



## The Man Is the Book

Barabtarlo Gennady

### Pour citer cet article

Barabtarlo Gennady, « The Man Is the Book », *Cycnos*, vol. 24.1 (Vladimir Nabokov, Annotating vs Interpreting Nabokov), 2006, mis en ligne en mars 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/586>

Lien vers la notice <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/586>

Lien du document <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/586.pdf>

### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118      ISSN papier 0992-1893

#### AVERTISSEMENT

*Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.*

*L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.*

# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

## The Man Is the Book

Gennady Barabtarlo

University of Missouri, U.S.A.

While most Nabokov's books present diegetic problems (identity of the narrator, narrative tiers, unmarked transposition of the first and third person narration etc.), his first English novel contains a special narratological difficulty which defined the narrative system he employed in the subsequent series of English writings. A plausible resolution, or at least a correct definition, of that difficulty—whose first trace can be seen, I argue, in *Invitation of a Small Guest*'s title and whose tail flashes so alluringly at the exit point—is of principal urgency, comparable only to that of *Pale Fire*. My observations will attempt to describe the problem as I see it and offer a possible solution.

The "I" of a book  
Cannot die in the book.

V. V. N.

If one understands the principles of interpreting and of annotating Nabokov's fiction as a matter of choice rather than integration, one cannot help seeing a measure of immanent tension, if not a confrontation, between criticism of cultural reference and philology (the latter term being taken in its organic purity).

That choice is, or used to be, a scholars' parlour game, and so instead of following a discourse of why the two disciplines cannot nowadays be happily married all the way to a brown study, I shall meet my argument at the exit, where I propose that the literary student's task is akin to that of a player, to use either music or chess terminology. One can see how the thing is made, and perhaps why, by playing it out, by performing it, by solving its difficult movements and moves as one goes over the score of a piece (or of a game). Not mere re-reading, which only points to a requisite method, but rather perpetual rehearsing. To what end? Of course, Nabokov repays each rereading, every time, and at different levels of appreciation. At the highest altitude, I think that, like John Shade, Nabokov believed that a well-

built fiction may, by a collapsible analogy, reveal to the builder something about the world he came into, as well as about the world to come.

I know of no better way to "play" a book than to translate it. One is forced to disassemble the powertrain, the suspension, the wiring, wipe up every part and particle of speech and then put it all back together, piece by piece, using parts from another language bin. One learns much by getting his hands dirty while trying to get his text clean.

There is a curious American roadside attraction—a Midwestern sort of all-family fun: a labyrinth made in a patch of a cornfield, a maize-maze, where one walks a narrow path trenched in a seven-foot tall corn thicket making right-angle turns or hitting dead-ends. There are no guides, only a few half-hidden, crudely drawn pointing fingers; the visitor gets his card punched at numbered stations, positioned cleverly and in an ascending sequence.

One can imagine all of Nabokov's books somehow congealed into a big formation with an elaborate structure, one enormous book whose opening parts may be very different from the final ones, but which in general is governed by the wondrously stable artistic principles and driven by fundamentally the same teleology. A look from above at any one of his books reveals an intricate system of canals abrim with meaning; at a greater elevation, the body of his entire output can be viewed as a philosophical system tested by artistic experimentation and based on a proposition that life has a design in itself and a purpose beyond itself.

## 1.

If it is possible to say that Nabokov's books are elaborate mazes, exciting yet baffling and stressful when explored on foot—beautiful and significant if beheld from above,—then one can venture further down that metaphor and discern stations and pointers. These are of the four main varieties:

The obvious ones can be seen from the ground level by all but the blind.

Next, the hidden or disguised arrows, to be sought and discovered by labour—in a crevice, under a patch of convolvulus, within an embroidered monogram on a handkerchief, or in plain sight (but through green spectacles only). Next, discernible only from an

elevation point—those huge arrows, showing general direction at the plot level—by plot I mean design. Ultimately, invisible ones, grasped only intellectually, pointing not laterally, not cruising across the novel's expanse, but rather of the surface-outer space type, directed at the true reader living in another world, ontologically incompatible with the fictional one.

