

## **Art and Ardor: The Presence of the Divine in the Poetry and Prose of Vladimir Nabokov**

Clifford L. Garner, Professor of English/Director, Mentor/Talented Student Honors Program,  
State University of New York: Rockland Community College

### **Abstract**

While an acknowledged master of “metafiction,” Vladimir Nabokov’s poetry and prose is rife with clues suggesting, and in many cases outright stating, that the postmodern/postdarwinian world is not at all without evidence of the existence of the divine.

The purpose of this presentation is to explore the ways in which Nabokov’s writing stands in stark contrast to the postmodern paradigm. The paper discusses the poetry and prose in this context to see clearly how Nabokov posits a very active divine presence in both the physical and artistic world.

### **Art and Ardor: The Presence of the Divine in Nabokov’s Poetry and Prose**

While Vladimir Nabokov’s poetry and criticism is largely unknown and unread, his place in the pantheon of the great English language fiction writers is secure. His masterpieces *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962) have assured that position. The critics who have helped to establish Nabokov’s fame have heaped praise upon these novels and others such as *Ada* (1969), *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935), and *The Gift* (1937). The stunning bulk of these critics’ commentary on the Nabokovian canon focuses on the formal aspects of his fiction, distancing itself from personal, ideological areas of interest—bifurcating life and art. Thus the general lack of interest in his often personal, lyric poetry or his very revealing criticism.

Nabokov’s novels have been judged by critics as paradigms of the self-referential, solipsistic “art” novel; as “metafiction... which turns its attention upon the work of art itself.”<sup>1</sup> One critic, Dwight MacDonald, called Nabokov’s fiction “high class doodling”<sup>2</sup> and Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, in a 1972 *Playboy* interview, said he could “hear the clatter of surgical tools” in Nabokov’s prose.<sup>3</sup> Nabokov has been grouped with writers in the mid to late 20th century as a post modernist or part of what theorist Roland Barthes calls the “literature of exhaustion.”

As the thinking goes, Nabokov’s work does not deal with questions about life, man, society and the like. As a practitioner of the metafictionist’s art, Nabokov’s work theoretically deals only with questions of art and style. The artist and his art present readers with “aloofness,” “indifference,” and “hermeticism.” It is all mechanics: the perfect Swiss watch; the prototype of a post-Darwinian vision of both life and art, devoid of any spiritual dimension and denying any ordering force in the universe. However, all art is inextricably tied to life and Nabokov’s art is

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1. Inger Christensen, *The Meaning of Metafiction* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981), 9.

2. Dwight MacDonald, “Pale Fire: A Review,” *Partisan Review* Summer (1962): 437-42.

3. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Playboy Magazine Interview* Volume 19, Issue 12 (1972): 105.

no exception.<sup>4</sup> To explore his work believing it is without meaning is to examine all the parts of that Swiss watch without recognizing that it tells time. Vladimir Nabokov writes literature which deals with ideas such as compassion, pity, and love, all of which leads careful readers to an understanding of a substratum to life and art: the presence of the divine.

The deeper one looks at Nabokov's poetry and prose, the more one discovers prescriptive pronouncements and reading directions. These reading directions give us a different roadmap to the fictional productions. The purpose of this paper is to explore the presence of an important theme in Nabokov's prose and poetry: the divine. Hints of that theme were given clearly by Vera Nabokov—the person to whom Vladimir dedicated everything he wrote—as the theme of *potustoronnost*, which Nabokov himself translated as “the hereafter.” In fact, Vera Nabokov said that this was the “main theme” in Nabokov's writing.<sup>5</sup> We will explore some evidence for, and the presence of, this idea in Nabokov's poetry, in his interviews and criticism, and finally in the novels: especially *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The paper will ultimately point to the relationship between the presence of the divine in Nabokov's work and the British Romantic vision of the creative imagination and its connection with the divine. In the process we shall see that the Nabokovian aesthetic incorporates a vision of art as both beautiful and moral.

