, then, by imagining the un-embraced universe as a field of darkness, and consciousness -- say, Nabokov's consciousness -- as a source of light within it. That light illuminates certain things around it, drawing them out of darkness and into the light. It does this in a unique way, shining on some things and not others, and on some things more brightly than on others. This uniquely-lit world constitutes Nabokov's *particular reality* -- the only kind of "reality" Nabokov believes there is.



What determines the particular pattern of that illumination, that particular reality? One's circumstances, experiences, capacities, inclinations, moods, interests, knowledge, habits of attention - everything that dictates the kinds of things that are presented to you and how they are presented, and the kinds of things you care about and how you care about them. Nabokov's passion for butterflies, for example, illuminates his world in a very particular way:

It is astounding how little the ordinary person notices butterflies. "None," calmly replied the sturdy Swiss hiker with Camus in his rucksack when purposely asked by me for the benefit of my incredulous companion if he had seen any butterflies while descending the trail where, a moment before, you and I had been delighting in swarms of them. It is also true that when I call up the image of a particular path remembered in minute detail but pertaining to a summer before that of 1906, preceding, that is, the date on my first locality label, and never revisited, I fail to make out one wing, one wingbeat, one azure flash, one moth-gemmed flower, as if an evil spell had been cast on the Adriatic coast making all its "leps" (as the slangier among us say) invisible (*SM* 129-130).

Nabokov and Véra notice the butterflies, and the hiker doesn't. Their interest in and knowledge of butterflies highlights the butterflies, allows the butterflies to show up for them; whereas the hiker's ignorance of, or lack of interest in, butterflies keeps them in the dark. For the hiker the butterflies remain "invisible."

Nabokov's point isn't just that the hiker doesn't *see* the butterflies: it's that, inasmuch as he doesn't see them, inasmuch as they fail to show up for him, they aren't a part of his reality, just as they weren't a part of Nabokov's own reality before 1906. Nabokov considers this an ontological difference, and not just a perceptual one. What's at stake in the incident, for the hiker and for Nabokov, isn't just the content of experience but the very composition of reality. From the hiker's failure to notice the butterflies Nabokov infers a difference not just in how things *look* to him but in what they actually *are* for him, and he attributes that difference, moreover, to a difference in

consciousness.

The hiker's reality is different because his consciousness is different, because his particular interests, knowledge, moods, memories, reading habits, projects, and commitments are all different from Nabokov's own. He might have missed the butterflies because he was lost in thought, mulling over the latest chapter of Camus; or he might have missed them because he is, lepidopteroleptically speaking, an "ordinary person," that is, because he doesn't share Nabokov's extraordinary mania for butterflies. Nabokov draws our attention to the way his own reality changed between the summer of 1905 and 1906, with the advent of that particular passion. One year there were butterflies where there had been none before, and all because Nabokov had suddenly begun to know and care about them. So marvelous is this fact to him that he tells us about it twice: "Retrospectively," he notes elsewhere, "the summer of 1905, though quite vivid in many ways, is not animated yet by a single bit of quick flutter or colored fluff around or across the walks with the village schoolmaster..." (*SM* 122). One thing Chapter Six of *Speak, Memory* makes clear, though, is that the difference between the Nabokov of 1905 and the Nabokov of 1906, or between Nabokov and the hiker, isn't *just* a matter of "knowing and caring" more about butterflies than he did before, or more than the hiker does. It isn't, in other words, just the result of having made some simple, internal, mental change. The universe begins to show up differently for him, to be embraced differently by him, not only because he starts thinking and feeling differently about it, but because he begins engaging with it in particular, complex, active, outward-facing ways: purchasing equipment, carrying around a net, going on excursions, subscribing to periodicals, fashioning locality labels, corresponding, even as a child, with some of the greatest "lepidopterists of all time" (*SM* 133), and attempting to add his own discoveries to the store of what is known. These are intellectual practices, but also physical practices,

and even social practices, and they all contribute to the way the world shows up for him, to why those butterflies are so real to him and so unreal to "ordinary" people.

These examples suggest that consciousness is like a spotlight, that either shines on something and allows it to show up, or not. But elsewhere Nabokov describes that illumination as something much subtler and finer. He shows us how the light of consciousness can illuminate certain aspects of things and not others, so that, for example, the beauty of a moth might show up for Mademoiselle, but not its relative commonness or rarity. He also tells us that that illumination can vary in intensity, so that some things show up for us more brightly than other things. This might be because they matter more to us, or because we know more about them, or because we've made room for them in our lives in a way that we haven't made room for other things. Moths and butterflies, for example, are always more brightly lit for Nabokov than other things, or than they are for other people:

On the bark of that birch tree, the stout one near the park wicket, I had found last spring a dark aberration of Sievers' Carmelite (just another gray moth to the reader). In the ditch, under the bridgelet, a bright-yellow *Silvius Skipper* hobnobbed with a dragonfly (just a blue libella to me) (*SM* 132).

Nabokov tends to equate increased specificity with increased "reality," so that, as we move from the "gray moth" to the "blue libella" to the "bright-yellow *Silvius Skipper*" to the "dark aberration of Sievers' Carmelite," from the order to the genus to the species to the freak aberration, we're moving from the dim to the brilliant, the real-ish to the super-real.

Here Nabokov doesn't just tell us that moths and butterflies show up more brightly for him than dragonflies do. He shows us that he's aware of just how brightly they show up for him, and also of how faintly the dragonflies show up, and of how still more faintly the Sievers' Carmelite shows up for the reader. In other words, he shows us that he's "aware of being aware of being" -- a kind of

awareness, he says elsewhere, that is unique to human beings (*SO* 142). Importantly, his observations suggest that "being aware of being aware of being" *also* means being aware that *other* people might be *more* aware of the being of *certain* things than *you*. Nabokov knows that the Carmelite is more than just a gray moth to him, and so he assumes that the dragonfly is more than just a blue libella to someone else. Acknowledging that the dragonflies are less real for him than butterflies, in other words, doesn't lead him to solipsistically deny that the dragonflies are less real in some *ultimate* sense. Quite the opposite: his observation prompts him to acknowledge that the dragonfly is very likely much *more* real than he himself can appreciate, and that it has, as Boyd says, an existence "independent" of his awareness of it, on the basis of which it can show up as a part of someone *else's* bright, brimming, "robust reality" (*SM* 77).

In Nabokov's conception of things, people want to -- or should want to -- enrich their realities, to render them brighter and more robust. At the same time he acknowledges that some -- indeed, most -- of what might be lit up for us will remain in darkness, or at least dimness, and that our efforts at illumination will tend to bring us up against these limitations. He elaborates on this point in *Strong Opinions*:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects -- that machine, there, for instance. It's a complete ghost to me -- I don't understand a thing about it and, well, it's a mystery to me, as much of a mystery as it would be to Lord Byron (10-11).

This is the passage Boyd has in mind when he writes that Nabokov believes that "[t]he world is so real that it always exceeds our knowledge of its reality...Reality is so elusive not because it is doubtful whether it exists outside the mind, but because it exists out there so resolutely, so far beyond human modes of perception and explanation in its endlessly detailed complexity, so real even in its minutest parts." Now, *something* exists "outside the mind," but it isn't, as far as Nabokov is concerned, quite deserving of the name "reality" -- anything worth thinking of in terms of "reality," is after all, as Nabokov says, "a very subjective affair." There is a world out there, "outside the mind," a universe un-embraced by consciousness; but it doesn't really make sense to think of it as "resolute" or "complex" or "detailed," because these are attributes that it only acquires in the light of "human modes of perception and explanation." And yet the spirit of Boyd's point is, I think, at least partly correct. Nabokov is saying that our realities could always be brighter than they are, that things could always show up for us more brightly than they do; there are always other aspects of things to be revealed, fuller or more specific visions to be had. Our realities are constantly humbled by the "ghostly objects" at their edges. This is partly because our own capacity for revealing things, for illuminating them, is limited, by time if nothing else. Our realities come into being gradually, and are the result of many concrete steps: studying field guides, going on hikes, comparing specimens -- and we can only cultivate that knowledge and specificity in so many domains. But it's also partly because, as Boyd suggests, there is always *more* out there, waiting to be illuminated, waiting to become "real," that is, to become a part of our or someone else's reality. Nabokov's tone is a little hard to read here, but I think it would be wrong to hear too much pessimism or frustration in what he says. After all, it's that apprehension of mystery, of darkness even in the things we know, that motivates us to attend and discover, to make the things around us show up more brightly. It's what

motivates Nabokov to spend all those hours at the microscope, to devote so much effort to his *Onegin* commentary, to wonder whether Tamara is serious or joking.

Nabokov's "reality," in short, is totally different from that of the sturdy Swiss hiker, but in many subtle ways. It isn't just that some things are included, while others are excluded; it's that Nabokov's reality emphasizes different things to varying degrees, and has, over time, developed its own particular texture and character. Nabokov has certain experiences, he involves himself in the world in certain ways, he undertakes certain projects and not others, and, as a result, some things are brightly lit for him, other things dark, some things dazzling, other things "ghostly." The same goes for the hiker: *his* reality is illuminated for *him* in some whole other way, as he undertakes certain projects, like reading Camus or climbing this mountain, while leaving aside others. This is the "universe embraced by consciousness"; this is reality as a "very subjective affair."

