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Playing Nabokov

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Artistic originality has only its own self to copy.
Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*.
Nabokov plays his game quite well.
Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*.

I

Although Nabokov was also a scholar, teacher, butterfly hunter, and composer of chess problems, his autobiography is that of a writer. The "Mademoiselle" chapter of *Speak, Memory* suggests, in fact, that he composed the autobiography expressly to protect his private past from the encroachment of his fiction. Nabokov noticed, he says, that whenever he tried to preserve "some treasured item" in a novel, "it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be safe from the intrusion of the artist… The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle" (95).

Self and artist, man and fictionist: Nabokov describes the relationship between his life and art in terms of the *Doppelgängers* of his novels. This is not surprising, however; as Geoffrey Green says in his book on Nabokov and Freud, "writing is a reproduction of the self… an outward projection of an internal conception" (8). In a sense, to write is to impersonate the self.[1] Jorge Luis Borges describes this tension between the "I" and the writer even more explicitly: "I live, I let myself live, so that Borges can weave his tales and poems, and those tales and poems are my justification… Years ago, I tried ridding myself of him and I went from myths of the outlying slums of the city to games with time and infinity, but those games are now part of Borges and I will have to turn to other things. And so, my life is a running away, and I lose everything and everything is left to oblivion or to the other man. Which of us is writing this page I don't know" (279).

Speak, Memory is a writer's autobiography precisely because it concentrates on this struggle between self and artist, man and fictionist. It emphasizes two distinct characters in Nabokov's life: a self whose adventures and discoveries are chronicled in the autobiography; and a narrator, in the guise of "Memory," who reshapes those experiences to reveal their artistic significance. Nabokov may have first explored the nature of this doubled consciousness in a game that he played with "Lidia T." in that "poor little oasis of miraged youth," the Crimea after the revolution (247). This "little oasal game of our own invention" functions as a *mise en abyme* of *Speak, Memory* itself (248):

> The idea consisted of parodizing a biographic approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past as perceived by a doddering memoirist who recalls, through a helpless haze, his acquaintance with a great writer when both were young. For instance either Lidia or I (it was a mater of chance inspiration) might say, on the terrace after supper: "The writer liked to go out on the terrace after supper…" (248)

Brian Boyd's biography confirms that Nabokov did indeed play such a game, in imitation of Pushkin's biographers, with Lidia Tokmakov (*Russian* 147). The passage in *Speak, Memory* implies that they each took the role of memoirist; according to an unpublished chapter of

[1] Because of the novel's fictional foreword, Nabokov says in "On a Book entitled *Lolita*," "any comments coming straight from me may strike one — may strike me, in fact — as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book" (313). He often refers to his public persona as an artifice, "the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether unpleasing personality" (*Strong*, 158).

Conclusive Evidence, however, Nabokov alone narrated his "own movements or words in the reminiscent, slightly mincing manner [she] might be supposed to develop many years later when writing her memoirs" (quoted in Boyd, *Russian* 147). In other words, he described *himself* in the third person by appropriating *her* voice.

This distinction is important, because as a writer Nabokov constantly plays the game of "parodizing a biographic approach" — that is, of framing one's (auto)biography as a fiction that announces its own fictionality. Already, in his teens, he had found such mock biography to be the perfect metaphor for the reciprocal relationship between man and fictionist. Consider this very passage, which transforms the Nabokov who is narrating *Speak, Memory* into a "doddering memoirist," whose subject is the life of Nabokov "the great writer" when young. "Projected, as it were, into the future," the biography becomes the book that we are reading. In fact, this self-conscious game is a good paradigm for all of Nabokov's metafictional strategies.

Nabokov plays this game twice more in *Speak, Memory* — each time in reference to his writing. Describing the composition of his first poem, for example, he parodizes a biographic approach in order to illustrate the "manifold awareness" (219) of the writing process:

> Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York licence plate) passes along the road … and trillions of other such trifles occur — all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus. (218)

In the first series of causes — "Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say" — Nabokov again transforms present experiences into a fictive third-person past. "Vivian Bloodmark" is an anagram of "Vladimir Nabokov"; *Speak, Memory* was completed in Ithaca, New York. This information, along with the immediate context — his first attempt at writing — suggests that Vivian Bloodmark represents Nabokov's alter ego, his writing self (the androgynous name further emphasizes the dissociation).[2] The difference between these two personas is especially appropriate in this passage, which suggests that the poet, who feels everything at once, can be self and artist simultaneously.

