TORPID SMOKE
THE STORIES OF
VLADIMIR NABOKOV

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T.S. Eliot remarked that in order to know any of Shakespeare's work well, one had to know all of it. Somewhat the contrary may be true of the Nabokov oeuvre: knowing any of it well may go a long way toward knowing all of it. In this essay, we shall test this hypothesis using a story from his mature middle years, "That in Aleppo Once ...." One of the master magician's most puzzling excursions into his perverse playground of indeterminate meanings, this story was originally written in English in 1943 and published in The Atlantic Monthly, later to be included in Nabokov's Dozen (1958), a volume of thirteen stories cobbled together to cash in on the popularity of Lolita.

The chief puzzle facing the reader of this story is what to make of the speaker's flagrant contradictions concerning the facts of his life, as in the story's second paragraph: "I married, let me see, about a month after you left France and a few weeks before the gentle Germans roared into Paris. Although I can produce documentary proofs of matrimony, I am positive now that my wife never existed." Something similar happens a couple of pages later vis-à-vis the family dog that was left behind in Paris. "Quite suddenly she started to sob," the narrator tells us, before quoting her explanation, "I cannot forget the poor dog." Like the wife herself, however, it seems that the dog never existed: "The honesty of her grief surprised me, as we had never had any dog." She in turn admits this fact — "I know [we never had any dog]... but I tried to imagine we had actually bought that setter" — but the narrator denies even this much of the dog's reality: "There had never been any talk of buying a setter" (558).

This tangle of contradictions, in turn, is a mere prelude to the main plot involving adultery and its consequences. At first the narrator's wife denies being unfaithful, then she confesses adultery with a hair-lotion salesman she met on the train, which she proceeds to alleviate by saying "I did not want it at all" (560), only to return in the end to

1 The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Knopf, 1995), 556. References to this book will hereafter be included in my main text.
denying the entire episode: “You will think me crazy... but I didn’t — I swear that I didn’t... . Perhaps I wanted to test you” (561). Finally, the initial question of the woman’s existence recurs for one last time when, on the voyage to New York, he tells an old acquaintance he is sailing alone, only to be told that the friend had seen the wife waiting for him back in Marseilles, which in turn leads the narrator to say, as “the point of the whole story,” that “I suddenly knew for certain that she had never existed at all” (563). And yet, on arriving in New York, he says “I went to an address she had given me once,” in a vain search for an uncle of this non-existent woman.

Further complications arise from the epistolary format that encloses the whole tale. “Dear V.” the narrative begins, “I have a story for you.” (The suspicion that V. is Nabokov deepens when the narrator mentions V.’s reputation for “betraying our national literature” (556) — as Nabokov surely did during the Soviet interlude of “socialist realism.”) At the end of the story, the epistolary framework closes with our narrator’s pleading, Humbertlike, for access through V. to the therapy of art: “you may clarify things for me through the prism of your art” (564). We are never told whether or how V. answered the call, but that Nabokov answered the call cannot be doubted in so far as the story exists, and through it we may witness the prism of art in the process of refraction.

In so far as that prism is actually the mind of Vladimir Nabokov, which is as likely to mystify as to “clarify things,” our hermeneutical expedition must begin with Nabokov’s distinctive list of subtractions from the conventional expositions of meaning. We know, first of all, that Nabokov categorically rejected the three greatest prophets of the twentieth century. Karl Marx, for obvious reasons, could never have become a great favorite of this White Russian exile, but Nabokov’s contempt as expressed in *The Eye* (1930) seems especially tailored to the sense of really knowing how to hurt a guy: “Some mean-spirited little man decides that the whole course of humanity can be explained in terms of... the struggle between an empty belly and a full belly. Luckily, no such laws exist... . Everything is fluid, everything de-
pends on chance, and all in vain were the efforts of that crabbed bourgeois, author of Das Kapital."²

