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The Elemental Nabokov: The Role of Natural Elements in Nabokov's Fiction

Even the casual reader of Nabokov's work recognizes that the author depicted the natural world in loving detail. Precision of observation and description are hallmarks of Nabokov's method, and this might be expected of a literary author who was also a dedicated student of nature with his research on Lepidoptera. Yet when one looks more closely at Nabokov's treatment of nature, one can detect a layer of metaphoric (and metaphysical) meaning beyond the surface phenomena. This paper will focus on the depiction of the four basic elements of the natural world in Nabokov's work—earth, air, fire, and water—and it will try to determine whether each of these elements carries any particular associations or meanings. Van Veen refers to these four elements in *Ada* when he writes: "Three elements, fire, water, and air, destroyed, in that sequence, Marina, Lucette, and Demon. Terra waited" (450). The association Van makes between three of elements and destruction is significant, as we shall soon see. Let us begin, however, with the fourth element—Terra, or Earth.

Earth is perhaps the element that carries the least amount of metaphoric significance in Nabokov's work. The earth appears primarily as *terra firma*—literally, the ground on which the action of Nabokov's novels and stories takes place. His characters move through recognizable landscapes (such as the city of Berlin or the countryside near St. Petersburg), and

he stocks his settings with the flora and fauna of our world. In some cases, however, his characters inhabit imaginary landscapes, often of their own making. Thus we have the *terra incognita* of a delirious man who may be dying in a European bedroom while fantasizing about exploring some fabulous jungle (“Terra incognita,” 1931). Or the richly detailed, but wholly imaginary land of Zembla conjured up by Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. Or, possibly even the world of Antiterra (or Demonica), at least as seen by Bobbie Ann Mason: in her reading of *Ada*, Antiterra is invented by Van Veen “to justify his own departure from reality” (12). In these works, the natural landscape described by the narrator bears the imprint of the creator’s own mind. The imaginative consciousness shapes the contours of the created world.

This pattern, in which the creative consciousness stamps its design on the features of the created world, has important ramifications for Nabokov’s oeuvre as a whole. Repeatedly Nabokov draws attention to the fact that literary texts are constructed objects, as for example, in a passage from *The Gift*, when Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev is working on some final revisions of his manuscript on Chernyshevski. Fyodor uses a construction metaphor here: “But to leave the paragraph in that condition, i.e., its construction hanging over a precipice with a boarded window and a crumbling porch, was a physical impossibility” (206). Yet it is not only man-made edifices that bear traces of a maker’s handiwork. In Nabokov’s fiction, the natural world itself sometimes seems to reveal (or to conceal) the designs of a higher creative consciousness.

The best expression of this occurs in a distinctive passage from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in V’s description of Sebastian Knight’s last novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*: “it was like a traveller realising that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of

natural phenomena, but the page in a book where those mountains and forests, and fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence; the vowel of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings of a road writing its message in a round hand, as clear as that of one's father [...]. Thus the traveller spells the landscape, and its sense is disclosed" (178–79).

This passage recalls the medieval concept that the natural world was God's book, "the book of nature." Every creature and every part of the environment reflected the intention and design of the Creator. God "inscribed" His word into the landscape as surely as human authors inscribe their messages in literary texts. While Nabokov himself was reticent about his personal religious views and did not espouse a conventional deist position in his work, readers have had little trouble in drawing analogies between the cunning designs planted by the author in his work and the possible designs that some higher consciousness or entity may have inscribed into our mortal lives. In *The Gift*, Fyodor ponders "getting deeper, to the bottom of things," and wonders if he could "understand what is concealed behind all this, behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green greasepaint of the foliage? For there really is something, there is something. And one wants to offer thanks but there is no one to thank." This last phrase—"there is no one to thank"—might lead one to think that Fyodor (or the narrator) is advancing an atheist point of view: there is no creator and therefore no one to thank. But the following sentence makes it clear that the issue is not that there is truly "no one" to thank; rather, the problem is that the identity of the entity whom one might wish to thank is not identified: "The list of donations already made: 10,000 days—from Person Unknown" (340).(1)

The earth, then, may be seen in Nabokov's work as bearing witness to the operation of

a higher designing consciousness. Yet this seems primarily to be a *passive* function. It is the other elements that play a more active role in manifesting the operation of a higher or transcendent power. Turning first to air, we should note that the most dynamic or active form this element takes in Nabokov's work is that of wind, and it is in the form of wind that we may discern the workings of a higher force or creative consciousness. Moreover, it appears that there may have been an evolution in Nabokov's treatment of this element.

