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Source: *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, Vol. 3 (2011), pp. 73-92

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/storyworlds.3.2011.0073>

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# Nabokov's Experiments and the Nature of Fictionality

Brian Richardson

The case of a character in a novel bearing the name or likeness of its nonfictional creator dramatizes the fault line that separates fiction from nonfiction, a distinction more durable than many care to acknowledge yet not as unbridgeable as others would aver. We can get a sense of what is at stake in this distinction by glancing at the way Nabokov begins his afterword, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”: “After doing my impersonation of the suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, 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” (1970: 313). One of the great intellectual achievements of modern narrative theory was to establish a fundamental differentiation between the narrator and the author and to ensure that the positions advocated by the one are not simplistically and erroneously pred-

icated of the other. And this distinction is most important for the understanding of *Lolita*. But the separability of author and narrator does not mean that the two cannot be brought closely together (even in *Lolita*, as we will see).

The differentiation between the author and a fictive being who closely resembles the author was central to the theory and practice of classic modernist fiction, and it is worthwhile to review it here. In the major novels of Joyce, Proust, and others, some of the characters are undisguised versions of their authors' earlier selves who think thoughts and undergo events similar to those experienced by their makers. For the most part such correspondences are ultimately adventitious: our reading of *Ulysses* is unchanged if we learn that the young Joyce actually had a conversation on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with John Eglington and others in the National Library in Dublin, rather like Stephen Dedalus does. Or, more deviously, readers' interpretations of *Ulysses* are not likely to change even if they learn that it was not the young Joyce but rather Oliver St John Gogarty, the model for Buck Mulligan, who paid the rent for the Martello tower Joyce stayed in, whereas in the novel it is clear that Stephen pays the rent and Buck thereby becomes the "usurper." In these cases, the life of the author is simply convenient raw material that will later be reproduced or radically reworked in the storyworld depending on the requirements of the composition of the text. If Dedalus needs to be dispossessed of his lodging, he will be, whether or not Joyce actually was. The relation then between life and art is one of largely indifferent correspondences. Insofar as the author's life forms an appropriate narrative trajectory, its salient details will remain; insofar as those details fail to cohere, new ones will quickly be invented.

In this context it is illuminating to recall the reflections of author Christopher Isherwood on the character-narrator whom he created and who bears the same name: "In writing *Goodbye to Berlin*, I destroyed a certain portion of my real past. I did this deliberately, because I preferred the simplified, more creditable, more exciting fictitious past which I'd created to take its place. Indeed, it had now become hard for me to remember just how things really had happened. I only knew how I would have liked them to have happened—that is to say, how I had made them happen in my stories. And so, gradually, the real past had

disappeared, along with the real Christopher Isherwood of twenty years ago. Only the Christopher Isherwood of the stories remained” (1954: vii–viii).

Similarly Nabokov’s earlier novels require a substantial separation of the fictionalized and the autobiographical self, even when, as in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941/1959), the narrator’s own life merges with the novels written by his half-brother, novels that he is trying to comprehend and save from critics who insist on—what else?—a narrow biographical reductionism. The narrator of this work, identified in the text only as “V.,” does have numerous features in common with Nabokov himself; his elusive alter ego, Sebastian, has still more: both were born December 31, 1899, in St. Petersburg, both moved to England after the Russian Revolution, both attended Cambridge, and so on. Sebastian himself may be, as Michael Wood suggests, “a picture of the writer Nabokov sometimes thought he might be. Better still, a picture of the writer many critics thought and still think Nabokov is” (1994: 33). Nevertheless, the correspondences between Nabokov and his creations remain largely ironic; one may not infer anything about Nabokov from the behavior or opinions expressed by the characters.

