

INVERTED REALITY IN NABOKOV'S *LOOK AT THE HARLEQUINS!*

D. BARTON JOHNSON

University of California at Santa Barbara

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov's last novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, is cast in the form of the autobiography of the distinguished Anglo-Russian writer Vadim Vadimovich N. (b. 1899).¹ Composed in the aftermath of a mysterious paralytic stroke, VV's memoir is no ordinary one and is perhaps best described in the words of the narrator himself:

In this memoir my wives and my books are interlaced monogrammatically like some sort of watermark or *ex libris* design; and in writing this oblique autobiography—oblique, because dealing mainly not with pedestrian history but with the mirages of romantic and literary matters—I consistently try to dwell as lightly as inhumanly possible on the evolution of my mental illness. Yet Dementia is one of the characters in my story. (p. 85)

We shall see that Dementia is not merely “one of the characters” in the story but that she is the leading lady. The narrator's works and women (apart from the last) are solely the offspring of his Dementia, who is both Mistress and Muse. The autobiography deals quite literally with “mirages of romantic and literary matters.”

The narrator, Prince VV, is the putative son of an aristocratic Russian couple who abandon him to the care of relatives in consequence of the frenetic pace of their divorces, remarriages, re-divorces, and so on. Their neurasthenic, dreamy son is left in the custody of a grand-aunt, who resides on one of the family estates called Marevo, a Russian word appropriately meaning “mirage.” It is this aunt (apparently fictive) who advises her morose seven- or eight-year-old charge

to "Look at the harlequins! . . . Play! Invent the world! Invent Reality!" (pp. 8-9).

Following the Bolshevik revolution VV shoots a Red Army sentry, steals across the Polish border, and makes his way to London where, funds soon exhausted, he discovers a patron, the Anglophile Count Nikifor Nikodimovich Starov. The Count, who had "graced several great Embassies during a spacious span of international intercourse," is a quondam lover of VV's "beautiful and bizarre" mother (pp. 10-11). In fact we shall learn that Count Starov, by virtue of his "spacious span of international intercourse," is the progenitor of several of the characters of *LATH*. He is also the head of an anti-Soviet spy network, the White Cross, that passes itself off as a charitable organization for refugees.

Thanks to the beneficence of Count Starov, his protégé is able to attend Cambridge where, in his final term, the spring of 1922, he is invited to the newly-inherited Riviera villa of his classmate, Ivor Black. Here he meets Ivor's twenty-one-year-old sister, Iris, who becomes the memoirist's first wife. The parentage of the fond brother and sister is no less murky than that of VV himself. Their mother, Iris says, was "American and horrible" (p. 29) while the businessman father had "good connections" (p. 177)—specifically (it later develops) in London diplomatic circles. This becomes strangely portentous when VV and Iris, newly married unbeknownst to the Count, visit him at his nearby summer villa on the Côte d'Azur. Upon being introduced to Iris (whom he assumes to be Vadim's fiancée) the old Count gazes at her for a time and then somewhat ambiguously tells his protégé that his fiancée "is as beautiful as your wife will be" (p. 49). After Iris leaves the room to have tea in "an adjacent alcove (illuminated by a resplendent portrait by Serov, 1896, of the notorious beauty, Mme. de Blagidze, in Caucasian costume)" (p. 50), the newly enlightened Count asks VV his wife's maiden name. Slowly shaking his head, he then inquires after the name of Iris's mother. Vadim's reply is greeted by the same response and the conversation moves on to talk of the couple's financial future.

VV and Iris move to Paris, where during the seven years of their marriage the narrator embarks upon his literary career, rapidly publishing three volumes in Russian—*Tamara* (1925), *Pawn Takes Queen* (1927) and *Plenilune* (1929).² Iris, not knowing Russian, is somewhat excluded from her husband's literary milieu, and it is through her unsuccessful efforts to learn Russian that she becomes the (unwilling?) object of the amorous attentions of Lieutenant Wladimir

Starov-Blagidze, the husband of her tutoress. The lieutenant, VV learns, is another "protégé" of Count Starov (at whose funeral the two half-brothers first met as pallbearers). Starov-Blagidze, three or four years senior to VV, is apparently the result of a liaison between Count Starov and the "notorious St. Petersburg courtesan" (p. 11) depicted in the above-mentioned Serov portrait. The lieutenant, already half-mad from a Russian Civil War head wound and now spurned by Iris, runs amok and on the night of April 23, 1930 shoots Iris and himself in the presence of VV and Ivor, who like his sister may well be yet another of the mysterious Count Starov's offspring (p. 169).

