Contrapuntal Otherworldliness in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita, Speak, Memory* and *Pale Fire*

指導教授：周廷戎  Ting-Rong Chou
研究生：陳品含  Pin-Han Chen

中華民國一〇三年七月
國立中興大學外國語文學系研究所

碩士學位論文

題目： Contrapuntal Otherworldliness in Vladimir Nabokov’s

Lolita, Speak, Memory and Pale Fire

姓名： 陳品含 學號： 7098012011

經口試通過特此證明

論文指導教授 固延成

論文考試委員 貝格泰

中華民國 103 年 7 月 30 日
Acknowledgement

At this moment, after almost ten years, the initial magical thrill rising from my freshman spine can still be felt by the present me. This is the first feel, which leads me to finish this thesis on Vladimir Nabokov’s works, when I came across his *Lolita* in my freshman year. Over the span of almost ten year, I appreciate the luck I had to meet many intelligent professors in National Chi Nan University. Professor Chuang, Tzu-shiow, Professor Hung, Min-hsiou, Professor Lee, Cheng-chan, Professor Lee, Huei-lin, Professor Lin, Song-yen, Professor Lin, Wei-cheng, and Professor Wang, Huei-ju, you are all the best professors and know how to make Literature interesting to students. Thank you all for introducing me to such a wonderful world of Literature.

I would like to appreciate my another luck to meet Professor Hannes Bergthaller, Professor Chou, Hsing-chun and my advisor Professor Ronald S. Judy in National Chung Hsing University. You all are inspiring and kind professors in supporting me to finish this thesis. My gratitude to you is beyond words.

During my graduate school education, one of the best things I earned is friendships from my dearest thesis group members, Rosa Hung and Monica Chang Chien. You are truly decent and honest people that only luck can allow me a chance to befriend you.

I also would like to thank Lin, I-chyun in this acknowledgement especially. Without him, I was probably still trapped in the hell I built for myself in my thesis writing years. I-chyun, thank you for all the supports you gave. I do appreciate them and the luck to meet you from the depth of my being.

Finally, I thank my understanding parents for tolerating and respecting a self-willed child’s decisions all the way. Without you, I am nothing.

This master’s degree is a memorial evidence of my love and respect to Vladimir Nabokov the writer. In the end, this thesis is to share immortality of digital databases, and there is an echo in the air, "…it will transcend its dust…".
中文摘要

在弗拉基米爾·納博科夫的作品之中，此界與它界的對位結構一直都是重要的主題。換句話說，許多納博科夫的作品都是從他對於它界的存在可能性，推論並發想而來的。在他的科學及文學作品中，它界或是彼方就像是對位法般地隨伺著。

在此論文，我以「羅麗塔」、「說吧，記憶」與「幽冥的火」為例，試圖闡述在納博科夫作品中的潛在它界性。針對此特性，模式 (pattern) 是張顯相對於此界來說，可能存在的未知意識與隱形維度的關鍵。因此，在我對此三本文本的分析中，我將閱讀的注意力導向自然、命運及冥界的文本展現。對於納博科夫來說，寫作使作家模擬彼方的未知意識的角色，寫作本身反映了不僅虛構的世界還有真實世界，也同時是對於宇宙奧秘的探討。此界與它界的對位結構展現了納博科夫對於生命及宇宙奧秘的形而上學關注。於此，納博科夫不僅僅是善於操縱文字的魔術師，他也是針對此界之外的未知可能性的思考家。

關鍵字: 納博可夫; 形而上學; 對位法; 它界; 模式
Abstract

A contrapuntal structure of this world and the otherworld(s) has been the main theme in Vladimir Nabokov’s works. In other words, many of Nabokov’s works are inspired from his speculation on the possibilities of the otherworld(s). The otherworld(s) or the beyond is like a counterpoint accompanying to both his scientific and literary compositions.

In this thesis, I take *Lolita*, *Speak, Memory* and *Pale Fire* as examples to examine the inherent otherworldliness in Nabokov’s works. On this, pattern is the key which suggests not only possible anonymous creative forces but also possible invisible dimensions to this world. Therefore, in my analysis of the three works, I direct the reader’s attention to representations of Nature, Fate and the Hereafter. To Nabokov, writing is a mimetic experience to imitate the role of the anonymous creative force beyond. Writing itself reflects not only the fictional world but also the real world. It is an investigation into the mystery of the universe. The contrapuntal structure of this world and the otherworld(s) demonstrates Nabokov’s metaphysical concern on the mystery of life and the universe. More than a magician of words, Nabokov is also a ponderer on possibilities beyond this world.

Key words: Nabokov; metaphysical; contrapuntal; otherworld; pattern
Table of Contents

Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter I: Lolita: “A Synthesis of Two Dead Women” ..................................................7

Chapter II: Speak, Memory: A Contrapuntal Genius at Work .................................26

Chapter III: Pale Fire: Delight is Combinational ..........................................................48

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................64

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................................70
Introduction

This thesis aims to expound the contrapuntal nature of Nabokov’s three books, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Speak Memory* from both metaphysical and aesthetical perspectives.

Contrapuntal composition is a music style that strives to make a chance mélange of two or more co-existing parallel melodic counterpoints in a piece of music. To this, David Temperley has a succinct definition of counterpoint: “[a]n essential feature of common-practice music is counterpoint: the simultaneous combination of multiple melodic lines” (85). In Temperley’s definition, two essential features of contrapuntal composition can be extracted: multiplicity and simultaneity. In the following pages, I will demonstrate this contrapuntal element manifested in Nabokov’s three works and his sense of art, which can be concluded as an avid desire to find artistic patterns in one’s life.

Once in his Cornell lectures on Flaubert, Nabokov mentions “Flaubert had a special device which may be called the counterpoint method, or the method of parallel interlinings and interruptions of two or more conversations or trains of thought” (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* 147). In that illustrative part of Flaubert’s contrapuntal method, Nabokov quotes from a correspondence between Flaubert and his mistress Louise Colet in his lecture:

> What a nuisance my Bovary is….This scene at the inn may take me three months for all I know. At times I am on the brink of tears—so keenly do I feel my helplessness. But I prefer my brain to burst rather than to skip that scene. I have to place simultaneously, in the same conversation, five or six people (who talk), several others (who are talked about), the whole region, descriptions of persons and things—and amid all this I have to show a gentleman and a lady who begin to fall in love with each other because they have tastes in common. And if I only had enough room! But the fact is that the scene should be rapid and yet not dry, ample without being lumpy. (qtd. in *Lectures on Literature* 147)

Read together with Temperley’s formal definition, here, a fuller picture of what Nabokov may
mean by the contrapuntal method might be discerned. It is a simultaneous reception of various
on-going events in a point of time and this concept is closely connected to what Nabokov terms
as cosmic synchronization in his autobiography *Speak Memory*.

Cosmic synchronization is a typical Nabokovian aesthetic value as a writer. In *Speak
Memory*, Nabokov begins the discussion of cosmic synchronization in regards to poetry
composing. “But then, in a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one’s position in
regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge” (218). Ensuing, he
proceeds to quote a philosophical friend of his, Vivian Bloodmark (which is in fact an anagram
of his own name, Vladimir Nabokov), to support his own idea of cosmic synchronization. That
fictional persona Vivian Bloodmark provides the reader a contrastive yet supplementary
relationship between Science and Literature: “[…] while the scientist sees everything that
happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time” (218).
However, one thing to be noticed is that Science is not contrasted with Literature for no reason
here, if one keeps in mind that Nabokov is also a distinguished scientist in the field of
Lepidoptera. The interrelation between Science, Nabokov’s metaphysics and their influences on
his contrapuntal aesthetics will be put in later discussion. Returning to the original discussion of
Nabokov’s illustration of cosmic synchronization, he concludes that “[…] a person hoping to
become a poet must have the capacity of thinking of several things at a time” (218). At this point,
a contrapuntal nature can be clearly observed in Nabokov’s own aesthetic value as a poet.
Besides, in his definition of the nature of poetry, Nabokov also implies that the purpose of
poetry is to relocate human position in the universe taken care of or encompassed by
consciousness. However, the deeper meaning of this definition is ambivalent. Why is the past
participant “embraced,” suggesting a kind of tenderness, being used here and whose
consciousness that one might belong to? In order to answer these questions, one is tempted to
refer to a key passage which expresses Nabokov’s central idea of aesthetic bliss. In his
afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov’s criterion of a genuine work of fiction is clarified as follows:
For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (Nabokov, *Lolita* 358)

In this excerpt from the afterword to *Lolita*, one learns that, to Nabokov, a genuine work of fiction should be capable of uniting its reader with another dimension where art claims to reign. Here comes the significant feature in Nabokov’s writings: the contrapuntal otherworld. In his *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, Vladimir E. Alexandrov, following the hint Nabokov’s wife Vera provides, indicates that the otherworld theme is crucial to Nabokov’s works. In that book, Alexandrov summarizes Vera’s talk as:

> In her brief but seminal remarks, Vera Nabokov calls “potustoronnost” Nabokov’s “main theme,” and stresses that although it “saturates everything he wrote,” it does not appear to have been noted by anyone. […] But she does not go beyond her husband’s own veiled hints in these works about what “potustoronnost” meant for him: it is “a mystery that he carries in his soul and that he neither may nor can betray”; it is what “gave him his imperturbable love of life [‘zhizneradostnost’] and lucidity even during life’s most difficult trials” (3-4)

The otherworld theme is like an accompanying counterpoint to any of Nabokov’s works. Nature, Fate, and the hereafter are all representations of the otherworld in his works. In Nabokov’s representation, the mentioned three types of otherworld are so highly artistic that they imply a designing consciousness behind them. Because of these elements, Nabokov’s works give the reader’s sense of being somehow connected with another dimension as he reads. Therefore, the contrapuntal otherworld is an eminent feature of Nabokov’s works.

In addition, it is also interesting to look into the four elements which Nabokov thinks to be the nature of art, namely, curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy.
Curiosity can be interpreted as a desire to know or an object that arouses one’s interest for its novelty and strangeness. To Nabokov, both are necessary elements to unlock the gateway to the world of art. Here, I am to continue the earlier discussion of the interrelation between Science, Nabokov’s metaphysics and their influences on his contrapuntal aesthetics because curiosity plays a key role in bridging the scientific Nabokov with the literary one. Mimicry as a natural deception has been a great curiosity to curious Nabokov. In *Speak Memory*, Nabokov gives various vivid examples of insects’ imitative behaviors he observes from Nature and concludes:

> When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in. “Natural selection,” in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of “the struggle for life” when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator’s power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception. (Nabokov, *Speak Memory* 125)

From this passage, one can infer that Nabokov finds that Nature and art are intrinsically the same thing because both share a quality of being artificial. Yet, Nabokov hints more by this quality of being artificial and it should not be easily interpreted. Just like there is an author behind every work of fiction, by the context of the comparison Nabokov makes between art and Nature, it is naturally to assume there is also an author behind the book of Nature. However, Nabokov never openly gives this transcendental author an identity and hesitates to address this possibility as God. At the end of his interview with Alvin Toffler in 1964, Nabokov replies his question “…do you believe in God?” with these ambiguous words:

> 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. (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 45)

David Rutledge reads Nabokov’s answer as to express “…the inability of language to capture this mystic presence, but it also stresses knowledge. He [Nabokov] claims to ‘know’ the answer, not simply to believe” (6). Here, Nabokov seems to hold back his answer from his readers’ knowledge, and thus provokes curiosity and an ambiance of game playing. Nabokov’s reply is also an embodiment of what he describes of the natural phenomenon of mimicry, and his method of composing is to reproduce the model of a subtle game that the transcendental author set in Nature. To Nabokov, art is Nature, Nature is art. In order to be a genius literary imitator of the transcendental author’s style, Nabokov has to know and study the transcendental author’s devices well first. On this, his scientific part supports his literary one so well.

Once one is endowed with the key of curiosity, the other three elements of Nabokov’s world of art are allowed to be glimpsed afterwards. In his “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov suggests that a private bomb should be dropped at the city of commonsense and “[i]n the brilliant light of the ensuing explosion many curious things will appear” (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 372). He continues to argue that the second result after the destruction of commonsense is that “the irrational belief in the goodness of man (to which those farcical and fraudulent characters called Facts are so solemnly opposed) becomes something much more than the wobbly basis of idealistic philosophies and […] goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one’s world” (373). To justify the occurrence of the second result, Nabokov chooses to provide an illogical and irrational argument to serve as his suitable argument for his world of art. Nabokov states that even though the general public may tell one it is “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,” in his world of art, such cruelty and banality do not exist. The reason Nabokov
offers reads:

[…] within the emphatically and unshakably illogical world which I [Nabokov] 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 great 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 same irrational and divine standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death. (373)

The reason Nabokov gives is a rather emotional and fairly illogical one: it is because he cannot imagine the existence of brutality and stupidity caused by war, which is also a sort of manifestation of commonsense, that his world of art is devoid of such degraded elements.