While no direct inference from his life to his fiction is authorized by the text, this does not mean that the facts of his life are entirely irrelevant to a comprehensive reading of the work. The two would oscillate in a kind of arabesque throughout his career; as Michael Begnal points out, “Just as V. plundered Knight’s novels for his own, Nabokov looted *Sebastian Knight* for [his own autobiography,] *Speak, Memory*” (1996: 3). Like Joyce and Proust, Nabokov made a work of fiction out of materials culled from his own experience, and he invented events and scenes derived from his own and others’ literary texts. But Nabokov braids life and fiction together more deviously than these other modernist authors, since some of the divergences between fiction and fact can be read as unactualized possibilities in Nabokov’s own existence. The novel not only traces out some patterns of his life but also points toward the life he did not live. And there is yet another twist: in *Sebastian Knight* (1941/1959), V. goes on to experience many of the events about which Sebastian has written in his novels; Nabokov thereby denies the facile reduction of the achievement of art to the personality of the author and

instead produces a far deeper allegory of the way a text creates its audience. The book does not expose the author; rather, it fashions its reader. As such, it embodies Nabokov's conflicted view toward this whole subject; as Andrew Field has observed, "Nabokov was both repelled and fascinated by biography, which he called psychoplagiarism" (1986: 3).<sup>1</sup> Yet as Nabokov's writing evolved, so too did his play with the boundary between fiction and autobiography, play that culminated in his last completed novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974).

In what follows I identify five rather ingenious confections or collisions of author and character in the work of Nabokov. But first I provide a brief account of current attempts to theorize the fiction/nonfiction distinction. Overall, my argument is that Nabokov's work can help us clarify the general salience of this distinction as well as indicate significant gray areas where the distinction fails to hold. My analysis further reveals the validity of one of the current theories of fictionality and the limitations of its main rival; it also sheds light on theoretical perspectives that attempt to clarify the relation between authors and narrators.

## The Nature of Fictionality

David Gorman identifies a significant debate between two types of theories of fictionality. On the one hand, pragmatic theories set forth by John Searle and others assert that "no purely linguistic or textual property of a narrative can serve as a criterion of its fictionality" (Gorman 2005: 166). What is essential is the kind of speech act the work is attempting to perform: if it presents itself as a work of fiction, it thereby adheres to a set of conventions "which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world" (Searle 1979: 67). When Joyce states in a novel that Leopold Bloom lived at 7 Eccles Street in Dublin on June 16, 1904, he is performing a different kind of illocutionary act ("make-believe") than if he had made the identical statement in a work of nonfiction. On the other hand, approaches based on semantics affirm instead that there are distinctive aspects of language and content that demarcate a work's fictional status, such as the presence of free indirect speech or an omniscient narrator. Thus, if we find a sentence like, "He thought about the lives he might have led, though no one would ever know this,"

we know the work within which it appears is fiction, because such statements are epistemologically impossible in nonfiction: in the world of our experience, no one can know the uncommunicated thoughts of another. Beyond these two positions, there is also the widespread view that has been designated “panfictionalism” by Marie-Laure Ryan in a 1997 article. The panfictionalist view denies that fictional and nonfictional discourse can be disentangled; all statements are ultimately fictional, it insists. In the recent formulation by Richard Walsh, “the categorical difference between real and imagined events is overwhelmed by the artificiality of narrative representation in either case: all narrativity . . . shares in the properties of fictionality” (2007: 39).

The work of Nabokov is well positioned to help elucidate the claims of these rival accounts, and in what follows I outline five ways in which Nabokov problematizes the doctrine of the absolute separation of author and narrator in a work of fiction. I discuss these methods under the following rubrics: *urfiction*, or texts that are presented such that they can be read either as fiction or as nonfiction; *author/narrator conflation*, in which the author of the nonfictional paratext merges with the narrator of the fiction; *autobiography as intertext*, where key facts in the life and work of the author are essential to the interpretation of the fiction; *transparent voices*, where the author’s opinions are expressed through the speech of a character; and *authorial interpolation*, signs within the text that reveal the presence of the author. The first two types contribute to debates concerning the signposts and nature of fictionality; all five types are pertinent to discussions of the fiction/nonfiction distinction. Ultimately, I argue for the pragmatic account of the nature of fictionality and affirm the importance of the fiction/nonfiction distinction even as I note the many ways in which Nabokov plays with, challenges, or collapses it.

## Nabokov’s Intrusions into His Fictional Worlds

### URFICTION: TEXTS AS FICTION OR NONFICTION

A fascinating fusion of life and art is present in two of Nabokov’s shorter texts that have been published both as fiction and as autobiography. The stories, “Mademoiselle O” (1939) and “First Love” (which was first

printed under the title “Colette”) both appear in his 1958 short story collection, *Nabokov’s Dozen*, and in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Both stories also appear, with slight alterations, as chapters of his autobiography, *Speak Memory* (1966).<sup>2</sup> Two questions are immediately raised by such a practice: what are the implications of composing a work that can be read either as one or the other mode, and what are the consequences of publishing it as both?