After his wife's death VV submerges himself in his writing, finishing his fourth and fifth Russian novels, *Camera Lucida* and *The Red Top Hat*. The narrator meets his second wife, Annette (Anna Ivanovna Blagovo), when he hires the long-necked Botticellian beauty as the typist for his longest, last and best Russian novel, *Podarok otchizne* (*Gift for the Fatherland*), later known in English as *The Dare*. Despite her inept typing, her thoroughly Philistine tastes and her frigidity, VV is so strongly attracted to her that he enters into his second and longest marriage. In 1939, VV, who has now completed his first English language novel, *See under Real*, emigrates with Annette to the United States where he joins the faculty of Quirn University (Quirn = kernel = Cornell). Here VV adds to his modest reputation as an English novelist with *Esmeralda and Her Parandrus* (1942), *Dr. Olga Reprin* (1946), and the short story collection *Exile from Mayda* (1947). Meanwhile, Annette gives birth to a daughter, Isabel, on New Year's Day 1942. The marriage, never more than marginally adequate, comes under the blighting influence of their ex-Soviet landlady Ninel (an anagram of Lenin), who befriends and carries off Annette and the four-year-old Isabel to her lake-side cottage while VV dallies with Dolly von Borg. The brief affair with Dolly, who successfully schemes to break up her lover's marriage, is the long-delayed consummation of a series of furtive fondlings committed by VV with the compliant eleven-year-old Dolly while he had been a house guest of her Russian émigré grandparents in Paris in the early thirties.

The covert kinship pattern that characterizes VV's first marriage is quite possibly, if obscurely, also present in the second. Anna Blagovo is the daughter of a Tsarist army surgeon, who in 1907 married a provincial belle in the Volgan town of Kineshma a few miles from one of VV's most romantic estates—presumably Marevo (p. 112). It may well occur to the reader that Count Starov, the long-time

lover of VV's mother, was quite possibly a visitor to the estate and its environs. Further, there are hints that Annette herself may have been acquainted with the late Lieutenant Starov-Blagidze. This becomes apparent in her responses to VV's questions at the time of his proposal. Although the status-conscious Annette hesitantly agrees to marry her titled suitor, she finds him strange—unlike other men she has met. In answer to VV's query as to whom she had met: "trepanners? trombonists? astronomers?" she blandly replies "mostly military men . . . officers of Wrangel's army . . ." (p. 108). That Lieutenant Starov-Blagidze, who had served under Wrangel, has been subject to trepanning (possibly at the hands of Annette's father) is quite probable, for we know he suffers a "terrifying tic" as a result of his head wound (p. 58). Still more curious is VV's choice of "astronomist," for the initial syllable is the Latin root for "star," while the first five letters form an anagram corresponding to the first five letters of the name Starov.³ In short, Anna Blagovo, like Iris Black, may be the half-sister, as well as the wife, of the narrator. Again like Iris, she is (possibly) acquainted with Lieutenant Starov.

In 1953, some seven years after Annette flees VV, she and Ninel perish in a flood and Isabel, now eleven and a half and called Bel, returns to live with her father. For two blissful years Bel and her adoring father are inseparable companions, spending their summers idyllically wandering from motel to motel in the Far West. The intimacy of father and daughter as well as brilliant Bel's precocity lead to ugly rumors which Professor N. seeks to counter by marrying Louise Adamson, the fast young widow of the former head of the Quirn English Department. Beautiful Louise, a sexually and financially avaricious celebrity collector, is all too ready to wed the novelist, who is reportedly the leading candidate for "the most prestigious prize in the world" (p. 175). She is, however, equally quick to cool when the prize is not forthcoming. Her relationship with Bel is abysmal and the daughter is soon packed off to a Swiss finishing school from which she eventually elopes with an American student who defects to Russia. VV finds solace for the loss of Bel by reliving their life and travels in the transmuted form of what will become his most successful (and sensational) novel, *A Kingdom by the Sea* (1962).

Louise, VV's third wife, who is clearly the least loved of the narrator's major innamoratas, is also less deeply implicated than her predecessors in the incestuous network of the author's life. She too, however, is not without family ties to her husband's tangled past.

Shortly before his marriage proposal VV spends an evening with a number of guests including Louise and her cousin Lady Morgain, the fat and fiftyish daughter of a former American Ambassador to England (p. 175). Fay Morgain informs VV that she had been acquainted with Iris Black in London around 1919 when she herself was "a starry-eyed American gal" (p. 177). The possibility presents itself that Louise's cousin was also acquainted with Iris's (and VV's) assumed real father, the former diplomat Count Starov. This is also suggested by her comment that she was "*starry-eyed*" in a sentence that is at strong variance with the rest of her mannered speech (p. 177). Thus Louise too may be a marginal member of the Count Starov's consanguineous brood and, conceivably, it is the remoteness of her kinship to VV that, in part, accounts for the relative coolness of the narrator's affection for her.