### *Multiple Realities*

Reality is only ever subjective: I have mine, and you have yours, and the world will never, ever show up for me as it does for you. Nabokov insists on this -- indeed, celebrates and is fascinated by it. But he also insists that reality is *multiple*. His discussions of reality almost always involve a multiplicity of realities: his, the reader's, and the dragonfly expert's; the naturalist's, the botanist's, and the expert in lilies'; Véra's, the hiker's, and his own. Nabokov once jokes to his students, "you sitting there may be merely my dream, and I may be your nightmare" (*LL* 4), but he never actually doubts that their realities are as real to them as his is to him. And he acknowledges, moreover, that these realities exist alongside one another in a shared universe. In his lecture on Kafka, he describes how a tourist, a botanist, and a farmer, all "walking through the same landscape," might embrace

that landscape in their own way:

Let us take three types of men walking through the same landscape. Number One is a city man on a well-deserved vacation. Number Two is a professional botanist. Number Three is a local farmer. Number One, the city man, is what is called a realistic, commonsensical, matter-of-fact type: he sees trees as *trees* and knows from his map that the road he is following is a nice new road leading to Newton, where there is a nice eating place recommended to him by a friend in his office. The botanist looks around and sees his environment in the very exact terms of plant life, precise biological and classified units such as specific trees and grasses, flowers and ferns, and for him *this* is reality; to him the world of the stolid tourist (who cannot distinguish an oak from an elm) seems a fantastic, vague, dreamy, never-never world. Finally, the world of the local farmer differs from the two others in that his world is intensely emotional and personal since he has been born and bred there, and knows every trail and individual tree, and every shadow from every tree across every trail, all in warm connection with his everyday work, and his childhood, and a thousand small things and patterns which the other two -- the humdrum tourist and the botanical taxonomist -- simply cannot know in the given place at the given time. Our farmer will not know the relation of the surrounding vegetation to a botanical conception of the world, and the botanist will know nothing of any importance to him about that barn or that old field or that old house under its cottonwoods, which are afloat, as it were, in a medium of personal memories for one who was born there.

So here we have three different worlds -- three men, ordinary men who have different *realities*...Indeed, this subjective life is so strong that it makes an empty and broken shell of the so-called objective existence. The only way back to objective reality is the following one: we can take these several individual worlds, mix them thoroughly together, scoop up a drop of that mixture, and call it *objective reality*. We may taste in it a particle of madness if a lunatic passed through our locality, or a particle of complete and beautiful nonsense if a man has been looking at a lovely field and imagining upon it a lovely factory producing buttons or bombs; but on the whole these mad particles would be diluted in the drop of objective reality that we hold up to the light in our test tube. Moreover, this *objective reality* will contain something that transcends optical illusions and laboratory tests. It will have elements of poetry, of lofty emotion, of energy and endeavor (and even here the button king may find his rightful place), of pity, pride, passion -- and the craving for a thick steak at the recommended roadside eating place (*LL* 252-253).

Nabokov describes three different levels of "reality" here. There's the level at which things -- let's take his example of the tree -- are yet-to-be-lit-up, yet-to-be-"embraced by consciousness," and thus

as-yet-unreal. Then there's the level at which the tree is "real," that is, "embraced by consciousness." In this example it's embraced by many different consciousnesses, and so is an element in many different "realities." Finally, there's what Nabokov calls the "objective reality" of the tree, which is something like the sum total of all these lit-up aspects, distinct both from the "un-embraced" tree and the "real" tree that shows up for the tourist, or the botanist, or the farmer, or the button king. We can never experience the tree in its "objective reality," but Nabokov believes that we can at least imagine what it would be like if we could. His willingness to imagine that collective, "objective reality" -- and, moreover, to imagine that objective reality as good (complete with "elements of poetry, of lofty emotion, of energy and endeavor...") -- speaks to his recognition of the many other "realities" that exist alongside his own, and challenges the charge of solipsism.

These other realities, moreover, have an *effect* on our own, for some of their light reaches us. A lepidopterist discovers a butterfly: he notices it, catches it, catalogs it, and in this sense brings it out of darkness and into the light. Now, perhaps, Nabokov reads about the discovery in a journal, or finds a picture of the newly named species in a book. That butterfly is now lit up for him, too -- more faintly than it is for the man who discovered it, but more brightly than it was for Nabokov before. He may even plan a trip to see the butterfly for himself. And Nabokov's own enthusiasm for butterflies lights them up a little for the people around *him* -- for Véra, for his readers. A person's "reality," in other words, even if it is a "very subjective affair," isn't sealed off to other realities. Each "reality" exists in one universe alongside others, and these are like candles in a room, not marbles in a jar. Together they create a kind of background illumination within which our own brighter and more particular reality presents itself. This background illumination precedes us and succeeds us. Nabokov's passion for butterflies, for example, develops within an already-illuminated world, as he



discovers when, around the age of eight, "in a storeroom of our country house, among all kinds of dusty objects," he comes across "some wonderful books acquired in the days when my mother's mother had been interested in natural science and had had a famous university professor of zoology (Shimkevich) give private lessons to her daughter":

Maria Sibylla Merian's (1647-1717) lovely plates of Surinam insects, and Esper's noble *Die Schmetterlinge* (Erlangen 1777)...Still more exciting were the products of the latter half of the century -- Hofmann's *Die Gross-Schmetterlinge Europas*, the Grand Duke Nikolay Mihailovich's *Mémoires* on Asiatic lepidoptera (with incomparably beautiful figures painted by Kavargin, Rybakov, Lang), Scudder's stupendous work on the *Butterflies of New England* (SM 122).

At eight, Nabokov hoped that he would one day make his own discoveries and add to that background illumination himself. And, eventually, in the Museum and in the field, he did.

Everyone's "reality" is different -- does that mean that some "realities" are better? More valuable? Yes, to the first question; no, to the second. Nabokov does think that certain ways of "embrac[ing]" the universe are better than others, inasmuch as they illuminate the world more fully, more brightly, more clearly, or more directly than other ways do. In the figures of the tourist, the botanist, and the farmer, for example, he presents us with a hierarchy of illuminations, and, therefore, of realities. The humdrum, realistic, matter-of-fact tourist takes a "commonsense" approach to the landscape around him, but this is a relatively innocuous version of commonsense. His experience of the landscape is mostly animated by his "current project" of getting some lunch. The trees are a nice, green backdrop for a "well-deserved vacation," the road is just a way to get to the steak house. This isn't the richest way of experiencing the world, but it isn't the worst way, either. Better to see the trees as just "*trees*," after all, than as obstacles to be cleared to make way for a bomb-factory, for example, or as resources to be harvested and sold. And, of course, there's the possibility that the tourist experiences other

parts of his world in a fuller way: the city, his workplace, the social world of office-mates and friends and leisurely, expensive lunches.

The next two ways of experiencing the "reality" of the landscape -- the botanist's way and the farmer's -- allow the world to show up more brightly than Nabokov imagines it does for the tourist. For the botanist the landscape is, as Nabokov says in *Strong Opinions*, "more real" because more "specific": not only the trees but also the grasses and flowers show up more brightly for him, as more particularly what they *are*. The botanist experiences the landscape not only with greater specificity, but in a fuller aspect: he can tell that the tree is an elm or an oak, not an oak or an elm, and also what kind of elm or oak it is; how old; whether it's healthy or diseased; how it relates to the plants and animals around it; how it responds to the soil and wind; and probably a hundred other things as well. He perceives what Boyd says Nabokov's style helps us to perceive: the intrinsic, autonomous worth of things. His specialized vision allows the trees to show as both "professional[ly]" meaningful and interesting, and inherently, independently worthwhile. His reality is more textured, more fully and brightly lit, than the tourist's.

Above this, though, Nabokov ranks the farmer's way of lighting up the landscape, of bringing it into his "reality." For the farmer the landscape has a great deal of existential importance. Of the three men, the landscape matters the most for the "one who was born there." It makes the strongest demands on him, and it's the most "real" for him. He loves it and knows it, intimately and in great detail, "every trail and individual tree, and every shadow from every tree across every trail, all in warm connection with his everyday work, and his childhood, and a thousand small things and patterns which the other two...simply cannot know." The trees, the trail, the field, the house show up with particular brightness for the farmer because his connection to them is so "warm," so

"intensely emotional and personal." "*This* is reality" -- and it's not located "beyond human modes of perception and explanation," as Boyd proposes, but wholly within it. And yet it's also not reducible, as de la Durantaye suggests, to those modes of perception and explanation. It's located neither in the landscape, "there and itself," nor in the tourist's appetite, the botanist's curiosity, or even the farmer's rich feeling. Instead, it's located, for the botanist, in the landscape *illuminated by* a "botanical conception of the world," and, for the farmer, in the fields "*afloat...in* a medium of personal memories" (my italics). *Both* the landscape and the illumination are important here. The farmer's illumination of that landscape, moreover, which Nabokov ranks highest, involves much more than just *perceiving* and *explaining*. It also involves *doing, working, encountering, loving, remembering*. Nabokov might have put a landscape painter here, and implied that the brightest reality is an artistically perceived one; but instead, importantly, he associates the boldest reality with practices of "everyday" *living*. The fields are more real for the farmer than the others not just because he has perceived them or thought about them more or explained them better, but because he has lived among them, every day, since he was born. They're part of the farmer's reality in the same way that Nabokov's estate is part of *his* reality.