So, how did we get to the prevalent vision of Nabokov as the ultimate art-for-art's-sake postmodernist? I would argue it is because of the persona Nabokov projects. This projection is “imperious, sardonic, dismissive, categorical, the ruler by divine right of his own private kingdom.”<sup>6</sup> This persona is indeed formidable and is calculated to throw the hounds off the scent and to “leave nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness.”<sup>7</sup> This persona tells the critic not to look for “ideas” in the work and sets up the formulae by which he may examine the Nabokovian oeuvre: that what Nabokov writes is *allegorique de lui meme* and his artistic goal is nothing beyond “aesthetic bliss.”<sup>8</sup>

In his article “Lolita and Pure Art” Michael Bell has noted this problem in reading Nabokov and rightly posits that it is not the critics' fault at all:

The critical deadlock illustrated here is not, of course, entirely the fault of the commentators: the problem is precipitated by Nabokov himself, both in his novels and in the principles of taste expressed in his own obiter dicta on literature generally.<sup>9</sup>

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4. When we see pain, loss, love, loyalty, compassion, pride, and honesty as the subject matter of Nabokov's poetry and prose, we can adduce clear connections with his critical judgments on the great masterworks of European fiction. Further, there are therefore safe inroads into the fiction that show us that fiction does not exist in a stylistic void.

5. Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 277. Boyd, Rowe, Alexandrov and others have explored the idea of *potustoronnost* in books and articles, however, they all see it as nothing much other than a device that is either meant for humorous effect or as a dividing line between life and death.

6. Douglas Fowler, *Reading Nabokov* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1974), 1.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 316.

9. Michael Bell, “Lolita And Pure Art,” *Essays in Criticism* 24 (1974): 170.

In fact, Nabokov is at fault. However his “obiter dicta” are not at all at fault. His principles of taste are often decidedly not postmodern and his obiter dicta on what he called “masterpieces of fiction” are actually decidedly Romantic, revealing an aesthetic which has room for both “aesthetic bliss” and “compassion,” both art and ardor; an aesthetic which gives us glimpses of the divine in both life and *potustoronnost*. So, let us turn first to Nabokov’s *Lectures on Literature* (1972).

This is a collection of lectures Nabokov gave when he was instructing at Cornell University from 1948-1958. When he took over what the campus grapevine called “dirty lit” Nabokov curricular choices were telling. Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* are there as representative of the “aesthete” to be sure, but can we see Dickens and Kafka as art-for-art’s-sake writers or as “machinists”? Yet, there they are in Nabokov’s pantheon alongside the “pure” artists.

A “major writer” is, for Nabokov, the writer who can combine form and substance, idea and artistry, machinery and magic. There is no division for Nabokov in the great artist as “art and thought, manner and matter, are inseparable.” There is, rather, a Coleridgean esemplastic ability:

There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered; he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter.<sup>10</sup>

This aesthetic does not send us running to Foucault, Derrida, or DeSaussure, or any modern theorist or lexicon. Actually, Nabokov here is more akin to Alexander Pope arguing in “An Essay on Criticism,” that the purpose of art is to teach and delight. In fact, Nabokov argues against the metafictionist’s approach:

I would not like to suggest that the initial urge with great writing is . . . the product of something seen or heard or smelt or tasted or touched during a long haired art-for-artist’s aimless rambles.<sup>11</sup>

The key word here is, of course, “aimless.” Nabokov knows, as both artist and critic, that to write without purpose is sterile. This is also the position of Flaubert who said that there is no “pure art” but argues, rather, that an artist’s work “must also come from the heart.”<sup>12</sup>

For Nabokov the mission of the great artist is manifold: to create a work that is at once aesthetically and stylistically beautiful, is moral at its core, and is also evocative of what he calls “pity” or “pathos.” In other words, art must be at once about style and about genuine human emotion. It is here that Nabokov sees the true mark of genius in an artist like Dickens. In his examination of *Bleak House*, Nabokov sees the “divine details,” but also the “divine throb of pity” and these two aspects of the divine together form the basis of great art:

Dickens’s great art should not be mistaken for a cockney version of the seat of emotion—it is the real thing, keen, subtle, specialized compassion, with a grading and merging of melting shades, with the very accent of profound pity in the words

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10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 5.