VV meets his fourth and final grand love in September 1969 on the day when the now notorious author submits his resignation to the overjoyed administration of Quirn University. As VV is leaving campus, a bulky folder under his arm spills and he is aided in gathering up its contents by a young woman coming from the library.⁴ As the girl helps VV collect his scattered papers she inquires about Bel (now in Russia). The narrator suddenly remembers her name and "in a photic flash of celestial color" sees her and her schoolmate Bel "looking like twins, silently hating each other, both in blue coats and white hats, waiting to be driven somewhere by Louise" (p. 226). This young woman, who is throughout referred to only as "you"⁵ and who shares Bel's birthdate (January 1, 1942), becomes VV's lover during his final year at Quirn while he writes his last novel, *Ardis*. At the end of the academic year they move to the Continent.

VV is markedly reluctant to speak of the details of his relationship with "you" in his autobiographical account, saying that "Reality would only be adulterated" (p. 226). In consequence we learn very little about the background and identity of VV's last love. She speaks a "lovely, elegant Russian" (p. 226), has studied Turgenev in Oxford and Bergson in Geneva and has "family ties with good old Quirn and Russian New York" (p. 228). She also knows butterflies and her lover's complete *oeuvre*. The question we are approaching is, of course, that of her place, if any, in the intricate network of Count Starov's progeny. The only clue to her identity is connected with her Russian background. This, together with her family association with Quirn, points to Marion Noteboke, the daughter of Professor Noteboke, the head of the Quirn Russian Department (p. 163).⁶ Marion,

however, seems to be slightly too old to be “you,” who is known to be eleven years and four-odd months of age in May 1953 when Marion is described as being twelve (p. 162). Also against Marion’s candidacy is VV’s passing reference to her (circa 1954) as “a depraved and vulgar nymphet” who carries tales of Bel’s relationship with her widowed father home to Mrs. Noteboke (p. 173). In sum it must be concluded that VV’s final love, “you,” remains both anonymous and outside the Starov family orbit. This assumption is strengthened by VV’s persistent association of “you” and “Reality,” an association strikingly absent from his account of his previous loves.⁷

It is a curious and significant fact that at least two of VV’s wives have the letter sequence “BL” in their names: Iris Black & Anna Blagovo. The writer’s much beloved daughter Bel also enters into this alphabetic series. The family name of Louise is unknown but one of the names from her past is *Blanc* (p. 181). Also of note is that Starov’s other son (and Iris Black’s lover) bears his mother’s family name *Blagidze* and that, on occasion, the narrator refers to himself as *Blonsky* (p. 232). All of these characters are related to Count Starov and it is their incestuous consanguinity that is denoted by the alphabetic emblem “BL” in their names.⁸ The sound sequence is, moreover, not randomly chosen. In answer to a query about the theme of incest in *Ada*, Nabokov replied: “Actually, I don’t give a damn for incest one way or the other. I merely like the ‘bl’ sound in siblings, bloom, blue, bliss, sable.”⁹ “BL” is Nabokov’s private emblem for the incest theme. That VV’s last love is in no way associated with the “BL” incest emblem is additional evidence of her unique reality in his “autobiography.”

It is now time to consider the other “real” character in VV’s autobiography—Dementia, which is the source of the other “characters.” Dementia appropriately attends both the beginning and ending of VV’s tale of love and prose. Indeed, it predates the narrative which begins with the youthful narrator’s meeting his first wife. In the memoirist’s earliest reference to himself—as a child of seven or eight—he already harbors “the secrets of a confined madman” (p. 8), something he in fact becomes at various times in his life. At nine or ten, he says, his morbid childhood terrors were supplanted “by more abstract and trite anxieties (problems of infinity, eternity, identity, and so forth)” (p. 7) which he believes to have saved his reason. This belief is, as we shall see, open to question, for it is these more abstract anxieties of space, time, and identity that seem to be at the root of his psychotic episodes. In their acute phase these episodes last from

several weeks to several years and seven are severe enough to require hospitalization.

VV's mental condition, vaguely described as "a nervous complaint that skirted insanity" (p. 5) and as "flayed consciousness" (p. 31), displays a number of symptoms among which the more mundane are severe headaches, dizziness, neuralgia and confusion about his surroundings.¹⁰ Attacks are sometimes occasioned by a faint ray of light that awakens the sleeper into a state of madness. Along this narrow beam descends a row of bright dots "with dreadful meaningful intervals between them" (p. 16). We shall see that sanity ultimately reestablishes itself in a not dissimilar pattern.

The most peculiar manifestation of the writer's madness is his inability to visualize left/right reversals. The problem is entirely psychological, for VV is physically able to reverse his tracks and the corresponding vista without difficulty. It is the mental effort of imagining the left/right reversal of vista that accompanies any such about-face that induces stress so acute that VV is literally immobilized. He likens the effort of such inversions to trying to shift the world on its axis (p. 236). The "paralysis motif" is prefigured in VV's account of earlier fits of total cramp while swimming—fits which he describes as "the physical counterpart of lightning insanity" (pp. 36-37). Mental transpositions of any sort induce severe trauma for the narrator. So acute, for example, is VV's distress arising from the change of languages entailed in the composition of his first English-language novel that it "almost led to the dementia paralytica that I had feared since youth" (p. 122).¹¹ It is, however, the purely spatial dimension of his aberration, the inability to translate mentally left into right (and right into left) that most troubles VV. So obsessed is he with this seemingly inconsequential aspect of his mental state that he feels honor bound to confess it—to the exclusion of the seemingly more serious aspects of his illness—to each of his four brides-to-be.¹² These set scenes have an almost ritualistic quality.

