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Inspector Gregory: "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"
Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."
Inspector Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night- time."
Holmes: "That was the curious incident."
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "Silver Blaze"
Holmes: "I followed you."
Sterndale: "I saw no one."
Holmes: "That is what you may expect to see when I follow you."
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Devil's Foot"

I would like to emphasize a distinction that was highly significant for Nabokov and provides, in my view, some clarification as to his seeming enthusiasm for both objective and subjective notions of truth and fact. I allude here to his distinction between "average reality" and "true reality": in a 1968 interview, he declared, "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 ... 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). Here I find myself moved and impressed by Nabokov's willingness to conceive of himself within a historical continuum in which he participates as a crucially subjective and artistic contributor: it is conceivable, he speculated, 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." "True reality" depends on the teller's telling of the tale — in relation to the usual, it must be "unusual"; in relation to its construction, it must be creative, perceptive, and subjectively artistic.

Writing is central to Nabokov's insistence on "true" rather than "average" reality: by writing, the creative perceiver is able to imaginatively fashion and "refashion" memories "retrospectively, by the very act of evoking them" (*Strong Opinions*, 142), in order to tease out their elusive essence and beauty. Accordingly, Nabokov defines art in this way: "the act of retention is the act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events" (*Strong Opinions*, 186). All perception is thus intertextual, dependent on comparison and interaction.

The creative apperception of individual details — arrived at and represented through writing — constitutes the means by which Nabokov differentiated "true reality" from "average reality." In this regard, even modifications or lapses of remembered details were less important than creative self-consciousness: "The distortion of a remembered image may not only enhance its beauty with an added refraction, but provide informative links with earlier or later patches of the past" (*Strong Opinions*, 143). For Nabokov, then, a "remembered image" may be "distort[ed]" in order to achieve an "enhance[ment]" of "its beauty" and to attain "informative links" with specific details of the past that occurred earlier or later than the particular remembered image — all this in the service of "true reality." "Average reality," on the other hand, is the vulgar and banal concocting of typical scenarios that explain events in

the general case — for instance, that V. D. Nabokov was targeted for assassination due to his political beliefs.

I would like to explore one specific instance of Nabokov's autobiographical representation and compare it to the biographical materials that create a distinctly alternate mode of reality: it may, in fact, be possible to assert that the mode of depiction selected by Nabokov in his autobiography was his artistic attempt to transform the "average reality" of his life — the "record of his adventures" — into the "true reality" of his life — the "story of his style" (*Strong Opinions,* 155). In this regard, I am interested in the change or lapse in narrative point of view — from the first person narrative perspective ("I") to the second person narrative voice ("you") that occurs in the concluding, fifteenth, chapter of Nabokov's memoir, *Speak, Memory*. In a 1949 letter to Katharine A. White, Nabokov described this chapter as "couched, so to speak, in the second person (being addressed to my wife) and is an account of my boy's infancy in the light of my own childhood" (*Selected Letters,* 95).

Now there are ample reasons to justify the stylistic gesture of Nabokov's concluding his memoir in the form of a second person intimate communication with his wife: it is a definitive and passionate indication of Nabokov's love for Vera; the narrative, as a result, spirals inward (echoing his discussion of the spiral as a "spiritualized circle" at the beginning of chapter fourteen) to focus on one living family at a time of great conflagration at the onset of World War II; it is a diminishment of large things (politics, war, history) and an expansion of the "small" (one life, one family, one set of special and particular detailed circumstances) (*Speak, Memory,* 167); it connects Nabokov's early recollections as a son to his later memories as a husband and father.

Nevertheless, a switch in point of view from the first person voice to the second person voice is a markedly striking gesture for a writer. If the "you" were a generalized "you," then the effects might not be so extreme, but then the narrative might achieve an "average reality": instead, the "you" is, very definitely, Nabokov's wife, Vera. As a result, the reader / audience is excluded from the narrative — a text that had been previously concerned with directing itself in the first person to that reader/audience. What had previously been a highly individual but recognizable generic autobiography is transformed into a personal letter — a letter that conveys, for the reader, in addition to the thrill of its eloquence and poignance, a touch of discomfort as a result of the voyeuristic element of reading someone else's personal mail. The overall communicative enterprise is thwarted in terms of the apparent form: if we assume that a writer's purpose is, as Nabokov stated, "shared by writer and reader" in the mutual appreciation of artistic nuance, then why publish a chapter whose only designated reader (the author's wife) has already read the text in manuscript form? The esthetic "combination of images" that, according to Nabokov, the reader desires in writing is to be ascertained indirectly, as it were, through the "impersonation" of the author or the father or the family as represented in the writerly private communication between husband and wife (*Strong Opinions,* 40). I use "impersonation" here in an analogous sense to Nabokov's use of it to describe his authorial self as represented in his "On a Book Entitled *Lolita.*"