In the chapter of *Lolita*, I am going to illustrate the relation between man and the contrapuntal worlds of Nature and Fate. Nymphet, a spirit pertaining to Nature, is a figurative term coined by the confessional narrator Humbert Humbert to designate an underage human girl with enchanting charm. Descriptions of Lolita in most part of the fiction is closely intertwined with Humbert Humbert’s irrepressible desire for her as in fact a substitute of his fatidic dead child lover, Annabelle. In the chapter of *Speak, Memory*, patterns in both Nature and life are carefully looked into to testify a contrapuntal genius behind them. In a nutshell, *Speak, Memory* is a “conclusive evidence” to the existence of a creating force beyond. In the chapter of *Pale Fire*, the contrapuntal dimension of the hereafter is the gist of the novel. In the novel, a game of worlds is played via a seemingly misprint of fountain and texture is the key to recognize the secret schemes contrived by invisible consciousnesses beyond. In the three works, a faint existence of a contrapuntal otherworld can be clearly “felt.”
Chapter One

*Lolita: “A Synthesis of Two Dead Women”*

“I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.” (Lolita 351)

In his 1962 BBC Television interview, Vladimir Nabokov mentions:

[...] *Lolita* is a special favorite of mine. It was my most difficult book—the book that treated of a theme which was so distant, so remote, from my own emotional life that it gave me a special pleasure to use my combinational talent to make it real. (*Strong Opinions* 15)

It is interesting to notice the adjective “combinational” Nabokov applies to modify his own talent as an artist and this is closely related to the contrapuntal nature of *Lolita* I am going to present in this chapter. Contrapuntal composition is a music style that strives to make a chance mélange of two or more co-existing parallel melodic counterpoints in a piece of music. On this musical aspect of Nabokov’s writing style, Barbara Wyllie comments that:

Nabokov proves himself to be a musical writer. The influence of poetics in the rhythms and modulations of his prose establishes sound as an important element of his art, but Nabokov goes further than this, to deliberately include music in the context of his narratives and to grant it a place in the thematic structure of his fiction. (43)

Wyllie clearly points out that music not only permeates in the language level of Nabokov’s fiction, but also constructs a thematic skeleton of his fiction, which I argue to be structurally contrapuntal. In this chapter of *Lolita*, I am going to state that *Lolita* the eponymous fiction is not only a metaphoric reading of the relation between Nature and Human but also a synthetic outcome of Humbert Humbert’s life when Lolita the immortal nymphet and Lolita the mortal
woman being simultaneously considered. In *Lolita*, a thematic contrapuntal structure of two co-existing extremities is to be discerned.

**Nymphetic Love: A Pursuit of the Lost Beauty of Nature**

*Lolita*, a controversial yet highly fascinating and seductive novel composed by Vladimir Nabokov, is basically about a middle-aged literary professor Humbert Humbert’s confession and memoir on his affairs with his young stepdaughter, Lolita. Because of the wide age gap and the incestuous relationship between them, some read it as a work of moral decadence. Besides, there are also numerous critics having written insightful analyses about the unbalanced narrative or social positions Lolita occupies in Humbert’s solipsism of her. However, unlike most former critics, in this session, I would like to shift my attention of the work to Humbert’s relation with the Nature and argue that his passion toward Lolita, his so-called nymphet, is derived from his fixation on the pleasant Nature he and Annabel Lee shares in his childhood. By looking into the narratives of landscapes, I try to argue that Humbert Humbert’s fantasized Lolita/Lolita reflects not only his nostalgia to the Nature in his childhood, but also his desire of going beyond the time of civilization through his eroticism to and verbalization of Lolita and the Nature respectively.

Nature could be taken as an interesting theme in *Lolita* in terms of Humbert’s nature implications behind his desires. First of all, nymphet, the word Humbert takes to designate a magically seductive girl between nine and fourteen is rich in its meanings. “Nymphet” can be divided into its stem, nymph, and a suffix, -et. According to OED online, the suffix, -et, suggests a diminutive sense. (“-et,” suffix1). As for the definitions of “nymph”, its first definition is “[c]hiefly Classical Mythol. Any of a class of semi-divine spirits, imagined as taking the form of a maiden inhabiting the sea, rivers, mountains, woods, trees, etc., and often portrayed in poetry as attendants on a particular god” (“nymph, n.1,” def 1). In this definition of “nymph,” a nymph is described as a spirit taking a human form, whose identity is closely related
to the landscape she inhabits. In other words, she is the personification of the landscape she
lives in. Of the personification of a landscape, the backyard scene of Humbert’s failure to
consummate with Annabel could be an example that “[a] cluster of stars palely glowed above us,
between the silhouettes of long thin leaves; that vibrant sky seemed as naked as she was under
her light frock. I saw her face in the sky, strangely distinct, as if it emitted a faint radiance of its
own” (Nabokov 13). In this depiction, Humbert is looking up at the sky to imagine Annabel’s
body. Annabel, in a sense, is the personification of the sky and Humbert is eroticized by the
beauty of the clear and starry night. To some extent, Annabel becomes a medium through which
Humbert discharges his desires for the beauty of the Nature. For another example, Humbert’s
definition of his enchanted island can also illustrate this personification of landscapes for the
reason that the boundaries of the island are circumscribed by human age. “It will be marked that
I [Humbert] substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see ‘nine’ and
‘fourteen’ as the boundaries—the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks—of an enchanted island
haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea (15). Of this statement
from Humbert, there is also one aspect to notice that the spatial elements, namely the beaches,
rocks and the sea, in it are also the ones of the beach scene where Humbert and Annabel try to
achieve their consummation. The summer beach motif is often implied in the work when
Humbert feels enchanted with Lolita. For example, the scene at Charlotte Haze’s garden where
Humbert meets Lolita for the first time, he describes his reactions as this: “[a]ll I know is that
while the Haze woman and I went down the steps into the breathless garden, my knees were like
reflections of knees in rippling water, and my lips were like sand, and —” (43). Here, Humbert
himself becomes the personification of the childhood beach landscape to suggest Lolita as his
late seaside nymphet revived. Humbert’s ecstasy is represented in his bodily unification with the
Nature, which is made possible through a nymphet-like child. Humbert’s departure for America
is not only because of the job offered by his late uncle but also due to the beautiful landscapes of
America he fanaticized in mind. On this, Humbert describes America as “the country of rosy
children and great trees” (28). Beautiful nymphets and splendid landscapes are America. Yet, Humbert’s fantasy dissipates when he is really there.

Humbert is a nostalgic figure who keeps in search of the beautiful Nature he remembers in his childhood. In Humbert’s first trip with Lolita, he drives her to beaches in order to experience the old pleasure he and Annabel had there through Lolita again. However, most beaches fail to meet the need of Humbert and this disappointment brings up as well the one he experiences in Europe parks:

However, in recollection, I suppose, of my hopeless hauntings of public parks in Europe, I was still keenly interested in outdoor activities and desirous of finding suitable playgrounds in the open where I had suffered such shameful privations. Here, too, I was to be thwarted. The disappointment I must now register (as I gently grade my story into an expression of the continuous risk and dread that ran through my bliss) should in no wise reflect on the lyrical, epic, tragic but never Arcadian American wilds. They are beautiful, heart-rendingly beautiful, those wilds, with a quality of wide-eyed, unsung, innocent surrender that my lacquered, toy-bright Swiss villages and exhaustively lauded Alps no longer possess…But in the Wilds of America the open-air lover will not find it easy to indulge in the most ancient of all crimes and pastimes. Poisonous plants burn his sweetheart’s buttocks, nameless insects sting his; sharp items of the forest floor prick his knees, insects hers…. (189-90)

The landscape in old Europe is too civilized and populated while the America landscape is less tamed and somehow hostile to people who want to share its beauty. Nevertheless, Humbert still admires its wilderness. What makes Humbert to leave Paris is because of its high civilization, which brings him mental exhaustion for the lack of intimacy with the Nature. Therefore, Humbert’s trip to America is also a trip of returning to the Nature. However, the more he travels in America, the more disappointment he has since America, his fantasized last paradise, is
gradually moving toward high civilization and industrialization. This disappointment can be discerned from the two pictures of America Humbert sees in childhood. The first picture is the oilcloths imported from America:

By a paradox of pictorial thought, the average lowland North-American countryside had at first seemed to me something I accepted with a shock of amused recognition because of those painted oilclothes which were imported from America in the old days to be hung above washstands in Central-European nurseries, and which fascinated a drowsy child at bed time with the rustic green views they depicted—opaque curly trees, a barn, cattle, a brook, the dull white of vague orchards in bloom, and perhaps a stone fence or hills of greenish gouache. But gradually the models of those elementary rusticities became stranger and stranger to the eye, the nearer I came to know them…while lost in an artist’s dream, I would stare at the honest brightness of the gasoline paraphernalia against the splendid green of oaks, or at a distant hill scrambling out—scarred but still untamed—from the wilderness of agriculture that was trying to swallow it. (171-72)

Humbert’s pictorial Arcadian fantasy toward America is gradually undermined by the intrusion of high industrialization and civilization. The paradox is on the discrepancy between fantasy and reality. However, Humbert still has hope on the Nature in America since the hill is still “untamed.” Nevertheless, in Humbert’s second trip with Lolita, the gap between his imagined Appalachian Mountains and the ones he sees on map in childhood appears and this disillusion gives him another shock:

I remember as a child in Europe gloating over a map of North America that had “Appalachian Mountains” boldly running from Alabama up to New Brunswick, so that the whole region they spanned—Tennessee, the Virginias, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, appeared to my imagination as
a gigantic Switzerland or even Tibet, all mountain, glorious diamond peak upon peak, giant conifers, le montagnard émigré in his bear skin glory, and Felis tigris goldsmithi, and Red Indians under the catalpas. That it all boiled down to a measly suburban lawn and a smoking garbage incinerator, was appalling.

Farewell, Appalachia! (238).

Again, Humbert’s pictorial imagination fails him. The hill in his first trip with Lolita is still untamed. But in this second trip with her, the mountains become tamed suburban lawn and a location for the wastes of civilization to burn up. At this scene, Humbert feels terrified and leaves quickly since the disappointment of disillusion is unbearable. However, in fact, Humbert has known the naturalness of American landscape is replaced by the one created by civilization already:

We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep.

(199)

The naturalness of Nature that Humbert imagines no longer persists. It contains tinges of consumerism and advertisements to reshape it. Humbert says he sees nothing is because he discerns the gap between the bluffs advertisements and consumerism promise and the reality of the Nature already intruded by too much civilization. The America landscape becomes a picture of maps and tour books, whose entity is lost. Therefore, a de-contextualized reading of Lolita’s sobs, a nymphet whose spirit is pertaining to the Nature, could be understood as the sobs of the Nature. And Humbert, a human being, is feigned to be unaware of the cries of her, whose act is a way of escaping the crimes he has done to her.

The intervention of civilization not only smears the landscape of the Nature Humbert
adores but also nullifies his right to re-enter the lost pleasant Nature he experienced in childhood through the help of nymphets. Humbert’s strategies of going beyond the time of civilization are his eroticism to and verbalization of Lolita and the Nature respectively. Eroticism and verbalization is similar in three aspects. First of all, they both help to discharge the unrealizable passion. In other words, they are actions themselves to confront the time of civilization. At Humbert’s first sight of Lolita, her body appears as a precious medium for him to break with the time of civilization:

With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts that last mad immortal day behind the “Roches Roses.” The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished. (42)

This passage again recalls the beach scene, where the rosy red rocks (“Roches Roses”) form a cave to shelter the child lovers. Humbert’s eyesight caresses on Lolita are also his discharge of the unrealizable passion for the presence of the Nature in the past and the outcome of this eroticism is the cancellation of his past twenty-five years. As for the reason that the verbalization of the idyllic Nature is a way of passion discharging, it is noteworthy that Humbert hopes the reader of his confession to see pictures from his words, using phrases like “[l]ook at this tangle of thorns,” “by the courtesy of a photographic memory,” and “I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves.”(7, 43, 62). In Humbert’s case, verbalization helps discharge his unrealizable passion because language has the potential to bring forth an image presence. Therefore, through the use of language, the image in the past is set free from its temporality, which is the linear time logic of progressive civilization. Second, eroticism and verbalization are close to each other in the sense that they are both means to possess the unattainable. Eroticism is a physical way to render the possession of the fantasized unattainable
possible. For example, the couch scene where Humbert solipsizes Lolita is a demonstration of possessing the fantasized unattainable by physical contacts:

…and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty—between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock…I lost myself in the pungent but healthy heat which like summer haze hung about little Haze. Let her stay, let her stay....(65)

The words, ripple, dimple, and summer haze, again conjure up the summer beach scene. Besides, the personification of landscape is also discerned. In a way, Humbert, at this scene, touches the beach scene physically. Lolita’s corporeality represents the unattainable beach scene’s materiality revived. Therefore, by transforming Lolita to the unattainable object (the beach scene), Humbert’s eroticism to her is at the same time his possession of the lost beach.

Regarding to verbalization’s potential to possess the unattainable, the materiality of written language is crucial to its ability of storing and possessing. Since the unattainable is something that has lost its materiality, the one of written language can serve to make up this lack for the unattainable is recorded in words. Therefore, verbalization is a kind of possession since it allows the writer to retrieve the past unattainable in his mind, revive it in the materiality of words and possess it in the end. Lastly, both eroticism and verbalization has a potential to render the stagnation of time flowing possible. On the side of eroticism, the intensity it brings up forms the dimension of the timeless. The later part of the couch scene where Humbert solipsizes Lolita could demonstrate the timeless dimension constructed by eroticism:

…the implied sun pulsated in the supplied poplars; we were fantastically and divinely alone; I watched her, rosy, gold-dusted, beyond the veil of my controlled delight, unaware of it, alien to it, and the sun was on her lips, and her lips were apparently still forming the words of the Carmen-barmen ditty that no longer reached my consciousness. Everything was now ready. The nerves of
In this scene, the time stagnates. The movements of golden dusts in the room and Lolita’s mouth positions of forming words are taken as slow motions for Humbert’s inner stagnation of conscious time. The linear and objective time prescribed by civilization is replaced by Humbert’s private and eroticized moment. This is discernable through Humbert’s neglect of the intrusion from the reality, say, the phone ring, which contrasts his timeless dimension. Therefore, eroticism has the potential to stop the time from flowing in terms of the intensive and timeless dimension it builds. In the case of verbalization, in language’s power to create a separate world and a transmissible space lies its possibility to resist the linear time flow of civilization. At the very end of the work, Humbert resorts to the help of language, hoping that Lolita and he will be immortal under the shelter of words: “I [Humbert] am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (352). The secret of durable pigments is the power of unfaded language to create a vivid world and make it circulate among people from generation to generation. This could be Humbert’s vision of attaining immortality through his work, even though, it turns out to be an ironic existence of positing his morbid mentality in the eyes of psychiatrists, for whom Humbert has most of his contempt.