At the ground floor the reader—or the player—of Nabokov's first English novel will follow the storyline as it unravels, perhaps noticing along the way that there is a vaguely developed chess-laden landscape, dotted with certain telling names and situations; on the next helical run, he finds all sorts of hidden hints and realizes that chess is mere diversion, a small game in a very big hunt<sup>1</sup>. He sees that V.<sup>2</sup> the reader sees that V. knows much more than he can glean from any of his sources, and produces writing that is of infinitely better quality than he tells us he is capable of, citing deficiencies of talent, experience, and literary English.<sup>3</sup> The reader may further observe that in the chapters where V. *collects* data his writing is far clumsier than in those where he propels his biography supposedly based on those data: there V.'s style flows and often soars to Knight's heights. One sees moreover that V. cannot possibly know this or that detail, especially of his subject's psychological state from the sources available to him – in other words, that V. has *imagined* much, perhaps most, of what he passes for a biography.

---

1 See for instance Nabokov's letter to Edmund Wilson of October 21, 1941. *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. S. Karlinsky, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 58.

2 In a letter to Andrew Field of February 3, 1967, Nabokov names his narrator "Victor"—see Brian Boyd's note in *Nabokov: Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951*. The Library of America, New York, 1996, p. 677. However, he may as well be "Vasilii", like the Russian narrator of "Spring in Fialta" whose name was changed to—"Victor" in the English version in order to retain the initial V. At the earlier stages of composition he was called "George".

3 There is much diegetic affinity between "Spring in Fialta" and the novel. The narrator of the story claims that he is no writer and does not see the point of writing fiction—all that from within a most refined example of imaginative writing. See my "Nabokov's trinity (On the movement of Nabokov's themes)", in *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*. Ed. J. Connolly. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 112ff.

Among several scholars who have pointed out this possibility Brian Boyd did it most clearly<sup>4</sup> while also outlining several other modes of reading the book, each leading to the next by a trapdoor through which the visitor slides in a Luna-park sort of delight. At this tier, the book becomes something quite different from what we can assume on the first run. Much as in *The Prismatic Bezel* room numbers are suddenly wiped off the doors of a boarding house, and its occupants turn out to be interrelated estate dwellers, so *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* becomes a book about V.'s writing a novel about Sebastian, whose relation to the author is suddenly flung open to question,—a story of a genius and two women, *la femme sympathique* and *la femme fatale*, the latter ruining him, just as his fairy-like governess claims to have foretold.<sup>5</sup>

This inevitably brings into play the other antinomic possibility (remindful of the *Pale Fire* dilemma<sup>6</sup>). At the next level the hourglass is flipped and the entire thing offers itself as Sebastian's uncanny production. This view resolves many grave inconsistencies, including the already mentioned, and holds out a good explanation to such baffles as the fact that in the second half V. lives through the situations from Sebastian Knight's books that he has already so well, so thoroughly described yet failed to recognize the trail of *déjà lu* so obvious to the reader.

I shall give but one curious example of many: in Chapter Four, the narrator, whilst inspecting Sebastian's flat comes upon a pictorial plan for a book Sebastian "never wrote but possibly was still contemplating doing so in the last year of his life" — a book with a

---

4 Vladimir Nabokov: *The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 500-1. See also J.B. Sisson, "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight" in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. V. Alexandrov. (Garland: New York, 1995), p. 633-43. Dieter Zimmer gives a useful list of the best literature on the book in his *Vladimir Nabokov: Gesammelte Werke*, (Rowohlt: Hamburg, 1996), Band VI, 280-1.

5 Odd and interesting that Victor, who by the time he writes this chapter already knows firsthand of Nina's actinia-like predatory powers, should not acknowledge the old governess's astuteness, instead deploring the callousness of her senility.

6 Summarized in Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), pp. 4-5 (see also notes).

"rather repellent bulldog type of man..." (40)<sup>7</sup> whose sequential pictures, from boyhood on, Sebastian kept in an envelope for future use. And in the last chapter we catch a glimpse of "a cross old man with a bulldog face" (197) twice crashing into the telephone booth where V. is frantically trying to reach Dr Starov and find Sebastian's hospital's address. If this is the same mysterious and raffish "Mr H." (and in support of this guess one may have to remember a "rather repellent bulldog" that Nina Lecerf is petting while trying to seduce V.), then Sebastian did write that book after all, and it must be the very book we are playing now.