In “The Autobiographical Contract” Philippe Lejeune clarifies the key differences between autobiography and first-person fiction. For Lejeune, the crucial difference is that in an autobiography, “there must be an identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*” (1982: 193), whereas in fiction written in the first person the narrator is not the same as the author. But the examples from Nabokov seem to elude this dichotomy: they are, at the same time, *both* fiction *and* non-fiction, challenging the opposition on which Lejeune insists.

A closer look at these curious texts is called for, and we may begin by noting some admittedly minor differences between the fictional and the autobiographical versions of the text of “First Love.” The story text is slightly shorter, contains substitutions for a few words, and replaces proper names with occupations; thus, the autobiography refers to “Linderovski” (Nabokov 1966: 151), whereas in his fictional incarnation he becomes simply “my tutor.” That is, specific names unnecessary to the unfolding of the tale are replaced in the story. Additional personal and historical details, appropriate for a memoir but dispensable in a fiction, are likewise duly removed (Nabokov 1995: 142–43). It should be noted that none of the changes has any effect on the status of the text as fiction or nonfiction; the changes merely make the fictional version more economical and provide the autobiographical version with a bit more factual matter.

Especially interesting are more essential divergences that underscore the differences between the two modes. Nabokov writes that his sisters angrily protested that he had incorrectly left them out of the railway trip to Biarritz in the original version of the autobiography (14); in the revised text he obligingly indicates they were there, riding in the next car (142), but in the fictional incarnation he eliminates them altogether as unnecessary to the work’s plot. These emendations underscore that

nonfiction is falsifiable while fiction is not; no human can protest she was actually present at a scene in a fiction. Likewise, we learn in the autobiography that “Colette” is a pseudonym and see that this name appears in the book’s index; no such qualification is needed in the story: there the girl is simply Colette, and there is no index to worry about (not until *Pale Fire* appeared in 1962 would Nabokov construct an index for a work of fiction).

Finally, there is a gesture in the text whose effect changes somewhat as one moves from mode to mode. Near the end of the piece, the narrator notes that he cannot remember the name of Colette’s dog, and that this bothers him. Several paragraphs later, “A delightful thing happens” (Nabokov 1995: 150): recalling other aspects and souvenirs of his days on the Riviera, “along those remote beaches, over the glossy evening sands of the past, where each footprint slowly fills up with sunset water” (151–52), the dog’s name re-enters his consciousness, and the conjuring up of fading memories is completed. However, at the risk of sounding like Borges dismissing the failings of the unfortunate Pierre Menard, I feel that the text works better—by Nabokov’s own standards of literary form—as autobiography than as fiction. In this case, I personally find the dramatization of the recovery of a lost memory much more compelling in the autobiographical narrative, especially one that has memory and its vagaries as a central theme, and during which the exiled author laments the absence of documents to aid his recall. In the story the suddenly recovered name seems, by contrast, relatively contrived; it has fewer of the intimations of immediacy that the autobiographical context produces and thus provides considerably less of *l’effet du réel*.

We may conclude that “First Love,” like “Mademoiselle O,” is a rare hybrid that can be read either as fiction or as nonfiction; that is, it obeys the rules for both modes and can reward either kind of reading. Depending on our perspective, the world depicted is either the actual world or a fictional storyworld. The figure who says “I” either is Nabokov or is merely a fictitious narrator, depending on the way we contextualize the work. Read as fiction, it cannot be falsified; read as nonfiction, it is making verifiable statements about the real world that are subject to corroboration.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the famous illustration employed by Gestalt psychologists, we may say that what we have here is the “duck/rabbit” of



narrative. If we must designate it by a name, we might employ a term as unusual as the texts themselves: *urfiction*. These examples show that the semantic theory of fictionality is inadequate: the fictional and nonfictional versions of the same events are virtually identical linguistically. By contrast, a pragmatic approach that stresses the use to which a particular text is put (that is, as fiction or as autobiography) can explain the oscillating fictional status of these strange works.<sup>4</sup>