Though Nabokov believes that some ways of "embrac[ing]" the universe are better than others, he doesn't believe that any one person's reality is worth more than another's. Precisely because everyone's "reality" is, in Nabokov's conception of things, so uniquely, completely, and inescapably theirs, each reality has a kind of absolute value. Nabokov is consistent on this point, though his characteristic haughtiness, his mandarin posturing, his contempt for "philistine vulgarity" and condescension toward the "button king[s]" of the world, can sometimes make this hard to perceive. In *Speak, Memory* he derides the Camus-reading hiker who fails to notice what he and Véra cannot

help but see; but in the same chapter he imagines how a dipterist, an odonatologist, and a botanist might look askance at his own relative unconcern for the objects of *their* study. Nabokov concludes his *Lectures on Literature* by acknowledging that all of his students, even the least talented among them, are yet "human and divine" (382):

Now the course comes to a close. The work with this group has been a particularly pleasant association between the fountain of my voice and a garden of ears -- some open, others closed, many very receptive, a few merely ornamental, but all of them human and divine. Some of you will go on reading great books, others will stop reading great books after graduation; and if a person thinks he cannot evolve the capacity of pleasure in reading the great artists, then he should not read them at all. After all, there are other thrills in other domains: the thrill of pure science is just as pleasurable as the pleasure of pure art. The main thing is to experience that tingle in any department of thought or emotion. We are liable to miss the best of life if we do not know how to tingle, if we do not learn to hoist ourselves just a little higher than we generally are in order to sample the rarest and ripest fruit of art which human thought has to offer (382).

The sturdy hiker and the stolid tourist might end up "miss[ing] the best of life," and that would be a shame; but it doesn't make them any less divine. The worst sin, in Nabokov's world, isn't missing the best of life, but rather failing to grasp this final equality. It's the Humbert Humberts of the world who make that mistake, not the Nabokovs.

### *Reality Happens When You Look Outward*

From here it should be clear that "reality," for Nabokov, resides neither in the crisp autonomy of the world outside the mind, nor in the peculiar twists and turns of some adventure within the self, but rather in the embracement of the universe by consciousness. The world is made more "real" by our embracement of it, and our "realities" are brightened and enhanced by our engagement with the world. Reality is, in this sense, "very subjective" (SO 10); but that subjective emphasis is far from

the "extreme solipsism," or even proto-solipsism, de la Durantaye perceives (45). While Nabokov believes that our own realities are the only "reality" we have, he fully acknowledges that these realities exist alongside those of others; he recognizes that these realities are as "real" and important to those people as his own reality is to him; he acknowledges that all of these realities are derived from the same, shared universe, which each person embraces in his or her own way; and he insists that those individual realities -- those particularly patterned illuminations -- are created not by simply thinking about things differently, or looking out at them differently from the top of a "perceptual" "ivory tower" (de la Durantaye 47), but by actively engaging with those things, in a world shared with others: the world of family traditions, art lessons, scientific expeditions, love affairs, shared spaces, knowledge, practices, experiences, habits, rituals.

Nabokov, it should be underscored, isn't an idealist, and he isn't a skeptic. He absolutely believes that there's a common universe -- or, in Boyd's phrase, an "external world" -- with which his, and the hiker's, and the reader's, consciousnesses are involved. But he *also* believes that you can only ever engage with that external world from a certain position within it, from the center of one circle of light or another -- from within, by means of, in terms of, your own reality. You can't rise up out of your own consciousness; there's no higher vantage point from which that external world will appear "permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known." Even if you can learn to *think* impersonally -- like a philosopher, or maybe a novelist -- you can't *act, perceive, be involved with things* impersonally, and so you cannot ever locate your reality in such a place. You can only hunt butterflies from one position, your position, on the ground. Nabokov doesn't find this disappointing. On the contrary, he feels that reality as it actually is for each of us, individual, various, dynamic, is a far more wonderful thing than any "utterly static...permanently observable,

essentially objective, and universally known" "reality" could ever be (SO 94).

We can sum up Nabokov's portrait of "reality," then, in the following image. First, there's a field of darkness, reaching out in all directions: this is the unknown, un-"embraced" universe. Within that, a large, subtly illuminated, twilight area: this is the "known," "observed" universe, and, taken in all at once, the "objectively real" universe. Within that, billions of points of light, like stars in the night sky, each representing an individual consciousness, shining out on the universe from its own unique position, in its own unique way. It's the light from these stars that creates that faint glow between them, that shared world of human knowledge and meaning.

This objective view can only be imagined, though; the universe can only ever be experienced from within one of those billions of points of light. What you see from within that light is your "reality," and this is the only reality you will ever have access to. You see whatever shows up, however it shows up, in the light of your unique consciousness. Yet you can also make out the presence of other consciousness around you. You can't ever see how, exactly, the world shows up from within those other points of light, but you can hear about how it does, read about it, imagine it. And, moreover, much of your own field of view is lit up, faintly, by the light from some other consciousness or consciousnesses, for whom that part of universe -- that object or that area -- shows up much more brightly.

"Reality," for everyone, comes into being between the human world of knowledge, meaning, and feeling on the one hand and the dark, non-human world it makes sense of on the other. There are different ways of illuminating that world and allowing it to show up, and in the figures of the tourist, the botanist, and the farmer, Nabokov shows us what some of those ways are. These different ways should be familiar to us, for of course we've already encountered them before, in the practices of

"looking" and "learning" and "loving" Nabokov portrays in *Speak, Memory*. These practices all contribute to, help to form and to enact, what he thinks of as the very *best* way of allowing the world to show up: "wonder[ing] at trifles." We can now see that what makes *this* attunement, *this* way of embracing the world, so valuable is that it allows the whole world to show up as worthy of interest and further illumination, not only the big things and the rare things but the "thousand small things and patterns" that make up our everyday life (*LL* 253). This looking, learning, loving and, in a word, living, prompts us to continually reveal more and more of that world, so that "reality" might be better thought of as a process than as a structure, as something we are constantly making, rather than as something we simply perceive.

"Wondering at trifles" is one version -- in Nabokov's view the "highest" version -- of that process, that making. It's a process that occurs neither inside of our heads nor outside in the world, but rather in the "embrace" of the two. In this sense it is not unlike a rainbow. When we wonder at a rainbow, we're not wondering at our own invention, at a hallucination or a dream. At the same time, we aren't wondering at something that exists independently of us, either. In a universe unembraced by consciousness, *something* would exist in its place -- water droplets and sunlight; but it wouldn't be beautiful or wonderful. It wouldn't be a rainbow. The rainbow comes into being when we embrace the world, and doesn't exist apart from that embrace. It's this generative interaction between world and self that makes the rainbow, for Nabokov, an emblem not only of wonder or "the capacity to wonder at trifles" but even, perhaps, of "reality" itself.

### *The Lunatic and the Businessman*

Nabokov is interested in good attunements, in positive ways of illuminating the world and allowing

it to show up, but he's also, as I've been arguing, interested in bad, negative, distorted, and deficient "realities" and their consequences. As we've seen, he's interested in two flawed ways of relating to the world in particular: "commonsense," and the kind of solipsistic madness exhibited by Humbert Humbert. This interest is never far from Nabokov's mind, as we can see from the details of his Kafka lecture. There, in addition to the neutral-to-good attunements of the tourist, the botanist, and the farmer, he glances at two inferior ways of relating to the world:

We may taste in ["objective reality"] a particle of madness if a lunatic passed through our locality, or a particle of complete and beautiful nonsense if a man has been looking at a lovely field and imagining upon it a lovely factory producing buttons or bombs (*LL* 253) [.]

What distinguishes this "madness" and "nonsense" from the other attunements Nabokov describes?

We've already examined "commonsense" at length in Chapter Two. Here we might simply note that the *structure* of commonsense isn't *fundamentally* different from the "capacity to wonder at trifles." It's still an "attunement" to the world in the sense that it "tunes in" to what's there; it just does this in a very circumscribed way. Allowing an oak tree to show up as a tree isn't getting it wrong, exactly; but it makes for a very faint illumination. Just as the particularizing tendency of science allows things to show up more brightly, as more fully what they are, so the generalizing tendency of commonsense renders things dim or even, as we saw in the case of Kaufman's birder, dark. This is true also of the tendency to see things only in instrumental terms. Trees *are* resources, but this isn't the only thing they are; and seeing them only in this way also makes for a much diminished "reality."

Nabokov's concern here is that as things become less real for us, they become less meaningful for us, less capable of making demands on us. The negative effects of this diminishment of meaning



might not be so bad: the tourist and Kaufman's birder don't seem to be doing anyone any harm, and "even the button king," as Nabokov concedes (*LL* 253), might end up creating something of value where the farmer's beloved trees once stood, something that enhances the "realities" of the people who come to work there. But Nabokov thinks that the effects of commonsense are not always so mild, and in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" he alerts us to the dark places where that diminishment of reality and meaning can lead. Mostly he worries about the way commonsense, adopted and applied on a large scale, can end up compromising the realities of other people: persecuting poets, inhibiting artists, plunging whole nations into war, tearing down a grove of trees to make way for a bomb-factory. He also worries about the ease with which commonsense can take root and spread in a world already diminished by commonsense.

The lunatic's case is different. The lunatic doesn't "allow things to show up" in a peculiar light. Instead, his madness *prevents* things from showing up. He sees things that aren't there; he distorts and invents; he projects his own fantasies *onto* the world. He doesn't just "tune in" to the world on his own unique wavelength. And neither does Humbert -- though this is how Humbert seems to think about his "nympholepsy," or at least how he seems to want us to think about it. Humbert describes his obsession as a form of special vision that gives him access to something that no one else, save, perhaps, a few fellow travelers, can see, the way Nabokov's passion for butterflies allows him to see butterflies where "ordinary" people can't (*SM* 129):

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, *reveal their true nature* which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate nymphets (*Lolita* 16; my italics).

