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Gogolesque Perception-Expanding Reversals in Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov's acrobatic disclaimers may often be safely qualified, and his strenuous self-estrangement from Gogol is no exception.[1] Indeed, these two very different writers are surprisingly alike in many ways, ranging from a fondness for depicting *poshlust*[2] to a deep preoccupation with painting. Parallels and parodies are of course mostly unlabeled.[3] But perhaps more important than the artistic purpose behind Gogolisms in Nabokov is that the mechanisms of many similar effects are nearly identical. And uniquely so. Both writers frequently contrive very similar "reversal effects" that conduce to a sudden, fresh view of "reality" and, somewhat paradoxically, a simultaneous and unsettling awareness of human perceptual limitations.

To begin with, both Gogol and Nabokov are fond of what may be termed Pandora's-box words[4]—innocent little trap doors opening into other, eerie

1. "Desperate Russian critics, trying hard to find an Influence and to pigeonhole my own novels, have once or twice linked me up with Gogol, but when they looked again I had untied the knots and the box was empty." Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York, 1944), p. 155. "It is Gogol's world and as such wholly different from Tolstoy's world, or Pushkin's, or Chekhov's or my own" (p. 144). Both assertions deceptively effect an illusion of dissimilarity far greater than that which is in fact claimed. Also typically, they seem carefully calculated to discourage attempts at comparing Nabokov with—and perhaps thus finding him partly dependent upon—Gogol. When asked in 1967 if Gogol had influenced him, Nabokov replied: "I was careful *not* to learn anything from him. As a teacher, he is dubious and dangerous. . . . at his best, he is incomparable and inimitable." Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Fiction," *Paris Review*, no. 41 (1967), p. 106. To deny being the pupil of a sometimes inimitable writer is still not necessarily to deny natural affinity and perhaps even influence.

2. This evocative transliteration of the Russian word *poshlost'* is Nabokov's. See *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 63, and "Art of Fiction," p. 103. A long passage in *The Gift* strikingly parallels Nabokov's famous explanation of *poshlust*. For example, "the father with a prize growth on his pleased face, the mother with her imposing bosom; the dog is also looking at the table, and envious Grandma can be seen ensconced in the background" (*The Gift* [New York, 1963], p. 22); "mother clasps her hands in dazed delight, the children crowd around, all agog, Junior and the dog strain up to the edge of the table where the Idol is enthroned; even Grandma of the beaming wrinkles peeps out somewhere in the background" (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 66).

3. In cases where Nabokov alludes to Gogol, the potential influence seems relatively obvious: "Luzhin was sitting sideways at the table on which, frozen in various poses like the characters in the concluding scene of Gogol's *The Inspector General*, were the remains of the refreshments, empty and unfinished glasses" (*The Defense* [New York, 1964], p. 232).

4. Not without good reason, perhaps, has Nabokov spoken of Gogol's "Pandora's box mind" (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 118).

realities. As Nabokov himself has said of Gogol, "this or that word, sometimes a mere adverb or a preposition, for instance the word 'even' or 'almost,' is inserted in such a way as to make the harmless sentence explode in a wild display of nightmare fireworks."[5] Most often, such unsettling little words serve to reverse illusion and reality, good and bad, life and death.

"Lance," a Nabokov quasi-science-fiction short story, calmly begins as follows: "The name of the planet, presuming it has already received one, is *immaterial*."[6] Kinbote, in *Pale Fire*, speaks of his crown jewels and "diamond-studded crown in—*no matter*, where" (p. 195, my italics). Since these royal accouterments are presumably a madman's fabrications, and hence "non-matter," his probably unconscious pun has an eerie ring indeed. One such pun (that subtly undermines "reality") is double. While Luzhin (*The Defense*) slips off in a half-insane trance, we read that "there was something *sense*less about his ab*sence*" (p. 149, my italics).