Nabokov continues this game in *Speak, Memory* when he alludes to a certain Russian émigré novelist:

> But the author that interested me most was naturally Sirin. He belonged to my generation. Among young writers produced in exile he was the loneliest and most arrogant one. Beginning with the appearance of his first novel in 1925 and throughout the next fifteen years, until he vanished as strangely as he had come, his work kept provoking an acute and rather morbid interest on the part of the critics. (287)

Sirin, of course, was his own nom de plume in the '20s and '30s. Here Nabokov not only refers to his writing in the third person but slyly assesses it, even quoting an anonymous critic who is, presumably, another avatar of himself:

> Russian readers … were impressed by the mirror-like angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences and by the fact that the real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech, which one critic has compared to "windows giving upon a contiguous world … a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train of thought." (288)

This passage actually describes its own stratagems: Nabokov's various disguises are reflected in those deceptive mirrors, and "Sirin" becomes, finally, a figure of speech for his identity.

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[2] Vivian's anagrammatic sister, "Vivian Darkbloom" (whose gender is at first equally ambiguous), appears in *Lolita* as Quilty's offstage collaborator and co-author, and Nabokov published his "Notes to *Ada*" under her name. He also used several other pseudonyms, especially during his early years as an émigré writer; see Boyd, *Russian* 118, 180, 187, 261, 509.

This self-conscious game is also a useful paradigm for Nabokov's fiction, with its constant authorial self-reference, its themes of doubling, incest, and mistaken identity, and, of course, its parodies of autobiography and biography. Many of his novels feature paired artists — the hero who finds "aesthetic bliss" in life, and the dispassionate trickster — who repeat the contrast of man and fictionist. Inevitably, however, Nabokov's awareness of himself as both subject and observer affects his narration most profoundly. He specializes in first-person narrators who are "narrauthors," in Lokrantz's term: they are literate and artful enough to have written the fictions in which they appear. In *The Eye*, for example, Smurov tries to escape his identity by describing himself in the third person; in *Despair*, Hermann imagines that he is his own voyeur. Other novels, like *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*, feature not one narrator split in two, but two possible narrators who may be the same person. Thus all of Nabokov's incestuous siblings, schizophrenic narrators, and troubled doubles may ultimately express his own divided consciousness. In a sense, then, each novel replays the game of playing Nabokov.

Nabokov's self-consciousness raises troubling questions, however. Is it "autoplagiarism" — his term, in *Speak, Memory* (37), for using details from one's life in one's fiction? Is it narcissism, as some critics have claimed? To ask these questions, of course, is to ask what happens when Nabokov's readers, critics, and biographers attempt to join the game. A case in point is Nabokov's encounter with his first real-life biographer, Andrew Field, which has been interpreted in various texts: Nabokov's 1974 novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*; Field's 1977 biography, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*; and Roberta Smoodin's 1985 novel, *Inventing Ivanov*. Each of these books becomes, inevitably, another performance of Nabokov's game.

II

Look at the Harlequins!, the last novel Nabokov published in his lifetime, is not his best. But because it began in response to Field's biography (Boyd, *American* 606), it explores the tension between man and fictionist more explicitly than anything else he wrote. *Look at the Harlequins!* is a further refinement, then, of the game of "parodizing a biographic approach." Yet, despite its many mystifications, self-referential allusions, and illusory realities, it also serves as Nabokov's ingenious answer to charges of autoplagiarism and narcissism.

Like many earlier novels, *Look at the Harlequins!* is a fictitious autobiography. However, its ostensible author, Vadim Vadimovich N., gradually senses that he is merely the impotent narrator of someone else's novel. He describes his life as

> … a clumsy conspiracy, with nonsensical details and a main plotter who not only knew nothing of its real object but insisted on making inept moves that seemed to preclude the slightest possibility of success. Yet out of those very mistakes he unwittingly wove a web, in which a set of reciprocal blunders on my part caused me to get involved and fulfill the destiny that was the only aim of the plot. (3)

Even his autobiography's title is part of this conspiracy. As other critics have pointed out, its acronym, "lath," means a wooden frame used in construction — just as the plot of Nabokov's novel is the frame of the narrator's life. Vadim's relationship with Nabokov thus repeats the struggle between self and artist: he even describes their interaction in terms of its reciprocity, and defines "the writing of fiction" as "the endless re-creation of my fluid self" (81).

