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Autobiography as Artistic Invention: Nabokov's Self-parody in *Look at the Harlequins!*

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Abstract

Though often dismissed as ramblings of an aging man, *Look at the Harlequins!* might be the most underestimated novel in Nabokov's oeuvre. This essay, however, contends that it is the culmination of Nabokov's novels in which the author masterfully wields parody to invent a fantastical world inhabited by characters and works either similar or deliberately contrary to those in his real or fictional worlds. Cast in the form of a fictitious writer's autobiography, *Look at the Harlequins!* manifests itself as a meta-fictional self-parody transmuting the author's own life and art into a distorted, highly stylized account of the narrator's "marriages, and literary life". This essay explores this artistic invention through a twofold analysis. Initially, it focuses on the reconstruction of Nabokov's biographical reality into Vadim's schizoid existence. It then moves on to an examination of the parodic parallels between the novel's fictional bibliography and the author's own literary canon. Ultimately, this essay demonstrates that Nabokov ingeniously utilizes parody in this novel to demonstrate that autobiography is an act of artistic invention, where imagination is more vital than the average facts of life.

Key words: Vladimir Nabokov; *Look at the Harlequins!;* Self-parody, Autobiography; Meta-fiction

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) is widely recognized as a master of twentieth-century literature, known for an idiosyncratic style that privileges aesthetic artifice over literal representation. As a parodist *par excellence*, he engages in a kaleidoscopic intertextual dialogue with a vast procession of literary figures, utilizing parody as a unique Nabokovian tool to both pay homage to his precursors and subject their works to his characteristic irony. Such parodic engagement is central to the narrative construction of his most celebrated auto/biographical novels. *The Gift* (1937), his final Russian novel, represents an early yet sophisticated experiment in this vein, presenting both an unfinished biography of the narrator's father and a sharply deconstructive, parodic biography of the nineteenth-century radical writer Chernyshevski. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), his first English-language novel, is so profoundly suffused with the conventions of life writing that it functions as a meta-biographical fiction, questioning the very possibility of capturing a subject's existence. This trajectory continues in *Pale Fire* (1962), a sophisticated meta-parody of Nabokov's own scholarly work on Pushkin, which subverts the traditional relationship between a poem and its commentary.

Look at the Harlequins! (1974), or LATH, the final novel published in Nabokov's lifetime, was ostensibly triggered by "absurd errors, impossible statements, vulgarities and inventions" (Boyd, 1991, p.610) found in Andrew Field's biography, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*. Rather than a mere rebuttal, however, the novel represents the radical and self-reflexive culmination of Nabokov's lifelong engagement with parodic auto/biography. Yet, unlike the masterpieces of Nabokov's American years that secured his global renown and financial independence, *Look at the Harlequins!* has frequently been criticized as a minor work, remaining largely marginal to the mainstream of Nabokovian scholarship. This critical dissatisfaction

often centers on a perceived decline in Nabokov's signature aesthetic precision. Even Martin Amis, a writer profoundly influenced by the spell of Nabokov's verbal art, lamented what he saw as the "crudity" of the novel's prose, noting that "[I]n the book's 250-odd pages I found only four passages that were genuinely haunting and beautiful; in an earlier Nabokov it would be hard to find as many that were not" (Page, 1982, p.240). This is echoed by scholarly circles; the general consensus seems to be that *LATH* does not live up to expected standards, often being dismissed as "narcissistic, hermetic, and so laden with arcane references to Nabokov's earlier work that only Nabokov buffs could make sense of it" (Alexandrov, 1995, p.331). However, this essay contends that the novel's perceived deficiencies are, in fact, integral to its function as a radical act of self-parody.