We may pause here to enumerate some other comparable examples of this kind of writing practice. *Urfictional* texts that could appear either as (barely) fiction or as (slightly fictionalized) nonfiction are not entirely unknown, beginning with Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia* (1855), a generically indeterminate text that is treated both as fiction and as autobiography. Some of Virginia Woolf's shorter texts, like "A Mark on the Wall" (1917), may be read as fiction or personal essay; their inclusion in the volume of Woolf's *Complete Shorter Fiction* is justified by the editor because "the narrator's voice is not necessarily identical with the author's" (Woolf 1989: 2), a much milder version of one of Lejeune's principal criteria of fictionality. Woolf herself, it might be observed, was less certain of the status of these works and wondered in one of her diary entries from 1920 whether she didn't "deal . . . in autobiography & call it fiction" (Woolf 1920–24/1980: 7).

Meanwhile, in the most autobiographical stories of Isaac Babel, there is no way to differentiate the author from the narrator other than by an appeal to the paratextual markers that designate them as fictions. Rebecca Stanton notes that these stories, though fictional, "pretend" otherwise, identifying themselves by means of various cues as autobiography. As Stanton puts it, "By installing a first person narrator/protagonist who shares his name as well as significant details of his autobiography, Babel establishes a relationship between himself (or 'himself?') and the reader that is governed by time honored conventions of credibility and credence: the relationship for which Philippe Lejeune, a quarter of a century ago, coined the term 'autobiographical pact'" (Stanton 2001: 117).<sup>5</sup> Henry Miller also belongs to this group of writers who challenge the boundary between fiction and autobiography. As Wayne Booth recounts, when praised by Edmund Wilson for his skillful, ironic portrait of a particular type of American poseur idling around Paris, Miller in-

dignantly responded: “The theme is myself, and the narrator, or the hero, as your critic puts it, is also myself. . . . If he means the narrator, then it is me” (qtd. in Booth 1961/1983: 367). As he continued writing, Miller straddled this boundary ever more effectively, especially as he sought out certain personalities and potentially dramatic situations that would be likely to provide good dialogue and scenes to transcribe later on. Placing these texts within a larger conceptual framework, we may affirm that fictional narratives are very different speech acts from nonfiction narratives: they are used differently, perform different functions, and require a different kind of reception. The concerned spectator who shouts out to the actor playing Othello, “Don’t believe Iago—he’s telling you a lie!” demonstrates the terms of the fiction/nonfiction distinction as well as the consequences of misapplying them. At the same time, some narratives exist that blur this distinction and remain ontologically ambiguous or indeterminable. In fact, the existence of this gray area is possible only because of the existence elsewhere of distinctions it collapses.

Another sentence from *Speak, Memory* is also potentially relevant to the debate between pragmatic and semantic theories of fictionality. The author seems to be disclosing the thoughts of another when he states that the last time he saw Colette she “slipped into my brother’s hand a farewell present, a box of sugar-coated almonds, meant, I know, solely for me” (1966: 152). Taken literally, this statement is the kind that is supposed by Käte Hamburger, Dorrit Cohn, and others to be a signpost of fictionality. And there are many other such statements in this autobiography, which is structured more like a devious modernist novel rather than a conventional memoir, as Christian Moraru has disclosed (2005: 40–54). Further reflection on this text as well as more extreme examples like Edmund Morris’s notorious biography of Ronald Reagan, *Dutch*, which provides samples of Reagan’s thoughts throughout the volume, reveal instead that the presence of devices from narrative fiction does not indicate that the text is fictional: Nabokov’s book remains an autobiography, and Morris’s a biography, albeit an eccentric one. Both remain falsifiable on all other points, despite the presence of techniques that normally can only be legitimately used in fiction. We can easily bracket such impossible thought transcriptions as the educated guesses of the

author. These texts are, rather, examples of a blending of fictional and nonfictional elements, as Murray Smith (2009) has recently described this practice. Yet the fact that they are blended does not imply that they cannot be separated back out and identified as nonfictional or fictionalized. In short, we may conclude with Gérard Genette that such purported indexes of fictionality are not “obligatory, constant, and sufficiently exclusive that nonfiction could not possibly borrow them” (1990: 773).