An early work in which wind makes a dramatic appearance is "The Thunderstorm" ("Groza, 1924). In this short sketch the narrator describes the onset and passage of a thunderstorm in which he sees Elijah the "Thunder-god" thrown from his carriage and cast onto earth in the guise of a "lean, stoop-shouldered old man in a drenched robe" (*Stories* 88). Finding a wheel that had come off his chariot, the old man ascends again to the heavens and is transformed into his former magnificence, as if "robed in flame" (*Stories* 88). The overt incorporation of a mythological figure into "The Thunderstorm" links the sketch with other early Nabokov pieces featuring mythological or folkloric figures (others include "The Wood-Sprite," "Wingstroke," and "The Dragon"); in subsequent years, Nabokov's treatment of the supernatural became more subtle.⁽²⁾ Nonetheless, Nabokov's depiction of the wind here is noteworthy. Nabokov personifies the wind in the first paragraph as "a blind phantom, covering his face with his sleeves" (*Stories* 86), but in a transformation that prefigures the transfiguration of the Thunder-god, the "blind wind" in the third paragraph "suddenly regained its sight" and swept upwards. The motif of gaining sight associated with the wind anticipates the sudden vision or inspiration that the narrator achieves when he awakens from sleep to behold the wondrous Thunder-god. Even though this is an early work, the tentative link between the

appearance of the wind and the capacity for heightened insight or inspiration finds reflection in later works by Nabokov.

A different version of this association of wind with inspiration may be detected in *The Eye* (*Sogliadatai*, 1930). When the narrator conceives of the idea of stealing a letter containing excerpts from Roman Bogdanovich's journal, he does so on a stormy March night when the clouds are blown across the sky "in grotesque attitudes like staggering and ballooning buffoons in a hideous carnival" (79); "Never had I experienced such a wind or seen such a drunken, disheveled sky" (79). The intensity of the wind peaks as he approaches Roman Bogdanovich and takes the letter: "For a moment the wind enveloped us in its violence" (81), but it mysteriously ceases as soon as he has moved away with the stolen letter. Evaluating the sudden onset and disappearance of the wind here, Nassim Berdjii speculates that the wind may exist only "in Smurov's mind" (76). At the very least, it seems to reflect the intensity of the character's internal agitation. Yet even so, Nabokov does not give the wind a particularly large role here. It was not until his next novel, *Despair* (*Otchaianie*, 1934), that Nabokov would develop a special role for the wind and its effect on an unbalanced narrator.

Although there is a wind accompanying Hermann Karlovich on the day he encounters Felix sleeping by the side of the road, the first hint that the wind may be something more than a neutral element of the natural surroundings comes as Hermann ponders the likeness between himself and Felix. He finds the likeness exact when Felix sleeps, whereas life "marred" his double. He continues: "thus a breeze dims the bliss of Narcissus" (15). This breeze, which disrupts the dream of perfect narcissism, may signal the presence of an external force that disrupts Hermann's dream of artistic genius as well. As Sergej Davydov has argued, it is Sirin

who, “like a mythical deity, assumes the form of an errant breeze to spitefully distort the image seen in the pool” (31). The breeze returns at the end of the novel, now as a terrific wind, and provides a tempestuous accompaniment to Hermann as he composes his manuscript. As in *The Eye*, the wind ceases as Hermann feels that he has achieved his goal, but the stillness that overtakes him as he reads his manuscript and discovers his blunder is, in Davydov’s words, “the eye of the hurricane, a breathing space before the shattering denouement” (32). The wind in *Despair* serves as one of many markers of Sirin’s presence, undermining and overturning Hermann’s mad schemes. The juxtaposition of narrator or would-be author and the authentic author may be detected in Hermann’s commentary about the possible ways to begin a chapter. He begins by writing: “it is clear, for one thing, that while a man is writing, he is situated in some definite place; he is not simply a kind of spirit, hovering over the page. While he muses and writes there is something or other going on around him; there is for instance, this wind, this whirl of dust on the road” (43). In rejecting the notion of author as a spirit hovering over the page, Hermann unwittingly denies the existence of his own creator.(3)

In later works, the wind can function either as an agent of destruction, undermining and toppling the flawed constructs of certain characters, or it can have a beneficent effect on the lives of other characters. An example of the former is the wind that topples the sham scenery at the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*: “A spinning wind was picking up and whirling: dust, rags, chips of painted wood, bits of gilded plaster,” and so on. And amidst the dust and the flapping scenery, “Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him” (223).