Nabokov's punnish reversals are highly versatile. They can create a strange telepathy ("his silence irritated Martha *unspeakably*"); a teasingly disturbing feeling ("Franz felt uncomfortable to the point of *numbness*"); perversely arousing breasts ("when she bent low . . . he noticed the parting of her breasts and was *relieved* when the black silk of her bodice became *taut* again");[7] a behind-the-scenes morality ("This girl's young sister was already earning a *decent* living as an artist's model");[8] an inside-out impossibility (". . . endless yawns—could not get his *fill* of them—"); a typical Nabokovian irony ("This disappointed me, but *happily* his smile vanished immediately"); and even a rule uneasily proved by its exception ("As a rule, I have always been noted for my *exceptional* humorousness . . .").[9]

The word "good," however, is Nabokov's favorite such reversal word—just as "better" (*luchshe*) is Gogol's. Nabokov: "Let me dally a little, he is as

5. Ibid., p. 142. Dmitry Chizhevsky has of course written extensively on Gogol's often astonishing usage of the word "even" (*dazhe*). See his "O 'Shineli' Gogolia," *Sovremennye zapiski* (Paris), 67 (1938): 173–74, 178–84. Nabokov himself also uses the words "even" and "almost," among others, in a similar way, and he has even revealed the device in his own writing: "Almost nightly—and what monstrous melancholy lurked in that 'almost'—. . . ." *King, Queen, Knave* (New York, 1968), p. 81. On the next page: ". . . he perceived almost without looking the tense sheen of her stocking. . . ." Consider also the perversely evocative potential of Gradus's stop in a "nice, modern, almost odorless lavatory" (*Pale Fire* [New York, 1966], p. 193), which combines Gogolian *poshlust* ("nice") with faintly disturbing suggestiveness ("almost"). The *poshlusty* "nice" echoes and re-echoes in Gradus's "nice" stay at the Beverland Hotel (p. 195) and his drinking "two paper-cupfuls of nice cold milk from [of course] a dispenser" (p. 198). The word "really" works similarly tainted wonders in *King, Queen, Knave.*

6. *Nabokov's Dozen* (New York, 1958), p. 145, my italics.

7. *King, Queen, Knave*, pp. 7, 81, 83, my italics.

8. *Laughter in the Dark* (New York, 1966), p. 16, my italics.

9. *Despair* (New York, 1966), pp. 19, 20, 71, my italics.

good as destroyed"; "Without his glasses he was as *good* as blind . . ."; "One respectable burgher, who suddenly, for no *good* reason, had dismembered a neighbor's child. . . ."[10] Gogol: "In this same village there often appeared a person, or, *better*, a devil in human form."[11] Here, the effect seems not unlike Kinbote's more subtle assertion that "present day bards, owing perhaps to *better* opportunities of aging, look like gorillas or vultures."[12]

But "life and death reversals" are surely the most far-reaching in both Nabokov and Gogol. In Gogol's *Overcoat*, for instance, Akakii's ghost threateningly reveals "a fist of a size rarely met with *even* among the living."[13] Pliushkin, in *Dead Souls*, is described as "some kind of *gap* in humanity"; the many hospital patients in *The Inspector General* are said to be "getting well like *flies*"; a peasant in *The Sorochinsk Fair* falls senseless to the ground and lies there "dumb and motionless" like "a terrifying *inhabitant* of a cramped coffin."[14] (The Russian word for "inhabitant," *zhilets*, with the same root as "life," can be seen to effect an even more insidious "life and death reversal" in conjunction with "cramped coffin.")

Such playful but uncanny insinuations are not mere manifestations of Gogol's famous "sad laughter." Rather, they seem more closely akin to Tiutchev's gaping "night chaos" waiting patiently beneath the bright but fragile surface of what we "perceive," or Borges's "crevices of unreason" which inform us that the "firm" architecture of the world is "false,"[15] or Bely's "thought-ark" traversing a primordial ocean of matter, or—Nabokov's numerous eerie puns.

In Nabokov, life and death reversal effects may be relatively playful ("town life generally, that's what is boring me to death") or disturbingly humorous ("a morbid fear of pregnancy") or Gogolianly unsettling: "Horror and helpless revulsion merged in those nightmares with a certain nonterrestrial sensation, *known to those who have just died*, or have suddenly gone insane after deciphering the meaning of everything."[16]

One such reversal in *Lolita* is almost diabolically subtle. "Every blessed morning"[17] (during July in the woods at camp), we are told, "Lo would be

10. *Lolita* (New York, 1959), p. 257, and *King, Queen, Knave*, pp. 22, 206, my italics.