#### AUTHOR/NARRATOR CONFLATION

The author/narrator conflation, which threatens to collapse the distinction between the author of the book and the narrator of the text, is another interesting stratagem; it appears most prominently in Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* (1947). This work, like so many other novels, is divided into a preface, written by the author, and a first-person text, articulated by the work’s narrator. These boundaries are customarily kept quite distinct, as in the prefaces of Henry James or Joseph Conrad, though they can be tampered with. Thus, in his author’s note to *Nostramo* Conrad thanks José de Avellanos for much of the material recorded in the rest of the text. Avellanos, however, is a fictional being within the novel; we can thus read this statement of thanks as an ironic gesture that confirms rather than dissolves the fiction/nonfiction distinction. But *Bend Sinister* provides a different kind of interpenetration that threatens to problematize the entire fiction/nonfiction distinction enshrined in the very division between novel and preface.

Typically, these parts of the text are ontologically distinct, with the introductory material being nonfictional, written by the author, and falsifiable in theory, while the novel proper is a work of fiction, articulated by a narrator, and not falsifiable. For comparable reasons, the case of an author seeming to enter into his or her fictional work as one of its characters, as occurs in a number of Nabokovian texts, need not detain us. As Leona Toker points out, Professor Chateau remarks in the novel *Pnin*, apropos of an unusual butterfly, “Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here. . . . He would have told us all about these enchanting insects” (Nabokov 1957: 128; Toker 1989: 25–26). Such intrusions are readily accounted for as fictional characters that happen to bear the same name as their authors as opposed to fictional names, just as there is a char-

acter named Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* who is unable to tell a good story (“The Tale of Sir Thopas”). A historical character, including the author, is simply another fictional character when placed within a fictional storyworld; as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, “the attribute of fictionality does not apply to individual entities, but entire semantic domains: the Napoleon of *War and Peace* is a fictional object because he belongs to a world which is fictional” (1991: 15).

But something rather different occurs in *Bend Sinister*. The protagonist Krug, suffering terribly, is finally assuaged by intimations that he is merely a character in a novel, and that his impending death is thus, in the words of the author, only “a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution” (1964: xviii). For some time Krug sensed the presence of a superior being; in his introduction to a later edition (1964), Nabokov identifies this figure as “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (xviii). That is, the author in a piece of nonfiction identifies the fiction’s vaguely perceived governing intelligence as himself. Similarly, discussing the death of his hero, Nabokov states, “Krug returns unto the bosom of his maker” (1964: xviii). Here he is not creating a fictional character called Nabokov who may or may not resemble the historical Vladimir Nabokov, but is referring directly to the person who created the fictional world. The presence sensed by the character would seem to be the same figure that identifies himself as such in the (nonfictional) introduction.

How are we to make sense of these claims? I believe that we must either agree with Nabokov and admit that he has placed himself as author within the discourse he has created, or we must, with a zealous formalist severity, insist that Nabokov, the real author, only superficially (if unmistakably) resembles the fictional character of the perceived author in the text; one is the ontologically independent simulacrum of the other. My sympathies are with the first explanation, which remains falsifiable: the governing intelligence described in the introduction might conceivably not match up with the figure in the text. As Lejeune points out, the autobiographical contract presupposes that an actual person vouches for the fidelity of the narrative (1982: 211–13); I believe this condition is met in the example from *Bend Sinister*. Others, however, might wish to preserve the distinction between the Nabokov of the introduction and the authorial presence in the novel—on the basis of larger assumptions

about the impermeability of fictional discourse by nonfiction. In any event, Nabokov presents us with a deft paradox: either we are left with a preposterously close resemblance between the two creator figures, Nabokov impersonating himself, as it were (a position that is very difficult and possibly pointless to defend), or else the nonfictional paratext breaches the fiction and becomes one with it at this point. It is precisely the cross-contamination of these two narrative modes that argues most strongly for the latter reading, with the nonfictional text vouching for the authenticity of its author's vague but unmistakable presence in the fictional world.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS INTERTEXT