A more benign wind appears early in the novel *Pnin*, when Pnin, sitting on a park

bench, suffers some kind of attack that has the effect of returning him to his childhood and enmeshing him in a tormented riddle that had plagued him as a child: he vainly struggles to decipher or unlock the intricate pattern of foliage depicted on his bedroom wallpaper. He feels compelled to try to penetrate the pattern, for “[i]t stood to reason that if the evil designer—the destroyer of minds, the friend of fever—had concealed the key of the pattern with such monstrous care, that key must be as precious as life itself and, when found, would regain for Timofey Pnin his everyday health, his everyday world” (23). This struggle, however, is immensely painful, and thus, it is a welcome change when “coming from very far, a rustling wind, its soft volume increasing as it ruffled the rhododendrons—now blossomless, blind—confused whatever rational pattern Timofey Pnin’s surroundings had once had. He was alive and that was sufficient” (24). I would argue that this soft wind may represent the beneficent assistance of the authentic author (Nabokov) foiling the snares of the “evil designer” whom we may associate with the narrator of the novel, a figure who “hate[s] happy ends” and believes that “[d]oom should not jam” (25); the latter figure is called by Pnin himself a “dreadful inventor” (“*uzhasniy vydumshchik*”; 185).(4) The presence of such benign winds in Nabokov’s late works may even signal the presence of the spirit world, for we are told in *Transparent Things* that the “most” a ghost can do when trying to help a favored mortal is to “act as a breath of wind and to apply the lightest, most indirect pressure” (92).(5)

If the element of wind is faintly connected with a spirit of inspiration or the otherworld, the element of fire seems to carry such associations in a more overt fashion. An early example of this occurs in “Details of a Sunset” (“*Katastrofa*,” 1924). When Mark Standfuss is hit by a tram car, his consciousness seems to undergo a kind of bifurcation. While his physical body has

been mortally wounded, and intimations of this fact occasionally irrupt into his consciousness, his mind also seems liberated from its accustomed channels, and he becomes aware of phenomena he had not perceived before. In particular, he notes the glorious colors of the sunset gleaming in architectural details of the upper stories of the buildings around him. As Nabokov puts it, “Mark could discern translucent porticoes, friezes and frescoes, trellises covered with orange roses, winged statues that lifted skyward golden, unbearably *blazing* lyres” (*Stories* 83; emphasis added). The images of the winged statues and blazing lyres suggest a higher realm of inspiration, and specifically, artistic inspiration.

A related image in Nabokov’s work is that of bright sunlight reflected from a glass surface, often a window pane. Characters glimpse such flashes of light at moments of sudden insight or epiphany. For example, when Nabokov describes Fred Dobson’s discovery that he had fathered a son with Nora Shock in “The Potato Elf” (“Kartofel’nyi El’f,” 1924), he writes: “The dwarf froze, his gaze fixing a minuscule casement *burning* on the side of a dark blue cup” (emphasis added). He stammers out the words “My . . . son” and then “all at once he understood everything, all the meaning of life, of his long anguish, of the little bright window upon the cup” (*Stories* 245). This image of the casement burning on the side of a cup hearkens back to the morning years earlier when Fred and Nora had become lovers. Just before that occurred, Fred had looked out the window and observed the following scene: “A melting, enchanting mist washed London’s gray roofs. Somewhere in the distance an attic window was thrown open, and its pane caught a glimpse of sunshine” (*Stories* 233). After Fred and Nora have made love, Nabokov recalls this image by stating that this special day, “a gift presented to only one person,” “began with the [...] flash of a casement swung open in the distance” (*Stories*

234). Fred's subsequent discovery that Nora had used him and had no intention of leaving her husband for him dashes his joy, but the meaning of the earlier experience is suddenly revealed to Fred when Nora discloses the news about his paternity. Fred's entire view of his identity, his purpose in life, is transformed as he catches sight of the "minuscule casement burning" on the side of a cup.