Vadim Vadimovich's psychological malaise is rooted in his troubled sense of dual identity. He is haunted by the feeling that he is a pale shadow, an inferior variant, of another vastly more gifted Anglo-Russian writer. On one level the plot of *LATH* consists of the accumulation of evidence that this is so. Although the ultimate prototype is, of course, Nabokov himself, it is important to understand that the "other" author is a Nabokovian persona (and *not* Nabokov, the author of *LATH*) who is the shadowy original of whom Vadim Vadimovich is the flawed copy.¹³ The reader must regard VV's

statements about his identity with suspicion, for VV is yet another example of Nabokov's use of the unreliable narrator. A telling example occurs in the narrator's contradictory statements about his father. Early in the narrative VV notes he was raised by a grand-aunt (upon whose reality he immediately casts doubt) and saw his parents only "infrequently" due to their frenzied cycles of divorce and remarriage (p. 9). This "infrequently" is a considerable overstatement, for later VV avers that his father, Vadim, a reactionary gambler and rake nicknamed Demon, has died in a duel following a card table fracas in Deauville some six months before the narrator's (and Nabokov's) birth in April of 1899 (pp. 95-96).¹⁴ Thus VV could never have seen his "official" father. Such contradictions (quite apart from the previous strong insinuation that Count Starov is VV's father) are among those that must lead us to question the veracity of the whole of the narrator's account of his life.

The name of the narrator remains obscure throughout his autobiography. In the London psychiatrist's report of his case, the patient is identified as "Mr. N. a Russian nobleman" although, to VV's intense irritation, the doctor lumps his case history with that of "another" patient, a Mr. V.S., whom the reader (but not the narrator) might reasonably associate with Nabokov's Russian pen name, Vladimir Sirin (p. 15). At a later point the tipsy narrator rhetorically addresses himself as Prince Vadim Blonsky (p. 232) but shortly thereafter disavows the surname as a false one used for a surreptitious trip to Russia in search of his daughter (p. 249). His Cambridge friend, Ivor Black, once refers to him as "McNab" because he resembles an actor of that name (p. 7) and on a later occasion calls him Vivian (p. 43)—the latter evoking for the reader Nabokov's own sometime anagrammatic pen names of Vivian Calmbrood and Vivian Darkbloom.¹⁵

The narrator's unease about his name and identity is, of course, symptomatic of his aberrant mental condition which *au fond* seems to partake far more of schizophrenia than dementia paralytica. Even the most casual reader of Nabokov will have noted that most of VV's books, in title, content and serial order are transparent variants and blends of Nabokov's own novels. For example, Nabokov's *Kamera Obskura*, which becomes *Laughter in the Dark* in English, obviously underlies the mad narrator's *Camera Lucida* and its English counterpart *Slaughter in the Sun*. It is VV's unseen and nameless double who is obviously the source of the narrator's intuition that he is a "non-identical twin, a parody." He feels that a demon is forcing him to

impersonate "that other writer who was and would always be incomparably greater, healthier, and crueler than your obedient servant" (p. 89). This feeling is reinforced in VV's conversation with Oksman, the Russian bookman, who mistakenly welcomes the author of *Camera Lucida* to his shop as the author of *Camera Obscura* and then blunders again by confusing VV's *Tamara* with a book entitled *Mary* (pp. 96-97).¹⁶ To make matters yet worse, the amiable bookseller reminisces that he twice saw the narrator's father, a prominent liberal member of the First Duma. On one occasion he was at the opera with his wife and two small boys and once again, later, at a public meeting where his English sang-froid and absence of gesticulation were in sharp contrast to that of his fiery friend Alexander Kerenski (p. 95).¹⁷ These recollections from the period between 1905 and 1917 postdate the 1898 death of VV's "father." Oksman, like a number of other characters, is seemingly party to the widespread confusion of the narrator with another, unnamed novelist.¹⁸ This so intensifies VV's lurking dread that "he might be permanently impersonating somebody living as a real being beyond the constellation of . . . tears and asterisks. . . ." that he returns home and makes a detailed record of the meeting in cipher (pp. 96-97). He even contemplates repatterning his entire life: abandoning his art, taking up chess, becoming a lepidopterist, or making a scholarly Russian translation of *Paradise Lost* that would cause "hacks to shy and asses to kick" (p. 97). Realizing, however, that only his writing, his "endless re-creation of my fluid self" (p. 97) keeps him "more or less" sane, he finally contents himself with dropping his *nom de plume*, V. Irisin, in favor of his real (but unrevealed) name. V. Irisin, of course, evokes Nabokov's Russian-language pseudonym, V. Sirin, the initials of which we remarked in the London psychiatrist's report.