Look at the Harlequins! not only smacks of "autoplagiarism." It takes the game of playing Nabokov to new lengths, as when Vadim tries to remember his last name:

> I definitely felt my family name began with an N and bore an odious resemblance to the surname or pseudonym of a presumably notorious (Notorov? No) Bulgarian, or Babylonian, or, maybe, Betelguesian writer with whom scatterbrained émigrés from some other galaxy constantly confused me; but whether it was something on the lines of Nebesnyy or Nabedrin or Nablidze (Nablidze? Funny) I simply could not

> tell. I preferred not to overtax my willpower (go away, Naborcroft) and so gave up trying. (210-11)[3]

Indeed, many readers cite the novel as proof of Nabokov's narcissism — claiming, for example, that it shows him to be "a deeply isolated man, whose wealth and success have done little to temper this isolation" (Hyde 37).

Yet I think that these readers miss the point. Although Nabokov stresses Vadim's resemblance, he also denies their identification. "People tend to underestimate the power of my imagination and my capacity of evolving serial selves in my writing," he complains in *Strong Opinions* (24). Accordingly, Vadim is calculated to make a fool of anyone who reads the novel as a *roman à clef*. Annoyed by Field's search for the secret behind his art, Nabokov created a hero whose private life — complete with four wives and an incestuous relationship with his daughter — *appears* to provide, in Vadim's words, " a *catalogue raisonné* of the roots and origins and amusing birth canals" of Nabokov's own fiction (7). Appearances are deceiving, however. Dean Flower's comment on Nabokov's notoriously contrived interviews seems appropriate here: "the point of these fictions is not so much that [he] must conceal his private life … as that he expresses himself better by adopting a persona" (148).

Look at the Harlequins! is thus an ingenious answer to charges of autoplagiarism and narcissism, and an inspired resolution to the conflict between man and fictionist. If Vadim is analogous to Nabokov, then the *fictitiousness* of his apparent reality suggests that the reality Nabokov shares with his reader may be equally elusive. "Playing Nabokov" is, after all, only a game.

III

From its opening pages, Andrew Field's *Nabokov: His Life in Part* seems less a biography than a metafictional struggle for textual authority, waged by a set of mismatched doubles from one of Nabokov's novels. Field warns the reader that "I have had difficult moments as I worked on this book" (8); admits that "the book you hold does not come with the recommendation of Vladimir Nabokov" (27); and calls his subject, then working on a sequel to *Speak, Memory*, "my competitor" (32). At one point he even acknowledges his lack of objectivity: "I was upset. There are , I must confess at the outset, ways (and I am not thinking of his many virtues and attributes) in which I am too much like Vladimir Nabokov to judge him" (9).[4] Such intrusive narration, such admissions of narrative unreliability, and, most important, such struggles with one's double for authorial control are already familiar to Nabokov's readers. Indeed, at times Field's biography reads like Nabokov's most successful performance of his own self-conscious game.[5]

The contest between Field and his subject appears in the biography as a dialogue between competing authorial voices. Like a novel, *His Life in Part* begins *in medias res* with a conversation. As in a Nabokov novel, moreover, that conversation — an argument between Field and Nabokov about the title — concerns the very book in which it appears. It even recalls specific instances in which Nabokov's fictional writers agonize over titles or debate

[3] This mnemonic effort echoes similar feats in Nabokov's autobiography (when he recalls the name of Colette's dog) and his other fictitious autobiographies (for example, when Humbert recalls the name of Valeria's Russian colonel in *Lolita*).

[4] For further information on Nabokov's quarrel with Field, see *Selected Letters* 511, 513, 515-19, 523-24, 536, 544-45n 555-586, and Boyd, *American* 580-82, 602-6n 609-14, 616-19.