Presented as a memoir of Vadim Vadimovich N., a fictitious Russian émigré writer, the novel functions as a parodic autobiography in which the narrator's identity, life trajectory, and literary oeuvre are meticulously modeled on—yet strategically distorted from—Nabokov's own life and canon. Written after he recovers from a mysterious paralytic stroke—an event that underscores the "Dementia" he identifies as a central character—this memoir is no ordinary as described by the narrator himself:

> In this memoir my wives and my books are interlaced monogrammatically like some sort of watermark or ex libris design; and in writing this oblique autobiography-oblique, because dealing mainly not with pedestrian history but with the mirages of romantic and literary matters-I consistently try to dwell as lightly as inhumanly possible on the evolution of my mental illness. Yet Dementia is one of the characters in my story (p.85).

Therefore, this essay explores this artistic invention correspondingly through a twofold analysis. First, it examines the reconstruction of Nabokov's biographical reality into Vadim's schizoid existence, arguing that this distortion serves to destabilize the historical author's ontological identity. Subsequently, it moves to an examination of the parodic parallels between the novel's fictional bibliography and the author's own literary canon, demonstrating how Nabokov weaponizes his past achievements to thwart biographical encroachment.

2. THE PARODIC INVERSION OF THE SELF

For Nabokov, a character's name is a coded vessel of identity, serving as the initial site where the boundaries between the historical author and his parodic double are both established and blurred. In *Look at the Harlequins!*, the author ingeniously provides his narrator with a semiotic label that serves as the primary indicator of this parodic inversion. Although the narrator's full surname remains pointedly obscure throughout the novel, his name, Vadim Vadimovich N., shares an enchantingly exact alliterative signature, *V. V. N.*, with his creator, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov. This nominal correspondence invites the reader to suppose that both deliberately designed name and identity might be Nabokov's—or at least a distorted, parodic echo of them. As a parodic inversion of the author, our schizoid narrator remains perpetually uneasy about his surname and identity. He is much frustrated that a London specialist named Moody identifies him as "Mr. N., a Russian nobleman," and even more to his irritation, the doctor "lumps me with a Mr. V. S. who is less of a postscriptum... than an intruder whose sensations are mixed with mine throughout that learned paper" (15). This Mr. V. S. serves as a deliberate intertextual signpost, evoking Nabokov's own Russian-language pen name, Vladimir Sirin. This intrusion of a former literary self into Vadim's clinical case history reinforces his existence as a parodic inversion of his creator. Furthermore, the protagonist is addressed by his Cambridge friend Ivor Black as "McNab"—a name that, by intimating the "son of Nabokov," relegates the narrator to the status of a secondary, flawed copy. On another occasion, he is called "Vivian," an anagrammatic specter of the author and his famous persona Vivian Darkbloom, a nomadic character who haunts several of Nabokov's works, most notably *Lolita*. Such pervasive onomastic mimicry confirms that *Look at the Harlequins!* functions as a specular inversion of the author's life—a "ghastly" mirror image where biographical facts are both recognizable and grotesquely transformed.

The narrator's existential anxiety reaches its zenith during his hospital recovery, where the act of reclaiming his identity becomes a desperate struggle for ontological survival. While he recognizes his "Christian name was Vadim," he finds himself unable to "make out... what surname came after [his] Russian patronymic" (248). He remains haunted by a family name that "began with an *N* and bore an odious resemblance to the surname or pseudonym of a presumably notorious (Notorov? No) …" (249). By rejecting a series of phonetic distortions—Nebesny, Naborcroft, and Nabedrin—Vadim acknowledges that his very existence is "unreal" without a definitive name. Ultimately, his persistent effort to shirk the shadow of the "other" proves futile; his identity is inextricably bound to his status as a parodic inversion of an extradiegetic existence—the historical Nabokov.