In proceeding to isolate one aspect of the autobiographical material Nabokov presents in the second person, I would like to emphasize that it is only one element within a larger tableau: in no sense do I mean to suggest that what we are about to discuss constitutes the principal or exclusive or even the dominant "meaning" of the last chapter of *Speak, Memory.* It is, however, an example of what Nabokov felt the creative writer must possess: "the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world" (*Strong Opinions,* 32). I compare two versions of a scene on the beach in the south of France because the comparison illustrates, I feel, significant contrasts between biography (and its intentions of informative, historical narrative) and Nabokov's conception of autobiography (as a hybrid form between history and fiction). According to Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years,*

Nabokov's various readings and attempts at seeking potential sites for his family's relocation from Germany resulted in a forced absence from his family that lasted from 18 January to 22 May of 1937. Sometime in February of 1937, during that interval, Nabokov began an affair with Irina Guadanini.

Reunited with his wife, son, and mother in Prague in May of 1937, Nabokov nevertheless felt the need to write to Irina, perhaps, in Boyd's words, to have "access to a more elastic time" or to "revisit the impulse of a past instant" — he wrote to achieve understanding, "true reality"; but such a goal is realized as the result of a process, a sustained endeavor of writerly recombinations. He wrote Irina of his "fourteen years of cloudless happiness" with Vera; but he was not ready to admit the affair to his wife: when she questioned him (after she had received an anonymous letter concerning the affair), Nabokov denied everything. About this, too, he needed to write to Irina: "The inevitable vulgarity of deceit ... and suddenly your conscience puts its foot down and you see yourself a scoundrel" (Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years,* 438-439). Note here how the narrator resorts to the second person: a stylistically sophisticated and elegant way of conveying the more vulgar and average, "I see myself as a scoundrel." Boyd recounts that Nabokov "could not stop" corresponding with Irina (439): he asks her to write to him under the assumed name of Korff, his grandmother's last name, but also the last name of Nabokov's great grandmother, the woman with whom his grandfather had conducted an affair while she had been married (Boyd, 24).

In July, the Nabokovs journeyed to Cannes, and it was there that Nabokov gave expression to his pangs of guilt and confessed his affair to Vera. To Vera's suggestion that he ought to join the woman he loved, he replied, "not now." Thereafter, the marital relationship reestablished itself: but throughout, Nabokov continued to write surreptitiously to Irina. In fact, in August, when Vera discovered that despite their marital rapprochement her husband had been writing to Irina stealthily, Nabokov wrote of even this to Irina in secret! Boyd recounts that he "reported [to Irina] such storms that he thought he would end in a madhouse." But to Irina's written offer to come to Cannes, he replied in writing that "she should not come" (Boyd, 440-441).

On the morning of September 7, 1937, Irina Guadanini appeared in Cannes and confronted Nabokov and his young son on the beach. According to Boyd, "although he still loved her, he told her, he felt too much for his wife. He asked her to leave, but she would not, and when he and Dmitri settled on the beach she sat down some distance off. An hour later Vera joined her husband and son. When the family all left for lunch, Irina remained. Later, Nabokov told Vera about Irina's vigil" (Boyd, 443). All of this had been for Nabokov a source of profound stress and emotional anguish: when he told Vera initially about the affair it had been the most dreadful experience of his life with the exception of his father's death (Boyd, 440). But here on the beach, in the presence of his son and the two women he loved, he was forced to formulate an image of response: he went on playing with Dmitri, continuing with his normal family routines while his mistress sat in witness to the entire representation.

Nabokov would later describe (in relation to his interviews) what he was struggling to achieve on the beach: he sought "to construct in the presence of my audience the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether displeasing personality" (*Strong Opinions,* 158). It may perhaps be surmised that Nabokov embraced the elements of "average reality" (the domestic tranquility of his "cloudless" family life) in order to reject the "true reality" of his affair with Irina: but this would be to reverse the significance of Nabokov's sense of these oppositional terms. His family life, his closed circle of love, his private harmony that had been so recently disrupted leaving him with images of madhouses — this was his "true reality." Love affairs, momentary flings, secret missives, adultery: these were the elements of "average reality" — it is to Nabokov's credit that he rejected "average reality" utterly even when it coincided with his own behavior, his own mortal (as opposed to artistic) inclinations. The part of himself that

was inclined toward "average reality" he recriminated as a "scoundrel." What remained for Nabokov was his desire to achieve "true reality": his need to provide the "act of individual creation" in order to "animate a subjectively perceived texture" (*Strong Opinions,* 118) — as an artist, the way for him was through writing.