[5] Field even compares interviewing the Nabokovs to a game of deception and disguise: "The Nabokovs are professionals, and there is little doubt that one of the attractions of the game we played was watching how everyone else played his part" (11). Nabokov constantly impersonated himself, Field says, although he seemed "too good an actor to be satisfied with a lifelong character part" (25). He also impersonated his own biographer, as in his game with Lidia: on one memorable occasion, Nabokov "was playing [Field's] part" while Field himself was "playing Russian" (12).

them with their muses: Claire Bishop tells Sebastian Knight, for example, that "a title must convey the colour of the book — not its subject" (72). Field's and Nabokov's initial conversation also recalls the dialogue, embedded in *Nikolai Gogol*, in which Nabokov refuses to change anything in *his* biography, despite his publisher's request. Yet such conversations evoke *Ada* more than any other work by Nabokov. Just as *Ada* is strewn with the comments of narrators Van and Ada — parenthetical glosses and emendations that reflect various stages of composition — so *His Life in Part* is peppered with exchanges between Nabokov and Field, as well as marital banter in which Vladimir Vladimirovich and Vera Evseevna give differing responses to the biographer's questions. However, *His Life in Part* is not a happy commingling of voices, as *Ada* was, but a pitched battle between them.

Field quotes Nabokov's complaints and rebuttals in boldface, to distinguish them from his own text; yet they shape the reader's response to the biography, just as they visually dominate almost every one of its pages. Field also introduces several remarks with the words *Nabokov says*. This italicized phrase apparently indicates that he is the only authority for the remark — but it prompts the reader to listen to Nabokov, not Field. Including Nabokov's voice may be candid, innovative, and reminiscent of his self-reflexive narrative strategies. It may even be necessary, given Nabokov's warning that he would sue "for breach of contract, slander, libel, and deliberate attempt to damage my personal reputation" if the book did not reflect his suggestions (*Letters* 517). Once Field allows Nabokov's voice in the biography, however, he forfeits his own authority. In a sense, Nabokov did become his authorized biography's ultimate author: he retained legal counsel, issued "200 pages of Critical Comments," revised the typescript, and even checked the proofs (*Letters* 516, 544-545). Certainly his remarks, in boldface and italics, remind the reader that he has already read it — and found it wanting.

Rather than the author of *His Life in Part*, then, Field becomes its narrator. His only way to beat Nabokov at this game is to appropriate *his* voice, to prove that he is writing the biography as Nabokov himself would have done. Accordingly, he points out biographical themes in Nabokov's fiction (28-29), traces as many instances of "autoplagiarism" as he can find,[6] and cites Nabokov's unconventional biographies of *The Gift* and *Nikolai Gogol* as models. Yet this strategy is doomed from the beginning; after all, Nabokov's unreliable narrators always claim to have authored the text in which they find themselves.

Field's most interesting attempt at impersonation occurs when he describes Nabokov's first romance in St. Petersburg:

> As the two furtive young lovers went their rounds of the city's museums and parks and cinemas and other nooks of semi-privacy, the young man's love for the girl blended and evidently got confused with his love for the cold and beautiful city without trees. The pale violet mists and light fogs of St. Petersburg, its smart trotting horses, the grey-blue of officers' greatcoats on promenade. Beautiful ladies of fashion, urchins and beggars, red-cheeked doormen and the sound of their brooms, a sombre policeman on a bridge. The cupolas of cathedrals sparkling in the pure blue and milk spring sky, and the slightly smaller churchlike edifices of the old-fashioned letter "b" on the city's galaxy-like profusion of richly illustrated shop signs … the elegant and smooth full stops of the city's squares, the creak of the barges on the splendid Neva as they press up against one another. (104)

This imagery is characteristically Nabokovian: precise sensory details; a comprehensive catalogue juxtaposing large and small, transcendental and mundane, sky and advertisement; analysis of the mnemonic associations of a letter's architecture (neatly mirroring the passage itself, in which hundreds of letters are arranged to evoke a city); and, finally, the transposed subject matter (the lovers' trysts) which continues to govern the imagery — for example, the

[6] Field claims that Nabokov "invited me to mine material for the Crimean period of his life" from *Glory*, but "later withdrew his invitation" (129); and that "there is a cargo of personal details" in the novels of the 1930s, if only "a fine mosaic of details which are quite independent of the plot" (197).

creaking of the barges "as they press up against one another."[7] Even more Nabokovian is the comic deflation which ends this rhapsody:

> I have decorated the preceding passage — a dreadful macédoine according to Nabokov — with pictures and images from Nabokov's early poetry. Nabokov assures me that he has **never** seen sombre policemen on bridges or heard creaking barges in St. Petersburg. (104)

Triumphantly, Field discloses his sleight-of-hand: he described St. Petersburg in Nabokov's own "pictures and images," as if he himself were Nabokov. But Nabokov reclaims those words by claiming, ironically, that they are false: he never saw those policemen or heard those barges.