The second prophet that Nabokov repudiates, Sigmund Freud, repeatedly appears as a “figure of fun” or “the Viennese quack” throughout Nabokov’s writing, usually in a humorous fashion, as in his Foreword to The Eye: “My books are not only blessed by a total lack of social significance, but are also mythproof: Freudians flutter around them avidly, ... stop, sniff, and recoil.” Underneath that humor, however, lies a serious quarrel with what he considers the corruptive fraudulence of the discipline. “Our grandsons will no doubt regard today’s psychoanalysts with the same amused contempt as we do astrology and phrenology,” he declares in Strong Opinions, and elsewhere he speaks of “Freudism” as “one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and others. I reject it utterly.”³

Nabokov’s third rejected prophet of the age — Albert Einstein — is perhaps the most surprising, but also the most crucial, in that any understanding of Nabokov’s fictional oeuvre must accommodate its rejection of the physical reality that is postulated by contemporary science. In an interview of 1968, regarding his work in progress (Ada), Nabokov declares “I’ve drawn my scalpel through spacetime, space being the tumor, which I assign to the slops. While not having much physics, I reject Einstein’s slick formulae” (SO 116). In Speak, Memory, the other half of spacetime fares no better: “I confess I do not believe in time.”⁴

Important as they are, Freud, Marx, and Einstein do not comprise the sum of Nabokov’s subtractions. He also declares “my utter indifference to organized mysticism, to religion, to the church — any church” in Strong Opinions (39), and the opening sentence of his memoir Speak, Memory appears to describe an atheist’s rejection of the supernatural: “common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.” Yet, in each instance, there is an antithetical corollary to each dismissal. Nabokov’s rejection of Freud, for example, should not be confused with a

⁴ Speak, Memory (New York: Pyramid Books, 1968), 103. Hereafter cited in my main text as SM.
rejection of psychology. “All novelists of any worth,” he says, “are psychological novelists” (SO 174). Nor should his contempt for Marx be identified with a love for his aristocratic privileges under the ancien regime: “My old (since 1917) quarrel with the Soviet dictatorship is wholly unrelated to any question of property. My contempt for the émigré who ‘hates the Reds’ because they ‘stole’ his money and land is complete” (SM 54). His rejection of Einstein is likewise qualified by his sense not of the falsity of science but of its limitations: “We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought” (SM 45). Most importantly, perhaps, Nabokov’s dismissal of “religion” should not be considered an endorsement of naturalistic realism. In answer to the question “do you believe in God?,” Nabokov’s answer implies a private theology — or theosophy, perhaps — capable of large if inscrutable significance: “what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill — I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more” (SO 45).

What Nabokov gives us in place of Freud and Marx and MC Squared is the unfathomable reality of individual consciousness, with all its egotistical quirkiness and unreliability, and it is this primacy of subjective over objective reality that is the key to all of Nabokov’s work. In Bend Sinister, Nabokov puts the issue as follows: “Now let us have this quite clear. What is more important to solve: the ‘outer’ problem (space, time, matter, the unknown without) or the ‘inner’ one (life, thought, love, the unknown within...)?” 5 Far from claiming pride of place, neither Marxian social problems nor Einsteinian spacetime can compete with Nabokov’s intuitions of a higher consciousness behind the surface fabric of phenomena. Speak, Memory provides an engaging instance of one such vision of a man who “does not believe in time”: “... And the highest enjoyment of timelessness... is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone” (SM 103). And in his Playboy interview of 1964 Nabokov includes a brief but memorable outline of

5 Bend Sinister (London: 1947), 152.
spiritual evolution that may help explain the peculiar idiosyncrasy of his outlook: “Time without consciousness — lower animal world; time with consciousness — man; consciousness without time — some still higher state” (SO 30).

Both of Nabokov’s major biographers, Brian Boyd and Andrew Field, offer an important clue as to how Nabokov came to have such opinions. Boyd’s *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* records that “when Vladimir was twelve or thirteen [his father] had him read his [the father’s] favorite, William James. James’s respect for the mystery and many-sidedness of the mind... and his search for an evolutionary explanation of the mind may have helped shield Nabokov against the archaic mythmaking and witchcraft of Freud. Nabokov kept his admiration of William James for life.”

And Andrew Field’s *V.N.: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* notes that Nabokov often visited the Cambridge (Massachusetts) home of James’s son, Billy James, who was “a tremendous admirer of Nabokov’s writing.”