11. *Ibid.*, 379.

12. Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1857-1880* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1984), 252.

uttered, and with an artist's choice of the most visible, most audible, most tangible epithets.<sup>13</sup>

While Dickens does not neglect the "art" side of the duality: "the visible, most audible, most tangible epithets," neither does he neglect the "life" side: "keen, subtle, specialized compassion . . . the very accent of profound pity." It is this combination of art and ardor that makes Dickens great in Nabokov's aesthetic. We note carefully the critical lexicon Nabokov uses: "divine details" "divine throb of pity." In all aspects of art, Nabokov, like the great British Romantic writers Wordsworth and Coleridge, sees parallels between the artist's productions and the Almighty's productions; between art and nature. So, like them, Nabokov the critic looks for "pity" and "pathos" along with "love" in both artistic and natural creation.

Love is an important theme in great art. The critic Leslie Fiedler said that all great art is about either love or death. In Nabokov's examination of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* we see that Emma's husband Charles is redeemed by his undying, if foolish, love for Emma:

So here is the pleasing paradox of Flaubert's tale: the dullest and most inept person in the book is the only one who is redeemed by a divine something in the all-powerful, forgiving, and unswerving love that he bears Emma, alive or dead.<sup>14</sup>

The very idea of redemption through love and enshrining its value in art separates Nabokov from the prevalent atheism of most postmodern art. His argument for Kafka's art is the same. What he finds exceptional and excellent in Kafka is the "human pathetic quality... human pathos... the throb in the throat of the story... that intonation of 'I cannot get out, I cannot get out'" and points out that:

The absurd central character belongs to the absurd world around him but, pathetically and tragically, attempts to struggle out of it into the world of humans.<sup>15</sup>

So, what is this "world of humans" to which Nabokov refers? Is it the world of scientific materialism and post-modern atheism, which levels all human endeavor to futility? No. Nabokov argues, as the Romantics would, that there is a fundamental goodness in humanity, which he delineates in his essay placed near the end of *Lectures on Literature* entitled "The Art of Literature and the Commonsense." Nabokov believes this goodness is "essential" and argues that if we cannot have it for our physical bodies, then we must build it as a home for our souls:

...the irrational belief in the goodness of man...becomes something more than the wobbly basis of idealistic philosophies. It becomes a solid and iridescent truth. This means that goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one's world, which world at first sight seems hard to identify with the modern one of newspaper editors and other bright pessimists, who will tell you that it is, mildly speaking, illogical to applaud the supremacy of good at a time when something called the police state, or communism, is trying to turn the globe into five million square miles of terror, stupidity, and barbed wire...but within the emphatically

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13. Quoted in Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 87.

14. *Ibid.*, 133.

15. *Ibid.*, 255.

and unshakably illogical world which I am advertising as a home for the spirit, war gods are unreal not because they are conveniently remote in physical space from the reality of a reading lamp and the solidity of a fountain pen, but because I cannot imagine (and that is saying a good deal) such circumstances as might impinge upon the lovely and lovable world which quietly persists, whereas I can very well imagine that my fellow dreamers, thousands of whom roam the earth, keep to these irrational and divine standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death...it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good.<sup>16</sup>

Here we see formulations that Wordsworth would not be uncomfortable with and we see the Nabokov I want to explore: the Nabokov who believes in the supremacy of the human spirit and its connections with the divine. This is certainly not the Nabokov who seeks what Page Stegner calls an "Escape Into Aesthetics." Instead we witness the Nabokov who believes in human goodness and sees a home for the spirit in the divine; a Nabokov who sees what is great in mankind confronting and rising above "death" itself.

So, we can see the divine in the criticism and in his aesthetic pronouncements, but where is the divine in Nabokovian art? Let us start with six poems originally written by Nabokov in his native Russian and translated by him for his collection entitled *Poems and Problems*. The poems are: "I Like That Mountain" (1925), "In Paradise" (1927), "Fame" (1942), "The Room" (1950) "Restoration" (1952) and "The Ballad of Longwood Glen" (1957). The two poems in the 1920s are, admittedly, the poems of a young man and one could argue that they lack the sophistication of the later Nabokov. However, they certainly project a subjective vision as personal, lyrical poems. These poems posit a personal conception of "paradise" or *potustoronnost*.