11. N. V. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 6 vols. (Moscow, 1959), 1:44, my italics. For two more see 3:32. Subsequent references to Gogol's work will be to this edition; unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

12. *Pale Fire*, p. 16, my italics. For two more see *Laughter in the Dark*, p. 21, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Norfolk, Conn., 1959), p. 28.

13. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:159. The translation and italics are Nabokov's (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 148).

14. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 5:124, 4:45, 1:32, my italics.

15. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (New York, 1964), p. 208.

16. *Despair*, p. 59, and *King, Queen, Knave*, pp. 102, 202, my italics.

17. With amazing accuracy, Nabokov reversely translates "blessed" into Russian as "cursed" (*prokliatoe*) in the Russian version of *Lolita* (New York, 1967), p. 122.

left as sentinel, while Barbara and the boy copulated behind a bush. . . . At first, Lo had refused 'to try what it was like,' but curiosity and camaraderie prevailed, and soon she and Barbara were doing it by turns with the silent, coarse and surly but indefatigable Charlie, who had as much sex appeal as a raw carrot but sported a fascinating collection of contraceptives which he used to fish out of a third nearby lake, a considerably larger and more populous one, called Lake Climax, after the booming young factory town of that name" (p. 126). This humorous near-definition of "camaraderie" finds amusing contrast in Charlie's silent, almost devoted surliness. The "raw carrot" image, vividly suggestive in itself, gains punnish humor through its proximity to "indefatigable." Laughing perhaps at "Lake Climax" and the explosive combination "booming young," one can easily miss the literally lethal humor of "populous." One casual reader may take it as people living nearby, or even as fish (the word *is* there); another as vaguely describing the town. Actually, of course, "populous" refers to the lake's richness in floating contraceptives, but with a sinister Gogolian twist. Since the contraceptives are doubtless used ones, the lake really is—at least in a strangely morbid sense tending to reverse life and death—partially "populous" after all.

Gogol and Nabokov both favor unique digressions that abruptly but subtly reverse their own descriptive direction. The result is a haunting return to the point of departure even while narrational focus seems to keep moving away. Such reversals often add a tang of uneasy humor.

Early in *Dead Souls*, we are told that the Manilovs were wont to affix to each other's lips "such a long and languid kiss that in its duration one could easily have smoked through a small straw cigar" (5:27). The descriptive technique superimposes strange images. Through a large cloud of smoke, we refocus upon that long and languid kiss, whereupon the oral pleasure of smoking uneasily haunts the Manilovs' bliss.

The return can be made from much further away. Later, we read that Pliushkin's tiny little eyes "ran out from under his bushy brows like mice, when, having poked their keen little snouts out of dark holes, ears alert and whiskers twitching, they peer out to see if a cat or prankish brat is lurking about, and suspiciously sniff the very air" (p. 121). So vivid do the mice's eyes become that one almost forgets it is their bodies to which Pliushkin's eyes were initially, explicitly compared. And so convincing is Pliushkin's inferentially "suspicious" expression that few readers will notice, two pages later, when Pliushkin "became more suspicious," that the word has not been applied to him before.[18]

Such passages can be considerably longer and exceedingly complex.

18. With what one suspects may be the natural, if unwitting, symmetry of true genius, inquisitive cockroaches earlier seem to transfer to a nosy hotel neighbor some of their own silent attentiveness. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 5:8, echoed on p. 181.

Early in the novel, "black tailcoats" at the governor's party are likened to flies, which, as Nabokov has explained, ultimately twist the parodied Homeric rambling comparison into a circle by arranging themselves "here separately, there in dense clusters" just as the tailcoats had done initially (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 79). In addition to this, the next long sentence mentions, among several humorously humanesque descriptions, that the flies "had not flown in to eat at all, but only to show themselves off, to walk back and forth" (5:14).