Beyond the ambiguous onomastic resemblance, Vadim's biography is meticulously populated with the recognizable milestones of his creator's life. Both were born in 1899 and enjoyed an opulent Russian childhood characterized by a St. Petersburg upbringing and a nearby country estate; both fled the Revolution to Western Europe, completing their studies at Cambridge between 1922 and 1924. Their professional trajectories

further align as they each navigated the Russian émigré literary circles of pre-war Europe before emigrating to the United States. Crucially, both characters experience the profound linguistic displacement of abandoning their native Russian for the "second-hand" English of their later works, eventually achieving financial independence and a return to Europe following the success of a controversial novel centering on a middle-aged solipsist and a nymphet. While the chronological dates remain identical, the internal quality of these life experiences is systematically subverted, transforming Nabokov's revered familial heritage and singular devotion to his wife into Vadim's fragmented ancestry and his repetitive, failed attempts at domestic stability. When examined closely, these biographical events remain only superficially similar, with most of the details bizarrely distorted. For instance, Vadim's unhappy childhood in the care of relatives is contrasted with Nabokov's happy celestial familial love as artistically documented in his memoir, *Speak, Memory* (1964). Furthermore, Vadim's claim that he shoots "a bare-headed Red Army soldier with a Mongol face" (p.10) stands in stark contrast to the historical reality of Nabokov's departure. While the real Nabokov left Russia via a somber, meditative voyage from the Crimea in 1919, Vadim's escape is a piece of sensationalist literary imagination. Underpinning these narrative fabrications, the most profound distortion arguably lies in the characterization of the father figure. In *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov is depicted as a man of "towering moral integrity" and a martyr for liberal democracy—a "jurist, publicist and statesman" who was "killed by an assassin's bullet on March 28, 1922, in Berlin" while shielding a political rival (Nabokov, 1999, Ch. 9). In contrast, Vadim's father is a diminished, "harlequinized" version. Vadim describes him as:

> ...a gambler and a rake. His society nickname was Demon. Vrubel has portrayed him with his vampire-pale cheeks... His politics were of the casual, reactionary sort. He had a dazzling and complicated sensual life, but his culture was patchy and commonplace. He was born in 1865... and died in a pistol duel with a young Frenchman on October 22, 1898, after a card-table fracas at Deauville (p.96).

By replacing a historical national hero with a "reactionary" rake who dies in a sordid "card-table fracas," Nabokov effectively decapitates the narrator's moral lineage. Furthermore, the chronological impossibility of Vadim's birth in 1899—a year after his father's death—signals that the narrator is not a real person, but a flawed, spectral imitation of his creator.

Nevertheless, Vadim introduces himself as the son of a Russian aristocratic couple whom he saw "infrequently" and who abandoned him to the care of an "invented" grand-aunt—a consequence of their chaotic cycles of "divorces, remarriages, and redivorces" (p.8). Beyond the textual contradiction of a father who dies before his son's birth, the reader soon discovers that even this lineage is built upon a foundation of narrative unreliability. The inversion of the paternal line reaches its peak after Vadim arrives in London. He attends Cambridge through the patronage of the Anglophile Count Starov, whom he later discovers had a "spacious span of international intercourse" and is a secret lover of his "beautiful and bizarre" mother (p.10). This revelation suggests that Vadim might well be the bastard son of Starov—a character hinted to be the father of numerous figures throughout the novel. Consequently, this shift transforms the "noble" Nabokovian ancestry into a sordid tale of cuckoldry and secret paternity. By replacing the historical Nabokov's stable, "celestial" family tree with the murky origins of an illegitimate son, the novel further destabilizes Vadim's ontological status; he is rendered not only a parody of an author but a man whose very biological origin is a shifting, fictional fabrication.

If the "unreliability" of Vadim's ancestry destabilizes his past, the multiplication of his wives systematically deconstructs his present. The narrator's loves and marriages are one major theme of his memoir. In Nabokov's reality, his marriage to Véra Slonim—who served as his sole reader, his editor, his driver, and his "one and only" domestic stability—was a "monogrammatic" and singular union that lasted over fifty years. In *Look at the Harlequins!*, however, this sacred domesticity is parodically shattered into four distinct marriages. Each of the first three wives—Iris, Annette, and Louise—functions as a distorted mirror image or a "failed draft" of the real-life Véra, transforming a lifelong partnership into a repetitive, near mechanical cycle of domestic dysfunction. However, this parodic fragmentation concludes with the unnamed "You", who stands in stark contrast to her predecessors. Unlike the unfaithful Iris or the intellectually indifferent Annette, the fourth wife represents a convergence back toward the real Véra; she is the compassionate "stable center" who finally offers the narrator the linguistic and psychological sanctuary he lacks. If the first three wives are the "harlequins" of Nabokov's domestic life, the fourth wife is the only character who approaches the authenticity of his true partner.