The next month, the Nabokovs left Cannes for Menton, where they took rooms in town, and where Nabokov adopted a beach / writing routine not unlike the regimen he had been applying in Cannes. Boyd reports that "life in orange-palmy- blue Menton seemed far, far better than in Cannes" (445). Since Menton is less than forty miles from Cannes, could it be that Menton was so appealing for the simple reason that it represented a "true reality" of family and fidelity unsullied by the "average reality" evoked by the personal visit of Irina Guadanini and its concomitant vulgar emotional strife?

When, ten years or so later, Nabokov came to write his "true reality," his artistic retelling of the memories connected with the south of France in the late thirties, he chose to write in the second person, in the form of a letter to his wife. Boyd has written with insight about Nabokov's characteristic method of evoking his own situation in fiction (or even autobiographical fiction): "And in the rare cases in which Nabokov depicts a marriage like his own, where two people do transcend solitude in the warmth of their love, he shuts us out" (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years,* 284-85). Here is Nabokov at the end of *Speak, Memory,* a memoir in the first person: "The years are passing, my dear, and presently nobody will know what you and I know" (295). Nabokov and his wife share a secret knowledge, and we, as readers, are "shut out." Nevertheless, a photo caption on the facing page comments: "the last chapter of our European period was to end as it ends in this book" (294). Nabokov is acknowledging the reader's presence at the end of the book even as his style endeavors to shut out that same reader! Despite the shift to the second person, the reader is indirectly addressed: why?

In Nabokov's "average reality," he committed adultery and wrote secret letters to his mistress, shutting out his wife. In his "true reality," he writes a private letter in public to his wife, shutting out his mistress. But in both forms, there is a reader: in the "average reality," that reader was Irina, the reader of his secret letters; in the "true reality," the reader is the Reader — and when the reader/mistress is shut out as a result of the public letter, Nabokov continues to write to that reader in secret. He returns with his wife to "snapshots" of their past, especially concerning the birth and early childhood of their son, Dmitri. It was this same Dmitri who was with his father on the beach when they were unexpectedly confronted by Irina, this same Irina who sat at a distance eavesdropping on the family of three. Why are we reading about these private matters? Why are we being told what only Nabokov and his wife will know? "I must know where I stand, where you and my son stand" (297): why is Nabokov asking this of his wife in our presence?

When asked by his wife why he did not go to the woman he loved, Nabokov answered, "not now." Now, in his writing, *now* is his time to make evident through the drama of his style the choice that he *did* make: ten years or so after the fact he is able to express the "true reality" of that event — by shutting out the intruder on his closed circle of private harmony. In his memoir, he goes to Vera: he abandons that furtive presence that had been lurking on the fringes of his life; the "story of his style" reveals his locking out Irina and his holding off the reader at arm's length. "In Prague, to which we journeyed to show our child to my mother in the spring of 1937, there was Stromovka Park..." (306): these elegant tones reveal nothing of Vera's receipt of the anonymous letter about the affair — or of Nabokov's denial and his second person description of his deceit to Irina: "you see yourself a scoundrel." He proceeds to Vera: "Roots, roots of remembered greenery, roots of memory and pungent plants, roots, in a word, are enabled to traverse long distances by surmounting some obstacles, penetrating others and insinuating themselves into narrow cracks" (307). Nabokov's "true reality,"

apprehended through writing by recalling an esthetic view of the past, the past transformed into art, does not include "average reality," does not include common affairs, places emphasis on fidelity, loyalty, the "roots of memory" and their ability to "traverse long distances by surmounting some obstacles": the visit to Prague, in retrospect, was the last time Nabokov would see his beloved mother; the visit to Prague marked Nabokov's reunification with his cherished family after an unfortunate absence of five months, an absence during which he had behaved in a manner appropriate to "average reality" by admitting an additional adulterous presence to their private threesome. Nevertheless, "the trees and flowering shrubs turned resolutely toward the sea" (307): even in artful "true reality," the scene of memory must be revisited.