The general artistic process appears to follow several simple stages: uncommon observations are stored as retouched impressions, impressions find an elaborate expression, these grow imagery and are inserted, by the retrograde method, into the overall scheme. A good example: in the summer of 1926, Clare came to join Sebastian at a German sea resort but did not find him there (he had gone to Berlin to see a heart doctor); she wandered into a grove by the beach, and suddenly felt "as if a German gnome... was peeping from under bindweed with his bright brown eyes..." (88). Sebastian experiences exactly the same eerie sensation a day later. This episode marks a first fracture in their relations and the first "warning" of a worsening heart condition, physical and emotional. Two chapters and as many years later (103) the crisis has crept up on them: in one of the by now frequent outbursts of terrible ire, Sebastian refuses to see "...a *meek little man* waiting..." for an appointed visit. This is a second warning he ignores. This "little man" ("*chelovechek*") appears in Sebastian's "The Back of the Moon" as Mr Siller, a lovable and most helpful character: "You remember that meek little man..." (103-04)... "most alive of his characters... helpful... waiting for the train... brown eyes..." etc. And when a Mr Silbermann enters V.'s train compartment. and, looking at V. with *his bright brown eyes*, begs him not to pursue *that woman* because it's dangerous and useless (132), the reader should recognize the origin of his magical touch (Siller is the Scotch for silver). "Too many warnings," he sighs on hearing of Sebastian's death of a heart attack, "too many general..."—he is

---

<sup>7</sup> Page references in parentheses are to the New Directions edition, New York, 1977.

groping for the right word, and V. furnishes it "...dress rehearsals of death."

To sum: at first we observe a tense image entering Sebastian's fancy, later materializing into a man waiting out Sebastian's frenzy in his flat's anteroom, then showing up in his fiction as a helper and guardian, and lastly re-materializing after Sebastian's death and entering V.'s compartment eager to help and to guard. The plot seems to migrate, helically, from one fiction to a larger one.

Up one flight of the winding staircase, and another way of looking at the landscape opens up. In Chapter Fourteen V. of a sudden admits: "...my quest had developed its own magic and logic and though I sometimes cannot help believing that it had gradually grown into a dream... using the pattern of reality for the weaving of its own fancies, I am forced to recognise that I was being led right, and that in striving to render Sebastian's life I must now follow the same rhythmical interlacements." (137) What follows is a masterful restoration of Sebastian's first love drama in four acts, full worthy of the best pages of *Other Shores*, which once again utterly gainsays V.'s claim to being a humble-bumble beginner equipped with rudimentary literary idiom. None of this could be gleaned from any of Sebastian Knight's books, nor could the "plump mother of two boys", whose story gave V. the "pattern", supply any of its verbal and compositional wonders. "Being led..." seems to be the key, and at that plane the first two antinomic possibilities can be reconciled, or at least mutually nullified: V. only taps the keys, but Sebastian's ghost supplies them, arranging and paraging situations, sometimes dictating, looking over his consanguineous brother's shoulder. Phrases and hints are dropped like little pointed arrows here and there.

There is a curious, entwined example of this in the end of Chapter Eight, where V. resorts to the stock expression "the presence of mind" as he crosses the street to accost (as he puts it) Clare Bishop. At the very last moment he cancels his plans for an interview on noticing that she is pregnant. To justify his all but bumping into her, he hands her the first thing he finds in his pocket, which turns out to be the key to Sebastian's flat—and then the ready-made phrase about the "presence of mind"—written by a Russian whose English is supposed to be lame—admits of being a translation of the Russian *prisutstvie dukha* (of the same *présence d'esprit* origin as the English phrase)

which, if de-idiomatized, means "the presence of a spirit", a charged double-entendre in Nabokov's world. The key that, with Sebastian's spirit's nudging help, V. produces and gives Clare to hold "with her innocent blind fingers" is the same key that Pnin thinks he grasps, but then drops and loses (Chapter One, end)—the key to the solution of the all-encompassing enigma of life and afterlife.