To summarize, Humbert Humbert is a man who has an excessive passion for the Nature in his childhood and this passion finds its way out through his subsequent quests of nymphets as media to go beyond the linear time of civilization and go back to his childhood. However, so far, it seems Humbert Humbert is an extremely selfish person who makes use of nymphets for his own pleasure. His solipsism of Lolita is based the lost of her autonomy. However, in the later parts of the work, Humbert gradually comes to realize the otherness of Lolita and still feel
touched by the presence of the pregnant Lolita. Here, I quite agree with Ellen Pifer’s reading of John Bayley’s definition of love. In her reading of Bayley, Pifer states that “‘love’ says Bayley, ‘is preoccupied with the uniqueness of the individual’; when we truly love, ‘we are really seeing another person,’ even though recognition of the other person’s otherness may cause distress and anxiety” (Pifer 78). Here are two scenes when Humbert comes to know the otherness of Lolita.

The first scene is about Humbert’s shock of glimpsing a piece of Lolita’s real thoughts:

“You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own”; and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gated dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions….(324)

The other scene taking place at Lolita and Dick’s house where her otherness is revealed after she is pregnant:

…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. She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past; an echo on the brink of a russet ravine, with a far wood under a white sky, and brown leaves choking the brook, and one last cricket in the crisp weeds… but thank God it was not that echo alone that I worshipped. (316-17)

In the second passage, Lolita is depicted as the Nature in autumn, when things start to fall and decay. Compared to the jolly and lively Nature in summer, which is also the image of Humbert’s seaside nymphets, autumn declares the cruel truth of the mortality of lives. Lolita is no longer a demi-god, a nymphet. She has become one of the common women that Humbert used to neglect.

This motif of love reminds me a passage from Nabokov’s Despair. At the beginning of chapter
Fate and False Generalization

Once in his 1962 BBC Television interview, Nabokov responds where the inspiration of *Lolita* is from:

As far as I can recall the first shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted in a rather mysterious way by a newspaper story, I think it was in *Paris Soir*, about an ape in the Paris Zoo, who after months of coaxing by scientists produced finally the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal, and this sketch, reproduced in the paper, showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage. (*Strong Opinions* 15-6)

Olga Hasty reads Nabokov’s inspiration from the ape with the panther in the poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Der Panther.” Both are creatures “shown not simply in sad captivity, but in a state of tragically circumscribed consciousness, aware only of the bars of his cage in their horrific multiplicity and not of the world beyond them” (226). In the text of *Lolita*, the residue of this ape image can still be found. Humbert describes his eyes and ear as aging ape eyes and ape-ear when Lolita is within his periphery of sensory absorption (42, 52). Humbert is like the captive ape itself. He is so imprisoned by his own fantasized nympholepsy that he fails to see the real Lolita beyond his own fantasy of her. Humbert’s failure of recognition also reflects on the term, nymphet, he coins to designate sexually provocative little girls. On the term nymphet, Ellen Pifer points out:

> Beyond its many associations with Greek myth and religion, the *nymph* designates, in entomological terms, “an immature stage of a hemimetabolic insect”; in contrast to butterfly, it “does not undergo complete metamorphosis.”

Inflicting his private fantasy of the nymphet—a mythical creature who must
“never grow up”—on an immature “girl-child” whose natural right is to do just that, Humbert would stunt both her growth and her freedom. (The Lolita Phenomenon 191-92; emphasis in original)

Lolita the nymphet is subject to Humbert’s fantasy of her, and her autonomy is disregarded by Humbert’s blind solipsism of her. Besides, in Humbert’s recollection of his past in the prison, he confesses to the reader:

What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. (68)

In this passage, Humbert points out what he is madly in love with is the Lolita of his own creation, a lifeless “painted girl-child” created by his imagination (78). Lolita is a dead love-object.

More than once Humbert stresses the role of fate plays in his encounter with Lolita and the formation of his nympholepsy. At the beginning of session four, part 1, Humbert draws a connection between imagination and fate:

I leaf again and again through these miserable memories, and keep asking myself, was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity? When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past. I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel. (12)

In Humbert’s description, he implies that there is “a sort of retrospective imagination” in the
working when he figures out that “in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel.” Brian Boyd’s observation of Nabokov’s treatment of fate is that “[h]e [Nabokov] treats fate exactly as a maker of fine patterns, a master craftsman […] it is visible only in retrospection” (Nabokov’s Ada 74). As to the nature of fate, Humbert reads it as a sort of “synchronizing phantom, mixed within its alembic the car and the dog and the sun and the shade and the wet and the weak and the strong and the stone” (115-16). In other words, it is only through retrospective and synchronizing imagination that an inherent pattern planted by fate can be observed. In a sense, one can say that, in Nabokovian sense, fate is itself very contrapuntal because its nature is synchronization. Besides, Humbert is equipped with a poet’s ability of which Nabokov terms cosmic synchronization, which is basically a “capacity of thinking of several things at a time” (Speak Memory 218). Therefore, it is not surprising that fate is a material Humbert resorts to in composing his Lolita, a confession made of by a series of fatidic event.

Nevertheless, Humbert is a flawed artist and this is the reason why he commits the mistake of false generalization which leads to a tragedy between him and Lolita. Humbert argues that one has to be “an artist and a madman” at the same time so as to be capable of identifying a nymphet among a group of ordinary little girls immediately (16). In the scene where Humbert meets Lolita for the first time, the reader is allowed to witness a sudden detection of nymphet:

I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition. In the course of the sun-shot moment that my glance slithered over the kneeling child (her eyes blinking over those stern dark spectacles – the little Herr Doktor who was to cure me of all my aches) while I passed by her in my adult disguise (a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood), the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride. A little later, of
course, she, this nouvelle, this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype. All I want to stress is that my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that “princedom by the sea” in my tortured past. Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy.

Everything they shared made one of them. (42)

From this passage, one can discern that Humbert, as an artist and madman, seems to be a fellow artist who follows the “irrational standards” Nabokov proposes in “The Art of Literature and Commonsense.” Nabokov posits that after the eradication of commonsense, an illogical yet lovely and lovable world of goodness will appear, where he can perfectly imagine his “fellow dreamers, thousands of whom roam on the earth, keep to these same irrational and divine standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death. (Lectures on Literature 373). In a sense, the illogical world is the pure world of art which serves to be “a home for the spirit” during calamities caused by stupid commonsense, such as war (373). Nabokov continues to define the meaning of the irrational standards, and it reads:

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. (373)

Returning to the scene where Humbert sees Lolita for the first time, one is able to observe that Humbert checks Lolita’s body with a scrutiny which conforms to Nabokov’s irrational standards. Besides, he is synchronizing a fatidic pattern at the moment he detects a nymphet in Lolita. It is a highly contrapuntal and artistic moment when the causalities between two girls are realized as a unified pattern. However, under this seemingly aesthetic moment of detailization, Humbert in fact makes a cognitive flaw because he compares Lolita with Annabel the prototype in his mind. He makes a mistake of detailized-generalization which bears a seeming conformation to Nabokov’s irrational standards; however, the nature of it is a set of generalized features of
nymphet in his fantasy. In a word, Humbert justifies his false generalization of Lolita and his encounter with her as a fatidic pattern inherent in his life. Nevertheless, in his highly artistically patterned life there is a flaw which Humbert’s inventive but limited mind fails but is to realize at the end of his confession.

**Inspiration, Time, and Awakening**

In *Lolita*, it is only after Humbert’s awareness of Lolita’s mortality that he is bestowed a gift of inspiration and moral awakening. In the scene where Humbert meets Lolita again in Dick’s house, he comes to realize his fantasized Lolita as in fact a mortal being. At that time, Lolita is a pregnant and worn girl whom Humbert describes as “the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I [Humbert] had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past” (316). In this scene, Humbert’s consciousness finally transcends his own fantasy and this prepares for his later inspiration and moral awakening. Humbert realizes that Lolita is not an immortal nymphet as he imagined but a decaying human girl with a sad life which he is responsible for.

Inspiration is a spiritual thrill when consciousness is working at its best. In his “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov defines inspiration as “the passage from the dissociative stage to the associative one is thus marked by a kind of spiritual thrill which in English is very loosely termed *inspiration*” (377; emphasis in original). The nature of inspiration is contrapuntal in the sense that it connects various events and dimensions into a meaningful whole. In the car driving scene after Humbert kills Quilty, an inspiration comes to Humbert:

> The road now stretched across open country, and it occurred to me—not by way of protest, not as a symbol, or anything like that, but merely as a novel experience—that since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic. So I crossed to the left side of the highway and checked the feeling, and the feeling was good. It was a pleasant diaphragmal
melting, with elements of diffused tactility, all this enhanced by the thought that
nothing could be nearer to the elimination of basic physical laws than
deliberately driving on the wrong side of the road. In a way, it was a very
spiritual itch. Gently, dreamily, not exceeding twenty miles an hour, I drove on
that queer mirror side. Traffic was light. Cars that now and then passed me on the
side I had abandoned to them, honked at me brutally. Cars coming towards me
wobbled, swerved, and cried out in fear. Presently I found myself approaching
populated places. Passing through a red light was like a sip of forbidden
Burgundy when I was a child. Meanwhile complications were arising. I was
being followed and escorted. Then in front of me I saw two cars placing
themselves in such a manner as to completely block my way. With a graceful
movement I turned off the road, and after two or three big bounces, rode up a
grassy slope, among surprised cows, and there I came to a gentle rocking stop. A
kind of thoughtful Hegelian synthesis linking up two dead women. (349)

Humbert’s driving scene is a figurative passage about the revelation of inspiration. Nabokov
affirms that inspiration is “a state of affairs that commonsense must condemn” (Lectures on
Literature 378). In the driving scene, Humbert disregards not only “all laws of humanity” but
also “the rules of traffic.” However, despite being a criminal, Humbert’s consciousness reaches
a maximum of freedom a human spirit can afford. He drives freely, recollects his past limitlessly
when he tries to kill himself incidentally by crashing into another innocent car. It is because of
the freedom of consciousness and recollection working together that grant Humbert’s a
“spiritual itch” which can be identified as inspiration. With that inspiration, Humbert concludes
his life to be “[a] kind of thoughtful Hegelian synthesis linking up two dead women.” It is also
interesting to notice that in the last sentence of the car driving scene excerpt, Nabokov forms a
“sentence” leaving out the use of a verb and the tense attached to it. The temporality here is
ongoing, an in-betweenness between two time-demarcating units, which is also what Nabokov
suspects to be the real essence of Time. In his 1971 *The New York Times* interview, Nabokov observes that:

> Van’s greatest discovery is his perception of Time as the dim hollow between two rhythmic beats, the narrow and bottomless silence between the beats, not the beats themselves, which only embrace Time. In this sense human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat. (*Strong Opinions* 186)

Inspiration is necessary to be accompanied by an experience of feeling the texture of Time. When one’s consciousness at its highest form focuses on to detect connection between events rather than events themselves, a pattern of life may suddenly suggest itself at this singular moment. To Nabokov, life should be a meaningful pattern rather than a cluster of dissociative events. “The missed heartbeat” is the invisible link that strings a series of rhythmic beats, which is just like an undiscovered pattern of life which connects different events in one’s life. Therefore, what Humbert experiences at the end of the car driving scene is his “missed heartbeat” when his inspiration is synchronizing two important deaths in his life, say, Charlotte’s and Annabel’s. On this Hegelian synthesis of his life, Alfred Appel, Jr.’s note to it reads:

> the death of Charlotte is remembered here (the killer’s car going up the slope; 97), blending with the whole story of Lolita, from the cows on the slope (P. 112) to her assumed death (if the reader reads the book, Lolita must be dead; see pp. 4, 280, and 309) […] When Humbert asks a pregnant and veiny-armed Lolita to go away with him, he demonstrates that the mirage of the past (the nymphic Lolita as his lost “Annabel”) and the reality of the present (the Charlotte-like woman Lolita is becoming) have merged in love, a “synthesis linking up two dead women.” (*The Annotated Lolita* 450; emphasis in original)

What Humbert has in mind at the moment of driving his car up to a slope is a curious pattern he perceives in two events: his schemed murder of Charlotte is ironically carried out by a random car going up a slope while he is also driving up a slope after killing Quilty. Both killers’ cars go
up a slope in the two events. Besides, it is only after Charlottes’s death that Humbert’s imaginary solipsism of Lolita becomes a physically sexual practice and thus Lolita’s misery begins. In addition, the death of young Annabel is the opening of Humbert’s nympholepsy, which leads to Lolita’s lost of her autonomy later. Lolita the fiction is basically about a little girl being a “double of a dead woman” and has “no life of her own” (Schweighauser 108; Lolita 68). The two dead women in Humbert’s life influence Lolita’s greatly and the lining of the fiction is the transition of Lolita’s images being an Annabel-like nymphet to a Charlotte-like mortal being. Hence, Lolita the fiction, a patterned and stylized story of Humbert’s life, is the synthesis of Annabel’s and Charlotte’s deaths and their respective influences on Lolita’s life.