One would not expect Nabokov to ignore this device in his own writings. The 1966 revised edition of his autobiography contains this passage: "Now the colored pencils in action. The green one, by a mere whirl of the wrist, could be made to produce a ruffled tree, or the eddy left by a submerged crocodile."[19] Much of the tree, and especially its "ruffles," seems vividly, aptly green. But the "eddy" is more complex. Somehow hauntingly, the (greenish) invisible crocodile tends to make the (greenish) eddy it left behind even more green. Or is the submerged crocodile completely invisible? Does it not lurk faintly below the surface, where its vague, scaly skin subtly blends with and intensifies the rippling eddy?

An earlier version of the same passage ends with "a ruffled tree, or the chimney smoke of a house where spinach was cooking" (*Nabokov's Dozen*, p. 132). Though more Gogolian—more uneasily humorous—the spinach smoke seems weaker in cumulative green. But it similarly haunts.

Two interesting specimens occur in *Pnin*. After their daughter married "a Waindell graduate with an engineering job in a remote Western state," the Clementses "felt dejected, apprehensive, and lonely in their nice old drafty house that now seemed to hang about them like the flabby skin and flapping clothes of some fool who had gone and lost a third of his weight."[20] Not until the final word "weight" does the simile completely crystallize. In context (where the daughter "left" on the preceding page), it is slightly less obvious that "lost weight" refers not only to the empty house, but even more precisely to the lost daughter in a sort of eerie "reverse birth" effect, complete with hanging, flabby skin. Even the not necessarily justified value judgment ("fool") seems to return to flavor the parents' loneliness and dejection.

Hopelessly lost while driving to The Pines, Pnin's "various indecisions and gropings took those bizarre visual forms that an observer on the lookout tower might have followed with a compassionate eye; but there was no living creature in that forlorn and listless upper region except for an ant who had his own troubles, having, after hours of inept perseverance, somehow reached the upper platform and the balustrade (his *autostrada*) and was getting all bothered and baffled much in the same way as that preposterous toy car

19. *Speak, Memory* (New York, 1966), p. 101.
20. *Pnin* (New York, 1965), p. 30.

progressing below" (p. 115). Obviously, the ant's exasperations return to haunt poor Pnin. Yet so patently, so playfully is the comparison engineered that three rather Gogolesque touches tend to slip by unnoticed. Both "preposterous" (with its opinion) and "toy" (with its distance) faintly imply, however ludicrously, that the ant *was* watching. After all, no other "living creature" was there; and the phrase "had his own troubles" does not exclude observation. Moreover the word "progressing," when applied to Pnin's belabored *lack* of progress, insinuates a further opinion almost sinisterly unantlike. Finally, if the tiny ant can be held responsible at all, its view of the "toy" car somewhat unsettlingly reverses normal perspective and dimension. In this respect, the ant may be seen to rival Gogol's famous inquisitive pig (1:32).

Of the two "Soviet experts" engaged to locate the Zemblan crown jewels in *Pale Fire*, Kinbote says: "One has seldom seen, at least among waxworks, a pair of more pleasant, presentable chaps. Everybody admired their clean-shaven jaws, elementary facial expressions, wavy hair, and perfect teeth" (p. 173). The "haunting return" is rapid, and easily missed. By the time most readers realize that "at least" has been substituted for "except," they have probably also encountered considerable evidence that these men *are* human waxworks. The phrase "everybody admired" is especially insidious, implying total conformity to awesome standards of gleaming *poshlust*.[21]

21. Incidentally, these two men are next described by a false contrast similar to that which introduces Gogol's arguing Ivans, whereupon they even seem "early evening" Gogolian Amateurs of Boots: "both wore elegant jackboots of soft black leather, and the sky turned away showing its ethereal vertebrae." (They are "silhouetted against the now flushed sky.") If the parallels with Gogol are intended, they are now complete even with Gogolian reaction to Gogolian *poshlust*. Moreover, the reaction itself derives from a typically eerie reversal of point of view. Similarly, it seems possible that Nabokov has spread Gogol's famous garrison-soldier-uniform sky (Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 5:23; *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 78) over three places in his own works: "The Poets," *Tri-Quarterly*, Winter 1970, pp. 4–5; *The Eye* (New York, 1966), pp. 6, 84.