In the spring of 1922, his friend from Cambridge, Ivor Black, invites Vadim to his newly-inherited Riviera Villa, where he meets the twenty-one-year old Iris Black, the first of this procession of his wives. The eight years spent with Iris occupy a predominant position in the novel, yet her identity is as "murky" and unreliable as the narrator's own. The parental identities of Iris are no less murky than Vadim's. Her father was a businessman who had "good connections" in London diplomatic circles, and her mother, Mme. de Blagidze, was "American and horrible" (p.29). Like Vadim, Iris's parentage is shadowed by the spectral presence of Count Starov; the fact that her mother's portrait hangs in Starov's villa intimates a hidden

biological link. This suggests a disturbing possibility: that Iris may be Vadim's half-sister as well as his wife. During his years in Paris, Vadim emerges as a budding author, publishing three Russian novels. However, Iris feels fundamentally excluded from his inner world because she cannot speak his native tongue. In a tragic attempt to bridge this gap, she enrolls in Russian language classes, only to fall "amorous victim" to her tutoress's husband, the deranged Lieutenant Wladimir Starov-Blagidze, who shoots both Iris and himself on the night of April 23, 1930. This date is one of Nabokov's most "meaningful" temporal markers—it is his own birthday as well as birth anniversaries of Shakespeare and Cervantes. In *Speak, Memory*, birth and life are celebrated as "celestial" gifts; in *Look at the Harlequins!*, the author's birthday becomes a day of "ghastly" violence and domestic collapse, further signaling the narrator's status as a "mock" or "doomed" version of his creator. Following the tragic death of Iris, Vadim immerses himself in his writing and hires Annette Blagovo as his typist. Driven by "sexual need" rather than intellectual or spiritual affinity, he enters into a second marriage with her—his longest union, spanning twelve years. Annette serves as the ultimate inverted version of Véra; characterized by her "dull-wit," "Philistine tastes," and her suffocating "prudishness," she is fundamentally hostile to Vadim's artistic inner world. Despite this profound lack of harmony, the union produces a daughter, Isabel (Bel), born on New Year's Day, 1942—the same birthday shared by "You," Vadim's fourth wife. Rather than a mere coincidence, this shared date suggests a spiritual lineage; both Bel and "You" embody the grace, intellect, and Véra-esque qualities that Annette lacks. This marriage proves to be a doomed failure for two primary reasons: Vadim's infidelity with Dolly von Borg and the "blightful" influence of their ex-landlady, Ninel (an anagram of Lenin), who dismantles Vadim's domestic life by spiriting away Annette and their four-year-old daughter, Isabel. Seven years after their departure, Ninel and Annette perish in a tornado, allowing for the return of Isabel, with whom Vadim spends two "blissful" years traversing the motels of the American West. This idyllic period of father-daughter travel directly parodies the cross-country odyssey in Nabokov's *Lolita*, yet here it is sanitized into a genuine emotional sanctuary. However, this stability is short-lived; upon entering his third marriage with Louise Adamson, Vadim sends Isabel away to a Swiss finishing school—a desperate attempt to shield her from the "ugly rumors" surrounding their Western journey. Described as a "sexually and financially avaricious celebrity collector" (Johnson, 1984), Louise represents the commodification of American superficiality. Unlike Véra, who protected Nabokov from the "vulgarities" of fame, Louise is "a snob and name-dropper excited by success" (Boyd, 1991, p.633). She poses as a woman of refined sensibilities while manifesting a "vulgar compulsion" for expensive gizmos and Philistine fads, marking her as the antithesis of the intellectual Muse. Louise is clearly the least loved of the narrator's wives.