The image of light glinting off a pane of glass is specifically associated with the fruits of artistic creativity in *The Gift*. At the outset of the novel, on a "cloudy but luminous day" (3), Fyodor is walking through Berlin when he is suddenly hit with a "burst of light" (6). He turns to look and sees, "with that quick smile with which we greet a rainbow or a rose, a blindingly white parallelogram of sky being unloaded" from a moving van; it is a dresser with a built-in mirror. This sudden visual phenomenon jolts his consciousness, and, as Nabokov puts it, "released in him that pleasant something which for several days now had been at the murky bottom of his every thought [...]: my collection of poems has been published" (18).

The association between sunlight and art returns later in *The Gift*, but while we are on the subject of *reflected* light, we should note the role this plays in *Pale Fire* as well. Of course, the interconnections among reflection, creativity, and the otherworld are evident in the opening lines of John Shade's poem: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure of the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky" (33). More relevant for the present paper, however, is the image of "pale fire" itself. Although Kinbote uses the image in describing John Shade burning drafts of his poem "in the pale fire of the incinerator" (*Pale Fire* 15), its more telling source appears, as several readers have noted, in lines from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* that Kinbote provides only in an English

paraphrase of a Zemblan translation (80).(6) The source text reads in part:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea. The moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun. (*Timon*, IV.iii.439-441)

As Julia Bader interprets these lines, “[t]he art metaphor [...] casts the poet as ‘the sun,’ whose rays of light are reflected by the mirror of the sea” (44). Within *Pale Fire*, the poet John Shade stands as the sun whose creative light is picked up and reflected by the “thief,” Charles Kinbote. Kinbote himself invokes this kind of imagery when he writes about the “family relationship” between the story of Zembla “burning” in his brain and Shade’s poem (80-81). Declaring that the “sunset glow” of the story acted as a catalytic agent upon Shade’s creative process, he acknowledges that when he reread his commentary, he caught himself “borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet’s fiery orb” (81).

While the role of the sun as a source of creative illumination is essentially metaphoric in *Pale Fire*, the sun is given a larger role in *The Gift*. This novel, which was Nabokov’s longest and most complex Russian-language work, traces the artistic evolution and maturation of its hero, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev. With its alternation of first- and third-person forms of narration, the novel points to Fyodor’s dual status as character and aspiring author. A key scene in the novel occurs in its last chapter, when Fyodor describes an outing to the Grunewald, where he finds a secluded spot for sunbathing. He strips to the nude, becoming an “Adam” as he does so (333). Now the force of the sun goes to work on him:

The sun bore down. The sun licked me all over with its big, smooth tongue. I gradually felt that I was becoming moltenly transparent, that I was permeated with flame and existed only insofar as it did. As a book is translated into an exotic idiom, so was I translated into sun. The scrawny, chilly, hiemal Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev was now as remote from me as if I had exiled him to the Yakutsk province [...] My personal I, the one that wrote books, the one that loved words, colors, mental fireworks, Russia, chocolate and Zina—had somehow disintegrated and dissolved; after being made transparent by the strength of the light, it was now assimilated to the shimmering of the summer forest with its satiny pine needles and heavenly green leaves [...] (333–34)

The scene comes to an end with the laconic comment: “One might dissolve completely that way” (334).

Earlier in the novel, Fyodor (or, more precisely, the voice of the first-person narrator of the novel) had used solar imagery to describe how he analyzed the figures of Yasha Chernyshevski and his two friends Olya and Rudolf in considering whether he could make a literary work out of their story: “I use a different method to study each of the three individuals [...] until, at the last minute, the rays of a sun that is my own and yet incomprehensible to me,

strikes them and equalizes them in the same burst of light” (42). The sun imagery here clearly suggests the operation of an artistic or creative consciousness. Now, in the Grunewald scene, Fyodor himself becomes subject to the transformative rays of the sun, and, as I have argued elsewhere, it appears that Fyodor’s contact with these rays forges a critical link in his own maturation as an artist.(7) That is, just as he had used the “rays” of his own sun to see whether he could transform the figures of other people into a creative project, he himself is exposed to the rays emanating from a higher source, and his creative potential is enriched.