But such tempting potential parallels are virtually endless. In a corner-room shop of the hotel where Chichikov first stops, there is a man in the window "with a samovar of red copper and a face exactly as red as the samovar, so that from afar one could have thought that in the window were standing two samovars, if one samovar had not been with a black as pitch beard" (Gogol, 5:8). The Russian word order has here been ruthlessly maintained in translation because it contributes to the humorous reversal. For example, the words "two samovars" should immediately precede and thereby enhance the deception of "one samovar," which, in turn, should be deprived of the word "beard" as long as possible to sustain the deception.

Nabokov may be seen to stop "prudently" short of a similar reversal in telling us that Mr. Piffke (*King, Queen, Knave*) had "a profile that had prudently stopped halfway between man and teapot" (p. 77). In *The Gift* one finds "Mme Chernyshevski, becoming for a moment—as usually happens—remarkably similar to her own (blue, gleaming) teapot" (p. 43).

Nabokov's world, as he claims, is surely quite different from Gogol's, yet also surely, there *are* similarities—from apparent territorial "reality" to minute verbal ritual.

Early in *The Gift* (which opens not unlike Gogol's *Overcoat*), the poet Fyodor sees a bright mirror reflection, which "—whether because it had given him a kindred pleasure, or because it had taken him unawares and jolted him (as children in the hayloft fall into the resilient darkness)—released in him that pleasant something which for several days now had been at the murky bottom of his every thought" (p. 14). This same sentence then reveals the "something": Fyodor's "collection of poems has been published." Whereupon the "falling" abruptly continues: "and, when, as now, his mind tumbled like this, that is when he recalled the fifty-odd poems that had just come out, he would skim in an instant the entire book. . . ." Carefully prepared, the total image seems to draw, appropriately, upon both vertical and horizontal motion: the poet's mind somehow seems to fall down through the very substance he is skimming. Similarly, his earlier thoughts now seem to "tumble," turning their "murky bottoms" up to the light, just as the mirror (which reflected a bright sky) perhaps caused his memory to probe "the resilient darkness."

This same sentence (it is 228 words in length) then further illuminates Fyodor's "instant re-experiencing" process through a typical "haunting return": "the familiar words would rush past, swirling amid violent foam (whose seething was transformed into a mighty flowing motion if one fixed one's eyes on it, as we used to do long ago, looking down at it from a vibrating mill bridge until the bridge turned into a ship's stern: farewell!)—and. . . ." The sudden vivid transformation of bridge to ship hauntingly parallels the one of familiar words to mighty flowing motion. Moreover, both transformations occur even as the image leaves the reader, in one bright flash. Here then, it is the image of vivid departure that hauntingly returns.

Three pages later Nabokov effects two related weird returns in two consecutive sentences. Fyodor locks himself in with his book of poems to do "the exact opposite of what he had done a short time ago, when he had skimmed over the book in one instantaneous thought. Now he read in three dimensions, as it were, carefully exploring each poem, lifted out like a cube from among the rest and bathed from all sides in that wonderful, fluffy country air after which one is always so tired in the evening" (p. 18). Diverted by the cube simile suggesting three-dimensional reading, one can easily fail to notice the subtly country-air-evoked image of exhilaration at a fresh insight, followed by exhaustion afterwards.

The return of the next sentence is reflected even in its wording: "In other words, as he read, he again made use of all the materials already once gathered by his memory for the extraction of the present poems, and reconstructed everything, absolutely everything, as a returning traveler sees in an orphan's eyes not only the smile of its mother, whom he had known in his youth, but also an avenue ending in a burst of yellow light and that auburn leaf on the

bench, and everything, everything." The word "orphan" here subtly implies that the father is nowhere about, just when he may be returning. Thus, "known" may be a sexual pun, and the reflected smile may even be partly the traveler's very own. If so, these implications will surely escape most readers.