But, as Nabokov says, there *are* no nymphets to be revealed. Humbert doesn't reveal something

hidden in the world, as he suggests; he hides what is there, by projecting his own fantasies upon it. The butterflies, by contrast, are part of a world that exists apart from Nabokov's apprehension of it, ready to show up, available for illumination, capable of being a part of someone else's "reality," too -- even if, in Nabokov's terms, that world is only made "real" in its illumination. The butterflies' "reality" depends on the illumination of Nabokov's consciousness, but, like a rainbow, isn't reducible to it. This is a crucial difference between Nabokov's singular vision and Humbert's own.

It isn't just, then, that Humbert's "reality" is bad, dark, or overly "subjective"; it's that, in Nabokov's terms at least, Humbert doesn't have access to "reality" at all. Unlike the botanist, the farmer, and even the tourist, who each illuminate "the same landscape" but in a different way, Humbert doesn't illuminate anything. The world doesn't *really* show up for him. He sees a nymphet where there is none, only a human being, only a girl. It's true that something *like* that "human" Lolita shines through Humbert's narrative, in bits of conversation, a couple of letters, glimpses into the kinds of things she does and decisions she makes. This might be artful, or it might be accidental, a gift from Humbert's maker; in the sealed-off world of *Lolita*, it's impossible to know. But we can at least say that all of Humbert's *deliberate* efforts to tell us something about Lolita actually tell us nothing about her. This is obviously the case in those passages in which he complains that she was an "exasperating brat," "a disgustingly conventional little girl," "so cruel and crafty in everyday life" and so on (*Lolita* 148; 148; 232). But it's also true in passages in which he more pointedly claims to be revealing something true and important about her, something about her that is "really there" and that, moreover, only he can see. Humbert's well-loved description of Lolita's tennis game is an excellent example of this, inasmuch as it shows us very little about Lolita and very much about Humbert Humbert. He doesn't describe her tennis game so much as

the indescribable itch of rapture that her tennis game produced in me -- the teasing delirious feeling of teetering on the very brink of unearthly order and splendor (230).

In this scene and elsewhere, Humbert shows us not Lolita but his passion for her, the "almost painful convulsion of beauty assimilation" (231) she "produce[s]" in him. And, actually, not even so much "she" but rather the unearthly nymphet he imagines in her place. Of the terrestrial girl he knows and wants to know very little. Humbert's "singular...vision" doesn't illuminate Lolita (de la Durantaye 47), the way the farmer, through *his* "intensely emotional and personal" engagement with the world, lights up the landscape (*LL* 253). Rather, it settles like a "prismatic" haze around her (*Lolita* 42), and keeps us from seeing much of her at all.

The closed-off quality of Humbert's vision manifests itself, as we've seen, in the lack of "wondering" -- of curiosity, surprise, and speculation -- in his narrative, and this lack of wondering points us to further differences between Nabokov's "very subjective" approach to "reality" and Humbert's solipsistic approach to the world (*SO* 10). Where Nabokov's "reality" is a dynamic process, for example, constantly expanding, incorporating new things into itself, pressing in on the dark and ghostly edges of things, Humbert's "reality," such as it is, is totally static. His obsession precludes him from really learning about and loving and living among the things around him, because it focuses his attention so exclusively on one person, and because it actively keeps him from being curious about even her. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov tells us that his life, too, was, at points, "dominated by a single passion" (119); but *Nabokov's* "mania," *his* "demon" (126; 127), as we've seen, brought him out, butterfly net in hand, into the world -- and not only the natural world but also the shared, social world of human meaning. It connects him to his father, who once shared the

same passion; to his grandmother, whose books on zoology he finds and reads; to a whole scientific community, from which he learns and to which he contributes.<sup>21</sup> But Humbert's obsession, by contrast, keeps him out of the world. It isolates him from everyone and everything: he has no friends, no family, no home, no job, no real projects or interests outside of nymphets. By the time we meet him, he seems even to have forsaken the company of books, with the exception of volume C of the *Girls' Encyclopedia*.

Humbert's way of relating to the world, then, is totally, fundamentally different from Nabokov's way of relating to it -- not an extension, intensification, or misapplication of it. Nabokov's attunement to things, though "very subjective," though uniquely his own, is fundamentally outward-facing, involved in, and open to the world, as I've aimed to show. Humbert's way of relating to the world, by contrast, is inward-facing, uninvolved, closed to the world and closed in on itself. It's *Humbert* who "focuses with rare intensity on the passionate pursuit of an inner vision," (de la Durantaye 47), not Nabokov. Nabokov focuses with rare intensity on the passionate pursuit of "reality," and that pursuit is directed in an outward direction, toward the *world*. The difference between the two is the difference between the fresh rainbows of *Speak, Memory*, which, while uniquely attended to by Nabokov, are basically available for everyone to see, and the grotesque rainbows of *Lolita*, which exist, like most of Humbert's "reality," entirely within the confines of his own mind. Only Humbert can see Lolita's "nacreous liver" and his own "rainbow blood," and even then only in his mind's eye. Ultimately, it is doubtful whether Humbert's vision of the world --

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21. And also, of course, Nabokov's love of butterflies took him all over the United States, on those road trips and expeditions out of which he would construct the travel scenes of *Lolita*. Of their journey Humbert says, "We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing" (*Lolita* 175).

solipsistic, fraudulent, and deceiving as it is -- can deserve to be called, in Nabokov's sense of the word, "real." Its effect on Lolita's reality, however, cannot be doubted.

### *Attunements and Actions*

My aim here has been to characterize Humbert Humbert's solipsistic vision as a radical negation of Nabokov's outward-facing attunement to the world. No serious critic doubts that Humbert does bad things and Nabokov does not; but there's a critical tendency, represented here by the arguments of Richard Rorty and Leland de la Durantaye, to see Humbert's "artistic gifts" and "passionate pursuit of an inner vision" as being uncomfortably similar to Nabokov's own. Rorty, de la Durantaye and others interpret that similarity as a kind of self-critique, a refutation or complication of Nabokov's moral claims for the power of those gifts or the primacy of that vision. And yet, as I've aimed to show, there's actually no such similarity between them at all. Humbert notices, but he doesn't wonder; and his singular vision turns away from the world, while Nabokov's turns emphatically towards it. Thus *Lolita* doesn't, as Rorty suggests, exhibit Nabokov's "inability to believe his own general ideas." In particular, it doesn't contradict Nabokov's claim that the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is a state of mind in which we "know the world to be good."

At the outset of this chapter I suggested that what Nabokov meant by this claim is what he shows us in *Speak, Memory*: that the capacity to wonder at trifles is a special state of consciousness that allows the world to show up for us as a source of wonder, joy, and meaning. It allows the world to show up as more finally a source of wonder than of fear, joy than of pain, meaning than of meaninglessness -- and, in this sense, as "good." Having examined Nabokov's idea of "what *reality* is" (*LL* 252), we can now add that this goodness isn't, in Nabokov's view, just something that we

create in our minds. It isn't just a way we have of thinking about the universe, or a quality we project onto it. Rather, it's a possibility that exists in the world itself, a way the world has of showing up, just as it can also show up, if we're oriented toward it in a different way, as a fearful place, or a collection of resources. In Nabokov's view, though, "reality" isn't located, or doesn't take place, out there, in the un-embraced universe that might yet show up as one thing or another. It takes place *in* the showing up. Consequently he can claim that "in this state of mind" we not only experience the world as good, or even allow the world to show up as good, but that we actually know the world to "be" good. It "is" good because that is what it is for us when we are disposed to it in that particular way -- in what Nabokov considers the "highest" way.

It should be noted that this isn't an instrumental claim. Nabokov isn't saying, for example, that in this "state of mind" we do good things, make good decisions, act virtuously, treat people well. Nabokov is, in fact, always circumspect in his moral claims about perceptions and attunements and "artistic gifts" -- not skeptical, exactly, in the way Rorty suggests, but careful, cautious. He says, for example, that "aesthetic bliss" connects us "somehow, somewhere...with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" (*Lolita* 315), and he suggests that the study of literature can help us to "hoist ourselves just a little higher than we generally are" (*LL* 382) -- but this is about as far as he ever goes. He's just as circumspect about the moral import of a state of mind in which we "know the world to be good." There's no doubt that that knowledge has a kind of moral meaning in itself: it can, for example, serve to comfort us in dark times, as Nabokov suggests in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense"; and there's a basic way in which, from the perspective of someone like Nabokov, simply embracing the smallest, most trivial parts of the universe, enriching "reality," just expanding the boundary of that general illumination -- is good and worthwhile. But

does the "capacity to wonder at trifles" have any more instrumental consequences than this? Does knowing the world to be good translate, in any direct way, into doing good in the world?

It's really *Lolita* that raises this question. In *Lolita*, as I've argued, Nabokov shows us the opposite of what he shows us in *Speak, Memory*: a vision of the world from within the mind of someone utterly cut off from the "highest form[] of consciousness," who doesn't wonder at trifles and doesn't "know the world to be good." But Humbert also *does* terrible things: he stinks, he cheats, he tortures. Is Nabokov positing a relationship between Humbert's defective way of orienting himself to things -- his bad "disposition" -- and his actual crimes? And, if so, is he suggesting that the opposite is also true, that the good attunement portrayed in *Speak, Memory* leads to good deeds, good actions?