Another intriguing intersection of author and narrator is present in *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), which fully develops a strategy that Nabokov had toyed with in a number of earlier texts, including *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941/1959). As you open the first pages of the volume you find, not the familiar list of other books by the same author, but instead a list of a dozen "Books by the Narrator."<sup>6</sup> These titles constitute a parodic version of Nabokov's oeuvre; the Russian works include *Tamara* (1925) and *Pawn Takes Queen* (1927), while the English volumes include *See Under Real* (1939) and *Ardis* (1970). These titles correspond to Nabokov's *Mashenka* (actually published in 1926), *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) and *Ada, or Ardor* (1969). To get the joke, here and elsewhere in the book, one must know the principal details of Nabokov's career—not just themes and images, but also dates of publication, changes in residence, number of divorces, career of his father, and so forth. When the narrator, Vadim Vadimich, notes that he had employed the pseudonym V. Isirin (1974: 97), the informed reader knows this is a variation of Nabokov's actual pseudonym, V. Sirin. The novel's sudden turn to a second-person address to the narrator's beloved likewise mirrors the similar turn made in the last chapter of *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov thus takes the public details of his life and work as an antecedent text to be humorously reworked in this novel more or less in the same way he uses *In Search of Lost Time* as a central framework for *Lolita*. The story of his life remains a central "pre-text" of the work, even though the mentally unstable protagonist

quickly diverges at many key points from his doppelgänger, the author. As Maurice Couturier has observed, the figure of the author emerges “as a result of the conflict between the real author and the fictional narrator, a conflict arbitrated by the reader familiar with Nabokov’s life and with his earlier novels. Nabokov encourages us to practice a Sainte-Beuvean variety of criticism even as we celebrate the author’s death, thus placing us in a highly paradoxical situation” (1995: 3).

An additional twist is provided when we are presented with the models or *clefs* of characters who would appear in the later works of the narrator. Referring to his lover, Iris, the narrator states: “Her cheeks and arms, without their summer tan, had the mat whiteness that I was to distribute—perhaps too generously—among the girls of my future books” (Nabokov 1974: 68). Such an assertion demands a look into comparable situations in Nabokov’s works. There we find similar examples but a different pattern: in *Speak, Memory* Colette, the girl with whom the very young Nabokov enjoys his first love, has “apricot skin” (1966: 149); Annabel Leigh, the “progenitor” of *Lolita*, has “honey-colored skin” (1955/1970: 13) as does her later avatar (41). Thus, Nabokov’s penchant for tanned girls is inversely mirrored by the *Harlequins*’ narrator’s fixation on young women with pale skin. The relation is thus something like that of a photograph to its negative, since light and dark are reversed. This motif, in fact, appears in another transposition of titles; thus Nabokov’s *Laughter in the Dark* (originally, *Kamera Obskura*) is transmogrified into the narrator’s work, *Camera Lucida, or Slaughter in the Light*. To no one’s surprise, the narrator soon becomes haunted by “a dream feeling that my life was the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant, of another man’s life” (1974: 89); he is occasionally confused with this other author whose name resembles his own and finally fears that he is the figment of another’s imagination. Such play with his identity as an author should perhaps not seem unusual coming from an author who, by ceasing to write in Russian, “became a phantom in his own prose, as if, he said, he created the person who wrote in English but was not himself doing the writing” (Wood 1994: 4).

#### TRANSPARENT VOICES

We also should acknowledge another important narrative strategy that may be termed the “transparent voice phenomenon,” in which the most

unreliable internal narrator can readily (and, more importantly, unambiguously) articulate the ideas of the author. In such cases, the narrator may be temporarily “evacuated” and his character dispensed with as the author speaks directly (and sometimes incongruously) through that character’s mouth. Most of Nabokov’s intellectually superior characters share Nabokov’s contempt for popular culture, psychoanalysis, socialist realism, and American philistinism, and they express their disdain in language more reminiscent of Nabokov’s nonfictional prose than the personal styles of the particular characters. Thus, and most implausibly, the author’s voice even breaks through the second-rate mind of the fatuous John Ray, the otherwise utterly fallible editor of Humbert’s text in *Lolita*. Consider Ray’s condescending reference to “old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of ‘real’ people beyond the ‘true’ story” (1955/1970: 6), or the following more tongue-in-cheek intrusion: “The commentator may be excused for repeating what he has stressed in his own books and lectures, namely that ‘offensive’ is frequently but a synonym for ‘unusual’; and a great work of art is of course always original, and thus by its very nature should come as a more or less shocking surprise” (7). These sentiments are the kind frequently found in Nabokov’s critical prose and are quite beyond the reach of a middlebrow psychiatrist who is much more likely to parrot various slogans of the day from advertising blurbs for the latest book-of-the-month club selection.

