Introduction

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The fourteenth chapter of Nabokov's autobiography begins with one of his discoveries, part pun and part revelation: "The spiral is a spiritualized circle." Noting further that the Hegelian dialectic describes "the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time," Nabokov goes on to apply his discovery to himself:

> Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call "thetic" the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; "antithetic" the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and "synthetic" the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side.
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> A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life. The twenty years I spent in my native Russia (1899–1911) take care of the thetic arc. Twenty-one years of voluntary exile in England, Germany and France (1919–1940) supply the obvious antithesis. The decade I have already spent in my adopted country (1940–50) looks like the beginning of a synthetic envelopment.

Like Nabokov, the autobiography described a spiral. Originally titled *Conclusive Evidence,* it soon acquired the new title *Speak, Memory.* Then Nabokov wrote a Russian version (*Drugie berega*) with significant changes. Finally, *Speak, Memory* went through a third, synthetic arc, returning to English with the subtitle *An Autobiography Revisited.* By this time Nabokov had completed his own third arc, and the last sentence of the above passage from *Conclusive Evidence* became, "The period spent in my adopted country (1940–1960) forms a synthesis—and a new thesis." Furthermore, in revising the autobiography Nabokov added the words "And so on" to the end of the first paragraph quoted above, apparently to emphasize

that "twirl follows twirl" not in a simple series of three but in an infinitely expanding pattern.

From the above quotation and its later additions we must draw the uncanny conclusion that Nabokov's move back to Europe in 1960 was already implicit in his original description of the spiraling patterns of his life in 1950. And the prophecy contained in the phrase "And so on" was also fulfilled, for Nabokov's residence in Europe from 1960 until his death in the summer of 1977 fell just short of describing another full arc of twenty years. Nabokov's life thus comes very close to achieving the formal perfection he sought in both life and art.

But Nabokovian forms are open forms, and there is always the implicit "And so on." To the four arcs of Nabokov's life—the Russian, the European, the American, and the neo-European—a fifth arc is now being added: the arc of Nabokov's continuing life as an artist who speaks and will speak in many different voices to many different generations. The fifth arc is the arc of literary history. "Dead is the mandible," says John Shade in *Pale Fire*, "alive the song."

This book is intended as a metaphor for Nabokov's fifth arc and as a first stage in its continuing climb through the crystal land into the reflected sky. The essays that follow study both individual works and their relation to the life's work. At the same time, they engage in a constant dialogue with previous criticism of Nabokov. In all these respects, they stand as tributes to Nabokov, celebrations as well as investigations of his unique literary achievement.

Our book begins with this fifth arc—with the end that is also a new beginning. "Part I: The Fifth Arc" opens with Alfred Appel, Jr.'s portrait of Nabokov during the last period of his life—the lionized, world-famous sage of Montreux. Appel's memoir is followed by three aggressive and perhaps controversial essays concerned less with interpreting individual works than with abandoning, refining, or extending traditional viewpoints and techniques. James M. Rambeau describes the traps Nabokov's writings hold for their critics; Dmitri Nabokov objects on behalf of his father to some recent commentators; and Phyllis A. Roth ventures into a psychological approach that Nabokov himself might have discouraged. The first section thus serves as a microcosm of the whole by highlighting the transition from Nabokov's life as a practicing writer to his continuing life as a stimulating and controversial figure in literary history.

We then return to the two earliest arcs of the spiral, to Nabokov's Russian and first European periods. Beverly Lyon Clark analyzes his little-known translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; Walter Evans delineates the neglected major story "The Potato

Elf"; William C. Carroll traces the philosophical and literary tradition behind *Despair*, generally regarded as Nabokov's first major novel; and Margaret Byrd Boegeman closes our second arc with an analysis that shows *Invitation to a Beheading* to be, among other things, Nabokov's farewell to the Russian language.

Our third arc begins with Beverly Gray Bienstock's analysis of the film imagery in *Bend Sinister*, the first novel Nabokov wrote in America, followed by Larry R. Andrews' close scrutiny of the brief but brilliant story "Signs and Symbols." This section continues with major contributions to the growing literature on *Lolita*: Gladys M. Clifton shows that we must take Lolita's point of view into account in order to understand Humbert and his narrative, and Thomas R. Frosch reveals heretofore unsuspected shades of irony and paradox in the novel's treatment of the literary traditions of which it is a part. Then Nabokov himself speaks out on his masterpiece: his critically neglected but highly revealing postscript to the Russian version of *Lolita* is presented here in its first English translation. The third arc concludes with Julian W. Connolly's analysis of the spiraling patterns of "recurrence and transformation" in *Pnin*.

In our consideration of Nabokov's fourth, Swiss period, Marilyn Edelstein analyzes the complex consciousness that informs *Pale Fire*, and Carol Shloss discusses the interplay of aristocratic and aesthetic motifs in *Speak, Memory*, a work that underwent its final revision and metamorphosis during this period of Nabokov's life. We then present our second major grouping of materials, on *Ada*: an essay by Charles Nicol on the unreliability of Van Veen as narrator, Nabokov's own "Notes to *Ada* by Vivian Darkbloom," and a commentary on those notes by J. E. Rivers and William Walker. This section concludes with Paul S. Bruss's demonstration that Nabokov's last two novels explore the metaphor of life as a difficult, perhaps corrupt, perhaps ultimately impenetrable text. Our final section thus presents searching new interpretations of the novels published during the final period of Nabokov's life, shows how they relate to more familiar works, and suggests several ways in which the masterpieces of the fourth period recapitulate the spiral of Nabokov's career as a whole.