*Lolita* and *Speak, Memory* do, I think, suggest that there's a connection between our attunements and our actions. But they don't go so far as to suggest that that connection is causal, or even necessary. Humbert Humbert doesn't make Lolita's life miserable because he doesn't wonder at trifles. And he doesn't fail to wonder at trifles because he's made Lolita's life miserable. Instead the two things seem to reinforce one another: Humbert's obsession, his bad disposition, cuts him off from the world; it keeps him from being curious about or capable of being surprised by other people; this makes it easier for them not to matter to him; which makes it easier for him to judge their "realities" unequal to his own; which makes it easier for him to do harm to them; which cuts him off further from them and from the world; and so on. The attunements and the actions are related, but Nabokov doesn't suggest that either one comes before the other; it may simply be that both things just are true for a person like Humbert Humbert. Perhaps this is simply what it is to be cut off from the highest form of consciousness -- Nabokov's most extreme vision of what is to be without access

to that attunement. But being cut off from the world, having no "capacity to wonder at trifles," need not *necessarily* translate into the kind of things Humbert does. The lunatic who passes through Nabokov's landscape might very well be a harmless soul.

Similarly, then, Nabokov suggests that good attunements and good actions are natural, if not necessary, companions. An attunement that allows things to show up as valuable, as capable of making demands on us; that helps us to more fully reveal the world as a source of wonder and joy; that encourages us to respect and respond to things, and to acknowledge the "realities" of other people; that adds to and enriches their realities by lighting the universe up a little for them: this seems like a good foundation, if nothing else, not just for knowing the good but actually being good, doing good, or at least not doing harm. The farmer, because he cares for the trees and the fields, because they matter to him in the deepest possible way, is less likely to cut them down than are the bomb-maker or the button king, for whom they mean much less. And yet Nabokov understands that knowing the good isn't *sufficient* for doing good; that it's a help and a natural companion for virtue but not a guarantee. Nabokov *does* think that there's a "special connection" between his "gifts" and "pity and kindness," but at the same time he knows it isn't a necessary connection, and that it probably isn't as strong a connection as he would like it to be (Rorty 168). Nabokov shows us this, not in *Lolita* and not in the figure of Humbert Humbert, but in *Speak, Memory*, in the figure of Sergey Nabokov.

Nabokov's brother Sergey functions in *Speak, Memory* as a reminder of how hard, how complicated, the translation of attunements into actions can be. As I argued in Chapter Three, *Speak, Memory* shows us how the world shows up in the light of the "highest form[] of consciousness." It shows us what it is to wonder at trifles, to know the world to be good, to dispose



ourselves to things in a way that allows them to matter to us, to make demands on us. And, correspondingly, there's lots of noticing, wondering, meaning and mattering, pity and kindness captured in the book. But *Speak, Memory* is also haunted by the figure of Sergey Nabokov, whom Nabokov, and, in Nabokov's reporting, his whole family, failed to notice, wonder at, value, care about, and, in a word, love, enough.

"For various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother," he writes, after telling us about Kirill, as though even saying Sergey's name would be painful for him. Sergey was born less than a year after Nabokov and looked very much like him; in the caption to one early photograph Nabokov notes that they look practically like twins. Nabokov describes him as

a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections. I was the coddled one; he, the witness of coddling...We seldom played together, he was indifferent to most of the things I was fond of -- toy trains, toy pistols, Red Indians, Red Admirables. At six or seven he developed a passionate adulation, condoned by Mademoiselle, for Napoleon and took a little bronze bust of him to bed. As a child, I was rowdy, adventurous and something of a bully. He was quiet and listless, and spent much more time with our mentors than I. At ten, began his interest in music, and thenceforth he took innumerable lessons, went to concerts with our father, and spent hours on end playing snatches of operas, on an upstairs piano well within earshot. I would creep up behind and prod him in the ribs -- a miserable memory (257).

Nabokov worries that he never really understood his brother, who died "of inanition" in a Hamburg concentration camp in 1945, and that the world didn't either. He worries that Sergey was owed something more from the world than he got: "compassion, understanding, no matter what" (258).

In addition to the differences Nabokov lists above, Sergey was also homosexual, and some of Nabokov's discomfort with that fact lingers, I think, in the "inordinate[]" difficulty he has in speaking about him. But much of that difficulty seems to have to do with his deep sense of regret --

not only for the general want of compassion and understanding in Sergey's life as Nabokov remembers or imagines it, but especially for his own lack of understanding of and compassion for Sergey.

After speaking of Sergey, in Chapter Thirteen, with such difficulty, Nabokov doesn't speak of him anymore. And yet he is careful to include him in every chapter of his memoir up to that point. Sergey is everywhere in the background of Nabokov's recollections, and though he is most often a "mere shadow," stammering, wheezing, meekly obeying, being kicked and prodded and bullied by his brother, wiping his glasses, being ignored, he is always there. There is one exception: Nabokov doesn't include his brother in Chapter Six, his chapter on butterflies; though in a way, I think, he does. In that chapter he tells us about a schoolmate of his who once, at a difficult time in his life, came to visit him, and whom he ignored:

I remember the visit of a schoolmate, a boy of whom I was very fond and with whom I had excellent fun. He arrived one summer night -- in 1913, I think -- from a town some twenty-five miles away. His father had recently perished in an accident, the family was ruined and the stouthearted lad, not being able to afford the price of a railway ticket, had bicycled all those miles to spend a few days with me.

On the morning following his arrival, I did everything I could to get out of the house for my morning hike without his knowing where I had gone. Breakfastless, with hysterical haste, I gathered my net, pill boxes, killing jar, and escaped through the window. Once in the forest, I was safe; but still I walked on, my calves quaking, my eyes full of scalding tears, the whole of me twitching with shame and self-disgust, as I visualized my poor friend, with his long pale face and black tie, moping in the hot garden -- patting the panting dogs for want of something better to do, and trying hard to justify my absence to himself (127).

The incident, which pained Nabokov then and seems to pain him still, is the only real moral transgression Nabokov describes from his youth. It's significant in that it demonstrates the limitations of the Nabokovian attunement. Nabokov has no trouble imagining his friend's

unhappiness. But he does have trouble doing what's right, because a person, the scene suggests, is more than his attunement. Here, Nabokov shows a want of willpower and self-discipline; even as he has no trouble imagining his friend's hurt feelings, he is overcome by other emotions of his own -- fear, desire, shame at his own untroubled existence -- which he is unable to constrain or manage. His attuned imagination does, crucially, provide him with a sharpened sense of his own guilt. But there's no easy connection between this imaginative wondering and doing the right thing; Nabokov might be attuned to the world in a way that allows things to show up as important, to imagine and wonder, but that attunement doesn't prevent him from slighting and neglecting his friend.

This incident gains more weight in the text when we see it as being part of a much larger preoccupation in *Speak, Memory* with failures, not only of understanding and compassion, but of the translation of that understanding into action. The sense of that failure is concentrated almost entirely around the figure of Sergey, whom Nabokov bullies, neglects, and, he worries, just doesn't try hard *enough* to imagine and understand. Sergey's conspicuous absence from the chapter -- the only such absence in Chapters One through Thirteen -- calls for explanation, and the explanation, I think, is that the schoolmate is meant to stand in for Sergey here. The association is made stronger by the fact that this incident foreshadows a later image in the book involving Sergey. Nabokov recounts how he and Véra fled Paris in haste, leaving Sergey behind:

We again met in the nineteen-thirties, and were on quite amiable terms in 1938-1940, in Paris. He often dropped in for a chat, rue Boileau where I lodged in two shabby rooms with you and our child, but it so happened (he had been away for a while) that he learned of our departure to America only after we had left. My bleakest recollections are associated with Paris, and the relief of leaving it was overwhelming, but I am sorry he had to stammer his astonishment to an indifferent concierge (258).

Here again, Nabokov can only imagine his brother's surprise and disappointment at finding him gone, and his efforts to explain, like the schoolmate, Nabokov's unannounced departure to himself.

The Sergey theme is subtle but omni-present in *Speak, Memory*, and in it Nabokov concentrates his feelings of regret and shame, of having done other people wrong, of having failed to understand where he should have understood, of having not been imaginative enough, compassionate enough, and of having failed to follow through on what his imagination did reveal. It doesn't deny the possibility of a connection between good attunements and good actions, but it suggests that that connection, whatever it is, isn't simple, causal, or necessary; that human beings, and moral life, are too complicated for that. "The capacity to wonder at trifles" might be an instrument of moral good, as Shelley said of the imagination; but there are many other instruments as well: moral laws, local rules, cultural norms, political action, religious obligations. Perhaps the will, or reason, plays a larger role in moral life than attunements do. Nabokov is interested in the overlap between attunements and actions -- but he never imagines that that overlap is total, and there is much to interest him about those attunements apart from their role in moral life.

#### *A Riddle with an Elegant Solution*

When asked why he wrote *Lolita*, Nabokov famously answered:

It was an interesting thing to do. Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions (SO 16).