Humbert experiences a moral awakening after the pattern of his life is dawned upon him after the inspiration. He begins to realize how his nympholepsy has deprived Lolita of a happy childhood she may have and his regret can be perceived from the slope scene which he recalls after being caught by the police:

Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic— one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for 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. (351)

In this scene, Humbert claims to hear children’s frolic voices from a mining town when he is standing on a high slope. Humbert’s description of those carefree children and the toys they play contains a peaceful and joyous ambiance that one expects from a happy childhood. However, he
is also aware that Lolita, because of his sexual exploitation of her, is not one of those happy children. Lolita’s voice is absent “from that concord.” It is at this moment that Humbert realizes he has corrupted Lolita’s life and done everything wrong.
Chapter 2

*Speak, Memory: A Contrapuntal Genius at Work*

“It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.” (*Speak, Memory* 139)

In this chapter, I am going to expound *Speak, Memory* in terms of pattern in Nature, pattern in life, and ecologically intersubjective state of timelessness, which are also three crucial concepts to the core of Vladimir Nabokov’s art and implied metaphysics. In his “Nabokov’s Trinity,” Gennady Barabtarlo has made an insightful summary of *Speak, Memory* as:“[*w*]hat is *Speak, Memory* if not a long and highly elaborate essay on precisely this sort of contrapuntal correspondence of art, life, and afterlife?” (112). By definition, contrapuntal composition is a music style that strives to make a chance mélange of two or more co-existing parallel melodic counterpoints in a piece of music. Therefore, in a sense, Barabtarlo proposes to read *Speak, Memory* as a contrapuntal synthesis of events happening in different dimensions and suggests there is an anonymous creative force in the working. Brain Boyd in his collaborative essay “Prologue: The Other World” with Don Barron Johnson speaks of such possibilities of dimensions as well. In his argument of modifying the word choice of Johnson’s “two-world” applied to Nabokov’s metaphysics, Boyd proposes three sensible insights to a more thoughtful understanding of Nabokov’s art and metaphysics. Firstly, Boyd argues that “two-world” is inappropriate in the sense that “[…] Nabokov stresses in numerous ways that the ‘other’ world he suspects surrounds the one we see is somehow in as well as beyond this one” (24; emphasis in original). Secondly, “two-world” limits the numerous possibilities of the beyond to a solid two, which “[…] collapses or ignores several more or less distinct possible levels in the Nabokovian ‘beyond’” (24). Thirdly, Boyd points out that “‘two worlds’ overdefines as it
undercuts. Nabokov suggests possibilities, and possibilities within possibilities, or, if you like, worlds within worlds: worlds in regression” (24). The other world(s), or the beyond, in Nabokov’s view, is not a proved fact, but suspected possibilities. In the following, I will try to illustrate such possible existence of the beyond by looking into Nabokov’s autobiography and propose possibilities of imagining the contrapuntal genius in that work.

**Pattern in Nature**

In an anecdote he mentions in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov declares his early interest in coincidence of pattern. It starts with a magic trick of creating an optical illusion by coinciding patterns of the papers under and on the coin. “Place upon a similarly ruled sheet a small coin (a silver twenty-kopek piece will do). Briskly slip the tumbler over the coin, taking care to have both sets of rules or patterns tally” (*Speak, Memory*, 157). If the performer manages to coincide the pattern of the top paper with the one under the coin seamlessly, then the magic trick is successfully performed—deception is achieved. Optically, the coin is hidden out of the audience’s sight and disappears. On this trick, Nabokov comments “[c]oincidence of pattern is one of the wonders of nature. The wonders of nature were beginning to impress me at that early age” (157).

The anecdote Nabokov mentions is not only a coin game of coincidence but a strong suggestion of high artificiality in Nature. In another passage from *Speak, Memory*, this sort of strong suggestion of artificial Nature can also be detected. As a professional lepidopterist and talented writer, Nabokov is particularly fascinated by mimicry in Nature because “its phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things” (124). From the phenomenon of mimicry, Nabokov gives examples of various insects, such as ant, moth, and butterfly, to support his speculation on the highly artificial essence of Nature. In *Speak, Memory*, he portrays details observed from creatures such as his lifelong passionate interest, butterfly, as support: “[w]hen a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the
details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in” (125). By looking into details, Nabokov further argues that Darwin’s theory is not persuasive enough to explain the existence of over-refined subtleties found in creatures capable of mimicry. The famous statement he makes to question Darwin’s theory of natural selection goes:

“Natural selection,” in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of “the struggle for life” when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator’s power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception. (125)

In this passage, Nabokov implies that Darwin’s “natural selection” does not explain an anonymous creativity or cunning intention which brings forth the phenomenon of mimicry neither nor does it explain the factual existence of surplus and nonutilitarian mimetic subtlety. One of the examples on the mimetic subtlety Nabokov gives is a phenomenon of refraction enhancement he observes on wings of a certain species of butterfly. In his “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov describes that species of butterfly1 as:

There is a species of butterfly on the hind wind of which a large eyespot imitates a drop of liquid with such uncanny perfection that a line which crosses the wing is slightly displaced at the exact stretch where it passes through— or better say under—the spot: this part of the line seems shifted by refraction, as it would if a real globular drop had been there and we were looking through it at the pattern of

---

1 Nabokov does not particularly identify the species for his readers in the context. However, Dieter E. Zimmer, a renowned researcher on Nabokov’s academic achievements on Lepidopterology, suspects it to be *Caligo eurilochus Cramer*. For details, please consult his 2012 web version of *A Guilde to Nabokov's Butterflies and Moths* via [http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/eGuide/Lep2.1-B-C.htm](http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/eGuide/Lep2.1-B-C.htm). The target species mentioned above is in the entry of *Cerura* (ex Dicranura) *vinula Linnaeus*, 1758 [Notodontidae].
By analyzing and speculating on visible facts, Nabokov argues a similarity between Nature and art since both Nature and art provide him “nonutilitarian delights” which are mainly derived from a sense of observing, analyzing and decoding, seeing through a greater designer’s cunning conceit through clues left in details. For Nabokov, even though he does not admit directly, he takes Nature as a spectacular artifice created by a greater consciousness, whose identity is suggested to be the Almighty. In his Playboy interview in 1964, Nabokov states that: “[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 re-creating the given world” (Strong Opinions 32). From this statement, it is not difficult to infer that Nabokov, who takes himself as a creative writer, studies not only works composed by humans, but also work of the Almighty, which is supposed to be “Book of Nature.” Besides, as mentioned earlier, Nabokov declares that “[t]he wonders of nature were beginning to impress me at that early age.” Therefore, in order to have a clear understanding of Nabokov’s works, it is necessary to understand the influence Nature has on the idea of his writing style. In his “Good Readers and Good Writers,” Nabokov remarks that “Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. […] Every great writer is a great deceiver, but so is that arch- cheat Nature. [...] The writer of fiction only follows Nature’s lead” (Lectures on Literature 5). In other words, one may say that Nabokov’s works try to imitate Nature: “[b]oth were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.” Therefore, in Nabokov’s works, pattern, which is proof of deceptive and intricate genius observed from mimic creatures, is not only a strong suggestion of highly artistic Nature but also a simple rule Nabokov sticks to when weaving his writing.

Once in his Vogue interview in 1969, Nabokov cunningly, yet justly, states that “[d]eception is practiced even more beautifully by that other V.N., Visible Nature” (Strong Opinions 153). It is also interesting to notice that V.N. is not only short for “Visible Nature” but also for “Vladimir Nabokov.” The analogy made by the same abbreviation suggests one of the
patterns that connects Nabokov himself with Nature, which he takes as a greater artist. Nevertheless, what Nabokov does not openly speak here is his deeper exploration of the origin of the universe. In his discussion on Nabokov’s concept of mimicry, Dieter E. Zimmer points out that “[h]e [Nabokov] was very close to postulating a creator whose intention was to amuse men by the subtlety of mimicry” and “Nabokov’s art has profited from an unobtrusive background of metaphysical speculation” (49; 51). Vladimir Alexandrov in his *Nabokov’s Otherworld* remarks:

> In interviews and as well as in his autobiography Nabokov insists that the entire world of nature is also filled with patterning that implies it was fashioned by some higher consciousness: from mimicry among insects to ‘the popular enticements of procreation’—all is the product of ingenious, and, Nabokov stresses, nonutilitarian and deceptive craftsmanship. In other words, Nabokov’s nonfictional writings show that he completely redefines the terms *nature* and *artifice* into synonyms for each other. (17; emphasis in original)

In his *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, Brian Boyd proposes a similar reading of Nabokov’s metaphysics: “[h]is [Nabokov’s] deliberate enactment of the role of a creator beyond the created world becomes a serious imaginative exploration of the possibility of a designing consciousness in the universe” (104-05). According to major Nabokov critics mentioned above, it is clear that they posit Nabokov imagines if there is such a possible existence of consciousness in another dimension. Indeed, in his introduction to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov does refer to a pattern-creator mode inherent in his own works: “[…] ‘someone is in the know’—a mysterious intruder who takes advantage of Krug’s dream to convey his own peculiar code message. The intruder is not the Viennese Quack (all my books should be stamped Freudians, Keep out), but an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (xviii). In this excerpt, it is clear that Nabokov takes himself as deity to his created world. Hence, one can say again that Nabokov’s works in fact mimic Nature, which is full of deceptive and miraculous patterns, and Nabokov himself
imitates the invisible designer of those. Besides, in his “The Poem” from Poems and Problems, it is obvious that, for Nabokov, good Literature reflects artistic patterns inspired from Nature when he describes a genuine inspiration of poetry:

Not the sunset poem you make when you think aloud, […]
but the poem that hurtles from heights unknown
— when you wait for the splash of the stone
deep below, and grope for your pen,
and then comes the shiver, and then—
in the tangle of sounds, the leopards of words,
the leaflike insects, the eye-spotted birds
fuse and form a silent, intense,
mimetic pattern of perfect sense. (14-21)

In this excerpt, Nabokov describes an instantaneous moment when a poem suddenly takes shape in forms of “the tangle of sounds” and “leopards of words” in the poet’s mind. The language of the poem tries to imitate and represent the pattern of perfect sense of miraculous mimicry of Nature. Therefore, it is clear to see again influences “Visible Nature” has on Nabokov’s creation.

Nevertheless, critics such as, Stephen Blackwell, suggests another possibility to interpret the relationship between pattern and its designer in Nabokov:

Nabokov’s primary focus, in nature, lived life, and art, was pattern. The existence of unlikely patterns at all three levels, discernable by human consciousness, is evocative of a creative force, but not necessarily a creator, behind life. And it is by now a truism that Nabokov constructed his works, with their layers of concealed patterns, as an embodiment of this principle—some would argue, as signs of the designer behind the design. (Quill and the Scalpel 87)

What Blackwell argues is that pattern is not necessarily a proof of a creator in another

31
dimension but an awareness of a creative force from the self. It is important to note that Blackwell does not overthrow the creator hypothesis established by numerous leading Nabokov scholars since, after all, imagining “possibilities” is one of the main concerns in Nabokov writings. Besides, in an earlier passage from the same book by Blackwell, he expounds on human creative force applied to interpret causality between visible phenomena:

Nabokov refuses to suspend awareness that the world is given to us by our senses, and in many ways is created by our conscious activity which “animates” subjective reality, or may “invent a cause or modify an effect.” Hence the scientific study of the world is in part the study of human creativity, the hidden art of consciousness in presenting the phenomenal world to us. As we explore the scientific dimensions of Nabokov’s art, we will discover a presentation that finds the maximum of human conscious potential fulfilled only in such quantitatively perceived ones. (18-19).

Instead of attributing the origin of creativity to an invisible creator behind things, Blackwell argues the world is created by human invention. Science, as a human activity of imposing logical patterns to understand the world, is inventing a reality. However, objectively speaking, a real and complete reality is also impossible to access due to the limitation of sensory capacities. In his BBC Television interview in 1962, Nabokov points out such a limitation in capturing an authentic and concrete reality. He openly states that “[r]eality is a very subjective matter” (*Strong Opinions* 10). In order to illustrate on this statement, Nabokov gives an example of various persons with different profession backgrounds when dissecting the reality of a lily:

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
Inferring from this excerpt, it is not difficult to notice that Nabokov thinks reality is approached by an accumulation of details. A specialist in lilies observes more details than a botanist and successively a naturalist, an ordinary person. Therefore, in this series of comparison, a specialist in lilies is the closest to the reality of lilies. Julian W. Connolly in his “Introduction: Nabokov at 100” clearly indicates detail is crucial to Nabokovian reality building: “[h]ighly impatient with vague, impressionistic evocations of consciousness, he [Nabokov] stresses above all an attention to detail, to the smallest, most minute attributes of a given phenomenon” (4; emphasis in original). Furthermore, in his Style is Matter, Leland de la Durantaye proposes a reading of the lily example as “Nabokov tells us here that reality is another name for a sort of infinity; that its approach is infinite (‘an infinite succession of steps’)” (45). In other words, reality is a composite of endless details and there are always steps falling behind to a complete grasp of it. Even though Nabokov is obsessive with depicting and dissecting endless details in both his literary and scientific careers, he is also constantly aware that there is a human limitation in this procedure for Literature and Science are, after all, representations of human consciousness. In Nabokov’s sense, what a writer or scientist can do is to imitate or represent details as accurate as possible. Nevertheless, this does not mean Nabokov is a disciple of so-called Realism. What Nabokov fascinates with is a stylistic way of representing details in an accurate, yet unconventional way.