But regardless of this, how much more the word "everything" now means! The eyes, their generation-spanning smile, the avenue, and so on, have now evoked a host of attendant possibilities, and, inferentially, the poet's creative recollections of his own formerly begotten poems seem similarly enriched. Finally, Fyodor's childhood (which unfolds in quotations from his poems over the next twenty pages) hauntingly re-echoes the imagery employed to suggest its paternal re-creational recollection ("children in the hayloft fall . . ."; "in an orphan's eyes not only the smile of its mother . . .").

Nabokov's famous manipulation of the Hegelian syllogism is closely allied to his use of the haunting return device. In the syllogism, however, both reversals, or twists of logic, revolve primarily around the initial image. But the final effect is similar: a sudden return opens up fresh, expanded perception.

Parallels in Gogol include both humorous and eerie effects. Of Sobakevich we are told: "No soul whatever seemed to be present in that body, or if he did have a soul it was not where it ought to be, but, as in the case of Kashchey the Deathless [a ghoulish character in Russian folklore] it dwelled somewhere beyond the mountains and was hidden under such a thick crust, that anything that might have stirred in its depths could produce no tremor whatever on the surface."[22] The word "or" humorously promotes a false alternative that ultimately corroborates "seemed." The syllogism (no soul, soul, no effective soul) is brief but complete. Its final image vividly reinforces the initial assertion, which was tempting, but difficult, to believe. And our last, and lasting, impression is surely the more convincing for its almost eerie complexity.

In Part Two of *Dead Souls* Chichikov learns that Petukh has mortgaged his estate because everyone is doing so, and Petukh has no desire to "lag behind" the others:

> "What a fool, what a fool!" thought Chichikov, "squandering everything and turning his children into little splurgers." . . .
>
> "Oh, I know what you're thinking," said Petukh.
>
> "What?" asked Chichikov, embarrassed.
>
> "You're thinking: 'What a fool, what a fool this Petukh is! Invited me to dinner, and not a sign of it yet.' "[23]

22. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 5:105. The translation and brackets are Nabokov's (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 98).

23. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 5:447 and 313.

At once both near and far. On the next page, Chichikov demolishes his food-loving host by admitting he has already dined. He then proceeds to console Petukh, however, by saying he had no appetite before and consequently ate nothing.

Nabokov of course employs the syllogism far more extensively than Gogol, but similar eerie humor not infrequently redounds:

> STUMP: Ow, ow, ow, my foot is asleep.
> LUMP: Now wait a minute—that's an artificial leg you have here.
> STUMP: Ah, that's what the matter is.[24]

Despite its facetiousness, this syllogistic tweak from Nabokov's play *The Waltz Invention* does suggest the tingling supposed to exist in appropriate space, after amputation, with surprising vividness. The subtle pun "matter" is almost sinisterly Gogolian.

Like Gogol, Nabokov also employs the device with deceptive, deep seriousness. A short story called "That in Aleppo Once . . ." contains this passage: "quite suddenly she started to sob in a sympathetic railway carriage. 'The dog,' she said, 'the dog we left. I cannot forget the poor dog.' The honesty of her grief shocked me, as we had never had any dog. 'I know,' she said. 'But I tried to imagine we had actually bought that setter. And just think, he would be now whining behind a locked door.' There had never been any talk of buying a setter" (*Nabokov's Dozen*, p. 105). The irony of "honesty" is intensified by its considerably preceding the dog they never had. Since the syllogism is here complete (dog, no dog, imagined dog) even without the concluding sentence, the phrase "never been any talk" seems to remove the imaginary dog yet another distance from "reality." (Even the animal's hypothetical existence was apparently purely imaginary.) And yet, despite the at least double denial of its reality[25] (and partly through selection of vivid detail), the dog perversely seems to whine all the louder.

In both Nabokov and Gogol the syllogism takes the reader back to where he started, only to emphasize that he is now somewhere else. Thus, one is artfully jarred into recognizing one's own perceptual limitations. And whatever humor ensues is characteristically tinged with eerieness.

Both Nabokov and Gogol often depict sudden, perspective-wrenching reflections (in puddles, mirrors, lakes, and so on) which all seem part of a larger and stranger preoccupation with reversing the real and the unreal. Of Akakii Akakievich, Nabokov revealingly finds that "his ghost seems to be the most tangible, the most real part of his being" (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 146). The

24. *The Waltz Invention* (New York, 1966), pp. 53–54.