Our broad chronological scope and close interpretation of individual works allow this book to supplement and complement another recently published memorial to Nabokov: *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, edited by Peter Quennell (1980). The Quennell collection is concerned more with the spirit than with the development of Nabokov's fiction and contains only one essay on an individual text (Robert Alter's reading of *Ada*). Our book combines an overview of

Nabokov's entire career with detailed readings of works from every period of his creative life. We believe it is important at this point in the ongoing assessment of Nabokov's achievement to review his career as a whole and to appreciate its sweep, its variety, and its inclusiveness.

The book has, then, a structure and a progression. What it does not have, and purposely so, is a consistently held critical outlook. In the following pages we present twenty-one individual minds exercising themselves from an assortment of critical perspectives on the problems and pleasures of Nabokov's fiction. The book approaches Nabokov as he often encourages us to approach "reality": not from a single, inflexible point of view but from many points of view which, taken together, may reveal something of the true complexity of the subject at hand. Some of the essays emphasize Nabokov the Russian, some Nabokov the American. Others scrutinize more elusive identities: the American within the Russian and the Russian within the American, the man behind the artist and the artist behind the man. Some are traditional in their approach and in their conclusions. Others are experimental in their conception and tentative in their findings. We have tried, in short, to create a book that will be both a commentary on and an example of the current state of Nabokov studies. Furthermore, the book is aimed at a wide audience. The general reader, we hope, will be able to use the book as an introduction to Nabokov, but it is an introduction that constantly challenges the general reader to explore in the company of experts hitherto uncharted territory in Nabokov scholarship. The specialist will find ideas that are new to the field and suggestions for further innovative research together with constant reminders that worthwhile discoveries can still be made through traditional methods and approaches. There is an essay attacking annotation as a way of understanding Nabokov. But there are also two sets of annotations to one of Nabokov's most complex novels, with one set acting as a commentary on the other. Not all the contributions are so antithetical. But the book does strive for—and we hope it achieves—a wide spectrum of argument and opinion.

The lively and occasionally sharp tone of the essays is due in part to the fact that some were first presented at the special seminars devoted to Nabokov at recent conventions of the Modern Language Association, seminars that have now metamorphosed into meetings of the newly formed Vladimir Nabokov Society. The editors served as discussion leaders for the first and second of these seminars, and the idea for the book grew out of their association with each other and with other Nabokov scholars at these annual gatherings. The

book was conceived, then, in a spirit of debate and intellectual exchange, and we have tried to preserve this spirit in the form the book has now attained. Nabokov loved a good intellectual joust, and any tribute to him that did not recall and honor this aspect of the man would be incomplete.

If we were asked to summarize what the essays have in common aside from their esteem for Nabokov, their occasionally pugnacious tone, and their ultimately synthetic purpose, we would answer as follows. First, they attempt to focus attention on the human qualities of Nabokov's art and on the humanity that underlies and vivifies what is often interpreted as artifice for its own sake. Second, they attempt to illustrate the various genres and traditions that intermingle in Nabokov's work and to use these as a basis for defining his artistic originality. Third, they attempt to view Nabokov within the context of his era and to begin the task of assessing his contributions to modern literature. Each of the essays addresses at least one of these topics, and many of them address all three.

Having thus begun to define the fifth arc of Nabokov's literary life, let us return for a moment to the third arc, to the beginning of his career as an American writer. In what is now a rare and little-known book—*New Directions in Prose and Poetry, 1941*, edited by James Laughlin—there is a section devoted to "Soviet Russian Poetry." One of the contributions to this section is "Hodassevich: A Note and Translation, by Vladimir Nabokov." The "Notes on Contributors" describe this newcomer to America as follows:

> Vladimir Nabokov, who translates Hodassevich in our Russian section, is now lecturing at Wellesley College. A Russian, member of a great aristocratic family, cousin of the composer Nicholas Nabokov, he was educated at Cambridge and lived in France and Germany after the Revolution. He wrote some twenty books—novels and stories—which were widely translated in Europe, winning him an important reputation. New Directions has just issued his novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and a number of his stories have appeared recently in *The Atlantic*. Several years ago Bobbs-Merrill published his novel *Laughter in the Dark*. His other books have not yet been done in English translations, but they will be. Nabokov is a chess fiend and a lepidopterologist. He is married and has a young son.

Nabokov's fantastically productive third arc began at this point of transition from his European to his American incarnation. Edmund Wilson was introducing him to New Directions, the *New Repub-*

lic, and the *Atlantic*, as later he would introduce him to the *New Yorker*. And already, in his second extant letter to Wilson (15 December 1940), Nabokov was explaining that "you are quite wrong about Hegel's triad being based upon the triangle"; instead, he continued, it "is really the idea of a circle." Now, at another point of transition, this time from the fourth to the fifth arc, the circle once again becomes spiritualized, bodies forth harmonies and congruences, and turns, at the same time, toward new directions.