In a sense, Nabokov suspects the nature of true reality as ample, unusual and unconventional by the evidence of highly artistic mimicry in Nature and the fact that an objectively authentic and complete reality is in fact unreachable, since all the details of it are beyond human absorption. In his BBC-2 interview in 1969, Nabokov responds to such a question of reality:

Your use of the word “reality” perplexes me. To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of
general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials. Now if you mean by "old reality" the so-called "realism" of old novels, the easy platitudes of Balzac or Somerset Maugham or D. H. Lawrence— to take some especially depressing examples— then you are right in suggesting that the reality faked by a mediocre performer is boring, and that imaginary worlds acquire by contrast a dreamy and unreal aspect. 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. *(Strong Opinions* 118)

The paradox Nabokov intuits and proves with an implicit reference to his reasoning of mimicry in scientific career is exactly the unusual nature of authentic reality, the artistic Nature. The real reality, unlike average reality perceived by the general, must be authentically unusual and unreal. As a realistic writer different from a traditional literary sense, what Nabokov endeavors to imitate in his writing is the unusual nature of reality and he is also conscious of himself creating “reality” since whenever a reality is accessed by human consciousness, it becomes “reality.” Therefore, it is no wonder that, in his *Vogue* interview in 1969, Nabokov declares that “[i]ncidentally, I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination— hence my inverted commas around ‘reality’” (154). However, Nabokov is also aware that “[…] even his ideas might someday be embraced automatically, without intelligence, creativity and art— in that case, they, too, would fall within an ‘average reality’ within a ‘new [unknown] context’” (Green 92). When his created “reality” becomes common sense, Nabokov knows his creation will stop reflecting the unusual nature of true reality and degenerates. His individual creation will become a general convention, which no longer triggers “a subjectively perceived texture ” in others.
Pattern, a special concern Nabokov pays to in both Nature and his literary world, may, suggest, as Blackwell moderately proposes, “a creative force, but not necessarily a creator, behind life.” Nevertheless, Blackwell still does not cancel out the possible existence of “the creator” in Nabokov’s metaphysics for Nabokov’s works, lectures, interviews, and private letters, the role of an implicit higher creator lurks in and out. In his “The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov,” Leland de la Durantaye clearly states that “Nabokov’s Creator was, without question, a Deus absconditus. As his translator, what could be more appropriate than that the author become, in his wake, a scriptor absconditus?” (312; emphasis in original) Nabokov, as the Creator’s translator, tries to imitate him as closely as possible.

**Pattern in Life**

As illustrated in the previous session, it is clear to know that the impulse to represent the unusualness of true reality, which in turn becomes “reality,” is the gist of Nabokov’s art. In this session, I am going to argue that in not only Nature but also his life that Nabokov tries to extract implanted patterns. Nabokov’s autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, as his life of “systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections” (*Speak, Memory* 9), is a life reviewed in retrospect for implicit patterns. Nabokov in *Speak, Memory* once stated that “[t]he following of such thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (27). To write an autobiography of one’s life is not only simply a recording purpose but also an exploration and examination of one’s life for implicit fatidic patterns. Nabokov, spending enormous time exploring the mimetic artistry in Nature, directs his analytical attention to his life as well. He remarks that “[n]either in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolscape” (*Speak, Memory* 25). Nabokov senses that there is a life pattern in his life; nevertheless, he does not know the true identity of the maker responsible to that “watermark”
pattern. To this crucial excerpt of understanding the core of both Nabokov’s metaphysics and his autobiography, Leland de la Duranayye in his *Style Is Matter* remarks that:

For Nabokov, this “intricate watermark” stamped upon our life becomes visible first with the aid of “the lamp of art.” It is through the specific form of creation that is art that he is able to first glimpse the sign and signature of his own creation. The watermarks he so carefully stamps on the pages of his works are not just the means through which he discovers his own “intricate watermark,” but are also reflections of the ones he himself saw in creation—the signs and signatures he saw shining through the translucent wings of the butterflies—and through himself. The work of art, for him, was then a means not just to shine a light into the darkness of his origin, but to pay homage to the greater creation of which he felt himself a part. (174)

Leland de la Duranayye’s argument is based on the crucial background of reading Nabokov the scientist and writer—Nature is a great form of artistry. By assuming himself as a part of Nature, Nabokov in his autobiography is also searching for patterns left on his life by an anonymous force. One of such examples of patterns perceived through the aid of “the lamp of art” can be observed in the creation of Nabokov’s first poem, where the coincidental correspondence of pattern between heart and a cordate leaf becomes suddenly transparent to the young Nabokov:

A moment later my first poem began. What touched it off? I think I know.

Without any wind blowing, the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief—the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat, which was refunded at once by a patter of rhymes: I say “patter” intentionally, for when a gust of wind did come, the trees would briskly

36
start to drip all together in as crude an imitation of the recent downpour as
the stanza I was already muttering resembled the shock of wonder I had
experienced when for a moment heart and leaf had been one. (Speak, Memory
217)

On this passage, Christian Moraru comments that “[t]he poem employs temporal referents and
‘the patter of rhymes’ to bring forth its own prosodic pattern, [...] This projection is perceived
as cosmic identification, as an effacing in a flash of the distinction between subject and object,
‘for a moment heart and leaf [having become] one’” (182; emphasis in original). In Nabokov’s
first poem, through the patter of rhymes does the coincidence of creational wonder between
heart and cordate leaf shine through. Nabokov finds a pattern left by an anonymous force on
both human heart and a cordate leaf, experiencing a sense of oneness with Nature, a greater
creation where he is part of it. Therefore, it is no wonder why Nabokov posits that:

It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind’s birth obtainable is the
stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of
twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural
component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird. (Speak,
Memory, 298)

When one comes to realize the affinity between Nature and man-made art, he is on the way to
access one infinite thinking mind, namely, the anonymous creative force behind all. For
Nabokov, Nature is an important model for both art and the development of mind. If one
manages to perceive the cunningness in Nature originally invisible to one’s eyes, he is then able
to experience the wonder of art, to marvel and start to think. To Nabokov, without art, reason
cannot exist: “[...] Homo poeticus—with which sapiens could not have been evolved” (298).
Therefore, the cosmic identification posited by Moraru is not only “an effacing in a flash of the
distinction between subject and object” but also an exploration toward one transcendental
thinking mind.
Assuming the role of an artist capable of reading a greater artist’s work, Nabokov tries to depict patterns he was once unaware of through retrospective inspection of his memories. In other words, one may say that Nabokov takes his life as a creation of an anonymous creative force as well, and therefore, there are implicit patterns for one with equal artistic sensitivity to find and appreciate. As a reader of his life and memory, Nabokov extracts “thematic designs” by re-telling and re-arranging his life events. For example, there is an “evolution of the match theme” that catches his attention (*Speak, Memory* 27). By recounting a childhood match trick performed by General Kuropatkin, Nabokov divines a coincidence inspired by the match-General Kuropatkin pair. On the day when General Kuropatkin was performing a match trick for the first-met child Nabokov, he was ordered “to assume supreme command of the Russian Army in the Far East” (27). Fifteen years later, when both the Nabokov family and General Kuropatkin are in exile, the latter’s identity is exposed to the family by asking Nabokov’s father for a light on a road. On this match-General Kuropatkin event, Nabokov comments that “[w]hat pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through […]” (27). By recollecting memories related to General Kuropatkin, Nabokov detects a match theme secretly coincides with the time of his two meetings with the General and the prosperity and decline of the Nabokov family in retrospect. Such a match theme is a pattern that Nabokov detects in his memories and transcribes in his autobiography. Other more implicit themes that form systematical patterns are studied by several careful Nabokov scholars. For example, D. Barton Johnson in his *Worlds in Regression* points out that the pavilion in Nabokov’s country house in Vyra is a special theme that strings together Nabokov’s three passions of his life in *Speak, Memory*. Johnson proposes that “[t]he pavilion plays a key role in Nabokov’s artistic and emotional development in that it serves as the point of genesis for two of the ruling passions of his life and is closely connected with a third: literature, love, and lepidoptera” (19). The pavilion is the birth place of his first poem, the first meeting place with his first love, Tamara, and is
etymologically related to *papilio*, “the Latin word for butterfly” (20). Brian Boyd in his *Stalking Nabokov* indicates that the image of church and funeral is a repetitive theme that keeps foreshadowing Nabokov’s father’s death, “as if he [Nabokov] had no choice but to reconstitute the insidious designs of fate” (268). Galya Diment remarks that Nabokov is “[a]n ardent and almost mystical believer in fate’s ‘patterned’ and repetitive nature” (45). On “the recurring pattern of flight from political trouble” Nabokov describes in the history of his ancestors, Diment refutes other critic’s reading of it as “a mere joke, a retreat into sarcasm” (45). Instead, Diment presents to the reader that Nabokov treats this theme as a serious compositional need, just as Nabokov reminds in chapter 9 of *Speak, Memory*: “it is only from a compositional viewpoint—because of the amusing thematic echo of Christina von Korff’s part in the Varennes episode of 1791” (183). From the three critics mentioned, it is unquestionable that Nabokov also tries to seek and present patterns hidden in his life through the art of composition. In this way, the originally invisible patterns gradually suggest themselves in the process of recombining and re-reading memories.

In *Speak, Memory*, patterns in both Nature and life serve not only as a literary style of Nabokov’s writing but also clues that reflect Nabokov’s persistent search for a possible existence of timeless otherworld(s). On this, Georges Nivat proposes an insightful reading of Nabokov’s concern on patterns in both Nature and life, and how it is culturally related to the Russian sense of autobiography. Georges Nivat’s argument is initiated by seeing the difference between Nabokov’s autobiography and a more traditional sense of autobiography:

One should first remember that autobiography is the main and central genre in Russian classical literature […] The Russian autobiography was not heir to a more ancient genre—that of the ‘confession,’ which came from Augustine, and was renewed by Rousseau in modern times. It was instead the poetical autobiography of the Russian nobleman who remembers the lost paradise of his ‘double culture’: aristocratic culture and intimacy with nature (and the people, as
By arguing Russian autobiography as also a memoir of lost nature, Nivat suggests a special feature inherent in Russian autobiography: Nature is a necessary part of a complete and a prior memory because man and Nature were one. Further, Nivat continues to argue Tolstoy as “the only nineteenth-century Russian writer who has, in a way, practiced both genres” and state that:

There is of course nothing similar in Nabokov, who is not a Christian, nor a pagan either, but some sort of tentative Oriental thinker, a mind tempted by the seeking of repetitive patterns in our lives that lead to the idea of metempsychosis, or at least some sort of eternal return. […] Nabokov’s interest lie in patterns, structure, and the pleasure that arises from the very fact of recognizing those patterns, which are hidden in the text of reality as a mimetic butterfly is concealed in the structure of the vegetable world. (673)

Nivat also posits that seeking patterns in both nature and life is the key to understand and appreciate Nabokov’s works. Being a believer on the possible existence of an anonymous creative force behind patterns of Nature and life, Nabokov refuses to label that force in any restrictive terms and thus narrows down its possibilities. The persistent attachment to seek patterns in both Nature and life is a typical Nabokovian style. Style, as David M. Bethea observes, is “Nabokov’s linguistic personhood: because it allowed him to join within one created structure the natural world of precise scientific observation and the abstract world of metaphysics and consciousness, it was his pledge of immortality, his active participation in the patterns of divine mimicry” (696; emphasis in original). In Nabokov’s world, his metaliterary practice as an omnipotent author has its metaphysic implication. Through searching and representing patterns found in both Nature and life, Nabokov enacts and imitates the role of the divine yet anonymous creative force. To Nabokov, this levitation of consciousness to a higher state is a necessary means to have a glimpse of the mystery of life and the universe, just as he himself comments:
It is certainly not then—not in dreams—but when one is wide awake, at moment of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction.

(Speak, Memory 50)

In a word, pattern is the guide board that directs Nabokov the mortal’s vision to the creative consciousness beyond. Therefore, Speak, Memory, whose original title was Conclusive Evidence, is not merely a “conclusive evidence of my having existed” as Nabokov declares in his foreword to his autobiography (11). In fact, the original title suggests more; it is a conclusive evidence attesting Nabokov the mortal’s discovery of an anonymous creative force behind Nature and life with rich patterns.

Time ceases to exist: an orchestration of memories

Referring back to Georges Nivat’s observation that Russian autobiography is “the poetical autobiography of the Russian nobleman who remembers the lost paradise of his ‘double culture’: aristocratic culture and intimacy with nature (and the people, as part of that nature),” one may also conclude that Speak, Memory is a composite of two kinds of memories, namely personal memories and memories with lost nature. (673) When one divines there are patterns implicit in one’s life, he is to be absorbed into a greater timeless realm where pattern is the evidence that that man’s life and the greater artifice Nature share the same art from an anonymous creative force. On the natures of memory and timeless, Nabokov once remarks that:

In my example memory played an essential though unconscious part and everything depended upon the perfect fusion of the past and the present. The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present and the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of
time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open. (Lectures on Literature 378)

Nabokov presents that memory is itself a perfect mixture of past and present. However, only man capable of perceiving inspiration of genius can single out artistic patterns in that mixture and turns it into a book in the future and makes it even survive the future of endless future. Therefore, this is “another way of saying time ceases to exist.” Moreover, when one comes to realize patterns of one’s life, he breaks through the walls of time and consciousness, which is another word for ego, that limit the vision of man’s telescope into a timeless and free realm.