Although, like many figures of genius, Nabokov was somewhat reticent about his intellectual indebtedness, it seems reasonable to postulate two or three major Jamesian contributions. One obvious instance, during a half-century of unspeakably murderous fanaticism that caused the murders, amid the general holocausts, of Nabokov’s own father (assassinated in 1922) and brother (who died in a Nazi death camp) as well as his own life of multiple exiles, is Pragmatism, which measures every ideology solely by its practical results in actual experience. Nabokov’s adherence to this creed may be surmised by its artistic corollary: “No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent” (SO).

Monism is another point of contact between Nabokov and William James, particularly with reference to the butterfly collector’s quasi-mystical “sense of oneness with sun and stone” that I cited earlier. “Philosophically,” Nabokov said in 1966, “I am an indivisible monist.” In 1969, asked to define the term, he said “monism... implies a oneness of basic reality” (SO 85, 124). It was William James who

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gave currency to the term by attaching it to what he called “the final question of philosophy... I believe the monistic-pluralistic alternative to be the deepest and most pregnant question that our minds can frame.”

Though James declared his own allegiance to Pluralism — the idea that the universe consists of discrete, independent entities rather than a single totalistic One — he strongly endorsed the reality of “cosmic consciousness,” which is what Nabokov’s “monism” actually signifies. Both he and Nabokov in the final analysis embraced both the pluralistic and the monistic alternatives, sensing an ultimate oneness of all things while also insisting on the pluralistic importance of individual consciousness.

Ultimately, both James and Nabokov ascribed supreme significance to individual consciousness, concerning which, James says, “Science confesses her imagination to be bankrupt. The production of such a thing as consciousness in the brain... is the absolute world-enigma.” Nabokov’s version of the idea is most succinctly put in answer to an interviewer’s question, “What surprises you in life?”: “... the marvel of consciousness — that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being; the mind’s hopeless inability to cope with its own essence and sense.”

This emphasis on individual consciousness, in turn, produces the most crucial correlation between the great psychologist and the novelist, which is to say William James’s confirmation of Nabokov’s “inner world” (“life, thought, love”) in preference to the “outer one” (“space, time, matter”). Although he was himself a scientist, James abjured what we might call “scientism,” or the idea that science reveals the most meaningful form of reality. Quite the contrary, James said in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> In spite of the appeal which this impersonality of the scientist makes, ... I believe it to be shallow.... The reason is that, so long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but as soon

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as we deal with private and personal phenonema as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term. [emphasis James's]\(^\text{11}\)

From this hypothesis ensues a perfect justification for Nabokov's incomparable parade of egomaniac crackpots and dreamers, irretrievably absorbed within their vital inscape. "If the foregoing hypothesis be true," James says, "it is absurd for science to say that the egotistic elements of experience should be suppressed. The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places, — they are strung on it like so many beads" (*Varieties* 377). And again, to cement a Nabokov-James connection (the impassioned visage of a Humbert or a Charles Kinbote is surely discernible here), James says: "Individuality is founded in feeling; and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making.... Compared with this world of living individualized feelings, the world of generalized objects which the intellect contemplates is without solidity or life" (379). To conclude, James says, "Let us agree, then, that Religion [Nabokov would say Art], occupying herself with personal destinies and keeping thus in contact with the only absolute realities which we know, must necessarily play an eternal part in human history" (379).

Freed from the "outer problem" by this sense of its small relevance, Nabokov found himself divinely free to furnish his inner world with all the power and beauty and magic his imagination could muster, along the lines of such favorite classics as *Alice in Wonderland* (which in 1922 he translated into Russian), *Ulysses*, and *Remembrance of Things Past*. Time, reason, morality, and the other enslavements of the outer world become powerless within this inner kingdom: morality submits to Lolita's joyous "incest," reason to *Pale Fire's* splendidly mad footnotes, and time to *Ada’s* twisted anachronisms. And it is not merely the novelist-enchanter's fictional characters who gain the advantage. On the contrary, the writer insists on enforcing similar claims for his own real life. *Speak, Memory*

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frames the contrast between outer and inner realms in a passage of such poignant majesty as to deserve generous citation:

Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love — from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter — to monstrously remote points of the universe. Something impels me to measure the consciousness of my love against such unimaginable and incalculable things as the behavior of nebulae (whose very remoteness seems a form of insanity), the dreadful pitfalls of eternity, the unknowable beyond the unknown, the helplessness, the cold, the sickening involutions and interpenetrations of space and time.... [But then] that slow-motion, silent explosion of love takes place in me, unfolding its melting fringes and overwhelming me with the sense of something much vaster, much more enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or energy in any imaginable cosmos” (SM 219).