Field's possible rejoinder — "but you *said* you did" — remains unspoken. It is as if he finds himself checkmate. Any reply would force him to admit that he has confused Nabokov's art with Nabokov's reality — assuming that because the poem's "speaker" saw or heard something, the poet himself did. It also would force him to acknowledge Nabokov's ultimate authority: after all, only the poet knows if he heard that creaking on the Neva! Field would thus have to admit that what is art in Nabokov's hands is careless scholarship in his own.[8] Even when Field's words are Nabokov's, then, Nabokov has the last word.

Indeed, Nabokov's comment — "a dreadful macédoine" — might refer to the entire biography, which seems to combine the Doppelgängers, biographical quests, and metafictional struggles of Nabokov's fiction. For Field, unfortunately, the game of playing Nabokov always ends the same way: he must acknowledge *him* as "the onlie begetter." He himself must play the blundering biographer and hapless critic to Nabokov's artist, the Charles Kinbote to his John Shade, in a masquerade that Nabokov has already scripted and cast. Field becomes, then, one of Nabokov's unreliable narrators — like Hermann in *Despair* — who hopelessly aspire to the textual authority and metatextual reality of Nabokov himself. Ironically, and perhaps unintentionally, *His Life in Part* illuminates Nabokov's own mock biographies.

IV

Roberta Smoodin's 1985 novel, *Inventing Ivanov*, reenacts the game of playing Nabokov once again. This novel, which Smoodin describes as "the most conscious Nabokovian thinking I've done, whether you call it adaptation, emulation, imitation, or whatever" (Letter 2), was inspired by Nabokov's life and art, as well as by his encounter with Field. More precisely, *Inventing Ivanov* grew out of some anecdotes that she was told by someone who knew Nabokov "in his Parisian, tennis playing, lady killing days," and an ensuing discussion about the dangers of literary biography and Nabokov's quarrel with Field. The novel thus "came to life as a meditation on the puzzle of biography" (2), and "the relationship of the biography/biographer to the life of the subject" — especially when that subject is Vladimir Nabokov (3).

Smoodin's novel features an expatriate Russian novelist, poet, and translator named Ivan Dmitrievich Ivanov, whose life is another Antiterran mirror of Nabokov's: a privileged, trilingual childhood in prerevolutionary Russia; an education in exile at a British university; a father who was assassinated in Berlin; a brother who died in a German concentration camp; and a wife to whom all his books are dedicated. Ivanov's *oeuvre* also resembles Nabokov's: a critical study (on Chekhov); early novels written in Russian; and later novels written in

[7] In another essay I use the term "amphiphor," after Nabokov, for such extended metaphors which are governed by transposed subject matter.

[8] Such artistic touches on his biographer's part aroused Nabokov's suspicion. As Field admits, Nabokov praised biographies "only for their documentation" (5-6), and proclaimed that " — **A serious biography is not adorned by good stories**" (22; original emphasis); yet *His Life in Part* not only experiments with the narrative conventions of biography, but ignores such scholarly apparatus as notes, bibliography, and index.

English, including *Annette*, the love story about a professor and a young girl that brought him fame and fortune. These works appear, opposite the title page, in a list of publications which recalls the "Other Books by the Narrator" in *Look at the Harlequins!*. More important than such allusions, perhaps, is the fact that Ivanov's discomfort with biography seems to echo Nabokov's: "the old biographer-killer" (216), he mocks interpretations of his life and art made "by over-fertile and over-banal imaginations" (127), and complains during an interview: " 'You have before you a unique mind, a mind like few others, if only because it has produced novels in two languages, if only because it has produced novels and poems and essays and stories at all, and you ask questions that can only command banal answers designed to make that mind sound like all others' " (196). In his life and art, then Ivanov resembles Nabokov. He also resembles Nabokov's impersonations of himself — from "Vivian Bloodmark" to the anonymous émigré novelist whose existence haunts Hermann in *Despair*, Vadim in *Look at the Harlequins!*, and many other galley slaves.