Nabokov in the opening of Speak, Memory states that: “[t]he cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (19). It is naturally for Nabokov’s experienced readers to take this statement from him as ironic since Nabokov himself is a famous common sense defier. Following the subject of two eternities of darkness, Nabokov continues to remark: “[n]ature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, [...] [i]magination, the supreme delight of the immortal and the immature, should be limited. In order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much”(20). Here, Nabokov’s attack is on society and religion’s constraints on limiting man’s imagination and political brainwash to make it as “natural” not to think about the world before and after one’s physical life. On this, Nabokov believes that “this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timeless” (20). In addition, Nabokov also observes that “the beginning of reflexive consciousness in the brain of our

---

2 In “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov declares common sense as immoral for it “has trampled down many a gentle genius” and “has prompted ugly but strong nations to crush their fair but frail neighbors.” Besides, “[c]ommonsense at its worst is sense made common, and so everything is comfortably cheapened by its touch.” For Nabokov’s detailed illustration of common sense, please consult “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” incorporated in Lectures on Literature.
remotest ancestor must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time” (21). Hence, the walls of time are also the walls of consciousness. In his “Nabokov, Time, and Timelessness: A Reply to Martin Hagglund,” Brian Boyd mentions an interesting parallel made by Nabokov in a 1951 year book. Nabokov states that:

From the point of view of evolutionary dialectics the hereafter finds its beautiful proof in the following series:

1. Time without consciousness (the lower animal world)
2. Time with consciousness (man=chelovek=Conscious Time)
3. Consciousness without Time (the future of the immortal soul)

The last term is really the thesis of a new series. (475)

In Boyd’s understanding, he argues that “‘[c]onsciousness without Time’ for Nabokov means not consciousness without access to time or without any sense of time, but consciousness not restricted to present time as human consciousness is: consciousness operating in a time that allows direct access to the past” (475; emphasis in original). In other words, Boyd’s reading of the third stage is a synchronization of both the present and the past, when time stops being a restriction for man to find patterns in his life. To Nabokov, those patterns are proof of a creative consciousness beyond, the hereafter. Hence, the third stage of “consciousness without time” is an optimistic belief in the prolongation of human consciousness after death since patterns prove a world beyond exists. Moreover, Nabokov also implies that this triad parallel is evolutionary in terms of development of consciousness. The third stage being “the thesis of a new series” cannot help bringing one to think of Nabokov’s discovery of “the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time” (Speak, Memory 275). On the structure of a spiral, Nabokov describes:

We can call “thetic” the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; “antithetic” the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and “synthetic” the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on. (275)
Starting from the structure, Nabokov views his life as “[a] colored spiral in a small ball of glass” (275). He defines his twenty years in native Russia as the thetic arc, twenty-one years of exile in Europe as antithesis, and the rest period of life in his “adopted country” United States as “a synthesis—and a new thesis” (275). In Nabokov’s life, one can easily discern a transformation of home-exile-home structure. The ampler third arc of Nabokov’s life in America follows the outside of the first arc of life in native Russia. The two arcs share affinity of home with each other; nevertheless, the former is a native home while the latter is an adopted one. Without the antithesis of exile, Nabokov would not come to realize an ample meaning of home from an ampler distance “outside”. In the procession of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov inserts a lament to his lost home:

> And finally: I reserve for myself the right to yearn after an ecological niche:
>
> …Beneath the sky
> Of my America to sigh
> For *one* locality in Russia.

The general reader may now resume. (75; emphasis in original)

Home, to Nabokov, is not only a national identity, but also an ecological attachment to the Nature and environment that help to shape his ego. Nevertheless, this knowledge is achieved after years of exile on a foreign land.

After illustrating the complex structure of Nabokov’s triad spiral, the “evolutionary dialectics” presented in Nabokov’s three stages—Time without consciousness, Time with consciousness, and consciousness without Time—can be seen as an evolutionary of spiral development of consciousness in understanding Time. The lower animal world live in pure Time, and they do not have consciousness to define or quantity it. Man demarcates the totality of Time into “conscious time” for jobs operating in accord with rules that shape man’s ego. The third stage “consciousness without Time” is man’s recapture of pure Time, which will lead him into a timeless state. In the process of seeking an implicit pattern in one’s past, different periods of
memories with same recurring suggestiveness converge in one’s mind for an instant self-realization. The act is itself timeless, since it does not take time as a restriction against synchronizing events happened in different periods of time. In the triad, there is a dialectical structure of Time-conscious time-recaptured Time structure. In the third stage, with a creative conscious not restricted to conscious time, man comes nearest to the anonymous creative force of Nature and man’s life. The mind is set free, and “[i]t is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open” (Lectures on Literature 378).

In the orchestration of personal memories and memory of lost nature in Speak, Memory, one may sense there is also an ecological concern in Nabokov’s recherche a temps perdu (French: search of lost Time). In his “Nabokov and Proust,” John Burt Foster, Jr. argues that “desire leads to artistic euphoria not by way of jealousy but through tenderness and love. Clearly this confrontation with Proust bears directly on Nabokov’s doctrine of ‘aesthetic bliss,’ which connected art to ‘other states of being’ including tenderness and kindness” (476). On “the other states of being,” Leona Toker reads “ ‘[t]he other states of being’ may here be read as a reference to the aesthetic or metaphysical ‘otherworld’— or else as the temporal (and, unfortunately, temporary) states of refined and responsively disinterested consciousness installed in pure duration” (137). By including Bergson’s idea of duration, Toker provides another possibility to interpret Nabokov’s “other states of being.” Duration, a concept from Henri Bergson, is defined by Toker as:

For Bergson, the reality out there, beyond subjective consciousness, is pure time, that is, time as mobility, change, heterogeneity, purified of the spatial dimension. He rejected the view of time as static environment in which one moves; such a picture of reality would be contaminated with space. Most of our discourse on time is, indeed, thus contaminated. (133)

Therefore, a durational reading of Nabokov’s “other states of being” is a state that one is
immersed in a dimension that daily subjective consciousness fails to perceive. It is pure time without restrictions which result in stagnation, invariability, and homogeneity. Nevertheless, among those readings of “the other states of being” proposed by Toker, it is clear they all share an inherent ecological concern, which is brought to light by Laci Mattison. Mattison indicates that:

Intuition is Bergson’s response to utilitarianism, to cause and effect, and so on, which are all results of our intellectual or analytical interpretation of and engagement with life. Later critics like Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, following Gilles Deleuze’s productive buggery with Bergson, emphasize the implicit ecological, even post-human implications of Bergsonian intuition. As we will see, Nabokov’s intersubjective moments of durée reveal a similar ecological insight.

(Mattison 40)

In addition, Mattison points out that “intuition is not only a scientific method (as Deleuze argues in Bergsonism), but also possesses ecological import because it enables us to connect with durations other than our own, both human and inhuman, and so allows us not only to ‘transcend ourselves,’ but to move beyond the ‘human, all too human’” (41). In Nabokov’s “the other states of being,” man experiences intersubjective durations with Nature, with non-human world. It is the timeless moment “when the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open” (Lectures on Literature 378). A similar intersubjective condition can also be found in Nabokov’s metaphysics. Nabokov remarks that he discovered “nonutilitarian delights” in both Nature and art in terms of mimicry (Speak, Memory 125). In Nabokov’s metaphysical world of aesthetics, Nature, art and, man’s life are united one, which implies an anonymous creative force of creating artistic patterns beyond. Therefore, Toker’s readings of “the other states of being” all implies an ecological concern since they are based on the premise of sharing intersubjective identities with inhuman world. Ego is a wall to be broken down. In Speak, Memory, Nabokov
makes a famous declaration that clearly illustrates the nature of “the other states of being:”

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.

(Speak, Memory 139).

This excerpt is a miniature of Speak, Memory the autobiography and the metaphor of the magic carpet is memory itself. Folding the magic carpet is like finding patterns in memories and making them tally with each other. In this process, the order of “conscious time” is thus broken. Therefore, Nabokov confesses he does not believe in time and endeavors to challenge the restriction of time in this way. In this scene, Nabokov also describes a magical moment when things he loves coincidentally converge into the same spot. This miraculous coincidence is the highest ecstasy chance can provide, which in turn touches off a conjecture of a possible existence of an anonymous creator in the working and ecological intersubjectivity with Nature: “a sense of oneness with sun and stone.” Both man and Nature are creations of one anonymous creative force. What Nabokov divines at that moment is a condensed feel of sensing anonymous creative forces in another dimensions, which Nabokov suspects to be “the contrapuntal genius of human fate” or “tender ghosts” capable of synchronizing chances among different dimensions. At that magical moment, different dimensions merge contrapuntally. Hence, one may say that Nabokov intends Speak, Memory to be an autobiography of coincidental patterns, a “conclusive evidence” of a possible existence of the otherworld(s).
Chapter 3

Pale Fire: Delight is Combinational

But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.

(Pale Fire 62-63, ll.806-10)

In his “Nabokov’s Dialectical Structure,” Carol T. Williams argues that, in Nabokov’s metaphysics, “[t]he human eye, he [Nabokov] implies, can see only half of the circle (the rainbow’s arc); the other half must be taken on faith” (165). Pale Fire is exactly a novel which illustrates on the faith in the otherworld. Because of the faith, the poet John Shade composes a 999 lined poem “Pale Fire” to investigate an encompassing answer to seemingly meaningless coincidences in life. The discovery he has is the contrapuntal theme which not only explains the possible existence of the otherworld but also becomes his inspiration of guiding Charles Kinbote to combine a commentary with the poem, whose combination in turn becomes a new work Pale Fire. In this chapter, I am going to expound the representation of the contrapuntal otherworld via coincidence and synchronization of Worlds, the misprint as a word golf game, and the texture of the universe and poetry.

Coincidence and Synchronization of Worlds

Pale Fire is a synthetic novel made of two parts, namely, a 999-line poem “Pale Fire” by John Shade and a lengthy commentary on the former by Charles Kinbote. It is a complex story about an exiled Zemblan king, Charles II the Beloved, who takes alias as Charles Kinbote and flees to New Wye because of Gradus the assassin’s regicide pursuits. Nevertheless, as the story evolves, Charles Kinbote the exiled king and his Zembla saga are suggested to be
inventions of a deranged Russian-teaching Professor Botkin who thinks he is the king himself.

In New Wye, Charles Kinbote befriends a famous poet, John Shade, and intends to have Shade unconsciously write for him an epic about Zembla by instilling his Zemblan memories and adventures into Shade while he is composing his last poem “Pale Fire,” an autobiographical poem about the poet’s dying experiences, his faith and imagination on the hereafter, and laments for his deceased daughter, Hazel. In Kinbote’s forward to Shade’s posthumous poem, he argues that ‘Pale Fire’ takes Shade twenty days to be almost finished before his accidental death and the final line undone, say, line 1000, “would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure, with its two identical central parts, solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings of five hundred verses each” (*Pale Fire* 15).

In his *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension*, William Woodin Rowe states that “[survival] after death and coping with the hereafter are central concerns of John Shade’s poem ‘Pale Fire’” (26). Nevertheless, “Pale Fire” the poem, in Kinbote’s commentary, is interpreted as one inspired by his Zemblan themes and his commentary is made to demonstrate those links between his Zembla and Shade’s life.

To the general readers, Kinbote’s commentary to the poem ‘Pale Fire’ may seem as a digressional gibberish made by a pompous critic; nevertheless, the commentary is in a symbiotic relation with the poem. In his *Literary Symbiosis*, David Cowart remarks that “[…] Kinbote reads and artfully transforms New Wye precisely as he reads and transforms Shade’s poem. The ‘two readings’ complement each other. In each instance, a text—New Wye, Shade’s poem—becomes the host for Kinbote’s Zemblan fantasy, the symbiotic guest” (75). In Kinbote’s case, it is little doubt that he argues his reading of the poem “Pale Fire” helps the reader to understand the nature of Shade’s work. In his forward, Kinbote even ostentatiously states that “[…] without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his […] has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide” (*Pale Fire* 28-9). Despite the ludicrous
Zemblan fantasies Kinbote tries to link with Shade’s autobiographical poem in the commentary, he points out the inseparability between his commentary and the poem. Kinbote argues that the poem is void of meanings without the commentary. Nevertheless, without the poem, Kinbote’s commentary and Zemblan fantasies cannot exist alone, either. Therefore, to Kinbote, the poem and the commentary are in fact in a symbiotic relation. On Shade’s side, it may seem that his poem is parasitized by Kinbote’s commentary, just as the sound of the commentator’s name suggests: king-bot, a parasite-like guest threatening the integrity of the work. However, if one looks into Shade’s poem, one may surprise to find out that Kinbote’s commentary is a complementary proof to justify Shade’s reflection on the existence of the other world(s).

In “Pale Fire,” Shade has hinted a rough structure of the novel Pale Fire in his verse. The two foreshadowing key lines are “[m]an’s life as commentary to abstruse/Unfinished poem. Note for further use” (67, ll.939-40; emphasis in original). Those two lines manifest a strangely pre-arranged coincidence which in some way explains and justifies Kinbote’s commentary from the poet’s side, especially when Shade indicates that the idea is saved for further use. As the reader reads on, it is becoming clear that the novel Pale Fire is exactly in the structure of Kinbote’s life as commentary to Shade’s abstruse unfinished poem. Therefore, Shade’s poem seems to be a strange anticipation in this case.

There have been numerous angles of reading John Shade as the sole author of Pale Fire. Andrew Field argues that since “[t]he most cogent argument for the essential unity of poem with commentary are the rejected draft portions of Shade’s poem, […] there must be more than just a suspicion that one of the two voices belongs, in ventriloquial fashion, to the other” (335). After identifying the oneness of both Shade’s and Kinbote’s voices, Andrew concludes that “[t]he primary author – even without Nabokov’s acknowledgement that Kinbote really does not know

3 In the Index to Pale Fire, listed under the entry of Botkin, V., American scholar of Russssian decent, king-bot is defined as “maggot of extinct fly that once bred in mammoth and is thought to have hastened their phylogenetic end” (Pale Fire 306). As the story evolves, the reader may suspect the true identity of the so-called exiled Zemblan king, who takes alias as Charles Kinbote, could be a deranged Professor Botkin. The reversed syllables of the two names suggest implicit a connection between the two characters.
what is going on in Shade’s poem—must be John Shade” for “Shade, a poet, could create a
madman. A madman such as Kinbote could not possibly create a glacially serene poem such as
‘Pale Fire’” (335-36). In her Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov’s English Novels, Julia Bader
maintains that “Shade, I maintain, has perpetrated his own ‘stylistic’ death within the novel, and
he has then given us a new aspect of himself in the guise of another soul and another artwork
(Kinbote and the commentary)” (31). Nevertheless, Brian Boyd in his “From Zembla to
Appalachia: The Contrapuntal Theme” from Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic
Discovery makes a modification of his previous interpretation of Pale Fire. In that book, he
abandons his previous Shade-as-sole-author reading of Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire, and
proposes a new hypothesis that John Shade, the poet of his poem “Pale Fire” and in the fiction
Pale Fire, together with his homely suicidal daughter, Hazel, guide the mad commentator
Charles Kinbote to finish the synthetic work Pale Fire beyond death. In that book article, Boyd
observes that the Gradus story, having no traces in the Zemblan materials Kinbote tries to instill
into Shade and resonating the most with the content of the poem, must be a new invention
Kinbote adds in his commentary after Shade’s death. He also points out the name Gradus,
“according to Nabokov’s well-thumbed Webster’s Second, is short for Gradus ad Parnassum,”
which is not only “a dictionary of prosody, poetical phrases, etc., once used in English school”
but also “the title of Johann Fux’s celebrated 1725 treatise on counterpoint, which laid the basis
for musical counterpoint over the next two centuries” (209). In addition, by indicating the
allusion to Thomas Hardy’s “Friends Beyond” in Pale Fire and the chronological closeness of
“The Vane Sisters,” one of Nabokov’s short stories, Boyd brings the reader’s attention to the
case of “communication between the dead and the living” (212). Conforming to his new
hypothesis of Shade helping Kinbote to compose the Gradus story, Boyd reads “the contrapuntal
theme” in Pale Fire as “the interplay of life and death, that he had sensed in mortal life and
himself now join the ‘the game of worlds’ by promoting Gradus’s advance” (220). Boyd also
finds the keyword “contrapuntal” in Nabokov’s autobiography, Speak Memory, to elaborate the
meaning of the contrapuntal in Nabokov’s usage and the related concern of human free will.