In September 1969, Vadim finds in Isabel's ex-classmate his fourth and only grand love, the unnamed "You". At this juncture, the tone of the narrative shifts from mocking parody to a fierce defense of domestic privacy. Mirroring Nabokov's own protective stance toward his marriage, the narrator refuses to disclose their intimacy in his memoir, declaring:

> Reality would be only adulterated if I now started to narrate what you know, what I know, what nobody else knows, what shall never, never be ferreted out by a matter-of-fact, father-of-muck, mucking biograffitist (p.226).

By shielding "You" from the public eye, he elevates her above the "harlequins" of his previous marriages. Despite the narrator's reticence, the resemblance between "You" and Véra Nabokov is unmistakable. Unlike her predecessors, "You" exhibits not only a sophisticated grasp of western literature and Russian language but also a natural affinity as the narrator's intellectual peer. As D. Barton Johnson (1984) notes, she speaks a "lovely, elegant Russian," has studied Turgenev at Oxford and Bergson in Geneva, and maintains "family ties with good old Quirn and Russian New York." Furthermore, her knowledge of lepidopterology and her lover's "complete oeuvre" establishes her as the ultimate collaborator and "ideal reader"—the only figure capable of validating Vadim's artistic existence and anchoring his fractured reality.

Through this procession of distorted mirrors—stretching from a father who dies before his son's birth to a sequence of wives who fail to understand the narrator's art—Vadim remains trapped in a "ghastly" inversion of the Nabokovian life. This inverted parody functions as an ontological prison, where every biographical milestone is present yet systematically devalued. It is only with the arrival of "You" that these mirrors finally shatter, allowing the narrator to transcend his status as a mock-double and anchor his existence in the same intellectual and emotional grace that defined the historical Nabokov's union with Véra.

3. THE REINVENTION OF THE LITERARY CANON

Just as Vadim's "mirages of romantic matters" serve as a distorted reflection of Nabokov's biography, his "mirages of literary matters" also function as a systematic reinvention of the Nabokovian canon, producing a bibliography that is both hauntingly familiar and fundamentally flawed. A large portion of Vadim's autobiography is dedicated to this fabricated literary career, a fact made evident even before the narrative starts. Immediately following the title page, a list of "Other Books by the Narrator" appears, featuring six Russian

and six English titles; this list serves as the primary site of the author's bibliographical self-parody and presenting the narrator's status as a flawed inferior copy of his creator. While there seems not a explicit one-on-one correspondence between Vadim's fictional output and Nabokov's actual novels, scholars have noted a pervasive intertextual mirroring. Springer (2002) identifies several "rough correspondences" that align Vadim's Russian and English bibliographies with Nabokov's major works. For instance, Vadim's *Tamara* (1925) acts as a mirrored text of *Mashen'ka* (1926), or *Mary* (1970), while *The Red Top Hat* (1934) and *The Dare* (1950) serve as parodic echoes of *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938) and *The Gift* (1952), respectively. This parallelism extends into his English works, where *A Kingdom by the Sea* (1962) provides a reinvention of *Lolita* (1955), and *Ardis* (1970) mirrors the lush, incestuous world of *Ada* (1969). By providing this exhaustive, symmetrical list of twelve works, Nabokov ensures that every one of his literary milestones is accounted for and subsequently parodied within Vadim's "harlequinized" literary world.