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Returning now to our short story “That in Aleppo Once ... ,” we can see that Nabokov’s prism of art helps answer the questions of the opening section of this essay. If, as in all fiction, the foremost question is how to judge the characters, our first recourse is an appeal to the Nabokovian axiom that “Reality is a very subjective affair” (SO 10). That is why the contradictions of fact in the narrator’s life-story — concerning whether his wife, or her dog, or her uncle, exists, for example — are unimportant. As the Viennese quack might have said — and did say, in fact — illusions matter because they carry a full charge of psychic reality, so the beliefs of Nabokov’s crazed narrator govern his behavior as surely as if he were perfectly sane. And the key to understanding that behavior lies in Nabokov’s reconfiguration of Shakespeare — a writer whose complete oeuvre Nabokov claimed to have read (in English) by age fifteen (Boyd 91).

Nabokov took his title from the last page of *Othello*, referring to the speech where Othello justifies his act of wifemurder (“[I] loved not wisely but too well”) just before his act of self-punishment by suicide:

Set you down this.
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat th’uncircumcised dog
And smote him — thus. [He stabs himself.]

It is unlikely that Nabokov’s narrator, any more than Humbert or Charles Kinbote, measures up to the self-punishing grandeur of Othello’s last gesture, and perhaps his aversion to such an outcome is what explains the warning to V. at the end of the story: “It may all end in Aleppo if I am not careful. Spare me, V.; you would load your dice with an unbearable implication if you took that title.” A similar delusion of grandeur no doubt explains the narrator’s “pleasure in imitating the life of a unique genius [Pushkin] (down to the jealousy, ... down to the stab of seeing [his wife’s] almond-shaped eyes turn to her blond Cassio behind her peacock-feathered fan),” but there is no inkling that Nabokov’s speaker might give up his life, as Pushkin did, in a duel fought for sexual honor.

And yet, as in other Nabokovian confabulations, there are definite flashes of credible reportage scattered among the narrator’s grand tangle of illusions and allusions. Othello’s reference to “th’uncircumcised dog,” for example, brings our narrator’s phantom setter back into play with a renewed claim on reality. Nabokov evidently includes an elderly lady’s [Anna Vladimirovna’s] stern testimony from the “outer” world to indicate a nasty bit of cruelty on the narrator’s part that was perpetrated before his wife had perhaps indulged in adultery: “[she] struck the gravel with her cane, and said in her deep strong voice: ‘But there is one thing I shall never forgive you — her dog, that poor beast which you hanged with your own hands before leaving Paris’” (563). The same testimony also indicates, obviously, that both the wife and the dog really existed, and we are left to infer that the narrator killed the poor beast in a jealous fit simply because his bride loved it.

Indeed, the old lady’s accusation is all we need to know to understand a number of clues to what the narrator himself describes as “our disastrous honeymoon” (558). In making a literal fact of Othello’s metaphor about smiting the uncircumcised dog, the narrator reveals the whole lethal extent of his sexual/emotional insecurity. Like Othello (and Pushkin), he had opened himself up to this danger by marrying a woman “much younger than I” (557), who he thinks had been attracted to him by his verbal artistry (“I suppose she had been solely attracted by the obscurity of my poetry”) — just as Othello believes Desdemona had fallen for his romantic adventure stories (Act
I, iii, 127170). Like Othello, too, he soon came to suspect the fragility of a relationship built on such a base: "[she] then tore a hole through its [my poetry’s] veil and saw a stranger’s unlovable face" (557). Unlike the saintly Desdemona, however, the narrator’s bride seeks escape from her marital misfortune and presumably finds it, despite the narrator’s refusal to grant a divorce and his threat of murder, in the “young Frenchman who could give her a turreted home and a crested name” (562).