This is a statement designed to tantalize readers, and many critics have taken a stab at answering the question of what that "elegant solution" might be. I don't propose to have "solved" *Lolita*, but, in

my reading, the novel does conform to what Nabokov thinks a good riddle, and a good solution, looks like. He describes one such "elegant" riddle in *Speak, Memory*:

I remember one particular [chess] problem I had been trying to compose for months. There came a night when I managed at last to express that particular theme. It was meant for the very expert solver. The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and discover its fairly simple, "thetic" solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme (exposing White's King to checks), which the composer had taken the greatest pains to "plant" (with only one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having passed through this "antithetic" inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. The pleasant experience of the roundabout route (strange landscapes, gongs, tigers, exotic customs, the thrice-repeated circuit of a newly married couple around the sacred fire of an earthen brazier) would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit, and after that, his arrival at the simple key move would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight (291-292).

*Lolita* is a riddle, as the rich and ever-expanding critical conversation around it suggests. The novel pulls us, ever deeper, into the interpretive "torments" prepared for us by Nabokov. Does Humbert love Lolita? Does he at least come to love her? What should we make of Humbert's powers of attention, his appreciation of beauty? Do they suggest that there's something potentially suspect about certain modes of appreciation, certain forms of attention? Where is his "moral apotheosis" located? In what does it consist? How credible is it? Does it matter whether it's credible or not? How can we tell, when all we have are Humbert's words? Is *Lolita*, finally, just about language, about the power -- or final meaninglessness -- of style? The fact is that there's no *final* way of answering most these questions, because the book is so completely Humbert's narrative, so entirely sealed off to views and voices other than his own. Every interpretation of Humbert's motives and

actions is finally unreliable, because Humbert is finally unreliable -- and not only unreliable but ingenious, and an absolute master of words. Any conclusion we come to about his narrative is necessarily "check[ed]" by the fact that he might have already beaten us to it, that he might have already considered, and even guided us into, that particular play. Hence the interpretive "inferno," the "wild goose chase," the "torments" -- "pleasurable" torments, but torments nonetheless.

And yet, there's a "simple key move" available to us. That move is to read *Lolita* alongside the book that came before it. This is the "solution" I'm suggesting: that *Speak, Memory* and *Lolita* are meant to be read as a pair. *Speak, Memory* gives us the outside view we need to see Humbert Humbert, and his narrative, for what they are. It allows us to see *Lolita* as the "queer mirror side" of *Speak, Memory*, as Nabokov's way of pursuing a topic he'd already pursued in his memoir, but from a completely different direction. In his memoir Nabokov had explored the gift of a good attunement. He'd shown what the world looks like in the light of the highest form of consciousness. He'd revealed what the "capacity to wonder at trifles" is all about it. In *Lolita*, if only because "[i]t was an interesting things to do," he explored the curse of a bad "attunement." He showed what the world looks like to someone cut off from that highest form of consciousness, and what it is to be incapable of wonder.

From this perspective, all our complicated inquiries into the quality of Humbert's love and remorse, and the relation of his "artistic gifts" to Nabokov's own, begin to look like an "illusory pattern of play." If Humbert shares some of Nabokov's verbal brilliance, his wit, his literary knowledge; if he appears, at first glance, to share his capacity for wonder; if he looks to be, by the end of the novel, a moral man, well that's because, as Humbert says, all performances are more interesting when they aren't what they seem:

We all admire the spangled acrobat with classical grace meticulously walking his tight rope in the talcum light; but how much rarer art there is in the sagging rope expert wearing scarecrow clothes and impersonating a grotesque drunk! *I should know* (249).

And yet that illusion is important, the basis not only of our pleasure, as in the case of the circus-goer, but also of our understanding. It's important that Humbert look a bit like Nabokov, that he appear, at least at first, to share some of his artistic gifts. For the illusion drives us to ask questions which, otherwise, as "unsophisticated" readers, we would never have asked. As unsophisticated readers, we might have been content to declare Humbert uncomplicatedly evil from the outset. But taking the "roundabout route" opens up new vistas. It helps to appreciate the full extent of what the "simple" pairing of *Lolita* and *Speak, Memory* can help us to see.

Seeing *Speak, Memory* and *Lolita* as a pair helps us to recognize *Speak, Memory* as Nabokov's picture of paradise, and *Lolita* as his vision of hell. It helps us to distinguish wondering from mere noticing, and singular realities from solipsism. And it also helps us to appreciate something else, too: that Nabokov followed up his celebration of an extraordinary childhood with an elegy for an ordinary one, and in this way drew an equivalence between them -- the childhoods of a extra-privileged, super-gifted, trilingual boy and a middle-class, ordinary, American girl, two children with equal claims, but not equal access, to happiness. If, in *Speak, Memory*, we see Nabokov's "thetic" move, while in *Lolita* see his "antithetic" one, then in their combination we find a "poignant" "synthesis" -- a powerful representation of the full range of forms of consciousness available within human experience.

## CONCLUSION:

### *Understanding Nabokov's Details*

My ambition, in this study, has been to offer a fuller account than already exists of the meaning of, and motivations behind, Nabokov's famous passion for detail. Nabokov communicates that passion directly, in his letters, lectures, interviews, prefaces, and afterwords, in numerous statements underscoring the detail's importance and authority; and he occasionally has his characters give voice to those views, so that they turn up in his fiction as well.<sup>22</sup> But he also, even more famously, communicates that passion implicitly, by means of his uniquely vivid, pointedly precise, emphatically detailphilic style. This emphasis on detail is one of the first things most readers tend to associate with Nabokov, and it's certainly one of the first things we tend to associate with his writing.

In the discussion that precedes these pages, I've emphasized the premium Nabokov places on "wonder[ing] at trifles" not so much in literature, or in art, but in life; and not even so much in remembered or imagined life -- though "the detail is all," for Nabokov, there too (*Ada* 71) -- but in life as it unfolds in real time, as it shows up in the present, as it is lived in the here and now. This, I

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22. These embedded arguments for detail include Ada's assertion, in *Ada, or Ardor*, that, in memory as in life, "the detail is all" (71); Martin's celebration of literary detail in *Glory* ("Just as, in the New Testament, Martin enjoyed coming across 'green grass' or 'indigo chiton,' in literature he sought not the general sense, but the unexpected, sunlit clearings, where you can stretch until your joints crunch, and remain entranced") (62-63); Krug's Nabokovian observation, in *Bend Sinister*, that "the edible Galilean fishes in the first century A.D. would be primarily chromids and barbels although in Raphael's representation of the miraculous draught we find among nondescript piscine forms of the young painter's fancy two specimens which obviously belong to the skate family, never found in fresh water" (155), among many other examples.



believe, is where we should look first for an understanding of what Nabokov's detailphilic style is all about. Readers who look, instead, in their explanations of that style, to Nabokov's inheritance from other writers, or to the influence upon him of literary movements, or to the effect upon him of political developments at home and abroad, begin their inquiries from too late a point in the author's life. Nabokov's passion for detail had already been set well before his first encounters with Russian Formalism, or even before his first serious encounters with Flaubert.<sup>23</sup> It evolved earlier on, as *Speak, Memory* suggests and as I've emphasized here, in the parks and parlors of Vyra and Morskaya Street. That isn't to say that that early passion didn't make Nabokov more open to the influence of those writers and movements; but it is to say that it precedes, and exceeds, that influence. Nabokov's famous passion for detail, in sum, extends less from his encounters with books than from his encounters with and adventures in the world outside them.

Above all, I've emphasized the premium Nabokov places on a certain way of being in the world, what he calls the "highest form[] of consciousness." This, of course, is "the capacity to wonder at trifles," a way of attuning oneself to the world in such a way that its smallest, most trivial and peripheral, aspects show up as occasions for wonder. Nabokov suggests that the value of this way of being lies in its ability to allow things to show up as distinct and non-interchangeable, weighty, meaningful, as genuinely important both for us and in themselves -- to show up, in a word, as mattering. It does this in open opposition to "commonsense," on the one hand, which hardly allows things to show up as mattering at all; and, on the other, the sort of self-involved solipsism that

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23. For arguments emphasizing Nabokov's inheritance from Flaubert, for example, see James Wood, *The Broken Estate*; for his relation to Russian Formalism, see Glynn, *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formality Influences in His Novels*; for the contrary influence of Soviet collectivism, see Bell-Villada's *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life*.

threatens to cut one off from the world altogether. This ethos, so particular to and characteristic of Nabokov, lends itself naturally to the detail-oriented style we see on display in *Speak, Memory* and also, though in more complicated ways, in his novels. The desire to allow things to show up as distinct, non-interchangeable, intrinsically "important" lends itself to precisely the sorts of stylistic techniques for which Nabokov is so well-known: the emphasis on visual precision and verbal specificity; the closeness and extravagance of his authorial attention; the almost pedantic emphasis on descriptive accuracy, on seeing and describing things clearly, rather than diminishing them with inattention, or obscuring them by seeing something else in their stead.