Thus one solution—the only one on *this plane* of narration—is that Sebastian's spirit guides V. on a literary excursion through his fiction, from key to key, untangling the mystery yarn of his life. Sebastian in this version acts as V.'s psychagogue.

## 2.

Nabokov likes to begin tearing down his hospitality tent while the unsuspecting guests are still enjoying themselves inside: many novels (most notably *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Gift*, *Bend Sinister*, and *Pnin*) and even some short stories ("Recruiting", "Leonardo") employ this sort of clean-up operation. Towards the end of our novel, the hero appears to have disappeared rather than died. *The Prismatic Bezel* serves as a Hamlet-like pantomimic allegory for Sebastian Knight's life's resolution: the body is "gone", the room is empty, and the explanation for the vanishing trick relies on a palindromic anagram of the name of the person presumed dead, for Mr G. Abeson is Mr Nosebag's *idem quod* read backwards. The art-collecting Abeson is absent, and so is good old Nosebag who collects snuffboxes. V. concludes his summary of Sebastian's first novel by pointing out that he has tried his best "to show the workings of the book". Yes, but which book? An extrapolation is begging to be made.

Edmund Wilson's blurb on the jacket of the first edition of the novel ends, rather startlingly, in a riddle enclosed (also oddly) in parentheses: "(The observant reader will have... a surprise of a special kind which it would be unfair to the author to give away.)". This leads me to suppose that Nabokov had told him the secret of his design, because it takes, besides keen observance, an intimate and special knowledge of Russian customs to suspect a thinning in a perfectly normal-looking textual fabric. About fifteen years ago I floated a proposition that the solution to the chief narrative riddle of *The Real*



*Life of Sebastian Knight* is to be found right in the title.<sup>8</sup> *Le mot de l'énigme* is that *Sebastian Knight* is an anagram of *Knight Is Absent*, with an "a" to spare (a useful article, I might add). Now that I have had a chance to reassemble the book in Russian<sup>9</sup>, I am convinced of it. Proofs abound, both within the book and without. To give but eight: The name *Sevastian* is practically unencountered among Russian upper classes at the time; yes, Sebastian was born on the day of St Sebastian's martyrdom (given, however, by the wrong calendar!), but the educated classes had long lost the pious custom of christening children by the name of a saint whose commemoration happens to fall on one's birthday. In other words, the odds of someone's from that sort of Russian family naming a boy "Sevastian" are comparable to those of finding a "Demetrius" or "Gennadius" among the English gentry—not impossible, but negligible. Of course, Nabokov knew it as well as anybody, and so if he were so minded and in need of that particular name for reasons other than encoding, he could make V. explain his odd choice by working in some plausible excuse, an especially pious aunt (Olga Olegovna Orlova?), a grandfather so named, or even Virginia's whim.

In this Nabokov's first full-size experiment in English (fashioned, let us not forget, as a perhaps pseudonymous entry in a book competition<sup>10</sup>), cryptograms, esp. of names read not only backwards but also upside down, are so numerous as to point to a special technical feature of the design. We have Miss Pratt, who presents a subtle, easily missed, trap in V.'s data-collecting<sup>11</sup>; Mr Goodman, whom V. later describes as "the blind man's dog," a "dog o'[f] man"; Roy Carswell, who never appears without his given name, whose cryptogrammatic secret is that his portrait is "clearly wors[e]" than the original, the "real" Sebastian, whatever "real" may mean on this plane

---

8 "See under Sebastian", *The Nabokovian*, 24 (Spring 1990), pp. 24-9, reprinted, with revisions, in *Aerial View*, (New York: Peter Lang), 1993, pp. 213-17.

9 For a new multi-volume series of Nabokov's collected works, to be brought out by Azbooka Publishing House in St Petersburg beginning in 2007.

10 See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 496.

11 She is hardly reliable: see especially the film episode, pp.86-87, narrated apparently through her eyes, which makes it a bit doubtful that she could really be Clare's confidante. Odd, too, is the way she flatly refuses even to try to fix V.'s interview with Clare, plying instead her own version of Clare's relation with Sebastian.

(his version of Sebastian's likeness is reflected in a stream – a "rechnoy" portrait, a "self-portrait of an artist as a madman", along with a water spider floating backwards, whose shadow will jump on Nina Rechnoy's neck revealing her plain ploy even to the thoroughly blinded V.). And it is "Uncle Black"'s knack of writing his name doubly inverted that shakes V. out of his Nina-induced stupor.