Behind Nabokov’s Shakespearean echoes lies admiration, and what he most admired in Shakespeare was the man’s virtuosity with language. “The verbal poetic texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has ever known, and is immensely superior to the structure of his plays as plays,” Nabokov says. “With Shakespeare it is the metaphor that is the thing, not the play” (SO 89-90). Elsewhere he implicitly connects Shakespeare’s verse with his own prose by noting that “there is a lot of overlapping in our concept of poetry and prose today. The bamboo bridge between them is the metaphor” (SO 44).

Of course this statement is Nabokov’s true judgment, but it is not really sufficient to pinpoint the most essential Nabokov-Shakespeare affinity, which is the two writers’ deployment of their poetic texture (metaphor included) toward the most difficult task of creative writing: the exact expression of degrees and nuances of feeling. No writer in any language has ever surpassed the power and precision of Shakespeare in describing moods, emotions, and desires, whether we focus on Macbeth’s guilt, Hamlet’s disgust, Othello’s jealousy, or Shakespeare’s own fear, shame, and desire in the Sonnets. Nabokov’s occasional snippets from Othello in this story — “The time, the place the torture. Her fan, her “loves. her mask,” “Yet the pity of it” (560, 564) — do not have any special verbal richness, but they do carry a huge freight of jealous feeling in one instance (about Desdemona supposedly sending her servant for a fan so as to be alone with her lover) and grief over the fatally broken relationship in the other (“Yet the pity of it”). That intensity of feeling is the focus of Nabokov’s literary borrowing. His truest bond with Shakespeare consists in their sharing of the Jamesian precept that “the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making.”

Within those recesses of feeling, Nabokov and Shakespeare pursue a similar fascination with the propensity of the human personality to
rationalize its wickedness or inadequacy. Even Othello's public act of suicide is a rationalization as much as an expiation for his slaughter of an innocent woman. He executes himself for his crime, it is true, but as a soldier he does not mind physical death as long as his reputation remains unsullied, and his claim that the tragedy happened because he loved her too much ("loved not wisely, but too well") is, along with his suicide, an attempt to rescue that reputation. The reliability of his claim that he loved her too well may be measured by his refusal, in the murder scene, to grant Desdemona the briefest moment of expiation — "But while I say one prayer!" — before he strangles her. (That prayer would have saved her life, inasmuch as Emilia enters seconds later — V, iii, 85). Nabokov's narrator likewise denies, distorts, or evades reality out of the fundamental human need to think well of oneself, and that is why the contradictions of fact in his testimony are finally irrelevant. In postmodern style, Nabokov was ahead of his time in treating any first-person narrative as unavoidably corrupted by the teller's self-interest. A Nabokovian narrator can sooner escape the clutch of gravity than break free of the need for self-vindication, which must inevitably confine the point of view within the realm of psychic reality rather than opening it up to "external" or "objective" truth.

To say that Nabokov's prism of art works through subjective refraction is not to say, however, that it disdains truth absolutely. On the contrary, Nabokov's exponents of perversity, like Shakespeare's Iago and Edmund speaking about free will, for example, sometimes speak the truth of their author's mind. Early on, the narrator of "Aleppo" experiences an epiphany when kissing his sweetheart's hair that closely resembles Nabokov's rapture in a field of butterflies — "and of course we all know of that blinding blast... an ecstatic and boundless expansion of what had been during his life a pinpoint of light in the dark center of his being." Under the force of that blinding blast, it even appears that death itself — as we have seen Nabokov intimate in his interviews — submits to the epiphanic moment: "And really, the reason we think of death in celestial terms is that the visible firmament, especially at night ... , is the most adequate and ever-present symbol of that silent explosion" (557).