The first half of Vadim's bibliography consists of Russian works that function as composite parodies, where the aesthetic bliss of Nabokov's Russian period is systematically inverted into a series of derivative, "harlequinized" plots. Vadim's first novel, *Tamara*, is evidently the parodic counterpart to Nabokov's own debut, *Mary* (*Mashen'ka*). As Boyd (1991) observes, Tamara is the name Nabokov gives in *Speak, Memory* to his first love, Valentina Shulgin, just as Mashen'ka or Mary is the first love in Nabokov's eponymous novel. Although Vadim discloses little of the book's plot, he recollects it in his later years as a lyrical image of "a girl at sunrise in the mist of an orchard" (p.228). However, this lyricism is undercut by the narrator's own admission that the work "smacks of self-plagiarism"; he recognizes the "regular striation of bright bloom along the outside of forearm and leg" (p.169)—a physical detail he finds repeated in his first wife, Iris, and later in his daughter, Bel. This intertextual collapse between creator and creation is made explicit through the Russian bookdealer, Oksman, whose "slip of the tongue" in mistaking *Tamara* for the English version of *Mary* signals the narrator's ontological instability. Vadim's fifth novel, *Krasny Tsilindr* (*The Red Top Hat*), is introduced as "the story of a beheading" (p.80) and recalled as "decapitation in a country of total injustice" (p.228), creating an immediate parodic parallel with Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*. In that work, the condemned protagonist Cincinnatus C. is forced to don the "red tophat"—a politically evil euphemism for execution "whose true meaning was known to every schoolboy" (Nabokov, 1965). However, Vadim's title is a multi-layered inversion; it also evokes the "Orwellian" imagery of *Bend Sinister*, specifically the Professor's description of a political idea growing into a "snowman in a crumpled top hat" (Nabokov, 1947). By merging the executioner's "hat" from *Invitation to a Beheading* with the political "snowman" of *Bend Sinister*, Vadim creates a literary hybrid that is both hauntingly familiar and fundamentally derivative. This intertextual layering reinforces the narrator's status as another writer's inferior copy who can only construct his literary reality by rearranging the fractured metaphors of his creator's superior works. As the self-proclaimed "best" of his Russian series, *The Dare* functions as a consolidated parody of Nabokov's *The Gift* and *Glory* (*Podvig*). The original title, *Podarok Otchizne* ("A Gift to the Fatherland"), explicitly mocks *The Gift* (1963), while the narrative arc mimics the "gratuitous feat" of the protagonist in *Glory*. Vadim's summary reveals an act of aggressive literary deconstruction: he replaces Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's sublime biography of Chernyshevsky (from *The Gift*) with a concise and vitriolic appraisal of Dostoevsky. By substituting Nabokov's nuanced aesthetic critique of a minor Russian thinker with a blunt condemnation of a literary giant, Vadim turns a sophisticated artistic inquiry into a sensationalist "dare." The final act—walking into Soviet territory merely to "accept a flirt's challenge"—strips the protagonist's journey of the existential longing found in *Glory*, reducing a spiritual quest to a mere act of bravado.

The narrator's bibliographical reinvention reaches its parodic zenith in his English output. Vadim himself draws a mental picture of these American novels with succinct, almost dismissive insights: 'My English originals, headed by the fierce *See under Real* (1940), led through the changing light of *Esmeralda and Her Parandrus*, to the fun of *Dr. Olga Repnin* and the dream of *A Kingdom by the Sea*. There was also the collection of short stories *Exile from Mayda*... and *Ardis*' (p.229). By categorizing these works with simple descriptors like 'fun' or 'dream,' Vadim inadvertently reveals the reductive nature of his parodies, transforming Nabokov's intricate metaphysical explorations into a series of simplified genre exercises. Consequently, his attempts to replicate the transgressive power of *Lolita* and the chronological complexity of *Ada*—manifested in *A Kingdom by the Sea* and *Ardis*, to mention but two examples—result in works that are structurally familiar but aesthetically hollow. Nearly everything about *A Kingdom by the Sea* serves as a transparent reminder of Nabokov's *Lolita*. The title itself is an overt allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's 'Annabel Lee'—a poem that provides the foundational myth for Humbert Humbert's obsession. By adopting what was essentially Nabokov's working title for *Lolita* (*The Kingdom by the Sea*), Vadim exposes the "skeleton" of his creator's masterpiece. The "dream" in this novel is actually a wish-fulfillment fantasy—the protagonist takes a ten-year-old girl as his concubine; however, unlike the tragic trajectory of *Lolita*, their relationship evolves into