In spite of this shift from pseudonym to real name, the narrator continues to be plagued by his shadowy nemesis. Some dozen years later while motor touring in the American Far West, VV is overcome by a "dream sensation of having come empty-handed—without what? A gun? A wand? This I dared not probe lest I wound the raw fell under my thin identity" (p. 156). The same page also contains an oblique reference to butterflies and it is obviously a butterfly net that VV's empty hand longs to enclasp.¹⁹ The wonder-working wand is also, however, the omnipresent symbol of the autobiography's title motif, the Harlequin, the madcap prankster of the *commedia dell'arte*—another of the guises of the mysterious double. The harlequin relates to the novel's theme in various ways. In the injunction of VV's grand-

aunt, it is a metaphor for art that sets the hero on his literary career. On another level, it is a pious visual metaphor for the narrator's schizophrenia. This is most explicit in the description of his recovery from his psychotic, paralytic seizure. Tactile sensation returns to his body in a precise pattern of left/right opposition. Patches of tactile symmetry lead VV to perceive his skin as "that of a leopard painted by a meticulous lunatic from a broken home" (pp. 242-43). This is obviously the harlequin pattern depicted on the novel's dust jacket and signals the final integration of Vadim Vadimovich and "Vladimir Vladimirovich."

There is yet a larger dimension in which the harlequin figure evokes the hero and the theme of *LATH*. After the fortuitous death of Annette, VV prepares a room for Bel stocking the bookcase with "Keats, Yeats, Coleridge, Blake, and four Russian poets" although he realizes that the child may well prefer comic books "to my dear bespangled mimes and their wands of painted lath" (p. 163). The Russian poets are unnamed, but a few pages later Bel's features are compared "to certain prosodic miracles" in Blake and Blok (p. 168). The pairing is instructive in several senses. For one, the two mystic poets contain the emblematic "BL" in their names. More important is that Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921), the leading Russian Symbolist poet and a particular favorite of Nabokov, wrote a number of works invoking the harlequin figure. Perhaps the best known of these is *Balaganchik (The Puppet Show)*, a symbolist play derived from the commedia dell'arte form, in which Pierrot loses his bride-to-be, Columbine (who also represents Death), to the mocking Harlequin. At the end of the play Harlequin leaps through a golden window into what he thinks to be reality but which proves to be the backstage of the theater where Columbine/Death awaits. The play's theme would seem to be the ambiguous nature of reality and the relationship of death to that reality—subjects central to Nabokov's *LATH*. The play also touches upon the double theme in a scene in which one of the lovers accuses his bewitching beloved of leading him into a darkness whence a "black double" beckons him. In the 1903 poem "The Double" ("Dvojniki"), Blok specifically associates the double theme with a twinned harlequin figure who addresses his song to Columbine. It seems not unlikely that Nabokov had Blok's play in mind as a subtext gently echoing the major themes of his novel.²⁰ In a more general sense two further aspects of the commedia dell'arte find some resonance in *LATH*. In some of the plays Columbine is the daughter of Harlequin, while in others she is his sweetheart. It is also of possible

relevance that Harlequin is traditionally invisible to some of the other commedia characters.

Vadim Vadimovich's sense of duality persists nearly to the end of the narrative, even manifesting itself at a particularly radiant moment in his life shortly after he has moved to Switzerland with his last love. The seventy-one-year-old author has just completed the fair copy of his last novel, *Ardis*. Louise has been blackmailed into agreeing to a divorce and VV is contemplating a proposal of marriage to his new love. Before doing so, however, he feels once again honor bound to confess his bizarre inability to mentally invert right and left. To accomplish this painful chore he hits upon the idea of giving "you" an early manuscript chapter of *Ardis* in which the hero discusses his own (and VV's) aberration. While his love reads his "confession," VV goes for a pre-prandial stroll. He is in a rare euphoric state that nothing can mar, not even, he says, "the hideous suspicion that *Ardis*, my most private book, soaked in reality, saturated with sun flecks, might be an unconscious imitation of another's unearthly art, that suspicion might come later" (p. 234). And indeed it does. VV reaches the far end of his stroll, stands before a low parapet, and gazes at the setting sun. As he attempts to turn about and retrace his steps, he finds he cannot: "To make that movement would mean rolling the world around on its axis . . ." (p. 236). VV's psychological inability has become a physical reality. The dementia paralytica he has feared from youth has overcome him.

VV awakes in a hospital, his mind racing but with his body and senses all but lifeless. As he gathers his thoughts he first tries to establish his own identity. He is fairly certain that his first name *cum* patronymic is Vadim Vadimovich but is troubled by the thought that in rapid, indistinct speech the name Vladimir Vladimirovich degenerates into something very like Vadim Vadimych (the slurred form of Vadim Vadimovich). Of his family name the narrator is at first certain only that it contains the letters *N* and *B*. After trying and rejecting several possibilities such as Nebesnyy, Nabledrin, Nablidze, Naborcroft, Bonidze, and Blonsky, his "sonorous surname" finally bursts into his consciousness (pp. 248-49).