Another Shakespearean gambit of Nabokov's is the role of the spectator-artist or storyteller. In Hamlet, that role was assumed by Horatio, who accepted the request to delay his suicide ("Absent thee
from felicity a while”) so as to tell Hamlet’s story to posterity: “And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain/To tell my story” (V, ii). For Othello the story-teller’s role went to the spectators of his suicide, who are the custodians of his reputation: “I pray you, in your letters, /When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,/Speak of me as I am” (V, ii, 341). (Here again Othello rationalizes his crime, this time through his choice of the word “unlucky” — as though he bears no culpability beyond bad luck.) Nabokov’s narrator, too, wants his story told (“Dear V... . I have a story for you”) and like Hamlet and Othello he must rely on someone else to tell it — to furnish, that is to say, his version of Humbert’s “durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art... the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.”12 For all his delusions, the narrator does grasp the reality principle with respect to the inadequacy of his own talent, as is evident in his embittered reference to “my best poem — the one you [V.] made such gruesome fun of in Literaturnie Zapiskie” (557). Acknowledging his deficiency, the narrator hopes to expropriate V.’s talent to communicate his story just as Charles Kinbote does with John Shade in Pale Fire.

But as Kinbote also demonstrates, the prism of art is a dangerous talisman. In “Aleppo,” the tale that was aimed at self-vindication concludes instead in a spasm of self-exposure. “Curse your art, I am hideously unhappy,” V. is told as the narrator, now at his most Othello-like, finally confesses his guilt for the act of psychic wife-murder that is implicit in his denials of her existence. In the end, her existence proves ineradicable in his memory of her abandonment at dockside: “She keeps on walking to and fro where the brown nets are spread to dry... . Somewhere, somehow, I have made some fatal mistake” (564).

The hopeless solipsism of this scene implies a final affinity of Nabokov with Shakespeare, which is the theme of isolation that permeates so much of both writers’ work. While in Shakespeare the theme arises mostly through powerful feelings of betrayal — one thinks of Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Coriolanus, and Julius Caesar being betrayed by their closest intimates — in Nabokov the isolato is usually alienated by his own psychological freakishness: Humbert the expatriate child-molester, Kinbote the exiled homosexual, Pnin the alien

buffoon-professor. For the refugee-narrator of “Aleppo,” the theme of alienation is exacerbated by his envy of V.’s success and happiness (the lichens here appear to be a surrogate for Nabokov’s butterflies): “You, happy mortal, with your lovely family (how is Ines? how are the twins?) and your diversified work (how are the lichens?), can hardly be expected to puzzle out my misfortune in terms of human communion…” (564). Like Humbert realizing too late that he never had any interest in knowing the real Lolita, the narrator of “Aleppo” comes to realize only in retrospect the solipsistic isolation in his marriage: “If she has remained a phantom to me, I may have been one to her …” (557).

The importance of this theme merits a last reference to William James at this point, drawing upon The Principles of Psychology to define the dimensions of the solipsistic quandary: “Absolute insulation ... is the law .... Neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content are able to fuse thoughts together which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds. The breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature.” In the end, Nabokov’s protagonists are meant to represent the universal human problem that James’s formulation underscores — the need to be understood. In ordinary life, it cannot be done. As regards the deepest recesses of one’s being, those “darker, blinder strata of character” that William James considered “the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making,” one normally cannot hope to be effectively understood. But that is why art is so important. By grasping beyond their various deliriums of nostalgia, rationalization, and desire in search of their storyteller, Nabokov’s characters verify their belief in the redeeming efficacy of art. And the implications of that belief reach to a final conclusion: precisely because they so often are screwballs, perverts, and outcasts, Nabokov’s people pose the ultimate challenge, not to V. vis-à-vis the narrator, but to Nabokov vis-à-vis his reader, as to whether “you may clarify things for me through the prism of your art” (564).

Belated though it was, the final success of Nabokov’s career indicates a positive answer to that question. His prism of art has clarified things for a world-wide reading audience, effusing a rare ray of light

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into a forbidding tangle of motives and feelings that lie beyond the more conventional artist's powers of expression. "'That in Aleppo Once...'" is a minor entry among the majestic monuments of Nabokov's total oeuvre, but in its absorption of Shakespearean portents and Jamesian precepts it represents the whole mind of its creator. The keys to his later kingdoms — of Zembla, or Ardis, or Lolita-land — may be found in such a tale.