In the concluding stanza of "I Like That Mountain" Nabokov describes the joy of a Wordsworthian perambulation up a mountain and rhetorically asks:

Shall we not climb thus  
the slopes of paradise, at the hour of death,  
meeting all the loved things  
that in life elevated us?<sup>17</sup>

Like Wordsworth in poems like "Tintern Abbey" and "The Prelude," Nabokov speaks personally about loss (in his case the "death" or loss of his father to an assassin's bullet), about love, and about how life mirrors the afterlife in bringing us to joy, elevation, and love. This nexus of loss, death and the afterlife is also prevalent in the opening of "In Paradise" where his "soul, beyond distant death" sees its "image" as "a provincial naturalist,/an eccentric lost in paradise."<sup>18</sup> Further, in the poem "The Dream" he writes:

how grateful one is to unearthly powers

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16. Ibid., 373-374.

17. Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems And Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 35.

18. Ibid., 45.

that the dead can appear in one's sleep  
how proud of the dream, of that nighttime event,  
is one's shaken soul! <sup>19</sup>

Clearly this early poetry lays out a belief system that includes a soul and a “hereafter” in terms that are not vague and do not in any way present any manifestation of postmodernist irony. Again, one might argue that these are the commonplace ideas of a young man who has not yet fully found his milieu or a mature philosophical framework for these ideas. However, in the poetry Nabokov wrote in his 40s and 50s these same ideas of *potustoronnost* are evinced. In the last stanza of “Fame” Nabokov says:

But one day while disrupting the strata of sense  
and descending deep down to my wellspring  
I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world  
Something else, something else, something else. <sup>20</sup>

These early pieces are personal poems translated from their original Russian by Nabokov while in his 70s—the last decade of his life. Certainly his inclusion of these specific poems at this specific point in his life is more than a mere cataloguing of the poetry of his Russian period (especially given that there are hundreds of poems NOT included therein but published posthumously by his son, Dmitri). The collection—interestingly and tellingly titled *Poems and Problems* <sup>21</sup> is more likely an addendum for readers of Nabokov to add to the corpus of his fiction so we might uncover another dimension in his work beyond the style, beyond the aesthetic bliss.

The “hereafter” is also evident in the English poetry, which is not as personal as the Russian poems and usually presents the reader with narrative personae. In “The Room” we learn about a suicidal poet who writes “Alone, unknown, unloved, I die” above the bed in which he kills himself. The narrator’s conclusion is that “here a life had come apart/in darkness, and the room had grown/a ghostly thorax, with a heart/unknown, unloved—but not alone.” We note the “ghostly” descriptor and keep it in mind for later discussion. However, the idea that we are not alone in death is suggestive of romance, not postmodernism. <sup>22</sup> Also, in “The Ballad of Longwood Glen” we meet a character who climbs up into a tree but “never came down . . . never returned.” The narrator says that Art Longwood saw “What tiaras of gardens! What torrents of light!/ How accessible ether! How easy flight! . . . None saw the delirious celestial crowds/ Greet the hero from earth in the snow of the clouds.” <sup>23</sup> The character Art Longwood experiences what

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19. *Ibid.*, 37.

20. *Ibid.*, 113.

21. We are, in examining the poetry in this volume, dealing with much more personal, emotionally vulnerable documents which do not, in most cases, present a distancing persona. These are lyrics which Nabokov uses to deal directly and personally with the “problems” (exile, loss etc) signified in the title of the book of poetry.

22. Quoted in Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 164.

23. *Ibid.*, 177.

Nabokov posits in the earlier poems—a connection with the divine. The divine is real. Paradise is real. The soul is real and reaches its apogee when it meets the divine: the “loved things” that in life “elevated us” in “delirious celestial” paradise.