The questions of identity and reality are closely coupled. The theme of "reality" in *LATH* is, in turn, closely linked with VV's nameless fourth love. The narrator even declines to identify her or speak of their relationship for fear that it would contaminate "the reality of your radiance." "Yet," he writes, "'reality' is the key word here; and the gradual perception of that reality was nearly fatal to me"

(p. 226). As the reader knows, it is just as VV wishes to go back to his newly enlightened love with his proposal of marriage that his near-fatal seizure occurs. As VV emerges from his death-like coma and at last recalls his surname, the door of his hospital room opens and he becomes aware of "a slow infinitely slow sequence of suspension dots in diamond type. I emitted a bellow of joy, and Reality entered" (p. 250). Reality in the person of his ideal love has entered the room.

The identity of the narrator is that of the nameless "other" author who is the prototype of which VV and his books are flawed copies. The identity of this original has long been obvious to the reader. It has remained secret only to the mad narrator who has vaguely sensed but not known the truth. It is only during VV's mysterious paralysis that his speeding mind has attained certain insights from its brief intimacy with non-being and "problems of identity have been, if not settled, at least set" (p. 239).

Vadim Vadimovich is now consciously aware of both halves of his dual schizoid being. Vadim Vadimovich and "Vladimir Vladimirovich," mad and sane, left and right, have been reintegrated. If we adopt this interpretation, and it seems fully warranted, then a new question poses itself. The narrator is now whole and between his seventy-first and seventy-fourth years composes *LATH*. This "autobiography" is, however, patently fantastic. If VV is no longer mad, why does he write a largely fantastical autobiography? There would seem to be only one perspective from which all of the pieces fall into place. *LATH* is an account of the *delusional* world of the narrator during his existence as Vadim Vadimovich told entirely and consistently from that point of view. It is VV's life within "the constellation of tears and asterisks" that bespeaks the fantastic familial galaxy of Count Starov (pp. 96-97, my emphasis).

In the fictional universe of Nabokov's *LATH*, there exists a Nabokovian persona who shares much, but far from all, of the biographical background of the real, extra-fictional Nabokov and who has written a series of books—*Mary*, *Camera Obscura*, *The Gift*, *Lolita*, *Ada*, etc. This Nabokovian persona whom we have termed "Vladimir Vladimirovich" suffers from periods of schizophrenia in which he is Vadim Vadimovich, the author of *Tamara*, *Camera Lucida*, *The Dare*, *A Kingdom by the Sea*, *Ardis*, etc. None of these works exist outside of the mind of the mad narrator. They are simply distorted variants of the real works written by the sane half of the narrator's personality—"Vladimir Vladimirovich." The other characters know that the narrator is mad and has periods in which he is the

"other" personality. The Stepanovs, for example, with whom VV stays after one of his breakdowns, refer to him as mad (pp. 87-88). Oksman, the book dealer, also knows this and humors VV by pretending that his reference to *Camera Lucida* as *Camera Obscura* is a slip of the tongue.

Vadim's wives and lovers (with the exception of the last) are no more real than his books. The unreality of this aspect of Vadim's life is attested to by the gross improbability of the fiction that the multifarious bastards of the mythical Count Starov meet, mate, and murder. Still more implausible is that their diverse names all include the emblematic "BL." The almost ritualistic patterning in the presentation of the women is strikingly artificial. With minor variations, three events must precede each new relationship. The obligatory butterfly must appear. There must be a scene in which the nude VV stands before a mirror and takes stock before making his declarations to his future brides.²¹ Finally, there is the bizarre left/right confession which assumes a modicum of meaning only within the context of the narrator's schizophrenic dual identity. All this bespeaks the artifice of art rather than the chaos of reality or even fictional realism. Vadim's "autobiography" is so neatly patterned because it never happened. It is the product of his disordered (or possibly his over-ordered) imagination during periods in which "Vladimir Vladimirovich" is supplanted by Vadim Vadimovich.

Look at the Harlequins! is the culmination of a series of Nabokov novels in which a schizoid narrator creates his own fantasy world and superimposes it upon the "real" world inhabited by the other characters. In each novel there is an "unreliable narrator" who is unaware of his split identity. The first major use of this device is Nabokov's 1930 novella *The Eye* (*Sogljadataj*) in which the hero early on attempts to kill himself after a crushing humiliation. When he recovers he believes he is a ghost who is dispassionately observing the activities of a strange young man who has no personality of his own but who sees himself in the image of what he thinks to be the impression others form of him. He is an insubstantial collage of disparate mirror images. Like VV he endlessly re-creates himself. The two components of the narrator's personality are treated throughout (up to the denouement) as different characters represented in the first and third person respectively. Only at the end is the common identity of the two characters subtly made explicit to the reader. The 1936 novel *Despair* (*Otchajanje*) is yet another treatment of our theme. This mirror-ridden work involves a schizoid, nearly bankrupt, chocolate manufacturer who,