It is after this exposure that he appears ready to make immense progress in two realms: first, to meet his father on the plane of the imagination, and second, to embark on a new stage of artistic creation. As he puts it in a letter to his mother: “You know, I’m black as a gypsy from the Grunewald sun. Something is beginning to take shape—I think I’ll write a classical novel, with ‘types,’ love, fate, conversations...” (349). Having made contact with a higher power expressed in the burning rays of the sun, Fyodor is ready, at the end of *The Gift*, to become an authentic author in his own right.(8)

While the most distinctive feature of the fire element when used metaphorically by Nabokov involves the workings of creative consciousness, the final element we shall be looking at—water—carries multiple associations. At the center of these in terms of its metaphorical and metaphysical significance, water seems to mark a boundary or interface between two disparate realms, and frequently, between the states of life and death (or whatever lies beyond death). This association takes a multitude of forms. One of the most archetypal or traditional of these is the image of a river separating two banks. We find this in the imaginary conversation Fyodor conducts with Koncheyev in *The Gift* at the end of Chapter One. Composing a poem

depicting the passage across the river separating the world of the living from the world of the dead, the imaginary Koncheyev first mentions the river Lethe and then corrects himself: “That river is not the Lethe but rather the Styx” (75). A similar, but more extended use of this image occurs in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* when V describes Sebastian’s last novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, which features a dying man and contains meditations on the subject of death. V quotes from the novel: “But the dying man knew that these were not real ideas; that only one half of the notion of death can be said really to exist: *this* side of the question—the wrench, the parting, the quay of life gently moving away aflutter with the handkerchiefs: ah! he was already on the other side, if he could see the beach receding; no, not quite—if he was still thinking” (178). Water imagery pervades V’s continued description until the moment of the hero’s death, and V writes: “The asphodel on the other shore is as doubtful as ever (180).

Water also serves in Nabokov’s fiction as the site of a character’s death, and the experience often seems to lead to a moment of expanded consciousness or even some kind of existence after death. At the end of the short story “Perfection” (“Sovershenstvo,” 1932), for example, the tutor Ivanov rushes into the sea in an attempt to rescue his young charge who, it turns out, has pretended to be drowning. Ivanov apparently suffers a heart attack and dies, but he has the impression of emerging onto the shore and realizing that if David is not with him, then David is not dead. The narrative continues: “Only then were the clouded glasses removed. The dull mist immediately broke, blossomed with marvelous colors, all kinds of sound burst forth,” (*Stories* 347). Although Ivanov’s impressions could be those of a dying man, it is also possible to interpret them as the perceptions of a consciousness that is crossing over from mortal life to a state beyond death. Keeping in mind the reflecting qualities that a body of water can have, one

could say that a person who has drowned has passed “through the looking-glass.”(7)

After this point, we find that it is primarily female characters who are associated with death by drowning, and several of them seem to attain a new state of being after death.(9) The prime examples of this are, of course, Hazel Shade in *Pale Fire* and Lucette in *Ada*. Their posthumous existences and influences have been amply discussed in works by Brian Boyd and others.(10) Jane Grayson and D. Barton Johnson have argued convincingly that Nabokov’s treatment of the theme of female death by drowning draws upon Russian folk traditions concerning the *rusalka*, a mythological creature often believed to be the soul of a young maiden who has died an untimely death, perhaps having committed suicide in response to unrequited love.(11) Nabokov himself had written a poem entitled “Rusalka,” which he published in his collection *Gornii put?* in 1923. He later wrote a continuation to Alexander Pushkin’s “Rusalka,” which he published in 1942. Commenting on the evolution of the theme in Nabokov, Grayson observes a shift in the depiction of the drowned maiden or water-sprite from “the negative to the positive variants of the legend—from the loss, despair, guilt, revenge aspects of the tale, to those versions which highlight motifs of intercession, reconciliation and immortality” (175). Those who have committed suicide by drowning, such as Hazel and Lucette, manage to exert a benign or consoling influence on those they have left behind.

Yet water imagery in Nabokov’s works not only serves to demarcate a boundary between the realms of life and death, it can also mark an interface between the world of the fictional characters and the consciousness of the entity that created them. One of the best examples of this is the “oblong puddle” in *Bend Sinister* that Adam Krug observes from a window in the hospital where his wife is dying (1, 3). This same puddle is observed by Krug’s

creator, the narrator of the novel, at the very end of the narrative. The narrator comments: “I could also distinguish the glint of a special puddle (the one Krug had somehow perceived through the layer of his own life)” (241). The same puddle exists both in Krug’s world and in the world of his creator, thus connecting the two. In his introduction to the novel, Nabokov offers more insight into the significance of this puddle. Pointing out that the “oblong pool [...] reappears subthematically throughout the novel,” Nabokov comments: “The puddle thus kindled and rekindled in Krug’s mind remains linked up with the image of his wife not only because he had contemplated the inset sunset from her death-bedside, but also because this little puddle vaguely evokes in him my link with him: a rent in his world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty” (ix). In a sense, then, the puddle indicates the existence of a benign presence beyond the world of the story’s characters.(12)