25. The denial may even be deemed a triple one, since the "narrator" (the story is in the form of a letter) repeatedly claims his wife "never existed" (*Nabokov's Dozen*, pp. 103, 109, 111).

people of both Nabokov's and Gogol's worlds relentlessly encounter eerie alterations of "reality"—reversal-like transformations of what had been previously taken for granted. In Gogol's *Portrait*, a strange, visionlike dream seems to contain, deep inside, "a terrifying fragment of reality" (3:84).

When Van Veen does, and yet does not, commit suicide, we read that "his destiny simply forked at that instant, as it probably does sometimes at night, especially in a strange bed, at stages of great happiness or great desolation, when we happen to die in our sleep, but continue our normal existence, with no perceptible break in the faked serialization, on the following, neatly prepared morning, with a spurious past discreetly but firmly attached behind."[26] Beneath its muted facetiousness, this passage subtly but viciously feeds upon its own growing Doubt.[27] Its not unsinister conclusion ("neatly prepared," "discreetly but firmly") is preceded by a disarmingly casual tone ("destiny simply forked," "happen to die in our sleep"). And a long *a* assonance subtly highlights—even though it is termed not "perceptible"—the "break" in "faked serialization."

Further reversals common to both Nabokov and Gogol include basic plot pattern[28] and even an expressed desire to alter authorial voice.[29] But (darkly humorous) disturbing reversals of the real and the unreal seem most characteristic of, and essential to, both writers' worlds. Consider the following two passages (the first ends *Nevsky Prospect*, the second is deep in *Speak, Memory*):

> . . . everything breathes deception. It is false at any time, this Nevsky Prospect, but most of all when night descends upon it in a thickening mass, separating the white and straw-colored walls of the houses, when the entire town turns into thunder and gleaming light, when streams of carriages cascade from the bridges, . . . and Satan lights the lamps himself, just to show everything in an unreal aspect.[30]

26. *Ada* (New York, 1969), p. 445.

27. And thus the treatment may be seen to reach disturbingly on beyond Borges, who raises similar questions, but with much less near-sadistic relish. See, for example, *Labyrinths*, pp. 28, 50.

28. "Gogol's guns," Nabokov writes, "hang in midair and do not go off—in fact the charm of his allusions is exactly that nothing ever comes of them" (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 44). Humbert's gun does not shoot Lolita, nor Albinus's gun Margot, nor Van's gun himself. Neither is Hermann's "double" his double, the "doomed" Dreyer is not drowned, and so on. Gogol's *Inspector General* ends in an almost inevitable reversal, just as *Dead Souls*—as it has survived and is discussed by its author—evokes a ghostly, projected about-face. Even the famous ending of a Gogol short story—"It is dreary in this world, ladies and gentlemen!" (2:245)—may be taken as a disturbing reversal simply by emphasizing the word "this."

29. "No! . . I cannot! . . Give me another pen!" (Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2:240); " . . . all New England for a lady-writer's pen!" exclaims Humbert (*Lolita*, p. 47).

30. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:43.

> In the purity and vacuity of the less familiar hour, the shadows were on the wrong side of the street, investing it with a sense of not inelegant inversion, as when one sees reflected in the mirror of a barber-shop . . . a stretch of sidewalk shunting a procession of unconcerned pedestrians in the wrong direction, into an abstract world that all at once stops being droll and loosens a torrent of terror.[31]

Both passages effect characteristic perception-expanding reversals. Whereas Gogol typically has Satan almost playfully make (totally serious) eerie optical mischief, Nabokov breathes frightening life into his "unconcerned pedestrians" and more deliberately releases his "torrent of terror." Any resulting humor is typically darker and less playful. Indeed, Nabokov creates his reversal with a directness evincing the respect he has expressed for Gogol's art: "At this superhigh level of art, literature . . . appeals to that secret depth of the human soul where the shadows of other worlds pass like the shadows of nameless and soundless ships. As one or two patient readers may have gathered by now, this is really the only appeal that interests me."[32]

31. *Speak, Memory*, p. 296.
32. *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 149.