upon finding a tramp whom he considers to be his look-alike, decides to switch identities with the vagrant, kill him, and have his wife collect the insurance money so that they might start a new life. The flaw that is apparent to everyone except the mad narrator is that the tramp does not resemble him in the least—a fact that is gradually but inadvertently revealed to the reader by the “unreliable narrator.” Nabokov’s most elaborate treatment of the double theme is *Pale Fire* (1962), in which mad Botkin (Kinbote) creates not merely a new identity but an entire kingdom.²² Nabokov’s oft-quoted dictum “there are no ‘real’ doubles in my novels,” can be taken at face value only if a very narrow interpretation is put upon the literary concept of the double.²³ It clearly underlies the works in question as well as *Look at the Harlequins!*

There are substantial differences as well as similarities among the above-cited works. In *Despair* and *Pale Fire* the mad narrators remain unaware of their obsessions and write their accounts in part as screeds of protest against the world’s failure to recognize their genius. In *The Eye* and *LATH* the divided selves of the protagonists are ultimately unified, but their tales are written as if seen only through the eyes of their mad “others.” The events of the narratives are set in the unreal (or, perhaps better, less real) worlds of the deluded minds of the narrators.

These novels may be opposed to those of a second group that display a very different kind of duality. In the latter the protagonists are not mad, not schizoid, but rather live in distorted anti-worlds, i.e., the world rather than the hero is schizoid. Here we may allude to *Invitation to a Beheading* (*Priglasenie na kazn'*, 1938), *Bend Sinister* (1947) and *Ada* (1969).²⁴ The first group presents an inverted reality in an individual mind as it exists within a single “real” world inhabited by the other characters; the second group centers on an inverted reality in which the entire fictional universe of all the characters is paired with another, unseen, but dimly intuited “real” universe. The factor uniting the two groups is that each type entails an “inverted reality.”

Nabokov’s last novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, belongs to the first group. In it the schizoid hero has taken the advice of his invented great aunt in the creation of his “oblique autobiography.” In obeying the injunction to “Look at the harlequins! . . . Invent Reality!” the narrator is looking at the left-handed world of Vadim Vadimovich’s “motley madness” as it is set within the right-handed world of “Vladimir Vladimirovich.” VV has invented a “reality” through inversion.

NOTES

1. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974. All page citations are to this edition. More general references are by Part and Chapter number, e.g., VI, 4. Since the surname of the narrator is obscure we shall adopt the convention of referring to him by the initials of his first name and patronymic, VV. We shall follow Nabokov's own convention of referring to *Look at the Harlequins!* by its punning acronym LATH. The lath, bat, or wand are fixed attributes of the commedia dell'arte figure of the harlequin. Information on the harlequin figure is drawn chiefly from Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (New York: Dover, 1966).

2. All of VV's books have patent connections with those of Nabokov. For an able discussion of this aspect of the novel, see Richard Patteson, "Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins!*: Endless Re-creation of the Self," *Russian Literature Tri-Quarterly*, 14 (Winter, 1976), 84-98.

3. The suspicion is strengthened by the fact that Nabokov made a similar play on this same root in *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam, 1962), where the character Starover Blue is a Professor of Astronomy (pp. 56 and 256).

4. VV also meets his earlier lover Dolly as she comes from a library (p. 136-37). The narrator's loves and books are indeed "interlaced monogrammatically like . . . [an] *ex libris* design" (p. 85).

5. Nabokov uses this same device in *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam, 1966) where he occasionally addresses an unknown person as "you." His wife is never explicitly referred to in person or by name in the text but if the reader checks in the index under "Nabokov, Vera Evseevna, born Slonim," the cited pages are those mentioning the mysterious "you."

6. A name evoking the writer's notebook and, more certainly, Botkin/Kinbote of *Pale Fire*.

7. The textual associations of "you" and "Reality" will be summarized shortly.

8. There is one further possible member of Count Starov's ubiquitous clan. It is VV's "Russian Zoilus," Demian Basilevski, who follows the narrator from Paris to New York where he promptly founds a Russian-language journal (p. 130). Basilevski could, in principle, be yet another offspring of Count Starov as well as the father of VV's last love who reportedly has ties with "Russian New York." Basilevski, however, is not known to have either a daughter or connections with "good old Quirn."

9. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 122-23. Although Nabokov does not include it, the word "blood" (in the sense of consanguinity) also belongs in this series and might well underlie it.

10. These confusions persist even in VV's recollection of certain scenes many years later. See, for example, the account of a visit to a French psychiatrist's office which blends surreally (and perhaps drunkenly) with a house party and a dentist's waiting

room (pp. 17-19). Similarly, a social gathering thirty-odd years later, also preceded by one of VV's "black headaches," seems to take place at two different locations simultaneously (pp. 175-82).