Of course, as one finds so often in Nabokov’s work, imagery or phenomena that may carry a positive charge in one context may display less favorable connotations in another context, particularly if the image or phenomenon is used for selfish purposes by an egocentric character. In *Despair*, for example, puddle imagery appears initially in connection with the Narcissus theme, and it highlights Hermann’s solipsistic fascination with his own image. In the English version of the novel Hermann recalls extending his hand the reclining Felix: “I grasped it only because it provided me with the curious sensation of Narcissus fooling Nemesis by helping his image out of the brook” (13). He subsequently makes the comment I’ve already quoted about life marring his double, just as a breeze “dims the bliss of Narcissus” (15). Later in the novel he recounts how he avidly watched leaves falling into a body of water in the Tiergarten: “When a slow leaf fell, there would flutter up to meet it, out of the water’s shadowy depths, its

unavoidable double. Their meeting was soundless. The leaf came twirling down, and twirling up there would rise towards it, eagerly, its exact, beautiful, lethal reflection. I could not tear my gaze away from those inevitable meetings” (62). The water image here offers no interface to another realm, no pathway to an existence beyond death. On the contrary, it merely displays the dead end of profound solipsism.

The lack of depth indicated in Nabokov’s use of water imagery here may be the exception rather than the rule. As we have seen, water often has positive, transformative qualities. When one combines the element of water with the other major element that points to the powers of creative consciousness—fire—one arrives at what is quite possibly the most positive image in Nabokov’s fiction: the rainbow. The prismatic color effect of a rainbow is produced by the passage of light (usually sunlight) through water droplets or mist. When Nabokov utilizes rainbow imagery in his fiction, it is generally associated with great joy and even with intimations of paradise. For the sake of illustration we can cite just a couple examples from *The Gift*. In the first sentence of Chapter Two Fyodor recalls or imagines a moment from his past in Russia when a rain shower was coming to an end: “The rain still fell lightly, but with the elusive suddenness of an angel, a rainbow had already appeared” (77). Having linked the rainbow with the angelic, Fyodor goes on to recall an episode where his father had “inadvertently entered the base of a rainbow [...] and found himself in colored air, in a play of light as if in paradise. He took one more step—and left paradise” (77).

Later in the novel, Fyodor uses rainbow imagery again, and this time it is associated with a moment of sudden insight, and perhaps even contact with the transcendent. He is standing in the hallway of his apartment building with Zina, and light from the street passes

through the door, creating a “prismatic rainbow” on the wall. The narrative continues: “And, as often happened with him—though it was deeper this time than ever before—Fyodor suddenly felt—in this glassy darkness—the strangeness of life, the strangeness of its magic, as if a corner of it had been turned back for an instant and he had glimpsed its unusual lining” (183). A final example from *The Gift* occurs immediately after Fyodor has been given a contract for the publication of his book on Chernyshevski. As he departs the publisher’s office building to meet Zina, he steps into the following scene: “The drizzle seemed a dazzling dew, happiness stood in his throat, rainbow nimbi trembled around the streetlamps, and the book he had written talked to him at the top of its voice” (211). One can find many more examples of the positive aura surrounding Nabokov’s use of rainbow imagery, but these few should be sufficient to convey the underlying pattern.(13)

As we have seen then, the four elements of the natural world in Nabokov’s fiction exhibit a special vitality and vibrancy. The earth may bear the imprint of an author’s creative design; air (or wind) may reveal the benign, destructive, or inspirational influence of a higher force; fire (particularly in the form of sunlight) can display the transformative power of a transcendent entity; and water may mark the interface between the world of the character and the world of the author, or between the realms of mortality and immortality. Throughout his career, the writer liked to evoke the mysterious interconnectedness of natural phenomena in our world. By looking at Nabokov’s treatment of the four elements discussed above, the observant reader can gain intimations of other realms, other states of being beyond the surface layer of everyday life.