#### *Some Objections to Nabokov's Detailphilic Style*

My account of Nabokov's detailphilic style addresses itself, in particular, to two ways in which our present explanations of that style fall short. The first, introduced in my first chapter and carried through to the last, is the tendency to understand Nabokov's detailed style in terms of the importance he places on noticing well, paying attention to things, being a good observer. This relatively flat understanding of what Nabokov is up to is problematic in itself, inasmuch as it keeps us from appreciating the full import of what is, perhaps, the most central part of his artistic creed; and it can also, as I've shown in Chapter Four, lead us to actively misunderstand other aspects of his work. So long as we think Nabokov's details are merely indications of having "notic[ed] things that most other people do not notice, being curious about what others take for granted, seeing the momentary iridescence and not just the underlying formal structure," we'll tend to see his "artistic gifts" as being provocatively similar to those of a good noticer like Humbert Humbert (Rorty 159). The other tendency, which I have addressed in a less direct way, is the tendency to see this aspect of

Nabokov's style as being, essentially, *just* about "style," a style of writing and a style of seeing, an inheritance from other stylists, capable of being parodied, emulated, inherited in turn. There are other ways of thinking about Nabokov's details, too; Brian Boyd, for example, emphasizes the way those details involve the reader in a special drama of perception and pattern-finding:

Reading one of Nabokov's works allows us to become aware of the process of gradually distinguishing and relating things in more and more detail: we experience an ever-deepening knowledge of reality, a succession of mingled pleasures and vexations, in which attention meets with obstacles, distractions, the illusion of insignificance, but can suddenly discover a connection hitherto unseen (*Nabokov's Ada* 41).

Daniel Albright, on the other hand, has seen in Nabokov's approach to detail a preoccupation with the limits of representation, with the way "reality" always eludes the artist who tries, as Nabokov does, to seize it; and with the way that very elusiveness opens up certain possibilities for the writer that might not have been available had "reality" been easier to seize. The more general trend, though, is toward those two forms of under-reading: seeing Nabokov's love of detail as merely an expression of his commitment to good noticing, or as merely an aspect of style.

I want to turn now, in this last chapter, to this latter way of thinking about Nabokov's details. In this view, Nabokov's details are primarily related to a certain *style* of looking or seeing and, especially, of writing. Many people simply love the style -- the surface "manner...mannerisms, various special tricks" that stamp Nabokov's work as his (Nabokov, *LL* 113). Lila Azam Zanganeh, for example, in her recent, exuberant, unapologetically uncritical celebration of the author, begins her chapter on Nabokov's details in the following way:

Once he had crossed over the transparent abyss of exile, borne the loss of his boyhood, his Russian, and his father, VN fervently wrote himself *into* happiness. His writing became the joyous "record of his love affair" with language. A magic

carpet on which the lucky reader might zip in and out of a light-infused sky, loll on limpid clouds, ogle at detail after detail of landscapes wild and new.

Because, no matter how snarled the stories, how outlandish the plots, all it amounts to (in the end) is a certain way of looking. Amid spinning planets, where nothing is impossible and mad lovers are immortal, details are the only spell. "Caress the details! The divine details!" (107).

Zanganeh delights in Nabokov's details. Still, she sees them as expressions of a "certain way of looking" and a certain way of writing, and these aren't fully adequate terms. Nabokov's details, as I hope to have shown by this point, are expressive not merely of a "way of looking" but of a whole way of being, of disposing oneself toward the world, of a special attunement to the world that exceeds its manifestation in words. To see them as merely an expression of style, of certain aesthetic interests and commitments, is to not quite see them for all that they are.

The real value of this account, though, lies not so much in its ability to respond to committed Nabokophiles like Zanganeh as in its ability to respond to those who are more skeptical of Nabokov's mania for detail, who see in it something frivolous, insufficient, or otherwise problematic. Even those who admire Nabokov for other reasons sometimes express frustration with his unending love-affair with trifles and particulars. The specificity of his terms can seem fussy and artificial; the visual brilliance of his descriptions can appear "dazzling to the point of weakness" (Michael Wood 23);<sup>24</sup> his extravagant articulation of the material world can seem like a distraction from more important things. In his essay "Half-Against Flaubert," James Wood takes a strong position against

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24. "Dazzling to the point of weakness" is Michael Wood's description not of Nabokov's style but of what he calls his "signature" -- Nabokov's typical "habit" and "practice," the special "marks" we easily recognize as his. It isn't, Michael Wood says, always dazzling to the point of weakness, but it can be. Nabokov's style, on the other hand, is something different -- stealthier, rarer, harder to recognize yet more "intimately" his own.

this aspect of Nabokov's art. There Wood, who admires both Nabokov and Flaubert, argues that it is nevertheless "hard not to resent" the latter for making "style a problem for the first time in fiction," and points to Nabokov as part of Flaubert's legacy in this regard. After Flaubert, style becomes self-conscious, a "trapped decision," surrounded always by anxiety and scruple, a primary object of attention in itself, so that the issue of style becomes impossible to avoid (*The Broken Estate* 57). This is true even for those writers who try to avoid "style" altogether, for a decision *against* style is, of course, still a stylistic decision. Thus Flaubert, Wood writes, "gave birth to Nabokov on one side, and to Hemingway on the other" (59). Nabokov is Wood's example of a writer for whom style is all-important, for whom style is practically everything.

Nabokov inherits one aspect of Flaubert's style in particular, his emphasis on visual detail:

From Flaubert comes that fetishizing of the visual for which Nabokov is always praised and which is actually his deepest limitation...[T]he danger of Flaubert's heavily visual details is that they flatter the visual over the unseen, the external over the interior..., that writing becomes primarily, and in some cases only, a way of making us feel 'almost materially the objects [it] describes.' Furthermore, in addition to the tyranny of the visual, comes the tyranny of the detail...Flaubert gave birth to the orthodoxy that the finest style of writing is a procession of strung details, a necklace of sensualities. We see this in Updike and above all in Nabokov...In Nabokov especially, the anxiety with which Flaubert surrounds detail - - the awful chosenness of it -- becomes a kind of terror, an inability to draw away from detail; and a concomitant paralysis, a static cult of the local; a frieze...[P]recise, observed detail is the food of any decent fiction. But Flaubert surely institutionalized this way of writing, canonized it into orthodoxy. Flaubert made it into a style (61) [.]

There are really two kinds of objections here, one aesthetic, one more philosophical. First, Wood argues that a style that puts so high a premium on precision and solidity may ultimately become fragmented and immobile. Nabokov's detail-centric prose, he writes, risks devolving into nothing *but* a string of details, a series of static, self-enclosed, deliberate descriptions. Each distinctly

observed detail, moreover, has about it an aura of terrible deliberation, "awful chosenness," and this has the effect, among other things, of drawing attention to the surface of the style, so that we end up attending more to Nabokov's descriptive techniques than to what they aim to reveal. Whereas Saul Bellow "notices superbly," as Wood says elsewhere, "Nabokov wants to tell us how important it is to notice. Nabokov's fiction is always becoming propaganda on behalf of good noticing, hence on behalf of itself" (*HFW* 62-63).

The second objection is ultimately more philosophical in nature. Wood worries that an outsized artistic emphasis on the visual outlines of the world -- an overindulgence in what Nabokov, in his lecture on Dickens, calls the "art of vivid sensuous evocation" (*LL* 113) -- may come at the expense of exploring and evoking other, deeper, more important things. If we take the job of the novel -- or one of its more important jobs -- to be that it gives us access to the inner life, to consciousness, to the "unseen" world of feeling and belief, then this overemphasis on surface forms and colors and textures must seem a "danger" and a distraction, a misallocation of energy and interest.

This particular objection has a long history, inasmuch as it recalls Augustine's argument against the dangers of "curiosity." In Book Ten of his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the habit of wondering at trifles -- of delighting, inquiring into, and speculating about "trivial and insignificant matters" (243), of taking pleasure in visual surfaces and indulging in the "gratification of the eye" (241) -- as a temptation we ought to resist, lest it distract us from deeper, more important things:

For in addition to our bodily appetites...the mind is also subject to a certain propensity to use the sense of the body, not for self-indulgence of a physical kind, but for the satisfaction of its own inquisitiveness...

[W]ho can tell how many times each day our curiosity is tempted by the most trivial and insignificant matters? Who can tell how often we give way?...I no longer go to watch a dog chasing a hare at the games in the circus. But if I should happen to see the same thing in the country as I pass by, the chase might easily hold my

attention and distract me from whatever serious thoughts occupied my mind...[U]nless you made me realize my weakness and quickly reminded me, either to turn my eyes from the sight and raise my thoughts to you in contemplation, or to despise it utterly and continue on my way, I should simply stop and gloat. What excuse can I make for myself when often, as I sit at home, I cannot turn my eyes from the sight of a lizard catching flies or a spider entangling them as they fly into her web? Does it make any difference that these are only small animals? It is true that the sight of them inspires me to praise you for the wonders of your creation and the order in which you have disposed all things, but I am not intent upon your praises when I first begin to watch. It is one thing to rise quickly from a fall, another not to fall at all (243.)

Augustine's objection to such wondering is different from that of commonsense. For Augustine the issue isn't so much that wondering at trifles is childish, impractical, irrational, a waste of time; the issue is that it actively disperses our energy and attention, so that we become distracted from higher, more important things. This wondering, Augustine concedes, might *eventually* lead to the contemplation of those higher things, but Augustine worries that it represents too indirect and incidental a path to them, and notes that we might very well get lost along the way. For these reasons, he characterizes this particular "propensity" -- this "lust of the eyes," "futile curiosity," and "idle speculation" -- as a temptation, a danger, and a sin, to be avoided as much as any other (241-243).

Heidegger updates Augustine's argument against "curiosity" in *Being in Time*:

When curiosity has become free...it concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen...but *just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty. In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world. Therefore curiosity is characterized in a specific way of *not tarrying* alongside what is closest. Consequently it does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the constant possibility of *distraction*. Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marvelling at them...To be

amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest. Rather it concerns itself with a kind of knowing, but just in order to have known (216-217).