Nabokov includes within his second person letter to Vera (which the Reader is meant to see): a "snapshot taken by my wife of our three-year-old son Dmitri (born May 10, 1934) standing with me in front of our boardinghouse, Les Hesperides, in Mentone, at the beginning of December 1937" (256). Why tell his wife that she has taken the picture? Why inform his wife of the age or birth date of their son? Wouldn't these details be known to her? For that matter, why revert to the third person for the function of a photograph caption? All of this reinforces our realization that the letter to Vera is a stylistic device, a strategy, a mechanism by which "true reality" is attained: in this case, that creative version of events proceeds from Prague to Mentone, omitting the account of any separation, or estrangement, or of time spent in Cannes — also eliminated is Irina Guadanini and the scene on the beach.

And in its place is a new scene on the beach: one of the most beautiful and poignant Nabokov ever created. Watching his son play on the Mentone beach, Nabokov imagines that young Dmitri found a shard of pottery "whose border of scrollwork fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882 ... until this assortment of parts, if all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the absolutely complete bowl...now mended by *these* rivets of bronze" (308-309). Nabokov mentions "the same shore" rather than Mentone in describing where he found his fragment because, according to Boyd's biography, young Vladimir would have been in Nice (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years,* 48- 49) in 1903 when he found his shard: but the "story of his style" that Nabokov wants to express (to Vera and to us) is Mentone — Mentone where his marriage was renewed at long last, Mentone where his family circle was again closed, Mentone where the purity of his love would provide him with "all space and all time [to] participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off ..." (*Speak, Memory,* 297).

There are actually three scenes on the beach; and if we recount them it may be possible to appreciate the unique representational insight that Nabokov was able to achieve by means of his writing — all in the process of transforming biography ("average reality") into autobiographical fiction ("true reality"). The first scene on the beach depicts Nabokov's "average reality": the beach is Cannes, and the actors are Vladimir, Dmitri, Vera, and Irina.

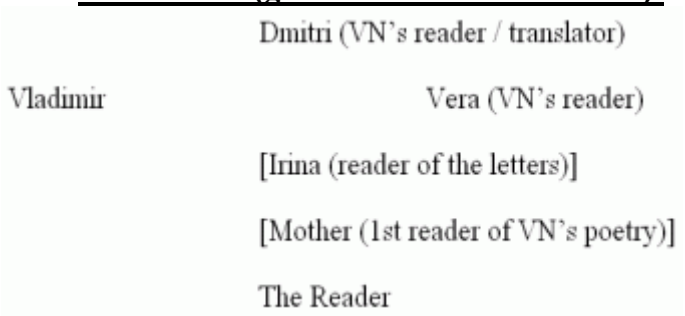
Scene One (Cannes):

The second scene on the beach corresponds with Nabokov's conception of "true reality": the beach has been "refashion[ed]" to Mentone, the actors are now Vladimir, Dmitri, Vera, and (in place of Irina), Vladimir's mother, Elena Nabokov. The animating principal is: "The distortion of a remembered image may not only enhance its beauty with an added refraction, but provide informative links with earlier or later patches of the past" (*Strong Opinions,* 142-143).

Scene Two (Mentone):

The third scene on the beach expresses what made Nabokov uniquely Nabokov: the transcendent significance that writing had for him. In an earlier study (*Freud and Nabokov*), I discussed this theme: "Writing was, for Nabokov, a method of self-analysis. In its duality, in the process of shaping a world by depicting it, he came to know himself as both a subjective and objective self" (38). It is this concern with writing as self knowledge that motivates Nabokov to keep writing, at all costs: first to Irina, then to Vera, and then to the reader — all the while employing "deceit" and "originality" as his "notions of strategy" (*Speak, Memory,* 289) in order to camouflage what Derrida refers to as the "scene of writing": "Like all those who write. And like all who know how to write, he let the scene duplicate, repeat, and betray itself within the scene" ("Freud and the Scene of Writing," 229). Instead of Cannes, or Mentone, there is a generalized south of France, a warm, fertile climate for creativity and love. The actors on this stage are Vladimir, Dmitri, Vera, and (replacing Irina and Mother, but in another sense coexisting with them) the Reader. Nabokov wants us to read him in his "true reality"; he creates his art, his "true reality," so that we will read it, so that it will be read as writing, as the "story of his style."

Scene Three (generalized south of France):



In this sense, it is "most satisfying" to recall the last words of *Speak, Memory: "*something in a scrambled picture — Find What the Sailor Has Hidden — that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen" (310). The three scenes on the beach are really one scene: visions of a "perfect past" (*Selected Letters,* 94) that circle back to Nabokov's enduring insight — the textuality of life, the inescapable subjectivity that lurks within the perception of beauty of all transparent things.

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