It is most suggestive that Sebastian Knight is said to be fond of this practice of using otherwise unreliable narrators as authorial mouthpieces: “He had a queer habit of endowing even his most grotesque characters with this or that idea, or impression, or desire which he himself might have toyed with” (1941/1959: 114). Because the thoughts of a narrator cannot always be attributed to the author does not imply that the latter cannot at times speak through the former. This practice, which cuts against the grain of accounts that assume an absolute divide between narrator and author, needs to be more carefully analyzed and understood within a historical context. After all, it was not that long ago that authors were criticized for using characters and narrators as mouthpieces for their own ideas. As Woolf expressed in her critique of E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*: “We are tapped on the shoulder. We are to notice this, or take heed of that. Margaret or Helen, we are made to understand, is not speaking simply as herself; her words have another and

a larger intention” (1942: 172). Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde were likewise castigated for using their characters as mere mouthpieces for their authors’ ideas. We should restore this practice to our critical and theoretical lexicons. In response to the question “How does one know when a character is articulating the views of its author?” one can answer: by comparing the valorization of ideas in a work of fiction with statements on the same subjects in nonfictional works by the same author. To take an easy case, tyrants and totalitarian regimes are regularly pilloried in Nabokov’s fiction and denounced in his essays. We need not shy away from pointing out such congruities, though we need to do it with the care and nuance biographers use when determining the beliefs of their subjects and also use the sensitivity and suspicion that literary scholars can bring to the vagaries of acts of narration—and to what those acts presuppose and entail.

#### AUTHORIAL INTERPOLATION

Finally, we may note a last form of self-presentation in fiction; this technique, like the other four that I discuss, militates against the assumption of an impermeable boundary between author and narrator. In *Lolita*, there is a character, Vivian Darkbloom, who inhabits the fictional world but whose name is an anagram of “Vladimir Nabokov.” The same is true of the characters Vivian Bloodmark and Vivian Calmbrood, who figure in other works. Nabokov criticism has noted many other such authorial self-representations, involving the letters *V* or *VN*, the Russian phrase for “on the side” (*na bok*), and numerous other manifestations.<sup>7</sup> The primary (if not sole) function of these names is to inject the alphabetical presence of the author into the text of the fiction, in the way that most of Hitchcock’s films include an image of the director unconvincingly portraying a supernumerary character or a most unlikely “man on the street.” Stephen Dedalus asserts that Shakespeare has subtly introjected his presence into his plays: “He has hidden his own name, a fair name, William, in his plays, a super here, a clown there, as a painter of old Italy set his face in a dark corner of his canvass” (Joyce 1922/1986: 172). Commenting on this passage, Nabokov states, “and this is exactly what Joyce has done—setting his face in a dark corner of his canvas” (1980: 319–20). Of course, the same is true for Nabokov.



## Conclusion

We may affirm that the basic distinction between fiction and nonfiction remains undeniable in most cases. Fictional and nonfictional narratives are two very different modes of discourse that perform different functions and identify themselves (and their ontological status) as such. We may now return briefly to the panfictionalist position, which states that all narrativity “shares in the properties of fictionality” (Walsh 2007: 39). For Walsh, “the ontological status of the [narrated] events themselves (and hence, for Cohn, the generic basis for reserving a distinct concept of fictionality) comes to seem of marginal interest at best” (39). In opposition to this position, A. P. Martinich and Avrum Stroll have convincingly pointed out that just because two groups of entities share many features, that does not mean that they are indistinguishable: paintings share many features with photographs, but this does not mean that paintings are photographs (2007: 3, 69–79). Going further, if it is admitted that nonfictional narrative genres are “constrained by rules of authentication (documentation, testimony)” (Walsh 2007: 39) that do not apply to fictional genres, this position inadvertently deconstructs itself; by affirming the different pragmatic status of each narrative type, one does all that is needed to affirm, identify, and explain the fiction/nonfiction distinction. All the texts I have discussed above (including the two curious short stories and autobiographical chapters) are designated on their covers or title pages either as fiction or as belonging to a nonfictional genre and can thus be recognized as performing two very different types of illocutionary act, each of which requires a different kind of reception. We may conclude by largely reaffirming what Dorrit Cohn has called “the distinction of fiction” (1999: 1–37) and concur with the recent arguments by Marie-Laure Ryan (1997) and by Lubomír Doležel (1999) against the doctrine of panfictionalism, which would deny any fundamental difference between fictional and nonfictional discourses. The crucial difference between the two modes is, I argue, the question of what Walsh calls “authentication” and what I have termed falsifiability. The storyworlds of *Bend Sinister*, *Look at the Harlequins!*, and *Lolita* remain fictional, even though Nabokov has managed to insinuate his authorial self into these fictions in various ways.