a conventional mutual love: upon the girl reaching the age of eighteen, the pair marries and enjoys a lifelong domestic harmony, eventually reaching a combined age of 170. Like *Lolita*, *A Kingdom by the Sea* is sensational and causes a minor scandal. Just as *Lolita* won its author worldwide fame and economical success, *Kingdom by the Sea* is his "most vigorous, most festive, and commercially most successful novel" (p.193) that "atoned for a fraction of the loss of my Russian fortune (1917) and bundled away all financial worries till the end of worrisome time" (p.129). The physical composition of Vadim's last novel, *Ardis*—consisting of "733 medium-sized Bristol cards" (p.231)—directly mimics Nabokov's own famous method of composition. By aligning the length and the literal stationery of *Ardis* with *Ada, or Ardor*, Nabokov presents Vadim's "magnum opus" as a purely quantitative mimicry. While the narrator conceives of this novel as his "most private book," he remains acutely suspicious that it may be nothing more than an "imitation of another's unearthly art" (p.234). This derivative status is confirmed not only by the title—borrowed from Van Veen's preferred heading for his own memoirs—but also by its philosophical core: Vadim's treatise, "The Substance of Space," serves as a direct, inverted parody of Van Veen's "The Texture of Time." Unlike Nabokov, who maintained a strict boundary between life and art, Vadim collapses these realms by populating Ardis with figures from his own biography, including Iris, Bel, and his father, Demon. By describing the work as "soaked in reality, saturated with sun flecks" (p.234), Vadim reveals his ultimate failure as a parodist: he cannot create an independent aesthetic world, but can only produce a "harlequinized" reflection of his creator's family tree and metaphysical inquiries.

This systematic reinvention of the Nabokovian canon ultimately demonstrates how Nabokov weaponizes his own past achievements to satirize and thereby invalidate—via, of course, Nabokovian parodies—any attempt at biographical encroachment by his narrator. By colonizing Vadim's bibliography with distorted versions of his own masterpieces, Nabokov ensures that the narrator's "no ordinary" memoir can never be read as a genuine autobiography, but only as a flawed inferior imitation. Consequently, these twelve volumes function as a series of bibliographical mirages—a "harlequinized" landscape in which Vadim is perpetually forced to confront the derivative nature of his own creative existence. Vadim's works do not exist as independent artistic achievements; rather, they are parasitic entities that depend entirely on the "unearthly art" of his creator for their form. Thus, the list of "Other Books by the Narrator" serves as the ultimate proof of Vadim's ontological status: he is not a writer in his own right, but a shadow condemned to perform a repetitive, derivative dance within the boundaries of another man's canon.

4. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, *Look at the Harlequins!* stands not as the "ramblings" of an aging author, but as Nabokov's most sophisticated act of meta-fictional defense. By transmuting his life and art into a version of Vadim "clad in harlequin's attire", Nabokov successfully weaponizes self-parody to safeguard the sanctity of his own biographical and bibliographical reality. As this essay has demonstrated, the systematic reinvention of both his personal history and his literary canon creates a series of "romantic and literary mirages" that effectively trap the narrator in a state of ontological inferiority. This dual analysis reveals that for Nabokov, the truth of a life lies not in the "average facts", but in the aesthetic vitality of the work itself. In the final estimation, *Look at the Harlequins!* proves that autobiography is the ultimate artistic invention—a realm where the shadow of a fact must always yield to the brilliance of the imagination. By forcing the reader to "look at the harlequins" rather than the man, Nabokov ensures that his true self remains exactly where it has always been: hidden in plain sight within the "unearthly art" of his masterpieces rather than in the reductive, factual fallacies of a biographer like Andrew Field.

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