Boyd writes:

At first it might seem an affront to human autonomy and dignity to find that our lives enacted moves made by forces above us, however “aloof and mute.” Yet although few prize their personal independence as much as Nabokov, his instinct at a moment of rare ecstasy was to feel “a thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.” Like his maker, Shade too feels it not demeaning but liberating to imagine his life as a game played from above. (223-24)

In other words, in Boyd’s reading of Nabokov’s metaphysics, fate and human free will are not exclusive to each other. Instead, there is “an infinite tenderness behind it all, promoting his [Shade’s] imagination to the utmost, taking care of his present with an eye to what will come, in a way that not only permits but promotes his freedom” (225). In the layers of plots in *Pale Fire*, Boyd argues there is “the tender respect for free individuality that Hazel shows toward her father, Hazel and Shade toward Kinbote, and the designer beyond toward them all” (226). Finally, Boyd states that ghost story is a central feature of Nabokov’s works. He points out that:

Ghost stories are nothing new in fiction, but nobody makes them as central, as serious, or as funny, as Nabokov. And nobody before him has written ghost stories that show the dead saying so much to the living, or saying so much through the living, or remaining so unheard. Certainly, no one else has written — and surely no one else has ever imagined — ghost stories where the ghosts remain unseen by every reader, and even by most reader. Nabokov heightens the irony and the implications still further when he insinuates an unnoticed message from the beyond into the very words in which a character denies the presence or possibility of such a message. (227)

Death is not the end of creative consciousness and imagination; “[b]eyond death, Shade, with
his still greater imaginative resourcefulness, seems to have found in Gradus a way to set up a
haunting fugue of echoes to signal his presence, to send out the kind of message from behind
death that he himself would so much have liked to detect in life” (231).

Brian Boyd’s new hypothesis of rejecting Shade as sole author of *Pale Fire*, rather than a
overturn of both Field’s and Bader’s interpretations, is an insightful supplement of reconciling
the otherworld element, clear in the poem ‘Pale Fire’, with their Shade-as-sole-author claims.
Kinbote is not an invention of Shade, nor is he Shade himself. Kinbote and Shade are separate
entities; nevertheless, the ghost Shade, after his death, guides Kinbote to write a commentary to
his poem, just as what Shade’s foreshadowing lines suggest: “[m]an’s life as commentary to
abstruse/Unfinished poem. Note for further use” (67, ll.939-40; emphasis in original). Shade is
influencing Kinbote from the other world and his death is not an end of his combinational talent
but a new dimension for enlarging the scale of his art. More than once, Kinbote points out that
the nature of Shade’s art is combinational. For examples, in Kinbote’s foreword, he argues that
Shade has a “combinational turn of mind and subtle sense of harmonic balance” (*Pale Fire* 15).
In his commentary to line 727-728, Kinbote observes for the reader Shade’s “special brand of
combinational magic” (253). In his own poem, Shade also describes his art as combinational: “I
feel I understand/ Existence, or at least a minute part/ Of my existence, only through my art, /In
terms of combinational delight” (68-9, ll.971-74). Shade is particularly fascinated with puns and
word games for miraculous combinations suggest secret connections. In his work, being an
expert on creating and detecting coincidence of words, Shade also exerts his combinational
talent on the structure of his work. The foreshadowing lines from the poem—“[m]an’s life as
commentary to abstruse/Unfinished poem. Note for further use”—explains and justifies the
existence of Kinbote’s commentary to the poem “Pale Fire” (67, ll.939-40; emphasis in original).
*Pale Fire*, a presentation of Shade’s combinational talent, is exactly a literary curiosity of
combining the poem “Pale Fire” and its commentary into an organic whole. In fact, the title
“Pale Fire” of both the novel and poem has its remote echo in *Speak, Memory*. In a childhood
game that boy Nabokov fascinates with, he describes a candle flame is turned deceptively transparent under the sunshine: “a candle flame (diluted to a deceptive pallor by the sunshine that invaded the stone slabs on which I was kneeling)” (Speak, Memory 58). One’s eyes may not be able to see the diluted pale fire clearly; nevertheless, it still exits and, if touched, is capable of burning one’s finger. Therefore, the title “Pale Fire” actually suggests an invisible force that Shade himself detects in life and enacts after death. That force does not belong to this visible world, just as the invisibility of the pale fire in Nabokov’s childhood game suggests.

The otherworldliness of “Pale Fire” has its germ in an early poem “Music” by Nabokov in 1914. In the poem, Nabokov describes a piece of ethereal contrapuntal music made by the flipping wings of dragonflies around a bellowing fountain and it goes:

"Midst everyday nighttime, there sparkles
a fountain harmonious and high;
it plashes, it quivers, convoking
mirages of lands undescribed.

Around it there noiselessly hover,
immersed in its silvery spray,
dragonflies, their wings in a sparkling
counterpoint to the mirage display.

The fountain, loftily floating
Its wondrous, its silvery voice,
plashes, and quivers, convoking
mirages of love and of loss."
Undisturbed the dragonflies hover,
like diamonds sparkle their wings,
encircled by snowy-white roses
that follow the font as it sings.

'Midst everyday nighttime, there sparkles
a music with billowing might,
that plays like a fountain harmonious
o'er the crowd's noisome, philistine plight.

With its delicate plashing the fountain
has dissolved the sinister shade—
the dragonflies' counterpoint mounting
were sparse echoes now-sparkling souls made.

In the last stanza, Nabokov likens the feeble sounds made by the sparkling and flipping wings of
dragonflies’ to sparse echoes made by sparkling souls. Here, one is to discover an otherworldly
force in coordinating the contrapuntal music between the fountain and the dragonflies. In *Pale
Fire*, the dissolved “Shade” could be one of the souls who contribute to the contrapuntal
commentary made by the king-bot like Kinbote. In Thomas Karshan’s introduction to this poem,
he indicates that “[i]n short, in this adolescent fountain already glisten traces of the ideas which
Nabokov would elaborate into his great novels, most of all *Pale Fire*, in which the poet John
Shade’s epiphany of a possible transcendental realm is symbolized by another sparkling
fountain” (*Selected Poems* xiv-xv).

In a nutshell, *Pale Fire* is a work about coincidence and synchronization of worlds. In
this sense, miraculous coincidences are the proof of different worlds synchronizing with each
other and a master coordinator behind this synchronization. In his *Worlds in Regression*, D.
Barton Johnson gives anagram as a good example to look into the coincidence and synchronization of worlds in Pale Fire:

Anagrams play a vital role in our understanding of the labyrinth of Pale Fire and show once again that such word games are one of the ways in which Nabokov’s fictional worlds relate to each other. The failure of the characters to recognize their literal kinship with each other is but a dimension of their failure to find the name of their creator who orchestrates the letter play that makes up their worlds. Each anagrammatic letter transposition effects a reordering of the novel’s fictional cosmos and betrays the presence of the master anagrammatist. (73)

Therefore, coincidences such as anagram imply worlds of different dimensions. In Pale Fire, just as the invisibility its title suggests, invisible forces from the other worlds are its main concern. Nabokov the invisible master anagrammatist designs the ghost Shade to guide Kinbote in composing the commentary to the poem “Pale Fire”, which in turns becomes Pale Fire. There are complex worlds within worlds in Pale Fire, which is to be termed as “worlds in regression.”

On this, D. Barton Johnson insightfully observes that:

If we blend Nabokov’s fictional cosmology with his presumed personal cosmology, we find an infinite succession of regressive worlds: the fictional worlds inside that of the author-persona who in turn aspires to that of his author (the real one from our point of view) who stands in the same relationship to his author ad infinitum: worlds in infinite regression. (2)

In Nabokov’s works, the hint to observe the multi-layers of worlds is coincidence and Pale Fire is a good example on this phenomenon of “worlds in regression.”

Life Based on a Misprint and the Contrapuntal Theme

In “Pale Fire,” the contrapuntal theme Shade discovers in life is a synchronized feeling of existences of worlds. In the poem, Shade reports he once sees a fountain in his dying
experience. Coincidentally, after his escape of that death, he accidentally reads a woman’s story in a magazine which is similar to his. The woman also sees a fountain in her dying experience. Excitedly, Shade drives all the way to the woman, hoping to learn more about her experience. Nevertheless, it turns out that the woman in fact sees a mountain in her dying experience and the fountain Shade reads in the magazine is just a misprint of mountain. On Shade’s way home, he feels anguished but suddenly realizes that:

Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!

I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
And stop investigating my abyss?
But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: 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,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (62-63, ll.803-16)

Shade, a poet who doesn’t stop probing into the possibility of a life after death or beyond this reality, seems to suddenly realize that Life is itself a writing being contrapuntally composed. It is a game of worlds. The misprint may at first sight seem to be a failure of one’s hope. Nevertheless, just as David S. Rutledge indicates in his Nabokov’s Permanent Mystery, “flaws are part of the complete structure, suggesting the presence of the higher levels” (52). In fact, fountain/mountain is exactly a word golf game that Kinbote mentions in his commentary to Shade’s line 819: “playing a game of worlds.” Word golf is a game of substituting any one letter
of the initial word so as to form another word. For example, Kinbote mentions one of his records is “hate-love in three” (262), which I conjecture to be hate-have-hove-love. In Kinbote commentary, he indicates that “[m]y illustrious friend showed a childish predilection for all sorts of word games and especially for so-called word golf” (262). Therefore, to Shade, the fountain/mountain game is like a contrapuntal word golf game some invisible forces play with him from beyond. Different worlds merge into each other through the fountain/mountain word golf game.

Some may read the misprint as a parody of the metaphysical exploration of the hereafter; however, just as Nabokov himself indicates in his BBC-2 interview in 1968, “John Shade in *Pale Fire* leads an intense inner existence, far removed from what you call a joke” (*Strong Opinions* 119). J.B. Sisson succinctly summarizes Nabokov’s works as: “[t]he search for a greater consciousness is portrayed throughout Nabokov’s work as a search for the clues that might permit a breakthrough vision, if combined properly” (175). In “Pale Fire,” the word golf game of fountain/mountain, which Shade divines to be a contrapuntal theme of life, is the clue he finds. Vladimir E. Alexandrov reads the contrapuntal theme Shade discovers as “[t]his idea is so comforting that Shade does not rail against the impossibility of knowing who ‘they’ are who ‘play’ with mortals and terrestrial events both great and small. […] And this realization is enough for him to have ‘Faint Hope’ in an afterlife” (*Nabokov’s Otherworld* 195). Besides, in “The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov,” Leland de la Durantaye interprets *Pale Fire* to be “Nabokov’s work which most concerns itself with patterns. It is not only itself densely and intricately patterned, it graphically portrays characters in search of patterns both earthly and divine” (322). To Shade, the word golf game of fountain and mountain is a game played in the earthly dimension by invisible forces beyond. Fountain and the misprint mountain suggest that it is not text but texture which unlocks the window opening to the beyond. In his *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, Michael Wood reads the moment when Shade finds out the word golf game fountain/mountain and the
The contrapuntal theme as:

What happens now is crucial to Shade and his poem, and an essential feature of Nabokov’s own theology for skeptics. Shade does not retreat to his own earlier conviction of the truth of his vision, and he does not (exactly) give the vision up. He takes the misprint as the meaning, a wilder, more entertaining instance of order and design in life. (190)

Hence, the contrapuntal theme is a theme about feeling an orchestration of worlds. Shade, a poet with artistic combinational talent, intuits the co-existence of worlds through the misprinted mountain. Nevertheless, the misprint has Shade have a deeper understanding of life.

Shade, a poet who doesn’t stop probing into a possible existence of consciousness after death or beyond this reality, seems to suddenly realize that life is itself a writing being polyphonically and contrapuntally composed. The quest of “Life Everlasting” in a physical or a spiritual sense is no longer the priority; the real point is to outwit one’s contingent life and rearrange all the events and coincidences into a meaningful whole: “Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find/ Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind/ Of correlated pattern in the game,/ Plexed artistry, and something of the same/ Pleasure in it as they who played it found” (Pale Fire 63, ll. 811-15). To Shade, one’s life being transformed into a form of exquisite artistry is the meaning of life to pursue in a seeming meaningless life. A real artist sees the fountain/mountain pair as cunning word golf game while the ordinary take it as a meaningless failure. Therefore, in “Pale Fire”, the ciphered meaning of life starts from Shade’s combinational tries of different events. In his inquiry into the possible existence of the hereafter, Shade discovers the pattern of games contrived by invisible forces beyond. In the end, Life is art is the conclusion Shade has and the proof to the existence of the hereafter he suspects.