Recently there have been a number of scandals involving factual claims about fictive materials. A number of ostensible autobiographers have been exposed as having invented the lives they purported to have lived, most theatrically James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (also known as *A Million Little Lies*), and, most egregiously, *Stolen Soul* by Bernard Holstein, the story of the Jewish man's escape from the holocaust—except that his last name was not Holstein, but Brougham, he was not Jewish, and he wasn't in Germany during the war but rather lived in Australia. These and many other similar examples testify to the importance of the fiction/nonfiction distinction, and the scandals provoked by these texts reveal the stakes of calling a work fiction or nonfiction. The achievement of Nabokov is not to demolish this opposition but to manipulate it in subtle and cunning ways that produce novel responses; indeed, one needs the distinction in order to appreciate and articulate Nabokov's impressive maneuvers.

This division between the fictional and nonfictional is often clear-cut, as Lejeune (1982) affirms, but it is not always so; there are, as Ryan (1997) and Doležel (1999) both admit, certain gray areas or open boundaries involving hybrid modes. Nabokov's examples show that some texts will legitimately be able to be read either as fiction or autobiography, some will straddle or blur the divide, some inject nonfictional discourse into the text of a novel, and some readjust the boundary between frame and fiction. Together, these phenomena indicate the rare and unusual ways in which the author of a book can unnaturally merge with the narrator of a work of fiction.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were read at the International Vladimir Nabokov Society panel at the MLA convention in Washington, DC, on December 30, 2005, and to the Fictionality Study Group at York University (UK) in June 2009. I am grateful to the Nabokov panel chair, Zoran Kuzmanovich, and to both audiences for helpful comments and sustained discussion of the issues raised.

1. José Ángel García Landa, in a masterful account of the powerful autobiographical resonances of several texts, including the short story "Christmas," articulates an important aspect of Nabokov's oeuvre: "The works thus communicate, between the lines, elements of experience which acquire their full meaning

when they are read as projections and transformations of the author's personal experience, and not merely as the experience transmitted by an 'intrinsic' reading of the work" (2005: 274).

2. As Nabokov remarks in the bibliographical note to *Nabokov's Dozen*, "'Made-moiselle O' and 'First Love' are (except for a change in names) true in every detail to the author's remembered life'" (1995: 662).
3. Lubomír Doležel, utilizing possible-worlds semantics in his essay "Fictional and Historical Narrative: Meeting the Postmodernist Challenge" (1999), affirms that nonfictional worlds are marked by epistemological gaps, while fictional worlds have ontological gaps. Nabokov's paradoxical practice here confirms Doležel's thesis: Nabokov could have continued to invent the exploits of his characters as fictional entities, *and* he could have filled in additional historical background of the actual people involved. Once again, only the latter would have been falsifiable.
4. For a fascinating discussion of the possibility of texts moving from the category of fiction to nonfiction, see Kai Mikkonen (2006).
5. The case of *Babel* is still more paradoxical since some of the "autobiographical" events are invented, and historical individuals are quoted as vouching for the accuracy of the stories, as Stanton (2001) explains.
6. This practice seems to parody Lejeune's comment that the author is "a personal name, the identical name accepting responsibility for a sequence of different published texts. He derives his reality from the list of his other works which is often to be found at the beginning of the book under the heading 'by the same author'" (1982: 200).
7. For a thorough discussion and bibliography of this phenomenon, see Gavriel Shapiro (1999), who also quotes the passage on Joyce that I cite below.

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