Notes

- (1) Counter examples to this evocation of a positive presence making an impact on the environment also appear in Nabokov's work. Two distinctive episodes in *Invitation to a Beheading* serve to illustrate this. In the first, Cincinnatus recalls a moment from his childhood when he learned "how to copy the model words from the flower beds in the school garden, where petunias, phlox and marigold spelled out lengthy adages" (96). Here, the rigid regime implants its message on an artificial landscape. Even more distressing to Cincinnatus is the "grandiose monogram" that intertwines the letters "P" and "C" in colored lights and is imposed on the natural beauty of the Tamara Gardens (189).
- (2) See Connolly, "Nabokov's Approach to the Supernatural in the Early Stories."
- (3) In supplying Hermann with the verb "muses" here in connection with writing, Nabokov may be directing the reader to consider a higher source of inspiration. This element was added to the English version of the novel. In the original version, the aspiring author's activity is described with the phrase "Poka on vspominaet i pishet [...]" (literally, "While he recalls and writes").
- (4) Such an opposition may also be detected in the pairing of characters named "Wind" in the novel. Eric Wind, for whom Pnin's wife leaves Pnin, is a rather unsavory figure, but his son, Victor Wind, is a kind of Nabokovian favorite whose involvement in Pnin's life may have salutary effects. Pnin is characterized by Eric Wind as Victor's "water father" (55). For more on water, see the discussion later in this essay.
- (5) The inveterate ghost hunter W. W. Rowe argues that winds in other Nabokov works signal

the presence of phantoms. In *The Eye* for example, Rowe declares that the spirit of Uncle Pasha “acts through the tipsy breeze” noticed by the narrator when he finds Vanya alone on the balcony in her apartment (95). He also attributes the workings of the wind in *Despair* (discussed above) to the ghost of Felix (111), and he comments that the spirits of Charlotte Haze and John Shade “inflict negative influences via wind” (112). As Brian Boyd has pointed out, however, Rowe’s speculations are not always supported by compelling argumentation (see “Spectral Hypotheses” in Boyd’s *Nabokov’s Ada*).

(6) Mary McCarthy pointed this out in her 1962 article, “A Bolt from the Blue” (p. 32).

(7) See Connolly, *Nabokov’s Early Fiction* 210–13.

(8) Fire can also play a destructive role in Nabokov’s work, as, for example, at the end of *Transparent Things*, when Hugh Person dies from smoke inhalation while trying to escape from a hotel fire. We should note, however, that this moment of destruction enables Hugh to enter a new state of posthumous existence. As the narrator puts it, “This is, I believe, *it*: not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental maneuver needed to pass from one state of being to another” (104).

(9) One male figure for whom death and water are associated is the narrator of *The Eye*. When he shoots himself he hears “the warble of water, a throaty gushing noise.” Inhaling, he “choked on liquidity”; falling to the floor, he reaches out a hand to steady himself, “but it sank into the floor as into bottomless water” (20). He subsequently regains consciousness, and he believes that although he has died, his consciousness continues on “by momentum” (20). Once again, it would appear, a death that is associated with water leads to a new posthumous existence. Yet here the association is surely based on an illusion (or delusion). What has

actually happened here, the reader surmises, is that the narrator's shot shattered a water pitcher and that he only suffered a minor wound, and therefore has not found new life after death. By the way, male characters who suffer from untimely death often do so by being shot or by falling from great heights (see, for example, Luzhin's fall in *The Defense*, and the deaths in plane crashes of King Alfin in *Pale Fire* and Demon Veen in *Ada*).

(10) See in particular Boyd's monographs *Nabokov's Pale Fire* and *Nabokov's Ada*.

(11) For a discussion of the theme, see Jane Grayson, "Rusalka and the Person from Porlock"; and D. Barton Johnson, "'L'Inconnue de la Seine.'" For brief description of the Russian folk beliefs about *rusalki*, see Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* 75–82.

(12) D. Barton Johnson argues that the puddle itself serves as a transformative portal between the world of the characters and the world of the author. In his view, Olga "passes through" the mirror-like puddle in the novel's opening scene and "re-emerges" at the end of the novel "from the nether side of the puddle outside Nabokov's study window as a moth" (239). A distant relative of the puddle in *Bend Sinister* may appear at the end of Chapter Five of *Pnin*. After all the characters in the Sheppard house have fallen asleep, the narrator makes the following remark: "It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags" (110). Here, however, the puddle is observed only by the narrator, and not by any characters. This may suggest the narrator's fundamental estrangement from (and lack of empathy for) the emotional world of his protagonist.

(13) For a discussion of rainbow imagery in Nabokov's prose work of the 1930s, see Berdjiiis 296–99.

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