There are many hints at this solution in the text itself. For instance: in his Cambridge years, "...while Sebastian sat on that fence, his mind was a turmoil of words and fancies, uncomplete fancies and insufficient words, but already he knew that this and only this was the reality of his life..." (50). Or: "The intricate pattern of human life turns out to be monogrammatic, now quite clear to the inner eye disentangling the interwoven letters." Or: "'The absolute solution was written all over the world he had known".

That "he" is the "man who is dying", a memorable refrain from *The Doubtful Asphodel*. But the second part of that syllogism is that "*the man is the book*". Which brings up another cryptogram: V. is sitting in the hospital room next to a man he thought was his sleeping half-brother, but who turns out to be a Mr Kegan. The confusion ensued when V. said to the night porter that his relative was an Englishman (whereas Sebastian had presumably checked in under his newly-rediscovered Russian identity), and then emphatically, several times, more for us than for that sleepy Frenchman, spelled his English penname: "k, n, i, g...", stopping short – not at the genitive plural of the Russian for *books*, as one may suppose,<sup>12</sup> but at a truncated nominative singular: *kniga*, the book. Indeed, Kegan is an anagram for that very Russian word (e-long), and if we recall again that on one page (of the *Asphodel* summary), "a man is dying" and, on the facing one, "the man is the book", we then know where to look for anagrammatic keys to an all-encompassing solution.

*Sebastian* is the very first word of the book, its master motto, its shopsign. It also ends the book, sounding as a refrain, in an incantation almost as memorable as the beginning of *Lolita* (whose harmonic worth Nabokov tended to exaggerate, I think). And out of the book's twenty chapters as many as fourteen, or 70%, have

---

<sup>12</sup> See Boyd's note in the Library of America edition, p. 680.

*Sebastian* in the first or last sentence (in the first half of the book the incidence rises to 90%).<sup>13</sup>

In Chapter Fifteen Nina's former husband lets V. in his apartment holding a black knight which he has just removed from the chessboard—and the slightly imperfect anagram becomes complete: "a knight is absent" from the *damier*—indeed, from the book itself, which recalls the line "*V zale avtora net, gospoda*" (from the poem "Slava", 1943)—"The author is not in the house, gentlemen", because on this plane of narration there is no title character in the book and the "player" is invited to "see under *Sebastian*". A deep-meaning phrase in V.'s disturbingly prophetic dream, the phrase that became dryly nonsensical upon awakening (190) may then be just that: "a knight is absent".

The significant word "Domremy" in Sebastian's last letter, in its pseudo-Cyrillic disguise, is the sort of trick that a bi-lingual detective may find in the Russian spelling of the title: '*Istinnaia zhizn' Sevastiana Naita*' produces the phrase "Naita net" (there is no Knight) + the narrator's likely real name<sup>14</sup>.

Nabokov's books immediately preceding and following *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* contain much plot-revealing anagrammatic encoding, from "mali è trano t'amesti" in *Invitation to a Beheading*<sup>15</sup> to Adam Krug's verbal hoops.

And in *Despair*, a two-stage play on the meaning of the hero's name brushes aside the question of the imagined likeness of Hermann and Felix and instead puts to question the very nature of the latter's presence in the book (perhaps the former's as well). Hermann keeps muttering a line from Pushkin's late poem, "*na svete schastia net...*" [there is no joy in life ...]; but *Felix*, meaning in Latin what it does, suggests, at a higher level, that someone above Hermann, someone that "neither of them knows" tells the reader something important enough to be repeated time and again about the book's design, which can be translated as there is no "felix" in the world, and therefore in

---

13 Opening and ending lines of Nabokov's works deserve, indeed ought, to be published and annotated specially—a sort of *Начала и концы*, as Leo Shestov's famous collection of essays was titled.

14 "Vasia", short of "Vasilii", as the narrator is called in "Spring in Fialta"—see note 3 above.

15 See my *Aerial View*, pp.193-7.

the book. Nor is there any "Hermann" for that matter. As Sebastian Knight puts it in *Asphodel*, "The eye undoes [the tie] while the clumsy fingers bleed".