The plot of *Inventing Ivanov* repeats the game of "parodizing a biographic approach." Protean, playful, wily Ivanov is allowing E. Michael Ross — a self-absorbed assistant professor — to write his biography. Ross eagerly begins his research, confident that being Ivanov's biographer will win him tenure and fame. But his progress is hampered by Ivanov's fabrications, conundrums, and practical jokes, as well as his infatuation with Ivanov's beautiful white-haired wife. One of Toss's students is in love with him, too — but she can't compete with his private fantasy of achieving academic glory on Ivanov's coattails, and then marrying his widow after his death. In Nabokovian fashion, the novel alternates this story, Ross's search for the real life of I.D. Ivanov, with excerpts from the autobiography that Ivanov himself is writing. That autobiography — which resembles *Speak, Memory* and imitates Nabokov's prose style — is actually a fictitious biography, since it is narrated in the third person. When Ivanov's wife reads it, for example, she wonders whether it is "autobiography? Memoir? Fiction masquerading as either?" (236).

Playing Nabokov in fiction rather than biography, Smoodin does not become trapped within the game, as Field did. She achieves this, in part, by transforming the story of masculine rivalry — so pervasive in Nabokov's novels and Field's biography — into a feminist metafiction, in which neither male artist nor male commentator has the last word; instead, the female muse — Ivanov's wife — does.[9] In the original game that Nabokov played in the Crimea, he appropriated Lidia's voice in order to describe himself in the third person. In a sense, Smoodin's novel returns her voice to the conversation.

But Smoodin also transcends the game as Nabokov himself did — by acknowledging its illusory reality. Just as Vadim is confused with another, more successful émigré novelist in *look at the Harlequins!*, so Ivanov's biographer seeks information about *him* in a memoir by the musical cousin (Nicolas Nabokov, perhaps?) of "an émigré novelist more famous than Ivanov" (132). This memoir was recommended to Ivanov's biographer, in turn, by a more successful colleague. Smoodin describes how Ross searches through the "Mus-" to "Nat-" section of the university library's card catalogue,

> snapping cards ahead one after the other, amazed at the collection of work on the more famous émigré novelist, despairing of ever finding the book by his cousin: perhaps this is all a prank, [he] thinks, that fellow has nothing to worry about, he's having fun with me, he doesn't want me to be competition. Perhaps this is a phantom cousin, a fictional cousin, made up on the spur of the drunken moment, to send me on this spurious chase. (133)

[9] "As a woman reading Nabokov's work and life," Smoodin says, "how can one not be fascinated by the shadowy presence, always, of Vera Nabokov? This was part of the reason for writing the novel" (Letter 2). *Inventing Ivanov* thus reinvents Nabokov's life and art from a female point of view — re-inscribing within them, according to Julia Kristeva's definition of the feminine, "that which is not represented, that which is unspoken, that which is left out."

The passage successfully imitates Nabokov's style: the subtle movement from third-person narration, to free indirect course, to stream of consciousness; the long, complex sentences, with their series of parallel clauses; the startling insertion of a new word in a familiar phrase, in "on the spur of the *drunken* moment"; and the wordplay of "spur" and '"spurious," which resonates from one phrase to the next. More important, this passage constitutes another *mise en abyme*. The famous émigré novelist, with a musical cousin and a last name filed between "Mus-" and "Nat-", is obviously Vladimir Nabokov. And this search through that novelist's works — a search haunted by suspicions of a nonexistent book, a "phantom" memoirist, and a "spurious" paper chase — alludes to Nabokov's own self-reflexive narratives. By repeating such metafictional strategies, Smoodin maintains the spirit of Nabokov's biographical game — to the extent that, after Ivanov's death at the novel's end, his real life still remains elusive outside his art.

Inevitably, then, Nabokov's readers, biographers, and critics find themselves repeating his mock biographies of himself — whether they write his "life" as if it were one of his fictions, as Field does, or write fiction based upon his life, as Smoodin does. Even this essay cannot help but replay Nabokov's own superior performance of the game.

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