11. VV twice refers to his illness as "dementia paralytica" (p. 122 and p. 242) and also, skeptically, refers to a medical diagnosis of his final attack as "general paresis" (p. 239). Strictly speaking, these synonymous terms refer to a dread complication of syphilis involving inflammation and degeneration of the brain. Symptoms usually begin to appear from ten to twenty years after primary lesion and end in paralysis and death within three years. Although VV appears to be mad and his behavior sometimes displays such standard symptoms of dementia paralytica as megalomania, impaired memory, depression, paranoia, and hallucination (*Cecil Textbook of Medicine*, P. B. Beeson *et al.* [Philadelphia: Saunders, 1979]), it does not seem likely that his madness is syphilitic in origin since his attacks date from early childhood. Dementia paralytica is not congenital nor is the narrator's recovery from his final paralytic seizure consistent with such a diagnosis. It seems probable that VV's madness is not organic in origin and that Nabokov seized upon the terms as a matter of thematic convenience.

12. The confession scenes are as follows: Iris (Part I, 7); Annette (II, 7); Louise (IV, 4); "You" (VI, 2).

13. We shall refer to the Nabokovian persona as "Vladimir Vladimirovich" (in quotes) to distinguish him from Vadim Vadimovich, on the one hand, and Nabokov, on the other.

14. Vadim's "father" died on October 22, 1898. The six-month interval would place VV's birthdate in late April of 1899. That the exact date is April 23 (Nabokov's birthday) is strongly hinted in that VV goes out to a formal (birthday?) dinner on the night of 23 April 1939 when Iris is shot (p. 65).

15. Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 54. Another Cantabrigian link is VV's passing allusion to "one of his Cambridge Sweethearts, Violet McD., an experienced and compassionate virgin" (p. 28), who suggests the Violet of Nabokov's long, autobiographical work "A University Poem" (pp. 82-85).

16. The "double" episode with Oksman echoes another such situation with the Russian bookseller Weinstock in Nabokov's 1930 *The Eye* (New York: Phaedra, 1965), a novella that has strong thematic affinities with *LATH* (pp. 52-53, and p. 63).

17. Love for the opera and the "English style" of oratory are two of the attributes that Nabokov assigns to his father in *Speak, Memory* (pp. 178-79).

18. The narrator's second wife, Annette, mistakenly presents her parents with copies of "another man's novel because of some silly similarity of titles" (p. 101). Oleg Orlov, a minor émigré writer, who has turned Soviet agent and follows VV on his clandestine trip to Leningrad, confuses VV's *A Kingdom by the Sea* with a book not unlike *Lolita* (p. 218).

19. Butterflies, toward which VV (in contrast to lepidopterist Nabokov) professes

indifference, if not distaste (p. 34), form their own thematic sub-pattern in the narrator's story. They are at one point identified with the harlequin motif (p. 108) and appear in scenes depicting the onset of VV's love for three of his wives and also for Bel: Iris (pp. 34-36), Annette (pp. 108-09), "You" (p. 226), and Bel (p. 156 and p. 163). It is not by chance that Louise is missing from the pattern.

20. The possible relevance of Blok's *Balaganchik* to Nabokov's *LATH* was first pointed out to me by Professor Elizabeth Beaujour. Although Nabokov's general familiarity with Blok's *oeuvre* needs no documentation, it is of interest that *Balaganchik* was performed along with that author's *Neznakomka* (*The Unknown Woman*) in April 1914 at the Tenishev school in St. Petersburg. Nabokov was a student at the school. Aleksandr Blok, *Sochinenija v dvux tomach*, ed. Vl. Orlov (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo xudozhestvennoj literatury, 1955), I, 775-76. It is not known for certain whether the fifteen-year-old Nabokov attended the play, but he later remarked to his biographer Andrew Field that the only literary performances he attended at the school were those of Blok; Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 116. Nabokov borrowed the figure of Blok's *Unknown Woman* (*Neznakomka*) as the basis for a recurrent image of Lucette in his novel *Ada*.

21. These scenes are as follows: Iris (p. 31), Louise (p. 174), "You" (p. 227). The parallel "Annette" scene exists only in embryo on p. 88.

22. For a survey of critical opinions as to the "reality" of the various levels of *Pale Fire*, see my "The Index of Refraction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Russian Literature TriQuarterly*, No. 16 (1979), pp. 33-49.

23. Dabney Stuart, *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1978), p. 106.

24. For discussions of these novels touching on their "anti-world" aspect, see my "The Alpha and Omega of Nabokov's Prison-House of Language: Alphabetic Iconicism in *Invitation to a Beheading*," *Russian Literature*, 6, No. 4 (October, 1978), pp. 347-69; "The Scrabble Game in *Ada* or Taking Nabokov Clitorally," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 9, No. 2 (1982), 291-303; and "Don't Touch my Circles: The Two Worlds of Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*," *Delta* (Montpellier), 17 (1983), 33-52.