In every chapter there is a point where Knight's person and his very existence are cast into a surreal light. But because the characters who cause his identity to fade and flicker are themselves shown to be unworthy of complete trust, the reader tends to ignore their evidence as a natural consequence of senility (in the case of Mlle), iniquity (Mr Goodman), oddity (Dr Starov), etc. This is definitely a version of Nabokov's well-known diegetic strategy in *Despair* and of course in every one of his later English first-person fiction.

The key two-page passage summarizing *The Doubtful Asphodel* (179-180), from "The word" on the one page to "the man is dead" on the next, provides a clean outline of the encryption. V. combs the text for a code in and between the lines, but it is outside the text – on the title page (and, to quote Sebastian Knight again, "... written all over the world he had known"). An anagram is a verbal equation; Sebastian is dying, yet Sebastian is the book; Sebastian "is absent", and the book is written by someone unknown to the half-brothers.

### 3.

Upon receiving Starov's wire, "Sebastian's state hopeless", V., "for some reason unknown, went to the bathroom and stood there for a moment in front of the *looking-glass*" (191). In the last chapter (which is longer by half than any of the preceding ones, just as in *Invitation to a Beheading*, the only other Nabokov's novel written, or at least drafted, so very fast and almost to exactly the same length and arrangement of parts) time's wheels spin and stall, and V. finds himself in situations or follows in the footsteps of select characters from every book Sebastian wrote, and, amazingly, without realising it. It is as if in his frenzied pursuit of Sebastian, still presumed alive, he has slipped through a Carrollian hole into a trans-looking-glass world. Chapter Twenty ends in an epilogue (set off by an interval), a weak device that Nabokov never employed before or after. This epilogue formulates an unsolicited answer, making re-entering the maze a necessity, for the task now is to find out what the question was and how it evolved throughout the book: without that knowledge, the answer makes little sense. The method is that of retrogressive

analysis: it consists in tracing back all legal moves and finding the combinations that have led to the final position on the playing board.

V. intends to write about Sebastian in chronological order, "...without overtaking him." (53) He never does; we see the two together only in the pre-preterite, in three flashback dissolves. The reason is that the half-brothers cannot appear on the same stage (or board) in the book's narrative tense. Sebastian Knight must be dead, or perhaps better to say, must be no more, by the time the curtain goes up. This will become a ground rule in *Pnin*: just as the narrator all but overtakes "his poor Pnin", Pnin is spirited out of the book.<sup>16</sup>

The "someone neither Sebastian nor V. knows" is a bodiless agent, who holds the narrative on a tray like a waiter, and serves it deftly. The waiter cannot be seen, and the tray flows towards you through the air and gently lands on your table.

When the treats are brought in, you crack open a fortune cookie like the sealing wax on a folded letter - and it's empty, or rather has a strip of paper which reads only "fortune, felix": a fool will think that he has been fooled, but a wise one will think otherwise. It's a figment-within-fiction device.

*Taina Naita* (Knight's secret) makes a perfect anagram in Russian. In Nabokov's fairy domain the beast is invisible but ubiquitous, and that is the beauty of it.

At the end one is left with a vibrant nothingness, a special kind of post-processed void: Sebastian is absent, so is V. The ultimate maker is present, fills every cell and fibre of the text—but ontologically is not merely imperceptible but incomprehensible.

Constantly, doggedly, inventively Nabokov searched for a formula, almost a mathematical expression, to make fictional world and ours mutually communicable, specifically, to find a way for the inhabitants of his fiction—not so much to be aware of our world (that's impossible this side of sanity)—as rather to feel a "thin place" (an old Celtic metaphysical expression). His fictions are large-scale laboratories, or workshops, where experiments are staged with the hope of finding out, by extraordinary extrapolation, the truth about the earth and the heaven.

---

16 On the antinomic nature of Pnin's riddle see *Aerial View*, pp. 143-86 (esp. 170ff.)

If *F* is less than but comparable to *R*, then perhaps *R*, while incomparably less, is nevertheless comparable to the big *IF*. That is one possible expression of Nabokov's tenet, desiccated and oversimplified as it may be.