The poetry opens up avenues of understanding about Nabokov’s belief in the hereafter and therein adds another “theme” for our delectation. Nabokov also made references to *potustoronnost* in interviews as collected in *Strong Opinions* (1973). When asked about science and the mystery of existence Nabokov, a world class lepidopterist who invented a new classification system for butterflies recognized by the Harvard School of Comparative Zoology, replied:

In point of fact, the greater one’s science, the deeper the sense of mystery. Moreover, I don’t believe that any science today has pierced any mystery... even in the better sense of “science”—as the study of visible and palpable nature, or the poetry of pure mathematics and pure philosophy—the situation remains as hopeless as ever. We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought.<sup>24</sup>

In response to this answer the interviewer introduces the idea of “Man’s understanding of these mysteries [as] embodied in his concept of a Divine Being” and then directly asks Nabokov if he believes in God. The answer is well known and often quoted but is very important here:

To be quite candid--and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a Salutary little chill—I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more.<sup>25</sup>

So, how does Nabokov the artist conceive of his relationship with the divine? He sees the writer as the English Romantic writers saw him—as a participant in the continuous act of creation of the world; as echoic of the divine act of creation. The writer must recreate the natural world—God’s creation—in his written art. Nabokov, as a lepidopterist, a scientist, sees the relationship between the evidence of the divine in the patterns of nature and the role of the artist as creator:

I think I’m in good company because all art is deception and so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation.<sup>26</sup>

He also argues that “reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable... we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects.”<sup>27</sup>

The artist’s job is to mimic or echo the divine creator:

A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of

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24. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973) 44-5.

25. *Ibid.*, 45.

26. *Ibid.*, 11.

27. *Ibid.*

re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should know the given world.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the artist makes his work the production of “art at its greatest” which is “fantastically deceitful and complex.”<sup>29</sup> So, while Nabokov is rightly accepted by critics as not religious—by his own dicta he is “indifferent to religion, to the church—any church” (39), that does not mean he doesn’t believe in the divine. The divine, for Nabokov, is creative force and the artist’s job is to see the patterns and evidence of that divinity while making his own lesser creation. It’s all a matter of scale.

Man’s creative expressions, because of their scale, cause him to explore many approaches to this act of creation:

I would say that imagination is a form of memory. . . . An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory. When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne’s mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may want to use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time.<sup>30</sup>

The Nabokovian artist, echoing the “Almighty” creates a reality in fiction that is new and unusual and individual; the “artist invents his own world” (136) using imagination, memory, and creativity. This new created world is not a mirror of the creations of others:

Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual. When my fancies will have been sufficiently imitated, they, too, will enter the common domain of average reality, which will be false, too, but within a new context which we cannot yet guess. Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture.<sup>31</sup>

So, the artist through his perception of the world imitates the Almighty, the reader then creates, through his perception of the writer’s created world a “reality” that is an echo of its creator’s work and so on. Without the creative imagination, there is nothing to “animate” “average reality.”

What, then, is the intent of all this creative energy and artistic production? Is it only “aesthetic bliss” or is it something else altogether? Ironically for the metafictionist readers of Nabokov it’s a moral intent—very much like the Popean moralist John Shade in *Pale Fire*—Nabokov believes in the functionality or utility of art, even his own art: “far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride.”<sup>32</sup> The poetry, the interviews, and the criticism give the reader a radically different vision of an important 20th

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28. *Ibid.*, 32.

29. *Ibid.*, 32-3.

30. *Ibid.*, 78.

31. *Ibid.*, 118.

32. *Ibid.*, 193.

century writer. But, we are not presented with a cold aesthete or a “frivolous firebird.” Clearly Nabokov believes in the importance and power of art, but he believes in an art that parallels the divine’s creation and ultimately inculcates a moral intent.