In Kinbote’s commentary to Shade’s line 810 “a web of sense,” one is to find the importance of the hereafter in Pale Fire. The quest to the hereafter is at the same time an elevation and expansion of one’s consciousness to one’s life. Kinbote indicates that one of
Franklin Lane’s manuscripts before his death “curiously echoes Shade’s tone at the end of Canto Three” (261). In the manuscript, Lane writes that:

And if I had passed into that other land, whom would I have sought?...Aristotle!--Ah, there would be a man to talk with! What satisfaction to see him take, like reins from between his fingers, the long ribbon of a man's life and trace it through the mystifying maze of all the wonderful adventure...The crooked made straight. The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above--smeread out as it were by the splotch of some master thumb that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line. (261)

Lane’s imagination of passing into the other land indeed echoes with Shade’s “Faint Hope” of the possibility of the hereafter at the end of Canto Three. In his “The Daedalus-Icarus Theme in Nabokov’s Fiction,” Julian W. Connolly reads Lane’s manuscript as:

Here, the writer envisions taking a higher perspective on the intricate design created by human life and disclosing its essential sense and direction. Such a perspective, he supposes, might be attained in the world beyond the grave. This vision—of the potential for existence after death and the attainment of a higher perspective and understanding of human experience—reflects a fundamental impulse in the novel *Pale Fire*. (157)

The contrapuntal theme Shade realizes brings a higher perspective he takes on his life. In Shade’s long detours of investigating into the possibility of the hereafter, he comes to understand that the word golf game of fountain/mountain is one being played by forces in a contrapuntal otherworld. At that moment of realization, Shade’s life becomes in fact a thread, rather than meaningless fragments, twisted in accordance to the maze of life designed from forces beyond. One may not be able to know the nature of the designers of the maze and games; nevertheless one can feel them for miraculous coincidences are the best proof of their possible existences. After Shade’s death, likewise, he also plays a contrapuntal game with Kinbote from
the otherworld. He guides Kinbote to compose the commentary to his unfinished poem. Shade’s combinational talent reflects not only on his intuition to detect the word golf game of fountain/mountain but also on the structure of *Pale Fire*. *Pale Fire* is a synthetic fiction of two lives being made in a contrapuntal structure, say, John Shade’s autobiographic poem as the thesis and Charles Kinbote’s autobiographic commentary as the antithesis. The main texture of both Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary is about reading an anonymous contrapuntal force as a coordinator of coincidences and events. In other words, they regard their lives as fictions or games contrived by a contrapuntal designer. Shade, after his death, joins in the invisible forces and takes on a similar job to influence Kinbote while he is composing the commentary. Hence, the structure of *Pale Fire* is also a contrapuntal outcome of forces from different worlds. In a nutshell, *Pale Fire* presents the contrapuntal theme in not only life but also Literature so as to testify a similarity of the two.

**The Texture of the Universe and Poetry**

Due to the contrapuntal theme inspired by the word golf game fountain/mountain, Shade starts to realize that life, like writing, is by nature artistic. Further, the poet Shade continues to consider his own existence in a greater artifice, the universe, and the verses go as:

> 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
Shall wake at six tomorrow, on July
The twenty-second, nineteen fifty-nine,
And that the day will probably be fine;
So this alarm clock let me set myself,
Yawn, and put back Shade’s “Poems” on their shelf. (*Pale Fire* 68-69, ll. 971-84).

Shade, being a poet, imagines the universe as a poem composed in an iambic way which he does
to his “Pale Fire.” To Shade, a creator of verse is similar to Creator of the universe. In a
conversation Kinbote records in his commentary, a colleague reports that “[…] the old man, you
know, at the Exton railway station, who thought he was God and began redirecting the trains,
was technically a loony, but John calls him a fellow poet” (238). Like God, a poet recombinesthis own universe. If the recombination is right, the poet gets closer to the mind of the greater
creator. Therefore, Shade suspects his poem about the possibility of the hereafter may be similar
to “the verse of galaxies divine” in terms of meters. In his “Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire,*** Brian
Boyd observes that:

> Throughout the poem, from the impact of its opening image, Shade exploits the
tension between himself as stay-at-home poet and the endless unknown that he
suspects surrounds him. What he feels as his best clue to the beyond is his sense
of the infinite possibilities of design present everywhere, his confidence in a
harmony behind things that his own work can reflect, even in a world where his
daughter has recently taken her own life. (179-80)

Shade’s poem is designed to reflect the texture of the greater unknown universe; both are works
about synchronization of different worlds and hence contrapuntal in nature. In *Vladimir
Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice*, Paul Duncan Morris also wisely points out “Shade’s
apprehension of the correlation between the universe of his art and life and the cosmic universe
confirms the legitimacy of his metaphysical intimations” (371). To summarize, *Pale Fire* is a work of man’s art reflecting how a man’s life is arranged by the invisible forces responsible to the operations of the universe. Shade’s combinational art is used to get closer to that greater art executed from the beyond.

Delight belongs to those who are able to detect the patterns of games they are in and Shade is one of them. In his poem, Shade once mentions that “[…] we are most artistically caged” (*Pale Fire* 37; l.114). Nevertheless, this does not mean that man is doomed not to be free in *Pale Fire*. Through tries of combining clues left by invisible forces beyond, one, if careful enough, is to find secret patterns of one’s life. At that moment, those discovered patterns cease to be limits of one’s life but trophies of one’s successfully outwitting the scheme designed by invisible forces beyond. Shade, an Icarus-like figure, takes a consciousness flight with a pair of wax wings to have a bird’s eye view over the maze of his life. What he sees is not only the pattern of his life maze, but also evidences of the hereafter and consciousnesses beyond that maze. At the highest plateau of his consciousness, Shade experiences an ecstasy of having worlds joined in him. With his combinational talent of reading clues, Shade detects that life is nothing but a contrapuntal work of this and the other worlds.
Conclusion

I often question myself where the power of Nabokov’s language is from. From my present limited knowledge of him, I infer that one of the sources could be his ambition of synchronizing the coincidence of “patterns” in Fate, Nature and Writing. Another could be his cunning use of the traditional romantic imagination on an apotheosized Nature.

Nabokov in *Speak, Memory* once stated that “[i]he following of such thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (*Speak, Memory* 27). Thematic designs, as a pattern in Nabokov’s writing of his past, a pattern he thinks Fate secretly implanted in his life, and to a more ecological phase, a pattern of artistic mimicry he observes from Nature, are ones keeping cropping up. In Nabokov’s recreation of his past, imagination (as he admits directly or indirectly) is a link to connect all the above three patterns. In his autobiographical imaginative space, time is not an obstacle to him from synchronizing patterns happening in different spaces. Nabokov’s literary genius of matching and corresponding these events and their intrinsic patterns makes his works ones of coincidence and timelessness.

However, coincidence and timelessness themselves alone don’t make his works powerful. It is Nabokov’s ambition to relate Fate and Writing to the grand romantic body of imaging Nature to be where the power of his works from. In *Speak Memory*, Nabokov implies several times that coincidence of pattern and timelessness are themes pertaining to Nature. For example, from a magic trick of a patterned sheet of paper in his childhood, he realizes “[c]oincidence of pattern is one of the wonders of nature. The wonders of nature were beginning to impress me at that early age” (157). Another example is that “[i]t is like a momentary vaccum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal” (139). From the above two quotations, the first one suggests that mimetic coincidence of patterns is one of the marvels in Nature, which is also a technique he applies in his writing, and thus attaining his works a sense of what he calls an imagination of scientist and precision of
artist. The second example is a combination of coincidence, the timelessness of Nature and an obscure cunning work in the other world; Nabokov’s ambition to synchronize patterns between this and the other worlds is where his artist talent from.

Structurally speaking, the three books I tackle with are composed in a contrapuntal structure. In Lolita, the two voices of Dr. John Ray, Jr and Humbert Humbert make up an eponymous novel bearing a sexually provocative nymphet’s name. In Speak Memory, it is the multi-stages of “Nabokov” being so stylistically condensed that procure itself an epic-like status in literary society. As to Pale Fire, it is formed by two works of John Shade the poet and Charles Kinbote the commentator being, if not nonsensically, jammed together in a fiction also bearing the same name of Shade’s autobiographical poem.

In Lolita, structurally, there is a contrasting feature between John Ray Jr., PhD and Humbert Humbert. A confessional love story turns out to be a psychiatry case study that Humbert may loathe. Humbert and Quilty, as his alter ego, are elucidated from Humbert’s paranoiac suspicion of the clues Quilty leaves. “The clues he [Quilty] left did not establish his identity but they reflected his personality, or at least a certain homogeneous and striking personality; his genre, his type of humor—at its best at least—the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me” (Lolita 284). Yet, contrast is derived from affinity logically; Humbert and Quilty are rivalries in this competition in terms of intelligence. Metaphysically, there is also the contrast on the different dimensions of two worlds which can be noticed from the word choice of nymphet—human versus a spirit pertaining to Nature—and the Hegelian epiphanic moment of a life pattern in the driving scene.

In Speak Memory, structurally, the contrast’s on Nabokov’s clear self-awareness (and he also reminds his reader) that his autobiography is never consisted of truthful memories that readers would expect to gather from the genre autobiography.

I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate
harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past. I like to imagine, in consummation and resolution of those jangling chords, something as enduring, in retrospect, as the long table that on summer birthdays and namedays used to be laid for afternoon chocolate out of doors, in an alley of birches, limes and maples at its debouchment on the smoothsanded space of the garden proper that separated the park and the house. I see the tablecloth and the faces of seated people sharing in the animation of light and shade beneath a moving, a fabulous foliage, exaggerated, no doubt, by the same faculty of impassioned commemoration, of ceaseless return, that makes me always approach that banquet table from the outside, from the depth of the park—not from the house—as if the mind, in order to go back thither, had to do so with the silent steps of a prodigal, faint with excitement. (170-71)

Imagination and sometimes, exaggeration are the counter-melodies to be imposed on an already existing melody, say, the raw and unmodified memory in his mind. Nabokov’s memories are “an autobiography revisited” as his book subtitle suggests; he is writing from the outside, as a visitor, rather than from the inside, as a possessor of his memories. Metaphysically, it’s the “something enduring” that serves as the main reason to write his autobiography, an endeavor to perceive something beyond this physical temporality, a grander Time where things remain unchanged. Also this Time is also experienced in his first poem writing experience: the coincidental correspondence of patterns between heart and a cordate leaf:

A moment later my first poem began. What touched it
off? I think I know. Without any wind blowing, the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief—the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat, which was refunded at once by a patter of rhymes: I say “patter” intentionally, for when a gust of wind did come, the trees would briskly start to drip all together in as crude an imitation of the recent downpour as the stanza I was already muttering resembled the shock of wonder I had experienced when for a moment heart and leaf had been one. (217)

Nabokov also mentions in his autobiography that “[c]oincidence of pattern is one of the wonders of nature. The wonders of nature were beginning to impress me at that early age” (157). In the excerpt above, the juvenile Nabokov perceives the coincidental patterns between a mortal’s heart and the Nature’s cordate leaf which engender his first poem. It’s the fissure of time being the dawning moment when coincidental patterns are discerned in two worlds, where Time and a creating force suggest themselves.

In Pale Fire, it is structurally contrapuntal on the sense that two contrastive parts and characters, the poet John Shade’s autobiographical poem and the critic Charles Kinbote’s commentary are combined together to form a fiction called Pale Fire. Metaphysically, in the evolvement of two separate parts, say, the poem and the commentary, the reader gradually comes to know that there implies a two-worldness structure in each of them: Shade and his imagined the hereafter and demented Kinbote with his fantasized Zembla, “a land of
reflections” (*Pale Fire* 265), where the people speak in Zemblan “the tongue of the mirror” (242). In addition, in *Pale Fire*, the poet Shade guides Kinbote to compose the commentary. The combinational style of *Pale Fire* is a trace of Shade’s combinational talent.

In the contrapuntal structure, layers of plots and voices superimpose the other; a theme may suddenly encounter its anti-theme as the story goes, just in the way a piece of contrapuntal music is composed. Nevertheless, in addition to this somehow apparent structure that Nabokov exerts in composing the three books, there is something more behind this structure of theme and anti-theme, and that is relate to Nabokov’s meditation on the essence of Time and its implication of another world or another possibility beyond human consciousness—a philosophical question that haunts in his *Lolita, Speak, Memory* and *Pale Fire*. In other words, we can say that the intersection of this corporeal world of a popular sense of linear temporality with another world of a temporal sense which cannot be understood in a spatial measurement sense is one of the main concerns in the three books.

Therefore, contrapuntal otherworldness is a significant key to understand Nabokov’s writing. The existence of the otherworld is like a hidden counterpoint attached to his works all the time. In fact, Nabokov’s writing topic is mainly concerned with the structure of synchronizing worlds. For example, In *Lolita*, this intersection of two worlds can be discerned not only from Humbert’s often word-choice of fate but also amplified itself in the driving scene after he kills Quilty. “In a way, it was a very spiritual itch….A kind of thoughtful Hegelian synthesis linking up two dead women” (*Lolita* 349). In the later sentence from the quotation, Nabokov forms a “sentence” leaving out the use of a verb and the tense attached to it. The temporality here is ongoing, an in-betweenness between two time-demarcating units, which is also Nabokov suspects to be the real essence of Time in his interviews. Besides, here, the Time is also rendered in a kind of contrapuntal structure, a thesis and an anti-thesis, where Humbert finally comes to realize the pattern of his life being unconsciously composed by an anonymous designer beyond the awareness of human consciousness. The contrapuntal theme found in *Pale
Fire, as an approach to look into Nabokov’s literary world of beyondness, implies a conscious coordinator of coincidences in his literary opuses. To Nabokov, a good writer should also be an expert reader in analyzing works of a greater designer of the world. In his works, Nabokov also pays close attentions to create the contrapuntal otherworld he intuits in real life. To Nabokov, a first rate writer is godlike. He is able to detect a contrapuntal otherworld in life and re-create that otherworld in his works.


Schweighauser, Philipp. “Metafiction, Transcendence, and Death in Nabokov’s