The inquisitive wonderment Nabokov describes, because it so clearly involves “tarrying alongside what is closest,” “observing entities and marvelling at them,” is fairly easy to distinguish from Heidegger’s concept of “curiosity.” The comparison, in fact, helps us to appreciate just how different Nabokov’s attentiveness to trifles, and the delight he takes in them, is from the restless, excited, scattered, novelty-seeking state of mind Heidegger describes. Yet it’s somewhat harder to distinguish wondering at trifles from what Augustine describes in his *Confessions*. Augustine’s transfixion by “small animals,” his inability to turn his eyes from “the sight of a lizard catching flies or a spider entangling them as they fly into her web,” which leads eventually to an experience of praise and wonder, doesn’t seem all that different from Nabokov’s fascination with butterflies.

And yet what Nabokov views as the highest form of consciousness Augustine views as a sin. James Wood, too, implies that there may be something deeply problematic about paying too much attention to the details and small “sensualities” of the visible world -- in literature, at least, if not also in life. For Wood the problem isn’t that such details turn our attention away from thoughts of God or even, as Heidegger says, from “being knowingly in the truth,” but is rather that they siphon attention away from the inner life, from immaterial, essentially spiritual concerns and values, from the “interior” and the “unseen.”

### *Responses to Those Objections*

I take James Wood’s case against Nabokov to be representative of a certain way of understanding



Nabokov's characteristic attentiveness to detail: that it's something Nabokov learned to do from other writers; that it reflects, primarily, a set of stylistic choices; that it deliberately calls attention to itself; and, finally, that it results -- or, at least, too often results -- in a somewhat superficial artistic vision, drawing attention to the surface of the work and the world and away from more important matters. That case looks less convincing, though, once we've recognized how this critique depends on an idea of "what *reality* is" that differs in fundamental ways from Nabokov's own, and when we connect Nabokov's detailphilic style to the broader ethos, the broader world of value, attunements, meaning, mattering, wondering and speculation described in these pages.

First, then, we should note that while Nabokov attends more closely and more emphatically to the contours of the visual world than most writers, the charge of superficiality doesn't apply as readily in his case as it might in another's. Both Wood and Augustine appear to conceive of "reality" in a dualistic way. Augustine imagines a material world on the one hand, and a transcendent, immaterial, spiritual world on the other; Wood, like Boyd and de la Durantaye, imagines an "external" world and an "interior" one, an apparent, manifest, "visual" world and an "unseen" one. But Nabokov's idea of reality, as we saw at length in Chapter Four, is very different from this. Nabokov doesn't distinguish between the inner life and the outer world; for him "reality" resides in, and has no meaning apart from, the embracement of one by the other. In Nabokov's view "reality" always shows up for someone and as something, and so, for him, the external and the interior always go *together*, as do the seen and the unseen, the apparent world and the world of feeling, thought, belief, inner experience. It's easy to mistake this for a kind of expressionism, as Ellen Pifer seems to:

Every item perceived by Nabokov's narrators and protagonists similarly acts a mirror of the observer's consciousness. The effect of Nabokov's self-conscious method is to suggest, furthermore, that objects are subjective mirrors in reality as

well as in art, because for Nabokov the world is not an objective entity but a "universe embraced by consciousness." By arranging the details of his literary landscape as reflections of their very observers, Nabokov made James's "modulations of perception" -- or, as he called them, "the shifts of levels" of perception -- the very form and context of human reality (127).

But we have to be careful. Pifer's account is only half right: the "item[s] perceived" by Nabokov's narrators and protagonists and, in *Speak, Memory*, by Nabokov himself, don't merely function as "mirrors": they tell us something about the protagonist's way of perceiving, true, but they also tell us something about the "item perceived." In extreme cases -- in Humbert's case or Kinbote's -- this might be less true, or even untrue; but in many of the other novels, and certainly his memoir, Nabokov's details reveal something about the "item perceived" as well as the consciousness that perceives it.<sup>25</sup> In any event, *both* sides of the equation are important. Consequently it doesn't make sense -- from Nabokov's point of view, at least -- to say that Nabokov's attention to the external world comes at the expense of the inner one, since the inner, unseen world of value and meaning is always present in Nabokov's descriptions, and especially in his details.

Second, a more robust understanding of that relation -- between Nabokov's details and the world

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25. This is especially true of novels that draw, at least occasionally, on the same store of memories Nabokov draws on for his autobiography, books like *Mary, Glory, The Gift, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister*, and *The Defense* -- a novel in which, among several other familiar images, Elena Nabokov's boletes appear:

Yes, they were there, those edible red boletes. Green needles adhered to their delicately brick-colored caps and sometimes a blade of grass would leave on one of them a long narrow trace. Their undersides might be holey, and occasionally a yellow slug would be sitting there -- and Luzhin senior would use his pocketknife to clean moss and soil from the thick speckled-gray root of each mushroom before placing it in the basket (58).

Pifer's metaphor of the mirror is more appropriate to a book like *Lolita*, with its explicit interest in problems of madness, delusion, and solipsism.

of value and meaning -- would, I think, help to temper the impression of tyranny, propaganda, fussiness, showiness, and pedantry his elaborately detailed prose sometimes creates. Wondering at flies or butterflies must seem like a perverse use of attention so long as we have an impoverished idea of why that wondering-at is, for Nabokov, so important; and insisting that *we* linger and wonder, too, must surely seem like the strange whim of a tyrant, the caprice of a "cult" leader, so long as it strikes us a distraction from more important things. If, on the other hand, we were able to more fully appreciate the high stakes of that wonder for Nabokov, I think we would see in his details something other than tyranny and distraction. Instead we would see, behind Nabokov's precise and "heav[y]" details, the aura of a particular way of revealing, of disposing oneself to the world, of allowing things to show up, to matter, to make demands, and an effort to preserve that aura in words. We would see his details, in other words, in relation to questions of *attunement*, *value*, and *meaning*, rather than merely in relation to questions or problems of *style*. When we encountered one of Nabokov's details, we wouldn't only about the stylistic effect it achieves. We would *also* ask questions like: What does this detail say about the way the world is showing up for the person who is wondering at it? What does it suggest about the way that person is involved in the world? About the way the world makes demands upon him or her? About the nature, composition, texture, patterns, potentialities, and limitations of his or her "reality"?

In a sense, of course, these are still questions about style, just style understood in a different way. This is "style" in Michael Wood's sense of the word: "a complex but still legible trace" of a "person's interaction with the world" (23). Surely there are some uninspired details in Nabokov; but his best details, his most memorable ones, always refer back to that interaction, or the idea of such an interaction, in which the world, illuminated by him in a certain way, revealed itself as an occasion for

wonder. The sense of that "interaction" might be present only in its absence, so that, in *Lolita*, Humbert's solipsistic details have a way of pointing to, and evoking, the aura of wonder that Humbert himself doesn't feel, just as the wonderful details of *Speak, Memory* often seem to inscribe within themselves, and to actively deny, the voice of commonsense.

In sum, we shouldn't think of Nabokov's details as reflections of reality or mirrors of minds; as propaganda for good noticing; as a means of making strange; as a necklace of sensualities. Most of the metaphors we use to talk about Nabokov's details are misleading. Instead we should think of them as things revealed, like this singular hawkmoth in *Bend Sinister*:

"Look," you said.

Very slowly, rosewise, you opened your hands. There, clinging with all its six fluffy feet to the ball of your thumb, the tip of its mouse-grey body slightly excurved, its short, red, blue-ocellated inferior wings oddly protruding forward from beneath the sloping superior ones which were long and marbled and deeply notched (134) [.]

Here -- as with the boletes that emerge after the rain, or the majolica chips that turn up on the shore, or the insects that show up in the light of Nabokov's acetylene lamp -- the hawkmoth, a trifle by commonsense standards, shows up as something wonderful, and not in a scene of estrangement or distraction or self-dramatizing deliberation but rather of revelation. "Bring[ing] out" (*SM* 43), "shin[ing] on" (134), opening up -- these, I think, are the right metaphors for thinking about what Nabokov is doing with his detailphilic style.

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Few writers have been as many different things as Nabokov was -- artist, scientist, Russian,

American, wealthy heir, impoverished emigre -- or worked so well in so many different genres. Over fifty years, and working across different disciplines, languages, traditions, and continents, Nabokov fashioned himself into a novelist, poet, playwright and screenplaywright, an author of short stories and scientific papers, an essayist, translator, critic and scholar, lecturer, memoirist, composer of chess problems, biographer and brilliant interviewee. Later, in the pages of his critics, he would assume more roles still: as a rigid moralist and a frivolous firebird; a perverse postmodernist and an old-fashioned emigre; a tender magician, a haughty mandarin; a mystic with his eyes turned always toward the "otherworld," a realist rooted firmly in this one.

Nabokov really was all of these things. But he was also one thing: a lover of details, and a wonderer. This is something he was all the time, throughout his life, throughout his career, in every book and project. It was a role he entered into early and never gave up. His most extreme, most mandarin, most tyrannical claims insist on this fact: details are everything! details are all! the first rule of reading! the main delight of the mind! And yet the substance of these assertions is surprisingly modest. The highest form of consciousness, he tells us, isn't the moment of poetic inspiration; it isn't the moment of elegant solution; it isn't even the moment after the butterfly's been caught. The highest form of consciousness is a readiness for wonder -- and for wonder not at magnificent things, but at small things, trifles. To some *this* vision of Nabokov -- humble, reverent, earnest, appreciative -- might at first seem unfamiliar. But it is something "one cannot unsee once it has been seen" (*SM* 310).

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