Finally, let us now turn to consider the two major novels to delineate these ideas. Nabokov’s *chefs d’oeuvre* are generally considered to be *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Where is the moral? Where is the metaphysical? As an overview, in and of itself the very idea of ghosts in any setting is usually the purview of romance and is certainly suggestive of the metaphysical. Nabokov’s novels, including *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, have ghostly presences, as in Shakespeare’s plays, at important and transitional moments. Nabokov scholars W.W. Rowe and Brian Boyd give very cogent examples of the existence of ghosts in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* but they see them only as fictional agents or parodies and don’t argue for any larger purposes for them. However, the ghosts in Nabokov’s fictions serve other functions. In fact, they are agents of love and protection. In *Lolita* the ghost of Charlotte Haze rises at the exact moment of Humbert’s apotheosis and transformation by love near the end of the novel. In *Pale Fire* the ghost of John Shade’s daughter scratches at their bedroom windowpane stirring the memory and love of both parents for the daughter, but also helping to affirm for John Shade that there is a hereafter.

*Pale Fire* contains a poem of the same name. The poem is concerned with loss—of Shade’s scholarly but homely daughter, of survival after death, and of coping with the hereafter in the now. It is important to our examination because it a poem of culmination. It combines sentimentalism, emotionalism, and romanticism with objectivity, surety, and formal control: the embodiment of the Nabokovian aesthetic as we have explored it thus far.

The 999 lines of rhyming couplets begins with an introduction of the voice of New England poet John Shade:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure in the windowpane  
I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I  
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of death of the body and immortality of the soul is manifested immediately in the poem. While many critics see this poem as a kind of necessary launchpad to get us to the “real” art, the commentary, Nabokov describes Shade in an interview as leading “an intense inner existence, far removed from what you call a joke.” Nabokov wants us to read the poem as a serious work of art on its own. If we do so, the opening of the poem can be seen as a roadmap to the rest of the novel with the afterlife giving meaning to loss and ardor giving richness to life. This works for both Shade and Kinbote.

Shade’s poem is a portrait of the artist explaining his life and how he came to an understanding of the existence of the divine and a hereafter. In Canto One he tells us that, like

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33. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam, 1962), 1.1-4.

many young scholars in the modern world, his “God died young” and explains how he denied the existence of the hereafter:

There was a time in my demented youth  
When somehow I suspected that the truth  
About survival after death was known  
To every human being: I alone  
Knew nothing, and a great conspiracy  
Of books and people hid the truth from me <sup>34</sup>

But there are numerous examples of Shade uncovering answers about the divine. This example occurs when he and his wife are walking home together the night their daughter commits suicide:  
Life is a message scribbled in the dark.

Anonymous.

Espied on a pine’s bark  
As we were walking home the day she died,  
An empty emerald case, squat and frog-eyed,  
Hugging the trunk; <sup>35</sup>

The “emerald case,” a symbol for the resurrection he seeks—the case remaining from the metamorphosed, earthbound, ugly caterpillar (his poor daughter) turned into a free flying, beautiful butterfly. In Canto Three Shade reacts to the loss of his daughter with more questions about the existence of God and a hereafter through the pseudo-scientific inquiries of the Institute for Preparation for the Hereafter (IPH). What drives the point home occurs when Shade has a near-death experience and comes to what he calls “hope.” This hope lies in an understanding seen earlier in the poems we examined: that the eternal search for a key or ordering principle to the divine lies in the world around us:

...not text, but texture; not the dream  
But topsy-turvical coincidence,  
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.  
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find  
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind  
Of correlated pattern in the game <sup>36</sup>

While man is looking at “text,” he is surrounded by the “texture” of the divine. While man is busy looking for an order that corresponds to his reason, the random whimsical order of the divine is everywhere around him:

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34. *Ibid.*, line 167-172.

35. *Ibid.*, line 235-239.

36. *Ibid.*, line 808-813.

It did not matter who they were. No sound,  
No furtive light came from their involute  
Abode, but three they were aloof and mute,  
Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns  
To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns;  
Kindling a long life here, extinguishing  
A short one there; killing a Balkan king;  
Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-  
Flying airplane to plummet from the sky  
And strike a farmer dead; hiding my keys,  
Glasses or pipe. Coordinating these  
Events and objects with remote events  
And vanished objects. Making ornaments  
Of accidents and possibilities.<sup>37</sup>

If man can see the texture of the world and see that “accidents and possibilities” might be just “ornaments” on the larger order, then man has touched the divine; if the artist can, on a smaller scale, coordinate events and objects with his own sense of order and pattern, he will create great art.

Canto Four is Shade’s homily to order. He has come to embrace the order in the world around him and its mirror in the creative work he does:

A feeling of fantastically planned  
Richly rhymed life.

I feel I understand  
Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight,  
And if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine  
Which I suspect is an iambic line  
I’m reasonably sure that we survive  
And that my darling somewhere is alive,  
As I am reasonably sure that I

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37. *Ibid.*, *line* 816-829.

Shall wake at six tomorrow....<sup>38</sup>

Nabokov, like the English Romantics, sees the creative act as a parallel with the divine and sees the world around him as filled with evidence of the creative Almighty's work.

The other evidence of the presence of the divine in *Pale Fire* is love. Shade's love for his lost daughter is one obvious level—it leads to the creation of the poem itself: a divine creation. His wife Sybil is also obvious—his poetry oozes with remembrance of her in youth, with sentiment about her in the present and her love, and love in general, is a divine gift. Ironically the parasitic Kinbote—the character who uses Shade's poem as an opportunity for a solipsistic vision of himself—also loves Shade and sees the divine in him:

I experienced a grand sense of wonder whenever I looked at him . . . I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse.<sup>39</sup>

And in fact sees the divine directly in Shade's creative process:

I could distinguish the expression of passionate interest, rapture and reverence, with which he followed the images wording themselves in his mind, and I knew that whatever my agnostic friend might say in denial, at that moment Our Lord was with him.<sup>40</sup>

So love brings us to the divine—whether the poetic genius or the insane commentator, love is the salvation. In this quotation the connection between love and the divine is clear. So too is the connection between the divine action of creation and the “rapture and reverence” of Shade creating his poetry.

So too with *Lolita*. As Rowe points out in *Nabokov's Spectral World*, Charlotte's ghost tries to drive Humbert away from *Lolita* early in the novel when he is obsessed with having sex with her. In what can be argued as the apothotic moment for Humbert, Charlotte “rises from the grave” as Humbert sees, through the lens of love, *Lolita* clearly for the first time in his life and it is not his creation he sees and loves.

There she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her gooseflesh white arms, and her shallow ears and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my *Lolita*!), hopelessly worn at seventeen...I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else.<sup>41</sup>

And his love, like all love, ultimately is transformative. It makes even beastly Humbert think beyond the physical to the metaphysical. He sees a broken image of a nymphet and thinks of a love beyond “anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth” and then states:

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38. *Ibid.*, 1. 969-982.

39. *Ibid.*, 27.

40. *Ibid.*, 89.

41. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 279.

I hope you will love your baby... That husband of yours, I hope, will always treat you well, because otherwise my specter shall come at him like black smoke, like a demented giant... I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art.<sup>42</sup>

The ghostly referent is clear as is the parallel between art and the divine. At the end, Humbert feels love, compassion, and tenderness for Lolita. There are critics who argue that the end is not an apotheosis for Humbert and there are numerous “proofs” that it is all ironic. However, there is one clearly cathartic moment on the penultimate page of the novel. Humbert has killed Quilty and is wretching at the side of the road looking down at the order and “geometry” of the valley below. He hears the “melody of children at play.” Earlier in the novel, this sound would have had an ironic and clearly carnal import for the reader. However, Humbert’s conclusion from this sound is something different in kind from the rest of the novel:

I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for the background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.<sup>43</sup>

This is a cathartic moment where Humbert has not only realized his love for the real Lolita, but also that he has stolen and destroyed her childhood and destroyed a kind of order or “concord” that is part of what he calls the “sounds of one nature.” At this moment he sees that as an artist and a madman he has disordered the ordered creation of a greater artist.

So, the novels, like the poetry and prose, while demonstrating tremendous technical skill and innovation, are not examples of sterile art. Instead, all Vladimir Nabokov’s work is of a piece. It is all paradigmatic of technical brilliance but is also indicative of the old-fashioned desire for human value and felt life and *potustoronnost*—what Nabokov called “beauty plus pity.” Nabokov’s great achievement is to fully realize art alongside ardor.

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42. Ibid., 311.

43. Ibid., 308.

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